

Is Azerbaijan a Middle Power?

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This article** seeks to present a fresh academic perspective on Azerbaijan's growing international standing and activism via the prism of scholarly debate on middle powers. It is argued that Azerbaijan, by virtue of its international initiatives and growing prestige, and having assumed the role of a norm entrepreneur, should no longer be characterized as a small state – despite its small geographic size – but as a middle power that demonstrates a high sense of global responsibility and supports international organizations, international development cooperation, sustainable development, global partnerships, multilateralism, multiculturalism, interfaith dialogue, etc. – principles that scholars in academia ascribe as the characteristics of middle powers. By acting as a norm entrepreneur on a global stage, Azerbaijan has the status of a middle power that also stands for collective gains and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Keywords: Middle Power, Azerbaijan, South Caucasus



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Introduction

This article argues that, despite its relatively small geographic size, Azerbaijan can no longer be considered a small state, but should be classified as a rising middle power. In doing so, the article seeks to engage with existing concepts and academic debate over what it means to be a middle power. Although it appears that there is no clear consensus definition in the academic literature of a middle power, some common features and behavioural patterns of states nevertheless enable one to argue that certain countries could qualify to be named as middle powers by virtue of their international initiatives, sense of responsibility, and assumption of the role of norm entrepreneur in an anarchic world that needs guidance and foresight.

In making this assertion about Azerbaijan, this article delves into an analysis of Azerbaijan's rising international profile; initiatives and collaborative projects undertaken by the country with its international partners that foster cooperation and partnership across different regions and continents; as well as its promotion of certain values and principles that stand for a better, more equitable world, sustainable development, diversity, multiculturalism, multilateralism, etc. Azerbaijan's adherence to these values and principles denotes its dedication to acting as a norm entrepreneur, which is one of the key characteristics of a middle power as identified in the relevant academic literature.

Having looked through the factors that elevate Azerbaijan's status from that of a mere small state to that of a middle power via the prisms of the relevant concepts in the academic literature, the paper concludes that Azerbaijan's ambition to be counted as a middle power should henceforth be treated as a legitimate aspiration that serves the greater good at the systemic level.

The Concept of a Middle Power

Middle powers have been at the forefront of many international initiatives that demand the coordination of resources and the promotion of values. Traditionally, middle powers are so named simply because they are neither great nor small. Scholars in the field, however, see beyond the mere geographic meaning of middle powers and rightly portray their importance in terms of more than just physical criteria. In

an attempt at classification, scholars such as Marijke Breuning divide states into great/superpowers, middle powers, regional powers, and small powers, with middle powers defined as “states that can wield a measure of influence, albeit not through the projection of military might.”¹

Breuning stated that “middle powers are usually affluent states that employ their resources to foster peace and lessen global economic inequality” and are norm entrepreneurs that “advocate for the adoption of certain international standards and work diplomatically to persuade the representatives of other states to also adopt these norms.”²

In a seminal work, Carsten Holbrad defined middle powers as “... moderating and pacifying influences in the society of states, reducing tension and limiting conflict among the great powers; or as principal supporters of international organizations, evincing a particularly high sense of responsibility.”³

Such countries play important roles in the area of international development cooperation, and the decision-makers of such countries typically advocate for more development aid and sustainable development. Examples of such states are Canada, a G8 member that has self-proclaimed itself a middle power to promote its role in the international environment; Norway, which, for example, facilitated negotiations between the representatives of Israel and Palestine in the run-up to the Oslo Accords in 1993; and the Netherlands and Sweden – which also claim to be norm entrepreneurs – whose work in the field of mediation, good offices, and environmental issues falls into the middle-power category. For instance, it is also argued that the decision-makers of Sweden and some other countries have used their middle power status and assumed a leadership role as norm entrepreneurs in countering global inequality.⁴ There is no consensus on the eligibility criteria; however, it is often advanced countries with purposeful activism on international affairs whose names make it onto the list.⁵

1 M.Breuning, *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Comparative Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.150

