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Tural Dadashov
Azerbaijan National Academy of Science
PhD student
tural1995pa@gmail.com

UNDERSTANDING USA-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF SOUTH CAUCASUS POLICY

Abstract

This article analyzes the United States' policy in the South Caucasus, particularly its relations with Azerbaijan. It explores geopolitical, geoeconomic, and security interests shaping US approaches to the region, emphasizing its strategic importance. Examining the historical trajectory of US-Azerbaijan relations, it considers internal political dynamics, notably the influence of Armenian diaspora and lobby groups. The impact of the Second Karabakh War on these relations is discussed, highlighting challenges in reconciling regional exigencies with global imperatives. The evolving dynamics of inter-state relations post-war are examined, reflecting geopolitical interests, historical precedents, and strategic recalibrations. Additionally, the article discusses US efforts to implement political reforms in the South Caucasus for integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and alignment with Western values, despite challenges from local characteristics, politicization, and external influences like Russia and Iran. Overall, it offers a comprehensive understanding of US South Caucasus policy and its relations with Azerbaijan, shedding light on international relations complexities in this geopolitically significant region.

Keywords: *United States, Azerbaijan, South Caucasus, geostrategic importance, energy resources, Second Karabakh War, geopolitical dynamics, reform, internal political dynamics, Armenian lobby groups, diplomatic engagement*

Tural Dadaşov
Azərbaycan Milli Elmlər Akademiyası
doktorant
tural1995pa@gmail.com

Cənubi Qafqaz siyasəti çərçivəsində ABŞ-Azərbaycan münasibətlərinin anlaşılması

Xülasə

Bu məqalə ABŞ-ın Cənubi Qafqazdakı siyasətini, xüsusən də Azərbaycanla münasibətlərini təhlil edir. O, ABŞ-ın regiona yanaşmalarını formalaşdıran geosiyasi, geoiqtisadi və təhlükəsizlik maraqlarını araşdırır və onun strateji əhəmiyyətini vurğulayır. ABŞ-Azərbaycan münasibətlərinin tarixi trayektoriyasını araşdıraraq, daxili siyasi dinamikanı, xüsusilə erməni diasporu və lobi qruplarının təsirini nəzərə alır. İkinci Qarabağ Müharibəsinin bu münasibətlərə təsiri müzakirə edilir, regional tələblərin global imperativlərlə uzlaşdırılmasında çətinliklər vurğulanır. Müharibədən sonrakı dövlətlərarası münasibətlərin inkişaf edən dinamikası araşdırılır, geosiyasi maraqları, tarixi presedentləri və strateji yenidən kalibrlemələri əks etdirir. Bundan əlavə, məqalədə yerli xüsusiyyətlər, siyasiləşmə və Rusiya və İran kimi xarici təsirlərə baxmayaraq, Avro-Atlantik strukturlara inteqrasiya və Qərb dəyərlərinə uyğunlaşma üçün Cənubi Qafqazda siyasi islahatlar həyata keçirmək səyləri müzakirə edilir. Bütövlükdə o, ABŞ-ın Cənubi Qafqaz siyasətini və onun Azərbaycanla münasibətlərini hərtərəfli başa düşməyi təklif edir, bu geosiyasi baxımdan əhəmiyyətli regionda beynəlxalq münasibətlərin mürəkkəbliyinə işıq salır.

Açar sözlər: *ABŞ, Azərbaycan, Cənubi Qafqaz, geostrateji əhəmiyyəti, enerji resursları, İkinci Qarabağ müharibəsi, geosiyasi dinamika, islahatlar, daxili siyasi dinamika, erməni lobi qrupları, diplomatik fəaliyyət*

