

# TURKEY-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS: THE DYNAMICS OF THE DEVELOPMENT

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## *Introduction*

The dissolution of the USSR and escalation of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict together with Bulgarian and Bosnian crisis's highly activated Turkey's foreign policy towards the South Caucasus and Central Asia in general, and Azerbaijan in particular. Demonstrating political, military, economic support to the latter, Turkey aimed to spread its influence over it and gain access to the Caspian oil and natural gas resources, thus hoping to fill the power vacuum created by Russia after 1991 and to become a regional superpower. Azerbaijan, especially during the first years of its independence, was favorable to Turkey's regional ambitions relying on its willingness to support in solving Nagorno Karabakh problem in Azerbaijan's favor. Besides, due to Turkey's and Azerbaijan's consistent cultural policy, Azerbaijani and Turkish people had special emotional connections with each other, considering themselves as 'brethren' that speak almost the same language, share the same ethno-cultural and religious traditions. That is why Turkish-Azerbaijani warm, brotherly relations and cooperation in almost every field developed soon after the collapse of the USSR and

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overall had sustainable dynamics of development. In present, Turkey-Azerbaijan relations are stated as military political strategic alliance that was officially set in the frames of a high level strategic partnership agreement signed in August 2010. Although, it is noteworthy that aside from the official relations, there are several 'internal' and 'external' factors which affect the bilateral relations and even pose challenges to the dynamics of their future development.

### *Internal factors*

'One nation-two states' is the slogan which is officially used by the both countries to outline the nature of the bilateral relations. However, it remained mostly a political tool as the essence of those relations is not only about the common language, ethnicity, religion and culture, but mostly the shared political interests. Moreover, any affinities between the two peoples are used by both, especially Turkey, as political tools. It is in Turkey's interests to bring Azerbaijan under its influence, considering the geopolitical and geo-economic position and Caspian natural resources of the latter. A controllable Azerbaijan is to be used as a corridor to a larger geo-economic territory of Central Asia thus lowering Russian and Iranian regional roles. As a historically ideological state, Turkey develops its foreign policy strategy based on a state ideology, which is adapted to the political needs of the time. The ideologies of Ottomanism (late 19<sup>th</sup> century), Pan-Islamism, Pan-Turanism, Turkism, Turkish Eurasianism have now been combined in Neo-Ottomanism,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Neo-Ottomanism implies restoration of Turkey's political, economic and cultural influence and control over the former territories of the Ottoman Empire and formation of an economic zone in the same areas as well. Implementing all of the above is supposed to make Turkey a regional superpower. Милошевич, З. 2010, 'Почему обновляется Османская политика?', Институт политических исследований, Белград.

which has been officially used by Turkey's current ruling party AKP ('Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi') since it came to power in 2002. Turkish foreign policy's new strategy with its 'Zero problems with neighbors' political slogan was fully adapted to this new ideology.

However, Turkey's underlying ambitions to become a superpower in the region were met mixed response from its neighbors, including Azerbaijan, which, on the one hand favors Turkey's regional ambitions, on the other one, does not really like to be treated as a 'junior brother'. Besides, there are certain number of people in both Azerbaijan and Turkey, who do not consider each other as 'brethren' and even have some negative emotions and attitude towards each other. That issue has its natural causes. While linguistically the Turkish and Azerbaijani are very close, the two peoples have different cultures. Turkish people mostly adhere to Sunni Islam, while the most of the Azerbaijani population are Shiites. Sunni-Shia religious controversies, which often lead to intolerant behavior towards each other, are well known. In the past, Sunni-Shia marriages were prohibited, this means that a Turkish man could not marry an Azerbaijani woman and vice versa [1]. Also, religion, which plays a great role in formation of the national identity, has also affected the two nations' culture. Sunni Turks and Shia Azerbaijanis live under different life-rules, have many different religious traditions, etc. Besides, Azerbaijani people, being under the Soviet rule for about 70 years, have adopted some Soviet-specific mentality, which is difficult to understand for an average Turkish person. And the most important factor is the issue of national identities in both Azerbaijan and Turkey, which affect the relations of the two countries. While official theory claims Turkish-Azerbaijani ethnic similarity, a quite large part of Azerbaijani population considers closer ethnic, religious and cultural ties

with its southern neighbor Iran. On the other hand, Turkey, being a multicultural country, has different approaches towards Azerbaijan as well. A large percent of the Turkish population, which considers the 'ethnic factor' more important than the religious one, has 'brotherly' feelings towards Azerbaijanis. However, a significant part of Turkish population puts Islam in the core of its national identity. So, these Turks view Azerbaijani people as Shia Muslims, towards whom they have quite negative feelings. It is noteworthy though, that along with the growing Turkish influence, the number of Sunni Muslims in Azerbaijan grows as well. This process is considered as an 'internal threat' in Azerbaijan and perceived by the local Shia population quite negatively.

