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Special, Exceptional, and Privileged
Azerbaijani-Turkish Relations

Ayça Ergun

The bilateral relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkey is special, exceptional, and privileged. Both countries assign the highest value and importance to their relationship at both the state and non-state level. The motto “one nation, two states” has been used quite frequently in this context, and it rings true. First pronounced by Heydar Aliyev, it is frequently used by the political and intellectual elites of both countries and strongly supported by the public in both nations. A strong pattern of friendship, fraternity, brotherhood, and unity characterizes the bilateral relationship, which presidents Recep Tayyip Erdogan defined in September 2010 as that between “two fraternal countries bound together by bonds unseen elsewhere in the world” and Ilham Aliyev described minutes later as having “reached the level of alliance.”

In this essay I will analyze the nature of the multifaceted bilateral relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkey while focusing on the content, quality, and meaning attributed to this special partnership. I will start by identifying the sources of the bilateral relationship and continue with a discussion of its political contours. I will then follow up with an examination of the state of inter-societal dialogue and level of cooperation in culture and education. Next, I will turn to an examination of the only period of turbulence in the relationship, which was caused by Turkey’s ultimately unsuccessful outreach to Armenia more than a decade ago. Finally, I will explore Turkey’s position vis-à-vis the Second Karabakh War and show how it exemplifies the exceptional and still deepening level of strategic cooperation between Ankara and Baku.

The Azerbaijan-Turkey bilateral relationship is important, perhaps crucial, for securing stability and security in the South Caucasus. It is based on mutual trust and relies on mutual interdependence. The mutuality in both support and solidarity that the two countries extend to one another is unconditional.

This strategic relationship also has a significant economic dimension, particularly in the field of energy and transportation, which continues to provide both countries with opportunities to get well-integrated into wider networks of economic relations through projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline as well as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line. Investments in both directions have also been strong and are growing. This creates a mutual dependence in both countries for the representation of economic interests and profit maximization.

Economic cooperation supports significantly the foreign policy priorities of both countries. They should therefore not be understood as a mere trade and investment relations, but as a constituent part of a common, forward-looking vision to connect future generations.

Thus, their emotional and historical bonds correspond seamlessly to their shared security and economic interests. This in fact goes beyond interests: Turkey and Azerbaijan have common development and security agendas.

For Azerbaijan, the image of Turkey is well-rooted in historical memory. Atatürk famously said, “Azerbaijan’s joy is our joy; its sorrow is our sorrow.” And in the immediate post-Soviet period, two cornerstone decisions taken by Ankara at the time continue to resonate particularly well in Baku, at both elite and popular levels: first, Turkey was the first country to recognize the modern-day independence of Azerbaijan; second, Ankara’s refusal to build-up diplomatic relations with Yerevan until the Karabakh conflict is resolved to Baku’s satisfaction. This was soon followed

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by Turkey’s support to Azerbaijan in both regional and international fora and organizations.

For Turkey, the collapse of the Soviet Union opened up the way to determine new foreign policy priorities, formulate new policies, and develop new tools vis-à-vis the Turkic world to its east. Through the rediscovery of commonalities—particularly in culture and language—between two close nations that had been almost entirely cut off from one another for decades, Azerbaijan quickly came to be seen by Turkey as its closest ally in the former Soviet space. Azerbaijan also became, in many ways, a jumping-off point for Turkey to seek opportunities to develop new economic relations in other Silk Road region emerging markets, including those centered on energy projects.

Patterns of cooperation coupled with large doses of strategic goodwill dominated the immediate post-Soviet period. By the time Azerbaijan was able to consolidate its statehood and sovereignty, this largely emotional basis was replaced by a more goal-oriented approach that deepened the two countries’ strategic alliance and partnerships. As of late 2020, both countries view the relationship as being one between equals in which both sides benefit from their mutual interdependence.

