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A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE NATO-AZERBAIJAN PARTNERSHIP IN NEW GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXTS

Abstract

This article examines the historical trajectory and essence of NATO-Azerbaijani relations, affirming that these relations embody a robust partnership. The significance of these relations has amplified for both parties in the face of new geopolitical realities. Several factors contribute to the importance of these relations, including Azerbaijan's geographical location, its geostrategic position, its abundant energy resources, and its strong military presence in the region. Furthermore, Azerbaijan's implementation of an independent, multi-vector foreign policy in a complex geopolitical landscape is a crucial factor in its relationship with NATO. The article also acknowledges the existence of certain factors that negatively impact Azerbaijan-NATO relations or have the potential to do so. In conclusion, it is important to note that while Azerbaijan does not aspire to join the alliance, its policy to continue relations with NATO amidst emerging geopolitical realities in the world and the region remains unchanged.

Keywords: NATO-Azerbaijani relations, robust partnership, geopolitical realities, geographical location, geostrategic position, energy resources, military presence, independent foreign policy

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NATO-Azərbaycan tərəfdaşlığının yeni geosiyasi kontekstdə hərtərəfli təhlili

Xülasə

Bu məqalə NATO-Azərbaycan münasibətlərinin tarixi trayektoriyasını və əsas mahiyyətini araşdırır və bu əlaqələrin möhkəm tərəfdaşlığı təcəssüm etdirdiyini təsdiq edir. Bu münasibətlərin əhəmiyyəti yeni geosiyasi reallıqlar fonunda hər iki tərəf üçün daha da artır. Azərbaycanın coğrafi mövqeyi, geostrateji mövqeyi, zəngin enerji resursları və regionda güclü hərbi mövcudluğu da daxil olmaqla, bu əlaqələrin əhəmiyyətinə bir sıra amillər təsir göstərir. Bundan başqa, Azərbaycanın mürəkkəb geosiyasi mənzərədə müstəqil, çoxvektorlu xarici siyasət yeritməsi onun NATO ilə münasibətlərində həlledici amildir. Məqalədə Azərbaycan-NATO münasibətlərinə mənfi təsir göstərən və ya bunu etmək potensialına malik olan müəyyən amillərin mövcudluğu da etiraf edilir. Sonda qeyd etmək vacibdir ki, Azərbaycan alyansa qoşulmağa can atmasa da, dünyada və regionda yaranan geosiyasi reallıqlar fonunda NATO ilə münasibətləri davam etdirmək siyasəti dəyişməz olaraq qalır.

Açar sözlər: NATO-Azərbaycan münasibətləri, möhkəm tərəfdaşlıq, geosiyasi reallıqlar, coğrafi mövqe, geostrateji mövqe, enerji resursları, hərbi mövcudluq, müstəqil xarici siyasət

Introduction

Over the past three decades, following the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence, the nation's relationship with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has occupied a significant position within its multi-faceted foreign policy. The foundations of Azerbaijan-NATO relations, established in the early 1990s, can be characterized as a robust partnership that aligns with the

interests of both parties. As time progressed, the cornerstone of Azerbaijan's strategy to deepen its ties with the Atlantic alliance was based on several key objectives. These included the fortification of its independence, effective integration into the international system of relations, securing international support for its territorial integrity, adapting to the military and security sector standards of the alliance, and mitigating security concerns for a nation situated in a complex geopolitical environment. Simultaneously, NATO has accorded special significance to its relations with Azerbaijan. The primary factors that characterize this importance are Azerbaijan's geographical location and the geopolitical and security interests of the alliance. In recent decades, Azerbaijan-NATO relations have evolved through various phases. Let us briefly examine the historical backdrop of these relations. Azerbaijan's relationship with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) commenced in March 1992, when Azerbaijan joined the Cooperation Council. This platform, designed for cooperation with post-Soviet and post-socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe, was rebranded as the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council in 1997.