However, the national identity is all what matters most. It plays a greater role than the DNA composition. On this matter, it needs to be pointed out, that formation of the national identity in Azerbaijan is not complete yet. Considering the many inner processes and also 'external influences' coming from Turkey, Iran and other Islamic Fundamentalist states, such as Saudi Arabia, it may take even more time and the final result is hard to predict. In this context, any geopolitical changes in the region can be crucial.

Understanding this, all the 'interested parties', especially Turkey and Iran, hurry to deepen their influence in the region in general and in Azerbaijan in particular, using mostly 'soft power' tools. To this end, theories on common ethnicity, religion, language and culture come to help with the situation. Both Iran and Turkey manipulate these factors to bring Azerbaijanis to their zone of political influence. Turkey also uses the 'ideological base' wrapped up in Pan-Turkic statements and slogans, thus intensifying the impact of the mentioned 'tools'.

### *External factors*

Both Turkey and Azerbaijan, due to their geographic locations and natural resources are geopolitically and geo-economically vital territories. This is the reason the 'world powers' (especially the USA and Great Britain), and the other 'regional actors' (such as Russia) continuously compete for spreading their political influence and control over them, thus directly or indirectly impacting the relations between the two countries as well.

The main geopolitical struggle is between the USA- EU and Russia -China blocs. For both Turkey and Azerbaijan are strategic targets. A NATO member Turkey is strongly supported by the West and acts as an intermediary between the West and Azerbaijan since 1991. The Western bloc tried to implement the 'Turkish Model' of governance in Azerbaijan through Turkey's mediation in 1990's.

Turkey's regional ambitions, any political and economic undertakings towards Azerbaijan are backed by the West in order to neutralize Russia's regional position. As Z. Brzezinski points out in his book 'The Grand Chessboard': 'An independent Azerbaijan, linked to Western markets by pipelines that do not pass through Russian-controlled territory, also becomes a major avenue of access from the advanced and energy-consuming economies to the energy rich Central Asian republics. ....the future of Azerbaijan and Central Asia is also crucial in defining what Russia might or might not become' [2].

Russia, on the other hand, needs to keep its influence in the strategically vital South Caucasus as it borders the most unstable Russian territory of the North Caucasus. The loss of its positions in the South Caucasus would cause deterioration of the national security as a whole. In this context, Azerbaijan, which shares border with Russia, is of great importance.

Another issue is the presence of the Russian Gabala radar station in Azerbaijani territory. Gabala is a Daryal-type bistatic phased-array early warning radar, built by the Soviet Union in the Qabala district of the Azerbaijan SSR in 1985 [3]. The radar station has a range of up to 6,000 kilometers, and was designed to cover Iran, Turkey, India, Iraq and the entire Middle East [4]. It can detect the launch of missiles, including SLBM's and track the whole trajectory to enable a ballistic missile defense system to intercept an offensive strike. Gabala is now operated by the Russian Aerospace Defense Forces. In 2012 the future of the station is being negotiated between Russia and Azerbaijan. The latter asks Russia to pay \$300 million a year instead of the seven million dollars annually paid previously [5]. As the political analyst Richard Rousseau states, 'The radar is politically crucial for Russia, especially if it wants to maintain its presence throughout the South Caucasus. It gives Russia a foothold in Azerbaijan, where the Russian military presence is weak. In addition, access to Gabala is an instrument for Russia in negotiating with other key players, such as the United States and Iran. It serves as a bargaining chip in terms of the controversial build-up of a missile defense system in Central Eastern Europe by NATO and the US. Russia also considers that the withdrawal from Gabala could create a window of opportunity for other regional powers such as Turkey or Israel, which has recently been the subject of substantial rumors according to which it secured access to airbases and facilities in Azerbaijan that will be used to attack Iran in the not-too-distant future' [6].

China's active policy towards energy rich Central Asia, Turkey's growing interest in a closer cooperation with the Russia-China economic zone also may make changes in the distribution of power in Eurasia affecting Turkey-Azerbaijan relations as well.

Azerbaijan, which has a largely Western orientation and strong economic ties with the USA, Great Britain, Israel, etc., also tries to keep the relations with Russia in positive dynamics. The Russia-West geopolitical struggle constantly impacts Turkey-Azerbaijan relations. In this context four other key factors need to be discussed: Armenian, Kurdish, Iranian, and Israeli.

