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To What Extent Have the Energy Economic Relations Between the US and Azerbaijan Impacted Their Geopolitical Partnership?

Abstract

Economic relations between the United States and Azerbaijan have, since the period of independence, become one of the key pillars of the geopolitical and energy architecture of the South Caucasus. In recent years, the growing relevance of regional communication projects – particularly the Zangezur Corridor – has added a new strategic dimension to U.S.-Azerbaijan economic relations. This corridor is of significant importance in terms of expanding East-West transport routes, accelerating trade flows, and enhancing the logistical potential of the region. Within the framework of regional integration initiatives supported by the United States, this project is regarded not only as an economic undertaking but also as a means of strengthening geopolitical stability.

The objective of the study is to examine the relations that emerged between Azerbaijan and the United States in the energy sector following the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence, to identify key aspects, and to conduct a comparative analysis of bilateral economic ties. Taking into account the historical trajectory and the political and economic context of these relations, the study highlights important strategic dimensions. The characteristics of bilateral relations, areas of mutual cooperation, and a comparative analysis of economic ties are examined in order to assess both mutual benefits and challenges (including Section 907) on a scientific basis. The study covers the period from the Contract of the Century to 2004, thereby comprehensively presenting the key turning points in U.S.-Azerbaijan relations during the post-independence period, developments in energy policy, and their interconnections with regional geopolitical processes.

Keywords: Section 907, economic relations, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main oil export pipeline, U.S. position, strategic partnership, U.S.-Azerbaijani relations in the energy sector

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ABŞ ilə Azərbaycan arasında enerji sahəsində iqtisadi əlaqələr onların geosiyasi tərəfdaşlığına nə dərəcədə təsir göstərmişdir?

Xülasə

ABŞ–Azərbaycan iqtisadi münasibətləri müstəqillik dövründən etibarən Cənubi Qafqazın geosiyasi və enerji arxitekturasının əsas sütunlarından birinə çevrilmişdir. Son dövrlərdə regional kommunikasiya layihələrinin aktuallaşması, xüsusilə Zəngəzur Dəhlizi məsələsi ABŞ–Azərbaycan iqtisadi münasibətlərinə yeni strateji ölçü qazandırmışdır. Bu dəhliz Şərqi–Qərbi nəqliyyat marşrutlarının genişlənməsi, ticarət axınlarının sürətlənməsi və regionun logistika potensialının artırılması baxımından mühüm əhəmiyyət kəsb edir. ABŞ tərəfindən dəstəklənən regional inteqrasiya təşəbbüsləri çərçivəsində bu layihə yalnız iqtisadi deyil, həm də geosiyasi sabitliyin möhkəmləndirilməsi vasitəsi kimi qiymətləndirilir.

Tədqiqat işinin qarşısında qoyulan vəzifə: müstəqilliyini bərpa edən Azərbaycanın enerji sahəsində ABŞ ilə formalaşan münasibətlərini araşdırmaq, mühüm məqamları üzə çıxarmaq, ikitərəfli iqtisadi əlaqələrin müqayisəli şəkildə təhlilini aparmaqdır. Bu münasibətlərin tarixən inkişaf trayektoriyasını və siyasi-iqtisadi kontekstini nəzərə alınmaqla tədqiqat işi mühüm strateji məqamları önə çıxarır. İkitərəfli əlaqələrin xüsusiyyətləri, qarşılıqlı əməkdaşlıq sahələri və iqtisadi əlaqələrin müqayisəli təhlili aparılaraq qarşılıqlı fayda və çətinliklər (907-ci düzəliş) elmi əsaslarla qiymətləndirilir. Tədqiqat işi Əsrin Müqaviləsindən sonra 2004-cü ilə qədər olan dövrü əhatə edir ki, bu da ABŞ–Azərbaycan münasibətlərinin müstəqillik dövründəki məhz dönüş nöqtələrini, enerji siyasətindəki inkişafı və regional geosiyasi proseslərlə bağlı qarşılıqlı əlaqələri əhatəli şəkildə təqdim edir. Tədqiqat işində Xarici İşlər Nazirliyinin arxiv materiallarından, həmçinin, müxtəlif mənbələrdən istifadə olunmuşdur.

