

THE TRANSFORMATION OF RUSSIA–AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS DURING THE 2003–2025 PERIOD: AN ANALYSIS IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the political, strategic, and geopolitical changes in the relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan during the period 2003–2025, within the context of transformations in the international system and developments in the region. The analysis goes beyond bilateral diplomacy to take into account the global power struggle, regional security arrangements, energy geopolitics, and the fundamental principles of international law. Its theoretical framework includes Mackinder’s Heartland theory, Spykman’s Rimland theory, Mahan’s sea power theory, Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, international legal principles concerning territorial integrity and self-determination, and the concept of strategic partnership. Within this framework, the study investigates the relationship between Russia’s “Near Abroad” policy and Azerbaijan’s multidirectional foreign policy under the Heydar and İlham Aliyev administrations, which has been shaped by sovereignty, territorial integrity, and strategic autonomy. Bu qualitative study is based on an extensive literature review in Turkish, Russian, Azerbaijani Turkish, and English. It also examines official documents, bilateral agreements, and diplomatic statements through content and discourse analysis. The findings indicate that the Russia–Azerbaijan relationship cannot be adequately explained by unilateral dependence or continuous conflict. Instead, the relationship has evolved into a pragmatic, multidimensional strategic partnership in which cooperation, competition, and mutual dependence coexist simultaneously.

Keywords: *Russia-Azerbaijan Relations; South Caucasus; Geopolitics; Strategic Partnership*

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2003–2025 DÖNEMİNDE RUSYA FEDERASYONU– AZERBAYCAN İLİŞKİLERİNİN DÖNÜŞÜMÜ: ULUSLARARASI VE BÖLGESEL DİNAMİKLER BAĞLAMINDA BİR ANALİZ

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, uluslararası sistemdeki değişimler ve bölgedeki gelişmeler bağlamında, 2003-2025 yılları arasında Rusya Federasyonu ile Azerbaycan Cumhuriyeti arasındaki ilişkilerdeki siyasi, stratejik ve jeopolitik değişimleri incelemektedir. Analiz, ikili diplomasiyi aşarak, küresel güç mücadelesini, bölgesel güvenlik düzenlemelerini, enerji jeopolitiğini ve uluslararası hukukun temel ilkelerini dikkate almaktadır. Teorik çerçevesi, Mackinder’in Kalp Bölgesi teorisi, Spykman’ın Kıyı Bölgesi teorisi, Mahan’ın deniz egemenliği teorisi, Gramsci’nin hegemonya kavramı, toprak bütünlüğü ve kendi kaderini tayin etme ile ilgili uluslararası hukuk ilkeleri ve stratejik ortaklık kavramını içermektedir. Bu çerçevede, çalışma, Rusya’nın “Yakın Çevre” politikası ile Haydar ve İlham Aliyev yönetimleri altındaki Azerbaycan’ın egemenlik, toprak bütünlüğü ve stratejik özerklik tarafından şekillendirilen çok yönlü dış politikası arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırmaktadır. Bu nitel çalışma, Türkçe, Rusça, Azerbaycan Türkçesi ve İngilizce dillerindeki geniş kapsamlı bir literatür taramasına dayanmaktadır. Ayrıca, resmi belgeleri, ikili anlaşmaları ve diplomatik açıklamaları içerik ve söylem analizi yoluyla incelemektedir. Bulgular, Rusya-Azerbaycan ilişkilerinin tek taraflı bağımlılık veya sürekli çatışma ile yeterince açıklanamayacağını göstermektedir. Bunun yerine, ilişki, işbirliği, rekabet ve karşılıklı bağımlılığın aynı anda var olduğu pragmatik, çok boyutlu bir stratejik ortaklığa dönüşmüştür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Rusya-Azerbaycan İlişkileri; Güney Kafkasya; Jeopolitik*

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to analyze, within the framework of multidisciplinary considerations, the tripartite relationship between the Russian Federation, the Republic of Azerbaijan, and the international system in the period from 2003 to 2025. The structural changes in the global and regional systems have led to the growth of the geopolitical importance of the Eurasian region, with the energy security issues, regional conflicts, great power politics, and international organizations playing a critical role. In this regard, the present study considers Russia-Azerbaijan relations in a larger context, beyond bilateral diplomacy and paying attention to geopolitical, theoretical, and regional issues. To begin with, the current Russia-Azerbaijan relationship is examined through the prism of the Russian Federation's growing interest in the "Near Abroad" in the early 2000s after Putin came to power and Azerbaijan's multi-vector diplomacy of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and strategic autonomy. Particular attention is drawn to the energy security issues concerning Azerbaijan's natural resource potential with the Caspian Sea legal status and Karabakh conflict (including the Second Karabakh War in 2020 and the prospects of the Russia-Azerbaijan relations after the fighting in 2023). Besides, the paper explores the role of Turkey in Azerbaijan's foreign and security policies, including propaganda and soft power, and energy diplomacy. The role of regional organizations in the Russia-Azerbaijan confrontation, namely CIS, CSTO, EEU, and the prospects of Azerbaijan for joining the European Union and NATO are considered. The Russia and West confrontation, associated with the Russian military adventures, and the redefinition of the regional balance of power characterize the situation in the South Caucasus at the beginning of the 2020s. At the same time, there are also power vacuums and regional undercurrents in the South Caucasus conducive to rapprochement. In this vein, Azerbaijan has pursued a multi-vector policy of aligning with the West and Turkey while balancing with Russia. In this regard, the Russia-Azerbaijan relationship can be seen as a pragmatic partnership, which should be viewed in the context of both countries' geopolitical orientations rather than a traditional alliance. It should be emphasized that the present paper studies the relationship between Russia-Azerbaijan from multiple angles, not limited to bilateral diplomacy. Specifically, the research takes into account global and regional geopolitical factors, including security issues in the South Caucasus, energy security, and soft power. Particular attention is drawn to legal frameworks and international law, energy diplomacy, and regional organizations. In addition, the study highlights both countries'

historical legacies, ranging from the 19th century to modern times, which shape their relationships. Finally, the paper reviews the relevant literary sources and theoretical concepts, including the bipolar world, great power politics, and international security. The analysis of the current relationship between Russia-Azerbaijan, including the assessment of its prospects, is complemented by the examination of the foreign policy practices of Azerbaijan in the post-Soviet space. More specifically, the comparison is made between the foreign policy strategies of Mutallibov, Elchibey, Heydar Aliyev, and Ilham Aliyev eras, which have been characterized by notable contradictions. At the same time, the paper highlights the revisionist tendencies of Russia under Putin, which seeks to revise both regional and global status quo. In this regard, the study aims to contribute to the existing scholarly discourse on Russia-Azerbaijan relations by demonstrating that they feature multidimensionality, including cooperation, competition, and interdependence. In this regard, the research question of this study can be formulated as follows that How have the Russia-Azerbaijan relationship been shaped by geopolitical, economic, and strategic factors throughout the 20th and 21st centuries? The study seeks to answer this question in order to determine whether Russia-Azerbaijan relations are to be viewed through the lens of strategic partnership or not.

