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POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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Time to Get U.S.-Azerbaijani Relations on Track

Luke Coffey

Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War has created a new geopolitical reality in the South Caucasus and the Caspian region. This new geopolitical reality creates challenges and opportunities for the United States. Azerbaijan's victory in the war means that NATO member Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus, and by extension Central Asia, is on the rise. If Washington and Ankara can get their bilateral relationship back on track, Turkey's ascendancy in the region can benefit broader U.S. strategic interests. In the aftermath of the conflict there is also an opportunity for America to increase and deepen regional economic and energy cooperation. However, Moscow now has troops—either by invitation or by occupation—in all three countries of the South Caucasus and in Kazakhstan on the other side of the Caspian. From the American point

of view, this does not help bring stability or security to the region.

Azerbaijan is in a strategic region where many U.S. geopolitical interests converge. Since 2001, Azerbaijan has proven to be a reliable partner for America against terrorism as well as in the war in Afghanistan. With the new geopolitical reality in the region, U.S. policymakers would be remiss to ignore this limited window of opportunity for improving Washington's relationship with Baku.

Bilateral Ties Over Time

U.S.-Azerbaijani relations date back to the post-World War I Paris Peace Conference—that is to say, during the early and short-lived days of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. Alimardan Topchubashov, the nascent repub-

lic's foreign minister, was stuck in Istanbul waiting for France to issue visas for him and his delegation to travel to Paris to make the case for an independent Azerbaijan in front of the victors of World War I.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months, but visas were not forthcoming. Finally, U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing wrote to his French counterpart, Stephen Pichon, asking for help in getting visas for the Azerbaijani delegation. After three months of waiting, Topchubashov and his delegation finally made it to Paris, met with U.S. President Woodrow Wilson in May 1919, and won de facto recognition of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. Sadly, the new republic was short-lived. Months later, the Red Army invaded and occupied Azerbaijan and absorbed it into the Soviet Union.

A few months after meeting with the Azerbaijani delegation, Wilson recounted the event during a speech delivered to San Francisco's Commonwealth Club in September 1919: "Well, one day there came in a very dignified and interesting group of gentlemen who were from Azerbaijan. [...] I was talking to men who talked the same language that I did in respect of ideas, in respect of conceptions of liberty, in respect of conceptions of right and justice."

During the Cold War and the Soviet occupation of Azerbaijan, the United States and the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic did not, and of course could not, have formal diplomatic relations. However, on the break-up of the Soviet Union, the then-U.S. president, George H.W. Bush, recognized the reestablishment of Azerbaijan's independence on Christmas Day 1991.

Regrettably, by the late 1990s, the United States had lost much of its enthusiasm for engaging with most of the newly independent countries of the former Soviet Union, including Azerbaijan. This all changed, however, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Soon thereafter, the U.S. sought to reengage with the region by seeking cooperation against international terrorism and to secure transit and basing rights in the South Caucasus and Central Asia for combat operations in Afghanistan. Azerbaijan, in particular, was an important focus for the United States during this time.

There were also efforts made immediately after 9/11 to improve Baku's maritime capabilities on the Caspian. The U.S. helped Azerbaijan gain the ability to secure its maritime borders, protect vital energy infrastructure, stop the flow of terror-

ists, prevent terror attacks, ensure the free flow of commerce in the region, and prevent the transfer of illegal weapons and drugs. Between 2000 and 2003, the U.S. Coast Guard donated a total five naval cutters to Azerbaijan. In addition, the U.S. supplied Azerbaijan’s naval vessels with radar and communication equipment to help improve command and control. One of Azerbaijan’s biggest capability gaps in the Caspian was maritime domain awareness, so the United States also provided a number of coastal radar stations, which, according to the U.S. State Department, are used “by the Navy, Coast Guard, and State Border Service to conduct maritime surveillance and detect smuggling threats.” U.S.-Azerbaijan military cooperation is not limited to the maritime domain. Since 2003, the Oklahoma-Azerbaijan National Guard Partnership, conducted under the auspices of the U.S. National Guard State Partnership Program, has regularly brought American and Azerbaijani soldiers together for joint training.