Acar sözlər: 907-ci düzəliş, iqtisadi sahədə əlaqələr, Bakı-Tbilisi-Ceyhan əsas neft ixrac boru kəməri, ABŞ-ın mövqeyi, strateji tərəfdaşlıq, enerji sahəsində ABŞ–Azərbaycan əlaqələri

Introduction

At the end of XX century Azerbaijan's oil strategy began to be implemented under highly complex conditions, both domestically and regionally. This strategy faced sabotage, terrorist acts, and attempted coups from both internal and external factors. Nevertheless, the far-sighted policy Heydar Aliyev succeeded in overcoming these obstacles within a relatively short period, paving the way for the revival and development of the oil industry.

As author notes, the State Oil Company of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) was set a number of goals: to attract foreign investment and new technologies to the oil industry; to negotiate contracts with foreign oil companies on terms favorable to the Republic, etc. (Bayramova, 2019). For instance, the attitude of the Russian Federation to the conclusion of economic agreements was not unequivocal; particularly on the issue of determining the legal status of the Caspian Sea, Russia often adopted a non-constructive position. A similar stance was characteristic of both Turkmenistan and Iran: neither of these two Caspian littoral states was willing to accept the orientation the Azerbaijan Republic's oil strategy towards Europe. For this reason, many foreign oil companies approached the prospective agreements with caution and opposed the signing of any oil contracts with Azerbaijan until the legal status of the Caspian was determined (Bayramova, 2019). These events show that the correct selection and analysis of sources and information is a decisive factor in the successful making of strategic decisions. Here, the symbiosis of knowledge based on both collective action and individual experience comes to the fore as the basis of strategic planning. In a short period of time, Azerbaijani specialists worked out all aspects of the contract to be concluded with foreign companies down to the smallest nuances.

Azerbaijani diplomacy faced a major challenge: to neutralise the position of the aforementioned states in regarding the agreement, and to align the interests of Western states with the national interests of Azerbaijan. Within context, İlham Aliyev – then the first vice-president of SOCAR –

during a business visit to Washington, held negotiations with the leadership of the US Department of Energy. Following these discussions, and with support of the United States, oil companies from other countries set aside their reservations. This diplomatic achievement highlights the importance of social trust and information sharing in political and economic processes.

Research

Energy Policy of Azerbaijan in the Late 20th Century in Relation to the United States. It becomes clear from the sources that on September 20, 1994, a 30-year agreement was signed between SOCAR and a consortium of major oil companies from the USA, Great Britain, Norway, Russia, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Greece (later the Japanese company “Itochu Slodzi” joined this consortium) concerning exploitation of the “Azeri” and “Chirag” fields in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea and the production sharing of extracted oil” (Bayramova, 2011). In his speech, Heydar Aliyev stated that this agreement became to be known as the “Contract of the Century”. The implementation of the signed contract began with the development of the “Chirag” field. Within a short period, the project was successfully carried out, and a modern, high-technology platform meeting international standards was constructed at the oil field (Bayramova, 2019). This event can be seen as the result of a high level of integration of knowledge collection and application at the technological and diplomatic levels. As Ibrahim Zeynalov notes, the preparation of the agreement, which was called the “Contract of the Century”, marked the beginning of the Azerbaijani oil industry and a new stage in the development of the oil industry. Thus, for the first time in history, a legal agreement was created to transform oil into a national asset (Zeynalov, 2024).

According to official data from SOCAR, On August 1, 1997, three new agreements were signed in Washington between leading US oil companies and SOCAR on joint work in the “Absheron”, “Nakhchivan”, “Oghuz”, and “Inam” oil fields in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea (ADNŞA, 2000).