METHODOLOGY

This study follows a survey review model within a qualitative research framework. It systematically examines national and international literature published in Turkish, Russian, Azerbaijani Turkish, and English; this literature includes books, peer reviewed journal articles, master's theses, and official state documents, reports of international organizations, bilateral agreement texts, and diplomatic statements. Content analysis was applied to bilateral agreements, joint communiqués, and official statements. Changes in discourse and policy were subsequently compared under thematic headings. The material was organized chronologically and thematically. Rather than relying on quantitative measurement, the study aims to reveal how the relations between the two countries have changed structurally and historically through detailed text analysis, discourse analysis, and multidimensional interpretation.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK EMPIRES: LAND, MARITIME, AND HYBRID EMPIRES

In the contemporary social sciences, the concept of empire is gaining

increasing attention in international relations. In a historical perspective, it embraces a set of political, economic, and socio cultural characteristics (Howe, 2002, pp.15-30). Historians tend to study an empire as a unit of analysis since the late nineteenth century; yet before attempting to define it, it is essential to note that the word “empire” was derived from the Latin word *imperium* that expressed the idea of command, authority, rule, and simply power. For more than a century and a half, up to the early first century AD, the republicans used the word *imperium* to denote the authority of judges to declare wars and to enforce the law. It is vital to note that the empire embodies a civilization mission, which aims to promote universal values and bring order to chaos. Michael W.Doyle’s definition “An empire is a formal or informal relationship in which one state controls the sovereignty of another political entity” sums up the nature of the relationships between the metropolis and its satellites (Doyle, 1986, p.45). Therefore, one should distinguish three types of empires. First, there are land empires. They are based on territorial expansion on the continent with little or no naval power projection. The dominance of land empires depends solely on their military force, and their expansion is viewed as the natural objective, while their contraction is perceived as mortal. In other words, land empires are divided into two groups that those with an expansionary and passive tendency (Özcan, 2019, p.72). Second, maritime empires are those that rely on their naval power to extend their political control and influence across continents. Their expansion depends on the strength of the trade network and the dominance of the mother country. Nonetheless, they are relatively decentralized as compared to land empires. Maritime empires’ decline or transformation takes place when their naval power is weakened or when a new sea power emerges, but their growth is attributed primarily to innovations and technological advances.

Finally, hybrid empires are those that combine both extensive overseas and continental domination with elements of exploitation to achieve their imperialist objectives. In land empires, expansion serves primarily economic purposes, while maritime ones use their influence to transfer wealth from the periphery to the metropolis. Hybrid empires share the characteristics of both land and maritime ones, but they possess the weaknesses inherent in these powers. It is noteworthy that the Ottoman Empire is considered to be a hybrid one as it simultaneously pursues continental and maritime expansion; thus, the Ottoman Empire fits better into the third category (Özcan, 2019, p.103). Similarly, the Russian Empire belongs to hybrid

empires. Complex empires must respond to the challenges of international relations as well as technological innovations; otherwise, they risk losing their stability and experience their decline.

THE CONCEPT OF HEGEMONY

The word hegemony comes from the Greek *hegēmai* that means “to lead” or “to guide” (“hegemony”). In a political sense, hegemon means a commander-in-chief, and hegemonia is the leading city-state of the alliance of Greek city states, which have been formed to fight the Persian Achaemenid Empire. For instance, Sparta was the hegemon that commanded the alliance of the free city states in fighting the Persians. Two characteristics were considered fundamental to the ancient Greek concept of hegemony. First, the hegemon and the allies should be independent and equal in their union as it was a coalition of equals, not a confederation. Second, the hegemon and the allies had to accept the leadership of the hegemon freely and democratically because there was no other authority in Ancient Greece. Consequently, it is possible to suggest that the concept of hegemony was entirely positive and implied loyalty; even Aristotle stated that hegemony served the interests of all and was different from despotism. Moreover, Isocrates, writing about the decline of Athenian power, claimed that hegemony could be realized by moral guidance combined with persuasion that was based on public opinion rather than coercion (“hegemony”). Nevertheless, although the concept of Hegemony had positive implications at that time, it is essential to analyze the concept created by the Western Marxism tradition and especially by Gramsci. The Gramscian concept of hegemony has been further developed in critical international relations theory, particularly in relation to international political economy, cultural studies, media studies, and theoretical linguistics and political sociology (Cox, 1993, pp.214-216). According to Gramsci, hegemony takes place in civil society, implying a domination by one class over another through ideological leadership, which is manifested in consent and compliance. With regard to the concept of hegemony, production relations are considered to be a critical element of social relations, despite the fact that Gramsci accentuated the role of ideological domination over the relations of production (Cox, 1993, p.214). Gramsci’s concept suggests that the hegemonic class chooses its strategies and institutional forms to develop the ideological leadership in every field of social life; although these particular forms can be different, the hegemonic apparatus can be classified according to the ways in which they express

