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Relations With Regional States During the Heydar Aliyev Period

Abstract

During Heydar Aliyev's leadership of Azerbaijan (1993-2003), the country's foreign policy was shaped by a strategic balancing act between regional powers and global actors. Aliyev sought to assert Azerbaijan's sovereignty, maintain independence from Russian and Iranian influence, and leverage its energy resources to strengthen its geopolitical position. Relations with Russia were complex, involving both cooperation and cautious independence. Ties with Turkey were particularly strong, rooted in shared cultural and strategic interests, especially in energy. Relations with Iran were marked by caution, as Azerbaijan navigated its connections with the West while managing regional sensitivities. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remained a key issue in relations with Armenia, while Georgia became a strategic partner in energy transit and geopolitical alignment. Azerbaijan also fostered ties with Central Asia and pursued closer relations with the West to secure energy exports and international support. Aliyev's foreign policy effectively positioned Azerbaijan as a rising regional power, focused on economic growth, energy security, and maintaining a delicate balance in a complex regional environment.

Keywords: *Azerbaijan, Turkey, Heydar Aliyev, nationwide leader, Caucasus*

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Heydər Əliyev dövründə regional dövlətlərlə münasibətlər

Xülasə

Heydər Əliyevin Azərbaycana rəhbərliyi dövründə (1993–2003) ölkənin xarici siyasəti regional güclərlə qlobal aktorlar arasında strateji tarazlıq aktı ilə formalaşmışdır. Heydər Əliyev Azərbaycanın suverenliyini müdafiə etməyə, onun müstəqilliyini Rusiya və İranın təsirindən qorumağa, geosiyasi mövqelərini möhkəmləndirmək üçün onun enerji resurslarından istifadə etməyə çalışırdı. Rusiya ilə münasibətlər mürəkkəb idi; həm əməkdaşlıq, həm də ehtiyatlı müstəqilliyi əhatə edirdi. Türkiyə ilə əlaqələr xüsusilə güclü idi və ortaq mədəni, dini və strateji maraqlara, xüsusilə enerjiyə əsaslanırdı. Azərbaycan Qərblə əlaqələrini istiqamətləndirərkən regional həssaslıqları idarə etdiyi üçün İranla münasibətlərdə ehtiyatlı davranıb. Dağlıq Qarabağ münaqişəsi Ermənistanla münasibətlərdə mühüm məsələ olaraq qaldığı halda, Gürcüstan enerji keçidində və geosiyasi uyğunlaşmada strateji tərəfdaşa çevrilib. Azərbaycan həmçinin Mərkəzi Asiya ilə əlaqələrini gücləndirib və enerji ixracını və beynəlxalq dəstəyi təmin etmək üçün Qərblə daha sıx əlaqələr qurmağa can atıb. Əliyevin xarici siyasəti faktiki olaraq Azərbaycanı yüksələn regional güc kimi mövqeləndirdi; iqtisadi artıma, enerji təhlükəsizliyinə və mürəkkəb regional mühitdə zərif tarazlığın qorunmasına diqqət yetirib.

Açar sözlər: *Azərbaycan, Türkiyə, Heydər Əliyev, ümummilli lider, Qafqaz*

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Introduction

The great leader Heydar Aliyev, who came to power in our country for the second time in 1993, developed the foreign policy course of independent Azerbaijan with flexible maneuvers without putting it in the tension sectors of global power poles. 3 main aspects of the foreign policy course conducted under his leadership can be pointed out: first of all, the regulation of mutual relations with the states of the region; second, establishment of mutual relations of our country with neighboring countries; third, forming mutual relations with geographically distant countries.

From this point of view, it is possible to systematize the important directions of Azerbaijan's foreign policy on three levels. Level I includes large countries that are geographically neighboring with our country. This includes Russia, Turkey and Iran. Level II consists of relations with regional states - Georgia, Armenia and Central Asian states. The III level consists of the policy conducted with the big countries of Europe, the USA and the Far East. The direction of cooperation with international organizations covers all 3 levels. The important principle that unites the mentioned directions is to ensure maximum national sovereignty of Azerbaijan in the environment of changing international relations (Free Trade Agreement between Georgia and Azerbaijan, 1996).

