

## HIGHLIGHT OF JOURNAL

Azerbaijan's Asian Perspective: Security and Cooperation  
**Farid Shafiyev and Roza Bayramli**



# CAUCASUS STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

Volume 5 • Issue 2 • Winter 2024

## Reinforcing the bonds between South Caucasus and Central Asia

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How Azerbaijan Advances  
South Caucasus–Central Asian Integration  
Through the Middle Corridor

**Robert M. Cutler**

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Managing Interrelated Environmental  
Challenges in Central Asia and the South  
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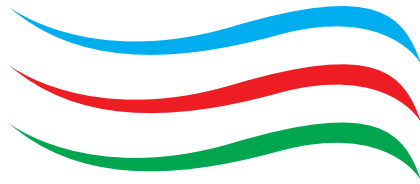
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CAUCASUS  
STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

**Volume 5 • Issue 2 • Winter 2024**

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# CAUCASUS STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

## Volume 5 • Issue 2 • Winter 2024

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## Reinforcing the bonds between South Caucasus and Central Asia



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# Editor's Note

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The current issue of the Caucasus Strategic Perspectives (CSP) journal entitled “*Reinforcing the bonds between South Caucasus and Central Asia*” is dedicated to the different aspects of the cooperation between two regions from connectivity, environment and climate issues to energy policy. The CSP journal also featured off-topic, yet timely-written articles covering the current and relevant developments in the South Caucasus region.

The CSP's new issue includes 7 articles and 1 commentary. The CSP's current authors analyzed Azerbaijan's increasing regional interaction with the countries of Central Asia, notably its role in multilateral organizations, such as the SCO, the CICA, and the OTS and emergence as a pivotal actor in the region, as well as the environmental and climate challenges in Central Asia and the South Caucasus regions and the roles of the regional organizations in addressing these challenges. The Journal's off-topic contributions addressed the importance of energy connectivity in shaping the relationship between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the roles of new extra-regional actors in the South Caucasus and the historical backgrounds of the crimes committed in the South Caucasus, notably towards Azerbaijanis.

The new issue's **Highlight** is the joint contribution of **Farid Shafiyev and Roza Bayramli** titled “*Azerbaijan's Asian Perspective: Security and Cooperation*”. The commentary narrates how following the Second Garabagh War, Azerbaijan has bolstered regional cooperation, notably with Central Asia, to strengthen ties through shared cultural and strategic interests and argues that Azerbaijan's role in multilateral organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, and the Organization of Turkic States, positions it as a significant regional player.

The new issue's **Articles Section** starts with the article of **Robert M. Cutler** titled “*How Azerbaijan Advances South Caucasus–Central Asian Integration Through the Middle Corridor*”. This article examines

the evolving geoeconomic significance of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, with a particular focus on Azerbaijan's emergence as a pivotal actor in the region and evaluates how Azerbaijan's foreign policy, balancing with multiple partners, allows it to consolidate its middle-power status, and also reflects on the country's broader impact on East–West trade and connectivity in the evolving global order.

**Nina Miholjčić Ivković's** article of "*Managing Interrelated Environmental Challenges in Central Asia and the South Caucasus through Regional Collaboration*" advocates for a unified response to these pressing issues, emphasizing the importance of collective action and shared knowledge to foster resilience and sustainable growth and examines how regional collaboration among Central Asian and South Caucasus countries can effectively address the interrelated environmental challenges of water scarcity, climate change, and energy dependence.

**Aytac Mahammadova's** article of "*The Increasing Role of Regional Organizations in the Climate Agenda of Central Asia: Challenges and Possible Implications*" examines the structural and political challenges impeding the efficacy of Central Asian regional organizations in addressing climate change and recommends establishing a comprehensive, centralized climate data repository, a regionally financed climate fund, and binding environmental agreements with enforceable mechanisms to ensure compliance and coordination.

**Eugene Chausovsky's** article of "*Azerbaijan and Armenia: How Energy Connectivity is Critical to Peace*" examine the importance of energy connectivity in shaping the relationship between Azerbaijan and Armenia across the economic, diplomatic and security spheres – from the Soviet period, to the present day, to the future and concludes that the key to a peaceful and sustainable future between Azerbaijan and Armenia is constructive cooperation across the energy, climate, and connectivity spheres, the successful implementation of which will have positive impacts throughout the Caucasus region and beyond.

**Vasif Huseynov and Aynur Abbasoy's** co-authored article titled "*Extra-Regional Actors in the South Caucasus: Armenia–India*

*Alignment in the Spotlight*” explores the ideological drivers behind the alignment between New Delhi and Yerevan and concludes that these developments generate reasonable concerns about their potential consequences for peace efforts between the two South Caucasian republics, while also suggesting that India’s strategy in the region could not only affect its relations with Azerbaijan but also risk undermining its broader economic and connectivity interests.

**Mima Čvorović’s** article “*Ethnic Cleansing in the South Caucasus Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Massacres and Mass Deportations of Azerbaijanis*” provides an overview of the key periods in the history of Azerbaijan, that is, 1905–1907, 1918–1920, 1948–1953, and 1988–1993, with a special focus on the violent and forced displacement of Azerbaijanis and the destruction of their cultural heritage.

**Rovshan Ibrahimov’s** comprehensive article titled “*Azerbaijan as an Emerging Middle Power after the 44-Day War and Reshaping the Foreign Policy*” defines the notion of middle power and the specifics of states with such status and analyses the tools and agenda for expanding Azerbaijan’s foreign policy and its more active participation in the global arena.

Finally, on behalf of the CSP team, we hope this issue provides food for thought and contributes to and enriches the discussion on subject-matter issue.

*Sincerely*  
**Farid Shafiyev**  
*Editor-in-Chief of CSP Journal*

# Azerbaijan's Asian Perspective: Security and Cooperation

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Farid Shafiyev\* and Roza Bayramli\*\*

Evolving geopolitical tensions among global powers are exacerbating security and economic issues worldwide, challenging the post-Cold War international order, and exposing the shortcomings of international law. The Caspian region, pivotal for trade and security, faces heightened pressures as the major powers attempt to sway the region's countries into exclusive alliances. Azerbaijan's foreign policy prioritizes regional autonomy, upholding sovereignty, and enhancing multilateral partnerships to safeguard its independence and security. Following the Second Garabagh War, Azerbaijan has bolstered regional cooperation, notably with Central Asia, to strengthen ties through shared cultural and strategic interests. Azerbaijan's role in multilateral organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), positions it as a significant regional player. Investments in transit infrastructure, such as the Middle Corridor and the 'Digital Silk Way' project, enhance Azerbaijan's role as a Eurasian logistics hub connecting Asia and Europe. Azerbaijan's deepening partnerships within these frameworks reflect its commitment to regional stability, economic resilience, and a balanced foreign policy that fosters collective security and prosperity across Asia and beyond.

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, Central Asia, CICA, OTS, SCO, South Caucasus



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***Introduction***

The contemporary geopolitical standoff among global powers has emerged as a significant factor exacerbating both security and economic challenges on a worldwide scale. The established international order, predominantly shaped by the frameworks and norms developed in the aftermath of the Second World War, now faces considerable strain and appears increasingly fragmented. This decline in order is further intensified by the ineffectiveness of international law, which is marred by pervasive double standards and a notable lack of enforcement mechanisms. In light of these dynamics, there is an imperative for a critical reassessment of existing global governance structures alongside a renewed commitment to uphold accountability and the rule of law in international relations.

The Caspian region’s significance reemerged in the context of increased geopolitical stand-offs and the volatility of international trade routes.

For the past thirty years, the countries of the Caspian region have tried to

*The Caspian region’s significance reemerged in the context of increased geopolitical stand-offs and the volatility of international trade routes.*

maintain a balance between major geopolitical actors. This will remain a vital element of most countries’ foreign policy priorities.

However, we see some global and regional actors in pursuit of making the countries of the Caspian choose between them. This policy is flawed and unconstructive. Although the countries of the region acknowledge the national interests of regional actors, they also have their own interests – foremost, the protection of independence, territory, and sovereignty.

However, the principles of international law, such as territorial integrity and sovereignty, have been challenged by global powers, making the current world order more fragile and fragmented. Although, today, it appears that the achievement of global peace and stability is a remote goal, countries could and should try to create a consensus, at least at a regional level.

Azerbaijan, having suffered from three decades of occupation, has steadfastly advocated for the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of international borders. Regrettably, the persistence of double standards, geopolitical manoeuvring, and the

ambiguity of international actors contributed to the continued occupation of Azerbaijani territory from 1993 until 2020. The Second Garabagh War (2020) not only had profound implications for regional security, but also reaffirmed the legitimacy of the use of force in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter. This conflict emphasized that unresolved disputes constitute a threat to international security, yet they can be resolved effectively when actions are undertaken within an appropriate legal framework and supported by efficient military means. The establishment of peace in the South Caucasus has the potential to yield significant consequences for the broader Caspian region.

*Regrettably, the persistence of double standards, geopolitical manoeuvring, and the ambiguity of international actors contributed to the continued occupation of Azerbaijani territory from 1993 until 2020.*

Since gaining independence, Azerbaijan has actively promoted multilateralism and the principles of international law. However, for three decades, its primary focus was on restoring its territorial integrity in response to the occupation by Armenia of the former's Garabagh region. With the liberation of these territories in September–November 2020 and September 19–20, 2023, Azerbaijan has now shifted its attention towards enhancing foreign policy cooperation at both regional and global levels.

In this context, strengthening relations with Central Asian countries has become a key priority for Azerbaijan's foreign policy. The two regions share a wealth of commonalities, including linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and religious ties, that facilitate closer collaboration. Moreover, they often align in their perspectives on various foreign policy issues, further reinforcing the potential for cooperation between Azerbaijan and Central Asia.

### ***Expanding strategic influence through the SCO and CICA***

The South Caucasus is strategically linked to Central Asia through various regional and interregional organizations. Among these, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) stand out as significant platforms

serving as key pillars for enhancing security and collaboration in the broader Eurasian space.

Azerbaijan, which was granted dialogue partner status with the SCO on July 10, 2015, has made significant strides in aligning its interests with the organization's goals. Under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed on March 14, 2016, Azerbaijan and the SCO agreed to collaborate in various fields, such as enhancing regional security and stability; combating terrorism, extremism, separatism, and drug trafficking; and addressing cybercrime and other forms of transnational crime. Additionally, they pledged to cooperate in sectors such as trade, investment, energy, and telecommunications.

Azerbaijan's engagement with the SCO is shaped by multiple factors. Primarily, its involvement offers substantial geopolitical and economic advantages, particularly in the evolving global context. The SCO's vast geographical reach across Eurasia provides Azerbaijan with access to a broad economic space, facilitating trade and economic ties between Asia and Europe. As a result, Azerbaijan has positioned itself as a key transit hub, benefiting from initiatives like the Baku International Sea Trade Port (Alat Port) and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars Railway, vital components of the Middle Corridor, which is aligned with China's Belt and Road Initiative. These projects have boosted Azerbaijan's transit potential, enabling it to serve as a critical link in the transportation of goods between Asia and Europe, while also attracting investment.

Beyond economic benefits, Azerbaijan's participation in the SCO strengthens its role in regional security, particularly through the organization's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. It also provides Azerbaijan with a platform to promote its stance on various global issues, including the promotion of multiculturalism and dialogue between civilizations – areas in which the country has considerable expertise.

In pursuing a deeper partnership with the SCO, Azerbaijan is reaffirming its commitment to a balanced foreign policy, seeking to capitalize on opportunities for cooperation with both Eastern and Western powers. Its efforts to enhance its ties with the SCO align with the organization's vision of fostering a secure, collaborative Eurasian community, and also contribute to regional stability. Through this engagement, Azerbaijan



aims to support international transport networks and strengthen its position within the broader geopolitical landscape.

This strategic approach is further reflected in Azerbaijan's growing role in regional diplomacy, exemplified by its recent election as chair of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) for the term 2024–2026. As part of its leadership role, Azerbaijan is set to host the CICA Council of Foreign Ministers in December 2024 and the CICA Council of Heads of State and Government summit in 2026.

Azerbaijan plays a crucial role in CICA due to its strategic position as a regional transport hub. This is closely tied to the country's geographical location and its proactive approach to fostering global interconnectedness. In today's multilateral diplomacy, transport networks are a key focus, as they are essential for facilitating international cooperation. However, without the development of a robust system of connectivity, sustaining the positive momentum of globalization would be a significant challenge. Azerbaijan has significant potential to further strengthen its productive cooperation within the CICA framework, as the organization recognizes the country's achievements in multilateral diplomacy.

Azerbaijan is becoming more fully integrated into international cooperation mechanisms, and its CICA presidency is anticipated to bring notable benefits as the country evolves into a global transport and logistics hub. This transformation is expected to drive economic growth and enhance security. Azerbaijan already plays an important role within CICA, an organization comprising most Asian nations, and this contribution is likely to deepen under its leadership. One of Azerbaijan's priorities will be to strengthen Asia's influence on global issues. CICA is also expanding its work in global mediation, and there are plans to support its institutional development, including the adoption of a new charter in response to changing global dynamics.

*In pursuing a deeper partnership with the SCO, Azerbaijan is reaffirming its commitment to a balanced foreign policy, seeking to capitalize on opportunities for cooperation with both Eastern and Western powers.*

*Strengthening relations with Central Asia and the Organization of Turkic States*

Azerbaijan's deepening cooperation with Central Asian countries marks this direction as a priority in its foreign policy. This commitment to regional and multilateral collaboration was further demonstrated at the 6th Consultative Meeting of Central Asian Heads of State on August 9, 2024, at which Azerbaijan's President, Ilham Aliyev, underscored the shared historical, cultural, and geopolitical ties between Azerbaijan and Central Asian nations. During this summit, leaders signed a Roadmap for Regional Cooperation Development and an Action Plan for Industrial Cooperation for 2025–2027, thereby formally establishing Azerbaijan as a strategic ally committed to strengthening the capacities of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

The advancement of relations with the Central Asian countries is vital for Azerbaijan. This partnership across the Caspian Sea has advanced in multiple spheres and is poised to grow further through joint initiatives to deepen ties in science, culture, transport, and logistics.

In August 2024, the first-ever meeting of energy ministers from Central Asia and Azerbaijan took place in Astana, resulting in the signing of a pivotal communiqué on cooperation in the energy sector. This agreement lays the foundation for enhanced partnerships across all critical areas of the energy industry, reinforcing a shared commitment to energy security, technological innovation, and infrastructure development. As the Central Asian region and Azerbaijan occupy a strategically vital position in global energy logistics, this cooperation is poised to bolster the sustainability and reliability of international energy supplies. By fostering collaboration on energy efficiency and resource management, the communiqué signals a unified regional approach to addressing global energy challenges and advancing each nation's developmental objectives within a framework of regional stability and shared prosperity. Renewable energy cooperation as part of this regional collaboration is also significant, as exemplified by a memorandum between Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan to unify energy systems.

As ties between Azerbaijan and Central Asia strengthen, the significance of transit along the Middle Corridor is growing. Azerbaijan is enhancing

the capacity of Baku International Sea Trade Port, expanding its commercial fleet, and increasing the capacity of the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway. In the realm of information technology, Azerbaijan is developing the ‘Digital Silk Way’ project to create a reliable digital business environment connecting Central Asia to Europe and Türkiye. Investment projects and joint funds have been established bilaterally between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, alongside efforts to improve digital infrastructure.

*As ties between Azerbaijan and Central Asia strengthen, the significance of transit along the Middle Corridor is growing.*

Another regional cooperation framework through which Azerbaijan is strengthening its relationships with Central Asian countries is the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The member states of the OTS are committed to deepening their integration, which is of paramount importance for interconnectedness and the prosperity of their peoples. The OTS’s informal meeting in the city of Shusha on July 6, 2024, focusing on “Building a Sustainable Future through Transport, Connectivity, and Climate Action”, clearly outlined these objectives. Leaders from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan participated, emphasizing the importance of multi-sectoral collaboration. The OTS, which enhances cooperation in 30 diverse areas, including politics, economics, culture, and education, celebrated its 15th anniversary in October 2024.

*Azerbaijan has seen a significant rise in transportation activity along the Middle Corridor, which connects Central Asia to Türkiye through Azerbaijan*

On November 6, 2024, at the 11th Summit of the Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States, President Ilham Aliyev affirmed Azerbaijan’s commitment to strengthening the organization. Highlighting the significance of collaboration in defence, security, and the defence industry, President Aliyev emphasized the importance of these ties in the face of rising global threats. Azerbaijan has recently expanded its cooperation with member states’ law enforcement and security agencies, increasing joint military exercises and opening its military education institutions to students from OTS member states, and thus demonstrating mutual trust and solidarity.

Azerbaijan has seen a significant rise in transportation activity along the Middle Corridor, which connects Central Asia to Türkiye through Azerbaijan. In the first nine months of 2024, transit traffic with member

and observer states of the OTS rose by approximately 15% compared to the same period in 2023. Azerbaijan continues to invest in this corridor to enhance its capacity, and new digitalization and trade facilitation projects along the Middle Corridor are expected to improve logistics and reduce costs, further strengthening regional connectivity.

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, Azerbaijan's foreign policy demonstrates a clear commitment to strengthening its role within Asia and emphasizing partnerships and cooperative frameworks that bridge regional divides. Through regional cooperation frameworks with Central Asian countries and active participation in multilateral organizations such as CICA, SCO, and OTS, Azerbaijan is enhancing its outreach across Asia. These efforts align with Azerbaijan's vision of Asia as a collaborative force in global stability and economic growth. By prioritizing critical infrastructure projects like the Middle Corridor, as well as the Digital Silk Way project, Azerbaijan is transforming itself into a vital logistics hub that connects Asia with Europe. This perspective shapes Azerbaijan's investments in security and economic resilience, fostering regional stability and economic prosperity.

# How Azerbaijan Advances South Caucasus–Central Asian Integration Through the Middle Corridor

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Robert M. Cutler\*

This article examines the evolving geoeconomic significance of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, with a particular focus on Azerbaijan’s emergence as a pivotal actor in the region. It begins by tracing the historical trajectory of the West’s interest in these regions, highlighting its recently renewed strategic focus there, which is driven by evolving global dynamics and competition among connectivity routes. Azerbaijan’s leadership in advancing the Middle Corridor is explored in detail, emphasizing its transformation from a conceptual framework to a significant logistical network supported by partnerships with Kazakhstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan. Subsequent sections analyse Azerbaijan’s infrastructure investments, including the Port of Alat and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway, alongside its cooperation with international financial institutions (IFIs) and the EU to address challenges like transit inefficiencies and bottlenecks. The discussion then turns to Azerbaijan’s expanding role within multilateral organizations, such as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and the UN’s Special Program for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA), illustrating how these platforms amplify its regional influence. Finally, the article evaluates how Azerbaijan’s foreign policy, balancing with multiple partners, allows it to consolidate its middle-power status, and also reflects on the country’s broader impact on East–West trade and connectivity in the evolving global order.

**Keywords:** connectivity, geoeconomics, infrastructure, integration, logistics, trade, trans-Caspian



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\* **Robert M. Cutler** is a Practitioner Member, Waterloo Institute for Complexity and Innovation, University of Waterloo, and a past fellow of the Canadian International Council.

***Introduction***

The South Caucasus and Central Asia have become geoeconomically prominent and connected regions since the end of the Cold War, most recently thanks to Azerbaijan’s leadership in shaping the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route). This corridor links Asia to Europe, bypassing routes through the territory of Russia and fostering economic resilience. Over the last 5–10 years, the Middle Corridor – bolstered by partnerships among Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan – has been transformed from a mere concept

*The South Caucasus and Central Asia have become geoeconomically prominent and connected regions since the end of the Cold War, most recently thanks to Azerbaijan’s leadership in shaping the Middle Corridor*

into a significant logistics network. Initiatives of international financial institutions (IFIs) and the EU have supported infrastructure upgrades, increasing trade efficiency and connectivity.

Through its leadership in multilateral platforms like the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and the UN’s Special Program for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA), Azerbaijan has deepened regional cooperation while raising its diplomatic profile.

Strategic infrastructure, such as the Port of Alat and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (BTK) railway, underscores Azerbaijan’s role as a logistical and diplomatic linchpin. This strategy exemplifies Azerbaijan’s multi-vector diplomacy as an emergent middle power. Azerbaijan thus diminishes Central Asia’s economic dependence on large powers and helps to integrate it into global markets. It is both an example and an instrument of Azerbaijan’s transformative impact on regional geoeconomics.

***Strategic Evolution and Western Interest in the South Caucasus and Central Asia***

Since the end of the Cold War, the South Caucasus and Central Asia have emerged as key geopolitical regions. The West’s initial focus on these areas extended beyond their abundant energy resources, emphasizing strategic connectivity and influence. Western involvement, however, diminished through the early 21st century, yet recent years have marked a renewed interest by both the U.S. and Europe, spurred by rising global instability and competition over transit routes.

Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have been instrumental in shaping the

Middle Corridor not only as a vital transcontinental link but as a framework for economic and political autonomy within the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Azerbaijan’s geographical role as a bridge between Europe and Asia underpins this growth, transforming the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the Middle Corridor, from a conceptual model into an active conduit for commerce and collaboration. The enduring bilateral commitment between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, initiated in 2017, has matured into a regional platform enabling a sustainable route that balances global political dynamics and fosters regional stability.

### ***Recent Developments and Strategic Initiatives in the Middle Corridor***

The Middle Corridor has gained significant traction, particularly after 2022, as Western sanctions on Russia intensified in response to its actions in Ukraine. This route – extending from China, through Kazakhstan, across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan and Georgia, and onward to Europe – has evolved into an essential transcontinental alternative, reducing dependency on northern routes. Initiated by Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, the corridor has since attracted broad support from IFIs, including the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and the World Bank’s International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD).

A recent IBRD report noted a 33 per cent increase in container traffic through this route in 2022, a growth underscoring both the route’s strategic importance and its infrastructural challenges. Issues like border delays and transshipment bottlenecks have surfaced, prompting Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan to collaborate on infrastructure enhancements.<sup>1</sup> The roadmap they signed with Türkiye in late 2022 prioritizes efficiency improvements, aligning with Azerbaijan’s ambition to bolster its position as a major transit hub and to catalyse economic growth through logistical modernization.

Europe’s active involvement, particularly through initiatives like the EU’s Global Gateway, has played a crucial role in advancing the Middle

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank, “The Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030”, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/middle-trade-and-transport-corridor> (Accessed: April 7, 2024).

*By leveraging its strategic infrastructure, such as the modernized Port of Alat and the BTK railway, Azerbaijan has positioned itself as an indispensable link in Eurasian logistics.*

Corridor. Dr S. Frederick Starr and other experts highlight the collaborative financial efforts between the EU and Türkiye that have accelerated the project's timeline, fostering stability in trade between Europe and Asia. The EU and EBRD have pledged substantial funding, including an initial €10.5 billion and an anticipated €18.5 billion for future development,

which aims to slash transit times between Asia and Europe from over a month to approximately 13 days, a vital upgrade for regional competitiveness.

By leveraging its strategic infrastructure, such as the modernized Port of Alat and the BTK railway, Azerbaijan has positioned itself as an indispensable link in Eurasian logistics. The roadmap signed by Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye outlines a commitment to corridor-wide logistics improvements, focusing on end-to-end and mid-route optimizations essential for eliminating bottlenecks and maximizing trade potential. These advancements further Azerbaijan's goal of securing its role in the Middle Corridor as a linchpin of connectivity and economic resilience for the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

### ***Azerbaijan's Regional Leadership through SPECA and the Organization of Turkic States***

Azerbaijan's evolving leadership role in regional connectivity was underscored at the 25th anniversary meeting of SPECA, held in Baku in November 2023. Established in 1998, SPECA promotes Central Asian integration into the global economy, with Azerbaijan leveraging this framework to expand its role as a critical logistics and transport hub within the region.

The OTS has traditionally served as the primary platform for regional collaboration. However, recent developments in SPECA signal Azerbaijan's intent to deepen ties across Central Asia through enhanced cooperation frameworks. The OTS's 2040 Vision provides a long-term strategy encompassing transport, energy projects, and preferential trade agreements, which Azerbaijan now uses in conjunction with SPECA



initiatives to accelerate regional economic integration.<sup>2</sup> The OTS's new policy direction, as crystallized in its Vision 2040 document, supports Azerbaijan's broader Eurasian ambitions.

As chair of the 2023 SPECA Economic Forum, Azerbaijan emphasized the strategic potential of transforming the SPECA region into a central connectivity node with global outreach. This builds on prior initiatives, including the 2019 Ashgabat Initiative and the 2021 Tashkent Statement, both of which sought to enhance sustainable transport and trade within the region.<sup>3</sup> Azerbaijan's investments in logistics, digital customs systems, and energy infrastructure make it a key facilitator of these initiatives, positioning SPECA and OTS as dual engines of Central Asia's growth trajectory.

Looking forward, the OTS's and SPECA's cooperation frameworks aim to attract new investment partners and stakeholders, with recent summits inviting participation from countries such as Georgia, Hungary, and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev inaugurated the latest SPECA summit by endorsing a multilateral trust fund to attract resources for new projects. By integrating broader partnerships under the SPECA framework, Azerbaijan is expanding regional connectivity and economic resilience, making Central Asia an emerging focal point in global trade dynamics.

It is also worth noting that Azerbaijan will soon assume, for the first time, the chairmanship of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) for the term 2024–2026. Azerbaijan intends that CICA should enhance pan-Asian dialogue and multilateral cooperation across various sectors, including security, economy,

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2 Cutler, R.M., "Middle Corridor countries expand cooperation beyond their region", *Asia Times*, December 4, 2003, Available at: <https://asiatimes.com/2023/12/middle-corridor-countries-expand-cooperation-beyond-their-region/> (Accessed: November 10, 2024). For analysis of the OTS's 2040 Vision, see Pelin Musabay Baki, "Turkic World Vision–2040: A Step Forward for the Resilience of Turkic Cooperation", *Perceptions* 27:1 (Spring–Summer 2022): 26–52, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/2559488>.

3 The Ashgabat Initiative refers to a document adopted by SPECA's Governing Council in November of 2019. Its full title is the "Ashgabat Initiative on Reducing barriers to trade and transport using United Nations legal instruments, norms, standards and recommendations while bolstering connectivity in the SPECA region", see [https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/ecf/2019/Ashgabat\\_Initiative\\_EN.pdf](https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/ecf/2019/Ashgabat_Initiative_EN.pdf). The Tashkent Statement refers to a document adopted at a SPECA Economic Forum in November of 2021, having the full title, "Tashkent statement on Sustainable Transport, Trade and Connectivity in the SPECA Region for a Greener, Circular and Inclusive Post-Pandemic Recovery", see [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/TASHKENT%20STATEMENT\\_ENG\\_0.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/TASHKENT%20STATEMENT_ENG_0.pdf).

*Azerbaijan intends that CICA should enhance pan-Asian dialogue and multilateral cooperation across various sectors, including security, economy, and cultural exchanges.*

and cultural exchanges. Azerbaijan will attempt to overcome past criticism of CICA for lacking concrete achievements and, while chairing key bodies, will also lead efforts to transform CICA into a fully-fledged regional international organization. It will host the CICA's Council of Foreign Ministers in 2024 and the CICA's Council of Heads of State and Government in 2026. On the agenda will be the enhancement of discussions around regional security issues, including counterterrorism and conflict resolution.

### ***Integrating Uzbekistan into the Middle Corridor***

Azerbaijan's efforts to integrate Uzbekistan into the Middle Corridor exemplify its strategy of consolidating regional alliances. The 2020 Treaty on Allied Relations between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan formalized a burgeoning strategic partnership, positioning Uzbekistan as a critical partner in Azerbaijan's Middle Corridor strategy. Recent backing from IFIs, including the EBRD and the World Bank, has accelerated Uzbekistan's inclusion, with IFI reports identifying key trans-Caspian routes and infrastructure priorities.

Uzbekistan's integration into the Middle Corridor has already involved multiple trilateral discussions and agreements among Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Türkiye. As a newly integrated partner in the TITR Association, Uzbekistan is benefiting from streamlined customs processes, intermodal links between Samarkand and Baku, and the establishment of digital customs platforms to expedite transit flows. Direct rail connections have opened between the two nations, enhancing trade logistics while bypassing traditional Kazakhstan-centric routes.

In energy, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan have collaborated closely, with Uzbekneftegaz poised to join the Shah Deniz consortium in natural gas extraction. This collaboration has broadened Azerbaijan's energy network into Central Asia, creating long-term synergies across the sector. The High-Level Economic Council co-chaired by the prime ministers of both nations has further institutionalized trade and investment relations, fostering a cooperative climate that aligns Uzbekistan's economic ambitions with Azerbaijan's Middle Corridor initiatives.

This growing partnership signals a pivotal shift in Uzbekistan's foreign policy, which has diversified significantly under this country's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Previously focused inward, Uzbekistan has embraced international engagement, joining regional frameworks such as the OTS and signing multiple bilateral agreements with Azerbaijan. These developments have cemented Uzbekistan's role in Azerbaijan's broader geopolitical framework, reinforcing Azerbaijan's capacity to drive regional connectivity and economic autonomy within the Middle Corridor.

### ***Azerbaijan's Political and Energy Diplomacy in Central Asia***

Azerbaijan's foreign policy within the Middle Corridor has extended beyond mere logistical concerns, emphasizing a strategic mix of energy and diplomatic initiatives. The TITR has advanced Azerbaijan's role as a central transit hub and diversified trade corridor links across Eurasia. This influence is amplified by Azerbaijan's dual approach: supporting energy cooperation and fostering a cohesive diplomatic network that reinforces Central Asia's geoeconomic and infrastructural autonomy from Russian influence.

After Western sanctions on Russia intensified in 2022, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan jointly promoted the Middle Corridor as a primary route connecting Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Europe, independent of Russian territory. This shift aligned with European Union investments through the Global Gateway initiative, with loans and grants totalling €10.5 billion and an anticipated €18.5 billion needed by 2040. These funds underscore the strategic imperative to improve customs efficiency and transportation infrastructure along the corridor. Azerbaijan's Port of Alat and the BTK railway have become pivotal nodes in this corridor, ensuring smoother and faster flows of goods from Asia to Europe.

Azerbaijan's energy diplomacy, particularly with Türkiye, complements these infrastructure projects. Through the OTS and the "Turkic World Vision 2040," Azerbaijan and Türkiye coordinate efforts to enhance energy and transport linkages across Central Asia, with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan joining as active participants. This network-building has enabled Azerbaijan to position itself as a middle

*As Azerbaijan's profile in the region has risen, so has its role in steering Central Asia's foreign policy alignment.*

power, balancing relations with global players while supporting Central Asia's aspirations for economic autonomy.

As Azerbaijan's profile in the region has risen, so has its role in steering Central Asia's foreign policy alignment. Bilateral and multilateral engagements with countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have allowed Azerbaijan to present itself as a stable partner for economic growth, logistics, and security, consolidating its influence in Central Asia. This cooperation enables Azerbaijan to drive broader economic and diplomatic agendas that integrate regional energy and transit routes into the Middle Corridor framework, positioning the South Caucasus as a bridge between Europe and Asia.

### ***Azerbaijan as a Foreign Policy Vector for Central Asia***

Azerbaijan's emergence as a foreign policy 'vector' for Central Asia reflects a strategic pivot among the region's nations towards increased autonomy from Russia and deeper integration into the Eurasian economic landscape. Building on its success with the Middle Corridor and the OTS, Azerbaijan has actively engaged with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan to promote shared economic, political, and logistical goals. This partnership aligns with Central Asia's broader aspirations for diversification, marking Azerbaijan as an influential player that not only offers alternative trade routes but also strengthens diplomatic ties across Eurasia.