2 Ibid.

3 C.Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics*, (The Macmillan Press, 1984) p. 205

4 Breuning, *op.cit.*, p.155

5 *Ibid.*, 150

Another interesting element in this categorization is the distinction that some authors make between the concepts of middle powers and small states. It is underscored that the latter is not so easily defined, covers a diverse group of states, and is not solely confined to geographic size, as it is a relative concept. In this context, small states are described as “those that have a rather limited capacity to exert influence on other states” and rarely resort to force in international relations.⁶ Breuning also argues that the concept of a middle power should not be coeval with the notion of a regional power, which is portrayed “as a state that has the resources to exert influence in its own region of the world”.⁷

Holbraad notes that, to assess the role of middle powers, one has to see their typical contributions to the “international political process” towards the “basic goals of the society of nations”.⁸ He specifically mentioned international order and international justice in this regard, arguing that most of the descriptions that in the past were made about middle powers were based on their behaviour towards the international order.⁹ In this context, Holbraad asserts that:

“Such powers were presented as guardians of the balance of power; protecting the security of other states and the peace of the whole system; as moderating and pacifying influences in the society of states, reducing tension and limiting conflict among the great powers; or as principal supporters of international organizations, evincing a particularly high sense of responsibility The contributions actually made by middle powers to the maintenance of order and the pursuit of justice may be considered first at the systemic level.”¹⁰

Holbraad also argues that, if middle powers seem “to behave differently from great powers and small states, it is essentially because they are placed in a different position in the hierarchy of powers and exposed to other pressures”.¹¹ He further points out that middle powers possess neither the exceptional strength nor the overarching interests and responsibilities of great powers, and therefore they often do not face

6 *Ibid.*, p.151

7 *Ibid.*, 150

8 Holbraad, *op.cit.*, p. 205.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 Holbraad, *op.cit.*, p.212.

the big temptations of great powers. Therefore, “commanding greater resources than lesser powers and carrying more weight in international relations, they are often led to attempt parts that would be beyond the capabilities of most small states”.¹²

Moreover, Holbraad refers to the role of military capabilities in middle-power politics in his above-mentioned work – without, however, making the military a defining factor in a state’s middle-power role. For example, he argues that “middle powers could be trusted to exercise their diplomatic influence and military power in the interest of international society, that they were capable of being less selfish than great powers and more responsible than small states.”¹³

In the paragraphs below, the present article argues that Azerbaijan, despite its relatively small geographic size, has already established itself as a middle power by being able to effectively fit into the above-mentioned descriptions of middle powers in international relations.

Azerbaijan as a Middle Power and Norm Entrepreneur

In taking a close look at Azerbaijan’s rising international profile and its successful foreign policy, this article argues that the country’s role as a norm entrepreneur has earned it the title of middle power through the global initiatives that the country promotes and the emphasis it puts on values that unite societies, alongside serving as a bridge between often-competing geopolitical spaces.

Energy, Connectivity, Sustainable Development

The country has come a long way to becoming a regional leader through the many energy and infrastructure projects that it is implementing together with its international partners, for example, the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum oil and gas pipelines, and the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) megaproject, which became operational in 2020. With the commissioning of the SGC, which spans seven

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.212-213

¹³ Holbaard, *op.cit.*, p.59.

Amid the Russia–Ukraine war and limitations on the use of the North–South Corridor, the significance of, and throughput via, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, or Middle Corridor, has further increased, thereby placing Azerbaijan at the heart of Eurasian connectivity.

countries – Azerbaijan, Georgia, Türkiye, Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Italy – Azerbaijan laid the foundation not only for mutually beneficial energy partnerships across the continent but also contributed to building trust and international cooperation, which deliver multiple benefits to these nations while also having contributed to greater energy security.

It has taken considerable work, cooperation, and coordination of efforts by Azerbaijan and its international partners to build this format of trustful cooperation. The SGC was built to be an expandable diversification infrastructure, with the existing capacity in the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Trans-Adriatic Gas Pipeline (TAP) capable of being increased as required. Work is under way for TANAP to be expanded to 31 bcm/yr transmission capacity, while TAP’s throughput could be doubled to 20 bcm/yr.¹⁴ Azerbaijani gas is also reaching new markets, such as the countries of the Western Balkans, as well as Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania. In the wake of the Russia–Ukraine war and the ensuing energy crisis in Europe, Azerbaijan stepped in to play a greater role in assuring Europe’s energy security with the signing of a memorandum of understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy with the EU in July 2022 for doubling gas exports to 20 bcm/yr by 2027.¹⁵

