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MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY OF AZERBAIJAN^{***}

Abstract

The geopolitical positions of Russia, Iran, and Turkey, combined with significant energy reserves, enabled Azerbaijan to develop a dynamic and flexible foreign policy to preserve its security, territorial integrity, and economic prosperity. The changes and challenges in regional security have been pronounced in the last ten years since the renewal of conflict with Armenia and the deepening of the cooperation with Türkiye and Russia, to maintain stable relations with the West, including the United States of America. As a state positioned at the

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crossroads of Eurasian forces, with resources of strategic significance (oil and gas), Azerbaijan is following a multi-vector foreign policy to balance the influences of Russia, Türkiye, Iran, the United States of America (USA), and the West in a broader sense. The paper focuses on relations with key regional and global actors, with a special emphasis on the long-standing conflict with Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh, the growing cooperation with Türkiye, diplomatic maneuvering in the relations with Russia and Iran, as well as a limited, but still significant influence of the USA. This paper aims to analyze the security and geopolitical aspects of the multi-vector foreign policy of Azerbaijan in the period from 2014 to 2024. In terms of methodology, the research rests on the analysis of secondary sources, comparative analysis of regional relations, a case study (Nagorno-Karabakh), as well as the analysis of political statements, official documents, and security indicators. The paper uses a realistic theoretical framework in which states act based on national interests in the system of anarchy and the constant fight for power and influence.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, South Caucasus, geopolitics, multi-vector foreign policy, resources, energy

INTRODUCTION

The foreign policy of states asks for a dedicated approach and reconciliation at different levels, in accordance with the current geopolitical events. Azerbaijan, as one of the more significant countries in the South Caucasus region, has been striving for years to preserve national security with a balanced foreign policy and not damage relations with the leading powers on the geopolitical scene at the same time. Implementation of projects that include different actors on a world level, as well as a tendency to act as a reliable partner in the energy security domain, not only in the region, but also at a wider level, represents an efficient method of preservation of their independent status, with strategic cooperation with relevant actors in the world.

The Republic of Azerbaijan, a country in the South Caucasus region, is positioned within the Eurasian subregion. Armenia and Georgia in the west, the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran and Türkiye in the south have all been, throughout their history, a blessing

or a challenge, depending on the historical period and geopolitical circumstances. The variety of ethnic groups and multicultural reality of Azerbaijan were a kind of incentive for nurturing friendly relations with neighbors despite their differences and occasional disagreements. Even though it cannot compete with the neighboring countries such as Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, Azerbaijan still holds significant potential to position itself as a leader, especially through regional projects based on energy export from this region.

As one of the key states of the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan is directed towards leading a foreign policy characterized by a multi-vector approach. The multi-vector foreign policy represents a strategy of small and middle states that, instead of bonding to a sole hegemon, tend to simultaneously build relations with different centers of power to preserve their own autonomy. Azerbaijan, positioned at a geopolitically sensitive point in the South Caucasus, applies exactly this model, balancing between Russia, Türkiye, Iran, the European Union, and the United States of America. It is also facing a long-standing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, energy export through unstable regions, and internal challenges of modernization and security.

This paper aims to examine how Azerbaijan implements the multi-vector foreign policy from 2014 to 2024, and to grade the efficiency of this policy in the context of regional stability, geopolitical positioning, and protection of sovereignty. A special focus is on analysing bilateral relations with five key countries: Armenia, Türkiye, Russia, Iran, and the United States of America. The research subject is the mutual dynamics of Azerbaijan's political, economic, and security relations of with the said states, as well as the instruments used for achieving such policy – diplomatic initiatives, energy cooperation, security arrangements, and the role of international organizations. The methodology of this paper is based on qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources: official state documents, strategic reports (Center of Analysis of International Relations [AIR Center], ADA University), international organizations' reports, and scientific literature. The case study method, as well as comparative analysis within each bilateral relation, was applied. This ensures a holistic approach to assessing Azerbaijan's long-term foreign policy strategy.

CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION OF MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY

The term multi-vector foreign policy refers to a strategy pursued by states, most often small or medium-sized, that simultaneously develops and maintains multiple partnership channels with great powers, regional actors, diverse institutions, and economic corridors, aiming to reduce vulnerability and enhance autonomy of action. Multi-vectorism does not imply a concept of “maintaining good relations with everyone,” but rather a conscious portfolio-style risk management through diversification of security, economic, and diplomatic ties (Kuik 2008, 162). In the post-Soviet space, this approach has been most thoroughly articulated through Kazakhstan’s experience (Anceschi 2020), yet it is also applicable to Azerbaijan, whose geopolitical position, energy resources, and conflict-prone environment structurally encourage such a strategy.

The political behavior of states in the international arena can broadly be understood through the categories provided by the realist theory of international relations. According to classical realism, states operate in an anarchic system, i.e., devoid of centralized authority, and are therefore compelled to ensure their own security and survival independently (Morgenthau 1948, 12). The principal driving force in such a system is the national interest, most commonly defined through the prism of power. Structural or neorealism, in the vision of Kenneth Waltz, emphasizes that the very structure of the international system – its anarchy and distribution of power – is the key factor shaping state behavior (Waltz 1979, 88). In this context, smaller and medium-sized states such as Azerbaijan must develop flexible strategies to avoid subordination to larger powers and to preserve their sovereignty.

Modern variations on the realist tradition have introduced concepts such as hedging and omnibalancing, which are particularly useful in explaining the foreign policies of small and medium states. Hedging represents a strategy whereby a state avoids fully aligning with one pole of power, instead seeking to combine elements of cooperation and resistance to reduce risks and preserve maneuvering space (Kuik 2008, 170). In the case of Azerbaijan, this is evident in the simultaneous cultivation of historical, cultural, and security ties with Turkey, economic relations with the European Union and Russia, and pragmatic cooperation with Iran (Mammadli 2023). On the other hand, the concept of omnibalancing, developed by Steven David, emphasizes

that governments in developing countries make foreign policy choices not only as a response to external threats but also as a means to maintain internal regime stability (David 1991, 240). This concept likewise applies to Azerbaijan, since Baku's foreign policy has frequently served the purpose of stabilizing the domestic order and consolidating the legitimacy of the ruling elite (Mammadli 2023).

Multi-vector foreign policy, increasingly mentioned in the literature (Contessi 2015; Valiyev 2017; Nasibov 2024) as a defining feature of states seeking to avoid binary divisions in the international system, may be considered as a synthesis of the aforementioned realist approaches. Nicola Contessi argues that small Eurasian states, rather than aligning with or submitting to a dominant power, seek to maintain close relations with various great powers, to balance competing interests, safeguard sovereignty, and avoid dependence on a single partner (Contessi 2015). He terms this "multi-vector diplomacy" as a durable strategy rather than a temporary condition (Contessi 2015, 299–311). According to Valiyev, multi-vector foreign policy entails the parallel development of relations with different centers of power, while avoiding complete reliance on any of them (Valiyev 2017, 128). Under conditions of global and regional uncertainty, such an approach allows a state to maximize its autonomy and minimize the risks of dependency or security vulnerability. Theoretically, Azerbaijan's multi-vector policy can thus be understood as a fusion of realist logic rooted in anarchy and power, and as an example of the application of contemporary concepts such as hedging and omnibalancing, which better account for the complex choices faced by smaller states in a dynamic international environment.

RELATIONS WITH ARMENIA: CONFLICT, DIPLOMACY, AND POST-CONFLICT STABILIZATION

The relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia represent the key security dimension of Baku's foreign policy. The central issue remains the Nagorno-Karabakh status, which was the subject of two big wars – the first in the 90s and the second in 2020. Despite many years of holding the "frozen conflict" status, since 2020, a sudden escalation occurred, when Azerbaijan regained most of its territory in the Six-Week War. This imposes a radical change in power relations, as well as the opening of a new phase in the post-conflict negotiations. In the war of 2020, with the support of Türkiye and the use of advanced unmanned technology,

Azerbaijan regained control over the major part of the disputed territory. According to the trilateral agreement from November 2020 under Russia's auspices, a ceasefire was established, but the final political solution was not reached (De Waal 2021, 1–10). In September 2023, Azerbaijan took control over the remaining parts of Karabakh through a military operation, which caused a mass exodus of the Armenian population. This move strengthened the position of Azerbaijan as an actor that resolutely defends its territorial integrity. Still, the process of normalization of relations continued, above all within the European Union mediation.

