

# Relevance of Non-Alignment for Azerbaijan's Foreign and Security Policy

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The commentary explains the conceptual basis of and the reasons why non-alignment is still relevant for the Azerbaijan's foreign policy. This commentary concludes that Azerbaijan's non-aligned stance is strongly rooted in a pragmatic understanding of the strategic opportunities embedded in and around the region. This stance was motivated by the fragility of the regional security environment and dictated by Azerbaijan's historical, cultural, and linguistic ties, religious affiliation, and geographical location.



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### *Introduction*

The concept of “non-alignment” is traditionally explained as the condition of a state that involves non-involvement in a conflict between other states and non-involvement in the military alliances of competing blocs. It also stands for a policy of performing autonomously in international relations and taking all decisions in pursuit of the national interest. Different scholars often depict non-alignment in diverse forms, such as isolationism, non-commitment, unilateralism, or non-involvement. In light of the evolving balance of power in Azerbaijan’s neighbourhood and beyond, it is necessary to understand the conceptual basis of the country’s foreign policy. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan has sought to mitigate regional security risks and to formulate co-operation with different regional actors. The relevance of non-alignment as a cornerstone of Azerbaijan’s foreign and security policy increased after the Russia–Georgia war of 2008. In general, Azerbaijan’s non-aligned stance is strongly rooted in a pragmatic understanding of the strategic opportunities embedded in and around the region. This stance was motivated by the fragility of the regional security environment and dictated by Azerbaijan’s historical, cultural, and linguistic ties, religious affiliation, and geographical location.<sup>1</sup>

### *Understanding the foreign policy of Azerbaijan*

Unlike some other states, Azerbaijan’s non-aligned stance is not embodied in the constitution. Rather, the country’s National Security Concept, established in 2007, highlights several important points regarding Azerbaijan’s foreign policy. First, Azerbaijan implements its security policy in pursuance of its national interest and, ultimately, to achieve a fair resolution of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict in order to restore the country’s territorial integrity. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan actively participates in the work of international organizations to promote its foreign

<sup>1</sup> Azerbaijan’s neighbouring countries are Russia (north), Georgia (northwest), Iran (south), Turkey (west via Azerbaijan’s exclave of Nakhchivan), Armenia (west, also via Nakhchivan); Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (eastward through the Caspian Sea).

policy interests as well as uphold international security. Respect for the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and international borders of other countries is the key principle in building Azerbaijan's foreign relations. In this regard, Azerbaijan prefers a policy of peaceful co-existence with other states and prefers not to interfere in their internal affairs –with the expectation that they, in turn, will not interfere in Azerbaijan's domestic affairs.

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Azerbaijan is a landlocked country and is dependent on its neighbours for access to world markets. Therefore, Azerbaijan pursues a multidimensional, balanced foreign policy and seeks to establish friendly relations with all countries, including its neighbours (except Armenia, which continues to hold Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territories under military occupation), to ease this geographical hurdle. In pursuing this policy, Azerbaijan nevertheless tries to avoid political, military, or economic overdependence on other states that may potentially impede the realization of the country's national interests. The negative effects of overdependence can be better explained through the case of Armenia, which has mortgaged its strategic independence to its main ally Russia, both in economic and military terms.

### ***Actions defining the non-alignment of Azerbaijan***

The practical implications of Azerbaijan's non-alignment are manifested by the following. First, Azerbaijan does not follow an externally imposed ideological path, because the country prioritizes its national interest in making all foreign policy-related decisions. Azerbaijan has hitherto been able to avoid political or ideological affiliations with major power blocs and to preserve its aloofness from military alliances. Azerbaijan's "Law on National Security" defines the involvement of Azerbaijan in military and regional conflicts instigated by other countries as a major threat in the military field. Azerbaijan prefers to maintain strategic neutrality towards inter-state disputes to which the country is not a direct party. The country's position in this context was crystal clear during inter-state disputes between Russia and Turkey, Israel and Turkey, Israel and Iran, and the

confrontations between the Western bloc and Russia and Iran. However, this does not imply that the country is isolationist or equidistant. Azerbaijan is an active participant in international affairs and manifests its position on critical international issues by co-operating with global and regional powers.