Moreover, the increasing importance of global connectivity projects has further solidified Azerbaijan’s central place therein. Amid the Russia–Ukraine war and limitations on the use of the North–South Corridor, the significance of, and throughput via, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, or Middle Corridor, has further increased, thereby placing Azerbaijan at the heart of Eurasian connectivity. The restoration and rebuilding work in the Garabagh region in the aftermath of the Second Garabagh War (2020),¹⁶ which includes new transportation projects, could further enhance the capacity of the Middle Corridor, and this could be further enhanced with the possible opening of the Zangezur Corridor through Armenia’s southern region to connect with

14 See the official website of the Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, <http://www.minenergy.gov.az>

15 *Ibid.*

16 Second Garabagh War will be described later in the article.

Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.¹⁷ Azerbaijan's role as a crossroads between two continents and in fostering cooperation and connectivity between two geographic spaces has thus increased exponentially.

However, these projects are not merely profit-oriented; they also aim to contribute to the energy security, greater interdependence, infrastructure development, and stability of the region and wider neighbourhood, including Europe. Security means stability; stability and profit facilitate sustainable development, common benefits that Azerbaijan is fostering together with its international partners.

Renewable Energy: COP29

Azerbaijan, in addition to remaining an oil-rich country where the first oil well was drilled, using an industrial technique, in 1846, is assertively diversifying its energy mix and contributing to the decarbonization efforts of the European continent by exporting clean energy and increasing the share of its green energy. Supporting clean and green energy and contributing to global climate objectives has thus become a very significant element of Azerbaijan's energy strategy.

In recent years, Azerbaijan has also made great strides in terms of increasing the share of renewable energy in its energy mix, thereby contributing to climate action and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. This reflects Azerbaijan's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 40% by 2050, demonstrating the country's strong alignment with global climate objectives.¹⁸ Despite having oil and gas reserves, Azerbaijan has embarked on the process of going

¹⁷ Article 9 of the Trilateral Statement clearly states that: “*All economic and transport links in the region shall be restored. The Republic of Armenia guarantees the safety of transport links between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to organize an unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions. Control over transport shall be exercised by the bodies of the Border Guard Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB) of Russia*” in President.az, *Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation*, November 10, 2020, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/45923> (accessed: January 25, 2024). This new connectivity line, quickly dubbed the ‘Zangezur Corridor’, aims to facilitate ‘unimpeded’ movement in both directions and finally end Armenia’s decades-long isolation from all regional infrastructure and connectivity projects.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

clean, which is accompanied by a process of going green. The country's offshore wind potential is estimated at about 157 GW, onshore wind and solar at 27 GW, and up to 10 GW of wind and solar in the territories liberated following the Second Garabagh War.¹⁹

The government aims to hit a target of 30% renewable energy in Azerbaijan's energy mix by 2030.²⁰ However, recent developments in Azerbaijan's renewable energy sector promise to boost this through the utilization of wind and solar energy. Agreements have been reached with Saudi Arabia's ACWA Power and the United Arab Emirates' Masdar on the construction of a 240-MW wind and a 230-MW solar power plant in Khizi-Absheron and Absheron-Baku respectively, a total of 470 MW. Another project set to be implemented in the liberated Jabrayil district will supply 240 MW. This makes a total of 710 MW of renewable energy in wind and solar. These facilities are expected to help free up millions of cubic meters of natural gas for export.²¹

The ground-breaking ceremony for the wind power plant to be built by ACWA Power took place in January 2022. Similarly, on 26 October 2023, the official inauguration of the 230-MW Garadagh Solar Power Plant, built by Masdar, also took place. Three investment agreements were also signed on this day, and Azerbaijan is working in phases towards producing up to 10 GW of renewables.²²

Moreover, Azerbaijan and its partners have already taken active steps towards building new partnerships based on renewable energy export. The initiation of the Caspian–EU energy corridor through building new interconnectivity projects, such as the “Green Energy Corridor” that includes, among other projects, integrated transmission production and consumption facilities, and the Black Sea Submarine Electricity Cable,