Nagorno-Karabakh represents the center of Azerbaijani politics; it is more than a territory, perceived as a symbol of state identity and sovereignty. During the last decade, Azerbaijan insisted on applying international law and the principle of territorial integrity (De Waal 2024). The policy towards Armenia after 2020 is moderate, directed towards reintegration of the liberated territories, demining, returning of the displaced individuals, and infrastructural reconstruction (AIR Center 2024, 2). Even though Moscow played the key role in reaching the ceasefire in November 2020, since 2021, the European Union has been increasingly active in the peacekeeping process. At the same time, the USA is supporting the normalization of relations and financing some reconstruction projects. In this context, Baku insists on signing a comprehensive peace accord that would confirm the internationally accepted borders, but still meets resistance within the Armenian political spectrum (Yavuz and Gunter 2023, 174–175).

The South Caucasus region has a history of conflicts that have extremely negatively impacted the democratic transformation of all regional states. These conflicts tended to halt the local and interstate cooperation between countries of the South Caucasus and slow down the economic advance of this region, primarily the conflicts between Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and then the long-standing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh region (Gurbanov 2024, 62). Despite its different consequences for Armenia and Azerbaijan, the war, which resolved the conflict, created a favorable ambience for both countries to profit from new regional situations. The Tripartite agreement offered a historical chance for a peace agreement between the two nations and cessation of hostilities. Soon after the war ended, in accordance with the Tripartite declaration, the sides began negotiations regarding opening regional roads and communication lines, which promote regional integration. Thus, after the 44-Day War, the new era began not only for

Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also for the region as a whole (Huseynov 2024, 39). The presence of Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh, however, did not completely prevent tensions since, in September 2023, Azerbaijan conducted a short “anti-terrorist operation,” and established complete control over the region after that. Such development of events additionally strengthened Baku’s position in negotiations.

Besides military aspects, it is also important to stress the diplomatic dimension of relations with Armenia. Despite constant tensions, Baku continued to participate in international negotiations, including the Brussels negotiations, under the auspices of the European Union. Besides the EU, the USA and Russia also attempted to maintain the diplomatic channels open, but with different levels of success. In this process, Azerbaijan shows that it is ready for normalization, but only under the full implementation of the principle of territorial integrity.

Farid Shafiyev, Chairman of the Center of Analysis of International Relations, emphasizes that ethnic myths and perceptions can pose an obstacle to the peace settlement process, as they prevent rational agreements on territorial arrangements, which implicitly points to the importance of recognizing realities on the ground and territorial integrity as prerequisites for stability (Shafiyev 2007). In the context of theoretical disputes on foreign policy, some analysts and authors (Jafarova 2020; Breuning 2007) increasingly describe Azerbaijan as a “middle power” in regional frameworks. This definition is based on factors such as military power, energy resources, ability to project influence in the neighborhood, and diplomatic activity. In the article “Is Azerbaijan a ‘Middle Power’?”, Esmira Jafarova emphasizes that “middle powers have been at the forefront of numerous international initiatives that require the coordination of resources and the promotion of values. Traditionally, middle forces were named such simply because they were neither big nor small. However, scientists in this field see further than the mere geographical meaning of the middle forces and justifiably represent their significance” (Jafarova 2020, 2). In an attempt at classification, scientists such as Marijke Breuning divide states into big/superpowers, middle powers, regional powers, and small powers, with middle powers defined as “states that can use the measure of influence, but through the projection of military power” (Breuning 2007, 149–151). As a middle power, Azerbaijan is not in a position to dominate, but has the capacity to shape events in its security environment, especially through strategic partnerships and economic initiatives.