**Sources of Commonality**

The origin of, and basis for, the “one nation, two states” motto that perfectly describes the Turkey-Azerbaijan relationship lie in four commonalities. First, Azerbaijan and Turkey share common historical, cultural, religious, and linguistic attributes. Although one cannot deny the velocity of shared cultural patterns and the mutual intelligibility of the dialects spoken by the two peoples, the underlying factors highlighting these commonalities are to some extent constructed (but not imagined).

Both communities did not interact at all during the Soviet period (from the early 1920s to the late 1980s). As a consequence, both the perception and the image each has of the other is not the product of an organic, uninterrupted evolution. This is not to imply artificiality but rather a certain idealization.

The national memory of the Azerbaijans thus glorifies the image of Turkey as savior, at least with regards to events that took place in the first decades of the twentieth century. Generally, the shared past is infused solely with positive connotations. There is much to be said for this narrative. For instance, the interaction between Azerbaijani and Turkish intellectuals during the *fin-de-siècle* period into the early 1920s, and the fact that they shared almost the same vision of a would-be state—with particular emphasis on Turkism and modernization—underlines the intellectual and ideological basis of the special relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan, especially from the latter’s perspective. Turks, on the other hand, without necessarily having substantial information, consider language as the main proof of common ancestry. In this respect, both countries’ perceptions are at once authentic and constructed—although loaded with meaning—in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Memory is there, preserved and revived, and has resulted in shared feelings, real bonds, and strategic depth.

Second, both countries share a common enemy. Armenians historically constitute the main Other for both societies. Historical grievances that could not been overcome have been revived by the Karabakh conflict. In other words, the fact of a common enemy helped to bring Azerbaijani and Turks closer together. Turkey’s unconditional support for Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict also has been tied to the issue of sharing a common threat. Although the level of threat perception is not the same both countries, it has constituted one of the main challenges in shaping Turkey’s relations with the West (both Europe and the United States) and Azerbaijan’s conception of territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as both nation- and state-building.
In this respect one could even argue that “shared memory” is less important than “shared enemy” with respect to forging and deepening commonalities. The fact that hostilities (or hostile intent) have continued provides the sense of “shared enemy” with a certain permanence with respect to both Turkey and Azerbaijan. The actual conflict—understood to refer particularly to the Second Karabakh War—has further contributed to the revitalization of a sense of shared memory, albeit converted into a sort of collective identity or collective consciousness among Azerbaijanis and Turks.

The Second Karabakh War has both accelerated and deepened existing trends in this most privileged of bilateral relationships, thanks to the unwavering moral and political support extended to Azerbaijan by Turkey. This implies that both countries’ societies would react in the event that one or both nations’ elites were to exhibit reluctance in pursuing common ground. The importance of the human dimension is such that it is likely to remain a driving force behind the choices of both elites in the time to come.

Three sources constitute the basis for the bilateral relationship, which later evolved into a more privileged partnership that served to deepen the unity between Azerbaijan and Turkey and, more recently, has been transformed into a strategic partnership with commonly high. This is exceptional for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that it developed and blossomed largely without governmental incentivization.

The Second Karabakh War has both accelerated and deepened existing trends in this most privileged of bilateral relationships, thanks to the unwavering moral and political support extended to Azerbaijan by Turkey. The continuous dialogue between Ilham Aliyev and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as well as their respective foreign and defense ministers, represents strong evidence of this new deepening. Turkey’s presence in Azerbaijan will definitely increase through participation in what the November 10th armistice agreement called a “peacemaking center to oversee the ceasefire” as well as the likely role Turkey will play in helping to rebuild Azerbaijan’s liberated territories.

Societal Dialogue

The backbone of the bilateral relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkey is the societal dimension. The perceptions and feelings among both countries’ publics are extremely positive, which is why they are most likely to endure well into the future. The level of mutual awareness is also uncommonly high. This is exceptional for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that it developed and blossomed largely without governmental incentivization.