19 Presiden.az, *Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the 9th Southern Gas Corridor Advisory Council Ministerial Meeting and 1st Green Energy Advisory Council Ministerial Meeting*, February 3, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/58967> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

20 See the official website of the Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, <http://www.minenergy.gov.az>

21 Presiden.az, *Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the 9th Southern Gas Corridor Advisory Council Ministerial Meeting and 1st Green Energy Advisory Council Ministerial Meeting*, February 3, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/58967> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

22 Presiden.az, *Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Official Opening Ceremony of the 230 Garadagh Solar Power Plant*, October 26, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/62005> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

is remarkable. Initially, the feasibility study for this project, which unites Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary, and Romania, is preparing for about 4 GW of renewables.²³ However, there is a lot of potential for this project to reach a larger geography in Europe as well as transporting greater volumes, thereby making an even greater contribution to the energy security of and energy transition in Europe, and also its climate objectives.

Azerbaijan's plans for green energy were also approved through an Order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan of 2 February 2021, titled "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development," which lists "clean environment and green growth" among five national priorities for the coming decade.²⁴ This, in turn, is expected to facilitate the application of environmentally friendly 'green' technologies and increase the share of renewable energy in the energy mix of the country. In addition, on 31 May 2021, a law "On the Use of Renewable Energy Sources in Electricity Production" was adopted.²⁵

Azerbaijan's success towards the energy transition and renewable energy, as well as efforts directed at meeting climate objectives, were recently globally acclaimed when, during the 28th session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) that took place in early December 2023 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Azerbaijan was granted the privilege of hosting COP29, which will take place on 11–24 November 2024 in Baku.²⁶ Moreover, by decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the year 2024 has been declared the "Year of Solidarity for [a] Green World" in Azerbaijan, with the objective "to enhance international solidarity in the global effort against climate change".²⁷

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ President.az, *Order of the President of Azerbaijan on Approval of "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development"*, February 2, 2021, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/50474> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

²⁵ See the official website of the Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan, <http://www.minenergy.gov.az>

²⁶ United Nations Climate Change, "COP28 Agreement Signals "Beginning of the End" of the Fossil Fuel Era", December 13, 2023, Available at: <https://unfccc.int/news/cop28-agreement-signals-beginning-of-the-end-of-the-fossil-fuel-era> (Accessed: January 7, 2024)

²⁷ Interfax, *President Aliyev declares 2024 as Green World Solidarity Year in Azerbaijan*, December 25, 2023, Available at: <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/97957/> (Accessed: January 7, 2024)

As the paragraphs above have demonstrated, the commitment to green energy, climate goals, and taking strong actions to this end fit well with Azerbaijan’s role as a norm entrepreneur and middle power.

Multiculturalism and Multilateralism

Azerbaijan has long made the promotion of tolerance and multiculturalism one of its central platforms in international affairs. Specifically, there is an established International Center on Multiculturalism in Azerbaijan that implements the state’s initiatives and vision in this area, and Azerbaijan declared 2016 the Year of Multiculturalism. It is a multiethnic and multi-confessional state where national minorities and freedom of religious belief are respected. Tolerance is therefore endemic to Azerbaijani society.

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Moreover, Azerbaijan’s emphasis on multilateralism is important. Its belief in the power of international institutions and increasing weight in international affairs elevated it to the status of non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2012–2013. One hallmark initiative promoted by Azerbaijan was the conduct of a high-level, open debate on “Strengthening partnership synergy between the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)” during the second term of its presidency of the Security Council in October 2013, which was the first ever high-level debate in the Council on this topic.

Further, it was Azerbaijan that initiated the creation of what has now become the driving force behind international efforts to stabilize the global oil market: OPEC+. The establishment of this united format of OPEC and non-OPEC countries amid fluctuating oil prices to tackle the challenges in the global oil market stems from the idea that Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev proposed during the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2016.²⁸ He stated that “it would be nice if the main OPEC and non-OPEC countries could come together and agree with

28 Mammadov, V. “Escape Window: How Does Azerbaijani President’s OPEC+ Model Justify Itself?”, *AzTv*, January 30, 2024, Available at: <http://www.aztv.az/en/news/4819/escape-window-how-does-azerbaijani-presidents-opec-model-justify-itself-markcommentmark> (Accessed: May 14, 2020).

each other.”²⁹ Azerbaijan’s appeal to the concerned oil-producing countries found widespread support among them, so OPEC+ came into being and has since been acting at the forefront of all developments associated with the global oil market.