Historically, Kazakhstan pioneered the "multi-vector" foreign policy approach, balancing relations between Russia, China, and the West. In recent years, however, Azerbaijan has stepped into a prominent role, guiding Central Asia toward enhanced trade routes and economic partnerships, notably with Türkiye and the European Union. Azerbaijan's proactive diplomacy has encouraged Central Asian states to diversify their foreign policy strategies and reduce their dependency on Russia – a shift underscored by Kazakhstan's President Tokayev affirming that his country will not violate sanctions against Russia.

Azerbaijan's role extends beyond bilateral relations. Baku leverages its partnerships within the OTS and with European and other IFIs to

consolidate regional interests and ensure that Central Asia's connectivity with Europe and the Middle East thrives independently of Russian infrastructure. The 2040 Turkic World Vision, a comprehensive strategy established by the OTS, reinforces this goal. As part of this framework, Azerbaijan and Türkiye facilitate energy and logistical investments across Central Asia, positioning Azerbaijan as an essential link within a larger network that prioritizes regional sovereignty and cooperation.

*Azerbaijan's middle-power status within this context is not only a product of its energy resources and strategic location but also the country's ability to mediate and foster regional initiatives that support Central Asia's development.*

Azerbaijan's middle-power status within this context is not only a product of its energy resources and strategic location but also the country's ability to mediate and foster regional initiatives that support Central Asia's development. By spearheading collaborative projects like the Middle Corridor, Azerbaijan enables Central Asia to access European and Middle Eastern markets more directly, reinforcing its relevance in the global supply chain and allowing it to leverage its resources and geographic position as a diplomatic asset.

### ***Azerbaijan's Emergence as a Middle Power in Eurasia***

Azerbaijan's ascent to middle-power status within Eurasia is characterized by its strategic use of energy resources, geographic positioning, and deft diplomacy. Positioned at the nexus of Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan has transformed from a regional player into a central figure in Eurasian geopolitics, leveraging its role in the Middle Corridor to enhance economic ties and political influence across the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and beyond.

The defining feature of Azerbaijan's middle-power diplomacy is its engagement in plurilateral partnerships and multilateral institutions, a tactic that enables it to navigate complex international dynamics. Through platforms like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organization of Turkic States, Azerbaijan has cultivated strong alliances and reinforced its commitment to regional integration. Azerbaijan's chairmanship of the NAM from October 2019 to January 2024, during which it founded and chaired the NAM's Parliamentary Network, underscored its leadership capabilities and affirmed its

*The defining feature of Azerbaijan's middle-power diplomacy is its engagement in plurilateral partnerships and multilateral institutions, a tactic that enables it to navigate complex international dynamics.*

role as a bridging force. This leadership is further emphasized by Azerbaijan's deepening engagement with the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development-GUAM, which promotes economic cooperation and security with Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova.

Azerbaijan's strategic partnerships with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Türkiye have propelled the development of the Middle Corridor, expanding connectivity from the Caspian Sea to Europe. This collaboration has positioned Azerbaijan as a crucial transit hub, essential for diversifying trade routes beyond Russian dominance. Notably, the BTK railway, a critical part of the corridor, exemplifies Azerbaijan's commitment to enhancing logistics infrastructure that bolsters trade efficiency across Eurasia. In conjunction with the Port of Alat, these investments not only secure Azerbaijan's standing as a primary transit state but also stimulate economic growth across the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Moreover, Azerbaijan's bilateral and multilateral diplomacy with Turkic-speaking nations, particularly Türkiye, has amplified its influence. The Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations, signed in June 2021 between Azerbaijan and Türkiye, established a framework for economic, defence, and political cooperation, solidifying their alliance within a multipolar world. This agreement has furthered Azerbaijan's influence in Central Asia, positioning it as a leading actor in the region's geopolitical restructuring and enhancing its autonomy from larger powers like Russia and China.

Through its multi-vector approach and role in key transport corridors, Azerbaijan has not only secured its economic and strategic interests but also contributed to regional stability and the integration of Turkic-speaking nations. This rise underscores Azerbaijan's transition from a regional energy supplier to an indispensable player in Eurasian trade and diplomacy.

### ***Conclusion***

This article has explored how Azerbaijan advances South Caucasus–Central Asian integration through the Middle Corridor and has

progressed it from a conceptual initiative into a developing logistical and trade network. The results reveal that Azerbaijan's strategic investments in infrastructure – such as the Port of Alat and the BTK railway – have been critical in enhancing connectivity and efficiency along the corridor. In parallel, Azerbaijan's active engagement with multilateral organizations like the OTS and SPECA has strengthened regional cooperation. In addition, the study makes clear how Azerbaijan's multi-vector foreign policy – supported by partnerships with Kazakhstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan – has permitted it to balance diverse geopolitical interests while diminishing Central Asia's economic dependency on larger powers.

Azerbaijan's pivotal role in the Middle Corridor project represents a strategic leap in Eurasian geopolitics, establishing it as a key player in reshaping regional trade, connectivity, and diplomatic relations. The corridor has become much more than a logistical pathway; it is a robust geopolitical asset that enables Azerbaijan to leverage its geographic location and infrastructure investments to foster regional stability, economic resilience, and diversified trade routes that bypass Russian influence.

The Middle Corridor has provided Azerbaijan with a unique opportunity to drive deeper integration across the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Europe. Through investments in key infrastructure – such as the Port of Alat and the BTK railway – Azerbaijan has established itself as an essential transit hub that links East and West, facilitating a flow of goods and services that is reshaping Eurasian trade dynamics. Partnerships with countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Türkiye have further consolidated Azerbaijan's influence, while trilateral agreements have expanded its reach and fostered stronger ties with the Turkic world.

Azerbaijan's ascent to middle-power status is also defined by its nuanced, multi-vector diplomacy. Rather than aligning exclusively with major powers, Azerbaijan has cultivated a balanced approach, navigating relations with Russia, Türkiye, and the West to optimize its own strategic autonomy. This pragmatism has allowed Azerbaijan to pursue regional influence while remaining resilient to external pressures. By fostering connections within the OTS and the NAM, and with other multilateral institutions, Azerbaijan has reinforced its position as a leader in regional diplomacy, one whose influence resonates across Eurasia.

The continued development of the Middle Corridor holds substantial promise for Azerbaijan and its partners. As investment flows into the corridor, regional cooperation will deepen, further diversifying trade routes and enhancing the economic and political autonomy of participating countries. Azerbaijan's stewardship of the corridor has catalysed a shift towards a more interconnected Eurasian landscape, where trade efficiency and geopolitical resilience are prioritized.

In conclusion, Azerbaijan's leadership in the Middle Corridor project symbolizes its transformation into a central player in Eurasian geopolitics. Through strategic infrastructure projects, diplomatic agility, and multilateral collaboration, Azerbaijan is not only advancing its own national interests but also contributing to the broader regional integration and stability of Eurasia. This pivotal role positions Azerbaijan as a bridge between East and West, securing its influence for decades to come in a rapidly evolving international order.



# Managing Interrelated Environmental Challenges in Central Asia and the South Caucasus through Regional Collaboration

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Nina Miholjčić Ivković\*

Central Asia and the South Caucasus face a range of environmental challenges critical to their future, including deteriorating ecosystems and resource depletion. These challenges necessitate coordinated regional efforts and sustainable resource management, underscoring the need for effective policies that respect ecological standards and principles. The unique characteristics of environmental issues in these regions often necessitate collaborative approaches, as many challenges, such as water scarcity and climate change, extend beyond national borders and impact multiple regions or countries. These challenges do not respect political boundaries and often require cooperative efforts and shared solutions to address them. This article advocates for a unified response to these pressing issues, emphasizing the importance of collective action and shared knowledge to foster resilience and sustainable growth. Moreover, this article examines how regional collaboration among Central Asian and South Caucasus countries can effectively address the interrelated environmental challenges of water scarcity, climate change, and energy dependence. By analysing both recommended and existing strategies for collaboration, it highlights specific environmental issues in the regions and their implications for sustainable development. Although both regions face geopolitical and historical tensions that could hinder future regional collaboration on environmental issues, there is a plausible expectation that the countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus have the potential to address environment-induced challenges through initiatives and strategies involving transboundary cooperation.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, South Caucasus, environmental challenges, regional collaboration, water scarcity, climate change, energy dependence



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### *Introduction*

Central Asia and the South Caucasus are regions characterized by their rich natural resources and diverse ecosystems, yet they are simultaneously facing myriad interrelated environmental challenges. These interlinked environmental problems, including water scarcity, climate change, land degradation, and energy dependence, are exacerbated by the region's complex geopolitical landscape, historical tensions among states, and socio-economic disparities.<sup>1,2</sup> Central Asia grapples with severe water scarcity, exacerbated by inefficient management practices, climate change, and the degradation of the Aral Sea.<sup>3</sup> Water resources are used in an inefficient way, which causes serious water stress across the region. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Central Asian countries are among the top ten water consumers in the world: Turkmenistan (5,319 m<sup>3</sup>/year), Kazakhstan (2,345 m<sup>3</sup>/year), Uzbekistan (2,295 m<sup>3</sup>/year), Kyrgyzstan (1,989 m<sup>3</sup>/year), and Tajikistan (1,895 m<sup>3</sup>/year). It has been also noted that 2.5–3 times more water is used in these countries to produce a unit of agricultural product than in developed countries.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, the South Caucasus is confronting water challenges, but in a rather different context. The region's rivers, such as the Kura and Aras, which are vital for agriculture and energy production, suffer from pollution and over-extraction.<sup>5</sup> The geopolitical tensions in both regions further complicate cooperative management of these water resources.

Climate change additionally exacerbates environmental issues in

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1 Veliyev, J., Manukyan, S., and Gvasalia, T., "The environment, human rights, and conflicts in the South Caucasus and Turkey: Transboundary water cooperation as a means to conflict transformation", *Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 3, No. 1, January 2019, Available at: <https://caucasusedition.net/the-environment-human-rights-and-conflicts-in-the-south-caucasus-and-turkey-transboundary-water-cooperation-as-a-mean-to-conflict-transformation/> (Accessed: November 1, 2024).

2 Mohapatra, N.K., "Geopolitics of water securitisation in Central Asia", *GeoJournal*, Vol. 88, May 2022, pp. 897–916, Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10708-022-10661-0#citeas> (Accessed: November 1, 2024).

3 Rudenshiold, E., "Is it too late to save Central Asia? The COP crisis is already here." Caspian Policy Center, December 2023, Available at: [https://api.caspianpolicy.org/media/ckeditor\\_media/2023/12/14/is-it-too-late-fopr-central-asia.pdf](https://api.caspianpolicy.org/media/ckeditor_media/2023/12/14/is-it-too-late-fopr-central-asia.pdf) (Accessed: November 2, 2024).

4 Mammadov, S., "Central Asia and the struggle for water", *BNE Intellinews*, July 20, 2024, Available at: <https://www.intellinews.com/central-asia-and-the-struggle-for-water-334613/> (Accessed: November 23, 2024).

5 Ismayilov, R., and Suleymanov, F., "Water resilience under climate change in Azerbaijan", *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 2024, pp. 677–686, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.53231-1243> (Accessed: November 2, 2024).

these two regions. Rising temperatures and altered precipitation patterns threaten water resources and agricultural yields, intensifying existing challenges in the communities across the regions. The World Bank's 2009 report, *Adapting to Climate Change in Central Asia*, assesses that average temperatures in the region have already increased by 0.5°C and are projected to increase by 1.6 to 2.6°C by 2030–50.<sup>6</sup> The glaciers in the Tien Shan mountains, crucial for regional water supply, are retreating, which could lead to severe water shortages in Central Asia in the future. Moreover, the glaciers in the Greater Caucasus are losing mass at alarming rates, which poses a risk to hydropower generation and irrigation systems that are vital for local agriculture. Between 2000 and 2020, glaciers in the Greater Caucasus lost about 23.2% of their area, or roughly 320.6 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>7</sup> Due to increased climate change impact causing more frequent extreme weather events such as droughts, floods, and heatwaves, the region's biodiversity, land, and agricultural productivity are under serious risk.

Energy dependence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus poses significant interconnected environmental challenges, stemming from reliance on fossil fuels, water scarcity, and geopolitical tensions. This region's energy landscape is characterized by a mix of abundant natural resources that can complicate and decelerate the green transition process and sustainable development. It is necessary for the countries that are heavily dependent on fossil fuels for economic growth to accelerate the transition to the green economy. In order to limit global warming to below 1.5°C, immediate action is essential to reduce carbon emissions. This goal necessitates a significant reduction in the use of fossil fuels, which can be accomplished through a transition to clean energy sources.<sup>8</sup> The gap between our present trajectory of fossil fuel consumption and the

*Climate change additionally exacerbates environmental issues in these two regions. Rising temperatures and altered precipitation patterns threaten water resources and agricultural yields, intensifying existing challenges in the communities across the regions.*

6 The World Bank, "Adapting to Climate Change in Europe and Central Asia", June 2009, Available at: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/es/127181468024643244/pdf/489480ESW0ECA010Box338935B01PUBLIC1.pdf> (Accessed: November 23, 2024).

7 Tielidze, L. G., Nosenko, G. A., Khromova, T. E., and Paul, F., "Strong acceleration of glacier area loss in the Greater Caucasus between 2000 and 2020", *The Cryosphere*, Vol.16, No. 2, February 2022, pp. 489–504, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5194/tc-16-489-2022> (Accessed: November 2, 2024).

8 Barbier, E. B., "Transitioning to green energy is key to both tackling climate change and creating sustainable economies. Here's why", *World Economic Forum*, July 11, 2022, Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2022/07/green-energy-transition-democracy-economy/> (Accessed: November 23, 2024).

*In Central Asia, water resources from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers are vital for energy and agriculture, but mismanagement can cause severe droughts, affecting food security. In Armenia, hydropower systems have been disrupting local ecosystems and threatening biodiversity.*

required path toward sustainability is widening. In the longer term, such a tendency might lead to significant air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, which will exacerbate climate change.<sup>9</sup>

In Central Asia, water resources from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers are vital for energy and agriculture, but mismanagement can cause severe droughts, affecting food security.<sup>10</sup> In Armenia, hydropower systems have been disrupting local ecosystems and threatening biodiversity.<sup>11</sup> In Georgia, hydropower plants account for over 73 per cent of the country's total electricity production. However, the heavy use of large-scale hydropower systems has led to several environmental issues, such as deterioration of flora and fauna, as well as the flooding of villages and farmland caused by construction and operation of the hydro plants.<sup>12</sup> The geopolitical landscape, influenced by Russia, China, and Western countries, often prioritizes energy projects over environmental standards, raising concerns about biodiversity and ecological degradation in the region.

The implications of these environmental challenges extend beyond local borders, threatening regional stability, food security, and economic resilience. Such interconnectedness necessitates comprehensive regional strategies that address water management, land use, climate adaptation, and transition to renewable sources of energy.

This article aims to investigate how Central Asian and South Caucasian countries can collaborate to manage these interrelated environmental issues. In order to address this important question, the article identifies successful regional collaboration models that tackle environmental

9 "Greenifying Central Asia: From fossil fuel to renewable energy giants?" News Central Asia, August 8, 2024, Available at: <https://www.newscentralasia.net/2024/08/30/greenifying-central-asia-from-fossil-fuel-to-renewable-energy-giants/> (Accessed: November 3, 2024).

10 Pingua, R., "The Distribution of Water Resources In Central Asia", World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2020, pp. 118–31, Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48622911> (Accessed: November 2, 2024).

11 "From Overexploitation of Water Resources to River Pollution and Unemployment: Problems in Goris Enlarged Community," Ecolur, February 16, 2022, Available at: <https://www.ecolur.org/en/news/water/13783/> (Accessed: November 2, 2024).

12 Gegechkori, T., "Georgia's hydropower dilemma", Caspian Policy Center, February 2022, Available at: [https://api.caspianpolicy.org/media/ckeditor\\_media/2022/03/02/georgias-hydropower-dilemma-final.pdf](https://api.caspianpolicy.org/media/ckeditor_media/2022/03/02/georgias-hydropower-dilemma-final.pdf) (accessed: November 23, 2024).

challenges in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. It further examines political, economic, and cultural barriers that hinder effective cooperation among states, highlighted by historical and geopolitical tensions. The article also proposes actionable strategies for enhancing collaborative efforts in the region.

Considering the interrelated nature of the environmental challenges affecting both regions and their implications for future regional development, it is of utmost importance that the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus accelerate and strengthen their efforts in applying strategies and solutions that promote mutual collaboration and understanding. Resolving, or at least alleviating, geopolitical issues, as well as recognizing the seriousness of environmental problems if not addressed in time, requires a more proactive role from governments and a better-informed local population.

Shared knowledge, regional cooperation, and strategies that involve key stakeholders – governments, local and regional NGOs, organizations, the local population, and other civil society initiatives aimed at promoting ecological standards and principles – are considered effective approaches in combating the negative impacts of environmental degradation in Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

### ***Water scarcity and water management***

Water scarcity and management in Central Asia and the South Caucasus are critical issues due to the combination of climatic, geographic, and geopolitical factors. This region faces significant challenges related to water resources, exacerbated by population growth, economic development, and climate change. Addressing water scarcity in both regions requires integrated water resource management (IWRM) approaches that consider social, economic, and environmental factors. One of the key strategies for resolving water shortages, in addition to improved infrastructure and policy reform, is regional cooperation. Enhancing dialogue and collaboration among countries can help establish equitable water-sharing agreements and joint management frameworks.<sup>13</sup>

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13 Janusz-Pawletta, B. and Gubaidullina, M., “Transboundary Water Management in Central Asia”, *Cahiers d’Asie centrale*, No. 25, December 2016, Available at: <http://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/3180> (Accessed: November 3, 2024).

Central Asia is characterized by a semi-arid climate and limited freshwater resources. The region suffers from severe water scarcity, largely due to inefficient irrigation practices, high evaporation rates, and competing demands from agriculture, industry, and urban areas. Nearly one-third of the population in the region lacks access to safe water, with this issue being especially pronounced in rural areas.<sup>14</sup> World Bank research predicts that, as the regional population is expected to grow to between 90 and 110 million by 2050, alongside continued urbanization, climate change, and the pressures of economic growth, the strain on finite water resources will intensify significantly.<sup>15</sup> Agriculture consumes approximately 90% of available water resources.<sup>16</sup> The over-extraction and mismanagement of water resources have led to environmental degradation, such as the shrinking of the Aral Sea, which has seen dramatic reductions in water levels and biodiversity loss.<sup>17</sup>

The South Caucasus faces issues similar to those in Central Asia, including outdated infrastructure, pollution, and climate variability. Water quality is a primary concern, particularly due to industrial runoff and inadequate wastewater treatment.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, urbanization and economic development have increased demand for water, stressing existing resources.

Water management has been ineffective in both regions. In Central Asia, the transboundary nature of major rivers complicates the establishment of efficient water management. Lack of meaningful cooperation among the Central Asian states has led to tensions and disputes over water

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14 Sara, J.J. and Proskuryakova, T., “Central Asia: at the confluence of global water action and climate resilience Dushanbe conference to emphasize role of water in sustainable development”, World Bank Blogs, June 7, 2022, Available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/water/central-asia-confluence-global-water-action-and-climate-resilience-dushanbe-conference> (Accessed: November 23, 2024).

15 Ibid.

16 Li, Z., Fang, G., Chen, Y., Duan, W., and Mukanov, Y., “Agricultural water demands in Central Asia under 1.5 °C and 2.0 °C global warming”, *Agricultural Water Management*, Vol. 231, March 2020, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.agwat.2020.106020> (Accessed: November 3, 2024).

17 Li, Q., Li, X., Ran, Y., Feng, M., Nian, Y., Tan, M., and Chen, X., “Investigate the relationships between the Aral Sea shrinkage and the expansion of cropland and reservoir in its drainage basins between 2000 and 2020”, *International Journal of Digital Earth*, Vol. 14, No. 6, December 2020, pp. 661–677, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17538947.2020.1865466> (Accessed: November 3, 2024).

18 Mammadova, L., Guliyeva, R., and Mammadov, M., “Environment and Water Resource Protection: Measures to Modernize Water Infrastructure in the South Caucasus”, German-Azerbaijani Chamber of Commerce, July 2023, Available at: <https://www.sustainerasolutions.com/images/954764e0-b5a1-464c-9771-37a3974bb694-RAHMENANALYSE%20English%20Final.pdf> (Accessed: November 3, 2024).

allocation. The Soviet legacy of centralized water management created an infrastructure that many countries now struggle to maintain.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, efforts to manage water resources are often hampered by political disagreements and differing national priorities, particularly between upstream countries (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and downstream countries (Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan).<sup>20</sup>

In the South Caucasus, water management also poses significant challenges. The region is rich in freshwater resources, but political instability and regional conflicts have complicated collaborative water management efforts. The Kura River, the main watercourse, flows through all three countries – Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia – highlighting the need for cooperative management strategies.<sup>21</sup> Azerbaijan is especially susceptible to water stress, as approximately 70–75% of its water resources are derived from upstream sources in Armenia and Georgia, rendering the country highly vulnerable to changes in river flow induced by climate change or political dynamics. Even though, after the Second Garabagh War, Azerbaijan managed to reclaim control over several vital rivers passing through its formerly occupied territories, essential for irrigation and drinking water, the persistent uncertainties with Armenia continue to pose a significant risk to the country’s long-term water security.<sup>22</sup>

Although Central Asia’s water management initiatives have evolved since the Soviet era, there are still a lot of issues concerning implementation and modernization of existing projects and initiatives. The Almaty Agreement (1992) established a framework for cooperation on transboundary water resources including arrangements on the

*In the South Caucasus, water management also poses significant challenges. The region is rich in freshwater resources, but political instability and regional conflicts have complicated collaborative water management efforts.*

19 Roberts, F. J., “Rival Eco-Anxieties: Legacy of Soviet Water Management in the Syr Darya Basin”, *Security and Human Rights*, Vol. 32, No. 1-4, February 2022, pp.41-52, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18750230-bja10011> (Accessed: November 3, 2024).

20 Pohl B. et al., “Rethinking water in Central Asia: The costs of inaction and benefits of water cooperation”, ADELPHI and CAREC, 2017, Available at: <https://carececo.org/Rethinking%20Water%20in%20Central%20Asia.pdf> (Accessed: November 3, 2024).

21 Suleymanov, F., “The institutionalization of the Kura-Aras River Basin for effective management of water resources”, *International Journal of River Basin Management*, Vol.1, No. 11, June 2024, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15715124.2024.2363310> (Accessed: November 3, 2024).

22 Mammadova, G., “Water security in Central Asia and the South Caucasus”, Topchubashov Center, November 8, 2024, Available at: <https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3689/water-security-in-central-asia-and-the-south-caucasus> (Accessed: November 23, 2024).



quantity of water that would be released by the upstream states.<sup>23</sup> The International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), created in 1993, aims to restore the Aral Sea and facilitate regional collaboration.<sup>24</sup> There are a number of bilateral arrangements on water infrastructure in Central Asia that have been signed over the years.<sup>25</sup> However, the water management system in Central Asia has been mostly declarative, but remains outdated and often improperly implemented.<sup>26</sup>

The South Caucasus has several key water management initiatives aimed at promoting cooperation among its countries. In 1992, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, along with other countries in the region, participated in a Framework Agreement under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). This agreement emphasizes cooperation in managing transboundary water bodies with the aim of preventing pollution and promoting sustainable water use.<sup>27</sup> Over the years, there have been a number of bilateral treaties and agreements between Georgia and Azerbaijan concerning the joint management of the Kura River, which is vital for both countries. However, the degree of realization of these agreements, especially the items concerning water resource management, remains low profile, and actions undertaken are usually one-sided.<sup>28</sup>

Although there are various regional initiatives, treaties, and agreements

23 Weinthal, E., “Water Conflict and Cooperation in Central Asia”, UNDP Human Development Report Office. Human Development Report 2006, 2006, Available at: <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/weinthalrika.pdf> (Accessed: November 4, 2024).

24 “International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea,” Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia, 1993, Available at: <http://www.icwc-aral.uz/ifas.htm> (Accessed: November 4, 2024).

25 “Agreement on the use of water management facilities of intergovernmental status on the Rivers Chu and Talas”, Bishkek 1998, Available online at: [http://www.cawater-info.net/library/eng/chu\\_talas\\_e.pdf](http://www.cawater-info.net/library/eng/chu_talas_e.pdf); “Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan on cooperation in the field of environmental protection and rational nature management”, 1997, Available at: [http://www.cawater-info.net/library/eng/l/nature\\_use.pdf](http://www.cawater-info.net/library/eng/l/nature_use.pdf) Almaty; “Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan on cooperation in the field of environmental protection and rational nature management”, Available at: [http://cawater-info.net/library/rus/uzbekistan-kazakhstan\\_1997.pdf](http://cawater-info.net/library/rus/uzbekistan-kazakhstan_1997.pdf).

26 Janusz-Pawletta, B. and Gubaidullina, M., op.cit.

27 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), “The 1992 UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes”, 1992, Available at: [https://unece.org/DAM/env/water/documents/brochure\\_water\\_convention.pdf](https://unece.org/DAM/env/water/documents/brochure_water_convention.pdf) (Accessed: November 4, 2024).

28 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), “National Political Dialogue on Integrated Management of Water Resources in Georgia in the Framework of European Water Initiative,” 2011, Available at: [https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Transboundary\\_Water\\_resources\\_Management\\_Problems\\_in\\_Georgia\\_Eng.pdf](https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Transboundary_Water_resources_Management_Problems_in_Georgia_Eng.pdf) (Accessed: November 4, 2024).



aimed at addressing the challenges posed by shared water resources in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, water management in these two regions remains dysfunctional. Political tensions and environmental challenges further complicate resolving water allocation and pollution issues. Moreover, climate change impact, which has increased variability in precipitation and glacial melt, poses additional risks to water availability and management in the region. Water resources in these regions are often viewed through a national security lens, hindering trust and cooperation. Effective water governance in Central Asia and the South Caucasus requires updated initiatives and solutions, especially due to increased negative effects of environmental issues.

*Climate change in Central Asia and the South Caucasus is already having profound environmental, social, and economic impacts. The increased frequency of extreme weather events, rising temperatures, and threats to agriculture are among the most pressing challenges.*

### ***Climate change impact and response***

Climate change in Central Asia and the South Caucasus is already having profound environmental, social, and economic impacts. The increased frequency of extreme weather events, rising temperatures, and threats to agriculture are among the most pressing challenges. Although both regions have initiated adaptation and mitigation efforts, much more needs to be done to build resilience and reduce vulnerabilities. Regional cooperation, increased investment in the agricultural sector, focus on renewables, and better water management are key elements for addressing the challenges posed by climate change in these areas.

Central Asia has been experiencing a rising trend in temperature, which is already significantly above the global average.<sup>29</sup> Between 1957 and 2005, the annual mean temperature in the region significantly increased at rates of 0.32°C/decade, 0.24°C/decade, and 0.41°C/decade, respectively, which were much higher than the increase rates globally or across the Northern Hemisphere.<sup>30</sup> This warming is causing

29 Yao, J., Chen, Y., Chen, J., Zhao, Y., Tuoliewubieke, D., Li, J., Yang, L., and Mao, W., "Intensification of extreme precipitation in arid Central Asia", *Journal of Hydrology*, Vol. 598, July 2021, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhydrol.2020.125760> (Accessed: November 5, 2024).

30 Zhang, M., Chen, Y., Shen, Y. and Li, B., "Tracking climate change in Central Asia through temperature and precipitation extremes", *Journal of Geographical Sciences*, Vol.29, No. 1, 2019, pp.3-28, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11442-019-1581-6> (Accessed: November 23, 2024).

glaciers in the Tien Shan and Pamir mountain ranges of Central Asia to melt at an accelerated pace.<sup>31</sup> According to a report by the Eurasian Development Bank, between 14% and 30% of the glaciers in these mountain ranges have melted over the past 60 years.<sup>32</sup> Glaciers provide crucial freshwater resources for much of the region, and their retreat threatens water availability for millions of people.

Moreover, changes in precipitation patterns are becoming increasingly apparent, with some areas experiencing droughts and others suffering from heavy rainfall and flooding. The World Meteorological Organization found that, in 2023, precipitation was below normal in large parts of the Turan Lowland (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan).<sup>33</sup> The World Bank reports that Central Asia's agricultural sector, which relies heavily on irrigation from rivers fed by glaciers, is highly vulnerable to these shifts.<sup>34</sup> Droughts and reduced river flow are exacerbating water scarcity, impacting food production, and threatening the livelihoods of rural populations who depend on agriculture.<sup>35</sup>

The South Caucasus is also experiencing the effects of climate change. Similar to Central Asia, rising temperatures and erratic precipitation are reshaping the region's environmental landscape. In Armenia, the average temperature increased by about 1.23°C between 1929 and 2016.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the average annual temperature in Georgia has

31 Shaw, R., Luo, Y., Cheong, T.S., Abdul Halim, S., Chaturvedi, S., Hashizume, M., Insarov, G.E., Ishikawa, Y., Jafari, ., Kitoh, A., Pulhin, J., Singh, C., Vasant, K., and Zhang, Z., "Asia" in "Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability", Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA, 2022, pp. 14571579, Available at: [https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGII\\_Chapter10.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGII_Chapter10.pdf) (Accessed: November 5, 2024).

32 Kalouay, B., "'Disappeared completely': melting glaciers worry Central Asia", September 16, 2024, Science X, Available at: <https://phys.org/news/2024-09-glaciers-central-asia.html> (Accessed: November 24, 2024).

33 World Meteorological Organization, "Climate change and extreme weather impacts hit Asia hard", April 23, 2024, Available at: <https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/climate-change-and-extreme-weather-impacts-hit-asia-hard> (Accessed: November 24, 2024).

34 Clement, V., Rigaud, K.K., de Sherbinin, A., Jones, B., Adamo, S., Schewe, J., Sadiq, N., and Shabahat, E., "Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration", World Bank, Washington, DC, Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/2c9150df-52c3-58ed-9075-d78ea56c3267> (Accessed: November 5, 2024).

35 Miholjic-Ivkovic, N., "Impact of climate change on migration trends in rural Central Asia", Central Asian Journal of Sustainability and Climate Change, Vol. 3, No.1, May 2024, pp. 74-95, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.29258/CAJSCR/2024-R1.v3-1/74-95.eng> (Accessed: November 5, 2024).

36 The World Bank Group and the Asian Development Bank, "Climate Risk Country Profile:

been increasing at an alarming rate. The average annual temperature increased by 0.25 to 0.58°C in most regions of the country, and by 0.63 to 0.73°C in bigger cities.<sup>37</sup> Azerbaijan is also facing rising temperatures, affecting its arid lowland regions, which are particularly vulnerable to desertification.<sup>38</sup> The number of days exceeding 16°C increased across the country by 3 to 26% between 1991 and 2010, relative to the 1961–1990 baseline, with the most pronounced increases occurring in mountainous districts such as Gadabay, Quba, and Nakhchivan.<sup>39</sup> These changes are contributing to reduced agricultural productivity and increased stress on water resources, especially in the irrigated areas of the Kura–Aras River Basin, which spans parts of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia.

Agriculture is a critical sector in both Central Asia and the South Caucasus, contributing significantly to the economies of these regions. Climate change has the potential to disrupt food production through shifts in temperature and precipitation, and increased frequency of extreme weather events. Implementing climate-smart agricultural practices, including crop diversification, soil conservation, and agroforestry, is essential. For instance, in Kazakhstan, the government has been promoting the use of drought-resistant crops.<sup>40</sup> In the South Caucasus, Georgia’s adoption of climate-resilient farming techniques such as reduced tillage and the use of organic fertilizers is helping mitigate agricultural risks.<sup>41</sup>

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Armenia”, 2021, Available at: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/709836/climate-risk-country-profile-armenia.pdf> (Accessed: November 5, 2024).