The reasons informing this exceptionalism for Azerbaijanis and Turks are different. For instance, the level of knowledge of, and first-hand experience in, Turkey or anything Turkish is much higher among Azerbaijanis than vice versa. Azerbaijanis follow domestic and foreign policy issues in Turkey, watch Turkish news and television programs, support Turkish football teams, and travel to Turkey quite frequently either for business or touristic purposes. In this respect, societal literacy about Turkey is Azerbaijan in not comparable with that of Turks about Azerbaijan.

In contrast, Turkish attachment to Azerbaijan is more emotional and, one could even say, intuitive. Turks are neither very aware nor follow Azerbaijan domestic politics. Their strong sensitivity and support for Azerbaijan’s position regarding Nagorno-Karabakh is likely due to perceptions of Armenia and Armenians. In opinion polls, the Turkish public considers Azerbaijan its closest and most
reliable ally, year in and year out. Although most Turks have neither first-hand knowledge of, or experience in, Azerbaijan, notions of collective memory, cultural affinities, and linguistic proximity condition these perceptions. Thus, Azerbaijani and Turkish public opinions share both joy and sorrow—to refer back to Atatürk’s famous formulation.

A further increase in societal literacy on Turkey in Azerbaijan would open even greater potential for further collaboration. But improving the other side of the ledger is more pressing: increasing Turkish societal literacy with respect to Azerbaijan. Turkish public opinion’s sympathy with Azerbaijan originates in the notion of shared memory, largely constructed with reference to a common enemy. Thus, it is highly responsive to emergency situations and becomes highly visible and vocalized when the need arises. During the Second Karabakh War, media coverage in Turkey was comprehensive. How ever, Turkish encounters with Azerbaijanis in Azerbaijan remain limited, since its South Caucasus neighbor is not a popular tourist destination.

Increased cultural interaction will not only contribute to an increase in familiarity between the two societies but also consolidate the societal dimension of the bilateral relationship. The Yunus Emre Institute and the Atatürk Center of Turkey can play critical roles in this process.

Educational and Cultural Cooperation

The field of education is one of the liveliest domains illustrating both the political and societal aspects of the patterns of cooperation between Azerbaijan and Turkey. In 1992, Turkey initiated the Great Student Project, which provided young people from the Turkic world of the former Soviet Union with the chance to study in Turkey at the undergraduate level. This visionary project aimed to provide an opportunity for the first post-Soviet generation to receive a quality education in a time of political uncertainty, societal transition, and economic turmoil that largely characterized the early years of independence.

In the first decade of the Great Student Project program, more than 17,500 scholarships were offered to students from Turkic countries, including to more than 3,650 Azerbaijanis. These students represented a core cultural link between the two societies, having had the opportunity to form a realistic picture of what Turkey was truly about, which allowed them to elaborate an informed perception of its culture, society, politics, and much else besides.

Ankara also worked hard to the building up of a pro-Turkey political, intellectual, and business elite in Azerbaijan. This soft power integration model has helped to foster a sense of commonality by establishing a shared social background in which trust, sympathy, and affinities are considered as given. The very presence of a large Turkish university alumni community in Azerbaijan is a critical niche for the further consolidation of the bilateral relationship.

A Period of Turbulence

The exceptional ties between Azerbaijan and Turkey were challenged, for a time, by Turkey’s attempt to normalize diplomatic relations with Armenia in 2008-2009. Although Turkey’s relations with Armenia have been (and continue to be) conditioned to the full restoration of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, the issue of Turkish-Armenian relations has become occasionally a topic for pressuring Turkey in international fora.

Historical hatred fueled by the absence of bilateral relations constitute a hurdle for Turkish foreign policy to deal with internationally. The attempt at rapprochement (or even reconciliation, as some thought possible) between Armenia and Turkey began with football diplomacy. In September 2008, Turkish president Abdullah Gül visited Yerevan to watch a football World Cup qualifier match at the invitation of Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan. The Armenian head of state was later invited to the Turkish city of Bursa to watch the sequel match.