Based on reports from the Center for Political Studies and the Press Service, the signing of the “Contract of the Century” laid the foundation for Azerbaijan’s transformation into an economically attractive partner for influential Western states, especially the United States. The United States began to take a more active interest in Azerbaijan. As a result, Azerbaijan came to be recognized not only within the post-Soviet space, but also across the broader Eurasian region as a country with a significant strategic geographic position. Azerbaijan was seen as a state that corresponded to the political and economic interests of the United States in the Middle East and Eurasia. It is shown here that the system that people and states build about the world determines their position.

In December 1998, during a visit to Washington, İlham Aliyev – then Vice President of SOCAR – held discussions with Richard Morningstar, who had been appointed by the White House to the position responsible for the Caucasus region, and later with Jan Kalitsky, the official responsible for the Caucasus region within the U.S. Department of Commerce. The discussions focused on this issue. Both sides emphasized that the United States supported Azerbaijan and had reached the conclusion that Azerbaijan’s successful integration into this project was of mutual interest to both countries (Azertag, 01.06.2009).

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project, which represents a path toward economic growth and development for Eurasia, passed through three stages: Initially, work on the project began in 1994, later, in 1997, an agreement was signed between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye, and finally, in 1999 an agreement was signed in Istanbul for the construction of the pipeline (Bayramova, 2019).

Upon analyzing the study, it becomes evident that the agreement signed in Istanbul on November 18, 1999 on the “Transportation of Crude Oil through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Main Pipeline through the Territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Georgia and the Republic of Türkiye” was of great significance. The efforts of the United States in the realization of this project were a gratifying event for Azerbaijan. By jointly implementing energy projects in the oil and gas sector with Azerbaijan, The United States contributed to enhancing political stability and security in the region.

According to the international conference materials, "The final cost of the BTC main export pipeline was determined to be 2.94 billion US dollars, with a total length of 1760 km. In the USA, "Export-Import Bank" (Ex-Im Bank) and "Overseas Private Investments Corporation" (OPIC) expressed their readiness to provide financial support for the project. In this regard, in December 2000, the chairmen of the organizations held discussions in Washington with the sponsor group on financial issues" (Bayramova, 2011). According to the material published by the Political Research Center and the Press Service of the New Azerbaijan Party, by Presidential Decree No. 240 of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the "State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan" was established on December 29, 1999. By Executive Order No. 434 of December 27, the Supervisory Board of this fund was established. The main objective of creating the State Oil Fund was to transform mineral and raw material resources into financial assets directed toward reproduction and sustainable economic development. The funds accumulated in the State Oil Fund were intended to be invested in other sectors of the Azerbaijani economy, to develop other non-oil industries, to create new jobs, and to implement programs aimed at reducing future generations' dependence on oil production levels and fluctuations in global oil prices. By early 2003, the Fund already held 730 million manats in assets (Bayramova, 2019).

The author argues that, by 1998, 1.7 billion USD had been invested in Azerbaijan's oil industry, of which approximately 700 million USD belonged to United States companies. During this period, hundreds of American companies operating as contractors and suppliers established representative offices in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan was confident that it could produce 50 million tons of oil per year and was ambitious in implementing the "Baku-Ceyhan" route. At the opening ceremony of the International Exhibition and Conference "Caspian Oil, Gas, Refining and Petrochemicals-2003" in Baku, Ilham Aliyev - then First Vice President of SOCAR - responded to a question regarding the financing of the "Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan" oil main export pipeline as follows: "By 2003, Azerbaijan has paid about 200 million US dollars. The remaining part, that is, the expenditures until the receipt of credit, has been repeatedly discussed by Azerbaijan with its partners" (Bayramova, 2019).