37 Sulava, I. and Tchitchinadze, S., “Georgia assesses climate change impact, plans next steps in building climate-proof society”, June 2021, available at: <https://georgia.un.org/en/131830-georgia-assesses-climate-change-impact-plans-next-steps-building-climate-proof-society> (accessed: November 5, 2024).

38 Abbasov R.K, Allahverdiyev R., Zaynalov R., Habilov A., and Aliyeva R., “Azerbaijan National Ecosystem Assessment”, Baku, Azerbaijan: Government of Azerbaijan, RECC Azerbaijan, 2024, Available at: [https://files.ipbes.net/ipbes-web-prod-public-files/webform/impact\\_tracking\\_database/76826/AZERBAIJAN-NEA-SPM-2024-2.pdf](https://files.ipbes.net/ipbes-web-prod-public-files/webform/impact_tracking_database/76826/AZERBAIJAN-NEA-SPM-2024-2.pdf) (Accessed: November 5, 2024).

39 The World Bank Group and Asian Development Bank, “Climate Risk Country Profile: Azerbaijan”, June 2021, Available at: <https://www.adb.org/publications/climate-risk-country-profile-azerbaijan> (Accessed: November 24, 2024).

40 ElDala, Kazakhstan presents latest water-saving technologies to farmers, July 30, 2024, Available at: <https://eldala.kz/novosti/kazahstan/19805-noveyshie-vodosberegayushchie-tehnologii-prezentovali-fermeram-kazahstana> (Accessed: November 5, 2024).

41 Gönner, C., Weigel, O., Kodiashvili, A., Kolbin, G., and Muzafarova, A., “Approach for “Climate-adapted Agriculture in East Georgia””, Integrated Biodiversity Management, South Caucasus – IBIS, 2019, Available at: <https://biodivers-southcaucasus.org/uploads/files/Approach%20Climate-adapted%20Agriculture%20Georgia.pdf> (Accessed: November 6, 2024).

The response to climate change in Central Asia and the South Caucasus is still evolving, and while some steps have been taken toward adaptation and mitigation, much more needs to be done to address the growing risks posed by changing climate. Effective cooperation at the regional and international levels, combined with strong national policies, is crucial for ensuring sustainable development and climate resilience in these regions.

### *Energy dependence and environmental impact*

Energy dependence is a critical and interconnected environmental challenge in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. These regions are heavily reliant on energy resources, both in terms of production and consumption, yet face growing environmental risks linked to this dependence. The environmental implications are compounded by geopolitical tensions, economic challenges, and the effects of climate change, making sustainable energy transitions more urgent. In both regions, energy dependence is closely tied to fossil fuels, which dominate the energy mix. This reliance limits the ability to diversify energy sources and slows the transition toward more sustainable and renewable energy options.

Countries like Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan heavily rely on oil and gas exports, primarily hydrocarbons, which constitute a significant portion of their GDP.<sup>42</sup> Nations such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan depend on their hydropower systems, supplied by melting glaciers and river flows from the Pamirs and Tien Shan Mountain ranges. In Tajikistan, hydropower accounts for over 90% of electricity generation.<sup>43</sup> Central Asia's dependence on hydropower, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, is jeopardized by glacial melting and unpredictable rainfall patterns that affect the region's water availability.<sup>44</sup>

Energy dependence also intersects with geopolitical tensions. The South Caucasus, strategically located between Europe, Russia, and the Middle

42 Aydin, U. and D. Azhgaliyeva, "Assessing Energy Security in the Caspian Region: The Geopolitical Implications for European Energy Strategy", Asian Development Bank Institute, October 2019, Available: <https://www.adb.org/publications/assessing-energy-security-caspian-region> (Accessed: November 11, 2024).

43 UNECE, "Energy Policy Brief: Tajikistan", March 2022, Available at: <https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/tajikistan%20%287%29.pdf> (Accessed: November 11, 2024).

44 Pohl B. et al., op.cit.

East, faces complex energy security issues. For instance, Armenia relies heavily on Russian natural gas supplies, which are almost entirely imported by pipeline through Georgia.<sup>45</sup> Armenia's reliance on Russian natural gas can be considered not just an economic issue, but also a geopolitical challenge. It limits Armenia's flexibility in foreign policy, creates tensions with Western countries, and ties its security to Russia in ways that might not align with Armenia's long-term strategic interests. Such connectivity to the Russian energy market creates vulnerabilities in both countries' energy security.

*Azerbaijan, on the other hand, was able to diversify its energy exports through the Southern Gas Corridor, a chain of pipelines transporting Azerbaijan's natural gas to Europe.*

Azerbaijan, on the other hand, was able to diversify its energy exports through the Southern Gas Corridor, a chain of pipelines transporting Azerbaijan's natural gas to Europe. However, this has created a dynamic that has long inhibited the process of a sustainable and green energy transition. However, backed by its recent experience of hosting COP29, Azerbaijan is ideally positioned to be one of the leads in lowering greenhouse gas emissions and prevent environmental degradation through a rapid and sustainable transition to a green economy.

The interrelationship between energy dependence and environmental issues is also manifest in the green transition process. For example, the push for renewable energy sources, although necessary for sustainable development, faces obstacles due to existing investments in fossil fuel infrastructure and political interests.<sup>46</sup> Transitioning to renewables could alleviate some environmental pressures but requires substantial investment and technological support, which many of these countries struggle to secure.

Kazakhstan has made progress in promoting renewable energy. In 2020, the government adopted an Action Plan for implementing the Green Economy Concept with plans to generate 50% of its electricity from "alternative or renewable" sources, which could include nuclear, by 2050.<sup>47</sup> Uzbekistan has also made significant progress in the renewable

45 IEA, "Armenia energy profile", 2023, Available at: <https://www.iea.org/reports/armenia-energy-profile> (Accessed: November 11, 2024).

46 Scott, M., "Why aren't we reducing our reliance on fossil fuels faster?", World Economic Forum, August 12, 2024, Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/08/speed-fossil-fuel-transition-climate-energy/> (Accessed: November 11, 2024).

47 IEA, "Kazakhstan 2022: Energy Sector Review", 2022, Available at: <https://www.iea.org/reports/kazakhstan-2022/executive-summary> (Accessed: November 12, 2024).

energy transition in recent years, though the process is still in its early stages. In 2017, Uzbekistan adopted a Renewable Energy Development Strategy with a target to obtain 25% of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030. Moreover, in 2019, Uzbekistan launched its first renewable energy auctions for solar power projects, a move designed to drive competition, reduce costs, and attract international investors.<sup>48</sup> These auctions are expected to continue throughout the renewable transition.

Georgia is expanding its hydropower capacity, while Azerbaijan is investing in solar and wind energy projects. In 2023, through cooperation with Masdar from the UAE, the 230 MW Garadagh Solar Power Plant, the largest in the Caspian and the CIS regions, was put into operation.<sup>49</sup> Central Asian and Caspian Basin states are actively working on the green energy transition. At COP29 in Azerbaijan's capital city of Baku, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, were actively working on developing a sustainable "green energy corridor" as part of the Middle Corridor trade route, aiming to boost renewable energy exports to Europe. These countries signed important infrastructure agreements, including for a strategic power line and cargo terminals.<sup>50</sup> However, these efforts must be intensified in order to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and mitigate the environmental damage associated with energy production.

### ***Strategies for enhancing regional collaboration***

Enhancing regional collaboration in addressing environmental issues in Central Asia and the South Caucasus requires a multifaceted approach that builds on existing frameworks, strengthens governance structures, promotes inclusive stakeholder engagement, and allows for knowledge

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48 The International Finance Corporation (IFC), "Uzbekistan Announces Winner of First Ever Solar Power Auction in the Country", October 31, 2020, Available at: <https://www.ifc.org/en/pressroom/2019/uzbekistan-announces-winner-of-first-ever-solar-power-auction-in-the-country> (Accessed: November 24, 2024).

49 Ministry of Energy of Republic of Azerbaijan, "The Use of Renewable Energy Resources in Azerbaijan", March 6, 2024, Available at: <https://minenergy.gov.az/en/alternativ-ve-berpa-olunan-enerji/azerbaycanda-berpa-olunan-enerji-menbelerinden-istifade> (Accessed: November 12, 2024).

50 Benson, B., "COP29: Caspian and Central Asian states make progress in promoting "green" trade plan", *Eurasianet*, November 20, 2024, Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/cop29-caspian-and-central-asian-states-make-progress-in-promoting-green-trade-plan> (Accessed: November 24, 2024).

and experience to be shared across the region. The environmental challenges in these regions are interconnected. Thus, addressing these challenges requires coordinated action that transcends national borders, supported by robust regional cooperation mechanisms, shared policy frameworks, and integrated solutions.

Regional cooperation is also essential for addressing these challenges. Regional cooperation on environmental issues necessitates strengthened institutional frameworks, yet political tensions often hinder effective collaboration.<sup>51</sup> Organizations such as the Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (CENN)<sup>52</sup> and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC)<sup>53</sup> are vital for facilitating dialogue and cooperation. Since 1998, CENN has promoted green growth and sustainable development through collaborative, region-wide initiatives involving local communities, national governments, and all sectors of society across Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to address environmental challenges. CAREC is a collaboration of 11 countries and development partners aimed at fostering economic growth and poverty reduction through cooperation, guided by the vision of “Good Neighbours, Good, and Good Prospects”.

These organizations should be further empowered to create platforms for regular interaction among governments, civil society, and the private sector. The creation of similar organizations that would include all concerned countries of both regions could further contribute to a more meaningful and robust response to transboundary environmental issues.

Such examples of regional environmental governance must be inclusive, involving local communities and civil society in decision-making processes. Environmental NGOs, youth groups, and local community organizations play an important role in raising awareness, fostering dialogue, and implementing grassroots initiatives. CAREC shows a great potential as a platform for stakeholder engagement that can help build capacity and foster cross-border collaboration.

The Caspian Sea, the Aral Sea, and rivers such as the Amu Darya, Syr Darya, and Kura are shared by multiple countries, which leads to

51 Asian Development Bank, “CAREC Energy Outlook 2030”, 2022, Available at: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/850111/carec-energy-outlook-2030.pdf> (Accessed: November 12, 2024).

52 Official site of the organization: <https://www.cenn.org/> (Accessed: November 8, 2024).

53 Official site of the organization: <https://www.carecprogram.org/> (Accessed: November 8, 2024).



disputes over water usage. However, such a transboundary situation also creates an opportunity for resolving the issue with integrated management and initiatives that transcend national borders and foster peaceful and sustainable development.

IFAS, which has worked with Central Asian nations to address environmental degradation of the Aral Sea, is a positive initiative. But it needs more development and modernization in order to face the issues of poor water management in the region more proactively. Similar mechanisms could be applied to other shared water bodies in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. This is especially true of the Caspian Sea basin, which has been receding at an alarming rate.<sup>54</sup>

Climate change impacts such as droughts, floods, and extreme weather events require joint regional climate adaptation strategies for resilience purposes in both regions. This could include climate risk assessments, vulnerability mapping, and the creation of early warning systems for extreme weather events. Central Asian and South Caucasus countries can benefit from the UNDP's regional climate change programmes that support countries in developing national climate strategies and regional adaptation mechanisms.<sup>55</sup>

Encouraging the transition to renewable energy and sustainable development practices is another crucial strategy. The potential for renewable energy – particularly wind and solar – is high in both Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Regional cooperation in clean energy projects can foster energy security, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and improve energy efficiency. Although the transition process will not be complete or on a fast track in the foreseeable future, especially considering the current pace of replacing fossil fuels with renewables, it is important to continue emphasizing the positive outcome of such a transition and to educate governments and local populations about the benefits of green energy.

Countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus could work together to develop regional renewable energy grids, thereby facilitating energy

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54 Board, J., “‘A catastrophe’: Why world’s largest inland water body could disappear and what it says about climate change”, CNA, November 9, 2024, Available at: <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/sustainability/sustainability-caspian-sea-cop-climate-change-4707106> (Accessed: November 12, 2024).

55 UNDP, “Europe and Central Asia: Environment”, Available at: <https://www.undp.org/eurasia/our-focus/environment> (Accessed: November 12, 2024).



trade and sharing technology. Collaborative projects that use solar and wind potential across sea and mountain areas in both regions could stimulate economic growth while addressing environmental concerns and even alleviating geopolitical hostilities and tensions.

### *Concluding remarks*

Regional collaboration is arguably one of the most effective approaches to addressing the interconnected environmental challenges in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, particularly given the transboundary nature of these issues. An understanding of the geopolitical and historical tensions in both regions provides insight into the slow pace of the green transition and the limited success of regional initiatives and strategies aimed at mitigating environmental problems. The findings emphasize the critical need to strengthen collaborative efforts through the exchange of knowledge, increased governmental commitment, and greater local involvement to combat environmental degradation and advance sustainable development.

The environmental challenges of water scarcity, climate change, and energy dependence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus are intricately linked, and their resolution demands collaborative, cross-border strategies. As demonstrated, regional cooperation mechanisms such as CAREC, IFAS, and various bilateral initiatives, while beneficial, need modernization and stronger implementation to achieve meaningful results.

Although these environmental issues are compounded by geopolitical tensions, they also present opportunities for cooperation and innovation. Effective regional governance, strengthened institutional frameworks, and inclusive stakeholder engagement are critical to overcoming the political, economic, and social barriers that hinder collaborative action.

Moving forward, enhancing cooperation in areas like shared water resources, renewable energy, and climate resilience will be essential for ensuring sustainable development in both regions. Addressing the complex environmental challenges in Central Asia and the South Caucasus requires a multi-faceted approach that provides gradual, adaptive, and integrated solutions to the interrelated issues of environmental degradation. Although such an approach might be

complex and difficult to embrace, it is important to support small-scale projects that not only tackle immediate concerns, such as water scarcity and energy dependence, but also pave the way for long-term stability in the face of climate change. By fostering collective action, these countries can not only mitigate the environmental impacts they face but also contribute to regional stability and prosperity, ultimately building a more resilient future for Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

# The Increasing Role of Regional Organizations in the Climate Agenda of Central Asia: Challenges and Possible Implications

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Aytac Mahammadova\*

This article critically examines the structural and political challenges impeding the efficacy of Central Asian regional organizations in addressing climate change. It identifies the region's acute vulnerabilities – accelerating glacial retreat, intensifying water scarcity, and rising temperatures – that endanger key sectors such as agriculture, energy, and public health, ultimately threatening regional stability. The analysis underscores the detrimental impact of divergent national agendas, fragmented policies, and limited institutional capacities. While over 150 bilateral agreements on water resources exist, their non-binding nature and lack of enforcement hinder meaningful progress. In addition, the region also faces issues such as inadequate regional coordination and the lack of a comprehensive legal framework for climate governance. The absence of unified data systems and insufficient investment in climate adaptation strategies further exacerbate the situation. The study recommends establishing a comprehensive, centralized climate data repository, a regionally financed climate fund, and binding environmental agreements with enforceable mechanisms to ensure compliance and coordination. Additionally, fostering public awareness and local involvement is deemed essential to bolstering support for environmental initiatives. Concluding that regional cohesion and sustained commitment are paramount, the article argues for substantial reforms in climate governance to enable Central Asia's resilience and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Climate governance, environmental sustainability, water resource management, regional cooperation, climate policy.



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## Introduction

Ensuring environmental safety is crucial for the sustainable development of the Central Asia region. Environmentally sustainable development involves the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources and ecosystems, as well as reducing the impact of human activities on the environment. This includes protecting biodiversity, preserving clean water and air, sustainable management of forest resources, and reducing emissions and greenhouse gases. This certainly requires a more systematic approach.

In 2023, Asia was the region most affected by natural disasters associated with climate change, while Europe and the Americas, despite experiencing extreme weather conditions such as heatwaves,

*In 2023, Asia was the region most affected by natural disasters associated with climate change, while Europe and the Americas, despite experiencing extreme weather conditions such as heatwaves, wildfires, and floods, reported fewer fatalities overall.*

wildfires, and floods, reported fewer fatalities overall. The report “The State of the Climate in Asia in 2023”<sup>1</sup> highlights the acceleration of changes in key climate indicators, such as surface air temperature, melting glaciers, and sea level rise. The warming trend has almost doubled compared to that in the period 1961–1990. Particularly high average temperatures were recorded from western Siberia to Central Asia and from eastern China to Japan. According to the Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT), 79 natural disasters related to natural phenomena were registered in Asia in 2023. Of these, more than 80% were related to floods and hurricanes, which killed more than 2,000 people and directly affected nine million individuals.<sup>2</sup>

Key environmental challenges – water scarcity, intense air and soil pollution, as well as the effects of climate change – not only threaten the natural diversity and environmental stability of the region, but also have an impact on public health, socio-economic development, and political stability and can provoke social and economic crises, leading to conflicts over resources.

This article aims to identify the key challenges for environmental

1 Storymaps.arcgis.com, The State of the Climate in Asia in 2023, 2023, Available at: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/a64df1437b9e4b3ca8a87ae633d55417> (Accessed: December 31, 2023)

2 Pedroletti B., “Asia most affected by climate-related disasters in 2023”, Le Monde, April 23, 2024, Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/environment/article/2024/04/23/asia-most-affected-by-climate-related-disasters-in-2023\\_6669252\\_114.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/environment/article/2024/04/23/asia-most-affected-by-climate-related-disasters-in-2023_6669252_114.html) (Accessed: April 23, 2024)

security in Central Asia and analyse the structural, political, and economic barriers that hinder regional organizations from implementing effective climate change mitigation strategies. It highlights the roles of organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), examining the underlying factors that limit their capacity to address the region's climate crisis, along with key approaches to enhance the effectiveness of these organizations in tackling climate change.

### ***Challenges for Environmental Security in Central Asia***

Central Asia occupies a special place on the ecological map of the world. This region, which includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, has unique natural resources and biodiversity, but has been facing increasing environmental problems in recent decades. The area of Central Asia is surrounded by mountains on three sides. The Ural Mountains are to the west, the Tien Shan and Pamir Mountains to the south, and the Sayan Mountains to the east. These mountain systems form the natural boundaries of the region and affect its climate and ecosystem. Central Asia is characterized by a continental arid and semi-arid climate with hot, cloudless, dry summers and humid, relatively warm winters in the south and cold winters with severe frosts in the north. As a result, the average annual temperature increase in this region is higher than in neighbouring regions. This makes it more vulnerable to climate change. Among the main challenges are the reduction of water resources, environmental pollution, land degradation, and climate change.

### ***Temperature Rise***

The increase in air temperature mainly occurred after the 1960s. Comparing surface temperatures over two periods, 1942–1972 and 1973–2003, we conclude that the average annual temperature increased by 0.5°C.<sup>3</sup> The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

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<sup>3</sup> Aizen V., Aizen E., Surazakov A., “Climate and Snow/Glacier Water Resources Changes in Central Asia in the last 50 years based on remote sensed and in-situ data”, The Handbook of Environmental Chemistry, Vol.105, No. 1, August 2020. p.98

notes that, over the past century, the average air temperature in Central Asia has increased by 1–2°C.<sup>4</sup>

According to North EurAsia Climate Centre data for 2018, the average annual air temperature in Central Asia is increasing at a rate that varies between 0.18°C per decade (Tajikistan) and 0.35°C per decade (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan). The greatest temperature increases occur in spring (0.33–0.70°C/decade) and in autumn (0.18–0.34°C/decade).<sup>5</sup> In winter, the change in air temperature decreases slightly, to between 0.13°C/decade (Kazakhstan) and 0.37°C/decade (Turkmenistan). In summer (with the exception of Turkmenistan), the lowest rate of temperature increase is observed: between 0.03 and 0.06°C/decade for the mountainous republics (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, respectively), 0.19°C/decade for Kazakhstan and 0.26°C/decade for Uzbekistan.<sup>6</sup> The absolute maximum temperature was observed in Kazakhstan in 2013, when the anomaly was 1.94°C, exceeding the record of 1983 with an anomaly of 1.86°C, which had remained the warmest year in Kazakhstan for the entire 30-year history of instrumental observations. The air temperature anomaly in 2016 was +1.66°C compared to average temperatures in the period 1961 to 1990.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, global warming poses an immediate threat to Central Asia. The impact of climate change in Central Asia is most evident in mountainous areas, where the area covered by glaciers has decreased by about one-third over the past 100 years.<sup>8</sup> Glaciers in this region, with an area of 27,677 km<sup>2</sup> (Tien Shan 15,417 km<sup>2</sup> and Pamir 12,260 km<sup>2</sup>),<sup>9</sup> retain a huge amount of water resources and melt by 0.6–0.8% year-by-year.<sup>10</sup>

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4 Parry M.L., Canziani O.F., Palutikof J.P. et al., *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007. p.976.

5 GIZ, “Regional Climate Change Adaptation Strategy for Central Asia”, Bonn, 2023. p.97.

6 Ibid.

7 United Nations Environment Programme, “Seventh National Communication and Third Biennial Report of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change”, Astana, 2017, p.286.

8 United Nations, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, “Second National Communication of the Republic of Uzbekistan under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change”, Tashkent, 2008, p.8.

9 Aizen V., Aizen E., Surazakov A., “Climate and Snow/Glacier Water Resources Changes in Central Asia in the last 50 years based on remote sensed and in-situ data”, *The Handbook of Environmental Chemistry*, Vol.105, No. 1, August 2020. p.9.

10 United Nations, United Nations Development Programme, “The Glaciers of Central Asia: Disappearing Resource”, December 2011, p.19.

The Asian Development Bank estimates that the subcontinent has lost an average of 30% of its glaciers over the past 50–60 years. During this period, Kazakhstan has lost 45% of the glaciers in its mountains. In Kyrgyzstan, about 16% of glaciers have disappeared over the past 70 years. A similar situation exists in Tajikistan. Scientists in Tajikistan attribute this loss to a 15% increase in temperature over the past 70 years.<sup>11</sup> Landslides are one of the consequences of melting glaciers. Such climatic phenomena inevitably cause damage to local biodiversity. The Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers originate from the mountains. With the melting of glaciers, the water level in these rivers increases, affecting the water quality. As a result, the lands irrigated by these waters are saline, and cotton plantations are destroyed by flooding.

*One of the most important problems of the region is the shortage of water resources. The Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, which historically provide water for a significant part of Central Asia, face serious challenges.*

### *Water Shortage*

One of the most important problems of the region is the shortage of water resources. The Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, which historically provide water for a significant part of Central Asia, face serious challenges. Due to improper use and pollution of water sources, as well as climate change, rivers are gradually becoming shallower, which creates additional risks for agriculture and local communities. One of the main problems of the Central Asian countries is the improper geographical distribution of water resources among the five countries. The economic use of water is primarily directed to cotton and energy production. Thus, water is also the basis of the internal – social and political – stability of the Central Asian states.

Due to the arid climate, many countries are heavily dependent on the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers. These rivers originate in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and provide water to the countries located downstream – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Two source countries (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) control the beginning of these rivers. The countries downstream (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and partly Kazakhstan) depend on a stable flow of these rivers for their

<sup>11</sup> [centralasiacimateportal.org](https://centralasiacimateportal.org), Kyrgyzstan Lost Over 16 Percent of Glaciers in the Last 50 Years: Drought Risk Gets Real to the Whole Region, November 14, 2024, Available at: <https://centralasiacimateportal.org/kyrgyzstan-lost-over-16-per-cent-of-glaciers-in-the-last-50-years-drought-risk-gets-real-to-the-whole-region/> (Accessed: November 14, 2024)

needs. As a result, the region's water-related interests revolve around ensuring sufficient water supply, supporting agriculture, and developing hydropower, leading to conflicting priorities among these nations.

The Amu Darya River (1,415 km) originates in the Pamirs (Tajikistan) and flows through the territories of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Its waters ultimately flow into the Aral Sea. The river is of great importance to the region, serving as a source of fresh water, irrigation, and hydropower for several countries.

The Syr Darya river, like the Amu Darya, plays a key role in the lives of Central Asian nations, providing for the needs of agriculture, industry, and water supply. The length and complex hydrological regime of the Syr Darya require close cooperation between the countries of the region to maintain sustainable water use and protect its ecosystem. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the management of the Syr Darya's water resources became more complex owing to the lack of coordination between independent states. Competition for water resources between the countries is complicated by differences in priorities: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan use water for electricity generation in winter, while Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are interested in using it for irrigation in summer.

The Caspian Sea, recognized as a critical ecological and economic resource, represents a significant area of focus for regional cooperation. Its unique environmental and geopolitical significance necessitates coordinated efforts to address challenges such as marine pollution, biodiversity conservation, and the sustainable utilization of marine resources. Moreover, an initiative called "The Caspian House: A Platform for Environmental Organizations of Caspian Countries" was officially launched through the signing of a joint cooperation protocol by representatives of public unions from Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan on November 20 in Baku on the sidelines of the 2024 United Nations Climate Change Conference (29th Conference of the Parties (COP29) of the UNFCCC). The initiative aims to establish an environmental association of non-governmental organizations from the four Caspian nations, focusing on collaborative efforts to address regional environmental challenges.<sup>12</sup> Iran's representatives did not participate in this framework, which highlights ongoing challenges in achieving unified cooperation

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12 Caspianpost.com, COP29 Unveils Project to Enhance Environmental Cooperation Among Caspian States, November 20, 2024, Available at: <https://caspianpost.com/en/post/cop29-unveils-project-to-enhance-environmental-cooperation-among-caspian-states>. (Accessed: November 20, 2024)



among all five Caspian littoral states despite shared environmental concerns.

Moreover, the untapped potential of offshore wind energy in the Azerbaijani section of the Caspian Sea offers an opportunity to integrate renewable energy development with marine resource management, reinforcing Azerbaijan's role as a regional leader in environmental and energy innovation. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Russia, through joint projects, can together develop interconnected wind-power, smart-grid facilities, and transmission networks.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and/or Iran can jointly initiate the establishment of a regional research centre to study the offshore renewable energy opportunities with a focus on addressing environmental challenges, optimizing wind energy technologies, and ensuring minimal ecological impact. These efforts would set a precedent for balancing energy production with marine ecosystem preservation.

The Aral Sea, once one of the largest inland bodies of water in the world, today represents a tragic symbol of an environmental disaster. During the 20th century, this unique sea, located on the border of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, practically disappeared due to the intensive exploitation of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers feeding its waters. The main reason for the shallowing of the Aral Sea was the massive use of the waters of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya for the irrigation of agricultural crops, in particular cotton, in the former USSR. As part of projects to transform the deserts of Central Asia into agricultural zones, river waters were redirected for irrigation.<sup>14</sup> This led to a sharp reduction in water inflow into the Aral Sea, and with each decade its area and depth decreased. According to data from the United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Human Security for the Aral Sea Region in Uzbekistan, the salinity level of the Aral Sea has increased by more than 13–25 times and exceeds the average ocean mineral level by a factor of 7 to 11.<sup>15</sup>

*Moreover, the untapped potential of offshore wind energy in the Azerbaijani section of the Caspian Sea offers an opportunity to integrate renewable energy development with marine resource management, reinforcing Azerbaijan's role as a regional leader in environmental and energy innovation.*

13 News.az, Offshore wind farm in the Caspian Sea: a new frontier of green energy, May 30, 2024, Available at: <https://news.az/news/--offshore-wind-farm-in-the-caspian-sea--a-new-frontier-of-green-energy-> (Accessed: May 30, 2024)

14 Britannica.com, Aral Sea. Environmental consequences, November 2, 2024, Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Aral-Sea> (Accessed: November 2, 2024)

15 The UN Multi-Partner Human Security Trust Fund for the Aral Sea Region in Uzbekistan, "Annual

Due to the decrease in water resources and the deterioration of land quality, crop yields are decreasing, which leads to a decrease in rural incomes and an increase in poverty and unemployment. As a result, food security suffers, which contributes to the growth of social tension. Deterioration of water and air quality, along with climate change, has a direct impact on public health, increasing morbidity and mortality, and healthcare costs. Agriculture, which plays a key role in the region's economy, will suffer economically. Declining agricultural productivity can lead to increased poverty and unemployment, which further undermines social stability. Collectively, environmental problems have a negative impact on all aspects of life and hinder sustainable economic growth.

To address these issues, regional cooperation between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan is extremely important. The lack of a unified policy to regulate hydropower will also only exacerbate the situation with water resources in the region.

### ***Obstacles to Regional Cooperation***

After gaining independence, the five Central Asian republics encountered a new challenge: the management and distribution of natural resources. Following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, each state began prioritizing its national interests over regional collaboration, asserting control over its resources. For instance, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, located upstream and controlling significant water sources, adopted policies favouring their energy needs, such as releasing water in winter for hydropower generation. This approach often conflicted with the needs of downstream countries such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which depend on water for summer irrigation to sustain agriculture.

In the 15 years from 1992 to 2007, there were about 150 interstate agreements between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan on water resources. However, these agreements were only partially respected, if at all. One of the reasons for non-compliance with the agreements and the lack of political interest within the Central Asian States in resolving the water problem is the lack of common institutions. In the process of writing this paper, the present author analysed 28 bilateral agreements, covering the period from 1996 to 2023,

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Fund-Level Report", Uzbekistan, 2023, p.38.

between Central Asian countries on water resources management. The agreements emphasize the importance of collaborative management of transboundary water bodies, with clearly defined goals focused on environmental protection, conflict prevention, and sustainable water usage. Key provisions include joint decision-making, the establishment of working groups to coordinate efforts and monitor water resources, and adaptation strategies for climate change.

Effective fulfilment of these conditions would lead to solving the problems of water use and ensuring sustainable development of the region. But in the process of implementing the terms of the agreements, the parties face a number of challenges.

Different interests and priorities, the need for significant funding, technical difficulties, and the impact of climate change require serious analysis and an effective approach for the successful implementation of all initiatives. Table 1 shows a comparative analysis of the strategic interests and priorities of the five states, and Table 2 indicates the conflicts and challenges they face.

**Table 1.** Strategic interests and priorities

Country	Strategic interests	Main priorities
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	Maintaining the water level in the Syr Darya for agriculture and water supply in the south of the country	Improvement of water infrastructure and cooperation to regulate the flow of the Syr Darya
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	Development of hydropower at the expense of Syr Darya's water resources	Construction and operation of hydroelectric power plants for energy independence and electricity export
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	Ensuring a steady supply of water from the Amu Darya for irrigation, especially for cotton cultivation	Development of irrigation systems, maintenance of water levels in the Amu Darya during the growing season
<b>Tajikistan</b>	Development of hydropower, especially large hydropower plants for energy supply and export	Construction of hydroelectric power plants to improve energy security
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	Stable water supply for the needs of cotton growing and agriculture in general, maintaining the level of the Syr Darya and Amu Darya	Modernization of the irrigation system and water resources management in cooperation with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

**Table 2.** Conflicts and challenges

Country	Major conflicts and challenges
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	Lack of water in the Syr Darya in summer, environmental problems of the Aral Sea
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	Dependence on seasonal accumulation of water for hydropower, possible conflicts with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in summer
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	Decrease in the flow of the Amu Darya due to Tajikistan’s hydroelectric power plant construction projects
<b>Tajikistan</b>	Concern of downstream countries due to the construction of large hydroelectric power plants
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	Unstable flow of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, dependence on upstream countries for water resources

***The Role of Regional Organizations in the Climate Agenda of Central Asia***

Regional organizations are playing an increasingly important role in advancing climate initiatives within Central Asia, a region highly susceptible to ecological challenges. Through initiatives such as the SCO’s “Green Belt Program”, “Aral Sea Rehabilitation Program”, “Water Resource Cooperation Framework”, and “Syr Darya Water Management Project”, the CSTO’s “Disaster Response Program”, “Combat Brotherhood”, and “Shield”, and CICA’s Ministerial Conference on Environmental Issues, which promote resource management, disaster preparedness, and collaborative environmental governance, these organizations are proactively addressing the ecological challenges facing Central Asia, enhancing resilience, and ensuring long-term stability in a region particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

*Regional organizations are playing an increasingly important role in advancing climate initiatives within Central Asia, a region highly susceptible to ecological challenges.*

The SCO has demonstrated an expanding commitment to environmental protection and climate resilience, leveraging regional cooperation to address the environmental challenges facing Central Asia. Initially established as a platform for security and economic collaboration, the SCO has progressively recognized that environmental degradation and resource scarcity can destabilize its member states and hinder regional

development. To address these pressing issues, the organization has launched a series of focused initiatives that foster collaboration on renewable energy, water management, and pollution control across its member states.