Research

As a strategic partner of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev attaches great importance to relations with Turkey even during the time when he was the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Nakhchivan MR. Thus, on March 22, 1992, Heydar Aliyev visited Turkey at the invitation of Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal and Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel. During this visit, a cooperation agreement was adopted on March 24. In the agreement, it was noted that the relations between Turkey and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in the fields of education, transport and communication are developing (Hüseynova, 2016, p. 153).

As the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev's first official visit to Turkey, which lasted from February 4 to 11, 1994, became a new impetus for the strengthening of mutual relations. During the visit, a protocol on cooperation and mutual assistance between Azerbaijan and Turkey, an agreement on cooperation in the economic, scientific-technical and cultural sectors, an agreement on the progress of friendship and rich cooperation and 16 important documents were signed.

Heydar Aliyev considered it important to build an important export pipeline along the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey route, taking into account the geopolitical landscape of the country and the existing system of political relations. Heydar Aliyev, who insisted on the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline despite being relatively expensive from an economic point of view, proved that it was the most important and politically correct decision.

Azerbaijan and Iran managed to establish stable, bilateral economic, political and cultural relations as a result of the principle of sincere neighborliness with mutually beneficial cooperation for the benefit of our peoples. During the visit of the former president of Iran Hashemi-Rafsanjani to Baku in October 1993, Heydar Aliyev to Iran in June-July 1994, 64 important documents covering all sectors of mutual relations between the two countries were signed.

During the visit of the great leader Heydar Aliyev to Iran in 2002, the signing of a set of documents reflecting the progress of cooperation in both economic, political and other directions further strengthened the relations between Baku and Tehran, and the creation of a commission on mutual economic cooperation in the economy stimulated the creation of cooperation across sectors. In the negotiations between Heydar Aliyev and Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, as a conclusion of the discussions on the legal status of the Caspian Sea, the implementation of meetings at the level of experts of the two states took on an intensive character. As a result of these ongoing meetings, a number of disagreements between Azerbaijan and Iran regarding the status of the Caspian began to disappear.

One of the issues that received special attention in the foreign policy strategy of the great leader was mutual relations between Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation. According to experts, it is possible to highlight the following periods in the relations between Azerbaijan and Russia from the

time our state independence was achieved (Azərbaycan Respublikasının xarici siyasətinin əsas istiqamətləri (1991-2016), 2017, p. 174):

1. The phase of conflicts - from the achievement of the country's independence - from April 1991 to October 1993;
2. Constructive dialogue - from October 1993 to January 2001;
3. The period of mutually effective cooperation and determination of joint interests - from January 2001 to July 2008;
4. Strategic partnership period - from July 2008 until now.

After Heydar Aliyev came to power again, with his experience and political foresight, he guided the heads of state of Russia to take a healthy position towards our country. In September 1993, Heydar Aliyev met with Russian President Boris Yeltsin in Moscow and discussed cooperation. In September, our country joined the CIS. The CIS issue has a special meaning for Russia and meant the recognition of Russia's influence in a large geopolitical space.

In the 90s of the last century, the forces that tried to use the events observed in the North Caucasus to attack Russian-Azerbaijani relations were more active. During this period, Heydar Aliyev took a wise position as a Caucasian politician and did not create conditions for anyone to accuse Azerbaijan. This conflict was clarified only as a result of Heydar Aliyev's work. As a result, a commission headed by L.A. Kojevnikov, deputy director of the Russian Federal Border Service, was created in January 1996.

