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Afghanistan-Azerbaijan Relations

An Underappreciated Bilateral Relationship

Mirwais Balkhi

Despite having a long history of friendly interaction going back centuries, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan have enjoyed formal diplomatic relations only in the post-Soviet period. The political destiny of the latter is in some ways reminiscent of the former (evident differences notwithstanding), given the hegemonic intentions and malicious machinations of various regional and great powers. Both past and present leaderships share a view that expansionist policies of neighbors can produce regional pessimism, which in turn can produce regional instability and result in the stagnation of economic and political development.

Afghanistan views Azerbaijan as a prosperous country that deftly manages its foreign policy by building various coalitions to offset centrifugal pressures. Azerbaijan, for its part, has viewed the advancement of cooperation with Afghanistan as key to augmenting its status from a Silk Road region energy and connectivity hub to an active player in Afghanistan's stability (and, by extension, the stability of the entire region). This has certainly been the case in the recent past and is likely to be so in the period to come—and, perhaps, it may even be possible in the difficult circumstances that characterize the present.

On the other side of the ledger—i.e., from Afghanistan's

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foreign policy perspective—Azerbaijan is one of the most important countries in the Silk Road region due at least in part to its strategic location, which represents an interest for Afghanistan

in the context of advancing its “land-linked” economic policies. Afghanistan looks at Azerbaijan both as a historically-important partner in a broader regional policy and as a transit hub for its cross-regional trading policy.

Azerbaijan regained its independence as the Soviet Union was collapsing. Since that time, it has developed an independent foreign policy and established relations with virtually the entire world. Among the countries in the Silk Road region, the Islamic State of Afghanistan was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of Azerbaijan in 1992. Kabul's newly formed regime recognized Baku and expressed support for its policy regarding the conflict over Karabakh.

With the first rise of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan (1996-2001), countries in the region—including Central Asian countries—became

Azerbaijan became involved in Afghanistan's post-Taliban affairs as an active and pragmatic actor in the fight against extremism and the promotion of development.

increasingly exposed and vulnerable to the resulting security threats. For a time, Azerbaijan was a country that was severely affected by the drug trafficking and religious extremism activities

of movements like Jay'sh al-Islam and al-Qaeda. Following the 2001 fall of the Taliban regime in Kabul and the involvement of international forces in the comprehensive reconstruction of Afghanistan, Baku wasted no time in joining that grand coalition.

Azerbaijan became involved in Afghanistan's post-Taliban affairs as an active and pragmatic actor in the fight against extremism and the promotion of development. Although Baku was not initially a member of the “Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process”—a platform jointly launched by Afghanistan and Türkiye in 2011 for promoting regional security as well as economic and political cooperation centered on Afghanistan, through the fulfillment of a set of “confidence building measures”—it firmly and immediately supported the initiative as soon as it joined it. A clear example of this support can be seen in Baku

having co-led the implementation of both the counter-narcotics and the regional infrastructure “measures” on behalf of the aforementioned Process.

A Historical Bird’s-Eye View

There is no book in any language devoted to the history of Afghanistan-Azerbaijan bilateral relations, notwithstanding the fact that the peoples inhabiting the two countries have a long and deeply-rooted record of ties based on mutual respect and other traditional values of international relations.

Thus, a common moral-traditional approach has heavily influenced the foreign policy doctrine of both countries. For example, in the doctrine developed by Heydar Aliyev during his years as President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, forming and deepening ties with different countries and blocks constituted an essential

component of Baku’s foreign policy (this vector has remained a constant under his successor, Ilham Aliyev). Meanwhile, Afghanistan’s foreign policy also traditionally emphasizes cooperation with a plethora of regional actors and stakeholders. Both countries, in other words, are attuned to the advantages of multi-vectoralism.

Relations between Afghanistan and Azerbaijan can be divided into seven periods, based on Afghanistan’s historical ups and downs: the ancient/medieval pe-

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riod; the pre-Soviet period; the Soviet period; the post-Soviet period; the first Taliban period; the 2001 to 2021 period; and the present Taliban-dominated period. In this essay, I discuss all but the first period (i.e., I do not discuss in detail the Aryavrata-Aropatene period, notwithstanding the fact that the legacy of Zoroaster

of Balkh is held in common among the peoples of Azerbaijan and Afghanistan). Still, it is at least worth mentioning here briefly that

in medieval Islamic records, Hatim bin Harthama ibn A’yan of Balkh, who was born on the territory of present-day Afghanistan and died in 826 AD, was the first ruler on the territory of present-day Azerbaijan who established an independent government (820 AD) during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al Ma’mun, following his father’s assassination.

Pre-Soviet Period

Before the establishment of the short-lived Azerbaijani Democratic Republic during the Russian civil war period at the turn of the twentieth century, there had been people-to-people contacts between the nations of Afghanistan and Azerbaijan going back centuries. Historical records show that the earliest direct contact between the people of Afghanistan and Azerbaijan took place during the Ghaznavids’ rule at the end of the eleventh century. At that time, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni made great efforts to support the Oghuz Turks around Khorasan—a historical territory situated mostly in present-day northeast Iran—whose presence

Both Afghanistan and Azerbaijan were attuned to the advantages of multi-vectoralism and shared a commitment to fighting terrorism and other forms of radical extremism.

was also felt on the other side of the Caspian in present-day Azerbaijan. This led to various exchanges with the Ghaznavids. Of course, these first relations ended with the fall of the Ghaznavid Empire in 1186. After that,

the Khorasan region (parts of which had been a part of medieval Afghanistan) experienced various sorts of tumults, due to the internal power displacement from the Ghaznavids to the Ghorids as well as invasions by the Seljuks and Timurids, both of which unified the territories of present-day Afghanistan and Azerbaijan during their respective apogees.