One significant example is the SCO's Green Belt Program, which strengthens cooperation on sustainable land use and reforestation, with an emphasis on combating desertification. Through this initiative, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have invested in large-scale afforestation projects designed to mitigate desert expansion and alleviate the severe dust and sandstorms that periodically afflict Central Asia. By encouraging biodiversity protection and the regeneration of sensitive ecological areas, the Green Belt Program contributes directly to building environmental resilience across the region.

The Aral Sea Rehabilitation Program is another key environmental effort supported under the SCO's framework, although it is primarily funded by the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS). This programme addresses the long-standing environmental crisis posed by the desiccation of the Aral Sea and seeks to rehabilitate the region through reforestation, sustainable agriculture, and improved irrigation. Under the SCO's Water Resource Cooperation Framework, countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan have engaged in projects to optimize water usage, improve irrigation efficiency, and enhance data sharing on hydrological conditions. A prominent initiative within this framework is the Syr Darya Water Management Project, which aims to coordinate dam releases and water allocations among participating states, thus preventing resource conflicts and reducing waste.

The CSTO, although initially dedicated to conventional military and security concerns, has adapted to the multifaceted threats that climate change poses to regional stability. This shift acknowledges that climate change, as a 'threat multiplier', can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities by intensifying natural disasters, increasing resource scarcity, and triggering potential social upheaval.

A significant manifestation of this expanded scope is the CSTO's Disaster Response Program, which has incorporated a range of joint training exercises designed to simulate various environmental crises. One of the primary exercises, "Combat Brotherhood", serves as a platform in which CSTO member states collaborate in simulations of

disaster scenarios, including those directly linked to climate-related hazards such as floods, wildfires, and extreme weather events. Combat Brotherhood enables participants to develop and refine coordinated responses to crises, with a specific focus on addressing the unique environmental challenges of Central Asia and Eurasia. This exercise not only strengthens operational coordination across member states, but also reinforces their capacity to address environmental disasters, which are increasingly seen as critical to the organization's stability mandate. The CSTO's commitment to environmental preparedness is further illustrated by its "Shield" initiative, which focuses on equipping member states for rapid response to ecological crises. The Shield initiative incorporates climate resilience into the CSTO's training protocols and readiness assessments, explicitly recognizing that changes in the environment can disrupt social and political order.<sup>16</sup> This integration of climate resilience into the CSTO's agenda reflects a sophisticated response to the changing nature of security in the region, positioning the CSTO as a proactive agent in managing the compounded risks of climate change and in safeguarding long-term stability in Eurasia.<sup>17</sup>

The CICA, a multi-state forum focused on fostering peace and stability in Asia, has expanded its agenda to include climate change as a critical issue for regional cooperation. One major initiative under CICA's environmental dimension is the recent establishment of the Ministerial Conference on Environmental Issues, held in August 2024 in Astana, Kazakhstan. This forum provided member states an opportunity to discuss pressing environmental challenges, including climate adaptation, water management, biodiversity conservation, and pollution control.<sup>18</sup>

On November 12, speaking at the COP29 in Azerbaijan's capital city of Baku, CICA's current Secretary General, Kairat Sarybay, highlighted the conference's dedication to a regional, collective approach to climate issues, recognizing environmental risks as integral to security. CICA also addressed climate-induced challenges, such as water scarcity, by

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16 Mihr A., Sorbello P., Weiffen B., *Securitization and Democracy in Eurasia Transformation and Development in the OSCE Region*, (Switzerland: Springer Cham, 2023), p.411.

17 Press.un.org, With Climate Crisis Generating Growing Threats to Global Peace, Security Council Must Ramp Up Efforts, Lessen Risk of Conflicts, Speakers Stress in Open Debate, June 13, 2023, Available at: <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15318.doc.htm> (Accessed: June 13, 2023)

18 Aninews.in, First CICA Ministerial Conference on environmental issues held in Astana, October 21, 2024, Available at: <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/first-cica-ministerial-conference-on-environmental-issues-held-in-astana20241021184012/> (Accessed: October 21, 2024)

hosting panels on the effects of resource depletion on the sideline of COP29. On November 13, in response to recent severe flooding across Southeast Asia, Sarybay emphasized the importance of unified water management strategies for enhancing resilience. CICA's approach to managing shared resources such as water underscores the connection between environmental security and broader regional stability.<sup>19</sup> These actions exemplify CICA's role in fostering climate resilience and sustainability across Asia, aiming to bolster cooperation among its members in the face of growing environmental risks.

*Azerbaijan's Chairmanship of CICA for the term 2024–2026 presents an opportunity to enhance regional climate action, backed up by the country's recent experience as the host of the COP29 in Baku*

Azerbaijan's Chairmanship of CICA for the term 2024–2026 presents an opportunity to enhance regional climate action, backed up by the country's recent experience as the host of the COP29 in Baku from November 11 to 24, 2024. As CICA's chair, and drawing from its COP29 experience, Azerbaijan has an opportunity to foster multilateral discussions on climate risks with a stronger focus on environmental issues and to promote water resources management among CICA countries through closer cooperation.

Another key focus could be the development of a renewable energy infrastructure perspective through the establishment of a "Renewable Energy Innovation Hub" encouraging collaboration on clean energy technologies among the 28 member states of CICA, with active contributions from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.<sup>20</sup> To facilitate the implementation of these initiatives, Azerbaijan could propose the establishment, within the framework of CICA, of a new funding mechanism aimed at securing international financial support for sustainable development projects.<sup>21</sup> By pursuing such actions, Azerbaijan could solidify CICA's role as a central platform for enhancing regional climate resilience and promoting sustainable development.

19 S-cica.org. Address by CICA Secretary General Kairat Sarybay at COP29 on adverse impacts of climate change on the decline of water basins, November 13, 2024, Available at: <https://www.s-cica.org/index.php?view=page&t=speeches&id=284> (Accessed: November 13, 2024)

20 S-cica.org. Conference on Development of Green Technologies and Renewable Energy Sources in the Context of Low Carbon Development, November 25, 2021, Available at: <https://www.s-cica.org/index.php?view=page&t=promotion-of-green-technologies-was-discussed-by-experts-of-cica-member-states> (Accessed: November 25, 2021)

21 Caliber.az. Azerbaijan Joins Green Finance Movement, October 19, 2024, Available at: <https://caliber.az/en/post/azerbaijan-joins-green-finance-movement> (Accessed: October 19, 2024)



### *Possible Implications*

The lack of a unified climate database creates a major obstacle to effective climate change adaptation and decision-making. Socio-economic research on climate change impacts, vulnerabilities, and distribution of effects, and the evaluation of adaptation strategies and policies, are essential for effective climate adaptation. To expand research on climate change, meteorological and statistical agencies across Central Asian countries need to provide easy and open access to long-term weather and hydrological data; detailed statistics on agricultural, environmental, and land-use impacts (e.g. at district level); and the results of agricultural and other domestic surveys, as is done in other countries and regions.<sup>22</sup>

Since the environmental sphere is quite extensive, it is impossible to monitor all changes. To track climate change in Central Asia, we propose a number of indicators:

- The Heat Wave Duration Index (HWDI) is a critical measure for understanding and quantifying the frequency and intensity of heat waves. The methodology for calculating HWDI involves several key steps, each designed to ensure that the index accurately reflects the severity of heat waves for a given period and location.<sup>23</sup> By comparing HWDI difference maps across different duration thresholds, researchers can gain insights into the frequency and intensity of heat waves and how they may change. A persistent period of unusually hot days is referred to as an extreme heat event or a heat wave. Heat waves are more than just uncomfortable: they can lead to illness and death, particularly among older adults, the very young, and other vulnerable populations. Prolonged exposure to excessive heat can lead to other impacts as well – for example, crop damage, livestock injuries or deaths, and increased risk of wildfires. Prolonged periods of extreme heat can lead to power outages as heavy demand for air

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22 Mirzabaev A., “Climate Change Science and Policy in Central Asia: Current Situation and Future Perspectives”, in Rahat Sabyrbekov, Indra Overland, and Roman Vakulchuk (eds.), *Climate Change in Central Asia. Decarbonization, Energy Transition and Climate Policy* (Switzerland: Springer Cham, 2023), p.170.

23 Fallah, B. and Rostami, M., “Exploring the Impact of the Recent Global Warming on Extreme Weather Events in Central Asia Using the Counterfactual Climate Data”, *Climatic Change*, Vol. 177, No. 5, May, 2024, p.20.



conditioning strains the power grid.<sup>24</sup>

- The Palmer Drought Severity Index uses readily available temperature and precipitation data to estimate relative dryness. It is a standardized index that generally spans  $-10$  (dry) to  $+10$  (wet). The PDSI has been reasonably successful at quantifying long-term drought. As it uses temperature data and a physical water balance model, it can capture the basic effect of global warming on drought through changes in potential evapotranspiration.<sup>25</sup>
- Measuring glacial activity: This is an important indicator of climate change, especially for mountainous areas of Central Asia such as Tien Shan, Pamir, and the Hindu Kush, where glaciers are key sources of water. This implies establishing the following indicators:
  1. Changes in the area of glaciers (reduction or increase) as a result of warming or changes in precipitation
  2. Changes in the position of the fronts (edges) of glaciers, where melting is most active. The retreat of fronts often indicates the acceleration of melting.
  3. The appearance on and around the surface of glaciers of lakes, which accelerate their melting. The formation of such lakes is associated with thermal processes and surface drainage
  4. Monitoring of flora and fauna living on and around glaciers, as their populations are sensitive to temperature changes and melting of glaciers.

Creating a central database is crucial to attract funding. The lack of funding is a major barrier to effective cooperation among regional organizations in Central Asia when it comes to tackling climate change issues. Addressing climate change requires significant investment in infrastructure, technology, and human resources, yet Central Asian countries often face financial constraints that hinder their ability to make these investments. Consequently, regional organizations struggle to implement and sustain climate-related initiatives, resulting in slow

<sup>24</sup> Epa.gov, Climate Change Impacts on Health, October 19, 2022, Available at: <https://www.epa.gov/climateimpacts/climate-change-impacts-health> (Accessed: October 19, 2022)

<sup>25</sup> Climatedataguide.ucar.edu, Palmer Drought Severity Index, August 19, 2023, Available at: <https://climatedataguide.ucar.edu/climate-data/palmer-drought-severity-index-pdsi> (Accessed: August 19, 2023)

progress and limited impact. To overcome this funding gap, Central Asian countries and their regional organizations may need to diversify funding sources, strengthen regional ownership, and enhance financial mechanisms.

Without addressing these funding challenges, Central Asia will struggle to develop the coordinated, sustained climate responses needed to protect the region's ecosystems, economies, and communities from the growing impacts of climate change.

### ***Conclusion***

This article sought to respond to the question: "*How can regional organizations in Central Asia enhance their role in addressing the pressing issue of climate change?*". The region's vulnerability to climate impacts requires a coordinated response that goes beyond bilateral efforts. A supranational institution with a unified legal framework is crucial for effectively managing climate risks. Strengthening regional organizations such as the SCO, CSTO, and CICA through structural, financial, and strategic reforms will improve their capacity to tackle climate change.

The SCO, CSTO, and CICA are increasingly prioritizing climate resilience in Central Asia, recognizing the critical link between environmental sustainability and regional stability. Their proactive efforts, including joint training exercises and the establishment of dedicated environmental councils, aim to enhance resilience and long-term stability in a region vulnerable to climate change.

There are a few key approaches necessary to enhance the effectiveness of the SCO, CSTO, and CICA in tackling climate change:

- Enhance data sharing and joint climate monitoring systems. Effective climate action requires accurate, up-to-date data, yet Central Asia lacks comprehensive data-sharing systems for monitoring climate impacts such as glacial melt, river flow changes, and extreme weather events. A centralized climate observatory with satellite monitoring, weather stations, and glaciological observation points should be established. This observatory would be jointly

funded and managed by regional organizations, with a mandate to regularly share data on climate trends and vulnerabilities. Reliable data will improve regional understanding of climate risks, allowing for more targeted and scientifically informed adaptation strategies. Joint data collection also fosters trust among countries, reinforcing collaboration.

- Increase public awareness of and community involvement in climate action. Public support for climate initiatives is limited, which can hinder implementation and weaken regional cooperation. Public awareness can create grassroots support for climate action, encouraging communities to participate in adaptation projects and influencing governments to prioritize environmental policies. Increased community involvement also enhances the resilience of local populations.
- Establish a dedicated regional climate fund. Funding limitations restrict the capacity of regional organizations to implement and sustain climate-related initiatives. A regional fund would provide consistent financial resources for climate projects, reducing reliance on unstable external funding and enabling the long-term planning necessary for impactful climate action.
- Develop binding environmental agreements with enforcement mechanisms. Many current agreements are non-binding, limiting their effectiveness and allowing countries to prioritize national interests over regional goals. Develop binding agreements focused on specific climate issues, such as water management, renewable energy targets, and emissions reduction. These agreements should include enforcement mechanisms, such as financial penalties or incentives, to encourage compliance. Binding agreements would enhance accountability, encouraging countries to adhere to regional climate objectives and ensuring more consistent participation in climate programmes.

To effectively address the climate crisis in Central Asia, regional organizations must establish clear governance frameworks with defined roles and responsibilities to ensure coordinated action. Stability can be achieved by fostering long-term political commitment and building trust among member states through consistent policies. Adequate resources,

including sustainable funding and skilled human capital, are essential for implementing and monitoring effective climate strategies across the region. A collective, well-supported effort will not only protect Central Asia's ecosystems but also ensure sustainable development and long-term regional stability in the face of a changing climate.

# Azerbaijan and Armenia: How Energy Connectivity is Critical to Peace

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Eugene Chausovsky\*

This article sets out to examine the importance of energy connectivity in shaping the relationship between Azerbaijan and Armenia across the economic, diplomatic and security spheres – from the Soviet period, to the present day, to the future. The article explains how energy and infrastructure connections had a significant influence on the post-Soviet development of the two countries and their ties with one another as well as regional and global players including Russia, Türkiye, the West, and others. The article demonstrates how energy and broader connectivity dynamics have played, and will continue to play, a critical role in the ongoing negotiation process between Azerbaijan and Armenia to normalize relations, one which involves both challenges and opportunities to achieve a diplomatic agreement. The article concludes that the key to a peaceful and sustainable future between Azerbaijan and Armenia is constructive cooperation across the energy, climate, and connectivity spheres, the successful implementation of which will have positive impacts throughout the Caucasus region and beyond.

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, Armenia, Energy, Climate, Connectivity, Conflict, Diplomacy, Peace



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### *Introduction*

In the South Caucasus region, as in much of the world, energy and geopolitics are closely intertwined. The location of energy resources such as oil and natural gas has shaped the economic and political development of regional states internally, while the transport infrastructure associated with bringing that energy to neighbouring and global markets has played an important role in shaping their foreign policy strategies. Thus, energy connectivity has impacted the political, economic, and security dynamics of each of the South Caucasus states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), as well as their relations with external players both near the region (i.e. Russia, Türkiye, and Iran) and far beyond it (i.e. the U.S., EU, and China).

The relationship between Azerbaijan and Armenia has been particularly impacted by energy. While the two countries were closely integrated with one another as Soviet republics during the era of the Soviet Union, that connectivity began to break down amid geopolitical tensions and conflicts in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period, in particular during the First Garabagh War (1988–1994). The war severed connections between the two independent states, prompting Azerbaijan and Armenia to take different paths in their post-Soviet development. Azerbaijan utilized its plentiful energy resources to develop its economy and diversify its foreign policy using a ‘multi-vector’ approach, while Armenia – an oil and natural gas importer with few resources of its own – aligned itself primarily with Russia. This took the countries on two different economic and geopolitical paths, ultimately resulting in Azerbaijan regaining full sovereign control over its territories, which previously were under the occupation of Armenia, in 2020 (September–November) and 2023 (September).

Now, Azerbaijan and Armenia are in the midst of negotiations to re-establish diplomatic relations and normalize bilateral ties within a

*The war severed connections between the two independent states, prompting Azerbaijan and Armenia to take different paths in their post-Soviet development.*

new geopolitical reality, one that has seen the power dynamics within the South Caucasus region shift. The question is, to what degree can energy connectivity play a role in shaping this new reality and its impacts on Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the wider South Caucasus region? The article argues that the prospects for Azerbaijan and Armenia to re-establish energy

and other forms of connectivity with each other and across the region will serve as a key factor in their broader negotiation and normalization process. This pertains to not only the sphere of traditional energy sources like oil and natural gas but also to renewable and green energy sources due to the emerging dynamics of climate change and the global energy transition. Certainly, many challenges still stand in the way, but what is clear is that energy connectivity will play a crucial role in any potential peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The article will explore the past, present, and future trajectory of the geopolitical contention between the two countries and how collaboration in the energy and climate spheres can be leveraged by Azerbaijan and Armenia to achieve such a peace.

### ***Energy, Geopolitics, and Post-Soviet Development***

Energy has long played an important role in shaping the evolution of the relationship between Azerbaijan and Armenia. During the Soviet era, the Republic of Azerbaijan served as a key oil and natural gas hub for the entire Soviet Union, providing vital energy supplies for Armenia and other neighbouring republics, including Armenia. At that time, all aspects of energy operations – from investment to production to the distribution of energy revenues – were tightly controlled by the central government in Moscow. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of Azerbaijan and Armenia as independent states changed the course of this arrangement dramatically, in terms of both the post-Soviet economic development of each country and the evolution of geopolitical dynamics within the South Caucasus region.

*During the Soviet era, the Republic of Azerbaijan served as a key oil and natural gas hub for the entire Soviet Union, providing vital energy supplies for Armenia and other neighbouring republics, including Armenia.*

For Armenia, its lack of oil and gas resources was a key factor in its decision to retain close ties with Russia, despite the fact that the latter was no longer in central control of all the republics of the Soviet Union. The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan,<sup>1</sup> which broke out in 1988, just a few years before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and ended with a ceasefire agreement in 1994, severed energy and broader economic

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1 Council on Foreign Relations, Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, March 20, 2024, Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/nagorno-karabakh-conflict> (Accessed: September 21, 2024)

ties between the two former Soviet republics once they both gained independence. As such, Armenia had to look elsewhere for imports of oil and natural gas, with the only available options for this landlocked country coming from Russia (via Georgia) to the north and Iran to the south. This had important consequences for Armenia well beyond energy, as it had to retain its alignment with Russia in not only the economic sphere but also in the political and security domains. Armenia kept the Russian military presence on its territory, including the 102nd military base in Gyumri, while Russian guards remained along the country's borders with Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Iran. In the meantime, Armenia became a member of the new Russian-led blocs of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), cementing its position within Russia's political and security alliance networks.

For Azerbaijan, the picture was quite different. Because Azerbaijan had substantial amounts of oil and natural gas resources, it could forge a more independent path in the post-Soviet era. Azerbaijan was able to attract significant investment from Western energy companies to further develop its energy fields, production, and export capabilities, including the construction of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum (BTE) natural gas pipeline<sup>2</sup> to Georgia, Türkiye, and onward to Europe and other global markets. This helped

*In the following years, Azerbaijan was able to leverage its energy resources, domestic political consolidation, and multi-vector foreign policy to foster strong economic growth. This enabled Azerbaijan to build up its military strength and eventually reclaim its territories, which were previously under Armenia's effective control*

facilitate a multi-vector foreign policy for Azerbaijan, which built economic and political ties in numerous directions without fully aligning itself with one bloc over another. Azerbaijan did join the CIS but chose to forego the CSTO, with Russia's troops departing from its territory in the early 1990s, while Azerbaijan developed close security and economic ties with other players, most notably Türkiye.

In the following years, Azerbaijan was able to leverage its energy resources, domestic political consolidation, and multi-vector foreign policy to foster strong economic growth. This enabled Azerbaijan to build up its military strength and eventually reclaim its

<sup>2</sup> Abdul, N., "Transportation surge: Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline witnesses increase in activity", AzerNews, June 18, 2024, Available at: <https://www.azernews.az/analysis/227398.html> (Accessed: September 21, 2024).



territories, which were previously under Armenia's effective control, with actions that started in September 2020 and concluded in September 2023.<sup>3</sup> This came after decades of cross-border attacks and inconclusive diplomatic negotiations, which included mediation efforts from both Russia and Western countries like the U.S. and France under various multilateral formats. Armenia's defeat, in turn, forced the country to re-evaluate its ties with Russia (which, as a CSTO ally, opted not to support Armenia this time, as the military conflict took place beyond the zone of responsibility of this block), while it also set the stage for a change in Armenia's bilateral relationship with Azerbaijan.

### ***Post-Conflict Diplomacy and the Energy Factor***

With the territorial dimension of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan having been settled militarily, and with the external mediation and involvement of both Russia and the West (most notably the U.S. and France) proving insufficient, the leaders of both Armenia and Azerbaijan entered into a period of direct negotiations to normalize diplomatic ties. Such negotiations have included certain arrangements such as border demarcation<sup>4</sup> as well as fostering long-dormant economic connections,<sup>5</sup> including in areas such as developing and restoring road, rail, and energy connections between the two countries and throughout the broader Caspian region. While such talks have faced certain political and geopolitical obstacles, they have nevertheless proceeded to make substantial progress towards a formal agreement.

There are several geopolitical factors that have driven these negotiations. One key element is that Russia's influence over Armenia has been substantially weakened over the past year, with the latter seeking supplemental (and potentially alternative) economic and security relationships with the former following Armenia's inability to get

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3 Kirby, P., "Azerbaijan halts Karabakh offensive after ceasefire deal with Armenian separatists", BBC News, September 21, 2023, Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66863702> (Accessed: September 21, 2024).

4 Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, Armenia, Azerbaijan Claim Progress In Border Delimitation Talks, July 1, 2024, Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-delimitation-border-talks/33017536.html> (Accessed: September 22, 2024).

5 Chausovsky, E., "Armenian-Azerbaijan Peace Might Finally Be on the Table", Foreign Policy, November 3, 2023, Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/03/armenia-azerbaijan-peace-nagorno-karabakh-economic-connectivity/> (Accessed: September 22, 2024).

Russia's support in the [now former] conflict with Azerbaijan.<sup>6</sup> In large part, this can be explained by Russia's desire to maintain influence over both Armenia and Azerbaijan while balancing its relations between the two countries. No less important has been Russia's focus on the war in Ukraine, which has limited the former's power projection capabilities in the South Caucasus. The Ukrainian conflict has also had a significant impact on Russia's own energy and economic position, with the U.S. and the EU imposing sanctions on Russia and European countries pursuing a strategy of major energy diversification from Russia following the start of the full-scale war with Ukraine in February 2022.

Azerbaijan has been an important part of this diversification strategy, with the EU signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to increase natural gas imports from Azerbaijan through the Southern Gas Corridor route.<sup>7</sup> It has also given greater impetus to the Trans-Caspian route,<sup>8</sup> which connects Azerbaijan to the energy-rich Central Asian states across the Caspian Sea. This is a major transit zone between China and Europe (known as the Middle Corridor), one which has increased in importance due to Russia's war in Ukraine, as well as China's economic rise and efforts to build greater land connections throughout Europe and Eurasia via its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Caspian region serves as a vital node for trade and energy supplies, thus showcasing the importance of opening greater connectivity between Azerbaijan and Armenia and serving as an impetus to resolve some of the lingering political and security challenges between the two states in the post-conflict environment.

### *Climate and the Energy Transition as an Emerging Dynamic*

In addition to geopolitical factors, another influential dynamic impacting Azerbaijan–Armenia relations and negotiations is the growing importance of climate in shaping the international system.

6 Zolyan, M., "Defeated Armenia Looks to a New, Post-Russia Foreign Policy, Carnegie Endowment, November 27, 2023, Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/11/defeated-armenia-looks-to-a-new-post-russia-foreign-policy?lang=en> (Accessed: September 28, 2024).

7 Ali, T., "Azerbaijan Strengthens Commitment to Double Gas Exports to Europe", Caspian Policy Center, March 8, 2024, Available at: <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/regional-south-caucasus/azerbaijan-strengthens-commitment-to-double-gas-exports-to-europe> (Accessed: September 28, 2024).

8 Bokhari, K. and Chausovsky, E., "Trans-Caspian Corridor: Eurasian Connectivity and the United States", New Lines Institute, October 31, 2023, Available at: <https://newlinesinstitute.org/geo-economics/trans-caspian-corridor-eurasian-connectivity-and-the-united-states/> (Accessed: September 29, 2024).

With the global effects of climate change increasing in both frequency and intensity, securing an energy transition from fossil fuels to green energy sources such as solar and wind power has risen on the global agenda. Therefore, while traditional fossil fuels like oil and natural gas have proven highly influential in shaping the geopolitical dynamics between Armenia and Azerbaijan and in the Caspian region overall, it should come as no surprise that climate and the energy transition have acquired a more substantial role in influencing those dynamics.

There was perhaps no greater illustration of this emerging shift than Azerbaijan's hosting of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP29), which was held in its capital city of Baku on November 11–24, 2024. The conference allowed the world to take stock of the current state of the climate transition, with international representatives coordinating efforts to reduce carbon emissions and agreeing on global climate financing for the coming decade.<sup>9</sup> The conference also served as a key venue for global leaders and policymakers to engage in diplomacy on issues not only related to climate and energy but also well beyond, from conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East to the strategic competition between the U.S. and China. A key demonstration of this was the COP Truce Appeal,<sup>10</sup> which called for all countries to halt military activities during the month of the conference.

Thus, the intersection of diplomacy, energy, and climate was on full display at COP29, perhaps most of all for the host of the conference itself, Azerbaijan. Despite Azerbaijan's role as an important producer and exporter of fossil fuels such as oil and natural gas, COP29 also highlighted the country's emerging role in renewable energy projects, including solar, wind, and green hydrogen initiatives.

As discussed, Azerbaijan has not only been a key shaper of energy dynamics in the Caspian region, it has also played a pivotal role globally, from facilitating Europe's efforts to diversify away from Russian oil and natural gas to partnering with Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia on green energy projects.

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9 UNFCCC, "COP29 UN Climate Conference Agrees to Triple Finance to Developing Countries, Protecting Lives and Livelihoods", November 24, 2024, Available at: <https://unfccc.int/news/cop29-un-climate-conference-agrees-to-triple-finance-to-developing-countries-protecting-lives-and> (Accessed: September 29, 2024).

10 COP29.az, COP29 Presidency Officially Launches Joint Solemn Appeal for a COP29 Truce, September 29, 2024, Available at: <https://cop29.az/en/media-hub/news/cop29-presidency-officially-launches-joint-solemn-appeal-for-a-cop29-truce> (Accessed September 21, 2024).

*Azerbaijan has designated the newly reclaimed territories as a 'green energy zone', with a focus on solar, wind, and hydropower.*

Indeed, Azerbaijan's hosting of COP29 could not have happened without Armenia's endorsement,<sup>11</sup> serving as a clear example of the role of climate in the bilateral relationship and how mutually constructive ties and goodwill gestures can lead to tangible results and benefits for both sides.

Of course, the role of climate in shaping Azerbaijan–Armenia relations goes well beyond COP. For example, Azerbaijan has designated the newly reclaimed territories as a 'green energy zone',<sup>12</sup> with a focus on solar, wind, and hydropower. Additionally, Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has promoted building transport and trade infrastructure between Armenia and Azerbaijan,<sup>13</sup> calling for such infrastructure to be sustainable through the use of renewable power sources and energy efficiency programmes. While the conventional resources component of energy connectivity is likely to serve a major role in shaping the bilateral relationship for the foreseeable future, a steady balance with climate transition cooperation is likely to enhance overall energy and economic security for all parties involved.

### ***Looking Ahead: Challenges and Opportunities for Peace***

Despite all of the progress that has been made in improving relations and connectivity between Azerbaijan and Armenia – as well as the clear role of energy and climate in shaping that progress – several challenges to the full-scale normalization of bilateral ties still remain. One is the issue of domestic politics, as there are individuals and groups within Armenia that have interests in blocking a peace agreement from being signed.<sup>14</sup> This will require careful manoeuvring by the leadership of both countries to ensure that elements opposed

11 Bagirova, N., "Armenia backs Azerbaijan to host COP29 climate conference", Reuters, December 7, 2023, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenia-backs-azerbaijan-host-cop29-climate-conference-2023-12-07/> (Accessed: September 21, 2024).

12 Caliber. az, Azerbaijan advances talks on creation of green energy zone in liberated territories, October 1, 2024, Available at: <https://caliber.az/en/post/azerbaijan-advances-green-energy-initiatives-in-liberated-territories> (Accessed: September 21, 2024).

13 Aze.media, Pashinyan shows interest in a project for supplying electricity from Azerbaijan to Europe, January 26, 2024, Available at: <https://aze.media/pashinyan-shows-interest-in-a-project-for-supplying-electricity-from-azerbaijan-to-europe/> (Accessed: December 7, 2024).

14 Al Jazeera, Armenian protests demand PM's head over concessions to Azerbaijan, June 10, 2024, Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/10/armenian-protests-demand-pms-head-over-concessions-to-azerbaijan> (Accessed: December 7, 2024).

to improving bilateral ties do not derail the broader normalization process.

Another challenge is the role played by external players, some of which could seek to disrupt the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia, in particular, could be one such player, given its decreasing influence over Armenia and its opposition to regional connectivity efforts that do not include its own involvement, such as the Trans-Caspian pipeline.<sup>15</sup> While enhancing energy connectivity within the South Caucasus region and between the Caspian and Europe would be beneficial to many states, Russia has made no secret of its opposition to such plans.<sup>16</sup> This will require a delicate balancing act by both Azerbaijan and Armenia to make sure that such opposition – as well as a less-than-enthusiastic approach from Iran – is managed carefully.

Finally, there is the relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan themselves. Given that these two states had been in conflict for nearly three decades, rebuilding mutual trust at both the political and societal levels will no doubt be difficult. There remain some contentious issues within the negotiation process. A particularly sensitive one is the Declaration of Independence provision within the constitution of Armenia.<sup>17</sup> Armenia has attempted to sign a draft peace agreement by removing non-agreed provisions and settling those at a later date, while Azerbaijan has insisted that all provisions should be agreed beforehand.

Despite these challenges, there are also significant opportunities for Azerbaijan and Armenia to achieve peace. Greater energy connectivity could allow Armenia to enhance its energy security at a time when Russian supplies could become more unpredictable, while also allowing Armenia to break out of its economic isolation and become an integral transit node for the region, much like Georgia has done. Thus, enhancing energy and other forms of connectivity ties would clearly be beneficial for both countries from an economic perspective, which in turn can be translated into political, societal, and even security

<sup>15</sup> Annayev, Dz., “Backed into a corner, Putin again opposes Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline”, Central Asia-News, December 22, 2022, Available at: [https://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2022/12/22/feature-02](https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2022/12/22/feature-02) (Accessed: December 7, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Mgdesyian, A., “Armenian PM’s new constitution proposal faces uphill battle”, EurasiaNet, February 7, 2024, Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/armenian-pms-new-constitution-proposal-faces-uphill-battle> (Accessed: September 21, 2024).

gains. Given the South Caucasus region's strategic location, such gains would not be limited to the regional states themselves but would have an influence far beyond, showcasing the benefits of constructive and pragmatic connectivity over isolation and conflict.