It is clear that the stage of establishing good friendly relations between Azerbaijan and Russia on a constructive basis, bilateral cooperation and common interests are directly related to the political, diplomatic activities and rich state experience of national leader Heydar Aliyev. Our country has repeatedly said that it will show interest in the Soviet republics subordinate to the same state of the Russian Federation. Normal, healthy neighborly relations with Russia, special cooperation prospects for our country were of special importance. It should also be noted that the activities of a number of Russian circles hinder the process of restoring good neighborly relations and cooperation between our countries, which harms not only bilateral relations, but also security issues in the region as a whole. For example, in February 1997, the Minister of Cooperation of the Russian Federation with the CIS countries, Aman Tuleyev, released information about the weapons and ammunition sent to Armenia by the Russian Federation in 1994-1996. Shortly after, on April 2, 1997, Lev Rocklin, chairman of the Russian State Duma's Defense Affairs Committee, released his final report on the transfer of 1 billion weapons from Russia to Armenia. This fact greatly aggravated Azerbaijan's relations with Russia. A month later, Defense Minister Igor Rodinov confirmed that Russia illegally sent weapons to Armenia (Mehdiyev, Əhmədoğlu, 2013, p. 181). Amid such political tensions, in July 1997, President Heydar Aliyev visited Moscow. Political and economic relations between the two countries, the status of the Caspian Sea, Armenia-Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as the illegal arms transfer from Russia to Armenia were discussed at the high-level meetings. After the meetings, a number of important documents were signed, including the "Agreement on Friendship and Bilateral Security between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation", which defines the legal basis and strategic nature of bilateral relations between the two countries. At the official reception given in honor of the President of Azerbaijan in July, Heydar Aliyev once again emphasized the effective atmosphere and support between the two countries and peoples: "Azerbaijan will make every effort to develop and strengthen friendly relations between Russia and Azerbaijan" (Azərbaycan Respublikasının Prezidenti Heydər Əliyevin Rusiya Federasiyasına rəsmi səfəri, 1997).

The Baku Declaration signed between our country and the Russian Federation on January 1, 2001 was an important step towards strengthening cooperation between the two sides. Practically all aspects of the developed Russian-Azerbaijani relations and the ideological basis of future joint activities are reflected in this valuable document. In the statement, both sides emphasized the importance of developing military and technical and long-term cooperation based on national interests (*Azərbaycan Respublikasının xarici siyasətinin əsas istiqamətləri (1991-2016)*, 2017, p. 234).

Relations with the two countries of the South Caucasus - Georgia and Armenia - form one of the important directions in Azerbaijan's foreign policy, conducted with the participation of the great leader Heydar Aliyev. Even now, eliminating Armenia's aggression remains one of the important directions of foreign policy. In the policy aimed at Georgia, a serious line of cooperation has been chosen. The non-constructive and aggressive policy of the Armenian state has created considerable artificial geopolitical difficulties in the region. The great leader Heydar Aliyev could not build a regional policy strategy without taking the mentioned factors as a basis.

At the beginning of the 90s of the last century, since the occupation policy of Armenia was still going on, our country was having problems clarifying its mutual relations with Georgia. In 1991-1993, the leadership of purely nationalist forces in Georgia made friendly relations between the two countries difficult. During these times, our compatriots who settled in Georgia were oppressed, they were forced to leave the places where they settled and came back to our country. The reason for this was the ultranationalist policy of the government of Z. Gamsakhurdia.

Georgia's place in Azerbaijan's foreign policy and major projects has been marked since the coming to power of national leader Heydar Aliyev, and our country has been a great support in overcoming the problems and obstacles faced by the neighboring country since the 1990s. This point has been repeatedly emphasized by former Georgian leaders Edward Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili in different ways. During his official visit to Azerbaijan in 2013, Saakashvili said: "Georgia has many allies, but none of them, like Azerbaijan, supported this country in difficult times" (*Azərbaycan Respublikasının xarici siyasətinin əsas istiqamətləri (1991-2016)*, 2017, p. 254).

Although diplomatic relations between our country and Georgia were established in the second half of 1993 until November 18, 1992, these relations were almost non-existent. However, in February 1995, the Georgian embassy was opened in Baku, and in March 1996, the Azerbaijani embassy was opened in Tbilisi. The first agreement between the two countries was signed in 1995 (*"Azərbaycan Prezidenti Heydər Əliyevin Gürcüstan parlamentinin xüsusi iclasında nitqi" (Tbilisi, 8 mart 1996-cı il) sənədinə tarixi arayış*).