class leadership. It is possible to suggest that the concept of hegemony is closely related to the historical development of the modern capitalist state and the transition from the classical to the new hegemony. It is possible to suggest that in the middle of the nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie was confronted by the rising labor movement; yet, it responded to the threat by eliminating revolutionary activity through coercive forces. In other words, the bourgeois state used primarily police and judicial powers to restrict and regulate the growing socialist movement. Still, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the socialist parties and trade unions turned into national movements. Pelz notes that the new European bourgeois state faced a new challenge because universal political mass parties emerged (“Class Analysis and the Third Way”, 2016, pp.83-102). Being confronted by the socialist revolution, the bourgeois state adjusted its policy; it used its hegemonic power to incorporate the growing labor movements within the framework of political society. Nonetheless, according to Harris, “at this stage the hegemonic power of the bourgeoisie no longer had the capacity to mobilize popular consensual endorsement of the status quo” (“Hegemony and the New System”, 1992, p.11). Gramsci referred to this stage of the development of the capitalist state as an organic crisis brought about by a passive revolution. Within the framework of this concept, it is possible to suggest that the state apparatus transforms civil society in order to exercise control over it by creating numerous no state and state hegemonic apparatus. Consequently, civil society becomes an integral part of the state power; yet, the border between the class state and society is not definite anymore. Gramsci called such a state the integral state. The hegemonic apparatus in the integral state implements the reformist policies of the state; still, its role is to dominate the conciliatory processes that take place in society, which has been transformed into the integral state. Gramsci argues that the concept of hegemony helps to explain the domination of a particular class in favor of another, not only in the state but in all areas of social life. Thus, according to Gramsci and his support of the idea of the integral state, the domination was promoted by state hegemony and its apparatus in the form of private institutions.

THE PRINCIPLE OF INDEPENDENCE AND TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY

According to the legal literature, territorial integrity is related to land, sea, and air as the material elements necessary for the existence of the state. Political independence, in turn, is the abstract principle of the sovereignty

of the state, its internal and external freedom, and the free exercise of power. President Woodrow W. Wilson introduced the principle of territorial integrity as part of the legal norms. In his message to the joint session of Congress of the US in January 1918, he called for a peaceful settlement in Europe, particularly respecting the mutual independence, political and territorial integrity of large and small countries (Wilson, 1918). The Covenant of the League of Nations, which enshrined this principle in international law, was another essential document. According to Article 10 of the Covenant, League of Nations members commit to respecting the territorial integrity and political independence of other states and to taking measures against states that have violated these principles. Later, this principle was enshrined in the UN Charter as part of the UN's basic principles. According to Chapter II, Article 4 of the UN Charter, all states' members commit to refrain in their international relations from the use of force or the threat of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of other states, as well as other actions contrary to the UN Charter. Since then, many resolutions on this issue have been adopted within the framework of the UN, as well as bilateral and multilateral treaties. On the one hand, the principle of territorial integrity, as reflected in international law, seems to contradict the right to self-determination, which is also enshrined in the UN Charter. According to the principle of territorial integrity, states have the right to protect their territorial integrity, including by using force against separatists. On the other hand, the right to self-determination allows peoples to freely decide on their political future. Consequently, peoples can seek to leave the state, which constitutes an infringement on the territorial integrity of the state. However, the principle of territorial integrity does not prohibit states from seeking to protect their integrity by using force against secessionist movements. Moreover, some legal scholars argue that the principle of territorial integrity puts the right to self-determination to the test, as the right to self-determination is primarily proclaimed for peoples living within states, not separating ones. The scholar Gudeleviciute notes that "in general, self-determination is a territorial concept, the exercise of which necessarily involves state territories" (Gudeleviciute, 2005, p. 54). Nonetheless, Libarona argues that "self-determination is an essentially geopolitical principle with potentially extensive ramifications when there is both popular support for secession and external support for separatist aspirations" (Libarona, 2012, p. 113).

STRATEGIC COOPERATION, PARTNERSHIP, AND ALLIANCE

Since international relations are characterized by dynamic change and new trends, strategic alliances and partnerships are becoming increasingly attractive today. Indeed, they are regarded as an important way to gain competitive advantages (Karimifard, 2009, p. 25).

Strategic partnerships have become a prominent phenomenon in the changing international relations system and a new approach in international politics. Basically, these are special relationships of a general nature; nevertheless, an analysis of the internal characteristics of partnerships and their role in foreign policy in the context of a changing geostrategic environment allow us to conclude that “since the early 1990s, the transformation of international relations has been conducive to shaping strategic partnerships as a response to both systemic and specific international problems” (Tyushka and Czechowska, 2019, p. 8).

It is difficult to quantify the number of strategic alliances and agreements that make up the entire body of strategic partnerships at the present time. The reason for this is the lack of coherent and consistent accounting for such agreements by the state and international organization foreign policy bureaucracy. However, this does not apply to the study of the factors that have encouraged the creation of strategic alliances. According to Nadkarni, structural, regional, and civilizational changes that have occurred after the end of the Cold War are regarded as factors explaining the transition from the traditional North Atlantic alliance pattern to partnerships (Nadkarni, 2010, p. 45).

Thus, what is a strategic partnership and what role has it played in international relations? It should be noted that this term can be applied to a wide range of interactions or mean a convergence of action vectors. At the beginning of the 21st century, the concept of strategic partnership acquired new dimensions, turned to the fore of international politics, international law, and international economics. However, due to the use of this concept as an instrument of rhetorical inflation, its value became blurred (Renard, 2013, p. 302). Michalski and Pan, in turn, note that strategic partnerships should be considered within the framework of specific concepts, implying a particular form of bilateral interaction, designed to establish privileged relations between the participating actors in the international arena (Michalski and Pan, 2013, pp. 611-627). In other words, strategic

partnerships can pursue various goals that from specific foreign policy objectives to the pursuit of values and vision through international relations, and enhance the international prestige of the participating states.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF RUSSIA–AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS

AZERBAIJAN WITHIN THE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE OF THE CAUCASUS

Russia's Caucasian policy began in the 16th century and lasted until the 1860s. During this period, the Caucasian wars with Turkey led to the complete expulsion of the Ottoman Empire from the Caucasus. The Russo-Iranian wars (1804–1813, 1826–1828) led to the same result with Iran. From the beginning of the Caucasian wars, Russia has sought to create a Caucasian administrative region within the Russian Empire to govern the territories gained in the South Caucasus. Russia has decided to develop an administrative system based on the conquered lands and to expand its administrative borders. The territory of modern-day Azerbaijan was occupied, and one of the main goals of the Tsar's government was to weaken the khanates and the khanate system itself. The authorities established a command system in the occupied territories and introduced the system of provinces instead of khanates. The post of the governor of the province was also established. In most cases, the governors were appointed from the commanders of the Russian troops stationed in a particular region. The commanders could only be Christians (mostly Armenians) holding the rank of major, lieutenant colonel, or colonel. For this reason, the system is also known as the command system (Mustafayev, 1989, p. 27).