The major expression of Azerbaijan’s non-alignment can be seen in a policy of military neutrality embodied in non-membership of military alliances. So far, Baku has remained disinclined to become a member of either of the two competing military blocs – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Azerbaijan’s “Law on National Security” excludes the conclusion of international agreements that could limit Azerbaijan’s sovereign rights, lead to a loss of state independence, or harm her national security. However, Baku continues to participate in NATO partnership mechanisms and capacity-building training while cultivating mutually beneficial military cooperation with individual member states of both NATO and CSTO on a bilateral level. The “Law on National Security” considers comprehensive co-operation with foreign countries and international organizations on military-political and military-technical affairs necessary for ensuring national security and strengthening the defence capability of Azerbaijan.

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One of the key features of Azerbaijan’s military non-alignment is that the country does not accommodate the military bases of third states on her territory. This is enshrined in Azerbaijan’s Military Doctrine (Article 29): “*the Republic of Azerbaijan, except for cases stipulated by international treaties, to which is a party, does not allow the installation of foreign military bases on her territory.*” Azerbaijan does not

open up its territories for the use of other states, either for any type of attack or any surveillance activity against its neighbours.

In the political–economic context, Azerbaijan declined to align with the EU as an associate state and therefore disassociated itself from the Union’s Association Agreement. Baku has, however, proposed and is currently negotiating the draft of a comprehensive new agreement, which, while opening a new chapter in EU–Azerbaijan relations, will be of a strategic nature that envisages deepening the partnership through a mutually

beneficial format in the areas of economic diversification, trade, energy, and transportation.

### *Azerbaijan's cooperative alignment*

Azerbaijan's commitment to co-operative alignment has been exercised in pursuing full solidarity and active engagement in tackling common challenges and addressing shared interests to ensure international peace and security. Since the 9/11 attacks in the USA, Azerbaijan has collaborated with the concerned international community to combat international terrorism by participating in the US-led peacekeeping mission in Iraq and NATO-led peacekeeping missions in Kosovo (KFOR) and Afghanistan (ISAF). The country is currently engaged in a similar capacity in Afghanistan with NATO's non-combat "Resolute Support" technical-advisory mission.

Baku has also adhered to the primary missions of "bridge-building" and "mediating". On several occasions since 2017, Azerbaijan has hosted mutual meetings between the military chiefs of the US and NATO and those of Russia in its capital city, Baku, in order to contribute to reducing international tension. The choice of Azerbaijan as a strategic dialogue platform was a manifestation of the country's pragmatic foreign policy as well as its reliable reputation and predictable stance in its bilateral and multilateral relations. Azerbaijan's proactive non-alignment policy and conscious non-bloc status enable Baku to present itself as a diplomatic capital for the region. This means that the country is willing to be a platform for co-operation and strategic dialogue, but not a buffer zone between the great powers.

In addition, Azerbaijan underpins voluntary formats such as Azerbaijan–Turkey–Georgia trilateral cooperation in military and security domains. This is done with the aim of maximizing the country's security capability and defence posture in the absence of significant confidence in the availability of external help. The negative impacts of terrorism and separatism on the sovereignty of these countries necessitate pooling capabilities

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to confront potential threats and ensure regional security. Azerbaijan has other tri- and quadripartite cooperation formats in different domains with Russia–Iran; Turkey–Turkmenistan; Turkey–Pakistan; and Turkey–Iran, as well as with Turkey–Iran–Georgia and Turkey–Iran–Russia.

Thus, Azerbaijan’s non-aligned stance has not changed her loyalty to the concept of regional cooperation. Azerbaijan’s unique geographical location makes it an important node for linking transportation points between Europe and Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Port Baku facilities, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, and the North–South and South–West transport corridors. Azerbaijan’s continuous engagement in the development of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) for European energy security is one prime example of Azerbaijan’s cooperative alignment policy. Notably, the SGC (comprising the South Caucasus Pipeline, Trans-Anatolian Pipeline, and Trans-Adriatic Pipeline) will be a game changer for the EU’s energy map by connecting energy-vulnerable parts of southeast Europe to the Caspian gas producers. With China emerging as an economic power in the South Caucasus, in particular through the BRI project, Azerbaijan is enhancing its attractiveness to Beijing as a transit and economic hub for tying China’s trans-regional cargo shipments into the EU.