The foundation of a new stage in mutual relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia was laid after Heydar Aliyev returned to power. During the difficult economic and political situation of the early 1990s, Georgia was the main strategic direction for Azerbaijan in Heydar Aliyev's foreign policy and global energy strategy, and Heydar Aliyev laid the foundation for another level of mutually beneficial regional economic, political and security systems within the region, and the integration process of the local population began to meet his needs. Under the leadership of Heydar Aliyev, high-level Azerbaijani officials visited different regions (Hüseynova, 2008).

The President of Azerbaijan continued to discuss the dangerous process taking place in Georgia with E. Shevardnadze and other leaders of the country and gave them other important recommendations and support. At the same time, Leader Heydar Aliyev met with officials of third countries and directed them to the problems faced by Georgia within the framework of international events and Georgia encouraged to solve the problems faced (Qasımlı, 2015, p. 82).

At that time, the policy against Georgia conducted by the great leader Heydar Aliyev seriously closed the future of the two countries and their peoples and created a solid foundation for the future peace, stability and continuous progress of the region. On March 8, 1996, after the internal policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan was stabilized and important steps were taken regarding energy projects at the international level, Heydar Aliyev paid his first major foreign visit to Georgia. The historical significance of that visit is that it is the first official visit of the President of Free Azerbaijan to Georgia.

During the visit, the two sides signed some important and valuable documents, signed 22 treaties and trade agreements to strengthen friendly cooperation and mutual security (Mamedova, Guseynov, 2003). On the initiative of Heydar Aliyev, the two countries approved the "Caucasus Declaration on Peace, Security and Cooperation" called the "Tbilisi Declaration". It is no

coincidence that some commentators consider the declaration signed by the two leaders of Tbilisi as the beginning of the "Caucasus Common House" concept.

Despite regional security concerns, internal stability issues and external pressures faced by both mentioned states, the agreement signed through the Baku-Supsa project, which laid the foundation for other future East-West regional projects of Azerbaijan and Georgia, was a great historical agreement and victory. At this stage, some forces opposed to the next energy contracts passing through the Georgian region were eager to make very serious pressures on both Azerbaijan and Georgia, to disrupt the internal political stability in both states. During the implementation of these important projects, a coup d'état attempt, terrorism and assassination attempts on the life of the great leader Heydar Aliyev were organized in the Republic of Azerbaijan, and similar provocations took place in Georgia. The attempt on the life of Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze caused great repercussions and it happened at that time. Both states, which had just won their independence and were still very weak, could overcome these obstacles and pressures against their free policies only due to the intelligent policies of persons with excellent statecraft in the leadership of both states.

On August 17, 1999, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, issued an Order "On the establishment of a working group to resolve issues related to the export of gas from the Shah Deniz field to Azerbaijan between global sales centers." The gas contract for Shah Deniz was approved in 1996. Therefore, it is considered appropriate to export Azerbaijani gas from Georgia through the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline to retail stores around the world, as it is in our long-term and economic interests. The South Caucasus pipeline with a total length of 691,000 meters, 443,000 meters above the territory of Azerbaijan and 248,000 meters above the territory of Georgia was implemented at the end of 2006. Since July 2007, this pipeline supplies natural gas to Georgia and Turkey. The Shah Deniz gas field in the Azerbaijani part of the Caspian Sea was the creation of the existing Europe-Caucasus-Asia-New Silk transport corridor as an important part of Heydar Aliyev's economic and regional activities. During this period, with the useful support of the European Union, significant works have been done to restore the historic Silk Road. In May 1993, TRACECA's Silk Road program for these countries was approved at a meeting in Brussels attended by the transport and trade ministers of five Central Asian republics and three Caucasus. In May 1996, with the participation of the Heads of State and Government of our country, Georgia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, an agreement was signed on the regulation of travel goods in the Saraken region of Turkmenistan. When the national leader Heydar Aliyev and the President of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze met in September 1997, in 1998 they started calling a conference at the level of the Caucasian leaders of the country in the East-West Corridor. At the meeting held in Baku on September 7-8, 1998, which was a member of 32 countries and thirteen international organizations, the Multilateral Basic Agreement on International Transport and the Baku Declaration on the further development of the Europe-Caucasus-Asia transport corridor were adopted (Qasımlı, 2015, p. 113). As one of the most important foreign policy successes of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the international conference on the restoration of the Silk Road and its results in Baku was an important step towards the implementation of the next regional transport projects between Azerbaijan and Georgia.