The Peace and Climate Initiative Conference of the Parties 29 (COP29) is one of the initiatives led to achieve tangible results, “such as establishing a center of excellence, to match the needs of the most vulnerable with the existing resources and incite further action for operationalization of various initiatives” (Hajiyev 2024). These initiatives have the goal to provide support to the promotion of international relations and inclusive peacebuilding to grasp the ongoing challenges, especially in countries that are pretty sensitive to climate change, as well as those facing conflicts and humanitarian situations, to access financial resources and conduct adjustment methods (Hajiyev 2024).

One of the key political instruments used by Azerbaijan is public diplomacy. Through making information on war crimes and the destruction of religious and cultural heritage public knowledge, as well as through the activity of diplomatic missions, Baku tends to influence public opinion. In this context, cooperation with the Organization of Turkic States member states and the non-aligned countries has quite a significant role.

In the end, although confrontation with Armenia marked a big part of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy, the current directions indicate a possible move towards formal normalization. However, this process will significantly depend on internal political factors in Armenia, as well as on the Russian and Western influence in the region.

RELATIONS WITH TÜRKİYE: ALLIANCE, DEFENCE COOPERATION, AND CULTURAL CLOSENESS

Relations between Azerbaijan and Türkiye represent one of the most developed and stable examples of regional partnership. Under the “one nation, two states” motto, these countries nourish intense political, economic, military, and cultural cooperation. Especially after the Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020, Türkiye became Azerbaijan’s key strategic partner, not only symbolically but also operationally. A strong military-strategic alliance is also reflected in the fact that Türkiye was the only significant regional actor that publicly provided support to Azerbaijan during the Six-Week War in 2020, including both logistical and intelligence support (Parezanović 2022, 120–121). After the war, the Shusha declaration on allied relations¹ was signed, formalizing the

¹ The Shusha declaration on allied relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Türkiye stressed the historical significance of the meeting between the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, İlham Aliyev, and the President of

alliance between the two states and including mutual military assistance in case of aggression (President.az 2021). The Turkish military base in Nakhichevan, opened in 2021, symbolizes the expanded security cooperation and a means of deterrence against potential threats. “TurAz Qartalı” military exercises are held regularly, along with the integration of defense industries and joint training (Trend 2022).

The economic cooperation is also on the rise. Türkiye is Azerbaijan’s second biggest trade partner, right after Italy (The Observatory of Economic Complexity [OEC], n.d.) The main products exported by Azerbaijan to Türkiye were petroleum gas (3.68 billion USD), crude oil (676 million USD) and refined oil (623 million USD) (OEC, n.d.). The main products exported by Türkiye to Azerbaijan were packed medicine (68.2 million USD), cars (60.8 million USD), and processed tobacco (57.5 million USD) (OEC, n.d.). In 2023, Azerbaijan was ranked 84th on the Economic Complexity Index (ECI -0.43) and 70th in terms of total exports (31.2 billion USD) (OEC, n.d.). The same year, Türkiye took up the 41st place on the Economic Complexity Index (ECI 0.62) and the 28th place in terms of total exports (272 billion USD) (OEC, n.d.). Besides, through joint projects, such as the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), both countries connect their energy interests with Europe (World Bank 2023).

It is also essential to address the issue of the energy and infrastructure cooperation. Türkiye is the main transit corridor for exporting the Azerbaijani gas to Europe, through TANAP, which is a part of the broader “Southern Gas Corridor” initiative (AIR Center 2019). TANAP represents the key factor in promoting political and economic cooperation between Azerbaijan and the European Union, positioning Azerbaijan as a significant alternative in the gas supply and the second largest natural gas supplier to Türkiye. Strengthening

the Republic of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in the city of Shusha, the ancient cradle of culture of Azerbaijan and the entire Turkic world. Among other things, the Declaration stresses the need for joint coordination of activities in regional and international strategic issues of common interest, starting from the principle of solidarity and mutual assistance in bilateral and multilateral formats regarding the issues of national interests, such as independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Türkiye, the inviolability of their internationally recognized borders, as well as joining efforts in the promotion of joint activities on regional and international plan, directed towards stable development of the Turkic world (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan [President.az] 2021).

the energy security of Türkiye and Europe, this project brings the three sides together – Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and the EU – and contributes to transforming of the global energy and geopolitical environment. At the same time, the geopolitical significance of TANAP incites planning and implementation of a new regional energy initiative (TANAP, n.d.). The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project connects these countries within the Eurasian trade network. Azerbaijan also actively supports the Zangezur Corridor – the planned transport route via the Armenian territory, which would enable the land connection between the main part of Azerbaijan and the Autonomous Province of Nakhichevan, thus strengthening the pan-Turkic infrastructural axis (Azerbaijan.az 2025).