### *Conclusion*

The central question posed by this article was: to what degree can energy connectivity play a role in shaping the relationship between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and what would be its impact on the broader region? Historically, energy connectivity has been a significant factor in shaping bilateral and regional ties, from the Soviet period to the formative years of independence when such connectivity was disrupted all the way to the present day when it is being reimagined. The centrality of energy connectivity is only likely to grow in the future with shifting geopolitical dynamics as well as the emerging role of climate and the energy transition. This can be seen in the efforts by Armenia and Azerbaijan to include expanding energy connections – for both fossil fuels and renewable energy – in the ongoing diplomatic negotiations between the two countries, as well as Armenia's endorsement for Baku to host the UN Climate Change Conference in November 2024. The peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia is at a pivotal and important stage, and it is vital for all sides to utilize energy connectivity in a constructive manner to advance such negotiations in order to bring stability and prosperity to both countries, as well as to the South Caucasus region and well beyond.

# Extra-Regional Actors in the South Caucasus: Armenia-India Alignment in the Spotlight

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Vasif Huseynov\* and Aynur Abbassoy\*\*

Armenia's quest for new security guarantors after the Second Garabagh War has elevated India to the position of its key arms supplier. This marks the emergence of India as a new extra-regional actor with a footprint in the South Caucasus amid the ongoing reconfiguration of the regional geopolitical landscape. New Delhi now views the South Caucasus as part of its broader geopolitical strategy, particularly in light of Azerbaijan's close ties with Pakistan and Türkiye. India's growing military cooperation with Armenia, highlighted by increased arms supply agreements, is a significant reflection of the security dynamics of the region. Given the fragility of the South Caucasus's security architecture, India's deepening involvement introduces new complexities into an already delicate geopolitical environment, raising questions about how these actions might influence prospects for peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This article also explores the ideological drivers behind the alignment between New Delhi and Yerevan. It concludes that these developments generate reasonable concerns about their potential consequences for peace efforts between the two South Caucasian republics, while also suggesting that India's strategy in the region could not only affect its relations with Azerbaijan but also risk undermining its broader economic and connectivity interests.

**Keywords:** India, South Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Garabagh, geopolitics



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### *Introduction*

It is difficult for small states to achieve extraordinary foreign policy ambitions, especially when they challenge more powerful neighbours. States with strong determination to pursue these ambitions often seek the support of larger powers, through various means, including military and political alliances.

Armenia, the South Caucasian republic with a population of less than three million and an area of approximately 29,000 km<sup>2</sup>, is a shining example to illustrate this situation. Although Armenia is a small former Soviet state with limited military and economic capabilities, its constitution contains territorial claims against the country's more powerful neighbours, Azerbaijan and Türkiye. In the early 1990s, the country dared to occupy 20 per cent of the territories of neighbouring Azerbaijan, although the latter's population was three times that of Armenia. This was possible thanks to the support of Russia, whose then leaders instrumentalized Armenia to maintain influence over the South Caucasus following the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The current landscape in the South Caucasus has changed significantly. Azerbaijan liberated its occupied territories and restored full sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders through the 44-Day War of September–November 2020 and anti-terror measures against the remnants of Armenia's armed forces, as well as Armenian separatists, in September 2023. Armenia's relations with Russia have cooled, although it remains officially aligned with Moscow through military and economic alliances. However, one constant over the past three decades is Armenia's continued reliance on foreign powers to pursue its broader ambitions, particularly against Azerbaijan. Today, Armenia has expanded the geographical spread of its patrons and enjoys support from

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France and India via various means and in different spheres. In this context, the close India–Armenia partnership and the former's military supplies to the latter create a particular case worth closer scrutiny, as these relations pose a critical threat to peace and security in the South Caucasus.

This article attempts to explore the burgeoning relations between Armenia and India with a focus on uncovering the strategic objectives that are the driving



force behind it. The starting point of this enquiry is to question the very timing of India's South Caucasus endeavour in the wake of the 44-Day War of 2020. It raises questions about the causes, existing dynamics, and potential implications of India's emergence as an active player in the region. To address this, the article first examines India's expanding relations with Armenia, with a brief timeline of the military procurement process at its core. It then seeks to situate these developments within the broader context of India's South Caucasus strategy and to assess how these ties align with India's wider security objectives vis-à-vis the regional power balance and its connectivity agenda. Additionally, the article explores the ideological affinities that have forged an alignment between Armenia and India. Finally, it evaluates the potential implications of India's strategy for the stability of the South Caucasus, considering the risks and challenges to regional peace.

*What stands out about this shift in India's interest in the South Caucasus is its timing, as India particularly boosted its engagement with the region following the 44-Day War, during which Azerbaijan enjoyed the political support of Türkiye and Pakistan.*

### ***India's expanding relations with Armenia***

While India is far from being a regional power, its engagement with Armenia marks a deliberate step towards securing a foothold in the ongoing geopolitical restructuring in the South Caucasus. Before this shift, relations were primarily focused on identifying areas of mutual interest for future development, previously limited to regional trade strategy, with Armenia's potential role in extending the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) through Iran being a key point of consideration. However, the first-ever visit of the Foreign Minister of India to Armenia in October 2021 revealed the growing strategic dimension of this outreach.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between Armenia and India has notably intensified on multiple fronts, with the defence partnership emerging as the cornerstone of this evolving strategic alignment.

What stands out about this shift in India's interest in the South Caucasus is its timing, as India particularly boosted its engagement with the region following the 44-Day War, during which Azerbaijan enjoyed

<sup>1</sup> Indian Express, Jaishankar stresses on connectivity, proposes Chabahar Port be included in the North-South Transport Corridor, October 13, 2021, Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/jaishankar-armenia-connectivity-chabahar-port-north-south-transport-corridor-7570148/> (Accessed: October 21, 2024)

the political support of Türkiye and Pakistan. The assessment of India–Armenia relations and, hence, India–Azerbaijan relations, in the broader context of India’s relations with Türkiye and Pakistan, has been a guiding principle of New Delhi’s foreign policy. An Indian expert writing for the Observer Research Foundation, a top Indian think-tank, clearly outlines this perspective and calls for cooperation between Yerevan and New Delhi in the sphere of intelligence:

*Ankara’s support for Pakistani claims on Kashmir and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan’s public statements about India’s domestic politics have eroded relations with New Delhi. Similarly, alongside its decades-old hostility towards India, Pakistan has refused to even accord Armenia diplomatic recognition. These hostilities have intensified, necessitating closer Indo-Armenian intelligence cooperation on this front.<sup>2</sup>*

Against this backdrop, India has stepped up its defence cooperation with Armenia, raising the possibility of it gradually replacing Russia as a key arms supplier and potentially becoming the main contributor to shaping Armenia’s military capabilities. Indeed, since 2020, Armenia

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has purchased advanced Indian-made weapon systems, making it the largest purchaser of Indian arms in the fiscal year 2024–2025 with contracts worth \$600 million.<sup>3</sup> Notable agreements include Armenia’s acquisition of Pinaka multiple-barrel rocket systems, anti-tank missiles,<sup>4</sup> and reportedly the Akash-1S surface-to-air missile systems, with deliveries expected by the end of 2024.<sup>5</sup> In 2023, India also exported the Zen Anti-Drone System (ZADS) to Armenia.<sup>6</sup> Earlier, in 2020, Armenia received Swathi

2 Goswami, A., R., “An India-Armenia Intelligence Partnership for the 2020s”, Observer Research Foundation, October 15, 2024, Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/an-india-armenia-intelligence-partnership-for-the-2020s> (Accessed: October 24, 2024).

3 EADaily, India has an unexpected largest arms buyer, July 24, 2024, Available at: <https://eadaily.com/en/news/2024/07/24/india-has-an-unexpected-largest-arms-buyer> (Accessed: October 21, 2024)

4 Tashjian, Y., “The Geopolitical Implications of India’s Arms Sale to Armenia”, The Armenian Weekly, August 9, 2023, Available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/08/09/the-geopolitical-implications-of-indias-arms-sale-to-armenia/> (Accessed: October 21, 2024)

5 Indian Defence Research Wing, India to Begin Shipping Akash 1S Air Defence Missile System to Armenia, August 8, 2024, Available at: [https://idrw.org/india-to-begin-shipping-akash-1s-air-defence-missile-system-to-armenia/#google\\_vignette](https://idrw.org/india-to-begin-shipping-akash-1s-air-defence-missile-system-to-armenia/#google_vignette) (Accessed: October 21, 2024)

6 Sharma, R. “After Pinaka Rockets, Armenia Buys Indian Anti-Drone System to Fight Azerbaijan’s Kamikaze UAVs”, Eurasian Times, November 7, 2023, Available at: <https://www.eurasiantimes.com>

weapon-locating radar systems from India, marking New Delhi's first major international sale of this kind. Pushing to further bolster its firepower, the recent confirmation of Armenia's order for 84 additional Advanced Towed Artillery Gun Systems (ATAGS) from India builds on a previous order of six ATAGS in 2023.<sup>7</sup>

One of the key items on Armenia's defence shopping list has been the acquisition of a medium-range missile system, which is crucial for enhancing its capability to strike deep inside Azerbaijan. Over the past few years, several options have been considered, with BrahMos often mentioned as a top contender due to its proven operational track record and range capabilities.<sup>8</sup> For now, the spotlight has shifted: according to recent reports, India is now planning to supply Armenia with short-to mid-range Pralay ballistic missiles, which have a range of 150 to 500 kilometres and can carry various types of warheads.<sup>9</sup> The export of Pralay, comparable to Russia's Iskander-M missile system, can be viewed as a bold move in India's military diplomacy.

Moreover, reflecting the level of Armenia's successive military orders, the establishment of an air cargo corridor between India and Armenia marks a pivotal development in enhancing strategic logistics and military–technical cooperation between these two nations.<sup>10</sup> The initiative, undertaken by the joint working group of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and Container Corporation of India (CONCOR), not only facilitates timely deliveries but also underscores India's commitment to supporting Armenia's militarization efforts.

In a mutual effort to solidify their defence ties, Armenia appointed a defence attaché to its Embassy in India in 2023,<sup>11</sup> followed by

[com/after-pinaka-rockets-armenia-buys-indian-anti-drone-system/](https://www.armenpress.com/after-pinaka-rockets-armenia-buys-indian-anti-drone-system/) (Accessed: October 21, 2024)

<sup>7</sup> Armenpress, Armenia begins process to purchase 84 additional units of ATAGS artillery systems, October 3, 2024, Available at: <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1201444> (Accessed: October 21, 2024)

<sup>8</sup> Caliber.az, India and Armenia's "missile" challenge to Azerbaijan, October 21, 2024, Available at: <https://caliber.az/en/post/india-and-armenia-s-missile-challenge-to-azerbaijan> (Accessed: October 21, 2024)

<sup>9</sup> Indian Defence Research Wing, India Considers Supplying Pralay Missile to Armenia Amidst Regional Tensions, September 25, 2024, Available at: <https://idrw.org/india-considers-supplying-pralay-missile-to-armenia-amidst-regional-tensions/> (Accessed: October 21, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Sidharth, R. "HALCON to Boost Strategic Air Cargo Exports to Armenia", Logistics Insider, March 19, 2024, Available at: <https://www.logisticsinsider.in/halcon-to-boost-strategic-air-cargo-exports-to-armenia/> (Accessed: October 21, 2024)

<sup>11</sup> Azatutyun.am, Armenia to Appoint Defence Attaché To India (translation from Armenian), May 18, 2023, Available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32417740.html> (Accessed: October 21, 2024)

a similar move from India in 2024<sup>12</sup>. During their first military consultation in May 2024, the two nations agreed to deepen military diplomacy beyond defence trade to encompass military education, tactical training, and experience sharing.<sup>13</sup> The potential for deeper collaboration is not limited to training or joint military exercises. Political will may be pushing forward to the inclusion of additional dimensions, such as intelligence sharing and conceptualization of military strategies. India is now positioned to become one of the key contributors to Armenia’s militarization efforts, with expert circles contemplating the potential evolution of their relationship into a strategic partnership.<sup>14</sup> Armenia is increasingly viewing India as its ‘new hope’ for its military diversification efforts, which would establish India as a significant player in the balance of regional affairs – one that cannot be overlooked.

*A shift in India’s approach to the South Caucasus*

The emergence of India as a new extra-regional power with a foothold in the South Caucasus following the Second Garabagh War is shaped by its geopolitical concerns, particularly over Azerbaijan’s victory in the 44-Day War, which set the new tone for the Azerbaijan–Pakistan–Türkiye trilateral cooperation. This victory is perceived by New Delhi as more than just a regional success – rather, it symbolizes the strengthening of that axis. This alignment has intensified India’s fears of a similar strategic collaboration being wielded against it in Kashmir, prompting New Delhi to cultivate closer ties with Armenia as a strategic counterbalance. Apart from matching up to its adversary’s strategy, India’s growing strategic footprint in Armenia is in tandem with synergies with France and the USA in regional affairs.

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12 Armradio.am, India to post Defence Attaché in Armenia, April 11, 2024, Available at: <https://en.armradio.am/2024/04/11/armenia-to-post-defence-attache-in-armenia/> (Accessed: October 21, 2024)

13 Armradio.am, First defence consultations held between Armenia and India, May 14, 2024, Available at: <https://en.armradio.am/2024/05/14/first-defence-consultations-held-between-armenia-and-india/> (Accessed: October 21, 2024)

14 Poghosyan, B. Time to transform Armenia – India cooperation into a strategic partnership, Civilnet.am, March 21, 2024. Available at: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/768808/time-to-transform-armenia-india-cooperation-into-a-strategic-partnership/> (Accessed October 21, 2024).

In addition, post-war developments in the South Caucasus are reshaping the projected regional transit routes, with each power vying to keep them under close watch as these routes hold the key to reshaping regional influence and geoeconomic connectivity. India is no different in this regard. India's recent activism comes at a time when the geopolitical landscape is rapidly evolving. Within this compelling geopolitical context, India might have wanted to respond to the emerging dynamics by reinforcing its strategic axis, thereby expanding its foreign policy space. One of the key drivers in India's positioning in the South Caucasus is to secure its national security objectives, particularly to reduce any possible reliance on Turkish-aligned routes like the Middle Corridor and counterbalance the influence of regional powers, including Azerbaijan in that regard, as a close ally of Türkiye. Additionally, India might seek to counterbalance the logistical efforts of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by crafting an integrated strategy to establish a stronger foothold in Eurasia. As part of this approach, New Delhi has likely incorporated Armenia into its strategic calculus to bolster its regional influence.

The South Caucasus, in one way or another, offers India a vital bridge to access European markets and serves as a key transit corridor within the INSTC, facilitating connections to Central Asia. On the one hand, Armenia, although poorly connected to its neighbours due to a lack of crucial infrastructure, offers an alternative transit route through the Iran–Armenia–Georgia connection or the Persian Gulf–Black Sea corridor. On the other hand, Azerbaijan serves as a readily available hub for transit projects and offers substantial economic advantages. Just a few years ago, before India's recent pivot to the region took place, New Delhi had been seriously evaluating alternative options along the Caspian coast through Azerbaijan to create a bridge to the north and west via the South Caucasus.

### ***Common characteristics of the dominant political ideologies of India and Armenia***

In addition to the strategic depth that India is pursuing, the ideological affinity between the two states adds another layer to the relationship, making Armenia appear a natural partner to India. India's Prime Minister Modi, who is currently in his third term, has been promoting a

*In addition to the strategic depth that India is pursuing, the ideological affinity between the two states adds another layer to the relationship, making Armenia appear a natural partner to India.*

Hindutva agenda, advocating for a Hindu renaissance and envisioning a homogeneous Hindu society for India.

India, home to the world's largest Muslim minority, has become increasingly dangerous for religious minorities, particularly at the hands of Hindu extremism. Rising anti-Muslim sentiment (as well as hostility to other religious minorities) has fuelled

communal riots, exacerbated by institutionalized mechanisms that marginalize the Muslim population. Despite these growing tensions, the government has yet to declare a clear policy or strategy for managing communal relations. Many of these incidents are fuelled by radical Hindu rhetoric and hate speech, often coming from members of the ruling BJP party. Yet, the records of declining human rights<sup>15</sup> and political freedom<sup>16</sup> in India have not hindered its expanding relations with the West, which continues to portray India as a 'democratic ally'.

A similar emphasis on ethno-nationalism can be found in Armenia's core political ideology, which is centred on the idea of national homogeneity and aspires to unite the Armenian people within their so-called 'historical homeland'. The *Tseghakron* movement, launched by Nazi collaborator Garegin Nzhdeh<sup>17</sup> and rooted in racist ideology, promotes a belief in the superiority of the Aryan race. Armenia's current demographic composition, which is overwhelmingly Armenian, speaks for itself in reflecting this nationalist ethos. The deportation of hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis from the territories of Armenia throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the consistent refusal of successive Armenian governments to allow the return of these Azerbaijanis to their homeland, is an outcome of these racist ideologies, which are deeply entrenched in the political thinking of the country.

Strangely, neither these facts nor a series of rallies and demonstrations

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15 Human Rights Watch, "India: Increased Abuses Against Minorities, Critics", May 16, 2024, Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/11/india-increased-abuses-against-minorities-critics> (Accessed October 21, 2024).

16 Bajpaee, Ch., "Modi's India has become less liberal but better governed", Chatham House, March 18, 2024, Available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2023-12/modis-india-has-become-less-liberal-better-governed> (Accessed October 21, 2024).

17 Trend.az, "Israeli ambassador condemns nazi rally honoring Garegin Nzhdeh in Yerevan", January 3, 2024, Available at: <https://en.trend.az/world/israel/3844978.html> (Accessed October 21, 2024).

calling for “Armenia without Turks” attracted the attention of Western media.<sup>18</sup> Instead, Armenia has enjoyed unwarranted sympathy, with the Western mentality often embracing the country as a ‘victim’ or, perhaps strategically, as a new address for the export of ‘colour revolutions’. The ready acceptance of persistent narratives has led observers to neglect conducting a reality check on the local discourse in Armenia. For instance, little attention is given to understanding the underlying reasons behind the voluntary departure of the Armenians of the Garabagh region of Azerbaijan, including their expressed reluctance to live alongside Azerbaijanis under the jurisdiction of that country. Meanwhile, unsubstantiated claims of ‘forced displacement’ or ‘ethnic cleansing’ are echoed by top officials and amplified by the media in those countries. This occurs despite the ethnic cleansing committed by Armenia in the formerly occupied territories of Azerbaijan, which resulted in the displacement of more than 700,000 Azerbaijanis and the relentless destruction of their settlements. This is largely overlooked, as if such atrocities were never committed by the ‘Christian Armenians’.

Indeed, the Western powers’ courting of both India and Armenia further aligns their political outlooks. For Armenia, this is primarily channelled through a pro-Western pivot and aspirations to join the EU. India, meanwhile, enjoys a unique ‘NATO-like’ partner status, labelled as a ‘like-minded’ state despite significant divergences. Washington has been giving the green light to India’s access to cutting-edge technologies, including membership in the semiconductor alliance, underscoring the deepening defence and strategic ties between them.<sup>19</sup>

Equally important, in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, is the way Western relations with India and Armenia serve as a test, given that both are defence partners of Russia. Normally, this should have presented a significant challenge; however, there are no indications that it truly is. Instead, strategic circles in the West have shifted towards a more tolerant perspective, contemplating a reasoned approach to both countries by offering alternatives to help them divert from Russia.

<sup>18</sup> Ednews.net, “Armenia has never brought to justice those who uttered ‘Armenia without Turks’ slogan - MFA”, October 30, 2023, Available at: <https://ednews.net/en/news/politics/628087-armenia-has-never-brought-justice> (Accessed October 21, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> Iyengar, R., “U.S. State Department’s ITSI Fund Adds India as a Partner”, Foreign Policy, September 6, 2024, Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/08/us-itsi-semiconductor-chips-india-manufacturing-state-department/> (Accessed October 21, 2024).



However, this situation raises questions about their roles in evading sanctions, seemingly doing so with impunity in the eyes of the West.

Indeed, it might seem paradoxical that the Russia–Ukraine conflict has provided momentum for India to deepen its relations with Europe, even while maintaining good ties with Moscow. This approach is also evident in Armenia’s case, which exemplifies a complex duality. The significant increase in its exports to Russia can primarily be attributed to the re-export of products sourced from third countries, thus facilitating the circumvention of sanctions imposed on Russia. Western media turn a blind eye to the skyrocketing growth in Armenia’s trade turnover with Russia, that jumped from a mere \$2 billion prior to the Ukraine war to a projected \$16 billion this year. It is a commonly accepted fact that such growth would not have been possible without circumvention of Western sanctions and re-export of sanctioned products.

### *Implications for peace and security in the South Caucasus*

The implications of Armenia’s defence procurement from India extend beyond their bilateral relations to influence regional security dynamics. This complicates New Delhi’s professed neutrality in the South Caucasus. By aligning with Armenia and providing military support at such a critical juncture, India joins a league of countries, for example, France,<sup>20</sup> pushing the arms race forward and bolstering Yerevan’s revanchism. Such moves have sparked sharp condemnation from Azerbaijan, which views these actions as detrimental to regional peace.<sup>21</sup> Baku has expressed clear concerns and suggests that external military support is encouraging revanchist sentiment in Armenia, further complicating prospects for lasting stability.

Interestingly, even from the outset, New Delhi poised itself to strategically extend its regional partnerships by coupling Armenia with other key allies through trilateral and multi-country frameworks, such as the India–Armenia–Greece and India–Armenia–Cyprus alliances

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20 Nazaretyan, N., “‘Strategic Intimacy’: Armenian-French Defence Cooperation”, Evnreport, November 15, 2023, Available at: <https://evnreport.com/politics/strategic-intimacy-armenian-french-defence-cooperation/> (Accessed October 21, 2024).

21 Azernews.az, “Azerbaijan conveys concerns to India’s ambassador over country’s expanding military co-op with Armenia”, July 26, 2023, Available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/212769.html> (Accessed October 21, 2024).



and, on the horizon, France–Armenia–India. Perhaps the boldest expression of this potential lies in THE defence alliance between India, Iran, and Armenia. Thus, from an Indian perspective, Yerevan serves as a flexible strategic asset, allowing India to forge various alliances across the region. This flexibility enables India to expand its geopolitical influence, particularly in key alignments such as the India–Iran–Armenia axis, where Iran offers port access for shipments, or the India–Armenia–Greece partnership, which focuses on countering Türkiye.

*Revanchist-minded political and societal groups in Armenia do not acknowledge the postwar realities in the region and are calling for a military takeover of the Garabagh region and other territories of Azerbaijan.*

India’s growing defence ties with Armenia can be seen as part of a broader strategy to enhance its influence in the region. However, India, although aspiring to be a global arms exporter, falls short of fully explaining the strategic calculus involved. Despite India’s framing of the emerging defence partnership as a business endeavour and emphasizing its relations with both countries, the one-sided nature of these dealings undermines the efforts for peace and stability in the South Caucasus by fuelling revanchism in Armenia.

Revanchist-minded political and societal groups in Armenia do not acknowledge the postwar realities in the region and are calling for a military takeover of the Garabagh region and other territories of Azerbaijan. For example, Benjamin Pogosyan, the chairman of the Center for Political and Economic Strategic Studies in Yerevan, claims, “*The only way to secure the right of return of Armenians is to end Azerbaijani control over Nagorno Karabakh, and Armenia can do that only through military means.*”<sup>22</sup> Several other prominent experts and politicians share Pogosyan’s views. Richard Grigosyan, director of the Yerevan-based Regional Studies Center, asserted in an interview with Armenian media in December 2023 that the prospect of instability in Azerbaijan caused by the implosion of the country is “the only positive scenario in regaining Karabakh”.<sup>23</sup> This analysis indirectly refers to the

22 Pogosyan, B. “What Next for Nagorno Karabakh?”, *The Armenian Mirror Spectator*, October 14, 2023, Available at: <https://mirrorspectator.com/2023/10/14/what-next-for-nagorno-karabakh/> (Accessed October 24, 2024).

23 Youtube Channel of Civilnet.am, *Insider Perspective on Armenia’s Military Transformation*, December 2, 2023, Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rREaP8tZ2sk&ab\\_channel=CIVILNET](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rREaP8tZ2sk&ab_channel=CIVILNET) (Accessed: October 24, 2024).

early 1990s, when Armenia launched a war and occupied Azerbaijani territories, taking advantage of the “implosion of the country” due to political and economic crises. By supplying weapons to Armenia, India, in a similar vein to France and others, emboldens these revanchist sentiments and fuels the arms race in the region.

In addition to the detrimental consequences of this policy to peace and security in the South Caucasus, such a positioning also jeopardizes India’s long-term interests vis-à-vis this region, particularly in terms of trade and connectivity. Investing all its strategic assets into Armenia while downplaying the repercussions of its actions may lead to significant consequences, including a potential complication for the shipment of Indian goods flowing through the INSTC in the case that any Indian-made weapon is used against Azerbaijan or if missiles inadvertently land on its territory. Such imprudent and risky projects threaten India’s overall presence in the region. Moreover, this new military partnership could complicate the dynamics of this region, where Türkiye, Russia, and Iran have established interests. Not only does it risk India’s economic engagement in Azerbaijan – encompassing energy projects, air connectivity, tourism, and around 1,000 Indian-owned businesses – but it also poses a threat to broader regional stability. While India may gain from its relationship with Armenia, it risks alienating itself from a key regional player, thus ultimately diminishing its prospects for cooperation throughout the South Caucasus.

In the current context, the region’s fate is closely tied to the progress of peace initiatives. The incentive structures in place are crucial to maintaining this momentum and preventing future re-escalation. Thus, factors such as the evolving dynamics of regional alliances hold paramount importance in shaping the power balance in the region, as they can either reinforce the stability achieved through peace initiatives or, if mismanaged, trigger renewed conflicts.

### ***Conclusion***

Armenia’s reliance on foreign powers to bolster its military ambitions, particularly through its burgeoning relationship with India, represents a significant shift in regional dynamics that poses new challenges to

peace and stability in the South Caucasus. As India is stepping towards an Armenia-focused approach in its engagement with the South Caucasus, its strategic motivations behind this endeavour come into sharper focus. Armenia and India are striking sparks off each other in an interplay of aligned security interests, which involve offsetting the influence of some regional powers, as well as ideological sympathy. This partnership, fueled by military procurement, is raising alarms in the already fragile post-war geopolitical environment of the South Caucasus.

*Armenia's reliance on foreign powers to bolster its military ambitions, particularly through its burgeoning relationship with India, represents a significant shift in regional dynamics that poses new challenges to peace and stability in the South Caucasus.*

Thus, this article has provided an analysis of India's evolving role in the South Caucasus to understand the broader implications of its strategy for regional dynamics and long-term stability. In conclusion, it suggests that India's bet on Armenia presents inherent risks, as it may backfire on its established interests in the region.

India's military support, framed as part of its broader geopolitical strategy, risks empowering revanchist groups in Armenia that have yet to come to terms with the post-war realities. This escalation, fueled by a deepening defence partnership, threatens to destabilize the region, as external powers inadvertently embolden Armenia's territorial aspirations and fuel an arms race in the South Caucasus.

For India, its growing involvement in the South Caucasus must be carefully calibrated to avoid unintended consequences. While seeking to counterbalance regional players like Türkiye and Pakistan, India risks undermining its own economic and strategic interests by alienating Azerbaijan, a critical partner in regional connectivity and energy projects.

Furthermore, by aligning so closely with Armenia's defence agenda, India is jeopardizing its reputation in the region and risks entangling itself in a conflict that could spiral beyond its control.

The South Caucasus stands at a critical juncture, as peace and stability depend on sustained diplomatic efforts and the recognition of new regional realities. As external actors like India and France continue to deepen their ties with Armenia, they must be aware that their miscalculated actions carry far-reaching implications. Encouraging

revanchism through military support only prolongs conflict and diminishes the prospects for long-term peace. To foster stability, regional and global powers must prioritize diplomatic engagement and refrain from actions that escalate tensions, thus ensuring that the momentum for peace, established through the post-war order, is maintained.

# Ethnic Cleansing in the South Caucasus Throughout the 20th Century: Massacres and Mass Deportations of Azerbaijanis

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Mima Čvorović\*

In all periods of history, genocide and other forms of crimes against humanity and international law have been committed, causing great losses to humanity. Azerbaijan, a country in the South Caucasus, has been also subject to genocide in its recent history. This article provides a brief history of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict and the background events leading up to the genocide and presents definitions of genocide and ethnic cleansing according to international law, accompanied by an introduction to theories related to the origins and development of genocide, including its political, social, and psychological aspects. The article provides an overview of the key periods in the history of Azerbaijan, that is, 1905–1907, 1918–1920, 1948–1953, and 1988–1993, with a special focus on the violent and forced displacement of Azerbaijanis and the destruction of their cultural heritage. The article also documents the author's personal study visit to the city of Shusha to record the scale of destruction in the city and get acquainted with the history of massacres committed against Azerbaijanis.

**Keywords:** Ethnic cleansing, deportation, South Caucasus, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Khojaly Genocide



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### *Introduction*

Genocide is an international crime of intentional, total, or partial destruction of national, ethnic, racial, and religious groups and is one of the most serious crimes against humanity. The term ‘genocide’ was adopted through Resolution 96 (I) at a session of the UN General Assembly in 1946.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to ethnic cleansing, where the goal is to ‘cleanse’ a given territory of a certain group of people, with genocide the goal is physical extermination. Genocide exists regardless of the number of victims, if the acts are committed with the intent to destroy members of certain target groups. According to the clauses of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, all perpetrators, accomplices, and instigators, as well as attempts at and associations for the commission of genocide, must be punished. Genocide consists of several key elements, such as planning, organisation, execution, and intention to destroy or inflict severe suffering on a particular group. This can include mass killings, deportations, forced displacement, sexual violence, torture, and other forms of abuse. According to the Criminal Code of Azerbaijan, the penalties for committing genocide or inciting genocide are high, and the perpetrator or all perpetrators of the crime of genocide will be sentenced to imprisonment for a period of 14 to 20 years, or to life imprisonment. For attempted genocide, the prescribed penalty is imprisonment for a period of 5 to 10 years.<sup>2</sup>

Ethnic cleansing is an illegal act in which one side in a conflict systematically expels or kills a population based on their religious or ethnic identity. Ethnic cleansing is usually accompanied by efforts to remove physical evidence and cultural artefacts of the targeted group, for example, the destruction of homes and infrastructure, and the desecration of monuments and cemeteries.

Crimes committed during ethnic cleansing are quite similar to the crime of genocide. While genocide implies the intention to completely or partially destroy the target group, ethnic cleansing may involve killing only up to the point of mobilization, i.e., the expulsion of the target group from the disputed territory. Mass killing can also be present in ethnic

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1 The term “genocide” was adopted at the session of the United Nations General Assembly in 1946 through Resolution 96 (I). This resolution called for the definition and condemnation of genocide as an international crime.

2 See the relevant clauses (104, 105 and 106) of the Criminal Code of Azerbaijan, Available at: <https://www.e-qanun.az/framework/46947> (Accessed: July 15, 2023).

cleansing, but it is not a necessary element as it is in genocide. Also, during ethnic cleansing, the violence may stop or decrease when the target group leaves the territory, while in genocide the mass killings continue even when the target group tries to escape.