The nobility and beys in the early 19th century played a significant role in the social and economic structure of the country. However, already at the beginning of the occupation, the Russian military authorities in Azerbaijan took steps to weaken the land ownership of the beys and restrict their political and civil rights. In addition, the Russian authorities often used the term “administration” to undermine the status of local feudal beys. According to the Russian administration, most of the beys in the past did not own their lands, and therefore they were not landowners but state officials (stewardship over state peasants). Thus, the beys were at the forefront of the Muslim uprising, which began in June 1826 (Orucov, 2012, p. 147). The Azerbaijani beys' opposition to the Russian authorities led to the confiscation of their land. It was the social unrest in Azerbaijan

that prompted the authorities to develop a new administrative system. Thus, two administrative system projects were developed in 1829. The first project was developed by General Paskevich and Senators Kutaysov and Mechnikov. The second project was presented in May 1833 and was called “General Thoughts on the Lands of Transcaucasia” (Milman, 1966, p. 132). Paskevich, the commander in chief of the Russian forces in the Caucasus, submitted his project to the Emperor in 1829. The general proposed to abolish the command system and annul all the existing local laws and regulations and to create a centralized system in the manner of the Russian Empire. It is noteworthy that in his project, Paskevich did not take into account the cultural traditions and beliefs of the local population. According to Paskevich, “the Muslim peoples will draw closer to Russia if they are subject to the same general laws and economic sanctions.” However, these projects were not realized since the State Council of the Russian Empire returned them for revision. In 1837, Senator Gan was tasked with the issue of revising the projects. Instead of studying the social and economic structure of the peoples of Transcaucasia, Gan used the projects developed by Paskevich, Kutaysov, and Mechnikov. The senator presented his project entitled “Administrative Management of the South Caucasus Region” to the Emperor and the State Duma. The State Council evaluated Gan’s project in February 1838 and responded to his criticism of the domestic law system in the Khanate. The Council noted that during the Khanate, “in Azerbaijan, there was no law except the will of the Khan,” and “Azerbaijanis did not dare to bring their disputes to the Sharia Courts.” The Russian authorities would correct all these “injustices” (Bayramov, 2011, p. 19). The driving force behind Gan’s reform was the policy of reliance on the “big men” in the country. In this regard, Tsar Nicholas I adopted the reform project in April 10, 1840, and it was approved as law (Mustafa, 2020, p. 74). The law, entitled “Administration of the Caucasus region,” came into force on April 10, 1840, and divided the South Caucasus into two: the Imereti governorship of Georgia and the Caspian province (News. az, 2022; Aliyeva, 2021, p. 57).

RUSSIA-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS DURING THE FIRST PERIOD OF INDEPENDENCE

After the Russian Tsarist regime was overthrown, liberation movements began in all the empire’s regions, including Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijan People’s Republic (ADR) was formed in the territory of modern day Azerbaijan in 1918. The first meetings of the ADR were held in Tbilisi,

where the capital of the republic was initially declared (Keykurun, 1998, pp. 34-35). However, in Ganja, the capital was also presented as a candidate for the title of the capital of the future republic. At that time Baku was under the control of the Baku Council of People's Commissars, which was established on the order of the Russian Provisional Government. The Council was dominated by Dashnak Bolsheviks. When the Baku commune was liquidated, the Baku government was formed, which was controlled by the Central Caspian dictatorship of the Mensheviks and Asarists. The Turkish troops managed to free Baku from the Bolsheviks and on 15 September 1918, and on 17 September the Azerbaijan People's Republic began its work there.

The short lived ADR was to last only 23 months, but it laid the foundation for the century long struggle for independence. In particular, a fundamentally new, civilized republic was created in Azerbaijan. The first signs of independence were the adoption of a new progressive law, as well as the establishment of a government structure with a Council of Ministers, which was elected by the National Assembly (Parliament). In other words, the ADR was a parliamentary republic.

Russia was preparing to occupy the newly created independent state. In August 1919, having fulfilled its duty to protect the independence of the ADR, Great Britain withdrew most of its troops from Transcaucasia, leaving only a detachment of soldiers in Batumi. In addition, there was another factor that ensured the full independence of Azerbaijan. However, the Red Army began its relentless advance to the south. In these circumstances, Baku was looking for ways to ensure its security. In an attempt to create a united front against the Bolsheviks, an agreement on mutual defense between Azerbaijan and Georgia was concluded. Armenia did not join the defense alliance. The representatives of the Azerbaijan People's Front presented a declaration on the recognition of Azerbaijan's independence at the Versailles Conference, where the leaders of the Allied nations were invited. In January 1920, Azerbaijan received de facto recognition of its independence (Akbulut, 2017, p. 30). This allowed Azerbaijan to preserve its independence and maneuverability in its foreign policy with the traditional allies of Russia, Iran, and Turkey.

The Allied powers, and in particular Great Britain, were hesitant to provide military assistance to the newly created state. They wanted to get

as many concessions as possible from the Bolsheviks, and the military intervention of Britain in Transcaucasia was too expensive. Besides, the troops stationed in the Caucasus were insufficient to resist the attacks of the Red Army. Nevertheless, the Azerbaijan National Front (ANF) turned to the Allied powers for help and support. ANF representatives participated in the meetings of the Supreme Council of the Allies in London and San Remo (Musa, 2011a, pp. 213-216). The issue of Azerbaijan was discussed at the London conference, where the newly independent states were invited to submit their proposals. The draft resolution entitled "Allied Policy toward Russia" developed by the ANF peace mission in Paris, which was approved at the London conference, was to develop a policy of peace with Soviet Russia and stop the war. However, despite several attempts to gain the support of the Allies, Azerbaijan was unable to get military aid. The reason for this was the reluctance of Great Britain to provide assistance. In addition, there was a threat of the occupation of Azerbaijan by Soviet Russia. The Hovci (Hoyski) government sent the Russian Foreign Minister Chicherin the third note on 15 February 1920. The note once again called on Russia to respect the independence of the ADR and protect the integrity of the territories of the Caucasus countries. It was also noted that Russia should explain to the world the reason for its military presence on the borders of the newly independent state. In addition, it was proposed to establish direct contact between the governments of the two countries and begin negotiations on a number of issues. However, Lenin's Russia, which had long been preparing for war with the ADR, did not respond to the call for negotiations. The Hovci government was forced to turn to other allies for help.