As we have emphasized, the important partnership between Azerbaijan and Georgia began to strengthen and develop only with the coming to power of the great leader. Agreements on economic, energy, security and bilateral cooperation were signed one after the other. The mentioned process is more noticeable with the conclusion of agreements based on a number of international energy and transport-communication sectors, which play an important role in the geopolitical fate of the South Caucasus (Qasımlı, 2015).

Heydar Aliyev was also serious about the creation of the region's security system. In April 2002, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey adopted the "Trabzon Agreement". As a result, 3 friendly countries formalized the strategic partnership. All three countries agreed to fight together against terrorism and separatism. The said valuable document should be evaluated as a serious step towards the formation of the region's security system. Relations in GUAM, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization and other institutions were getting serious. More than a hundred

documents of legal and normative value have been signed between the two countries. Now the strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Georgia is progressing even more broadly. As a result, our country's policy with Georgia is based on mutual cooperation, restoration of stability in the region, progress of regional integration and establishment of security system.

Regarding Armenia, we face a different picture. Armenia's aggressive policy has created a paradoxical situation in the South Caucasus. The region has a wide opportunity to make intensive progress. The great powers of the earth are more interested in the region just because of this. Normally, the people living here should use the opportunities of the region first. However, by seizing the territory of the neighboring country, Armenia excluded itself from using the natural resources of the region. As a result, the Armenian state hinders the progress of the South Caucasus, and at the same time creates conditions for its people to live in a miserable state. Therefore, almost tens of thousands of people leave Armenia every year. Even the number of Armenians living in Armenia is three times less than the number of those living abroad (Məmmədzadə, 2023, p. 126).

It is clear that due to the aggressive policy of the Armenian state, Azerbaijan has been involved in the ongoing conflict and undeclared war since the beginning of its independence. Since the end of 1987, mass gatherings were held in Yerevan regarding the integration of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Province (NAGO) into Armenia. Abel Aganbekyan, an Armenian academician and adviser on economic issues to the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, tried to economically justify the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia in an interview with the French newspaper (Humanite) in 1987 (Məmmədov, 2013). Taking advantage of M. Gorbachev's pro-Armenian position, the Armenians in 1988 demanded the integration of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Province into the Armenian SSR. Thus, on February 20 of the same year, the Supreme Soviet of the Armenian SSR made a decision to withdraw the NAGO from the subordination of the Azerbaijan SSR and to include it in the Armenian SSR. Until December 1988, 250 thousand of our compatriots were forcibly deported from the residential areas of Armenia where Azerbaijanis live, and hundreds of Azerbaijanis were killed (Mammedzade, 2016, p. 78).

Currently, this country is a mono-ethnic republic and there are no Azerbaijanis left. As a result of the Armenia-Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, 20% of Azerbaijan's lands were trampled over a period of nearly 30 years, more than a million refugees and internally displaced persons were displaced from their homes, and thousands of our soldiers and civilians died.

Considering this point of view, Heydar Aliyev, who returned to power in June 1993 with the insistence of the people, first of all tried to end the military operations and signing a ceasefire agreement and achieved a successful result. Thanks to the decisions made by the great leader, his rich civil experience and wise policy, social and political stability was gradually established in the republic, and serious measures were taken to create an army. As a result, Armenia signed a ceasefire agreement with the Republic of Azerbaijan, which began on May 12, 1994 (Mehdiyev, Əhmədoğlu, 2013, p. 191).

