

The Azerbaijan- NATO partnership at 20

Khazar Ibrahim^{*}



^{*} Ambassador Khazar Ibrahim is the head of the mission of the Republic of Azerbaijan to NATO

May 4, 2014 marked the 20th anniversary of Azerbaijan's membership in the NATO Partnership for Peace Programme (PFP). Two decades on, this review will take stock of the achievements to date, and consider the future of cooperation within the PFP.

Looking back, three distinctive trends of development can be identified within the partnership.

From basic to strategic. In 1994, Azerbaijan was still actively seeking opportunities for international engagement. NATO, as the only Euro-Atlantic military alliance, was the natural choice, as demonstrated by the signing of the framework document the same year. But at that time, the actual substance of the partnership remained unclear; generating substantive mechanisms for cooperation was itself a process. Today, the dynamics have changed radically, as reflected in this declaration by NATO Secretary General Rasmussen: "Azerbaijan is a country of pivotal importance for Europe's energy security and to peace and stability in the Caucasus." In turn, President Aliyev has stated that "during the years of cooperation, these 20 years of our membership of the Partnership for Peace Programme, our relations have been elevated to a level of strategic cooperation."¹

From possible to necessary. In 1994, partnership with Azerbaijan became possible due to the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the emergence of the newly independent states. Today, this partnership is necessary in order to combat regional and global challenges and to create opportunities for peace and stability. Stable, tolerant and capable Azerbaijan has become an indispensable NATO partner in the Caspian region, where many traditional and new threats and challenges come together: interstate conflicts and military aggressions along with terrorism, radicalism and organized crime. The Caspian is also an important crossroads for trade and transportation.

From a receptive partner to an active contributor. For most of the first decade, the partnership was characterized by NATO's assistance to Azerbaijan in security sector reform, improving interoperability, and other efforts towards capacity building. To-

¹ Joint press point with NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Heydar oglu Aliyev, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_106145.htm?selectedLocale=en

day, Azerbaijan is a troop contributor and a crucial transit route for ISAF in Afghanistan, and a lead partner on emerging security challenges. The Azerbaijan Mine Agency (developed with NATO's support) provides its own support to Afghanistan and NATO Trust Fund project in Georgia.

A comprehensive analysis of the future of Azerbaijan-NATO relations requires not only an assessment of the PFP's historical meaning, but also that of its updated significance: Practical, Flexible and Principled.

Practical. The partnership should concentrate on areas that are mutually beneficial: emerging security challenges, defense reform and Trust Funds. Energy security is something Azerbaijan brings to the table, since it is a major oil and gas provider for several NATO member countries. And energy security is inseparable from cybersecurity nowadays. Counterterrorism cooperation represents even greater value for the partnership in light of recent developments in both Greater Central Asia and the Middle East.

Defense reforms provide a vital tool for the further modernization of Azerbaijani Armed Forces. This, in its turn, will enable the smoother engagement of Azerbaijani troops in future operations. The role of a professional "cadre" is undeniable here and the decision by Azerbaijani Defense Minister to increase the number of seconded officers (Partner Staff Element - PSE) at NATO is a step in this direction.

The success of Trust Fund endeavors in Azerbaijan should encourage the expansion of activities in both Azerbaijan and beyond. The destruction of old ammunition is important for Azerbaijan, while demining can be Azerbaijan's further contribution to NATO efforts in Afghanistan.

Flexible. The partnership should avoid "dogmas". True, in April 2011, NATO sought to move beyond the existing matrix and suggested enhanced partnerships and flexible formats. It deserves praise. But what I mean here goes further. It is time for the Alliance to disregard a dogmatic "balanced" approach, which often implies "what I do for one regional country, I shall also do for another".

Flexibility also entails adaptability. Global affairs are both dy-

namic and unpredictable. In this regard, new areas of cooperation should be incorporated as the context changes.

Principled. The PfP Framework Document of 1994 says: “They [subscribing States] reaffirm their commitment to fulfil in good faith the obligations of the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights; specifically, to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, to respect existing borders and to settle disputes by peaceful means”.² Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity has been violated by Armenia (another PfP member) for at least as long as the PfP has existed. NATO, in its Summit final documents and through its officials, has made its adherence to the PfP Framework Document clear. It is a principled position. There should be no attempts to water it down. On the contrary, even stronger, consistent and very clear messages should prevail. This is crucial for NATO’s credibility and represents the backbone of any future partnership.

² <http://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c940110b.htm>