The new plan was developed in two variants. The first version of the plan assumed that the Red Army would cross the borders of the ADR on 27 April 1920, capture Baku, and seize control of the Azerbaijani oil fleet. However, the Red Army's objective was to occupy all of Azerbaijan. The occupation of Baku began on 27 April 1920 and marked the end of the ADR's 23 month independence (Aydinoğlu, 2023, p. 8). Thus, another attempt by Azerbaijan to follow the path of independence was stopped by the Red Army. It was the policy of the world socialist revolution pursued by Lenin and his comrades that led to the creation of the ADR and its subsequent destruction. Russia did not recognize the independence of the ADR, and by occupying the country, Russia once again established its dominance over the region. In addition, Russia canceled the independent

foreign policy of the ADR and began to dismantle its army (Nəşibli, 2011, p. 273). Azerbaijan again became the source of raw materials for the Russian industry. In particular, Azerbaijan's fuel reserves were transferred to Russia, which, in turn, led to the Azerbaijani people's resistance to the occupation and the struggle for independence.

THE KEY DETERMINANTS OF RUSSIA–AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS

THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE INDEPENDENT REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

By the mid-1980s, the political conditions in the USSR were deteriorating. The central government and the Communist Party further undermined their credibility by resorting to mass violence against citizens. Relations between the center and the periphery began to unravel both politically and economically. Meanwhile, the countries of Eastern Europe were experiencing complex socio political upheavals. As the socialist system was collapsing, their peoples aimed to end Soviet intervention and pursue forms of independent development.

The restoration of state independence marked a significant turning point in the history of the Azerbaijani people and inaugurated a new era. At the same time, it set the country on the path to building a democratic, law-based state grounded in national state traditions and its historical and cultural heritage. However, independence also brought serious responsibilities. Azerbaijan had to secure and consolidate its state, resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh issue stemming from Armenia's unfounded territorial claims, liberate the occupied territories, and create favorable conditions on the international stage. Above all, the Republic of Azerbaijan had to protect its people and support the country's development. Meeting these demands required consistent and purposeful preparation and action in both domestic and foreign policy. Shortly after the restoration of state independence, the Azerbaijani people entered an important period in their history. The Republic of Azerbaijan also took its first steps in foreign policy. Many countries recognized Azerbaijan's independence, and in January 1992 Azerbaijan joined the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE; since 1995 the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) and ratified numerous international agreements.

Haydar Aliyev's rise to power and strong political activities saved the Republic of Azerbaijan from conflict, separatism, and fragmentation.

At the same time, it marked the beginning of efforts to build a stable, continuously developing state and to restore the self-confidence of its people. To resolve Azerbaijan's difficult domestic and foreign problems, the country pursued an active foreign policy. Haydar Aliyev, who tied Azerbaijan's future to state independence, said: "One of the principal tasks of strengthening the independence of our Republic is to have an intelligent and competent foreign policy that can protect Azerbaijan's interests on a global scale. Our foreign policy must primarily focus on securing the state's independence." "The task is to establish equal, mutually beneficial relations with every country in the world and to use them effectively to strengthen the international position of the Republic of Azerbaijan while developing its economy, science, and culture" (Aliyev, 1997, p. 204).

Azerbaijan's foreign policy has shifted toward a more pragmatic direction compared with previous years in order to tackle the complex challenges ahead. Abandoning the ineffective approach that pushed the country into regional isolation, a balanced and diversified foreign policy line was adopted (Yenicag.az, 2022). At the same time, wide ranging measures were taken to maintain internal stability and ensure the normal functioning of state institutions. Resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh issue on the basis of Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity also became one of the main priorities of foreign policy.

Azerbaijan, situated at a sensitive geopolitical point between Europe and Asia, prioritizes establishing and strengthening its ties with its neighbors Turkey, Russia, Iran, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Its primary aim is to develop bilateral and multilateral cooperation on the basis of good neighborliness and mutual benefit. Heydar Aliyev expressed this view as follows: "As a democratic state, the Republic of Azerbaijan must establish equal relations with all states.

A parallel effort to establish and expand ties with the United States and European countries also became an important part of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. The main aims were to present Azerbaijan as an independent state, strengthen its position abroad, address the conflict resulting from Armenian aggression, and move toward integration with Europe. This strategy extended beyond Europe and the United States that Azerbaijan also established contractual and legal foundations for relations with countries in Asia and Africa, including Japan and China. The approach initiated by

Haydar Aliyev was later continued by Ilham Aliyev, who maintained a balanced foreign policy. During Ilham Aliyev's tenure, Azerbaijan expanded its bilateral and multilateral relations with various states and achieved significant foreign policy results since 2003 (Orujova, 2025, pp. 580–581). During this period, there was also an increase in the number of countries seeking cooperation with Azerbaijan. In 2018 alone, President Ilham Aliyev made official and business visits to 16 foreign countries, including Turkey, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Croatia, Switzerland, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. In the same year, presidents from 16 countries and the Federal Chancellor of Germany paid official visits to Azerbaijan, including leaders from Turkey, Russia, Iran, Italy, Serbia, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Macedonia, and Albania (Aliyev, 2019).

RELATIONS WITH THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION DURING THE AYAZ MUTALIBOV PERIOD

After the collapse of the USSR and Azerbaijan's regaining of independence, other states intensified their competition for regional influence, creating new conditions. As a result, Azerbaijan transformed from an area where states cooperated around regional interests into one where they competed. After Azerbaijan regained independence, Russia whose borders had been greatly reduced and whose superpower status had diminished sought to maintain its position as a major power and chose confrontation over cooperation. The struggle for influence in Azerbaijan intensified further among Russia, the West Turkey alliance, and Iran, whose regional foreign policy approaches conflicted. Under these conditions, Russia failed to develop a strategy that matched the new reality of the South Caucasus. The imperial perspective it tried to preserve no longer fit that reality. There was also no consensus within Russia regarding Azerbaijan. Because Russia had long regarded Azerbaijan as strategically important, it used the Karabakh conflict to its advantage, openly supporting Armenia while attempting to keep Azerbaijan within its sphere of influence.