The foundation of the comprehensive partnership between NATO and Azerbaijan was laid in 1994 when the National Leader Heydar Aliyev signed the "Partnership for Peace" (PfP) framework document. This marked the beginning of a strategic alliance that would shape the geopolitical landscape in the years to come. Several key documents have defined the main principles and objectives of the individual partnership between Azerbaijan and NATO. These include the PfP Presentation Document (1996), the Planning and Review Process (1997), and the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP, 2004). These documents outline the areas of cooperation, which encompass defense and security sector reforms, development of military forces according to NATO standards, participation in peacekeeping operations led by the Alliance, civil emergency planning, resolution of emerging security issues, and cooperation in fields such as science, environment, and diplomacy. In 2004, Azerbaijan joined the IPAP, which facilitated regular political dialogue with the Atlantic bloc, systematized bilateral cooperation, and allowed for more flexible agreement on new cooperative activities of mutual interest. Azerbaijan successfully implemented the first (2005-2007), second (2008-2010), third (2012-2013), fourth (2014-2016), and fifth (2017-2019) cycles of the IPAP document (1). This underscores the nation's commitment to fostering a robust and dynamic partnership with NATO. Indeed, Azerbaijan's active participation in NATO's peacekeeping operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq has significantly bolstered the development of their relations. Particularly noteworthy is Azerbaijan's substantial logistical contribution to the Northern Distribution Network. This network was instrumental in the transportation of military and humanitarian supplies, as well as personnel, for the operations conducted by the alliance in Afghanistan. This pivotal role further underscores Azerbaijan's commitment to its partnership with NATO and its involvement in maintaining regional and global security.

Indeed, it's worth noting that approximately 40% of the goods transported to Afghanistan passed through Azerbaijan (2). This fact underscores the strategic importance of Azerbaijan in the logistics of these operations. The military operations conducted by NATO in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s significantly heightened Azerbaijan's importance to the alliance from a security and geostrategic perspective. During this period, Azerbaijan and NATO engaged in high-level political dialogue and diplomatic contacts on strategic local, regional, and global issues. This led to numerous mutual visits by high-level officials from Azerbaijan and the alliance. A noteworthy fact is that the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, has participated in NATO summits eight times to date. However, it's important to consider Azerbaijan-NATO relations not only at a bilateral level. For instance, between 2017 and 2020, Azerbaijan hosted seven meetings involving high-ranking military personnel from NATO-Russia and the US-Russia (3). This further demonstrates Azerbaijan's role as a significant player in the broader geopolitical landscape. Let us underscore the significant support extended by NATO to Azerbaijan over the past three decades. Throughout this period of collaboration, NATO has consistently demonstrated its firm commitment to upholding the territorial integrity and sovereignty of our nation, surpassing other European institutions in its

clarity and steadfastness. This unwavering stance has been prominently reflected in the declarations and resolutions issued during NATO summit meetings, as well as in the pronouncements made by high-ranking officials within the alliance. Particularly during the tumultuous years of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, NATO's unequivocal support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity held immense political significance. The National Security Concept of 2007 further underscores Azerbaijan's deep-seated commitment to fostering cooperation with NATO, as evidenced by our active participation in various programs initiated by the alliance (4).

In addition, Azerbaijan's comprehensive military doctrine has assigned a prominent role to elements such as collaboration with NATO, utilization of the alliance's "Partnership for Peace" program, and the execution of the Operational Plan for Individual Partnerships in the process of military development (5). Despite the extensive cooperation and broad relations that have been established between Azerbaijan and the alliance over the past three decades, Azerbaijan has not expressed any intention to join NATO, nor has it pursued any initiatives in this direction. This is in line with the essence of the official stance of Baku in its relations with the Atlantic bloc, which is characterized by a non-alignment and multi-vector approach. Specifically, Azerbaijan's admission into the Non-Aligned Movement in 2011 unequivocally indicated that our country has no intention of becoming a member of any military-political alliance. This stance reflects Azerbaijan's strategic approach to maintaining its sovereignty while fostering cooperative relationships on the international stage. One of the pivotal facets influencing Azerbaijan-NATO relations pertains to its close ties with Turkey. The military and political alliance between Azerbaijan and Turkey, a prominent member of the North Atlantic bloc, has been instrumental in aligning the Azerbaijani armed forces with NATO standards and bolstering their combat capabilities. Notably, Azerbaijan's robust collaboration with Turkey within NATO's "Partnership for Peace" program underscores the depth of their cooperation. The alliance between Azerbaijan and Turkey, a key military and political force within NATO, holds significance for Azerbaijan's security interests. Despite Azerbaijan's non-membership status within NATO, its alliance with Turkey serves as a vital aspect of the country's security landscape, offering implicit security assurances, albeit indirectly, from the Atlantic bloc. Many local analysts interpret this dynamic as NATO's indirect provision of a security "umbrella" over Azerbaijan (6). It is pertinent to highlight that Azerbaijan-Turkey military cooperation is highly regarded within the North Atlantic bloc, representing a substantial pillar supporting Azerbaijan-NATO relations. This mutually beneficial partnership contributes significantly to the broader objectives of both Azerbaijan and NATO, fostering regional stability and security (7).