Today, the U.S.-Azerbaijan relationship is dormant and in dire need of revitalization. In the past 15 years, there have been no new initiatives of note to enhance

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relations. Much of the enthusiasm for energy cooperation in the 1990s is gone today. Many of the post-9/11 initiatives to cooperate on counter-terrorism and security issues have ended. There has not been a cabinet-level visit to Baku since Hillary Clinton visited as Secretary of State in 2012 (although John Bolton came in October 2018 as National Security Adviser). Complicating matters even more is that Azerbaijan, due to its closeness and association with Turkey, has become “collateral damage” resulting from the currently frosty relations existing between Washington and Ankara. Making matters worse for bilateral relations, influential diaspora groups (particularly Armenian-American ones), coordinating with influential members of the U.S. Congress, have made improving the U.S.-Azerbaijani relationship difficult.

U.S. Interests in the Region

Azerbaijan is an important, if often overlooked, country concerning many of the challenges the U.S. faces around the world. There are five clusters of issues here and each will be addressed in turn.

First, Azerbaijan is important for energy security for the Transatlantic Community. The Transatlantic Community benefits whenever Europe reduces its dependence on Russian oil and gas. Azerbaijan offers an important alternative. The Southern Gas Corridor is a great example of this. If projects like the proposed Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline are ever realized, Azerbaijan would play an even bigger role in the European continent’s energy diversification. This is particularly important at a time when pressure is mounting on Germany to stop the certification process of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline project with Russia.

Second, Azerbaijan is in a geostrategic location in the context of great power competition. At some point on the vast Eurasian landmass, all trade and transit has to pass through one of three countries: Russia, Azerbaijan, or Iran. The breakdown in relations between the West and both Moscow and Tehran means that Russia and Iran are not viable options for the east-west free flow of trade and energy. This leaves only Azerbaijan, specifically the trade chokepoint

known as the “Ganja Gap,” which is named after Azerbaijan’s second largest city that sits in the middle of this narrow passage. Retaining access to the Ganja Gap is important to any U.S. strategy in the region.

Third, Azerbaijan has also proved to be a reliable U.S. partner regarding another sensitive geopolitical issue: Israel. Although Azerbaijan is a majority-Muslim country, it is both in law and in fact a secular society and has a very close relationship with Israel. The Azerbaijani city of Qirmizi Qasaba is thought to be the world’s only all-Jewish city in the world outside Israel. Azerbaijan also provides Israel with 40 percent of its oil. As a sign of how close the bilateral relationship is between the two countries, former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu even visited Azerbaijan when in office. At a time when the U.S. has been working hard getting other Muslim majority countries to normalize relations with Israel, Azerbaijan should be highlighted as an example.

Fourth, Azerbaijan is also an important diplomatic interlocutor. Baku often hosts high level and sensitive diplomatic meet-

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ings. A number of meetings between American and Russian military leaders have been held in the country in recent years. Such meetings are especially useful given the frosty state of U.S.-Russian relations. They present a non-political opportunity for the United States to discuss, on a military-to-military level, issues such as how to prevent accidents in Syria, where both the United States and Russia are militarily involved. Meetings like this led one veteran observer of the South Caucasus to ask: “Is Baku the new Caucasian Geneva?”

Perhaps most relevant to the current geopolitical circumstances resulting from the situation in Afghanistan is that Azerbaijan is the key to Central Asia—the *fifth* cluster of issues. For economic, cultural, trade, historical, and transit reasons, Azerbaijan is the gateway to the region for the Transatlantic Community. This is particularly true considering the importance of the Ganja Gap. Baku also maintains close relations with many of the Central Asian republics, especially Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—both of which could be very important to the European continent’s energy needs.

Furthermore, with the Taliban now in control of Afghanistan, Central Asia is even more im-

portant to U.S. policymakers. The five Central Asian countries have a new reality on their doorstep and are nervously watching it unfold. In the coming months and years, Afghanistan will likely become a place of instability, as it was in the 1990s. While options are limited, the U.S. must mitigate the geopolitical fallout from the restoration of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Central Asian region will be an important part of any approach. The Biden Administration needs to develop a new Central Asia strategy and build confidence and trust with the Central Asian states—especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Azerbaijan (and Turkey) could play an important role in this important context.