The international conference materials note that regarding the issue under consideration, it is also important to highlight several key points concerning the volume of oil reserves in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea. According to 2001 reports, although the Caspian Sea region is not as rich in energy resources as the Persian Gulf, it contains at least 10% of the world's total oil reserves. For comparison, this is approximately five times greater than the proven oil reserves of the United States. With estimated potential oil reserves of 100 billion barrels, The Caspian Sea could serve as a reliable source of oil for the Western countries for the next 40 years. By 2001, the contracts signed in Azerbaijan alone envisaged oil production of 2 million barrels per day, which was approximately equal to the volume of oil imported by the United States from OPEC member countries (Bayramova, 2011).

It is stated in the "Azerbaijan" newspaper that another important issue is the persistent attempt by the foreign policy establishment of the Russian Federation and its oil magnates to downplay the oil reserves in the Azerbaijani sector. Russia's activities in this direction, as well as its continued "strong hand" policy in the Caspian Sea region, required an immediate response from Washington. At this time, the US government faced several serious tasks.

First, the Bush administration should have paid special attention to the continuous development of oil and gas production in the Caspian Sea and their international transportation. It is clear that pipelines through Russia should not have been the only option for exporters, since Moscow could use the suspension of oil transportation as a means of pressure on the pipeline user. Therefore, Washington fully supported the implementation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline.

On the other hand, the US should not overlook another important point: support for BTC also strengthened American political interests in the region. In this regard, it was necessary to either repeal, or at least suspend, Section 907 to the "Freedom Support Act", which had imposed restrictions on direct assistance to Azerbaijan by the U.S. Congress. Although the legal force of this amendment has been repeatedly suspended, such measures do not represent a permanent resolution of this issue.

As Mustafayev emphasized, in the existing reality, the Freedom Support Act Section 907 posed a serious obstacle not only to the political relations between the United States and Azerbaijan, but also to the intensive development of their economic relations. The administration of George W. Bush clearly understood that this provision was causing significant harm to U.S. interests in the South Caucasus. Therefore, Washington's efforts to repeal the Jackson-Vanik Amendment with particular concern once again confirm both the development of U.S.-Azerbaijani relations and Azerbaijan's confident progress on the path of economic development and democracy, and its position as a country with a great position in the South Caucasus.

The government of the United States needed to demonstrate high-level diplomatic initiative in order to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Because if this conflict remains unresolved, it could become a major obstacle to the future operation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. J. Bush's predecessor, Bill Clinton, did not devote sufficient attention to the settlement of this conflict. However, since Russia's policy from the first stage of the conflict remained unchanged, Washington should have clearly conveyed to Moscow its determination to resolve this issue promptly. Washington should have shown determination and conditioned its assistance to Armenia on the return of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan outside the borders of Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time the United States was required balance between the principle of territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and the right of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians to self-determination within Azerbaijan.

Another important task was the support of Georgia by the United States. This was any disruption of Georgia's political stability by external or internal forces could pose a serious threat to the functioning of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.

Based on the archival materials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the discussion of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan export pipeline at the meeting of Russian and US presidents V. Putin and J. Bush in Moscow in June 2002, and the fact that this issue was reflected in the document they adopted, was a clear example of Azerbaijan receiving great support from the US for this project (XİN, 2002). According to the Spencer Abraham, the U.S. Secretary of Energy who visited Azerbaijan in September 2002, the commencement of the construction of the BTC main export pipeline represented a historic event for the United States project (XİN, sənədlər məcmuəsi, 2002). From the very announcement of its new energy strategy, the United States closely monitored the developments and achievements in the Caucasus region.