At the time, the symbolism was rather exaggerated, although it later came to be viewed as the first step in the attempt to normalize relations between Ankara and Yerevan: the outcome of these face-to-face presidential meetings opened the way to the signing up of the Zurich Protocols in October 2009 between the countries’ foreign ministers. Of the two documents signed, one concerned the establishment of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey whilst the other focused on the development of bilateral relations. Although these Protocols were not been ratified by the legislatures of either country, they had a considerable impact on the Azerbaijan-Turkey relationship.
It did not help Ankara’s case in Baku that the Zurich Protocols made no mention of Nagorno-Karabakh; prior to their signing, Erdogan appeared to indicate otherwise. In April 2009, for example, he had announced that “unless Azerbaijan and Armenia sign a protocol on Nagorno-Karabakh, we will not sign any final agreement with Armenia on ties. We are doing preliminary work but this definitely depends on resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem.” Four weeks later, during an official visit to Azerbaijan, he said that “there is a relation of cause and effect here. The occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh is the cause, and the closure of the border is the effect. Without the occupation ending, the gates will not be opened.” And yet, for a time it seemed as though they would—assurances to the contrary notwithstanding.

At bottom, the exceptional type of relationship enjoyed by Turkey and Azerbaijan is based on trust. Turkey obviously miscalculated the potential gains of the nascent normalization process. It also underestimated its own domestic grass-roots opposition to the Zurich Protocols as well as the extent to which these could potentially disturb both Azerbaijan’s elite and public opinion. Ankara did not do itself any favors by opting not to consult with Baku prior to initiating the normalization process. All this produced a real rupture between Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Although constructive dialogue at high levels resumed—as did reciprocal official visits along with a resurgence of popular support in each country for the other—the damage had been done: the crisis was overcome, but not forgotten. For some period of time thereafter, the Azerbaijani government embraced a more cautious stance towards Turkey: the restoration of trust was hardly instantaneous.

The breakthrough came about a year later with the signing of the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support between Turkey and Azerbaijan and the establishment of the Azerbaijan-Turkey High-level Strategic Cooperation Council (and the holding of the first meeting of the latter mechanism in October 2011). This can be interpreted as symbol of the quick restoration of disturbed relations as well as a further institutionalization of the Ankara-Baku alliance. What is also remarkable is that this new mechanism formally incorporated a security dimension. Both countries pledged to support each other “using all possibilities” in the event of a military attack or “aggression” against either of them. The Joint Declaration that established the aforementioned Council also contained provisions to upgrade hardware for joint military operations, cooperation in “military-technical” areas, and joint military exercises and training sessions.

The Karabakh Conflict

Turkey’s refusal to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia until the return of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan is considered by Baku to be of fundamental importance. One can argue that although Turkish moral and political support during the Second Karabakh War is a natural continuum of the discourse, the latest developments provided yet another opportunity for the bilateral relationship to intensify and deepen.

Between July and September 2020, the two countries conducted joint military exercises that were qualitatively more serious in comparison to those that had taken place in the past, which made their unconditional relationship more visible. This can also be interpreted yet another example of overlapping political, economic, security, and strategic interests.

Azerbaijan’s military operations on its own territory were unequivocally supported by a very high-level declarations. Erdogan stated that the Turkish nation stands by its Azerbaijani brothers “as always and with all its resources.” Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu declared that “Azerbaijan will, of course, use its right to legitimate defense to protect its people and territorial integrity. In this process, Turkey’s full support for Azerbaijan is complete and its solidarity is unwavering. We will stand with Azerbaijan in any way it wants.” Çavuşoğlu again: “We will stand with Azerbaijan in the field and on the table.” Turkey’s defense minister, Hulusi Akar, added the following, for good measure: “we will stand with our Azerbaijani Turkic brothers and sisters until the end with all our means in the struggle to protect the integrity of their land.” During one of his wartime visits to Baku, Çavuşoğlu said...
that Turkey and Azerbaijan can even be “counted as one state when necessary.”