Recent geopolitical developments in Europe and globally have significantly influenced NATO's strategy, including its policy towards Azerbaijan and the region in which it is situated. The onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war in February 2022 has reshaped the strategic environment surrounding the alliance, bringing several factors to the forefront of NATO's global and regional policy. This shift is reflected in the new Strategic Concept adopted by the North Atlantic bloc at the Madrid summit on June 30, 2022. The distinguishing features of this new Strategic Concept, compared to previously adopted documents, can be summarized as follows:

a) The peace in Russia's Euro-Atlantic space is perceived as the most significant and direct threat to stability, including that of the alliance. b) China is viewed as a strategic adversary of the alliance due to its revisionist, ambitious, and protectionist policies in the global economy. c) There is an emphasis on increasing military power. d) The protection of common values and democratic political systems is prioritized. e) There is a focus on strengthening social sustainability within Alliance member countries (8).

Thus, both the newly adopted strategic document and the practical steps taken by the alliance indicate that changes in the global and Eurasian geopolitical landscape, coupled with escalating security risks, are prompting NATO to pursue a more proactive policy. When we refer to an active policy and strategy in this context, we are not only addressing relations within the Union but also extending this to encompass relations with neighboring regions and partner states. Amid the backdrop of ongoing geopolitical processes, it is evident that the geostrategic significance of

Azerbaijan, and the region in which it is situated, has escalated for the alliance. Energy security emerges as another critical factor shaping Azerbaijan's position in NATO's regional strategy. Over the past two decades, the issue of energy security has gained considerable relevance for the alliance. This was underscored at the Riga summit in 2006, where the alliance articulated its strategic objectives of securing access to natural resources and ensuring their reliable export to safeguard its vital interests (9).

The intensification of the geopolitical conflict between the West and Russia, particularly following the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war, has amplified the importance of energy security in the alliance's policy. From NATO's perspective, Azerbaijan is perceived as one of the partner countries with optimal supplier and logistical capabilities to diminish energy dependence on Russia and access alternative energy sources. This aligns with Azerbaijan's policy of diversifying the export of its energy resources, further consolidating its strategic partnership with NATO. In recent years, Azerbaijan has continued to pursue a policy of deepening relations with NATO, particularly in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War. This period has been marked by a series of reciprocal visits and meetings between Azerbaijani officials and military personnel and their counterparts in the Alliance. A notable instance was the participation of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in the NATO summit held in Brussels in December 2021. During this summit, President Aliyev met with NATO Secretary General Y. Stoltenberg and affirmed Azerbaijan's status as a reliable partner of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. This sentiment was reciprocated by Stoltenberg, who characterized Azerbaijan as a "valuable partner" (10). In May 2023, Hikmet Hajiyev, the Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan, visited NATO Headquarters in Brussels, where he conducted a series of meetings with representatives of the Alliance. Xavier Colomina, NATO's Special Representative for South Caucasus and Central Asia made several visits to Azerbaijan between 2021 and 2023 to discuss bilateral relations and regional processes with Azerbaijani officials. During one of his recent visits, Colomina noted a revitalization of Azerbaijan-NATO relations, signifying a return to the pre-pandemic state (11). Another significant aspect is NATO's acceptance of the new realities that have emerged in the South Caucasus following the Second Karabakh War. This acceptance signifies NATO's adaptability and responsiveness to changing geopolitical landscapes. It also underscores the increased geostrategic importance of Azerbaijan and the region in which it is situated for the Alliance. This is particularly relevant in the context of energy security, a factor that has gained considerable importance for NATO over the past two decades. The geopolitical conflict between the West and Russia, especially following the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war, has amplified the importance of energy security in the policy of the Alliance. From this perspective, Azerbaijan, with its potential as a supplier and its logistical capabilities, is seen as a key partner in reducing energy dependence on Russia and gaining access to alternative energy sources. This aligns with Azerbaijan's policy of diversifying the export of its energy resources, further consolidating its strategic partnership with NATO. Indeed, the NATO summit held in Brussels in June 2021 marked a significant milestone in the recognition of the resolution of the conflict. The final text of the summit underscored that NATO, akin to Azerbaijan, views the conflict as concluded (12). Post the cessation of the Second Karabakh War, NATO has been supportive of the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. While NATO does not serve as a direct mediator between the parties, it endorses the mediation initiatives undertaken by the European Union and the United States in the peace process. This stance reflects NATO's commitment to fostering stability and peace in the region, even as it navigates the complexities of geopolitical dynamics (13). Over the past three years, the relationship between NATO and Azerbaijan has demonstrated positive trajectories, albeit punctuated by certain adverse incidents. One such incident pertains to the actions taken by Azerbaijani activists along the Lachin-Shusha Road and the establishment of a control-release point by Azerbaijan in Lachin, in proximity to the Armenian border. These actions have elicited expressions of concern from officials affiliated with the alliance (14). While Azerbaijan sustains a constructive relationship with NATO, there are discernible elements that have negatively impacted this relationship. Of particular significance is the stance adopted by certain prominent