Potential Areas of Cooperation between Azerbaijan and the United States in Renewable Energy. As indicated in the archival records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, within the framework of cooperation between the United States and Azerbaijan in the field of renewable energy, a meeting was held on April 14, 2004 at the U.S. Trade and Development Agency (XİN, 2004). Author underlines, the meeting was attended by Daniel Stein, Regional Director for Eurasia of the TDA; Rochelle Turner, Country Manager at its Eurasia Office; Leonard Coburn, Director of the Office for Russia and Eurasian Affairs at the U.S. Department of Energy; Kay Thompson, Head of the Department of International Affairs of the same ministry; Robert Shelton, Director of the Joint Institute for Energy and the Environment based in Tennessee; and Fikrat Pashayev, Economic Counselor at the Embassy (Bayramova, 2019). The participation of specialist from various levels and fields within this framework demonstrates that the cooperation was structured through a multidimensional and comprehensive approach.

As evidenced by the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during the meeting, it was noted that several Azerbaijani institutions expressed interest in the field of renewable energy, including SOCAR, the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of Azerbaijan, and Azerenergy. The interest shown by local organizations in renewable energy here is an indication of the country's strategic approach to energy diversification. The sending of the assessment mission is a sign of mutual understanding between the two countries and the laying of the foundations for future initiatives (XİN, 2004).

Thus, in 2004, at the suggestion of the Azerbaijani embassy, the U.S. Trade and Development Agency sent an assessment mission to Azerbaijan to evaluate issues related to renewable energy.

Within the framework of the draft document entitled “Energy Dialogue between the United States of America and the Republic of Azerbaijan”, “Azerigas” JSC put forward several additional proposals:

“1. Strengthening the existing scientific research capacity of “Azerigas” and promoting the implementation of new technologies;

2. Enhancing scientific and technical cooperation and facilitating the exchange of experience between “Azerigas Transport” and U.S. gas industry companies,

3. Carrying out modernization works to ensure that Azerigas’s existing gas transmission network meets contemporary standards.” (XİN, 2004).

Two proposals were put forward by the United States: One of them was to prepare a feasibility study on the use of wind and other renewable energy in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, which has faced energy shortages. It was emphasized at another meeting between the parties that General Electric would be involved in addressing this issue (XİN, 2004).

It is worth mentioning that on April 20, 2004, U.S. President George W. Bush, at the U.S.-Latin American Chamber of Commerce in Washington, urged Congress to quickly pass an energy bill aimed at reducing the US's dependence on oil imports. According to him, this measure was intended to decrease reliance on external energy sources for American workers and families. Furthermore, “the President urged Congress to submit for his signature an energy bill addressing four key issues: 1.cooperation in the implementation of political, economic, security,and global energy projects; 2. regional security; 3. settlement of the Karabakh conflict; 4. other issues of mutual interest” (XİN, 2004). This policy statement indicates that cooperation in the energy sector encompasses economic, political, and regional security aspects.

The monograph highlights that on July 20, 2004, the newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, Elmar Mammadyarov, met with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington. U.S. Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham proposed the development of an energy dialogue project covering bilateral cooperation. The signing of this project could further strengthen cooperation between the countries. This step confirms the development of purposeful dialogue and mutual understanding in the countries' energy policies. On September 20, 2004, a memorandum of understanding on energy dialogue was signed in Baku between Prime Minister A. Rasizadeh on behalf of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham on behalf of the U.S. Government” (Bayramova, 2019).

The monograph points out : “The Memorandum stated: “Based on provisions of the “Statement of Intent on the Establishment of a Bilateral Energy Dialogue between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the United States”, signed in Washington on July 31, 1997,...and building upon the dialogue initiated in May 2003 at the Oak Ridge National Laobarotary, the two parties will seek to expand technological cooperation and promote private investment in order to increase the application of efficient and renewable energy technologies in Azerbaijan”” (Bayramova, 2019).

Based on the archival materials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the main objectives of the dialogue are stated in the memorandum as follows: “1. In the oil and gas sector – to support, depending on the circumstances, the policy of multiple export routes for Azerbaijan's energy resources, cooperation in strengthening the necessary base for oil and gas production, transportation and consumption based on market economy principles in order to increase efficiency, etc.