Historical facts indicate that Azerbaijanis, who lived in their historical lands both in the territory of present-day Armenia and in the Garabagh region and surrounding districts of Azerbaijan, were subjected to ethnic cleansing, genocide, and aggression by Armenian nationalists. In order to achieve their goals, Armenians, under the influence of mythical misperceptions about ‘Greater Armenia’, and often with the help of their foreign patrons, carried out various acts of terror, genocide, and ethnic cleansing against Azerbaijanis. Due to this policy, Azerbaijanis were forced to leave their historical lands as refugees and displaced persons. In the 20th century, Azerbaijanis were subjected to genocide and ethnic cleansing four times – from 1905–1907, 1918–1920, 1948–1953, and more recently in 1988–1993.

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The main question this article asks is: “*How did the period of forced displacement and ethnic cleansing that occurred during the First Garabagh War (1988–1994) contribute to the systematic destruction of the cultural identity and community of Azerbaijanis, and what role did the state of Armenia play in this process?*”. The aim of the article is to examine the various aspects of genocidal actions, as well as ethnic cleansing and forced deportation, committed in Azerbaijan by Armenia and Armenian forces during the First Garabagh War, with a particular focus on ethnic cleansing and the violent deportation of Azerbaijani civilians.

This article will argue that the actions that took place during and after the First Garabagh War were, in many cases, part of a broader process of ethnic cleansing that can be classified as genocide, supported and enabled by certain political and military structures at both the national and local levels. The study will examine the evidence and purpose behind these actions, as well as their long-term consequences for the region.

The importance of this study lies in its contribution to a better

understanding of the complex and often under-examined aspects of the conflicts in the South Caucasus. This may help provide a broader understanding of processes such as ethnic radicalization, political violence, and international relations in post-Soviet states. Additionally, this topic has significant legal and political implications, as the analysis may assist in the development of legal and historical frameworks for addressing these events in the context of international law and human rights history.

### *The Massacre of Azerbaijanis by Armenians in 1905–1907*

The rapid development of the oil industry in Azerbaijan's capital Baku in the late 19th and early 20th century attracted a wave of Armenian migration into this city. As one of the main industrial centres in Imperial Russia, Baku saw the emergence of an industrial proletariat and revolutionary fervour. The number of Armenian workers increased significantly at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and they actively participated in revolutionary and socialist movements in Baku. On the eve of the First Russian Revolution from 1905 to 1907, the Armenian Nationalist Party used revolutionary ideas to promote their nationalist agenda. They were inspired by the idea of creating 'Greater Armenia' and, because of that, Armenians carried out a series of bloody massacres against Azerbaijanis between 1905 and 1907. Hundreds of villages in Azerbaijan were destroyed and thousands of people were killed. The massacres started in February in Baku and then spread to the whole territory of Azerbaijan, including villages in the territory of today's Armenia. Hundreds of settlements were destroyed, and thousands of civilians were barbarically killed. After Baku, the most violent clashes happened in Nakhchivan in May, then in the city of Shusha in August and in Ganja in November. Estimates of the total number of lives lost range from 3,100 to 10,000. Another 15,000 people were uprooted.

Azerbaijani writer Mammad Said Ordubadi's *Pogroms of the Azeri villages in 1905* sheds light on what happened to Azerbaijanis during that time. On June 9, 1905, Armenians also attacked an Azerbaijani village named Takiya (district of current Etchmiadzin).<sup>3</sup> The Azerbaijanis were completely unarmed, unlike their enemies. And, because of that,

<sup>3</sup> Ordubadi, M.S., "Pogroms of the Azeri villages in 1905", Available at: <https://karabakh.org/karabakh-history/karabakh-during-the-1905-1920/pogroms-of-the-azeri-villages/> (Accessed: July 16, 2023)



Azerbaijanis took their children and wives, left the village and fled to the mountains. After this attack, the Armenians destroyed more than nine large villages in the current Etchmiadzin district. On July 29, 1906, Armenians attacked another village, Karkhana, in Gafan district. The village, home to more than 5,000 Azerbaijani people, was under fire from all sides. The Azerbaijanis tried to leave the village, which the Armenians occupied.”<sup>4</sup> Most of the Azerbaijanis were captured and many were shot on the ground. The village was completely destroyed, and 30 women hidden in a shelter were also brutally killed by Armenians. On the same day, the villages of Saldashly, Ijevan, Dashnov, and Khalaj were also demolished and their populations subjugated. On August 10, 1906, more than 8,000 Armenians surrounded the village of Gatar. Although the battle lasted for nine days, they were unable to capture the village until they were helped by a group of Iranian workers<sup>5</sup> who carried dynamite and petroleum and followed the orders of the Armenians. When they entered the village, they doused the houses with petroleum, set them on fire, and then detonated the dynamite. After the destruction of this village with the loss of 3,500 people and 750 houses, the Armenians began to rob and destroy villages situated on the banks of the river Okchu. They did not make exceptions for the elderly, children, or women and killed the populations of these villages with sabres. On August 18, 1906, amid horrible scenes of brutality, many men, women, children, and babies were killed by Armenians.

### *The Massacre of Azerbaijanis by Armenians in 1918–1920*

The second genocide that happened in Azerbaijan was in the Garabagh region in 1918, after World War I. In the wake of the fall of the Russian Empire, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia became independent states. The massacre of 1918 was more skilfully prepared and more ruthlessly executed than the attacks of 1905–1907. The victory of the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution in 1917, and their collaboration, provided the Armenian political party Dashnaksutyun (a.k.a. Armenian Revolutionary Federation) a smooth path to pursue its nationalist goals. Dashnaksutyun was key to pursuing the national goals of the Armenians during and after the October Revolution of

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4 Ibid.

5 T. de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, (Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2010), 295 pg.

1917. The Dashnaks advocated for resistance against the Ottoman Empire during World War I and after the fall of Tsarist Russia. During the October Revolution (1917), they took advantage of the political opportunities that arose in the post-revolutionary environment. After the Bolsheviks took power, the Dashnaks managed to secure a degree of political autonomy for Armenia. The Bolsheviks supported various national movements within the former Russian Empire, including the Armenians, which allowed the Dashnaks to continue pursuing their national objectives.

In 1918, the leader of the Russian Bolsheviks, Vladimir Lenin, appointed Stephan Shaumyan, of Armenian origin, as an extraordinary commissioner of the Caucasus. After that, the Bolsheviks seized power in Baku and viewed the Armenian politician party as a source of support for removing the influence of the Azerbaijani party Musavat from Baku and other regions, an act in which the interests of Bolsheviks and the Armenian politician party in March 1918 were aligned. The mission was to liquidate Azerbaijanis throughout the Baku area. According to Shaumyan's confession, 6,000 soldiers of the Soviet Union and 4,000 armed men from the Armenian political party participated in the massacre of Azerbaijani civilians in March 1918.

Armenian and Bolshevik units launched an attack on Baku on March 30<sup>th</sup> using artillery fire from ships on the Caspian Sea. They then attacked the homes of Azerbaijanis and carried out ruthless massacres. The killings became even more merciless on March 31<sup>st</sup> and in the early days of April. Thousands of Azerbaijani civilians were killed just because of their ethnic identity. During this period, more than 20,000 Azerbaijanis were killed in Baku, including those who were burned alive in their homes or cruelly tortured.

The genocide was not limited to Baku. In a short period of time, Armenians also committed massacres in Shamakhi, Guba, Iravan, Zangazur, Garabagh, Nakhchivan, and Shusha. The discovery of mass graves in the Guba district of Azerbaijan in 2007 confirms the Armenian inhumanity.

During the first five months of 1918, more than 16,000 people, including children and elderly people, were killed in extreme barbarism in the Guba district and more than 167 villages were destroyed, of which 35 no longer exist today. During the Armenian attack on Guba in 1918,

people were subjected to violence and their bodies mutilated.

After three days of massacres in Guba district, Armenians, with the help of the Bolsheviks, attacked the district and its more than 167 villages where Azerbaijanis lived and killed everyone. A German witness testifies about these horrible days in the following way:

*Armenians rushed into Azerbaijani districts and killed, cut everyone into pieces with swords, pricked with bayonet. After several days of the massacres, 87 corpses of Azerbaijanis were found in the hollow with their ears and noses cut off, their bellies torn, privy parts cut. Armenians had no mercy either on children or on the old.*<sup>6</sup>

From March to April 1918, Armenians killed more than 8,000 people living in Shamakhi and burned and destroyed every monument there, including the Juma mosque. Armenians also destroyed several villages in Nakhchivan and more than 115 villages in Zangazur, where more than 10,000 Azerbaijanis were killed or invalided and more than 50,000 turned into refugees. A terrible massacre was also committed in Iravan province, where more than 135,000 Azerbaijanis were tortured and killed and 199 villages destroyed. After these activities, the Armenian armed gangs shifted to Garabagh, where they destroyed 150 villages and killed all the population therein.<sup>7</sup>

In May 1918, the city of Guba was occupied by Armenians and the XI Red Army (formed by the Bolsheviks). Here, more than 12,000 Azerbaijanis were murdered and the bloodiest and most terrifying crimes were committed.<sup>8</sup> Armenians were killing every man and child they encountered on the streets, and afterwards, they would break into the houses of Azerbaijanis and kill them mercilessly.

From March to September 1918, Armenians killed more than 50.000 Azerbaijanis in total. To commemorate the bloody massacre that took place against Azerbaijanis in March 1918, the date of March 31 is

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<sup>6</sup> The State Commission on prisoners of war, hostages and missing persons, Events of 1918-1920; the March extermination, Available at: <https://azerbaijan.az/en/related-information/185> (Accessed: July 17, 2023)

<sup>7</sup> According to the materials of the Extraordinary Investigation Commission on July 15, 1918, Available at: <https://supremecourt.gov.az/en/static/view/273> (Accessed: July 19, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> The State Commission on prisoners of war, hostages and missing persons, Events of 1918-1920; the March extermination, Available at: <https://azerbaijan.az/en/related-information/185> (Accessed: July 17, 2023)

marked as “the day of genocide against Azerbaijanis” in the Republic of Azerbaijan.<sup>9</sup> During the two massacres at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, about 2 million Azerbaijanis were killed or displaced from their lands.

*Mass deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia in 1948–1953*

The deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia occurred as an act of forced displacement and ethnic cleansing throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the previous two mass killings committed against Azerbaijanis, the next major stage in the policy of ‘ethnic cleansing’ of Armenians

*The deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia occurred as an act of forced displacement and ethnic cleansing throughout the 20th century.*

was the mass deportation of Azerbaijanis from the territory of the Armenian SSR during 1948–1953. As in many other nations of the former USSR, Azerbaijanis became the victims of Stalinist deportation. Before the October Revolution (1917), Azerbaijanis constituted 43% of the population in the capital of Armenia (Iraavan).<sup>10</sup> Azerbaijanis experienced forced migration

from both the territory of the First Republic of Armenia and the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) of Armenia multiple times during the 20th century.

During the rule of Joseph Stalin,<sup>11</sup> who led the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953, around 100,000 Azerbaijanis were deported from the Armenian SSR, beginning in 1948. Their homes were taken over by Armenians who arrived in the Soviet Union from abroad. The deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia during the rule of Stalin was started after the establishment of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. According to the 1939 census, 130,896 Azerbaijanis

9 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan on 31 March - Day of Genocide of Azerbaijanis (No: 72/18), March 31, 2018, Available at: <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/no7218-statement-by-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-on-31-march-day-of-genocide-of-azerbaijanis> (Accessed: July 16, 2023)

10 T. de Waal, op.cit.

11 Joseph Stalin was a Soviet politician and dictator who ruled the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953. During his rule, Stalin implemented brutal policies of industrialization and collectivization, which caused widespread famine and the death of millions, particularly in Ukraine. His regime was known for mass purges and repression, during which millions of people were arrested, tortured, and executed for political reasons. Stalin played a key role in the Soviet Union’s victory in World War II, but his reign left deep scars on society. While he achieved significant economic and military successes, his dictatorial rule came at a tremendous human and moral cost.

lived in the Armenian SSR.<sup>12</sup> The 1959 census showed that the number of Azerbaijanis in the Armenian SSR had decreased to 107,748. The period of Soviet deportation of Azerbaijanis and the settlement of Armenians who lived outside the borders of the Soviet Union was the main reason for the decrease in the number of Azerbaijanis in Armenia. The deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia, with the aim of strengthening Armenia's hold, was a plan of the Soviet regime.<sup>13</sup> Azerbaijanis were massively and forcibly expelled from their homes in the territory of the Armenian SSR. Thousands of people, including the elderly and children, died, unable to deal with the difficult conditions of resettlement, drastic climatic changes, physical upheaval, and mental anguish. Overall, 150,000 Azerbaijani people were deported from the Armenian SSR to Azerbaijan during 1948–1953.

At the beginning of 1948, about 40,897 Azerbaijani families were completely deported and around 216 people died during the deportation. Some archive documents also contain the facts of the deportation of Azerbaijanis from the city of Iravan. For example, around 64 Azerbaijani families, 253 people, were relocated from Iravan in December 1948, and around 400 families were relocated in 1949. More than 81,000 families were resettled from Armenia in 1948–1950.<sup>14</sup> “As a result of deportation from 1948 to 1953, the Azerbaijani population of Iravan was halved. In 1959, only 3,413 Azerbaijanis were registered in Iravan.”<sup>15</sup>

*Along with the deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia, an operation was carried out to rename the settlements where Azerbaijanis lived.*

Along with the deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia, an operation was carried out to rename the settlements where Azerbaijanis lived. In 1947–1953, the names of more than 60 Azerbaijani settlements were renamed by Armenians. In order to provide a legal and political assessment of this situation, which is considered a terrible and historic crime against the Azerbaijani people, and to convey it to the international community, on December 18, 1997, former President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev signed a decree “*On the mass deportation*

12 Zamanov, R., Gender, ethnicity and peacebuilding in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Univerzita Karlova, 2020, page 10, Available at: <https://www.academia.edu/43889276> (Accessed: July 20, 2023)

13 T. de Waal, op.cit.

14 Mustafa, N., “Mass deportation of Azerbaijanis from the Armenian SSR in 1948-1953”, Soyqirim. az, Available at: <https://soyqirim.az/en/link/6221> (Accessed: July 21, 2023);

15 Ibid.

*of Azerbaijanis from historical and ethnic lands in the Armenian SSR*". Since then, the date of March 31 (commemorating 1918, when the massacre of Azerbaijanis began) has been declared a day of mourning throughout the territory of Azerbaijan.

The deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia during the Soviet period, particularly between 1948 and 1953, was part of a broader Soviet policy that involved ethnic purges and manipulation of ethnic groups for political and territorial stability and that could be seen as 'Soviet ethnic engineering' and a 'plan for restructuring ethnic borders' to ensure political stability within the Soviet Union. While the specific plans and reasons relating to the deportation of Azerbaijanis were multifaceted, especially in the context of Soviet geopolitics, and often tied to particular political circumstances, the following key factors can help explain the logic behind this decision.

*Political control and 'national problems'*: The Soviet authorities were highly concerned about ethnic tensions and potential separatist movements within the Soviet Union, especially in regions with mixed ethnic compositions like the Caucasus. The Soviets often used a 'divide and rule' strategy to control different ethnic communities. The deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia could have been part of a policy to manage ethnic tensions, however, it generated a problem of massive displacement.

*Nationalism and territorial dimensions*: While the Soviet Union officially promoted brotherhood and unity among nations, in practice, their policy created deep ethnic and political tensions, especially between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The Soviet regime was concerned about nationalist tendencies in many Soviet republics, including Armenia and Azerbaijan, given the territorial claims of the former towards the territories of the latter. During periods when tensions escalated, the Soviet authorities often resorted to repressive measures to prevent violence from breaking out. The Soviets likely justified the deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia to reduce tensions.

*Stalin's policy of ethnic deportations*: Under Stalin's rule, the Soviet Union implemented a broader policy of ethnic deportations that affected not only Azerbaijanis but also many other ethnic groups, such as Chechens, Crimean Tatars, and others. These deportations were based on the destructive idea that it was necessary to 'reset' the ethnic

structure of certain regions to prevent potential political problems. In the case of Azerbaijanis, the Soviet authorities misperceived their presence in Armenia as a source of tension.

*Ethnonationalism within the Soviet Union:* Although the Soviet Union promoted the idea of ‘internationalism’, in reality, the Soviet system was deeply tied to ethnic and national identities, which were often exploited for political purposes. Deportations were frequently part of a larger strategy to reshape ethnic boundaries and weaken the ties between certain ethnic groups and their homeland territories, making it easier for the state to manipulate those groups.

*Post-World War II territorial reorganization:* After World War II, the Soviet authorities attempted to reorganize territorial and ethnic boundaries within their republics. These changes, including deportations, were part of an effort to ensure political control over ethnic groups that were seen by Soviet authorities as potential sources of instability.

*Stalin’s policy of ethnic engineering:* The Soviet authorities carried out a series of deportations of Azerbaijanis from Armenia during the period 1948–1953, ostensibly with the goal of reducing ethnic tensions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. This policy was also part of a broader strategy to reduce the presence of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Armenia, while simultaneously attempting to increase the number of Armenians in areas outside the borders of Soviet Armenia. Under Stalin, the Soviet Union implemented a policy of ethnic engineering, which involved the forced relocation of large ethnic communities from one region to another. The goal was to prevent nationalist movements, reduce potential separatism, and create more ethnically homogeneous territorial units that would be easier to control by the central government. The deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia was part of this heinous policy.

*Creating demographic balance and reducing ethnic tensions:* The deportation of Azerbaijanis was tied to the desire to create a political and demographic balance in the Caucasus region, where ethnic tensions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis were often high. Additionally, the Soviets encouraged the settlement of Armenians in various parts of the Soviet Union, including areas in Azerbaijan and elsewhere, which led to an increase of the Armenian population in specific regions, including parts of Azerbaijan and Armenia. The deportation of Azerbaijanis from



Armenia was linked to the Soviet authorities' efforts to strengthen the dominance of the Armenian population in Armenia and the political position of the republic within the Soviet Union. As part of the broader policy of 'ethnic engineering', the Soviets also encouraged the settlement of Armenians outside the borders of Soviet Armenia.

Armenians settled in other parts of the Soviet Union and beyond, primarily in several key areas:

*Central Asia* – The largest migration of Armenians within the Soviet Union occurred towards Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Many Armenians emigrated from Anatolia (then part of the Ottoman Empire) after 1915, and the Soviet authorities settled them in different parts of the Soviet Union. Cities such as Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan became home to a large number of Armenians.

*Russia* – Armenians also settled in major cities of the Russian Federation, particularly in the Moscow region and the Volgograd area.

*Georgia* – Although Georgia was part of the Soviet Union, there were migrations of Armenians into parts of Georgia, such as Tbilisi, where they were present in larger numbers.

*Azerbaijan* – There was also settlement of Armenians into Azerbaijan, although this geography was highly sensitive due to ethnic conflicts and tensions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. These migrations were

*Thus, the deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia between 1948 and 1953 was part of a broader Soviet strategy that aimed to reduce ethnic tensions, strengthen Armenia's political influence in the region, and create more stable borders within the Soviet Union, particularly in light of territorial claims such that of Armenia toward Azerbaijan's former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast.*

not just demographic but also political in nature, as the Soviets used ethnic minorities to control different territorial and political goals within the federation.

Thus, the deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia between 1948 and 1953 was part of a broader Soviet strategy that aimed to reduce ethnic tensions, strengthen Armenia's political influence in the region, and create more stable borders within the Soviet Union, particularly in light of territorial claims such that of Armenia toward Azerbaijan's former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast. The deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia was also associated with the Soviet policy of ethnic engineering, aimed at stabilizing political and ethnic relations in regions with high ethnic tensions. The Soviets mistakenly believed



that removing Azerbaijanis from Armenia would reduce the possibility of conflict escalation, while simultaneously enacting broader political manoeuvres that involved controlling ethnic groups across the country.

### ***Mass deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia in 1988–1989***

The systematic policy of ‘Armenia without Turks’ was implemented through the deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia during 1988–1989. The government of Armenia, the ‘Karabakh’ and ‘Krunk’ committees, and representatives of the Etchmiadzin church, under the patronage of the Soviet leadership, provoked thousands of bloody actions during the expulsion of Azerbaijanis.

As a result of ethnic cleansing, 185 settlements in Armenia were ethnically cleansed, over 250,000 Azerbaijanis were forcibly expelled from their homes, and 217 Azerbaijanis were killed by Armenians. Among them, 49 people died by freezing in the mountains while fleeing from Armenians, 41 people were killed in brutal beatings, 35 people were killed through torture, 115 people were incinerated, 16 were shot, 10 died from heart attacks due to torture, two were killed by doctors in the hospital, and the rest were drowned, hanged, killed by electric shock, or beheaded.<sup>16</sup>

### ***The Massacre of Azerbaijanis by Armenians in 1992: The Khojaly Genocide***

In all wars, there are crimes that differ in their cruelty and inhumanity. The mass genocide committed on February 26, 1992, in the town of Khojaly, located in the Garabagh region of Azerbaijan, represents one such crime. The Khojaly genocide represents one of the bloodiest chapters of the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which took place in the early 1990s.

The town of Khojaly was home to 2,605 families, and 11,356 people. The Armenian army had previously seized the main city of the Garabagh region, Khankendi, and then targeted Azerbaijan’s other villages in

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<sup>16</sup> The State Commission on prisoners of war, hostages and missing persons, *Deportation of the Azerbaijanis from Armenia in 1988-1989*, Available at: <https://azerbaijan.az/en/related-information/185> (Accessed: July 17, 2023).

*The Khojaly genocide represents one of the bloodiest chapters of the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which took place in the early 1990s.*

that area, of which Khojaly was the largest. Khojaly was home to the only airport in the region and served as an important channel for the transportation of humanitarian aid to Azerbaijanis in that area.

At one point, the killing of civilians took on unimaginable dimensions of violence, torture, and brutality. A blockade of Khojaly was launched during the winter months of 1991. This involved cutting off telephone lines, electricity, water, and heating systems. At the end of February 1992, Armenians and local detachments of the Soviet army completely surrounded Khojaly. After shelling the town, a fierce armed operation to capture the town began during the night of February 25<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup>. The infantry attack involved more than 2,000 Armenian soldiers. Azerbaijani civilians were forced to go eastward. However, when the column of civilians approached the village of Nakhchivan, Armenian military forces started shooting them.

The result was genocide: in the cold February night, 613 residents of Khojaly were killed, including 63 children, 106 women, 70 elderly people and 8 completely destroyed families; 1,275 people were captured, and 150 are still missing.<sup>17</sup> To this day, it is impossible to obtain any information about the captives and the missing persons. The bodies of the killed children, elderly, and women were mutilated. The town was set on fire by Armenian military units and all cultural infrastructure, such as museums, mosques, and educational institutions, was destroyed.

This act of genocide is the most heinous crime committed not only against Azerbaijanis but also against humanity. According to the testimonies of survivors, Armenian armed units were burning people alive and killing pregnant women and children. In other words, the civilian population that fell hostage to the Armenian units was condemned to extermination.

Shortly after the events of 26<sup>th</sup> February 1992, on March 1, 1992, the first newspaper article about Khojaly, titled “*Corpses Litter Hills in Karabakh*”, appeared in *The Times*.<sup>18</sup>

The Khojaly genocide was followed by an attack by Armenian military

17 The Commissioner for Human Rights of the Republic of Azerbaijan, “Khojaly Genocide”, Available at: <https://ombudsman.az/en/view/pages/163/> (Accessed: July 23, 2023)

18 Mentioned article is available in the edition “Khojaly Tragedy” (The Azerbaijan – Great Britain Youth Society, Baku, 2003); pg. 15.

units on the Lachin district ten days later. In the period that followed, Kalbajar district was captured on April 2, 1993, followed by Agdam on July 23, and Fuzuli and Jabrayil districts on August 23. Gubadli was captured on August 31 and Zangilan on October 29, 1993. Thus, Azerbaijan lost more than 20% of its territory. In addition to the territorial loss, Azerbaijan faced a problem of refugees and internally displaced persons who, during a period of less than four years (1988–1994), amounted to between 750,000 and 1,000,000 people.

All the events that occurred in Azerbaijan’s formerly occupied territories before and after the Khojaly tragedy testify and indicate that it was a deliberate policy of ethnic cleansing against Azerbaijanis. The fact that civilians were not allowed to leave the besieged town of Khojaly openly shows the true intentions of the Armenian forces.

International recognition of the Khojaly genocide today holds a special place in the process of bringing Azerbaijan’s cause to the attention of the international community. In order to widely recognize this tragedy, since 2009, on the initiative of the Vice President of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, Leyla Aliyeva, an international campaign called “Justice for Khojaly!”<sup>19</sup> has been conducted in more than a hundred countries. The organization of events in many countries as part of this campaign, dedicated to the Khojaly tragedy, plays an important role in bringing the truth about the consequences of the occupation and the acts carried out by Armenia against Azerbaijan to the attention of the international community.

The recognition of the Khojaly tragedy as an act of genocide by the parliaments of different countries, international organizations, and a number of U.S. states indicates the great success of the “Justice for Khojaly!” campaign. Hundreds of thousands of people worldwide have already signed the campaign’s appeal to recognize these events as acts of genocide and crimes against humanity.

At the international level, Azerbaijan has done a lot in the past decade for the recognition of the events in Khojaly as a genocide. In this regard, the Senate of Mexico adopted a resolution on October 27, 2011, characterizing the events in Khojaly as a genocide. The Senate of the

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<sup>19</sup> “Justice for Khojaly” campaign ([justiceforkhojaly.org](http://justiceforkhojaly.org)) is an organizer of international conferences, round tables, photo exhibitions, and similar events. During 2008, the genocide in Khojaly was commemorated in more than 60 cities worldwide.

Islamic Republic of Pakistan did the same on February 1, 2012. They were joined by the Senate of Colombia on March 28, 2012. The Foreign Relations Committee of the Czech Parliament followed this step on February 19, 2013, as did the House of Peoples of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina on February 26, 2013. The Senate of Jordan joined these initiatives on May 28, 2013, the Congress of Peru on June 14, 2013, the Parliament of Sudan on September 1, 2014, Djibouti on January 24, 2017, the Republic of Slovenia on January 27, 2016, and the Legislative Body of Paraguay on December 21, 2017. In addition to these countries, Canadian Member of Parliament Ed Holder issued a statement on June 6, 2012, describing Khojaly as a genocide. From 2009 to mid-2017, the competent authorities of the federal units of the United States adopted appropriate documents describing Khojaly as a crime against humanity or genocide.

### *A Journey through the City of Shusha – Remembered for its Tragedy*

The city of Shusha located in the formerly occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Before the occupation, Shusha was rich in ancient monuments. The city had a lot of ancient buildings, mosques, tombs, two castles, and historic fortress walls. “Shusha Fortress” represents the walls surrounding the city of Shusha, also known as the Pearl of Garabagh, which was liberated after years of illegal occupation by Armenia. In 2020, Shusha was declared the cultural capital of Azerbaijan, with the aim of restoring the historical appearance of the city and promoting it as the crown jewel of a centuries-old rich culture, architecture, and urban planning. Shusha was named the cultural capital of Azerbaijan because of the many influential poets, artists, and singers from the city whose statues were recently reinstated here, although they still bear bullet marks from the past conflict.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Armenia occupied 20% of Azerbaijan’s territory, including the city of Shusha. During this occupation, more than 30,000 Azerbaijanis were killed, and approximately 750,000 residents who lived in these territories were expelled from their homes through an ethnic cleansing process carried out by Armenia. Later, after nearly 30 years, the Azerbaijani army restored sovereignty over the city of Shusha in November 2020, following a 44-day war with Armenia. The liberation of Shusha played

a key role in the surrender of Armenia's armed forces. After the signing of the Trilateral Statement, Armenia also returned the occupied districts of Aghdam, Kalbajar, and Lachin.

Shusha currently has limited visitors, as the region has been heavily contaminated with landmines planted by Armenian forces and it is not safe to travel freely through the region.

One of the problems in Garabagh is the safe return of the population who were ethnically cleansed from the region. The destruction of Shusha was thorough and widespread, and the city is still not ready to support its normal population. One of the biggest challenges in the Garabagh region is the presence of unexploded ordnance scattered across the fields after the Second Garabagh War, which makes it unsafe to freely navigate around and work on the restoration of the city. Demining the area is a very important project that requires long-term effort. Experts claim that there are over a million mines yet to be discovered in the liberated territories. These pose a grave threat to human life.

### *Conclusion*

Genocide and the mass deportation of populations are very difficult topics that have marked many parts of the world in the past. Genocide refers to the systematic destruction of a specific ethnic, religious, or national group, while mass deportation involves the forced relocation of a large number of a particular group of people from their homes and countries. These tragedies have long-term consequences for the victims and their communities, so it is very important to study and learn from them in order to prevent such crimes from happening in the future. Genocide and mass deportation, which represent the most heinous crimes against humanity, have had profound and long-lasting effects on the affected communities and their histories. These events are the result of systematic violence, discrimination, and political conflicts that have led to a large number of victims and the permanent destruction of cultures and identities. Their weight and seriousness require attention, confrontation, and justice to prevent similar tragedies in the future. Crimes against humanity remind us of the importance of preserving human rights, peace, and tolerance among different peoples. They represent the dark side of human history. Only through confronting the

past and working towards promoting justice and reconciliation can a better future be built where such crimes are avoided, and peace and security are ensured for all people.

This work has analysed various aspects of genocide and mass deportation, including historical context, causes, consequences, and international reactions. It is very important to confront the crimes that have occurred in the past in order to build a better future. This involves facing the truth, obtaining justice for the victims, punishing the perpetrators, and ensuring that such crimes never happen again. International courts, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Court of Justice, play a crucial role in prosecuting those responsible for these crimes and ensuring justice for the victims. It is also important to work on reconciliation and reconstruction after genocide and mass deportation. This includes providing support to survivors and their communities, rebuilding infrastructure and institutions, as well as promoting dialogue and mutual understanding between different groups.

The article analysed how Azerbaijan, particularly its population, suffered from forced displacement, ethnic cleansing, and violence during the war with Armenia. The ethnic cleansing and forced deportation were carried out by Armenia and Armenian forces during the conflict. Thus, with the wave of forced displacement and ethnic cleansing, Azerbaijan was the key victim of the conflict, whereas Armenia was the perpetrator of these actions.

# Azerbaijan as an Emerging Middle Power after the 44-Day War and Reshaping the Foreign Policy

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Rovshan Ibrahimov\*

After the 44-day war of September–November 2020 and the anti-terror measures conducted in September 2023 by Azerbaijan in its formerly occupied territories, Azerbaijan restored its territorial integrity and provided the necessary basis for ensuring its security and stability in the future. The new status quo in the South Caucasus region also formed a new reality that strongly contributed to Azerbaijan’s currently developing status as a middle power. This article defines the notion of middle power and the specifics of states with such status. Further, the current status of Azerbaijan in regional and international fora is analysed on the basis of the proposed category. As middle powers attach great importance to diplomatic actions in the international arena, such states’ agendas and priorities are mainly determined in this field. Moreover, this article also analyses the tools and agenda for expanding Azerbaijan’s foreign policy and its more active participation in the global arena.

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan’s Foreign Policy, Middle Power, Green Energy, Anti-neocolonialism, COP29.



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***Introduction***

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan, along with Georgia and Armenia, became one of the newly independent countries that appeared on the world map in the small region of the South Caucasus. Immediately after regaining its independence, Azerbaijan faced many political and economic challenges, mostly inherited from the Soviet Union. Political instability, economic collapse, the First Karabagh War with Armenia, and the occupation of part of its sovereign territory were among the problems that had to be addressed by a young state. At the time of its acquisition of independence, due to its size and potential, Azerbaijan belonged to the category of countries labelled as ‘small powers’. Countries belonging to this group usually do not have significant resources, are unable to influence international processes, even at the regional level, and are also incapable of independently resolving national security issues, and usually depend on the great powers of the international system.