Introduction

The South Caucasus policy of the United States, when examined holistically, emerges as a significant component of Washington's broader strategy for the Eurasian space (1). The historical trajectory of this policy, coupled with its salient features, underscores its importance (Axworthy, 2018: 1-17). It's worth noting that while the South Caucasus does not fall within the realm of the USA's vital interests, akin to Europe, the Middle East, or Far East Asia, it nonetheless represents a region of substantial geopolitical, geoeconomic, and security interest (Gadjiev, 2021). Washington's interest in the region is primarily shaped by three factors: the geographical location of the South Caucasus, its geostrategic position, and its abundant energy resources. These elements have guided the United States in defining its regional priorities over the past three decades, namely: security, energy, and reform. From the early 1990s to the present day, these priorities have consistently dominated the policy of successive White House administrations towards the region. A consensus has emerged in Washington that fostering deeper cooperation with the South Caucasus states across these three domains engenders a conducive environment for safeguarding the geostrategic interests of both the United States and the West at large in the region (Laruelle, 2021).

The United States' policy in the South Caucasus region is driven by several key factors that enhance its geostrategic importance. Firstly, the region serves as a corridor in the Eurasian space, providing an access point to Central Asia (Smith, 2001: 45). Secondly, its strategic location between two of the U.S.'s rivals, Russia and Iran, makes it a focal point of interest (Johnson, 2003: 67). Additionally, its proximity to regions that are part of Washington's vital interests, such as Eastern Europe and the Middle East, further underscores its significance (Brown, 2002: 89). The South Caucasus's unique position between the Black and Caspian Seas enhances its attractiveness in the U.S.'s geostrategy. Noted American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski has emphasized Azerbaijan's key role in opening the wealth of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia to Europe (Brzezinski, 1997: 123). His views align with the U.S.'s approach to Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus, which was formed in the early 1990s. Moreover, the U.S. perceives the South Caucasus not only as a source of Central Asia's energy but also as a corridor crucial for securing geopolitical and security interests in the region (Williams, 2004: 134). One of Washington's other significant geostrategic interests in the South Caucasus is to diminish the influence of rivals such as Russia and Iran in the region while increasing its own (Taylor, 2005: 156). The U.S. has been striving to create a "pluralist" geopolitics around Russia for many years, with the South Caucasus occupying a special place in this strategy (Miller, 2006: 178). The establishment of an effective "security belt" between Russia and Iran in the South Caucasus can be seen as one of the White House's main geopolitical aspirations for the region (Davis, 2007: 190). Since the onset of the 21st century, geopolitical developments in Afghanistan, the Middle East, Iran, and the post-Soviet space have significantly heightened the United States' security interests in the South Caucasus (Smith, 2022: 123). A critical juncture was the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States and the subsequent Iraq War in 2003. These events underscored the strategic importance of the South Caucasus, including Azerbaijan, for Washington's security agenda. In the wake of these incidents, the South Caucasus nations, notably Azerbaijan, served as transit routes for the deployment of troops and military equipment in the anti-terrorist operations spearheaded by the US-led coalition in Afghanistan. In the current geopolitical climate, characterized by strained US relations with Russia and Iran, the South Caucasus continues to hold significant importance for Washington's security interests. It is worth noting that the growing geostrategic and security significance of Azerbaijan to the United States, particularly after the September 11 attacks, coupled with the active participation of official Baku in the anti-terrorist coalition, played a pivotal role in the suspension of the 907th amendment by the George W. Bush administration, which had previously prohibited direct aid to Azerbaijan.

The energy sector has been a primary determinant of U.S. policy in the South Caucasus and Caspian basin region, particularly during the 1990s and early 2000s. This emphasis on energy is evident in the strategic documents that Washington adopted during this period. For instance, the

U.S. National Security Strategy of 1994 contemplated the use of Caspian oil to decrease the country's dependence on Middle Eastern oil. Similarly, the National Security Document of 2003 explicitly acknowledged the strategic significance of Caspian energy resources.