During this period, the foreign policy of the president of the newly independent Azerbaijan was of great importance. He had to fulfill several urgent tasks that prevent separatism, preserve the territorial integrity and security of the state, mitigate the severe socio economic effects of the war, and improve the country's position in foreign relations. Ayaz Mutallibov served as Azerbaijan's first president from 1991 to 1992. At

that time, an ideological split emerged in Azerbaijan between two factions. Mutallibov's faction supported a more Russia-oriented approach, while the independence oriented Popular Front aimed to move away from Russia and the structures led by it. During Mutallibov's presidency, his foreign policy was generally open to proposals advanced by Russia. At a meeting held in Almaty on December 21, 1991, Mutallibov supported and signed the agreement for Azerbaijan's membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and signed the declaration (Kasimli, 2015, p. 505). The Azerbaijan Parliament had already adopted Decision No. 32 of December 20, 1991, on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which aimed to limit Mutallibov's actions. According to the decision, the authority to participate in the meeting related only to the status of Soviet military units in Azerbaijan (Aslanli, 2023, pp. 50–51); under these conditions, Azerbaijan's CIS membership was not considered appropriate. Despite Parliament's stance, Mutallibov signed the Almaty Declaration (Kasimli, 2015, p. 505). The opposition objected to this decision, which the Parliament had not approved.

However, Mutallibov continued his pro-Russian foreign policy strategy, seeing ties with Moscow as the fundamental element of Azerbaijan's foreign policy (Öztarsu, 2011, p. 2). Despite this, he expected Russia to assist Armenia in occupying Karabakh, while Russia continued to refuse to recognize Azerbaijan's independence. This Moscow centered approach collapsed after the Armenians, with the help of the Russian 366th Armored Regiment, committed genocide in Khojaly on 26 February 1992 (Cafersoy, 2001, p. 10). This tragedy sparked nationwide protests demanding Ayaz Mutallibov's resignation; the protests intensified on 5 March 1992. The next day, 6 March 1992, the protests succeeded and Mutallibov was forced to resign (eqanun.az, 1992).

THE ELCHIBEY PERIOD

During this period, the Azerbaijan Popular Front repeatedly called for the country's president to resign. After the tragic events in Khojaly on 25–26 February 1992 and a series of failures in Nagorno-Karabakh, Ayaz Mutallibov resigned (Məmmədov, 1999, p. 160). One of the Popular Front's leaders, Abulfaz Elchibey (1992–1993), became Azerbaijan's first democratically elected president. His foreign policy differed considerably from that of his predecessor. Pro-Turkish, Elchibey pursued a nationalist strategy aiming to forge closer ties with Turkey and to develop friendly

relations with Western countries as well. He identified these states as strategic partners and waged a covert campaign against communism, the remnants of the Soviet past, and Iran, which was increasingly seen as Azerbaijan's most dangerous neighbor.

From that point on, efforts intensified in Azerbaijan to promote the Turkish language and foreground the national identity. Elchibey even spoke in Azerbaijani Turkish at some international meetings (Yavuz, 2004, p. 67). While Pan-Turkism later became central to foreign policy, from 1992 onward matters of trade, economy, credit, investment, and industrial and technical cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan gained importance. Turkey also began to support Azerbaijan on the Karabakh issue. In the same year Ankara severed economic ties with Armenia for the first time, and in 1993 the Turkey and Armenia border was closed. Relations with Iran deteriorated significantly during Elchibey's period. He pursued an openly anti-Iranian policy, describing Iran as "the enemy of the entire Muslim and Turkic world" (Alizada, 2021, p. 301). His harsh criticisms were based on what he saw as violations of rights and freedoms in Iran. In the South Azerbaijan region, where the majority of Azerbaijani Turks live, they had been deprived of their freedoms and subjected to cultural discrimination. To resolve these disagreements with Iran, Elchibey advocated for the reunification of South and North.

During Elchibey's presidency, Russia was among the countries that particularly complicated foreign policy for Azerbaijan. The main reasons were Russia's political pressure and military superiority, but the previous government's pro-Russian stance also played a major role; it had paid a heavy price in the Karabakh conflict and had helped the Armenians advance in the war. Therefore, Elchibey focused on expanding military capacity to resolve the Karabakh issue and on obtaining foreign assistance in order to internationalize the conflict. As part of this effort, the Tashkent Agreement of 15 May 1992 envisaged the sharing of military assets. According to the agreement, both parties transferred to Azerbaijan 220 tanks and armored vehicles and 285 artillery units. The aim was to create an army with a nationalist spirit, and this equipment significantly contributed to the successful completion of the Azerbaijan Army's operations (Elchibey, 1996a, p. 1).

However, neither national restructuring measures pursued by Elchibey's side nor the efforts to find a negotiated solution to the Karabakh

problem produced a positive result. The Armenian side maintained its uncompromising stance, Azerbaijan did not receive the support it expected from the West, and Russia contributed to the stalemate. As is well known, Russia supported Armenia on Karabakh and continuously provided military and political assistance. In this context, Azerbaijan Popular Front's decision to pursue a strategy of resistance against Russian imperialism (Elchibey, 1996b, p. 1), together with efforts to develop alternatives that could free Azerbaijan from Russian influence, led to a complete break with Russia. In light of these developments, Elchibey pursued two main directions in his strategy toward Russia. The first emerged during the national restructuring period he implemented. At that time Russia could not ignore Azerbaijan's demands and stated that it would not obstruct the country's progress toward democratization. Russia later abandoned this stance by adopting the "near abroad" doctrine and once again made Azerbaijan a priority in its foreign policy. The second direction concerned Elchibey's policy toward the Turkic republics. His efforts to establish a common Turkic union and initiatives to have the Turkish language recognized among the UN languages made Azerbaijan a renewed target of Russian policy. As Russian forces withdrew from Azerbaijan, they handed over their weapons to Suret Huseynov, who would later attempt a coup in the country. At the same time, Russia increased its support for Armenia, which led to Armenia's occupation of Kelbajar.

