

Book Review

*Azerbaijan as a Regional Hub
in Central Eurasia*

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The political and economic dynamic of geographic space encourages states to ascribe to themselves a geopolitical meaning that evidences their necessity and indispensability to the world at large. This is particularly true of smaller states; however, only very few of them have a realistic outlook, and are able to maintain a successful political/economic strategy concomitant to their geopolitical position. This need to be indispensable and geographically central becomes especially important in conflict zones and areas of turmoil. Among those, Azerbaijan comes forth as a rare example of a territorially small but geopolitically indispensable state, due to its location at the intersection of Eurasian secure gas supply, logistic, trade, and transportation. The Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy recently launched Taleh Ziyadov's timely book, "Azerbaijan as a Regional Hub in Central Eurasia". The book offers a fresh interpretation of Eurasian geopolitics and the non-oil economic development of Azerbaijan.

Ziyadov explores Azerbaijan's geopolitically-driven goal of becoming an "intra- and inter-continental hub". As he demonstrates, the motivation behind this goal is a vision of Azerbaijan as a "commercial bridge between east and west, north and south". Thus as a long-term development strategy, Azerbaijan is keen to become the "Dubai of the Caspian" within the space of two decades. In

view of this, the country has launched a number of infrastructure projects those require a stable political and economic environment within the country and throughout the region. The Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku railway project, for instance, is designed not only to connect Georgia-Turkey-Azerbaijan; beyond this regional basis, the project represents a geo-economic and geopolitical driver to create a rail corridor between China and Europe via Azerbaijan. In a similar vein and in tandem with its large-scale infrastructural investments, Azerbaijan is investing in the modernization of the country's international highways, establishing sea trade ports, building new airports, and even founding Free Economic Zones. The grand strategy to rebuild the country's economy and infrastructure to develop its non-oil economic sector requires a unified and transformative approach. This approach involves coherent and coordinated management of economic and infrastructural investment and development projects.

Ziyadov's thoughtful narration of this unique unified and transformative approach is comprised of four chapters, each one of which fully elaborates on the book's central lines of enquiry: trade, infrastructural investment, transportation, and free economic zones.

The first chapter deals with Eurasian trade routes and international trade

actors. The chapter begins by pinpointing Azerbaijan's specific geo-economic and geo-political location and the flow of trade arrows in Eurasia. The author presents Azerbaijan as almost the only secure corridor between the EU and China, India, and ASEAN countries respectively, through which the goods of all kinds can pass back and forth safely. This is what Ziyadov calls "looking beyond energy", and to him, this illustrates the non-oil economic development future of Azerbaijan.

The second chapter reviews the present condition of transportation and logistics facilities in Azerbaijan, concluding that the country has a reliable network of motorways, railways, maritime transportation ports, logistic markets, and air passenger and cargo transportation facilities. Based on existing of geopolitical and infrastructural facilities, Ziyadov offers realistic accounts of future development. This evaluation of the current circumstances enables the reader to visualize the whole picture in terms of transportation, logistics, and economic 'corridors'. This chapter, finally, clarifies the geo-economical and geo-political categories into which Azerbaijan falls, and uses this information to draw links between the trade and logistics capabilities of the country.

The third chapter surveys the country's free economic zone development strategies. The country per-

ceives construction and the upholding of free zones as a crucial step toward alternate oil-based economic development and in embarking on non-oil economic growth. Strategic planning comes forth as the primary and preliminary step to be taken by the country, whilst, argues Ziyadov, the existing operation models must be developed. Nonetheless, port development and management processes along with the modes and forms of entrepreneurial involvements (such as the scope of privatization) feature among the main challenges. The chapter reviews these courses of actions with reference to the New Baku International Sea and Trade Port at Alyat.

The final chapter deals with the free economic zone and port development provisions of the country. Placing free economic zone development at the heart of Azerbaijan's future non-oil economic development and reconstruction strategy, the chapter offers a road map to success. To Ziyadov, this success is heavily dependent on the political will and commitment of the president of Azerbaijan to the comprehensive vision drawn up over the last few years. In tandem with the executive, entrepreneurial participation and faith in the vision of Azerbaijan as an intra- and inter-continental hub by 2030 is also required.

Taleh Ziyadov, in *Azerbaijan as a Regional Hub in Central Eurasia*, provides a detailed development strategy

for the country. By taking into consideration the politics and economy of geographic space, Ziyadov offers a reinterpretation of territorial space and power. In the meantime, through the inclusion of current and anticipated infrastructural conditions, the book puts forth a grounded exploration of sustainable economic development in Azerbaijan. Ziyadov does, however, disregard the regional politico-military balances, distortions, and turmoil that could ruin the processes of sustainable economic development. The prevailing dependency between development and stability, and the contingency of long-run economic growth on political peace and non-war psychology require analysis of the regional cooperation and opportunities for peace that this hub strategy would create. Aside from this point, the study offers a satisfying account of unilateral and multilateral investments and plans for transforming an oil dependent economy to a non-oil developed economy.

Azerbaijan as a Regional Hub in Central Eurasia

Taleh Ziyadov, Baku: Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, 2012.