Another point worth mentioning is the meaningful contribution Azerbaijan made to NATO’s efforts in Afghanistan. In 2020, Azerbaijan had 120 soldiers serving in Afghanistan under NATO command. While this might not sound like much, it exceeded the troop contributions of 23 other countries, including NATO members like Greece, Norway, and Spain. During the chaotic evacuation at Kabul International Airport in the summer of 2021, Azerbaijani soldiers played an important role that received praised from NATO’s Secretary General. Also,

the campaign in Afghanistan served as a reminder of the importance of the Ganja Gap. At the peak of the war, more than one-third of U.S. non-lethal military supplies such as fuel, food, and clothing passed through the Ganja Gap either overland or in the air. During last year’s evacuations, dozens of NATO aircraft used the Ganja Gap’s airspace to safely remove thousands of civilians from Afghanistan.

New Geopolitical Reality

Azerbaijan’s victory in the Second Karabakh War has created a new geopolitical reality in the South Caucasus and the Caspian region—both integral parts of what the editors of this journal have taken to calling the Silk Road region. The Azerbaijani victory also demonstrated that the ‘old way’ of viewing the region no longer applies. The sooner American policymakers recognize and understand these new realities, the better for U.S. interests. This new geopolitical reality creates opportunities and challenges for the United States.

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There are now five new “realities” that U.S. policymakers must recognize in the region after the Second Karabakh War. Each will be addressed in turn. *Firstly*, Turkey’s influence in the South Caucasus and, by extension, in Central Asia is on the rise. NATO member Turkey surprised many in Washington by actively taking on the role of the balancing power against Russia in the region. If Washington and Ankara can get the bilateral relation back on track Turkey’s ascendancy in the region can benefit broader U.S. strategic interests.

Secondly, there is now regional uncertainty about Russia’s commitment to the broader region. Even though it was Russia that brokered the ceasefire agreement, there is a perception that Moscow to a certain extent abandoned Yerevan during the conflict. There is also a perception in the region that Azerbaijan defied Russia, with no serious consequences, by using military force to liberate its territory. Countries in the region might be willing to test the waters more with Moscow as a result. One of the first examples

of this was the agreement between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan over a long-disputed hydrocarbon field in the Caspian they now both call Dostluk (it used to be called Kapaz by Baku and Serdar by Ashgabat). In the 1990s, Ashgabat was loathed to make a deal with Baku over Dostluk for fear of upsetting Moscow. The situation is now different.

Thirdly, Iran is weaker in the region. Tehran has a new geopolitical reality on its northern border, in the form of an emboldened Azerbaijan and a weakened Armenia. The latter has enjoyed surprisingly cozy relations with Tehran over the years. On the other hand, relations between Iran and Azerbaijan are cordial but there are tensions beneath the surface, in part due to the issues having to do with the sizable number of ethnic-Azerbaijanis living in northwestern Iran and other parts of the Islamic Republic. In recent years, Azerbaijan has strived to maintain cordial relations with Iran because it relied on access to Iranian airspace and territory to supply its autonomous region of Nakhchivan—an exclave of Azerbaijan nestling between Iran, Armenia, and Turkey. As part of the 10 November 2020 peace deal, Armenia must open a corridor through its territory to allow Azerbaijan to transport goods directly to Nakhchivan. In addition,

last year Turkey announced a new natural gas pipeline to supply Nakhchivan with energy. Iran is thus now becoming less important for Azerbaijan, and it is likely that the dynamics in the bilateral relationship will change in Baku's favor.

Fourthly, while cordial on the surface, relations between Moscow and Baku are strained. Azerbaijan has pursued a pragmatic foreign policy when dealing with Russia. One that balances Baku's desire for independence from Russian-backed organizations while maintaining cordial relations with Moscow. However, several events in 2020 have strained Azerbaijan's relations with Russia. As one notable observer of the region recently stated, "Azerbaijan has launched a public campaign against Russia." The most notable point of friction between Azerbaijan and Russia is the credible allegation that Armenia fired Russian supplied Iskander-M missiles during the conflict. However, relations between Moscow and Baku had frayed even prior to the onset of the Second Karabakh War—in the summer of 2020—when the former vocally and very publicly protested and accused the latter of "intensely arming Armenia" using an air bridge to deliver weaponry and supplies. This charge was repeated during the war, as well.