Map 1. The Zangezur Corridor



Source: Eurasia Today 2024

The map shows the planned route of the Zangezur Corridor, which links western Azerbaijan with the Nakhichevan enclave via the southern territory of Armenia, thus illustrating the strategic significance of this corridor for the Turkish-Azerbaijani integration and access to Central Asia. The cultural and diplomatic synergy indicates closeness between the Turkic and Azerbaijani nations, strengthened through the activities of the Turkic Council (Organization of Turkic States), where Baku plays an active role. The joint projects in the field of education, media, and youth serve as a foundation for long-term strategic synergy. The Turkish Embassy in Baku is one of the most active diplomatic missions in the region (Organization of Turkic States 2022; Omuraliev 2024).

RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA: AMBIVALENT PARTNERSHIP AND GEOPOLITICAL BALANCE

Relations between Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation in the last decades are distinguished by complex dynamics in which historical heritage, security interests, trade flows, and competitive influences in the South Caucasus region intertwine. Russia tends to maintain the role of the chief security mediator in conflicts in the post-Soviet region, while Azerbaijan tends to maintain balance by cooperating with Moscow, but avoiding deeper dependence. Considering the historical context and the security framework, Azerbaijan has maintained bilateral cooperation with Moscow, while, on the other hand, the Russian politics in the South Caucasus remains predominantly consistent, although partially weakened by the invasion of Ukraine. Russia has no plans to withdraw from this region, and its most significant ally today is Azerbaijan. The relation between these two countries is strengthened by signing the “Declaration on the Allied Interaction between Azerbaijan and Russia” on February 22, 2022, only two days before the beginning of the war in Ukraine (Bilban, Labarre, and Niculescu 2024, 111). According to Vasif Huseynov, a senior fellow at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Centre, Baku), this declaration significantly deepens the military and diplomatic cooperation between these two countries (Bilban, Labarre, and Niculescu 2024, 111). Until the signing of this declaration, military relations predominantly consisted of Azerbaijan purchasing Russian arms, but the new accord shifts this cooperation to a higher level. It implies joint military operations, armed forces training, establishment of maintenance and arms modernization centers, as well as joint production of military equipment. Moreover, both countries will provide military assistance based on international accords, such as the United Nations Charter. Also, the declaration shows readiness of Azerbaijan and Russia to agree on joint positions regarding key international issues (Bilban, Labarre, and Niculescu 2024, 111).

Moscow remains a significant trade partner, and Azerbaijan is the key exporter of oil and gas to Russia, which additionally supports their common economic ties. Besides energy relations, Azerbaijan often calls upon its economic interests that are linked to the transport and logistics corridors, which also imply the Russian factor.

On the other hand, economic and energy exchange with Russia is significant in the agricultural industry, metals, and oil, whereas Moscow

represents the third most significant economic partner of Azerbaijan, after Italy and Türkiye (The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2023). Gazprom and SOCAR have multiple agreements on gas sales and purchase, including the re-export of Russian gas via the Azerbaijani network. Even though this creates space for cooperation, it also increases the risks from energy instrumentalization.