1. *Armenian factor* is one of the most important drivers in the context of the Turkish-Azerbaijani relations. It consists of two main sub-factors: 1) the international recognition of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, 2) the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Both issues are uniting the two states against a common 'enemy' for a common cause: do not let the international recognition of the Armenian Genocide happen and to 'liberate' Karabakh from what they call 'occupant Armenians'.

On the other hand, we saw how the Armenian factor impacted the bilateral relations in 2009, when Turkey and Azerbaijan faced a crisis because of the well-known 'football diplomacy' and the Zurich protocols signed between Turkey and Armenia. Azerbaijan was disappointed by Turkey's step towards the opening of the Turkish-Armenian sealed border and came up with several official statements against it. The tensed relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan during 2008-2009 were extensively discussed by the international and local media and even found its place in Wiki Leaks cables [7]. After the Zurich protocol ratifications failed, the Turkish-Azerbaijani relations even broadened and stepped in a qualitatively new stage by signing the 'Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support' in August, 2010.

2. Being both an internal and external factor at the same time, the *Kurdish factor* is also dominant in Turkey-Azerbaijan relations. In par-

allel of quite smooth dynamics of the bilateral relations, the Kurdish issue time to time arises between them. Considering some political presence of Kurds in Azerbaijan, Turkey also uses the 'Kurdish card' against Azerbaijan when the political situation seems appropriate.

3. *Iran* is a great 'regional actor' in Azerbaijan. It is actively involved in religious, cultural propaganda in the country. Using the 'soft power' tools it tries to impact the process of the formation of Azerbaijani national identity. It enroots the theories of common ethnicity, religion and shared cultural heritage to take Azerbaijan under its influence. It also plays the 'Talysh' and 'Tat' cards for these purposes.<sup>1</sup> It is natural that in terms of Turkey's large ambitions in Azerbaijan and the region as a whole, Iranian activeness endangers the Turkish-Azerbaijani relations in a broader sense. That is one of the reasons Turkey realizes a multi-dimensional policy towards Azerbaijan in order to totally take it under its influence and control. Azerbaijan with Turkey's support, time to time uses the 'North Iranian' card claiming the '20 million Azerbaijanis living under Iran's rule' should be united with the Southern Azerbaijanis, meaning the people of the Republic of Azerbaijan. This statement was used since Elchibey came to power in 1992, which resulted in very tense relations with Iran.

4. *Israel* is another key player in the region. For many years, it has been the strategic partner of Turkey, but the 2010 Flotilla scandal deteriorated the bilateral relations and even caused them plunge into crisis. On the other side, Israel-Azerbaijan relations have not only remained in positive state, but also tended to deepen. Considering also the serious

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<sup>1</sup>Talysh and Tat peoples are of Iranian ethnic origins, but reside in Azerbaijan and consider themselves autochthone indigenous population of Azerbaijan, but not Turks



issues existing between Israel and Iran, and the rest of the Fundamental Muslim states, it is obvious, that Israel can play a significant role in the potential regional developments. In this context, Turkish-Azerbaijani relations can be also affected.

### *Conclusion*

Turkey-Azerbaijan relations in the present are in their height of development. There is a bilateral cooperation in every possible field from the military and economic to cultural and social affairs.

Especially after the military-strategic agreement of 2010 and the recently signed energy project TANAP (Trans Anatolian Pipeline), Turkey and Azerbaijan became even closer.

However, the history has shown that there are also many issues behind the curtains, which time to time arise between the two states. Rovshan Javadov's unsuccessful internal coup against Heydar Aliyev that led to a political scandal between Azerbaijan and Turkey [8], the latter's periodical accusations towards Azerbaijan concerning its support to Kurdish organization PKK (Partiye Karkaren Kurdistan)<sup>1</sup>, the Armenian issue which arises every time Turkey-Armenia reconciliation talks occur, Turkey-Israel-Azerbaijan dubious triangle coupled with the rising tensions around Iran, interreligious and intercultural misunderstandings among the two peoples show that the foundation of relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan is not that deep and the essence of the current "One nation-two states" mutual policy is underpinned not so much by the affinities between them, but more by the currently common political interests. Therefore, considering the un-

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<sup>1</sup>PKK is a Kurdish political organization recognized as a terrorist one by Turkey and a number of other states.

stable political situation in the region, growing tensions around all over the world, changes in the current developments may occur any time, thus affecting not only the dynamics of the relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan, but also the very power balance that currently exists. In this context, all the internal and external factors mentioned above may play crucial roles. Moreover, while the external factors can be temporary, the internal ones almost always are not, or at least are a lot more durable. This is the reason the future dynamics of Turkey-Azerbaijan relations is questioned.

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