2. Electric Power Sector – to cooperate in the development of policies and reforms aimed at promoting the market- based development of major transmission lines, national power systems and electricity distribution companies.

3. Energy Efficiency and Alternative Technologies – to cooperate in the development of standards for energy-intensive building materials, including windows, to exchange information on alternative technologies such as wind, solar and mini-hydro and the cost-effective application of these technologies, and to conduct joint scientific research and experimental-testing work, etc.

4. Science and Technology Sector – to facilitate discussions and exchanges between Azerbaijani research scientists, specialists in the energy sector, and scientists from the Department of National Energy Laboratories (XİN, 2004).

Conclusion

In a 2004 article entitled “Problems in Energy Security”, Alan Larson, Deputy Secretary of State of the United States for Economic, Business, and Agricultural Affairs, stated that the United States would support the diversification of its energy supply by assisting oil-producing countries in establishing good governance, transparency, and security. He noted: “It is well known that even with investments in the development of new alternative energy technologies, global demand for oil and gas continues to grow. A large part of these needs of the United States and its most important allies and economic partners are met through imports. Oil supply shocks occurring in any part of the world can affect the US economy through sudden operations in international oil markets. Such realities, analyzing the concept of energy security, prove that it is necessary to create reliability in energy supply”. As mentioned in the source, Alan Larson further continued his remarks: “This reliability can be in two ways: achieving diversity of energy sources and creating transparency and a good investment climate in energy-producing countries. Because a number of regions are attracting increasing interest from energy companies from the United States and other countries of the world. The US sees interesting prospects for extensive oil and gas production in the Caspian region, Russia, West Africa, and North and South America”. Alan Larson expressed his views on the Caspian region as follows: “With the possibility of increasing production from 1.6 million barrels per day (2001) to 5 million barrels (2010), the Caspian basin has enormous potential. The following points emerge in the development of Caspian energy: the second pillar of the East-West energy corridor should be completed by building the South Caucasus natural gas pipeline, the general investment climate in the region should be improved, and Kazakh oil should be brought to this corridor. Multi-branch pipelines that bring Caspian resources to the world market strengthen the sovereignty and economic development of the new states in the region”. Although it is known that U.S.-Azerbaijani relations have connections in many directions, it was not encouraging that the U.S. did not give up its double standard position towards the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in Azerbaijan. Although the US, as a superpower, tried to show its “role” in the resolution of conflicts in various regions of the world, it took a balanced position in the South Caucasus region by acting as “one of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group”, which was a clear example of the policy in the Second Karabakh War. However, despite all this, strengthening relations in the economic sphere, and the US supporting the implementation of new economic and infrastructure projects in Azerbaijan are within the mutual interest of both states. The Washington meeting of August 8, 2025, demonstrates the emergence of a new stage in relations between the United States and Azerbaijan. According to official documents released by the U.S. Department of State, a number of agreements were signed within the framework of the meeting, covering not only the peace process but also the deepening of strategic cooperation, energy security, and regional economic integration (U.S. Department of State, Joint Declaration, 09 August, 2025). These documents confirm that the United States has assumed a more active role in the South Caucasus in terms of both political mediation and economic cooperation.

At the same time, as noted in the official statement of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Washington meeting is of great significance for the expansion of U.S.-Azerbaijan strategic cooperation, particularly in the fields of energy, transport, and investment (President.az, 29 August, 2025). In this context, energy security and the opening of regional communication routes emerge as key priority areas of bilateral relations. At the same time, although restrictive mechanisms such as Section 907 of the “Freedom Support Act” had long affected U.S.-Azerbaijan economic relations, in recent years political dialogue and strategic cooperation formats have reduced the practical impact of these limitations. Overall, the August 8 meeting demonstrates that U.S.-Azerbaijan relations have evolved beyond energy cooperation into a broader geopolitical framework encompassing peace, security, and regional integration.

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