In this context, Azerbaijan could be considered a typical small power. After concluding the Ceasefire Agreement with Armenia in 1994, Azerbaijan started to focus on other concerns to consolidate its statehood and enable it to ensure political stability, stop the economic downturn, and attract foreign investment to the energy sector. The last-named allowed Azerbaijan to launch the implementation of regional megaprojects in the energy and transport sectors, which doubled Azerbaijan’s geoeconomic significance in the region. Azerbaijan was known as a stable and trustworthy partner in implementing energy transport projects. At the same time, no project in this area was implemented without the participation and consent of Azerbaijan, or that project faced failure. The energy transportation projects implemented by Azerbaijan began to play a connecting role between the regions of the Black Sea basin, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. That meant alternative routes for oil supplies to European markets. The State Oil Company of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) became an important agent in implementing regional projects of geoeconomic importance. SOCAR’s activities have extended far beyond the borders of Azerbaijan. In this regard, the Black Sea region has become an ‘inland sea’, of interest to this company as it has been active in all the countries of the region.



However, geopolitical issues did not resonate well with the geoeconomic importance of Azerbaijan. The reason for this was the then-ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, notably the occupation of the latter's territories by the former. Armenia's occupation persisted for almost three decades, despite the world community's recognition of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and the four UN Security Council Resolutions (822, 853, 874, 884) of 1993, which demanded the immediate withdrawal of the occupying forces of Armenia from the occupied territories. Azerbaijan patiently held negotiations towards this end from 1994. In contrast, the Armenian side preferred to drag out time with the sole purpose of consolidating the de facto situation as de jure.

It is worth noting that, at that time, Azerbaijan mostly actively participated in the international arena from a geopolitical perspective. Thus, as the (now former) conflict remained unresolved, Azerbaijan was unable to realize its full potential. In 2020, Azerbaijan managed to change this de-facto situation as a result of a 44-day war that led to the liberation of part of its territories, and Armenia agreed to liberate the rest after inking the trilateral statement of November 10, 2020. For the first time, a country from the former socialist bloc, although a small power, managed to shift the status quo in its favour. Nevertheless, it took thirty years for Azerbaijan to resolve this problem.

The liberation of the final batch of the formerly occupied territories and the restoration of sovereignty over the country's entire territory also allowed Azerbaijan to ensure its transition from the category of small powers to a middle power. Since Azerbaijan acted as a regional actor from an economic point of view, actively initiating and implementing regional energy and transport projects, the only missing element in the designation of it as a middle power was the fact of its territory being occupied by Armenia.<sup>1</sup> Azerbaijan previously proved its middle power status as an economic actor, but, in the geopolitical context, it needed control over its whole territory. After transforming into a middle power, Azerbaijan has begun to formulate its specific foreign policy agenda, which it is trying to present at the international level.<sup>2</sup>

1 See the article of Rovshan Ibrahimov regarding the specifics of Azerbaijan's transition from a small power to a middle one, "Азербайджан: Укрепление «Малой Силы» или Переходный Период в Становлении «Средней»?" (Azerbaijan: Strengthening the "Small Power" or a Transition Period in the Formation of the "Middle Power"?), *Journal of International Analysis*, Volume 12, No.2,

2 See the book of Rovshan Ibrahimov, "Small State Foreign Policy in Contemporary World, The South Caucasus States (Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia) and Beyond", 2024, Germany. The book

This article will analyse those actions in the geopolitical and geoeconomic spheres in the international arena to resolve the (now former) Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict and, after its resolution, the steps that Azerbaijan is taking as a small power in international relations.

The main goal of this article is to evaluate the status of Azerbaijan as a middle power within the theoretical framework. This article also explains the process of Azerbaijan’s transition to a middle power and the development of new foreign policy instruments within the demands of the country’s new status. The new middle power status of Azerbaijan is analysed within the framework of various definitions of this category. In addition, given that middle powers are more actively involved in international politics while developing instruments for implementing their foreign policies, the article also conducts an analysis of the directions Azerbaijan has developed to achieve this.

### *Theoretical Definition of a Middle Power*

The definition of power is a cornerstone of the central paradigm of international relations – realism. Other schools in this discipline also pay special attention to this definition. Therefore, in this article, various aspects of the understanding of power, including the classification of countries by their potential as great, middle, and small powers, are thoroughly explored. Tom Crowards, a prominent figure in the field of international relations, conducted a quantitative analysis to classify approximately 190 states according to their potential. His research, which classified all the countries by their area, population, and GDP, is a significant contribution to our understanding of power dynamics. Crowards’ work classified 79 countries as being “small”, 75 as “middle”, and 34 as “great”, with the GDP of each country being a key aspect in determining small and medium powers.<sup>3</sup>

If we review the concept of middle power from the point of view of theoretical designation, then there is no exact definition for this category of countries. Therefore, it is easier to conduct a comparative analysis with other categories of countries defined in the format of power. In

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provides theoretical generalizations for the optimal foreign policy of small forces and also provides examples of the foreign policy of the countries of the South Caucasus.

3 Crowards, T., “Defining the Category of ‘Small’ States”, *Journal of International Development*, 14, No 03, (2002), p. 168.

short, the great powers of international relations are countries that influence global politics. Most often, great powers are countries with a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, with the right of veto. These are the U.S., the Russian Federation, Great Britain, China, and France. Currently, the U.S. is defined as the only remaining superpower in the world (following the collapse of the Soviet Union). Countries in this category have significant political, military, and economic influence on the world arena. Moreover, countries belonging to this group have nuclear weapons in their possession. Although nuclear potential is considered necessary to appear as a great power in the modern international system, the presence of nuclear weapons is nevertheless not a sign that a state is a great power (e.g. Pakistan and India).

Still, nuclear potential brings these countries to the forefront among middle powers. Thus, the category of middle power includes countries with very different potentials and capabilities. Some of these countries have a small territory and population. For example, Israel, which has a small territory (20,770 km<sup>2</sup>; according to this indicator, it occupies only 148th place among 193 countries) and population (9.8 million people, 96<sup>th</sup> place in the world), but still plays a very significant role in the Middle East region.

In short, countries in the category of middle power are those states that are a step behind the great powers but still have a vast influence (at regional or interregional level) in world politics. These states have the potential to implement large-scale diplomatic and economic activities, and some (such as Türkiye) also have military influence abroad.

The countries of the Global North, such as Australia, Canada, and South Korea, as well as the countries of the Global South – Argentina, Brazil, and Indonesia – are among those in leading positions within the category of middle power.<sup>4</sup> Leading countries in the middle power category usually have a large swath of territory (except for South Korea), a large number of population, as well as a large economy. Thus, for convenience in defining a middle power, countries with a small territory, small population, and small economy are mostly classified as small powers. However, a small size of territory and a small population are yet insufficient to define whether the country is a small power or

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4 World Economic Forum, Middle Powers: What are They and Why do They Matter?, January 24, 2024, Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/01/middle-powers-multilateralism-international-relations/>, (Accessed: May 15, 2024).

not. If a country with a small territory and a small population has great economic potential, it can be included in the category of middle powers. Tom Cowards, when categorizing countries by their GDP, defines Burundi, Eritrea, and Haiti, which have large populations, as small powers. At the same time, in his definition structure, Slovenia and Kuwait, which have tiny populations, are presented as medium powers.<sup>5</sup>

In defining the differences between the categories of small and middle powers, David Vital, in short, considers the presence or absence of material resources in a country to be an essential factor in determining which power category this state belongs to. He also emphasizes the importance of population. Thus, according to Vital, small powers cannot fully act as full-fledged independent members of international society due to limited human and material resources.<sup>6</sup> However, he does not imply this factor from a legal point of view, as all actors in international relations in this regard are legally equal; that is to say, it is the lack of resources that prevents these countries fully implementing activities to meet their national interests. Maurice A. East makes a significant contribution to the definition of small powers and, therefore, the designation of middle powers. East relies on four factors as the basis for defining small powers: a small power is a state with a small territory, a small population, a low GDP, and insignificant military potential.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Vital, East gives a more detailed definition of the term ‘material resources’ and divides them into two groups: economic and military potential.

Bernard Wood, a representative of the Realist School of International Relations, believes in using the size of a country’s GDP and its military expenditure to classify its “power”. If a country’s economy is small and its military expenditure is insignificant and unable fulfilling its security needs independently, then this country is classified as a small power.<sup>8</sup>

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5 Cowards, *ibid.*, p. 168.

6 Vital, D., “The Inequality of the States: A study of Small Power in International Relations”, in *Small States in International Relations*, ed. Jessica Beyer et al, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2006, p. 77.

7 East, M. A., “Size and Foreign Policy Behavior: A Test of Two Models”, *World Politics*, 25, No 4, 1973, p. 557.

8 Kohei, I., “Comparative Middle Power Analysis: Turkey and Japan”, MEI, November 7, 2013, Available at: [https://www.mei.edu/publications/comparative-middle-power-diplomacies-turkey-and-japan#\\_edn2](https://www.mei.edu/publications/comparative-middle-power-diplomacies-turkey-and-japan#_edn2) (Accessed: December 12, 2020).

A country's economic capabilities, and the military potential backed by these, are essential criteria for categorizing the differences between small and middle powers. Based on this definition, we have to distinguish between small and middle powers. The lack of the necessary economic and political potential leads to a situation in which small countries cannot ensure their own security independently based solely on their own resources. These countries usually need the support of powerful allies to realize this goal. That can either be through a group of small powers that coordinate their efforts in a common direction or with the support of a great power.

However, the support of a great power is not a constant and unchangeable process. The great powers often build their policy of support not on the desires or needs of a small power, but rather on their own national interests. Since these interests are often dynamic, over time, a small power may lose this support at any point. As for consolidating the efforts of several small powers, their potential may be insufficient to ensure individual and collective security in grave situations. Due to their limited economic and military capabilities, small powers are more accommodating when compromises are needed to resolve disagreements or conflicts. In addition, small states have fewer alternatives and less manoeuvrability when making political decisions. As a result, the degree of vulnerability of small powers in the international arena is comparatively higher than that of the medium powers – and much greater than that of great powers.

Middle powers are, compared to small powers, more proactive in their approach. They have the ability (albeit not all of them) to neutralize most external actions that do not align with their national interests. These countries, at a minimum, will seek ways to resolve an undesirable scenario, reassuring themselves of their ability to handle external actions.

Eduard Jordaan makes a very ambitious statement regarding middle powers. He believes that all middle powers demonstrate foreign policy behaviour that stabilizes and legitimizes the world order, usually through multilateral and joint initiatives.<sup>9</sup>

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9 Jordaan, E., "The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers", *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies*, Volume 30, Issue 1, 2003, p. 165.

After the Second World War, due to the decolonization process, the number of states in the world increased and, today, the number of countries has reached 193 (UN members). These new states, which also actively shape the agenda of international politics, are all, without exception, small and medium powers. In modern international relations, as the system is transformed, the role of these states also increases. Azerbaijan is one of those countries that is increasingly active in the global arena.

*Energy Projects as a Tool for Creating New Opportunities for Azerbaijan*

Despite all the difficulties, several months after the conclusion of the ceasefire agreement with Armenia in May 1994, and the beginning of a relatively stable situation in Azerbaijan, on September 20, 1994, Baku signed an agreement that later became known as the ‘Contract of the Century’ with international energy companies. Along with Western companies, Azerbaijan also managed to attract Russia’s Lukoil to the project, which was of high significance in terms of pacifying Russia and its reaction.<sup>10</sup> At this stage, the main task was to attract as many energy companies from different countries as possible.<sup>11</sup> Signing this agreement was not easy, as Russia was initially against the penetration of Western companies into the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea region. Russia, therefore, provided military support to Armenia in the conflict and also supported coup attempts against the second and third presidents of Azerbaijan for the purpose of pressuring official Baku. Only the third president, Heydar Aliyev, managed to achieve what Azerbaijan’s first and second presidents, Ayaz Mutalibov and Abulfaz Elchibey, were unable to do.<sup>12</sup> The policy of balance in Azerbaijan’s foreign policy course thus originated from within the energy projects. These same projects eventually turned Azerbaijan into an interregional actor. For Azerbaijan, signing this agreement was, alongside its promising economic benefits, more a matter of geopolitical importance.

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10 Ibrahimov, R., “Azerbaijan’s Energy History and Policy: From Past till Our Days”, in R. Ibrahimov, *Energy and Azerbaijan: History, Strategy and Cooperation*, Baku: SAM 2013 (a), p. 23.

11 Ipek, P., “Azerbaijan’s Foreign Policy and Challenges for Energy Security”, *Middle East Journal*, 63, No 2, Spring, 2009, p. 233.

12 Ibrahimov, R., *ibid*, 2013 (a), pp. 21-23.

Within the framework of the Contract of the Century, Azerbaijan, together with Western energy companies from seven countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, Norway, Scotland, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia, agreed to develop its largest oil field, Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli, in the Caspian Sea, with a total volume of one million tons of oil.<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that, although Azerbaijan initially considered the development of the field mainly as a source of economic income, signing the agreement fulfilled the requirements of geoeconomic reality and the formation of a policy of balance of power. Thus, Azerbaijan managed to attract companies from different countries, including Russia (the primary opponent in implementing this project) into the international consortium developing this project. Despite protests from official Moscow regarding the signing of the agreement, Lukoil took a place in the consortium, which subsequently became one of the factors that allowed Russia to soften its position.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan limited SOCAR's share to 20% when the contract was signed. Subsequently, 5% of the shares were transferred to Turkish company TPAO. Azerbaijan proposed to transfer another 5% to the Iranian national oil company, NIOC, to ensure balance across the entire region. Thus, all prominent actors in the region would have access to the project. However, the United States strongly opposed this. As a result, that 5% was transferred to another American company, Exxon Mobil.<sup>15</sup> Thus, SOCAR's share was reduced to 10%. During these years, the members of the consortium and their shares changed regularly, and so did the shares of SOCAR. After some time, when SOCAR's financial capabilities improved and the project began to acquire a more geoeconomic colouring, the national company began to increase its share in the project. As of 2024, after acquiring another 7.27% of the shares of Norwegian company Equinor at the end of 2023, SOCAR's share increased to 32.27%,<sup>16</sup> making it the largest shareholder in this deposit.

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13 Ibrahimov, R., "Azerbaijan Oil Production as a Main Locomotive of State Economy", Çankiri Karatekin Üniversitesi Uluslararası Avrasya Strateji Dergisi, Vol. 1, No1, 2012, p. 64.

14 Ibrahimov, R., *ibid*, 2013 (a), p. 23.

15 Le Vine, Steve, *The Oil and the Glory: The Pursuit of Empire and Fortune on the Caspian Sea*, New York, Random House, 2007, p. 352.

16 Interfax.ru, *Norvejskaya Equinor Prodaet SOCAR Ostavshiesya Aktivi v Azerbaydjane*, December 22, 2023, Available at: <https://www.interfax.ru/business/937573> (Accessed: April 13, 2024).

### *Shaping the Geopolitics of Pipelines*

The signing of the agreements was only the first stage of the formation of a balanced policy that would allow Azerbaijan to conduct its foreign policy more independently, relying solely on national interests. Taking into consideration that Azerbaijan is a landlocked country (with no access to the open sea), the export of oil and natural gas resources could only be possible through pipelines passing through the territories of neighbouring countries. Under such circumstances, it was essential to determine the correct route to prevent unwanted political and economic dependence on those neighbouring countries, which could use the transit factor in their interests. Then the Russian Government, after failing to prevent the signing of the Contract of the Century, wanted oil transportation to be carried out specifically through its territory. However, the U.S. government began to show an active interest when Azerbaijan was in the process of determining the direction of export transport corridors for access to world markets and Russia. Given the broad representation of American companies in this project, the United States wanted its companies to feel comfortable at all stages of the activity, from exploration to oil export. The first conflict of interest between Russia and the United States on this issue began to manifest itself when the pipeline route for the export of 'early oil' was being determined. At that time, two route options were proposed, both beginning in Baku and with endpoints at two exits at Russia's Black Sea port of Novorossiysk and Georgia's Supsa. The first route was lobbied for by Russia, which believed that, if this option were chosen, the main volumes of oil from Azerbaijan would subsequently be transported through its territory. The United States supported the second option. The task for the government of Azerbaijan was not easy: it was necessary not to complicate relations with either side. Moreover, the Yeltsin government was unfriendly towards Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan believed that choosing a route in favour of one of the parties could worsen relations with these actors. At the same time, relations with Russia at that period were initially complex, and official Baku had no desire to complicate them even more. However, choosing the Russian route meant falling under dependence on its northern neighbour. When Russia launched a large-scale military operation in Chechnya, a separatist region located in the North Caucasus, in September 1994,



its borders with Azerbaijan and Georgia were closed. At that time, 70% of all Azerbaijan's exports were transported to third countries through Russia. The border closure meant that Azerbaijani industry was functioning at only 5% of its potential, and 30% of the products produced were unsold and had to be stored in warehouses. The border was closed not only because of the conflict, but also for the purpose of putting pressure on Azerbaijan.<sup>17</sup>

As for the United States, it was the participation of American companies that first attracted the attention of this country to Azerbaijan, which initially had no particular interest in the region. It was for this reason that lobbying by the Armenian diaspora succeeded in 1992 in pushing through (in a half-empty Congress) Section 907 of the United States Freedom Support Act, which introduced a ban on state aid to the government of Azerbaijan, except specific support for non-proliferation and disarmament. Between 1992 and 2002, Azerbaijan did not receive aid from the United States. Only since 2002 has the U.S. president waived the Section 907 restrictions annually, authorizing aid on certain conditions.<sup>18</sup> This became operationally possible after the events of September 11, 2001, when Azerbaijan provided access to its territory for the transportation of goods to facilitate logistics for the U.S. and its allies participating in the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> The situation began to change only after the participation of American companies in the development of oil fields in Azerbaijan. As a result, the government of Azerbaijan decided to accept both route options in order to maintain parity in relations with both actors.<sup>20</sup> This was in complete agreement with Azerbaijan's emerging policy of balance. Soon, both oil pipelines, Baku–Novorossiysk and Baku–Supsa, began operations. That is to say, Azerbaijani oil was exported through both Russia and Georgia. Although the transit fees for deliveries through the Russian pipeline were five times higher than those for Baku–Supsa (US\$15.67 per ton versus US\$3 per ton),<sup>21</sup> Azerbaijan had to act as it judged the

17 Ibrahimov, R., "Azerbaijan Energy Strategy and the Importance of the Diversification of Exported Transport Routes", *Journal of Qafqaz University*, November 29, 2010, p. 25.

18 Gao.gov, US Government Accountability Office, *Foreign Assistance: Agencies Should Take Steps to Improve Reporting on Assistance to the Government of Azerbaijan*, March 2, 2022, Available at: <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104619>, (Accessed: April 14, 2024).

19 Official Site of NATO, "NATO Relations with Azerbaijan", September 28, 2023, Available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49111.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49111.htm) (Accessed: April 14, 2024).

20 Ibrahimov, R., *op.cit.*, 2010, pp. 23-26.

21 Ibrahimov, R., *op.cit.*, 2010, p. 25.

geopolitical realities at this early stage of its energy strategy.

The commissioning of the Baku–Supsa oil pipeline in April 1999 was a significant geopolitical move. It allowed Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic, to export its oil directly to world markets, bypassing Russian territory. This strategic decision was influenced by geopolitical considerations, marking a shift in Azerbaijan’s energy strategy.

As oil production increased at the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli fields, it was also necessary to determine the main route for oil exports. At the peak of production, exports were expected to reach about 50 million tons per year, and the Baku–Novorossiysk and Baku–Supsa oil pipelines could not cope with these volumes. For obvious reasons, the Russian direction of transportation was unprofitable for Azerbaijan and undesirable for many consortium members. Azerbaijan did not want to grant Armenia a chance of hosting a new pipeline to transit gas to Türkiye as this country occupied some territories of Azerbaijan at that time. Meanwhile, the U.S. was against transportation through the territory of Iran.

Therefore, one of the best options for exporting oil was the construction of a new pipeline that would pass through countries (Georgia and Türkiye) that were both friendly to Azerbaijan and members of the consortium, with access to the port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean Sea. However, the construction of such a pipeline required political will and support from the U.S. government, and this was personally and officially provided by the Clinton administration.<sup>22</sup> Heydar Aliyev, who laid the foundations of the country’s energy strategy and is considered an author of the balanced approach in foreign policy, was not destined to witness the practical implementation of this oil pipeline, as he passed away in 2003. However, this project facilitated stability within the country and the development of subsequent national goals. The fourth president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, the son of Heydar Aliyev and a follower of his policies, had the opportunity to participate in the opening ceremony of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline.

### ***Gas Pipelines and the New Reality***

Following the BTC pipeline, a decision was made to build the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline after large gas deposits were

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<sup>22</sup> Ibrahimov, R., op.cit, 2013 (a), p. 36.

discovered at the Shah Deniz field. The significance of Shah Deniz is that this field is located closer to European markets when compared with Russian and Middle Eastern fields. At the same time, this field is considered an alternative gas source for Europe. The BTE gas pipeline was built in 2006 and became operational for the export of natural gas to the markets of Georgia and Türkiye. For Türkiye, it became a significant alternative gas source. Azerbaijan began exporting its gas to Georgia when Russia's Gazprom raised the gas price to \$235 per 1,000 cubic meters (twice as much as the previous year) in January 2007. This was a heavy burden for the economy of Georgia. Azerbaijan's gas began to flow to the Georgian market for \$120 per 1,000 cubic meters.<sup>23</sup>

As the fields developed and gas production consequently increased, it was decided to create the necessary infrastructure with appropriate volume capacity for the export of Azerbaijani gas to Europe. By 2020, the construction of the \$45 billion Southern Gas Corridor was completed, which included the expansion of the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline, the construction of the Trans Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP) across the entire territory of Türkiye to its western border, and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) through the territories of Greece and Albania to Italy, with a branch (Interconnector Greece–Bulgaria) to Bulgaria through the territory of Greece.<sup>24</sup>

The month of November 2020 was marked in Azerbaijan not only by victory in the '44-Day War' (on November 10, 2020), but also by the start of natural gas exports via the TAP gas pipeline (November 15, 2020).<sup>25</sup> These two significant events in Azerbaijan's foreign policy are related to its geopolitical and geoeconomic vision. This project also allowed Azerbaijan to establish interregional relations among the countries of the South Caucasus, the southern Black Sea region, and the southern flank of the European Union. Moreover, Azerbaijan acted as the main initiator of this project. It is the participation and consent of Azerbaijan in the implementation of such projects that makes them possible. For comparison, the 'Nabucco gas pipeline project', which

23 Rferl.org, Georgia To Receive Natural Gas from Azerbaijan, January 10, 2007, Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1073915.html> (Accessed: April 25, 2024)

24 Bankwatch Network, Southern Gas Corridor, Available at: <https://bankwatch.org/project/southern-gas-corridor-euro-caspian-mega-pipeline> (Accessed: April 25, 2024).

25 Gurkov, A., Tap i Yujniy Gazoviy Koridor v Obhod Rossii Voshli v Sroy, November 17, 2020, Available at: <https://www.dw.com/ru/tap-i-juzhnyj-gazoviy-koridor-v-obhod-rossii-voshli-v-sroj/a-55631331> (Accessed: April 25, 2024).

was supposed to connect the countries producing natural gas in the Caspian basin with European markets through Türkiye, was not implemented because Azerbaijan refused to participate,<sup>26</sup> as it did not meet its national interests, nor was it commercially appealing.

An important point for the growth of Azerbaijan's gas exports to Europe was the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the EU and Azerbaijan on July 18, 2022, in Baku. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev agreed to double the volume of Azerbaijan's gas exports to Europe from 8 billion cubic meters annually in 2021 to 20 billion cubic meters a year by 2027.<sup>27</sup> Azerbaijan has the potential to increase its natural gas exports thanks, in addition to the Shah Deniz field, to other gas fields such as Absheron, Umid, Babak, Shafak, Asiman, and Garabagh, as well as the deep layers of the Azeri–Chirag–Guneshli field. The number of countries where Azerbaijani gas is supplied is expected to grow. Azerbaijani gas has already been provided to Serbia via Hungary; since September 2024, Azerbaijani gas has been supplied to Croatia;<sup>28</sup> and, in the future, it may be supplied to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro.<sup>29</sup> Albania will receive Azerbaijani gas in 2025–2026.<sup>30</sup>

Azerbaijan also has reached an agreement to start or increase gas exports to countries such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.<sup>31</sup> On April 25, 2023, these five countries signed an MoU in Sofia concerning the implementation of the Solidarity Ring (STRING) gas corridor project. Cross-border infrastructure will be developed for the purpose of supplying Azerbaijani natural gas to these countries. Even before this, from the end of 2023, Azerbaijan had already started exporting gas

26 Ibid.

27 EU Commission, “European Commission, Statement by President von der Leyen with Azerbaijani President Aliyev”, July, 18, 2022, Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/statement\\_22\\_4583](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/statement_22_4583) (Accessed: April 26, 2024).

28 AzerTac, SOCAR Nachala Postavki Gaza v Xorvatiyu, September 2, 2024, Available at: [https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/socar\\_nachala\\_postavki\\_gaza\\_v\\_xorvatiyu-3160818](https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/socar_nachala_postavki_gaza_v_xorvatiyu-3160818) (Accessed: September 15, 2024).

29 Dovgal, V., “Azerbaijan Wants Certainty From EU on Gas Needs”, Argus Media, April 27, 2024, Available at: <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news-and-insights/latest-market-news/2562870-azerbaijan-wants-certainty-from-eu-on-gas-needs> (Accessed: April 29, 2024).

30 A'Hearn, B., “Azerbaijan to supply gas to Albania in 2025-26”, Argus Media, May 1, 2024, Available at: <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news-and-insights/latest-market-news/2543198-azerbaijan-to-supply-gas-to-albania-in-2025-26> (Accessed: May 2, 2024).

31 Apnews.com, European Countries, Azerbaijan Agree to Boost Gas Transfers, April 25, 2023, Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/europe-azerbaijan-gas-bulgaria-romania-hungary-slovakia-a0ae5e90dbb7b87b7b81afb3acd3455a> (Accessed: April 25, 2024).

to Hungary (initially, 100 million cubic meters, with a possible increase to 2 billion cubic meters)<sup>32</sup> and Romania.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to natural gas, Azerbaijan plans to export green energy (energy generated from alternative energy sources, mainly solar and wind) to Europe in the future. In this regard, on December 17, 2022, Bucharest, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary, and Romania signed an agreement on a strategic partnership for developing and delivering green energy. The parties agreed to build a power cable with a capacity of 1 GW and a length of 1,195 km for transporting electrical energy across the bottom of the Black Sea.<sup>34</sup>

### ***SOCAR: The Main Agent for the Implementation of Azerbaijan's Geoeconomic Policy***

Azerbaijan's national energy company SOCAR has become a leading entity for implementing the country's geoeconomic policy abroad. At the same time, SOCAR is also the largest investor in some countries where this company is implementing projects. It is actively represented in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea regions, as well as several other European countries. The Black Sea has become an internal sea of interests of the company, which plays an active role in forming inter-regional relations and is represented in all the countries of this region.

SOCAR is widely represented in the **Georgian** market (through its subsidiary SOCAR Energy Georgia, established in 2006), where it is engaged in gas distribution activities covering more than 800,000 domestic consumers, has a vast network of gas stations (110 gas stations, as well as 13 service stations and four oil terminals), and, since 2008, has been operating a terminal in the Black Sea port of Kulevi for the export of oil products. Meanwhile, the company is the largest taxpayer in Georgia.<sup>35</sup>

32 Shahin, U., "Azerbaijan to Start Supplying Gas to Hungary via Turkiye", Azernews, February 19, 2024, Available at: [https://www.azernews.az/oil\\_and\\_gas/222029.html](https://www.azernews.az/oil_and_gas/222029.html) (Accessed: April 25, 2024).

33 Turan.az, Romania is a New Gateway for Azerbaijani Gas to Europe, April 1, 2024, Available at: <https://turan.az/en/europe/romania-is-a-new-gateway-for-azerbaijani-gas-to-europe-778909> (Accessed: April 25, 2024).

34 TASS.ru, Gruzija, Azerbydjan, Vengriya i Ruminiya Sozdadut Kompaniyu po Pokradke Podvodnogo Kabelya, March 1, 2024, Available at: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/20133503> (Accessed: April 11, 2024).

35 SOCAR.ge, SOCAR in Georgia, Official Site of SOCAR Georgia, Available at: <https://socar.ge/en/about-company/> (Accessed: April 3, 2024).

Along with Georgia, SOCAR has expanded activities in **Türkiye**, where it is the largest investor. SOCAR started its activities in this country by acquiring the leading shareholding in privatized Petkim, Türkiye's largest petrochemical company. Over time, the company's activities have become even broader. SOCAR works through three separate business units:

Refinery and Petrochemicals, with the companies Petkim, STAR Refinery, SOCAR Storage, SOCAR Trade, and Petkim RES;

Natural Gas: SOCAR Energy Trade, Bursagaz, and Kayserigaz; and

Portfolio Management: Millenicom, SOCAR Terminal, SOCAR Fiber, SOCAR Re-De, SOCAR Insurance, and TANAP.

SOCAR is the main shareholder (58%) in the TANAP gas pipeline and also the main refueller at the new international airport in Istanbul. The total investments of this company in Türkiye amount to about \$18 billion.<sup>36</sup>

As for **Romania**, the company started operating in 2011. Currently, 75 fuel stations are operating under the SOCAR brand.<sup>37</sup>

Since 2012, SOCAR has been operating in **Switzerland** after acquiring assets from ExxonMobil. There are about 200 fuel stations in this country, specializing in traditional fuel and refuelling with electricity and hydrogen. The company also has wholesale points for the sale of petroleum products.<sup>38</sup>

SOCAR Energy Austria Operating Company GmbH and SOCAR Energy Switzerland GmbH are wholly owned subsidiaries of SOCAR Energy Holdings AG in Zurich. In January 2018, SOCAR acquired the fuel station operator A1 and it has more than 82 fuel stations in **Austria**. The first petrol station under the SOCAR brand was opened in Graz in July 2019.<sup>39</sup>

The company has four modernized oil depots in **Ukraine** that store

36 SOCAR.com.tr, Bir Bakışta SOCAR Türkiye, Official Site of SOCAR Türkiye, Available at: <https://www.socar.com.tr/bir-bakista-socar> (Accessed: April 3, 2024).

37 SOCAR.ro, SOCAR Stations in Romania, Official Site of SOCAR Romania, Available at: <https://socar.ro/en/socar-stations/> (Accessed: May 4, 2024).

38 SOCARENERGY.ch, SOCAR Energy Switzerland, Official Site of SOCAR Switzerland, Available at: <https://www.socarenergy.ch/en/socar-energy-switzerland.html> (Accessed: May 4, 2024).

39 SOCARENERGY.at, SOCAR Energy Austria, Official Site of SOCAR Austria, Available at: <https://socarenergy.at/de-ch/ueber-socar.html> (Accessed: May 4, 2024).

petroleum products. There are 60 gas stations in the country, 12 of which also offer electricity.<sup>40</sup> SOCAR has built representative offices in 13 different countries. Moreover, the company has founded international trading companies in Singapore, Vietnam, Nigeria, and Switzerland and acquired assets in Greece.<sup>41</sup> In 2023, the company opened a representative office in **Bulgaria**, where it also plans to engage in gas distribution activities.<sup>42</sup>

SOCAR is seeking to expand its activities in other countries, too. In October 2023, SOCAR, together with BP and Israeli NewMed, won a tender and received a licence for exploration works in the north of Israel's Leviathan gas field.<sup>43</sup> Engagement in the exploitation of fields outside the territory of Azerbaijan is a new direction for the company.