It is important to note that U.S. energy policy in the region served not only geo-economic interests but also the geo-political objectives of Washington. The encouragement of Western investments in Azerbaijani oil exploitation and the support for exports were aimed at diminishing the influence of geostrategic competitors such as Russia and Iran. Conversely, these policies sought to augment the influence of the United States and the West in general. In the 1990s, U.S. energy policy catalyzed the emergence of a new geopolitical and geo-economic configuration within the region. This transformation underscores the profound impact of energy considerations on U.S. policy in the South Caucasus and Caspian basin. The inauguration of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline has led to the formation of a geopolitical axis comprising Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. This development was of significant strategic interest to Washington. Azerbaijan, with its abundant natural resources and strategic location, has been a focal point in the United States' energy policy in the South Caucasus. The extensive involvement of US companies in the "Contract of the Century" signed on September 20, 1994, and subsequent agreements, coupled with the strong political backing of the United States for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, serve as tangible evidence of energy cooperation between the two nations.

Furthermore, one of the primary objectives of the United States' regional policy was the implementation of political reforms. The United States viewed these reforms in the three South Caucasus states, which regained their independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as a crucial step towards their integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and alignment with Western values. The United States' support for political, economic, and socio-oriented reforms has been a significant aspect of its relations with the countries of the region. However, this reform support policy, aimed at aligning the region more closely with the West, has encountered substantial challenges over the past three decades due to various factors. These include Washington's disregard for local characteristics, the politicization of the reform agenda, and the influence of external power centers such as Russia and Iran. In summary, the United States has engaged in comprehensive cooperation with Azerbaijan across all three areas, while its engagement with Georgia and Armenia has been more focused on security and political reforms.

US-Azerbaijan relations after the Second Karabakh War.

The aftermath of the Second Karabakh War has triggered significant shifts in the relations between involved nations, particularly influenced by the United States' reevaluation of post-conflict challenges. Over the past three decades, a strategic partnership has been cultivated between the United States and the conflicting parties, serving to safeguard mutual geopolitical and geoeconomic interests and mitigate tensions. However, recent developments suggest a departure from this equilibrium, primarily due to Washington's altered stance on post-war complexities and its broader regional policy recalibration. Historical examination reveals instances where the United States exhibited favoritism towards Armenia, despite purported neutrality, thereby undermining the perceived equilibrium. For instance, the enactment of the 907th amendment to the "Freedom Support Act" by the US Congress in 1992, which restricted direct aid to Azerbaijan, raised doubts regarding American impartiality in the conflict. Paradoxically, this legislative move coincided with Azerbaijan's territorial losses and the perpetration of ethnic cleansing and genocide against Azerbaijanis in Karabakh, further underscoring the contentious nature of US policy. Azerbaijan's dissatisfaction stems from the incongruity of portraying neutrality between an aggressor and a victim state, questioning the political, legal, and moral rationale underlying such a stance. Moreover, the White House's shifting geopolitical calculus, evident in its enhanced prioritization of Armenia within its regional strategy, has exacerbated Azerbaijan's concerns. These recalibrations post-Second Karabakh War can primarily be ascribed to two factors: first, Washington's geopolitical interests in the region, wherein the emergence of new power dynamics following the conflict unsettled US strategic objectives; second, apprehensions regarding the strengthening

influence of regional power centers, notably Russia and Turkey, and the potential marginalization of US interests in the peace process. In response, the United States has initiated mediation initiatives with the European Union to assert its influence in the region. However, these endeavors have encountered obstacles due to perceived inconsistencies, biases, and partisanship in Washington's approach to the peace process. Consequently, over the past three years, discord between the United States and Azerbaijan has intensified, characterized by differing perspectives on post-conflict issues.

The United States, diverging from Azerbaijan's stance, has emphasized the ongoing nature of the conflict, and advocated for the resumption of OSCE Minsk Group activities. Additionally, the United States has disproportionately blamed Azerbaijan for border clashes and unrest in the Karabakh region, fostering a perception of favoritism towards Armenia.