Illustration 1. Azerbaijan – the key hub on the Eurasian transport route



Source: Abdul 2024

The map shows the key energy and transport corridors that link Azerbaijan with Russia. Through these routes, Azerbaijan exports oil, gas, and other energy resources to Russia and to Europe. These corridors also play a key role in multilateral economic projects, including those in other regions. The state tends to become an international transport hub by modernizing the infrastructure and improving the road and railway networks. One of the more significant steps is the participation in the “Eurasian Transport Route” project, where the foundation of the international association for this transport route is currently being considered. At the meeting held in September 2024,² the representatives

² Multimodal transport represents an efficient and flexible method of transport that enables the use of the most suitable types of transport for different segments of the path, thus reducing transit time and improving total efficacy. For example, the combination of railroad and road transport, could reduce expenses and make deliveries more economical. This approach also offers higher flexibility in planning and easier adjustment to changing conditions, such as delays and demand fluctuation. Moreover, multimodal transport can have a lower impact on the environment, especially when using the more environmentally acceptable types of transport, such as railroad and maritime traffic. Still, this system carries along certain challenges as well, such as the complex coordination of several carriers, different regulatory frameworks for each type of transport, and the need for a

expressed their expectations that all the formalities would be completed soon. The representative of the Austrian Federal Railroads stressed that Azerbaijan is the key link between Europe and Asia, as well as that Austria will support the development of the Middle Corridor as part of the global transport network (Abdul 2024). Eniko Gyorfí, head of the Department for Eurasian and Central Asia connection of the Austrian Federal Railroads, stated that Austria confirms its dedication to the use of the Middle Corridor as part of the global network for cargo shipment and that it will contribute to its development, while the Azerbaijan's initiative directed towards establishing an international association "Eurasian Multimodal Transport Route" stresses this significant role (Abdul 2024).

Political and diplomatic cooperation and limitations point to the fact that, even though Russia formally acknowledges the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, its practical politics often favor the *status quo* in the region. During 2022 and 2023, there was a noticeable decline in Moscow's influence due to the war in Ukraine, which Baku used to strengthen diplomatic cooperation with the West (Grynszpan and Vincent 2024). At the same time, Moscow is attempting to preserve its influence through cultural cooperation, "The Russian Houses," and media channels in Azerbaijan.

RELATIONS WITH IRAN: BETWEEN NEIGHBORHOOD, DOUBTS, AND REGIONAL COMPETITION

The relations between Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran represent one of the most sensitive aspects of Baku's foreign policy. Even though these countries share many centuries of cultural and religious links and have a joint border along the Aras River, the political tensions, ideological differences, and geopolitical competitiveness mark the bilateral relations during the last decades. The issues, such as the position of the Azeri minority in Iran, the Iranian support to Azerbaijan, and the cooperation between Baku and Israel, additionally make stabilization of relations difficult.

The ideological and ethnic sensitivity is expressed even though 15 to 20 million ethnic Azeris live in Iran, making up the largest minority group in the country. Even though most of them are well integrated into

developed infrastructure that enables the smooth transfer of cargo from one type of transport to another.

the state apparatus, Tehran fears that Baku could incite ethnic nationalism and separatism (Souleimanov and Kraus 2017, 7–9; 14–15). From its side, Azerbaijan views Iranian religious organizations and propaganda within their own Shia communities with suspicion, fearing Tehran’s “soft power” and possible destabilizing influence.

Iran and Azerbaijan have a long history of cooperation, but are also susceptible to political tensions. Iran always supported the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, but was, on the other hand, cautious when speaking of Azerbaijan’s relations with Türkiye, especially in the context of the Zangezur Corridor. The Zangezur Corridor, which should link Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan via Armenian territory, represents a significant geopolitical challenge for Iran, deeming it a potential threat to its strategic position in the region. The construction of this corridor could weaken Iran’s position as the key player in the South Caucasus and ease the presence of Türkiye in its immediate vicinity, which would violate Iran’s security and regional dominance. Moreover, there are also concerns regarding potential incitement of ethnic nationalism among Iranian Azeris, which could lead to deterioration of interethnic relations within Iran. In accordance with that, Iran threatened that this corridor could represent a geopolitical and security threat that surpasses the framework of a simple infrastructural project and leads to changes in the region’s political balance (Koolae and Rashidi 2024, 13).