From a pragmatic point of view, the signing of the armistice made it possible to diversify the activities of Azerbaijan in many strategic directions - to invest more foreign investments in the state of Azerbaijan for the creation of a modern oil strategy, to increase the standard of living of the nation, to strengthen the National Army, and to strengthen international positions. In addition, starting from June 1993, Azerbaijan started to successfully implement its oil strategy to ensure the national sovereignty of the country. This strategy was designed by Heydar Aliyev. Heydar Aliyev, who correctly assessed the interest of the developed countries of the world in Azerbaijan's hydrocarbon resources, drew up a multi-combination political-diplomatic line that served the national interest of the state. For this line, the principles of "open door" and balanced policy were of particular importance. The Azerbaijani administration knew that "oil transportation has its good sides as well as its bad sides." The "Contract of the Century" approved on September 20, 1994 led to the laying of the foundation of the oil strategy drawn up on the initiative of Heydar Aliyev, the construction of the BTC and BTE oil and gas pipelines, and the serious strengthening of Azerbaijan's position in the energy sector (Ulu Öndər Heydər Əliyev xatirələrdə, 2023).

After Heydar Aliyev became the head of the country again, the activity towards the settlement and resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict covered the core of his foreign policy course. In his bilateral and multilateral meetings with presidents and representatives at the highest levels, as well as in direct negotiations with the President of Armenia, our great leader took this problem as a basis and took purposeful and decisive steps towards its regulation and solution. However, due to the presence of double standards in world politics and the lack of interest of major powers in seriously resolving this conflict, our lands remained under occupation for nearly 30 years. As a result of the Second Karabakh War, which began on September 27 and lasted for 44 days, Azerbaijan was able to restore its territorial integrity (Yaqubova, 2004).

It is clear that one of the conditions indicating the sovereignty of the state in international law is purely territorial inviolability. If one state does not understand the territorial inviolability of another, it is impossible for those states to cooperate. Therefore, Azerbaijan always excluded Armenia from oil and gas projects. Also, after the "Contract of the Century" was approved, a number of forces tried to ensure Armenia's participation in international projects organized in the region, as well as to reveal that the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and other regions is separate from the energy issue. Sometimes they expressed their opinion with wishes such as "first cooperation, then conflict resolution", they even said that Armenia will agree to return the captured lands after believing that Azerbaijan is friendly (Kollektiv monoqrafiya, 2021, p. 85). Still, despite all these attempts, Heydar Aliyev categorically stated many times that oil transportation routes will never pass through the territory of Armenia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, during Heydar Aliyev’s period (1993–2003), Azerbaijan’s foreign relations were marked by strategic pragmatism as the country navigated its newly independent status and sought to assert its sovereignty on the global stage. Aliyev skillfully balanced ties with regional powers, seeking to maintain Azerbaijan’s independence while leveraging economic and geopolitical advantages.

- **Russia**: Azerbaijan maintained a delicate relationship with Russia, cooperating on energy and economic matters, but also asserting its independence, particularly in the face of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space.
- **Turkey**: The relationship with Turkey was one of the strongest, based on shared cultural, linguistic, and strategic interests. Turkey was a vital partner in the energy sector, and both countries stood united in supporting Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.
- **Armenia**: The relationship with Armenia remained deeply strained due to the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, with little progress made on peace during Aliyev's tenure.
- **Georgia**: Azerbaijan and Georgia developed strong ties, particularly in the energy sector, with joint infrastructure projects like the BTC pipeline. Both countries also shared a desire to limit Russian influence in the region.

Heydar Aliyev’s foreign policy was marked by a pragmatic approach to balancing relations with both regional powers and global actors. While Azerbaijan sought to assert its sovereignty and independence, particularly in the face of the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it also worked to position itself as a strategic player in the Caspian region through energy exports and diplomatic alliances. His leadership marked a critical period in Azerbaijan's transition from Soviet republic to an independent nation-state, navigating the complexities of regional dynamics with skillful diplomacy.

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