

*Eurasia's Hinge: Azerbaijan's Triangular Balancing Act**

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Abstract

This article presents Azerbaijan, a post-Soviet state known for its oil and gas wealth, as subject to misconceptions by the West. The author explains three elemental tendencies that accentuate the pivotal nature of Azerbaijan's geographic position: infused with Iranian culture, ethnically and linguistically Turkic, and historically part of the Russian, then Soviet empires. Eurasia's future is likely to play out in and around Azerbaijan for reasons that are independent of the Caspian's energy wealth but are amplified by it.

Further, the author looks at Azerbaijan's neighborhood, and examines its geopolitical position, concluding that investment and trade between Azerbaijan and Turkey - while promising - should not come at the expense of further regional integration, given the relative decline of the West versus the rise of the East in the 21st century. The desire for 360 degrees of "strategic depth" in both Ankara and Baku reflect pragmatic calculations and hedging about Western commitments to the region. Tracing developments in Azerbaijan's near-abroad, starting with Turkey and its traditional Western allies in America and Europe, then moving to its neighbors in the post-Soviet space and the Middle East, this piece outlines the global changes in geopolitics, economy, and energy that have presented Baku with complex challenges as well as opportunities.

* This piece is an expansion of a co-authored work with Enders Wimbush, 'Eurasia's Hinge: It's more than just Energy'.

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Few geographies are as critically important yet understudied as the region surrounding the Republic of Azerbaijan. Most analysts focus on Azerbaijan's status as a critical mid-sized energy power connected to world markets, and increasingly to Europe, through important pipeline systems. Indeed, energy is the principal reason that most governments and corporations pay attention to Azerbaijan.

Energy wealth in today's world is enough to generate almost universal interest. Indeed, without energy the small Caucasian state of Azerbaijan would likely have been an afterthought in the post-Soviet space: deep in the shadow of the Christian civilizations of Georgia with its compelling cultural attachments to Europe, and Armenia with its engaged and influential political diaspora on both sides of the Atlantic.

But Azerbaijan is much more than an energy hub. It is a junction of powerful cultural forces where old empires overlap and modern states compete, of ambition and energy, both figuratively and literally. Azerbaijan is the sum of three elemental tendencies that accentuate the pivotal nature of its geographic position: it is infused with Iranian culture, ethnically and linguistically Turkic, and historically part of the Russian, then Soviet empires. Eurasia's future is likely to play out in and around Azerbaijan for reasons that while independent of the

Caspian's energy wealth, are nonetheless amplified by its presence.

Misunderstood & Underappreciated

As a new partner of the West, Azerbaijan has been seeking the role of bridge and crossroads with Eurasia, much like Turkey in the early 1990s. However, Baku's aspiration is just as dependent on cordial neighborly relations and Transatlantic affiliations as it is on its energy reserves, rhetoric and regional context. Azerbaijan is not destined to follow the examples of Singapore, Qatar, or the UAE, considering its unique history as a Post-Soviet Muslim-majority and secular state in a difficult geography. Azerbaijan has historically valued its independence over any affiliations or alliances, but at this stage, the need for stronger transatlantic engagement region and for Baku to play a more constructive role in a challenging environment has never been more urgent. Therefore, as Baku continues to cultivate relationships with its neighbors, Organization of Islamic Conference state members, and the West throughout the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia, Azerbaijan can no longer be seen as a means to an end for foreign policy initiatives.

From Baku's vantage point, its strategic arena is increasingly complex and worrisome, if not threatening. To the north, Russia offers a lethal cocktail of dysfunctional politics, official corruption, economic torpor, regional

fissures and ethnic shifts—all within the cone of a demographic death spiral, powered by resentment at having lost an empire and unrequited imperial ambition. Russia has never lost its appetite for its former Caucasian possessions. Its wars in the North Caucasus, its attack on Georgia in 2008, and efforts to impede a settlement between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh as a means of increasing its own regional influence and blocking Azerbaijan's access to Turkey together illuminate Russia's strategic design. For Russia, Azerbaijan is the key to this region.