In recent years, the strategic relations between Azerbaijan and Israel have been often supported by high-level diplomatic visits and numerous bilateral agreements that illustrate deep economic and political ties between these two countries. These relations show a long-term and valuable partnership. Even though stronger cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel brought along benefits for both countries, Iran sharply criticized this cooperation, seeing it as a serious threat to its security. Recent relations between Azerbaijan and Israel have caused concerns in terms of security issues and have initiated discussions on the potential broadening of cooperation in the Middle East. This partnership left a deep mark on the geopolitical dynamics of the region, including changes in the foreign policy of Iran, which tends to undermine the growing relations between Azerbaijan and Israel, as well as the possibility of strengthening relations between Israel and Türkiye (Miholjčić Ivković 2023, 49).

For centuries, the Caucasus was the place of competition for influence between Russia, Iran, and Türkiye. Today, given the Russian

conflict in Ukraine, Türkiye sees a possibility of consolidating its power in the region. The changes in the geopolitical situation, and especially the Russo-Ukrainian war, the support of Azerbaijan, and the construction of the Zangezur Corridor, offer Türkiye a possibility to ensure access to the Caspian Sea resources and thus fulfill its long-term geopolitical ambitions, which represents a threat to the position of Iran in the region. Moreover, the Zangezur Corridor also has ethnic and political implications. Through connecting the Turkophone countries, and especially Azerbaijan and Türkiye, the idea of unification of the “Turkic world” and “one Azerbaijan” is incited, including the Azerbaijani minority in Iran as well. The statements of the Azerbaijani and Turkish leaders, as well as the cultural symbols, such as the poem read by Erdoğan, encourage ethnic and separatist sentiments in the Iranian Azerbaijan, which increases Iranian concerns regarding possible internal destabilization (Koolae and Rashidi 2024, 4).

However, even beyond these tensions, Baku and Tehran are attempting to maintain the pragmatic dialogue, above all through economic commissions and regional formats, such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). There is a potential for energy cooperation and infrastructural projects to mitigate political differences, but only in the case when the influence of external security pressures is reduced.

RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN THE SHADOW OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND ENERGY INTERESTS

The relations between Azerbaijan and the United States of America are based on a series of strategic interests, but are often marked by changeable dynamics due to the issues of democracy, human rights, and the impact of the diaspora. The US recognized Azerbaijan as an important geopolitical partner in the energy transit and the fight against terrorism, but the relations never reached the level of formal alliance due to different values and political approaches.

The strategic interests of the United States of America in the South Caucasus region date from the early 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. At that point, the US attempted to support the independence and stability of the newly formed states through the “south corridor” policy. However, the construction of the state and nation in the

post-Soviet space is still disputed, since the South Caucasus region has once again become the field of conflict between major geopolitical and regional powers, and above all, the United States of America and Russia. Azerbaijan especially gained significance as a country rich in resources and a key player in projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline, TANAP, and TAP gas pipeline, which transport oil and gas to Europe, bypassing Russia and Iran, where the USA played a significant role in encouraging the construction of these energy corridors. The goal was to enable the transport of the Caspian oil and gas to the European market, thus reducing Europe's dependence on Russian and Iranian energy resources. These projects also aimed to strengthen Europe's energy security and promote economic cooperation in the region (Poghosyan 2022, 37; 42–43).

The contemporary dynamics and challenges over the last years suggest that Washington attempted to increase its diplomatic engagement in the South Caucasus. However, limited attention and resources, especially when compared to the role of Türkiye, Russia, and the EU, have made the American influence less present. Still, in 2023, the USA mediated the dialogue between Baku and Yerevan in Washington, representing a renewed interest in the region (Republic of Armenia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023). The cooperation will still depend on the preparedness of both sides to manage their differences in attitudes and maintain a pragmatic dialogue in the domains of energy and security.

CONCLUSION

The multi-vector foreign policy of Azerbaijan is reflected in a complex balance between different regional and global actors who play a key role in the security, economy, and political alignments of the country. This approach, which Azerbaijan applied for more than two decades, is seen as a pragmatic response to geopolitical challenges, but also as a strategy that enables the country to avoid dependence on one partner or one global force. In recent years, the relations with Türkiye strengthened to the point of alliance, especially in the fields of energy and security. For Azerbaijan, Türkiye is the key partner in the transit of energy resources towards Europe, as well as support in political and military aspects, especially in the context of the conflict with Armenia. However, strengthening these relations is not without challenges since it

comes with the need to balance relations with other significant partners, such as Russia and Iran.