Western states and organizations towards post-conflict issues, especially in relation to the ongoing peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This stance is perceived by Azerbaijan as biased and prejudiced, contributing to tensions in its relations with the Western community. In this context, challenges emanating from Azerbaijan's interactions with the West can indirectly influence its relations with NATO. As a result, strains in Azerbaijan's diplomatic ties with Western entities reverberate in its engagement with NATO, underscoring the interconnectedness of regional dynamics and international partnerships. This highlights the complexity of geopolitical relationships and the delicate balance required in maintaining constructive international relations. An important consideration in this context is that Azerbaijan has been formulating its relations with the alliance with due regard to the geopolitical realities and security risks in the South Caucasus and the broader post-Soviet space.

It is noteworthy that Azerbaijan's risk reduction strategy, also known as Strategic Hedging, or its multi-vector foreign policy, involves relinquishing a unilateral policy and mitigating potential risks associated with regional powers, without engaging in conflict with them. Prioritizing its security interests, Azerbaijan opts for a policy of non-alignment, thereby avoiding becoming a geopolitical target of distinct power centers. From this perspective, it is instructive to recall the significant threats that the integration policies of several post-Soviet countries, such as Georgia and Ukraine, have posed to these nations over the past 10-15 years. For instance, Russia's military intervention in Georgia during the "5-day war" in South Ossetia in August 2008, and the response of NATO and the West as a whole to this intervention, underscore the necessity for regional states to adopt a more cautious and balanced policy. The ongoing situation in Ukraine since 2014, including the still-raging Russia-Ukraine war, further exemplifies this point. Another crucial factor to consider is that the Alliance itself approaches the strategic aspirations of states wishing to join the alliance with caution and hesitancy, with the Russian factor playing a significant role in this approach. In this context, the unilateral policy of some regional states creates a substantial security void around them, which could potentially escalate into an existential threat for those states. This highlights the complex interplay of geopolitical dynamics and the importance of strategic diplomacy in maintaining regional stability.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory and core essence of NATO-Azerbaijani relations have been examined, and the results affirm that these relations embody a robust partnership. The significance of these relations has amplified for both parties in the face of new geopolitical realities. Several factors contribute to the importance of these relations.

These include Azerbaijan's geographical location, its geostrategic position, its abundant energy resources, and its strong military presence in the region. Furthermore, Azerbaijan's implementation of an independent, multi-vector foreign policy in a complex geopolitical landscape is a crucial factor in its relationship with NATO. In the context of Azerbaijan's balanced, multi-vector foreign policy, its relations with the North Atlantic bloc serve as a stabilizing factor in the regional geopolitical configuration. Additionally, the adaptation of the country's armed forces and security sector to NATO standards, which enhances combat readiness and operational capacity, plays a significant role in assuaging security concerns.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the existence of certain factors that negatively impact Azerbaijan-NATO relations or have the potential to do so. These factors prevent us from assuming that the development of Azerbaijan-NATO relations will follow an exclusively upward trajectory.

Moreover, Azerbaijan's partnership and relations with the North Atlantic bloc, and more broadly, the geopolitics of the South Caucasus involving the West and Russia, do not imply that Azerbaijan is willing to become a pawn in their conflict. Instead, Azerbaijan is committed to establishing an effective regional security system based on common interests, mutual benefits, and international law, rather than divisive lines.

In conclusion, it is important to note that while Azerbaijan does not aspire to join the alliance, its policy to continue relations with NATO amidst emerging geopolitical realities in the world and the region remains unchanged. Azerbaijan believes that this policy will yield geopolitical and security benefits for both parties.

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