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To the south, Iran is on the cusp of international conflict. Azerbaijan shares a 700 kilometer border with Iran, and according to some estimates, up to 25 percent of Iran's population are ethnic Azerbaijanis. Iranian mullahs of Azerbaijani descent have made Baku a special target, as the majority of Azerbaijani Muslims are Shiite, and Iranian authorities have never made a secret of their disdain for Azerbaijan's independence. Their strategies will resonate in Azerbaijan to the extent that Baku is failing to anchor its citizens in a more powerful and compelling set of national values. A destabilized Iran,

whether as a result of internal revolution or external attack, will pose a special range of challenges for Azerbaijan. It is implausible to imagine that Azerbaijan can avoid being affected by the resulting turmoil, and therefore it is in the West's interest to assist Azerbaijan in advancing inoculations of strong civil society antibodies. In fact, there is every reason to believe that a stable Azerbaijan with political, economic, and military links to the West can serve as a model for post-conflict Iran, as well as a conduit for Western values and ideas.

Turkey represents a counterforce to Iran, serving as an important influence preventing Azerbaijan from slipping into Iran's orbit. Its links to Azerbaijan have grown steadily, based on common ethnic and linguistic foundations, and there are growing economic, social, educational, political and military ties. Major energy pipelines connect the two. Former Azerbaijani President Abulfaz Elçibey may have struck close to the mark when he spoke of Azerbaijan and Turkey as "one nation with two states." Turkey's support for Azerbaijan against Armenian claims on Nagorno-Karabakh has been constant. However, the Arab Spring, and particularly turmoil in Syria, have exposed institutional weaknesses in Turkish foreign policy that could eventually affect a range of Turkish interests, including Azerbaijan. Given personal differences between leaders in Ankara and Baku, simple

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ethnic brotherhood cannot paper over significant differences in worldviews. And Europe, reluctant to give Turkey traction toward full membership, will miss a singular opportunity to pull Azerbaijan into its embrace.

Interlinkages of a Deadly Triangle

Born into a triangle of great power politics, Azerbaijan's twenty years of independence has largely focused on balancing the competing interests of its larger neighbors. However, the interlinkages between these regional powers and Azerbaijan's own national interests have resulted in an extremely complex, chronically understudied and, as such, misunderstood set of dynamics.

Within a Western-led world, states such as Turkey simply followed the lead of its transatlantic allies in isolating and containing Iranian or Russian interests in the region. However, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey has begun to transform its relationship with Russia from enemy state to rival regional power. Similarly, until recently, Iranian-Turkish relations seemed to be following a distinctly different track than Ankara's Western allies. While Iran, Russia, and Turkey

have worked to maintain normal and pragmatic relations, their competing interests in the mutually shared areas of their near-abroad are leading to tense relations.

The history of Turkish-Russian antagonism makes the present state of Turkish-Russian relations truly remarkable. While they may not seem as promising as Turkish-Arab or Turkish-Turkic relations, they are far more significant in that they offer a pragmatic starting point for an Ankara that no longer considers Europe its exclusive anchor. Given the deep ambivalence felt by both Ankara and Moscow towards Europe and the West more broadly, the warm relations between Russia and Turkey point towards a pragmatic partnership to ensure a more multipolar and Eurasian world order. By minimizing its rivalry with Russia in the Balkans, Caucasus, and Central Asia, Turkey has neutralized its greatest immediate threat without fully eliminating it. Unlike Turkey's re-orientation towards its immediate southeastern neighborhood, Ankara's future with its northwest remains far from certain. Ethnic ties, frozen conflicts, and secessionist movements all represent flashpoints for domestic politics that will continue to dictate a cautious and pragmatic embrace of Russia.

Turkish-Iranian relations have traditionally been strained in regard to the two questions at the heart of

Turkey's security dilemma: political Islam and the Kurdish question. Turkey is very sensitive towards Iranian attempts to "export" the Islamic revolution. Turkish-Iranian competition in the Caucasus, along with Iran's accusations that Turkey is inciting separatism amongst its Azerbaijani minority and harboring violent opponents to the Iranian regime, also burden relations. But over the last decade this dynamic has visibly changed, with deepening energy ties, burgeoning bilateral trade and intense social contact between Turkey and Iran.

Improving Turkish-Iranian ties explain Turkey's position on the Iranian nuclear question, which has confounded the West in recent years. Turkey simply did not feel as threatened by Iran's nuclear program as its partners in the West, in the same way that it has not felt directly threatened by Israel's nuclear arsenal. Yet Turkey does seem concerned about a nuclear arms race in the region. Thus, Turkey is calling for a nuclear-free region and yet objections to sanctioning Iran, which would hinder burgeoning commercial relations with its neighbor without bringing a nuclear-free Middle East any closer.