Lastly, there are new regional energy and transit infrastructure projects that are now possible. Everyone likes a winner. The completion of the Southern Gas Corridor and Azerbaijan's stunning victory in the Second Karabakh War could inject new enthusiasm, if not a healthy dose of realpolitik, into the region's thinking. Another opportunity for the U.S. in the region should be focused on increasing foreign investment and improving in the economic situation in the South Caucasus.

It is impossible to calculate how many billions of dollars in foreign direct investments the almost 30-year-old frozen conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia has cost the region. Now that there is some degree of peace and stability, the U.S. should consult with regional countries on possibilities for new regional energy and infrastructure projects. This could help boost the economic prospects of the region and help build an enduring peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

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Thinking boldly and creatively, if there is genuine peace someday and if the idea of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline is realized, why could there not be a Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Armenia-Nakhchivan-Turkey gas pipeline (TAANaT)? The idea would not be to compete with TAP, TANAP, and the Southern Gas Corridor. Instead, such an ambitious project could help the region integrate better, build trust among old adversaries, and support Armenia with its own energy issues. While the region is probably years away from diplomatic conditions allowing for such a project, the United States should start a discussion now on what is possible.

Challenges with Relationship

Like all relationships, the one between the United States and Azerbaijan faces challenges. In a number of cases around the world, including this one, bilateral ties frequently suffer from a lopsided policy pursued by Washington heavily focused on lofty human rights goals—

often at the expense of strategic American interests in the region. Rightly or wrongly, there is a feeling in Baku that Azerbaijan is singled out for sustained criticism by the West—mainly by the EU and some of its member states, but also by the U.S.—in contrast to the almost complete silence that greets the activities of some other countries in that part of the world and elsewhere.

It is no secret that human rights issues have been a persistent problem in the relationship. In recent years, there have been legitimate concerns about freedom of the press and the slow process of democratization. From America’s perspective, these worrying developments for U.S.-Azerbaijani relations cannot be ignored.

At the same time, it is important to remember what former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said about democracy development in the former Soviet Union. He believed it is important to ask, “Which way are they moving, and are they coming towards freer political systems and freer economic systems or are they regressing?”

The U.S. needs an anchor of engagement and influence on each side of the Caspian Sea. On the western side, Azerbaijan is the natural partner for the United States.

Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan’s overall democratic trajectory has been headed in the right direction. Recent changes in top government positions have also signaled a desire to align more with Western views and thinking. For example, it has not gone unnoticed by observers of the South Caucasus in Washington, DC that older officials who spent time in Moscow for education have been replaced with younger ones with U.S. education. While Washington should continue to press for improvements on human rights, U.S. policymakers cannot allow that issue to create a lopsided foreign policy that undercuts the United States’ broader interests in the region.

Another major obstacle to better U.S. and Azerbaijani relations occurred in 1992 when the U.S. Congress passed Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act as a result of actions undertaken by the influential Armenian-American lobby. Amongst other things, Section 907 prevents the U.S. from providing military aid to Azerbaijan and identifies Azerbaijan as the aggressor in its war

with Armenia. This latter point is curious considering that Armenia is the aggressor and Azerbaijan is the victim in the conflict over Karabakh.

After 9/11, the Bush Administration recognized the important role that Azerbaijan would play in the campaign in Afghanistan (and later Iraq) and annually waived Article 907. The Obama, Trump and incumbent Biden administrations have all continued to waive Section 907. Azerbaijan is the only former Soviet republic that has restrictions, such as Section 907, placed on it. Even the most casual

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observer can see that the origins of Section 907 were motivated by lobbyist-driven parochial political concerns in the U.S. and not connected—then or now—to larger U.S. strategy or goals in the region

The Way Ahead

There is now great opportunity for the United States to strengthen its relationship with Azerbaijan. The signals coming

from the region could not be clearer. The U.S. needs an anchor of engagement and influence on each side of the Caspian Sea. On the western side, Azerbaijan is the natural partner for the United States. The U.S. should pursue a pragmatic relationship with Azerbaijan based on strategic and regional mutual interests. There are some legitimate human rights concerns, but in the long-run, only U.S. engagement, not constant criticism, can lead to an improvement of the situation.