Azerbaijan’s emphasis on international cooperation, and the importance it attaches to the role of international organizations, in this case, paid off well for the common objectives of the oil-producing states and achieved balance in the global oil market. This fact also testifies to the fact that the country has acted as a middle power and norm entrepreneur that both “advocated for the adoption of certain international standards and work diplomatically to persuade the representatives of other states to also adopt these norms”³⁰ and worked to provide “moderating and pacifying influences in the society of states”³¹ and as a notable supporter of international organizations, thereby showcasing a particularly high sense of responsibility.

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Chairmanship in the Non-Aligned Movement and other global initiatives

Commitment by Azerbaijan to multilateralism is further manifested in the most recent initiatives taken to bring together countries of diverse as well as similar faiths, identities, and interests. The country also acquired a valuable chance to assert itself as a middle power and a norm entrepreneur through its chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the second-largest global entity after the UN with 120 members, from 2019 to 2022, as well as of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS),³² GUAM, and TRACECA in 2020. Due to the success of its NAM Chairmanship, Azerbaijan’s tenure was extended to cover the year 2023. The 7th Summit of the Turkic-speaking States and

²⁹ APA News Agency, *President Ilham Aliyev attended Energy Security round table as part of Munich Security Conference*, February 15, 2020, Available at: <https://apa.az/en/foreign-news/President-Ilham-Aliyev-attended-Energy-Security-round-table-as-part-of-Munich-Security-Conference-coloredUPDATEDcolor-312830> (Accessed: May 14, 2020)

³⁰ Breuning, *op.cit.*, p.150

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Turkic Council at a time.

the 18th Summit of the heads of state and governments of the member countries of the NAM were held under Azerbaijani chairmanship in October 2019, and the 2nd Summit of World Religious Leaders was held in Baku in November 2019. Later, on March 2, 2023, the summit-level Meeting of the NAM Contact Group in response to COVID-19 on post-pandemic global recovery was also held in Baku.³³

Among many achievements of the NAM, its institutionalization through various mechanisms also stands out. The establishment of the NAM Parliamentary Network and Youth Organization in 2021 and 2022 respectively, as well as an initiative on the establishment of the NAM Women Platform and NAM Contact Group on humanitarian demining, are important milestones in this regard.³⁴

Azerbaijan's initiatives with the OTS and NAM were also remarkable during the new reality induced by COVID-19.

By possessing the central role in these organizations, making its voice heard through such versatile institutions, and once again focusing on issues of global importance such as those related to religious tolerance, multiculturalism, tolerance, interfaith dialogue, interstate cooperation, youth movement,

women's empowerment, and sustainable development, Azerbaijan has further explored opportunities to act as a norm entrepreneur and middle power.

Azerbaijan's initiatives with the OTS and NAM were also remarkable during the new reality induced by COVID-19. Online special meetings of the two organizations were convened in April³⁵ and May³⁶ 2020 respectively that focused specifically on global efforts to deal with the consequences of the pandemic and sought to agree more specific, united

33 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev Attends NAM Contact Group on Fight Against COVID-19*, March 2, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/59074> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

34 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev Participated in Ministerial Meeting of NAM Coordinating Bureau*, July 5, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/60366> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

35 Huseynov, V. "Azerbaijan Hopes to Minimize Ramifications of Coronavirus Crisis", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*; The Jamestown Foundation, Volume: 17 Issue: 52, April 16, 2020, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-hopes-to-minimize-ramifications-of-coronavirus-crisis/> (Accessed: May 14, 2020)

36 Jafarova, E. "Non-Aligned Movement is United Against COVID-19", *EURACTIV*, May 5, 2020, Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/azerbaijan/opinion/non-aligned-movement-is-united-against-covid-19/> (Accessed: May 14, 2020)

actions to alleviate the negative effects of COVID-19 on the member states of the two organizations. A focus on unity, multilateralism, international cooperation, and commitment to common objectives was the crux of those meetings. It was repeatedly underscored that only through effective multilateralism and consistent adherence to the common values that unite all the affected states would they be able to overcome these challenges.