For Baku, unity in support of the territorial integrity of other states, especially where those are violated or threatened, is among its highest priorities, as Azerbaijan remains subject to the similar situation of an internationally unlawful act committed by Armenia through the latter’s occupation of the former’s territories. In general, Azerbaijan’s Constitution (9.II) “*rejects war as a means of infringement on the independence of other states*”. Azerbaijan has made its stance quite clear on the cases of the territorial integrity of Ukraine and Georgia in a number of international platforms, including the UN General Assembly, the Council of Europe, the Eastern Partnership, and the GUAM and NATO Summits.

### ***Relevance of non-alignment for Azerbaijan***

Azerbaijan’s non-alignment will be relevant as long as the region is subject to the following determinants. First, non-participation

in the competing alliances or blocs enables Azerbaijan to uphold its sovereignty and autonomy in its foreign-policy-making process. That is to say, Baku can freely communicate its foreign policy initiatives and elaborate its national interest without being bound by the institutional commitments of any economic or military alliance. Second, this posture is an indispensable element for ensuring the national security and stability of the country. In general, opting to join any military alliance or integration bloc could hamper the domestic security architecture of the country and lead to the direct or indirect involvement of regional powers, which are sensitive about backyard intrusion. Thus, non-alignment authorizes Azerbaijan to manoeuvre between ideologically hostile camps while staying outside their confrontations. It consequently empowers Azerbaijan to demonstrate a strategic resolve when the interests of great powers clash. Non-aligned, selective, or interests-based engagement is also necessary for sustaining the ability to preserve a pragmatic relationship with the major powers that attributes international credibility to Azerbaijan's foreign policy profile.

In the foreseeable future, Azerbaijan is unlikely to abandon its path of strategic neutrality owing to the following drivers: (1) the country's vulnerable geostrategic location and complex neighbourhood (between Russia and Iran, and in proximity to the Middle East); (2) Azerbaijan's territorial integrity remains violated by Armenia's military occupation; (3) the existence of unending competition between different economic and military integration initiatives in the region; and (4) the ongoing discriminatory stance of the international community towards Azerbaijan's territorial integrity through the selective application of international norms and laws (unlike the similar cases of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova that are fully supported by the Western bloc in both declarations and actions).

### ***The Non-Aligned Movement and Azerbaijan***

In order to institutionalize her non-aligned status, Azerbaijan joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 2011. The reasons for Azerbaijan opting to join the NAM, which is the largest political institution representing world states after the UN General Assembly, are conditioned by two main factors.

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First, Azerbaijan decided to build its priorities and activities on the historical Bandung principles, which formed the cornerstone for the NAM's establishment. The Bandung principles include respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries; non-interference in the internal affairs of states; protection of mutual interests; and promotion of co-operation. Such principles coincide with the fundamental principles of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Second, Azerbaijan seeks to cross-communicate its position in the NAM to elicit the support of the international community for the country's positions on critical issues; every single vote matters in the adoption or rejection of any resolution when these are discussed in the international organizations.

### *Azerbaijan's foreign policy behaviours*

Because of all the reasons discussed above, Azerbaijan's foreign policy in the context of small-state behaviour can be conceptually classified under six key points: (1) ***careful bandwagoning*** – in which the country partners with dominant powers in the neighbourhood to neutralize their potential threat; (2) ***pragmatic balancing*** – under which the country partners with powerful actors to balance against a threatening one; (3) ***strategic hedging*** – behaviour that prioritizes choosing multilateral policies to offset risks and unilateral dependence, and to create interdependence; (4) finding a ***balance of interests*** – this policy implies creating a symmetric strategic partnership based on reciprocity and mutual recognition of interests; (5) ***predictability*** – which implies making no abrupt turns or unexpected steps in the foreign policy direction; and (6) ***strategic patience*** – which implies understanding what a state “should” and “should not” do, and demonstrating strategic resolve when necessary.

### *Conclusion*

In reality, for a small state like Azerbaijan, it is not easy to maintain a balance between non-alignment and solidarity in the contemporary international relations system. Today's international practices show that Azerbaijan has hitherto successfully managed



to sustain that balance. Thus, Baku demonstrates alignment (solidarity) for upholding the international and regional peace and security environment; but the country maintains its non-aligned position in the event of confrontation and competition between belligerents and great powers. In this process, Azerbaijan is using her resources and multi-layered identity in a plausible manner in order to gain recognition of her status in the international relations system. Baku is carefully calculating its potential foreign policy steps in order to assure the sustainability of its performance in the international relations and avoid undesired costs.