Even though it is a significant element of Azerbaijan's foreign policy, Russia is a controversial factor. Historically speaking, this relationship is defined by common security interests, as well as deep political and economic differences, especially in terms of Azerbaijan's interest in European integration. Despite these interests, Azerbaijan succeeds in maneuvering between Russia and Türkiye, maintaining critical neutrality in regional and global security issues.

As the largest neighbor and an important factor in the region, Iran also holds significant influence over the politics of Azerbaijan. Even though these two countries occasionally dispute over religious differences and policies regarding the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan successfully maneuvered a pragmatic approach to Iran, especially regarding energy and economic interests. Iran remains a significant source of energy cooperation, but at the same time, Azerbaijan has to take care of its relations with the West and Türkiye, which are often opposed to the interests of Iran.

The relations with the United States of America, even though less intense when compared to other partners, remain significant due to the support for democratization and human rights. In the context of relations with the West, Azerbaijan faced challenges in human rights, but it still succeeded in maintaining strategic relations with the USA, especially in the context of energy security and geopolitical stability of the region. Armenia, on the other hand, represents the most significant security challenge to Azerbaijan, since the long-term and deep conflict regarding Nagorno-Karabakh defines the relations with Armenia.

In the future, maintaining stability in the multi-vector foreign policy of Azerbaijan requires strategic endurance, diplomacy, and the ability to adjust quickly to new global and regional trends. Challenges such as new regional conflicts, economic competition, and pressure from big powers all present challenges for the stability of this policy. However, Azerbaijan holds a clear vision of its future as an active player on the international scene and will continue to be a key factor in the regional and global security and economy.

The success of the multi-vector policy of Azerbaijan will depend on its ability to find a balance between its regional interests and global allied relations, as well as on the ability to continue with economic

and security reforms that will enable maintaining independence and significance of the country in international relations.

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ВИШЕВЕКТОРСКА СПОЉНА ПОЛИТИКА АЗЕРБЕЈЦАНА***

Резиме

Рад анализира развој вишевекторске спољне политике Азербејџана у последњих десет година, са акцентом на стратегије које држава користи како би максимизовала своју безбедносну, економску и дипломатску корист у сложенем регионалном окружењу. Истраживање показује да Азербејџан примењује мултивекторски приступ као свесно портфолио-управљање ризиком, избегавајући потпуну зависност од једног глобалног или регионалног актера. У раду је развијен теоријски оквир заснован на реалистичким концептима анархије и националних интереса, као и на теоријама хеџинга и омнибалансирања. Ови концепти омогућавају разумевање вишевекторности као активне стратегије мале и средње државе у региону Јужног Кавказа, која комбинује диверзификацију безбедносних, економских и дипломатских веза како би се одржала флексибилност у међународним односима. Резултати анализе показују да Азербејџан у последњој декади успешно балансира односе са Русијом, Турском, Ираном, САД-ом и другим регионалним актерима. Систематска употреба мултивекторности омогућава Бакуу да утиче на регионалну стабилност, заштити своје економске интересе, посебно у енергетском сектору, и истовремено

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одржи дипломатску аутономију. Истовремено, студија указује на ограничења оваквог приступа, као што су ризик од претеране зависности од одређених партнера у критичним ситуацијама и могућност конфликта интереса међу великим силама. Закључно, рад потврђује да је вишевекторска политика Азербејџана стратегија адаптивног и рационалног управљања националним интересима у сложеном регионалном и глобалном окружењу. Она представља пример мале државе која активно користи диверзификацију односа као алат за одржавање суверенитета, безбедности и економске добити. Ово истраживање пружа основу за будуће анализе вишевекторских стратегија других држава у сличним геополитичким контекстима.

Кључне речи: Азербејџан, Јужни Кавказ, вишевекторска спољна политика, геополитика, ресурси, енергетика

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