Azerbaijan also acted as a norm entrepreneur and middle power as it repeatedly stood for sustainable development, having allocated about US\$10 million to the World Health Organization (WHO) to support its efforts concerning COVID-19, especially to help needy populations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Azerbaijan also extended humanitarian and financial assistance to over 80 countries bilaterally and through the WHO.³⁷

In line with its broader foreign policy objectives, Azerbaijan also vowed to promote multilateralism, international cooperation, and solidarity within the NAM during its 2019–2023 chairmanship. Among the important outcomes of the above-mentioned online NAM summit on May 4, 2020, one gained particular traction: the idea proposed by President Ilham Aliyev that NAM countries could initiate convening a special online session of the UN General Assembly on COVID-19 at the level of Heads of States and Governments.³⁸ This initiative voiced the innate belief of many that more should be done by international organizations to stave off the repercussions of COVID-19 and unite global efforts through fostering greater cooperation and multilateralism, as opposed to pursuing isolationist and national agendas in the face of the calamity.

Owing to this confidence and trust in Azerbaijan's initiative by the NAM countries and the greater UN community, the proposal for convening the special session of the UN General Assembly in response to COVID-19 was supported by more than two-thirds of UN Member

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37 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev Participated in Ministerial Meeting of NAM Coordinating Bureau*, July 5, 2023, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/60366> (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

38 Jafarova, *op.cit.*

States, 130 in total.³⁹ Only 30 UN General Assembly special sessions had taken place before that, as these are different from regular plenary sessions. However, while COVID-19 continued to pose an unseen challenge to our existence in the habitual system of international relations, discussions about the modalities of this special session started in July 2020 and it took place on December 3, 2020. Once again, Azerbaijan, as an ardent believer in the power of international institutions, cooperation, and solidarity, stood up to its role as a *norm entrepreneur* by initiating and summoning this special session of the UN General Assembly in response to COVID-19. Every effort matters, but one country is insufficient to cope with such a crisis if its efforts are not multiplied by the like-minded. Azerbaijan's efforts to achieve global solidarity were supported first within the NAM and later by the rest of the UN community, and the message delivered through this special UN General Assembly session related, first and foremost, to the message of solace – that we are not alone in times of trial.

Among other initiatives proposed by Azerbaijan, particular emphasis should be given to the work done on the topic of decolonization that was rightfully put forth by the country. Azerbaijan, as a norm entrepreneur, also assumed the role of a defender of those nations that are still under modern colonial domination. To defend the rights of suppressed people against the manifestations of colonialism and neocolonialism across the world, Azerbaijan announced the establishment of the Baku Initiative Group on July 6, 2023, within the framework of the ministerial meeting of the Coordination Bureau of the NAM.⁴⁰ Oppression of populations under colonial domination is at cross purposes with the existing norms and principles of international and human rights law, and Azerbaijan stands ready to flag the issue for the protection of human rights and the fight against injustice.

39 Hajiyev, H., "More than 130 countries of the world supported President Ilham Aliyev's initiative to hold a special session of the UN General Assembly" (translation from Azerbaijani), AZƏRTAC, June 27, 2020, Available at: https://azertag.az/xeber/Hikmet_Haciyevev_Dunyanin_130_dan_chox_dovleti_Prezident_Ilham_Aliyevin_BMT_Bas_Assambleyasinin_xususi_sessiyasinin_kechirilmesi_tesebbusunu_destekledi-1523401 (Accessed: January 5, 2024)

40 See the official website of the Baku Initiative Group, <https://www.bakuinitiative.com/#about-us>

Restoration of Azerbaijan's Territorial Integrity and its Rising Middle Power Status

A state's middle-power status is often defined not by its military might alone, however, a critical review of the concept of a middle power underscores the role of many sources of power, including military, in middle-power politics, revealing that a middle power is a state actor that has limited influence on deciding the distribution of power in a given regional system but is capable of deploying a variety of sources of power to change the position of great powers and defend its own position on matters related to national or regional security that directly affect it.⁴¹

Moreover, other sources also argue that, besides a state's leadership capabilities and rising influence in international politics, its military strength may also be a factor in defining a particular state as a middle power.⁴² Although being a middle power means a lot more than being in mere possession of strong military assets, some authors claim that the latter plays a role in consolidating a state's middle-power status.