The historical rivalry between the Ottoman and Safavid successor states in Turkey and Iran respectively has only increased in the wake of the Arab Spring, as both regional

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powers try to position themselves in the context of weakened states and regimes. Yet rather than simply being a proxy of the West against Iran, Turkey has pursued its own pragmatic agenda. Turkey did not transform itself from a defeated post-Ottoman Empire state to a flourishing market-based Muslim-majority democracy overnight; this has been almost a century in the making. The lessons learned and the opportunities offered by Turkey are unique, yet it is still being presented as a "model" for neighboring countries.

Unlike its regional power neighbors in Iran, Russia, or Saudi Arabia, which actively supported counter-protest movements in order to deflect attention away from their own domestic shortcomings throughout the "Arab Spring", Turkey's vibrant civil society, and the skillful judgment of its leaders, nudged Ankara onto the side of the Arab street even at the expense of investments made with previous regimes. Given Turkey's economic success and democratic character in a Muslim context, Ankara's courtship of the newly emerging democracies and regimes in its neighborhood has shown great promise. But its potential has not come to full fruition. While talk about the "Turkish model" has spread, Ankara has found itself sur-

rounded if not overwhelmed with increasing political and security challenges, casting a long shadow over the fulfillment of its regional ambitions.¹

Strategic Balancing Act

At a stage in which Turkish-Israeli relations have reached all-time lows, Azerbaijani-Israeli cooperation in defense, education, and intelligence spheres has reached new highs. On the frontline of Iran's activism and interference, escalations between Tehran and Jerusalem are inevitably felt first in Baku. Heightened Israeli-Iranian tensions over Iran's nuclear program that resulted in attacks on Israeli diplomatic missions in Bangkok and New Delhi, and Tbilisi have also resulted in attempted assassination plots against Israeli targets in Baku that were thwarted by the Ministry of National Security of Azerbaijan. Taken in combination with the Israeli government's leak of information that Azerbaijan was buying \$1.6 billion worth of weapons, Baku faces increased pressure from an agitated Iranian regime that is struggling under unprecedented international sanctions.

Furthermore, as cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan increases, so does Iran's contempt for this relationship. Israel is Azerbaijan's second major export partner and fourth ma-

ior trade partner overall.² While the Iranian government has stopped short of declaring war on Azerbaijan, it has made sure that its anger is manifest, through its espionage and attempts at terrorist attacks within the country. After last summer's attempts by Iranian agents to kill Israeli diplomats in Baku, the Ministry of National Security of Azerbaijan recently uncovered a plot to carry out an attack during the Eurovision song contest, held in Baku in May. The suspects were thought to have lived and trained in Dagestan, a Russian province that shares a border with Azerbaijan. Previous Dagestani terrorists have had links to Iran, and therefore blame and suspicion have once again been directed towards Tehran.³ Even in its economic claims Iran has become more ambitious in relation to its drilling interests in the Caspian Sea, to the point where Iran might eventually challenge Azerbaijan's territorial claims. As a telling sign of these circumstances, the Azerbaijani-Israeli weapons deal involved the purchase of anti-ship missiles by Baku for the first time.

Iran's regional influence has been curbed by its falling out with Turkey over Ankara's decision to host NATO radar sites and, more importantly, over the ongoing crisis in

¹ See Joshua W. Walker *Staying Above the Middle Eastern Fray: Turkey's Sectarian Temptations* <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/staying-above-the-middle-eastern-fray-turkeys-sectarian-temptations>

² http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113347.pdf

³ Sultanova Aida. "Azerbaijan: 40 Arrested in Eurovision Terror Plot." *Yahoo! News. Yahoo!*, 30 May 2012. Web. 15 June 2012. <<http://news.yahoo.com/azerbaijan-40-arrested-eurovision-terror-plot-124952624.html>>.

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Syria, where Assad has been a loyal ally since ignoring advice from Ankara and facing international isolation. Given the estimated quarter of the Iranian population that is of Azerbaijani origin, Tehran, like Ankara, is affected by decisions and pronouncements issued from Baku. However, given this domestic factor, in addition to Azerbaijan's close relationship with Israel, Baku is also among the first targets of Tehran without security guarantees from the West, unlike Israel or Turkey.

The darkest shadow over the strategic triangle of Baku's neighboring great powers (Iran-Russia-Turkey) is cast by Moscow. Having emerged from the Soviet Union with a healthy appreciation for Russian culture, language, and power, Baku has walked a fine line between compliance and

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defiance in its evolving relationship with Moscow. In the aftermath of 2008 Russia-Georgia War, many post-Soviet states saw this move as

a sign of the Kremlin's neo-imperial ambitions and were forced to reevaluate their relations with Russia.