The easiest thing that America could do is plan a presidential visit to the South Caucasus. No sitting U.S. president has ever visited Azerbaijan or Armenia and only one, George W. Bush, has visited Georgia. It is time for this to change. A visit by the American president would send a strong message of the importance of the region to the United States. This should then be followed up by a more visible U.S. presence in Azerbaijan. As noted above, the most recent cabinet-level visit in Azerbaijan was by Hillary Clinton in 2012. A good way to start re-engagement easily and symbolically would be with a few high-level

visits by U.S. officials. Alternatively, official visits to Washington by the three South Caucasus heads of state or government could be arranged.

The U.S. should do a better job at understanding how the broader region is interconnected. This could be done by turning the C5+1 into the C5+2 by including Azerbaijan. For the United States to implement any successful Central Asia strategy it must include Azerbaijan. The C5+1 initiative is

a U.S.-led effort created in 2007. The primary goal is to create a multilateral format for the five Central Asian republics and America to build relations. For economic, cultural, trade, historical, and transit reasons Azerbaijan, while not a Central Asian country, is the gateway to the region for the Transatlantic Community. This is particularly true considering the importance of the Ganja Gap. Azerbaijan must have a seat at the table.

In addition, the United States should appoint a Special Envoy for Eurasian Energy with a specific focus on the Caspian region.

American policymaking in the Caspian region is often a victim of administrative and bureaucratic divisions in the U.S. government. For example, responsibility for the Caspian region is divided amongst three different bureaus in the State Department, two different

Combatant Commands in the Department of Defense, and three different directorates in the National Security Council. Not only would the appointment of a Special Envoy send a strong

political message to the region, but it would also help lead to a coherent cross-government policy for the region.

On a national level, the United States should request to establish a diplomatic presence in Ganja. A U.S. diplomatic presence, whether in the form of a consulate or consular agency, would be welcome. Not only is Ganja strategically located on the Eurasian landmass, but it is also Azerbaijan's second largest city. An American consulate in Ganja would demonstrate that the U.S. takes the region at a level of seriousness proportionate to its role in America's global interest. In addition,

For the United States to implement any successful Central Asia strategy it must include Azerbaijan, which is the gateway to the region for the Transatlantic Community.

a diplomatic presence would give the U.S. government a depth of situational awareness in the region not possible without a consulate.

Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act is an unfair impediment to acting in the interest of American security.

When appropriate, America should help Azerbaijan improve its security and defense capabilities. In the South Caucasus in particular, sovereignty equals security. This means respecting other countries' sovereignty and being able to defend one's own sovereignty. The U.S. should work bilaterally and, when appropriate, through NATO to improve the security and military capabilities of partners in the region. This also includes providing military and security assistance to all deserving allies in the region. The U.S. government's decision to provide military assistance to another country should be based on American security interests and not the particular priorities of pressure groups lobbying the U.S. Congress. Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act is an unfair impediment to acting in the interest of American security.

Finally, the United States must do a better job at striking a balance between promoting human rights and safeguarding other American strategic interests. The

U.S. should have frank, open, and constructive discussions with its allies in the region when and where there are human rights issues—

with the goal of long-term democratization. However, human rights should be just one part of a multifaceted relationship that considers broader U.S. strategic interests and stability in the region.

Focus and Engagement

Azerbaijan will continue to be a regional economic leader in the South Caucasus and an important economic actor in the Caspian region. If correct policies are pursued, Azerbaijan will serve as an important alternative source of energy for Europe well into the future.

Azerbaijan will continue to look to the West. But it also realizes that while the U.S. might come and go in the region, Iran and Russia are there to stay. This is why European states, the EU, America need to stay engaged with Azerbaijan and encourage Azerbaijan to maintain good relations with its neighbors, but also to stay focused on deeper cooperation with the West.

Today the U.S. sees an Azerbaijan that is more cautious and mindful of its place in the region. Globally, Azerbaijan is trying to keep a balance between its relations with the West and Russia. Regionally, Azerbaijan has sought to keep a balance between Russia and Iran

while striving to preserve its autonomy or independence as much as possible.

With great power competition heating up around the globe, the U.S. needs to increase its engagement with Azerbaijan. **BD**

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