Building on Holbraad's work, other scholars concur that one can define middle powers by a quantitative assessment of their GDP, population, military expenditure, trade, and similar material factors. It is argued in this regard that "although not as powerful as major powers, middle powers can be treated as secondary states whose possession of material capabilities can, to some degree, influence the international system through their active engagement in global governance."⁴³

As argued above, Holbraad also speaks of the role of military capabilities in middle-power politics, albeit he does not prioritize the role of the military in deciding a state's middle-power status. To repeat the previous assumption from his work: "middle powers could be trusted to exercise their diplomatic influence and military power in the interest of

41 Min-Shin, D. "A Critical Review of the Concept of Middle Power", *E-International Relations*, December 4, 2015, Available at: <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/60016> (Accessed: November 27, 2020)

42 Muftuler Bac, M. "Middle Power Politics", Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/middle-power> (Accessed: November 27, 2020)

43 Faisal Karim, M. "Middle power, status-seeking and role conceptions: The cases of Indonesia and South Korea," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/10357718.2018.1443428, p.3.

The Second Garabagh War (or 44-day war) that unfolded in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict between September 27 and November 10, 2020, demonstrated Azerbaijan’s military prowess.

international society, that they were capable of being less selfish than great powers and more responsible than small states.”⁴⁴

In this sense, and building on the above assertions, Azerbaijan indeed boasts strong military capabilities, and its armed forces score high in the leading military indices.⁴⁵ The Second Garabagh War (or 44-day war) that unfolded in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict⁴⁶

between September 27 and November 10, 2020, demonstrated Azerbaijan’s military prowess. Azerbaijan substantiated the legitimacy of its counteroffensive according to its right to self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter – fighting a foreign threat within its internationally recognized territories. From the outset of the 44-day-long war, Azerbaijan’s military superiority was clear. International military experts often refer to this as a “fifth-generation war” owing to the widespread use of military drones by Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani armed forces managed to liberate over 300 population centres, cities, villages, and strategic heights.

As a result of Azerbaijan’s military gains, Armenia capitulated. On November 10, a trilateral statement was signed by the Russian Federation, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The statement, which reflected

⁴⁴ Holbaard, *op.cit.*, p. 59.

⁴⁵ Global Firepower, “Azerbaijan Military Strength, 2020”, Available at: https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=azerbaijan (Accessed: November 27, 2020)

⁴⁶ The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan broke out with armed military aggression by the Republic of Armenia against Azerbaijan and the latter lost twenty per cent of its internationally recognized territories to the former in the course of the first Garabagh War (1988–1994). It should be remembered that Armenia continued to occupy the [former] Nagorno-Karabakh region and seven adjacent districts of Azerbaijan for about three decades in blatant disregard to the norms and principles of international law, including the four UN Security Council Resolutions (822, 853, 874 and 884) that, in 1993, demanded an immediate, unconditional, and full withdrawal of all occupying forces from the internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan. The negotiations towards the peaceful resolution of the conflict that started in the early 1990s under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group were unsuccessful, owing to the maximalist and unconstructive position of Armenia, which refused to liberate Azerbaijan’s occupied territories and feigned engagement in the peace talks. During these years, Armenia many times violated the ceasefire that was in place since 1994 and, on September 27, 2020, launched a massive attack against Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan responded by undertaking a counteroffensive that lasted for 44 days from September 27 to November 10.

Armenia's practically complete capitulation, obliged Armenia to return to Azerbaijan all remaining occupied territories. Furthermore, on September 19–20, 2023, Azerbaijan embarked on local counterterrorism measures in the parts of its Garabagh region where tens of thousands of illegal armed formations of Armenia remained, thus finally dismantling the illegal separatist entity in this region.⁴⁷

Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Garabagh War in 2020 and the restoration of its territorial integrity following the September 2023 counter-terrorism measures also showed that, in line with the above critical review on middle powers, the country is capable of defending its "own position on matters related to national or regional security that directly affect it".⁴⁸