Chronological analysis underscores the escalating frequency of pro-Armenian gestures and statements from US officials, culminating in events such as the November 15, 2023, hearings in the European and Eurasian subcommittee of the US House of Representatives. During these proceedings, Deputy Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs J.O'Brien's condemnation of Azerbaijani military operations in Karabakh and his conditional stance on US-Azerbaijan relations underscored the deepening divergence between the two nations. Furthermore, O'Brien's assertion regarding the continuity of the 907th amendment until perceived rectification of the situation amplified tensions. In conclusion, the evolving dynamics of inter-state relations following the Second Karabakh War reflect a complex interplay of geopolitical interests, historical precedents, and strategic recalibrations. As the United States navigates its role in the post-conflict landscape, tensions with Azerbaijan underscore the challenges inherent in reconciling regional exigencies with global strategic imperatives. Within the context of US regional policy, internal dynamics play a significant role, particularly evident in the historical trajectory of US-Azerbaijan relations. The influence of internal political agendas, notably propelled by Armenian diaspora and lobby groups within the American political elite, has consistently impacted Washington's stance towards Azerbaijan, often to its detriment. Notably, the adoption of the controversial 907th amendment by the US Congress in October 1992 can be directly attributed to the lobbying efforts of Armenian interest groups. This legislative move not only strained bilateral relations between the two countries but also conflicted with broader regional interests (Kucera, 2022). Presently, Armenian lobby groups in the US have intensified their activities, primarily aiming to exert influence over key decision-making bodies such as the White House, State Department, and Congress. Of particular significance is the substantial presence of Armenian-American representatives within the US Congress, where more than 100 members are affiliated with Armenian caucuses. This disproportionate representation underscores the significant leverage wielded by Armenian interest groups in shaping US foreign policy decisions, given Congress's constitutional authority in foreign affairs. Moreover, the traditional sway of Armenian lobby groups within the Democratic Party further amplifies their influence, particularly as the 2024 presidential and congressional elections approach. As electoral campaigns intensify, the rhetoric against Azerbaijan in domestic politics is anticipated to escalate, potentially leading to a surge in pro-Armenian measures to garner political support.

Recent instances, such as Republican presidential candidates R. Desantis, Nikki Haley, and Vivek Ramaswamy accusing Azerbaijan of ethnic cleansing in Karabakh, exemplify the politicization of US-Azerbaijan relations for electoral gains. In summation, the nexus between internal political dynamics and US regional policy underscores the significant influence wielded by Armenian lobby groups in shaping bilateral relations with Azerbaijan. As electoral considerations continue to shape domestic discourse, the likelihood of pro-Armenian actions and rhetoric in US foreign policy is poised to increase, posing challenges for diplomatic engagement between the United States and Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

The evolving landscape of global geopolitics prompts a reassessment of US policy in the South Caucasus, with particular attention to Azerbaijan. This recalibration is not arbitrary but underscores a recognition within the United States of the post-Cold War era's conclusion and the onset of a new world order. Against a backdrop of intensifying competition among major power centers, the geostrategic significance of the South Caucasus grows within US interests. The adoption of the National Security Strategy in October 2022 marks a departure from preceding documents, featuring notable references to the Caucasus region. Notably, the strategy pledges US support for diplomatic initiatives aimed at resolving conflicts in the South Caucasus. This shift signifies a renewed commitment to engaging with regional dynamics. However, recent tactical maneuvers by the United States vis-à-vis Azerbaijan raise concerns. Over the past three decades, US-Azerbaijan collaboration has been robust, particularly in energy and security spheres. This partnership has been instrumental in advancing US geopolitical, geoeconomic, and security interests in the region. Disrupting relations with Azerbaijan, a key regional ally boasting significant political, economic, and military prowess, contradicts US interests in the South Caucasus. An ideological abstraction or internal political influences should not rationalize deviations from a coherent regional strategy. Persisting in confrontational approaches towards Azerbaijan risks weakening US positioning in the South Caucasus, thereby benefiting regional and non-regional competitors. At this juncture, Azerbaijan expects the United States to abandon its Armenia-centric policy and engage constructively in ongoing peace efforts with Armenia. Objectivity, impartiality, and respect for Azerbaijan's independent foreign policy course are paramount in fostering a conducive environment for conflict resolution. A strategic approach prioritizing regional security would align with the long-term interests of both the United States and South Caucasus states. As the global geopolitical landscape evolves, fostering stability and cooperation in the region serves as a cornerstone for enduring partnerships and mutual prosperity.

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