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As demonstrated most recently by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to the region on the eve of renewed violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the U.S. remains a critical player, even if it is not involved on the ground. Clinton made a point of remaining neutral on the topic, expressing her deep regret over the senseless violence and deaths caused by the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. For the U.S., Azerbaijan is critical in that it is one of Israel's most important economic allies in the region; however, the U.S. must remain sensitive to the large and

influential Armenian diaspora living within its borders. Therefore, it is important that the U.S. act as an honest broker between the two countries, much in the way it has tried to act as an intermediary between Turkey and Armenia.

The complexities and internal contradictions of the region, as opposed to a lack of sincerity on the part of any political leadership, have proven untenable slogans such as Turkey's "zero problems with neighbors". Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkey now all face the danger of being dragged into rising sectarian tensions in the Middle East. The Arab Spring, which has heightened sectarian tensions within and between Baghdad, Damascus, and Tehran, has forced all players to directly confront the sectarian realities of the region.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan faces difficult challenges in the areas of governance, civil society and democratic development, each of which must be addressed if Baku is to maintain its delicate balancing act amid these powerful interests and states. But it also boasts important strengths and instincts. A strong sense of national identity, as well as its historic tradition of Islamic modernism, has so far been a barrier to the inevitable inflow of radical Islamist ideas, though this remains a constant worry. It actively seeks to deepen ties with Europe and

the United States, despite the fact that both parties are often distracted. The announcement that Washington has nominated Ambassador Richard Morningstar to Baku is an encouraging sign, but must also entail closer cooperation.

Increasing levels of cooperation, investment, and trade between Azerbaijan and Turkey are further promising signs; on the other hand, these should not come at the expense of further regional integration. Given the relative decline of the West versus the rise of the East over the 21st century, the desire for a 360-degree vision of "strategic depth" on the part of both Ankara and Baku reflects pragmatic calculations and hedging about Western commitments to the region. Tracing the developments in Turkey's international relations, starting with its traditional Western allies in America and Europe and then moving to its neighbors in the post-Soviet space and the Middle East, allows one to further appreciate the significance of global changes in geopolitics, economy, energy, and human mobility that have presented Turkey with complex challenges as well as opportunities.

Amidst this changing reality, it is now the case that Azerbaijan's young professionals can be found in most Western and Asian capitals and universities, and its cadre of professional diplomats, educated increasingly at the globally-linked Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. Given the dy-

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dynamic changes occurring throughout Azerbaijan's neighborhood both with the color revolutions that originally swept the post-Soviet space and most recently in the Arab world, Baku stands at a historic crossroads. Azerbaijan sits between two geopolitical regions: to its west, one characterized by democracy, and to its north, east and south, one with very weak democracies or authoritarian regimes. As a neighbor of powers such as Iran and Russia, both of which offer alternative paths to development and promote alternative understandings of democracy, as well as Turkey, which continues to require the support of its EU and U.S. partners if its own democracy is to consolidate and develop in a liberal manner, Azerbaijan has been watching the revolutionary movements sweeping the Middle East with little enthusiasm. Fearing spillover and a loss of primacy as the region reshapes itself, Baku is hoping that it can shape rather than react to these developments.

Azerbaijan's growing sense of self-confidence should not detract from the larger, sobering reality. Azerbaijan's neighborhood is increasingly dangerous and unstable, and many of

the most potent political, economic and cultural dynamics intersect at this small Caucasian country. This has led Azerbaijan to increase its military budget by a significant amount over the past few years (the increase from 2010-2011 was 89% or, an impressive \$1.187 billion).⁴ The 2012 proposed budget shows another increase.⁵ It is hard to imagine where modest investments from the West that reaffirm Azerbaijan's inclination and predispositions might pay a larger dividend, nor where failure to do so could have more extended consequences. The importance of Azerbaijan and its geography's to the West goes well beyond oil and gas. Put another way, it's about a lot more than energy in Azerbaijan these days.

4 Abbasov, Shahin. "Azerbaijan: Baku Embarks on Military Spending Surge, Seeking Karabakh Peace." *EurasiaNet.org*. N.p., 22 Oct. 2010. Web. 15 June 2012. <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62223>>.

5 "News.Az - Your Window to the Region." *News.Az*. N.p., 12 Oct. 2011. Web. 15 June 2012. <<http://www.news.az/articles/46508>>