Azerbaijan's Middle Power Role in Reducing Tensions among Great Powers

Another distinctive feature of a middle power, as defined in Holbaard's work, cited above, is "reducing tension and limiting conflict among the great powers". Azerbaijan has hosted several consecutive meetings between Russia and its Western partners. The first⁴⁹ took place in April 2018 between Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation General, and then NATO Supreme Allied Commander Curtis Scaparrotti, who met in Azerbaijan to discuss the situation in Syria, while the second⁵⁰ occurred in December of the same year

This practice continued in 2019 with a meeting in July in Baku between Russia's Chief of General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, and then NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, General Tod Wolters. The

47 Daily Sabah, *Separatists in Azerbaijan's Karabakh dismantle their illegal regime*, September 28, 2023, Available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/separatists-in-azerbajjans-karabakh-dismantle-their-illegal-regime/news> (Accessed: December 29, 2023)

48 Min-Shin, *op.cit.*

49 Gotev, G., "Top Russian, NATO generals choose Baku for talks on preventing military incidents", *EURACTIV*, April 19, 2018, Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/azerbaijan/news/top-russian-nato-generals-choose-baku-for-talks-on-preventing-military-incidents/> (Accessed: May 14, 2020).

50 Gotev, G., "NATO: Baku is 'perfect venue' for talking to Russia", *Euractiv*, December 16, 2018, Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/nato-baku-is-perfect-venue-for-talking-to-russia/> (Accessed: May 14, 2020).

parties discussed issues including “European and global security, ways to prevent incidents between Russia and NATO and the prospects for resuming dialogue between military experts.” They also deliberated topics relating to the fight against terrorism and maritime piracy, alongside focusing on the situations in Afghanistan and Syria.⁵¹ In November 2019, a meeting was held in Baku between Valery Gerasimov and then Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach. In February 2020, another meeting of Valery Gerasimov and Tod Wolters took place in Baku.⁵²

The choice of Baku for such meetings between Russia and NATO officials is not coincidental, as Baku is increasingly proving itself as a geographic venue capable of accommodating diverse and often competing interests between different geopolitical spaces, thus once again hewing to the definitions attested above of the concept of a middle power.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are different perspectives in the scholarly literature on what actually constitutes a middle power. The ones chosen for this work have given some description of the concept, sufficient to be utilized as an analytical framework. In an attempt to argue whether Azerbaijan fits into the concept of a middle power, the article has highlighted many initiatives and policies implemented by the country in recent years that have encapsulated the values of cooperation, multilateralism, multiculturalism, interfaith dialogue, sustainable development, and other norms and principles that attest to Azerbaijan’s high sense of global responsibility and have provided a bridge for dialogue.

As was also argued in the article, all the Azerbaijani initiatives described – certainly not an exhaustive list – demonstrate a strong dedication by the country to continue acting as *a* norm entrepreneur with a particularly high sense of responsibility. They testify to the fact that the country is a middle power that, as Breuning argues, has both

51 Caucasus Watch, *Meeting between NATO and Russia commanders in Baku*, July 12, 2019, Available at: <https://caucasuswatch.de/news/1816.html> (Accessed: May 15, 2020).

52 Mehdiyev, E. “MP: Russia-NATO meeting in Baku confirms that Azerbaijan perceived as reliable partner”, *Trend News Agency*, November 27, 2019, Available at: <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3154952.html> (Accessed: May 15, 2020).

“advocated for the adoption of certain international standards and work diplomatically to persuade the representatives of other states also to adopt these norms” and delivered “moderating and pacifying influences in the society of states”. As underscored above, Azerbaijan is a notable supporter of international organizations, international development cooperation, global partnerships, multilateralism, multiculturalism, and other principles that many authors in the field define as among the characteristics of middle powers. By choosing to act as a norm entrepreneur on the global stage, Azerbaijan also stands for the greater good and collective gains.

Objectively, our world would have been a better place had all the above values and initiatives been instilled into the fabric of our societies and foreign policy choices. Widespread acceptance of these values and norms could bring more dialogue, understanding, and peace to the anarchic nature of the international system. Norm entrepreneurs and middle powers are therefore valuable for the premium they place on these and other types of value systems that build, unite, improve, and consolidate our collective home. It seems that Azerbaijan is on the right track, and its ambition to qualify for norm entrepreneur and middle power status should be taken at face value.