Another very interesting direction in the activities of SOCAR is the possible transit of natural gas through the territory of Ukraine. The gas transit agreement between Russia's Gazprom and Ukraine's Naftogaz expires on December 31, 2024, and the Ukrainian government does not intend to further extend it.<sup>44</sup> At this stage, Ukraine and Russia are negotiating with Azerbaijan for the latter to facilitate the continuation of supplies through Ukraine's territory so that Ukraine's transport system will not be paralyzed and countries such as Austria will not face problems with their natural gas supplies.<sup>45</sup> This aspect became possible only because Azerbaijan has its own perception of the conflict in Ukraine and remains neutral. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev maintains strong relations with the leaders of both Russia and Ukraine.

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40 SOCAR.ua, SOCAR Energy Ukraine, Official Site of SOCAR Ukraine, Available at: <https://socar.ua/ru/socar-today> (Accessed: May 4, 2024).

41 SOCAR.ro, SOCAR Stations in Romania, op.cit.

42 Commerciant.ge, SOCAR Plans to Expand its Business in Bulgaria, May 9, 2024, Available at: <https://commerciant.ge/en/news/world/socar-plans-to-expand-its-business-in-bulgaria> (Accessed: May 11, 2024).

43 Rabinovitch, A., and Scheer, S., "Israel Awards Gas Exploration Licences to Eni, BP and Four Others", Reuters, Available at: October 30, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/israel-awards-gas-exploration-licences-eni-bp-four-others-2023-10-29/> (Accessed: May 4, 2024).

44 Korochkina, A., "SMI Uznali o Planax EC Zakluchit Noviy Kontrakt s "Gazpromom" posle 2024 goda", Forbes, July 3, 2024, Available at: <https://www.forbes.ru/biznes/516097-smi-uznali-o-planax-es-zakluchit-noviy-kontrakt-s-gazpromom-posle-2024-goda> (Accessed: September 15, 2024).

45 Energypolicy, Energeticheskaya Politika, Rossiya, Ukraina i Azerbaydjan Vedut Peregovori po Tranzity Gaza v Evropu s 2025 Goda, September 6, 2024, Available at: <https://energypolicy.ru/rossiya-ukraina-i-azerbaydzhjan-vedut-peregovory-po-tranzitu-gaza-v-evropu-s-2025-g/novosti/2024/15/06/> (Accessed: September 15, 2024).



### *Resolution of the Conflict and Transition to the Category of Middle Power*

Today, Azerbaijan could already be assessed as a middle power in terms of achieving its geo-economic goals. However, for years it was hard to assign this status to Azerbaijan when the country was in conflict with Armenia, had not yet restored its territorial integrity, and could not ensure its security on its own.

Arguably, the [former] Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict had the greatest influence on the formation of independent Azerbaijan. Certainly, this conflict became decisive in structuring the state and the public perception of Azerbaijan’s further development and shaping virtually all spheres of the country.

Before Azerbaijan liberated its territories by military means in 2020, endless negotiations were held between the two countries, either with the mediation of the OSCE Minsk Group, represented by the co-chairs of the United States, Russia, and France; with the mediation of Russia; or in a bilateral format. However, no results were achieved during those negotiations and the status quo formed after 1994 had remained unchanged. The main guarantors of the status quo were the Great Powers, that is, the co-chair countries of the OSCE Minsk Group who, surprisingly for these countries, had a rare united opinion on this issue. They did not want another military conflict to flare up<sup>46</sup> and were interested in maintaining the status quo for different reasons. Even though Azerbaijan had the right to self-defence according to international norms (namely Article 51 of the UN Charter, as well as four UN Security Council Resolutions 822, 853, 874, and 884, adopted from April 30 to November 12, 1993), in the absence of appropriate favourable conditions, the use of force to solve that problem would not have yielded the expected results at a time when Azerbaijan was unready and the geopolitical conditions were not yet met.

As a small power, Azerbaijan recognized the necessity of considering the interests of great powers, particularly that of Russia in the South Caucasus region. Georgia’s experience with Russia’s swift and forceful response in 2008 underscored the need for strategic thinking and the

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46 Sputniknews.ru, Kakim Viditsya Budushee Otnosheniy Azerbaydjana i Rossii – Markedonov, January 5, 2021, Available at: <https://az.sputniknews.ru/news/20210105/425851582/azerbaijan-russia-zapad-karabakh.html> (Accessed: September 15, 2024).



far-reaching implications of miscalculations in foreign policy.<sup>47</sup> In the case of Georgia in 2008, the West's engagement was limited to verbal statements of condemnation. Azerbaijan realized that having sufficient military potential is not the only factor for restoring territorial integrity and, without support and the emergence of the necessary conditions, such as international recognition and diplomatic negotiations, it would be difficult for this small power to resolve the conflict.

Given Georgia's reality and negative experiences, Azerbaijan had few tools that could be developed independently without dependence on external factors. So, what was possible?

Firstly, for three decades, Azerbaijan continued to build a modern army, equipped with advanced weaponry and trained in modern warfare tactics, and developed its defence industry, focusing on the production of high-tech military equipment and the enhancement of its cyber and electronic warfare capabilities. Azerbaijan's defence spending also increased. On average, between 2012 and 2020, up to 4% of the country's GDP was spent on the army's needs. The lowest figure was observed in 2018 (3.56% of GDP) and the highest in 2015 (5.46% of GDP).<sup>48</sup> In this way, Azerbaijan strengthened its military potential while forcing Armenia to spare funding for military needs from its limited state budget. By doing so, Azerbaijan contributed to Armenia's economic weakening, as other sectors in that country did not receive the necessary financial backing. To a certain extent, this policy was successful. From 2012, when military spending amounted to 3.58% of GDP, Armenia had to increase its military budget. It reached its highest point in 2020 at 4.98%. On average, between 2012 and 2020, Armenia allocated just over 4% of GDP to military and defence needs.<sup>49</sup> The degree of militarization of Azerbaijan and Armenia's expenditures can be better understood if they are compared to the average spending of European Union countries: EU member states spent 1.3% of their GDP on defence needs in 2022.<sup>50</sup>

47 Lenta.ru, Rossiya Priznala Nezavisimost Abkhazii i Yujnoy Osetii, August 28, 2008, Available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2008/08/26/medvedev/> (Accessed: September 16, 2024).

48 Statista, Azerbaijan: Ratio of Military Spending to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 2012 to 2022, Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/810328/ratio-of-military-expenditure-to-gross-domestic-product-gdp-azerbaijan/> (Accessed: October 25, 2024).

49 Statista, Armenia: Ratio of Military Spending to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 2012 to 2022, Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/810319/ratio-of-military-expenditure-to-gross-domestic-product-gdp-armenia/> (Accessed: October 25, 2024).

50 Eurostat, Government Expenditure on Defence, Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/>

Another instrument of pressure on Armenia was the deliberate isolation of the country from regional projects. This strategic move, initiated in the late 1990s, significantly impacted Armenia's geopolitical position, underlining the gravity of the situation. For instance, at the conference on the revival of the Great Silk Road held in Baku in 1998 within the framework of the EU TRACECA programme, Azerbaijan amended the Final Agreement, stipulating that, until the resolution of the conflict, cargo from Armenia, heading to Armenia, or crossing the territory of that country would not have the right to cross the territory of Azerbaijan.<sup>51</sup> Thus, Azerbaijan, within the framework of TRACECA, limited Armenia's participation in the fourth European transport corridor passing through Türkiye and Georgia.<sup>52</sup>

Also, despite the fact that the route through Armenia is shorter and commercially more attractive, the main pipelines for the export of oil (Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan) and gas (Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum) were laid through the territory of Georgia.<sup>53</sup> For the same reason, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway,<sup>54</sup> which made it possible to connect the rail routes of Europe and Asia, also passed through the territory of Georgia. During the Soviet period, there was a railway connection between Türkiye and Armenia,<sup>55</sup> which ceased to operate after Türkiye closed its border with this country in solidarity with Azerbaijan in the early 1990s. The new railway was also intended to remove the temptation to reopen the railroad between Türkiye and Armenia. This railway route existed since Soviet times and was closed from the Turkish side in 1992 after Armenia occupied the Kalbajar region of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan also made efforts to prevent Armenia from benefiting from another transport project – the North–South Transport Corridor, initiated

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statistics-explained/index.php?title=Government\_expenditure\_on\_defence (Accessed: October 15, 2024).

51 TRACECA.org, Basic Multilateral Agreement on International Transport for Development of the Europe-the Caucasus-Asia Corridor, Baku, September 9, 1998, p.6, Available at: [http://www.traceca-org.org/fileadmin/fm-dam/pdfs/til\\_mla/MLA\\_English\\_with\\_ammdments.pdf](http://www.traceca-org.org/fileadmin/fm-dam/pdfs/til_mla/MLA_English_with_ammdments.pdf) (Accessed: September 16, 2024).

52 Ibrahimov, Rovshan, op.cit, 2013 (a), p. 53.

53 Ibrahimov, R., “Turkish-Azerbaijani Energy Relations: Significant Leverage in the Implementation of the Foreign Policy Interests of Both Countries”, *Insight Turkey*, 17, No 2, 2015, p. 85.

54 Ibrahimov, R., “The Development of the Transport Sector in Azerbaijan: The Implementation and Challenges”, *Caucasus International*, Volume 6, No 1, Summer, 2016, pp. 106-107.

55 Ibrahimov, R., *EU External Policy Towards the South Caucasus: How far is it From Realization?*, Baku, *Strateji Arashdirmalar Merkezi*, 2013, p. 140.

by Russia, Iran, and India in 2000. Azerbaijan actively modernized the rail tracks and roads on its section and began building the necessary transport infrastructure for this purpose.

Along with strengthening Azerbaijan's military potential and weakening Armenia's economic position, Azerbaijan continued negotiations with Armenia, hoping to resolve the conflict peacefully. However, Armenia postponed the resolution of disagreements and occasionally carried out provocations on the [former] line of contact between the military forces of both countries, leading to an escalation of the level of tension. Eventually, this led to the short military skirmishes between the armed forces of Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2016, later dubbed the 'Four-Day War'. For the first time since 1994, Azerbaijan was able to change the long-standing status quo and managed to liberate a certain part of its territories. The events of 2016 became a harbinger of a larger military operation.

Another escalation of the situation occurred on the Armenia–Azerbaijan border in July 2020. As a result of shelling from the Armenian side, several high-ranking officers of the Azerbaijani army were killed, including Major General Polad Hashimov, who was widely popular in Azerbaijan.<sup>56</sup> The events on the border achieved broad resonance in the capital, Baku, where, despite the lockdown restrictions imposed due to the coronavirus, an unauthorized rally was held in support of the army and demanding mobilization for the liberation of the Armenian-occupied territories.<sup>57</sup>

In response to another military provocation, Azerbaijan's Armed Forces launched counter-offensive operations on September 27, 2020, which eventually turned into a large-scale war lasting 44 days. During the course of the war, the Azerbaijani army managed to restore the country's territorial integrity in many areas. A significant milestone was the return of the city of Shusha on November 8, 2020. In addition to the symbolic and strategic significance of Shusha for Azerbaijan, its liberation also became a point of no return, after which Armenia, finally realizing that it was facing an inevitable defeat, agreed to the terms of the Trilateral

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56 Mishutin, G., "Perestrelki na Armyano-Azerbaydjanskom Granitse ne Prekrashayutsya", *Vedomosti.ru*, July 15, 2020, Available at: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2020/07/14/834579-perestrelki-ne-prekraschayutsya> (Accessed: May 15, 2024).

57 BBC, *Protesti v Baku: tisyachi azerbaydjantsev ustroili aktsiyu v podderjku armii*, July 15, 2020, Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/media-53421189> (Accessed: May 15, 2024).

Statement to terminate the war, which was proposed with the mediation of Russia. As a result, on the night of November 9 to 10, three countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia) signed the Trilateral Statement. The document, consisting of nine points, agreed on the deployment of a peacekeeping force of the Russian Federation in parallel with the withdrawal of the armed forces of Armenia, including from the Aghdam, Kalbajar, and Lachin districts; the exchange of prisoners of war and other detained persons, as well as the bodies of fallen soldiers; ensuring the return of internally displaced persons and refugees; and the restoration of all economic and transport links in the region.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the requirements of the Trilateral Statement, the remnants of Armenia's armed forces did not leave the region, and the separatist junta established by Armenia continued to function therein. Meanwhile, Armenia illegally transported weapons, ammunition and landmines into the region, and promoted and facilitated illegal travel of representatives of third countries to this region via the Lachin road, which connected Armenia with the Garabagh region of Azerbaijan where an Armenian population remained.

Events reached their peak on September 19, 2023, when Armenian sabotage forces planted mines on the recently repaired Ahmedbeyli–Fuzuli–Shusha road in the territory of Azerbaijan. As a result, a truck was blown up by a mine, killing several people.<sup>59</sup> On the same day, Azerbaijan announced the start of local anti-terrorist measures against the illegal Armenian military formations in the Garabagh region to restore its full sovereignty and constitutional order. The fighting lasted less than one day, after which the Armenian side surrendered.

Following the abrupt end to hostilities, a significant portion of the residents of the Garabagh region decided to migrate from the region through the Lachin corridor to Armenia.<sup>60</sup> On April 17, 2024, 18 months earlier than planned under the Trilateral Statement (2020), Russia

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58 Sputniknews.ru, Eto Voennaya Kapitul'yatsiya Armenii – Obrashenie Prezidenta Aliyeva k Natsii, November 10, 2020, Available at: <https://az.sputniknews.ru/azerbaijan/20201110/425428253/Segodnya-istoricheskiy-den-dlya-Azerbaydzhana--prezident-Aliev.html> (Accessed: May 15, 2024).

59 RBC, Azerbaydjan Obyavil o Nachale “Antiterroristicheskoy Operatsii” v Karabakhe, September 19, 2023, Available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/19/09/2023/65096ae39a7947d4d615f6e1> (Accessed: April 24, 2024).

60 TASS.ru, “Gerasimov: Mirotvortsii RF Obespechili Viyezd v Armeniyu Pochti Vsex Jiteley Karabakha”, December 21, 2023, Available at: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/19599403> (Accessed: April 21, 2024).

began to withdraw its peacekeeping forces from Azerbaijan, thereby confirming that there is no need for a presence on the ground due to the final resolution of the conflict.

### *Azerbaijan's Activities in the International Arena*

The existence of the conflict previously prevented Azerbaijan from fully realizing its potential, even though it did not hinder implementing large-scale energy and transport mega-projects. Azerbaijan's increased military and economic potential formed a new reality, both within the country and in the region as a whole. Azerbaijan succeeded in becoming the first country among the small powers of the former socialist countries to resolve its conflict on its own. The author of the liberal definition of middle power, John Wendell Holmes, believes that engaging in active diplomatic activity enables a middle-sized country to influence international politics and achieve the desired results. Thanks to this, such a state strengthens its prestige and is, thus, able to expand its influence in the global arena.<sup>61</sup> In this case, the most rational and optimal option for its active foreign policy is based on the possibility of competently using the available resources and maximizing the levers of soft power whenever possible.

Eduard Jordaan also tries to provide a rationale for the recently emerged and developing middle powers, which can be used to explain Azerbaijan's actions. According to Jordaan, such middle powers are semi-peripheral, materially unequal, and recently democratized states that demonstrate great regional influence and self-association. In their behaviour, they choose reformist changes rather than radical global ones, demonstrate a strong orientation in favour of regional integration, and seek to create an identity different from the identities of weak states in their region.<sup>62</sup>

In this aspect, Azerbaijan has chosen two concepts as a basis for more active participation in the international arena. These are the fight against the modern challenges of neocolonialism; and the promotion of the transition to green energy (alternative energy sources) within the framework of global environmental challenges. It is worth noting that Azerbaijan's political activity in the international area was observed

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61 Kohei, I., op.cit.

62 Jordaan, E., op.cit, p. 165.

even before the liberation of its territories. At that time, this activity was consolidated to increase the country's potential for resolving the conflict. Towards its first goal, Azerbaijan chose the platform of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), of which it became a member in May 2011.<sup>63</sup> Azerbaijan's participation in this block was a smart strategy to demonstrate its neutral status to the Great Powers, particularly Russia, and to avoid any misinterpretation of its foreign policy that could lead to undesirable consequences. This successful manoeuvre, from a political perspective, demonstrates the maturity of a smaller player in the complex landscape of international relations. Azerbaijan's adept use of the movement's platform, which boasts 120 members, led to its election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council from the Eastern European Group for the term 2012–2013.<sup>64</sup> Azerbaijan chaired the NAM between 2019 and 2022. During this period, Azerbaijan initiated several reforms and programmes within the movement.<sup>65</sup> Azerbaijan has been developing contacts with many African and Asian countries since it became a member of the NAM. This platform has enabled Azerbaijan to establish diplomatic relations with countries from more distant regions.

The COVID-19 pandemic began during Azerbaijan's chairing of the NAM. Many developed countries stocked up on vaccines to levels several times greater than their needs. As a result, some developing countries faced difficulties in accessing these medications. Azerbaijan initiated a proposal to hold a Special Session of the UN General Assembly at the level of heads of state and governments dedicated to the fight against the coronavirus. More than 150 UN member states supported this initiative, and the Special Session was held on December 3–4, 2020. Moreover, Azerbaijan provided humanitarian and financial assistance to more than 30 countries in the fight against the pandemic. It provided voluntary financial assistance to the World Health Organization in the amount of US\$10 million, half of which was earmarked for NAM member states.<sup>66</sup>

63 Azerbaijan in the Non-Aligned Movement, Available at: <https://namazerbaijan.org/azerbaijan-in-the-nam> (Accessed: September 16, 2024).

64 UN News, Azerbaijan Wins Final Vacancy on Security Council, October 24, 2011, Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2011/10/392772> (Accessed: September 16, 2024).

65 Azerbaijan in the Non-Aligned Movement, op.cit.

66 Official Site of President of Azerbaijan Republic, Ilham Aliyev's Statement Presented at Mid-Term Ministerial Conference of Non-Aligned Movement in Video Format, July 13, 2021, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/52430/> (Accessed: September 16, 2024).

This is how Azerbaijan's initiatives in support of the Global South began to take shape. Along with supporting independent states and former colonies, Azerbaijan started to attach increasing importance to the fight against neocolonialism as a form of exploitation of both developing countries and those territories that have the right to self-determination but, due to artificial obstacles, have been unable to realize this legal right as prescribed in international law. In short, in 2023, on the initiative of the Center for Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center) in Azerbaijan, on the sidelines of the ministerial meeting of the Coordinating Bureau of the NAM, a decision was made to create the Baku Initiative Group to combat manifestations of neocolonialism, primarily that of France. A document adopted in this context outlines that:

*The supporters of independence and the representatives of Martinique, Guyana, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, the Solomon Islands, as well as the representatives of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the French Republic, confirmed and emphasized the validity and relevance of the Movement's fundamental positions regarding the fight against colonial and neocolonial practices.*<sup>67</sup>

The Baku Initiative Group has been very active, becoming a voice for territories seeking their independence within the framework of international law. Since the establishment of the Group up to September 2024, about sixteen events have been held, and the number continues to grow.<sup>68</sup>

Initiation of the fight against neocolonialism at the level of the NAM and its active promotion at the international level is becoming one of the 'brands' through which Azerbaijan is presenting itself as a middle power. As the experience of the past year since the creation of this initiative shows, it has not been random and reflexive, but increasingly institutionalized and equipped with the necessary tools.

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67 BR.az, Bakinskiy Rabochiy, Budet Sozdana Bakinskaya Initsiativnaya Gruppya Protiv Frantsuzskogo Kolonializma, July 6, 2023, Available at: <https://br.az/politics/64311/budet-sozdana-bakinskaya-initsiativnaya-gruppa-protiv-francuzskogo-kolonializma/> (Accessed: September 16, 2024).

68 AzərTac, Abbas Abbasov: Bakinskaya Initsiativnaya Gruppya za Posledniy God Organizovala 16 Mejdunarodnix, September 3, 2024, Available at: [https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/abbas\\_abbasov\\_bakinskaya\\_initsiativnaya\\_gruppya\\_za\\_poslednii\\_god\\_organizovala\\_16\\_mezhdunarodnyh\\_meropriyatii-3162306](https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/abbas_abbasov_bakinskaya_initsiativnaya_gruppya_za_poslednii_god_organizovala_16_mezhdunarodnyh_meropriyatii-3162306) (Accessed: September 16, 2024).



The second format Azerbaijan has chosen for its agenda of being a new middle power in the international arena is the encouragement of the increased use of alternative energy sources to ensure a reduction in environmental threats emanating from using hydrocarbons, mainly oil and coal.

It is worth noting that Azerbaijan is a significant producer of oil and natural gas, with Baku being famous for being the first place in the world where oil was extracted industrially, in 1846. Even though Azerbaijan's economy relies on oil and gas export revenues, for the past few years, the country has been setting an agenda for transition to alternative energy sources. The year 2024 has been declared the "Year of Solidarity for a Green World" in Azerbaijan by presidential decree. Thus, Azerbaijan has committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions 40% by 2050. The country intends to increase its renewable energy capacity to 30% by 2030 and diversify its existing energy system to become a leader in green energy. To this end, Azerbaijan is intensively building solar and wind power plants through the assistance of companies such as ACWA Power (Saudi Arabia) and Masdar (United Arab Emirates).<sup>69</sup> ACWA Power plans to invest about US\$5 billion in Azerbaijan. The company's investment decision is associated with Azerbaijan's political stability and the advantages of transit routes.<sup>70</sup>

As for Masdar, the company has built the 230-MW Garadagh solar power plant in Azerbaijan and signed agreements to develop an additional 1 GW of clean energy projects.<sup>71</sup>

Azerbaijan intends to produce 7 GW of green energy by 2030. Of this figure, 2 GW will be used to meet domestic demand, and the rest will be exported. Of the produced green energy, 4 GW will be exported via the Caspian–Black Sea–Europe corridor via a cable on the bottom of the Black Sea, and 1 GW via the Azerbaijan–Türkiye–Europe corridor.<sup>72</sup>

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69 Official Site of COP 29, Azerbaijan's Green Energy Transition Initiatives, Available at: <https://cop29.az/en/green-energy-transition-initiatives> (Accessed: September 16, 2024).

70 AzərTac, Acwa Power: V Azərbaydjane Budet Investirovano Okolo 5 Milliardov Dollarov, July 5, 2024, Available at: [https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/acwa\\_power\\_v\\_azerbaidzhan\\_budet\\_investirovano\\_okolo\\_5\\_milliardov\\_dollarov-3040718](https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/acwa_power_v_azerbaidzhan_budet_investirovano_okolo_5_milliardov_dollarov-3040718) (Accessed: September 18, 2024).

71 Official Site of Masdar Company, "Azerbaijan", Available at: <https://masdar.ac/en/global-office-locations/azerbaijan>, (accessed: September 18, 2024).

72 APA, Azerbaijan to Produce 7 Gwt of Green Energy by 2030, September 18, 2024, Available at: <https://en.apa.az/energy-and-industry/azerbaijan-to-produce-7-gwt-of-green-energy-by-2030-448525> (Accessed: September 19, 2024).



The goals set for transitioning to alternative energy sources are not indicators of Azerbaijan's transformation into a middle power. The fact is that Azerbaijan received the right to host the UN Climate Change Conference (COP29) in Baku, held from November 11–22, 2024.<sup>73</sup> It is through this platform that Azerbaijan has chosen to present itself to the world as a middle power with a new image of the country as formed after the restoration of its territorial integrity. COP29 is, for the first time, being held in the post-Soviet space. As Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev stated, for Azerbaijan, it is a unique chance to step into a higher league.<sup>74</sup> President Aliyev implied that Azerbaijan is now acting in line with a global agenda and becoming an actor capable of implementing that agenda. According to President Aliyev, Azerbaijan is one of the few countries, perhaps the only one in the Eurasian region and the post-Soviet space, that has signed or adopted declarations and agreements on strategic partnership with 10 EU member states. In addition, Azerbaijan is a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the OPEC+ format. Azerbaijan is actively working with oil-producing countries and has already developed proposals on how oil-producing countries can play a more critical role in accumulating funds for environmental protection.

As its goals for COP29, Azerbaijan proposed the creation of the Climate Finance Action Fund (CFAF) to invest in climate action in developing countries. The CFAF will be capitalized through contributions from fossil-fuel-producing countries, as well as oil, gas, and coal companies. Participants will commit to transfer annual contributions as a fixed amount or based on production volumes. Azerbaijan will be the founder of this fund, which will start functioning after the initial fundraising round, which aims to capitalize the fund in the amount of US\$1 billion, and when ten donor countries commit themselves as shareholders. Some countries have already responded positively to the initiative. Fifty per cent of the capital will be directed to climate projects in developing countries that rely on support, including for mitigation, adaptation, and research and development. The other half of the contributions will be used to help form Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to

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73 UN Climate Change, UN Climate Change Conference, Available at: <https://unfccc.int/cop29> (Accessed: September 19, 2024).

74 Official Site of President of Azerbaijan Republic, Meeting of the President Ilham Aliyev with the participants of the 2nd Shusha Global Media Forum, July 20, 2024, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/66533> (Accessed: October 15, 2024).

support the target of not allowing the planet to warm more than 1.5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century, according to the agreement reached under the Paris Climate Agreement. Azerbaijan has committed to and is working on submitting its NDC to set an example for other countries.<sup>75</sup> If the current trend continues, global temperatures will rise by 2.5–3°C by the end of the century. Incidentally, 1.5°C is a scientifically sound limit (albeit a political goal) initially proposed by small island states and then supported by a broad coalition of ambitious countries.<sup>76</sup> Azerbaijan has also taken responsibility for these small island states. In short, after the pandemic, Azerbaijan has already allocated US\$1 million for the post-pandemic recovery of African and small island states.<sup>77</sup> Within the framework of COP29, Azerbaijan will pay attention to solving problems related to the consequences of climate change for small island developing states during its presidency, and plans to hold a Summit of Small Island Developing States in Baku.<sup>78</sup> A special fund is expected to be created to support these states.

### *Conclusion*

As mentioned above, in the past the only limitation in defining Azerbaijan as a middle power was Armenia's continuing occupation of its territories. However, Azerbaijan's strategic foreign policy, coupled with its abundant resources and military potential, has enabled it to address this issue effectively. This achievement is also significant, as no country had previously been able to change an unsatisfactory status quo since the collapse of the socialist bloc and the Soviet Union.

The restoration of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan has allowed

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75 Official site of COP 29, Azerbaijan Launches Climate Finance Action Fund in Package of Initiatives for COP29, July 19, 2024, Available at: <https://cop29.az/en/news/azerbaijan-launches-climate-finance-action-fund-in-package-of-initiatives-for-cop29> (Accessed: September 19, 2024).

76 Rogelj, J., Tsel Ostaetsya Prejney: ne Dopustit Globalnogo Potepleniya Vishe 1,5°C, Project Syndicate, June 5, 2024, Available at: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/ambitious-global-warming-target-still-feasible-and-necessary-by-joeri-rogelj-2024-06/russian> (Accessed: September 19, 2024).

77 TASS, Azerbaydjan Videlit \$1 mln na Vosstonovlenie Afriki i Ostrovnii Gosudarstv Posle Pandemii, March 2, 2023, Available at: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/17176429> (Accessed: September 19, 2024).

78 Akberova, E., Ilkham Aliyev: Azerbaydjan Vsegda Otstaival Zakonnie Interesi Malix Ostrovnix Razvivayushixsya Gosudarstv, May 25, 2024, Available at: [aa.com.tr/ru/мир/ильхам-алиев-азербайджан-всегда-отстаивал-законные-интересы-малых-островных-развивающихся-государств/3232553](https://aa.com.tr/ru/мир/ильхам-алиев-азербайджан-всегда-отстаивал-законные-интересы-малых-островных-развивающихся-государств/3232553) (Accessed: September 19, 2024).

this country to re-evaluate its potential and its achievements in the international arena before 2020. Azerbaijan, as a middle power, continued its active interaction at the regional level and formed a new agenda for its foreign policy, in line with its unique status. As was previously examined, for Azerbaijan, this is the fight against neocolonialism and the introduction of a ‘green’ agenda at the international level.

After the 44-day war, Azerbaijan restored its territorial integrity on its own, demonstrating its determination and resilience in the face of the ambiguous reaction of the international community. This was achieved strictly within the framework of international law. Azerbaijan withstood the onslaught and achieved its goals, marking a transition to the category of a middle power. Azerbaijan has long deserved this status from a geo-economic point of view and through its regional activities. However, it was impossible to confirm this when its territories remained under occupation.

Now, a post-war perception of Azerbaijan is being formed, showcasing its proactive approach. It is a common practice to showcase one’s achievements at important international events. Azerbaijan is no exception in using COP29 as a demonstrative platform. At the same time, the platform itself can also serve as a basis for building a new mission for Azerbaijan.

As President Aliyev stated, as the host of the COP29, Azerbaijan, from a geographical point of view, is ideally located to bridge the gaps between Global North and South, East and West, and the developing and developed world. At the same time, the COP29 presidency will provide platforms for smaller countries to make their voices heard, as they often face the most significant risks from climate change but have limited capacity to combat its impacts.<sup>79</sup>

Support for small countries is not new to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan implemented such support when it was still the chair of the Non-Aligned Movement. As can be seen from its actions, Azerbaijan’s foreign policy is not reflexive; in other words, it is not formed purely as a reaction to current events. Azerbaijan builds its agenda and firmly holds to its convictions. For further development, both within the country and in

<sup>79</sup> Official Site of COP 29, President Aliyev Outlines COP29 Commitment to Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Leaders, March 14, 2024, Available at: <https://cop29.az/en/news/president-aliyev-outlines-cop29-commitment-to-small-island-developing-states-sids-leaders> (Accessed: September 20, 2024).

the international arena, Azerbaijan prepares a long-term strategy and takes consistent tactical steps based on its existing potential. At the same time, the foreign policy model is constructed while considering the realities of the international arena. As a result, the consolidation of the country's potential and its efforts in the political, economic, military, and diplomatic fields have allowed Azerbaijan to resolve its primary task and reach a new qualitative level due to its growing potential.

# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

**Caucasus Strategic Perspectives, Volume 6, Issue 1, Summer 2025**

**Issue Title:** “Role and Relevance of Multilateralism for the South Caucasus countries”

**Deadline:** 1 April 2025

**Subtopics:**

- Role of multilateral organizations in addressing climate change, global health crises, and crisis situations in the South Caucasus;
- The ineffectiveness of the OSCE in mediating and resolving the conflicts and promoting regional stability in the South Caucasus;
- Achievements of the United Nations and other international organizations in the area of economic growth, diversification, and infrastructure development in the South Caucasus countries;
- Selective application of international law, double standards and lack of solidarity within multilateral platforms (UN, OSCE, EU) in relation to the South Caucasus;
- Between effectiveness and geopolitical turmoil: lack of the unified cooperation for the South Caucasus within and between regional organizations;
- Strengthening regional cooperation (trilateral or quadrilateral) formats in the South Caucasus in light of shrinking leverage of multilateral organizations;
- Role of the multilateral organizations in mine action: the cases in the South Caucasus;
- Vision of the South Caucasus countries for the future of effective multilateralism.

Prospective authors should submit **3.000-5.000** words (max.) for articles and **2.500-2800** words for commentaries (including footnotes, abstract, title and sub-titles in both formats) in Microsoft Word-compatible format. For full details please see the “**Guidelines for Authors**” section of the journal’s website. Submissions should be sent in electronic format to: **editorcspjournal@gmail.com**. Manuscripts submitted to CSP journal should be original and challenging, and should not be under consideration by another publication at the time of submission.

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