HEYDAR ALIYEV'S BALANCING POLICY AND RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

For Heydar Aliyev, whose foreign policy was shaped by these issues, maintaining balanced relations with Russia and other states was extremely important. However, Russia's unconstructive efforts to maximize its military and political influence in the South Caucasus showed that it was not seeking mutually beneficial, equal relations with the countries of the region. Armenia's unjust approach to resolving the Karabakh dispute stemming from its unfounded territorial claims against Azerbaijan and the measures that restricted Azerbaijan's commercial and economic ties reflected a state policy contrary to the interests of both countries. These actions also long harmed the development of good neighborly relations.

In this context, Azerbaijan joined the CIS in September 1993 in an effort to rebuild its political, economic, and cultural ties with Russia and the other CIS countries. It aimed to base these relations on new principles

reflecting the common interests of the independent states and, at the same time, to protect its national interests more effectively in the former USSR territories and in the international arena. Therefore, from the second half of 1993 Azerbaijan pursued a foreign policy that paved the way for a dynamic development of mutual relations with Russia. The Republic of Azerbaijan later confirmed this stance with concrete measures. The "Contract of the Century" signed on 20 September 1994 (Azerbaijan.az, 2024) and the subsequent oil agreements demonstrated Azerbaijan's intention to develop friendly relations with Russia on mutually beneficial terms. Those measures included granting a fair share to the Russian oil company LUKoil, choosing the Baku and Novorossiysk route for transporting the country's oil, and inviting other Russian companies to cooperate (Rzayev, 2023, p. 266). In the following years, Azerbaijan attached special importance to interstate relations with Russia as part of its foreign policy. During President Heydar Aliyev's visit to Moscow on 3 July 1997, Azerbaijan and Russia signed an agreement on friendship, cooperation, and mutual security (Xalqqazeti.az, 2024). This document created a broad legal basis for elevating bilateral relations in line with the national interests of both states.

Vladimir Putin's assumption of office in 2000 led to a more pragmatic trend in Russia's foreign policy, including its relations with Azerbaijan. The official visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Azerbaijan on 9–10 January 2001 marked a new stage in the development of Azerbaijan and Russia relations (Arif, 2008, p. 3). It was the first visit to Azerbaijan by a Russian head of state since the country gained its independence. A more objective Russian assessment of the current geopolitical realities, the need to establish relations with Azerbaijan on equal terms, and the national interests shared by both states helped open a new chapter in bilateral relations. In Baku, President Vladimir Putin and President Heydar Aliyev held interdelegation talks covering all areas of mutual cooperation. They also addressed regional security, strategic stability, and important international issues of mutual concern. The President of the Russian Federation acknowledged that differing views between the two countries on political and economic relations had cooled bilateral ties. Therefore, he emphasized the necessity of effectively taking advantage of every opportunity to turn a new page in their relations.

SOFT POWER AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY INITIATIVES

The concept of soft power is currently recognized as the most potent

geopolitical tool for eroding the influence of actual and potential enemy states in international relations (Nye, 1990, p. 154). By employing certain technologies, interstate geopolitical confrontations may involve a comprehensive yet discreet exploitation of the tools needed to impose indirect control over the policies a given state is to pursue domestically and abroad. In this respect, the actions of the geopolitical actor taking on the role of an aggressor tend to fall under the category of indirect action soft power designed to secure strategic advantages against an adversary in socio-economic, defense, cultural, ideological, and other areas of confrontation (Nye, 1990, p. 167). Within this framework, the primary target of geopolitical aggression is the ruling elites of the enemy state, who are perceived as the decision making and power hubs of society. The overall aim is to obtain control of the target system by covertly influencing the behavior of specific individuals and social groups, as well as promoting the implementation of policy options conducive to the achievement of the aggressor's political and strategic objectives (Əkbərov, 2023). State elites are now capitalizing on the described soft power approach to legitimize their foreign policy choices. The Russian Federation, which is determined to advance its geopolitical interests in the South Caucasus region, also benefits from the use of the described tools of indirect confrontation.

In this respect, Azerbaijan's attempts to soothe Russia and reorientate its foreign policy accordingly have enhanced Moscow's soft power appeal in the region. Russia actively promoted its geopolitical and ideological interests in post-Soviet space through extensive pro-Moscow agitation. Two key Soviet era assets account for the strong appeal of Russia in Azerbaijan namely, the Russian language and education system. The Russian language retained its popularity in the country (Kəngərli, 2012, p. 6). However, Azerbaijan's independence allowed the nation to orientate itself toward the West while pursuing a west oriented foreign policy course. Consequently, Russia's appeal declined, as the Russian language failed to meet the growing demand for English as a foreign language. Russian was officially recognized as a foreign language, whereas its previous privileged position was significantly diminished. Additionally, the decreasing number of ethnic Russians in Azerbaijan after the dissolution of the Soviet Union also decreased the language's attractiveness. Azerbaijani gained ground as the dominant language of instruction in education. In particular, in Baku, the share of students taught in Azerbaijani Turkish increased from 45% in 1988/1989 to 78% in 1995/1996 (Paşayeva, 2016, p. 44). Although

instruction in Russian was compulsory in primary and secondary education for over seventy years, it failed to gain popularity. In 2013/2014, only 21.8% of primary and secondary school students studied the Russian language as a foreign language, compared to 83.5% studying English. According to the 2014 data, Russian was used as the language of instruction in only 7% of primary and secondary schools.

Russia's growing soft power in Azerbaijan is also accounted for by the emergence of the pro-Russian Eurasia Movement, which brings together Azerbaijani individuals and entities with extensive experience in Russia's military and political establishment. Officially launched in Azerbaijan in early 2015, this Russian backed initiative was designed to create conditions for promoting Russia's interests and soft power in the Republic (RIA Novosti, 2024).

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP: A STRATEGIC MANEUVER OR A NECESSITY?