The Turkish public was glued to their screens, watching the news coverage of the war that was more extensive of Azerbaijan in comparison to any other period since Azerbaijan’s independence. Even a cursory examination of Azerbaijani social media accounts lead to the realization that Azerbaijanis frequently use the Turkish flag emoji alongside their own. The number of Turkish flags hanging side by side with Azerbaijani ones in cities and town across the country would be impossible to count, so great is the number. Public celebrations after the armistice was signed on November 10th were held with both Azerbaijani and Turkish flags. And Erdogan was the guest of honor for the Victory parade that took place on December 10th in Baku.

Turkey has already been supportive of Azerbaijan in all regional and international fora, in accordance with the strategic nature of the bilateral relationship. There was nothing new in this. But by the start of the Second Karabakh War, Turkey’s stance had become more proactive, assertive, and involved. Ankara in effect made a total commitment of support for the war effort (Azerbaijan reportedly drew the line regarding Turkey’s offer of direct military involvement on the battlefield).

It should be noted, however, that the Turkish army and its military academies have been providing training to their Azerbaijani comrades in arms for a couple of decades. This has obviously contributed to the formation of a well-equipped and strong Azerbaijani military, which has vastly improved in comparison with the 1990s. And generations of the military elites of the two countries have trained side by side.

The postwar period represents a test for Turkey—especially in the context of its immediate neighborhood. Ankara has what may be a truly historic opportunity to strengthen its role in the region while becoming a more prominent security actor. The balance of power in the South Caucasus will largely be determined by the nature of the relationship between Russia and Turkey that has aptly been defined as a competitive partnership.

Further Consolidation

The bilateral relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkey remains exceptional and has been further deepened as a result of the Second Karabakh War. The will and policies of the ruling elites are fully supported by the publics of both states. With respect to the question of further consolidation and enhanced institutionalization, important initiatives can be considered—particularly in non-political fields. The diversification of policies and tools would eventually contribute to the further strengthening of a unique set of bilateral ties. Three will here be mentioned briefly.

First, civil society dialogue, which is one of the least developed dimensions of the bilateral relationship. Although Turkish civil society organizations are neither donors nor fund-generating entities, they still have the capacity to transfer their knowhow through jointly-created initiatives. This can be very inspiring for Azerbaijani civil society, given the considerable experience of Turkish NGOs in voluntary activism.

Second, developing and strengthening relationships between universities and research centers. Almost all the first- and even many second-tier universities in Azerbaijan and Turkey—both public and private—signed cooperation agreements with each other years ago, but relatively few have satisfactorily fulfilled their stated aims in practice. Faculty, student, and staff exchanges, along with joint research initiatives and the organizations of workshops and conferences, would significantly contribute to the development of an interactive academic milieu. The establishment of Turkish and Azerbaijani studies centers and academic departments, operating under relevant institutional frameworks, would not only contribute to knowledge production but also to heightened scientific analysis of the multiple dimensions of the bilateral relationship. Supporting such new academic initiatives would
necessitate an investment on the part of both governments.

Third, alumni organizations should also be supported. States can support their activities when doing so would make sense, certain in the knowledge that university graduates are the best potential representatives of each nation in terms of entrenching the continuity of an exceptional and deepening bilateral relationship.

The Second Karabakh War brought the relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan to an even higher level. In the time ahead, its contours will remain the same whilst the substance will continue to grow and deepen. One can therefore easily expect more institutionalization, a diversification of joint initiatives, and stronger commitments by both sides. Based on historical ties and cultural proximity, and inspired by common interests and benefits, the bilateral relationship will continue to be supported and preserved at the societal level in both countries. This rare asset—this true alliance—should be not taken for granted so that its true potential may be revealed.

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