Russia's geopolitical and geo-economic interests suggest that strengthening ties with the South Caucasian states is a priority for the country. In particular, Azerbaijan plays a special role given its transit location and strategic importance. The question then arises as to whether the Russia-Azerbaijan relations are based on strategic partnership or mutual necessity. The strategic and economic interests of both countries suggest that their relationship is one of necessity. In particular, a strategically significant step towards strategic partnership was the Agreement between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation on Alliance, which was signed on 22.02.2022 (Kremlin.ru, 2022). The document contains 43 articles, covering all areas of interstate relations, from political to economic. In particular, the agreement highlights the deepening of economic ties between Russia-Azerbaijan. In addition, the sides emphasized their interest in expanding joint investment in the oil, gas, chemical, machine building, agricultural, and construction sectors. Russia-Azerbaijan noted the importance of strengthening economic ties through settlements in national currencies and the use of integrated payment systems, including bank cards. Closer interaction between Russian and Azerbaijani banks is also being established.

Russia is expanding its infrastructure, economic, and institutional networks to promote the concept of Greater Eurasia. President of Russia V.V. Putin

called the project's development a response to global risks, ensuring political stability, and creating conditions for the economic development of states. In particular, the strategic partnership between Russia-Azerbaijan is designed to ensure the state's security, derive benefits from common transit routes, and develop new areas of political, economic, cultural, and humanitarian cooperation. In particular, given the growing political risks and threats to energy security in a context of geopolitical tensions, including among major hydrocarbon producers and exporters, strategic and economic partnership is a priority for both countries. At the same time, enhanced relations between the two neighboring states also serve as a guarantee of stability and predictability in bilateral trade and economic ties.

The evolution of relations between Azerbaijan and Russia between 2003 and 2025 is therefore also determined by key external factors, which are also of interest. In particular, the first critical development was the Russia-Georgia war that broke out in August 2008. Russia's military intervention on Georgia's behalf followed by Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states dramatically altered the regional geopolitical balance. From the standpoint of Baku, this confrontation had significant negative implications for regional security and was a direct challenge to state sovereignty. The event served as a warning to other South Caucasian states of Moscow's intentions. At the same time, although Baku explicitly supported Tbilisi's territorial integrity, it did not follow up with concrete military and political measures. As such, Azerbaijan adopted a strategy of pragmatic balancing that took into account its national security and strategic interests while avoiding direct confrontation with Russia.

Considered together, these developments demonstrate that Azerbaijan's foreign policy between 2003 and 2025 was determined by external factors, including deepening Russia-Western confrontation. From this perspective, Azerbaijan's strategic partnership with Russia was the foreign policy choice of a pragmatic state that sought to pursue its national interests. The experience of the last twenty years demonstrates that such a policy is entirely compatible with the principles of realism. In other words, the mutual interests of Russia-Azerbaijan in the South Caucasian region created common ground for strategic economic and political ties. At the same time, Baku's foreign policy between 2003 and 2025 still demonstrates that the concept of necessity driven geopolitical alliances is also compatible with the principles of realism.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to identify political, strategic, geopolitical, and other aspects that have shaped and reshaped the Russian Federation's and Republic of Azerbaijan's bilateral relations in 2003–2025. The analysis is based on the author's hypothesis that they are not strictly dependent, hostile, or permanently dependent but rather transformed through time with the international system's shifts and regional dynamics. The findings confirm this hypothesis and highlight several critical aspects of Russia–Azerbaijan relations.

Firstly, the study discovers that despite many crises and political tensions, Azerbaijan and Russia did not experience complete policy disengagement. In other words, the existing bilateral ties acted as a guarantor of the relationship, regardless of sharp fluctuations in interstate diplomacy. For instance, despite the Russia West confrontation drivers (the Russia–Georgia War in 2008, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the Russia–Ukraine War in 2022), Baku chose to pursue a conciliatory policy rather than break ties with Moscow. This implies that both the state's share a diplomatic platform that allows them to sustain the relationship regardless of external fluctuations. Moreover, institutional ties are another critical factor in the current Russia–Azerbaijan strategic partnership. While political ties face periodic tests, economic interdependence remains relatively stable. The discovery underscores natural gas and oil as vital elements of the relationship that ensure a balanced one, neutralizing the risk of either country dominating the partnership.

Furthermore, the research highlights that Azerbaijan's foreign policy does not follow the neorealist balance of power theory, which to a considerable extent determines its foreign policy toward Russia. In other words, while the official narrative promotes strategic partnership, economic, and energy policy ties, Azerbaijan simultaneously engages other powers, including Turkey, the EU, and regional actors. It allows Baku to follow a multi veined foreign policy and retain its independence.

Additionally, the study discovers that the Karabakh war complexified the bilateral ties, but it did not transform them into out rightly adversarial ones. In other words, although Russia has diminished its influence over Nagorno-Karabakh after the war and the events that occurred in 2023, Azerbaijan has not turned into an explicit antagonist. Rather, both countries continue to

pursue a policy of strategic interdependence, which remains their primary foreign policy instrument. This is the fourth discovery of this research.

Finally, the analysis uncovers that the Russia-Azerbaijan relationship has become increasingly institutionalized over time, which underlines their commitment to strategic partnership. For instance, the 1997 Friendship Treaty, energy, and transport agreements, and the 2022 Alliance Declaration suggest that both countries value the alliance, which extends beyond a temporary partnership. This implies that there is a strong institutional framework that can withstand the test of time and international relations' fluctuations. The fifth discovery is that Azerbaijan continues to pursue a multi veined foreign policy, which includes its membership in the CIS. However, its selective participation in some organizations (the CSTO, EAEU, etc.) suggests that it has chosen a pragmatic rather than an explicitly none Western foreign policy.

To summarize, Azerbaijan and Russia share a multifaceted strategic partnership that has withstood the test of time. The 2003-2025 dynamics demonstrate that while the two countries do not follow the traditional realism, their relations remain based on strategic interdependence rather than out rightly hostile or dependent. However, Azerbaijan's foreign policy promotes engagement with several powers, including Turkey and the West, rather than exclusive reliance on Russia. Thus, the relationship is rather unique and serves as an excellent model of how a middle power can exercise its foreign policy to maximize its geopolitical gains.

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