Hotaki is the second dynasty in Afghanistan’s history that retains a footprint in the history of earlier contacts between the two peoples. Shah Ashraf Hotaki (1725-1730) attacked the Azerbaijani (Oghuz) Turks by launching a campaign in the western part of Iran from Tabriz to Azerbaijan. This clash lasted throughout much of the eighteenth century. Interestingly, notwithstanding these political-military clashes, there is scant evidence of any sort of substantive contact between the two peoples.

There is quite a bit more evidence of elite-level contact from the post-Hotaki period to the start of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan (1738-1979). Various records indicate that at different stages of history, the various rulers of Afghanistan took quite an interest in Azerbaijanis. On the other hand, not much archival research has been undertaken on the people-to-people side of the ledger—so we just don't know yet. But we should mention that diplomatic contact between Afghanistan and the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic did take place during the latter's few years of existence.

Soviet Period

Following the Soviet Union's occupation of Central Asia and the South Caucasus after the Russian civil war, the USSR became Afghanistan's neighbor. During this period, there was significant contact. Obviously, Azerbaijan was not an independent actor during this time, but Moscow did rely on diplomats originating from that part of the USSR to advance its interests in Afghanistan, sending a number of Azerbaijanis to Kabul as Muslim agents.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 precipitated a new era of relations among the people of Central

Asia. A document refers to Heydar Aliyev from that era (he was then a candidate member of the country's Politburo). In it, he indicates support for the Soviet Fortieth Army's arrival in Afghanistan, adding that henceforth the country would be included in the development plans of the socialist countries, and that the people of Afghanistan would soon be prosperous.

Perhaps as many as 10,000 Soviet soldiers from Azerbaijan—spread out over a decade's time—took part in the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Unintentionally, the presence of so many Azerbaijani military personnel had the effect of increasing the level of people-to-people contacts between the two nations: many contemporaneous reports indicate that the people of Afghanistan, including men in uniform fighting for all sides, recorded these encounters in various forms, which helped deepen knowledge of each other's cultures.

Post-Soviet Period

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, on the one hand, resulted in the victory of Mujahideen in Afghanistan, and, on the other hand, the emergence of Central Asian and South Caucasus independent

states, including Azerbaijan. After establishing the Mujahideen government in Kabul, the Islamic State of Afghanistan pursued a policy of supporting the Muslim nations of Central Asia. The government declared its support for the rule of law in Azerbaijan, which included recognizing the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast as an integral part of the country's territory—notwithstanding the fact that the First Karabakh War was reaching its peak.

Burhanuddin Rabbani, the then president of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, sent a force of around 1,000 Afghans to assist the Azerbaijani war effort in the period prior to the return of Heydar Aliyev to power. Approximately 300 of them remained in Azerbaijan, with some marrying local women and starting families (these households assimilated so thoroughly into the fabric of Azerbaijan that in many cases the resulting children do not speak the language of their fathers). The rest returned to Afghanistan by war's end. I have met some of these veterans, who shared their memories of life in Azerbaijan in the early 1990s.

The first Taliban period (1996-2001) is characterized by the absence of diplomatic ties between

Kabul and Baku, which was consistent with the Taliban government's rejection of the legitimacy of secular governments, including Azerbaijan's. The government and people of Azerbaijan would have hardly had contact with Afghan issues. Baku did not have an active policy towards Afghanistan during this period, although it was concerned about the Taliban's support of Islamists movements beyond the country's borders; the Taliban Islamic Emirates had announced the recognition of Chechnya as an independent state one week after its forces entered Kabul and even allowed a Chechnyan embassy to open up in Wazir Akbar Khan, the diplomatic enclave in Kabul. All this was an alert to Baku, which took all necessary preventive steps.

More Recent Bilateral Relations

The contemporary relations between Afghanistan and Azerbaijan began after the invasion of the U.S.-led forces to support the United Islamic National Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (i.e., the Northern Alliance) and remove the Taliban from power. Since then, relations between the two countries entered into a new phase.

This next section will cover the period 2001-2021: the collapse of the first Taliban regime with the cooperation of international forces and the establishment of a new government in Afghanistan was one evident turning point (another, obviously, was the return of Taliban rule in summer 2021). Within this 20-year period, we will begin by discussing the place of Azerbaijan in Afghanistan's foreign policy and then the place of Afghanistan in Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

Although Azerbaijan's pragmatic foreign policy in Afghanistan is quite noticeable, diplomatic relations between Baku and Kabul had been limited at the start to sending and receiving congratulatory and condolence notes, with the two countries first covering each other on non-residential bases before opening embassies in each other's capitals.

After the fall of the Taliban and the establishment of an interim administration in Afghanistan, the government in Kabul sought to

From Kabul's perspective at the time, the most critical factor in developing good relations between the two countries was the explicit opposition of Azerbaijani policymakers to any extremist and terrorist activities in the Silk Road region, especially Afghanistan.

redefine foreign policy and drew the lines of this policy in three concentric circles consisting of relations with neighbors, the region, and the world. As a Silk Road region country (albeit located in its South Caucasus portion), Azerbaijan was given serious attention by Afghan policymakers within the context of Afghanistan's second concentric circle (regional policy). This was because the Azerbaijani government became interested in Afghanistan and took an active part in the security and reconstruction of the country. "In the most difficult circumstances, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan have supported each other, and there has been a very close relationship between the two countries," Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul said in a 2012 interview with an Azerbaijani newspaper.

From Kabul's perspective at the time, the most critical factor in developing good relations between the two countries was the explicit opposition of Azerbaijani policymakers to any extremist and terrorist activities in the Silk Road

region, especially Afghanistan. Azerbaijan became a strong partner of the international community in helping to stem the tide of this devastating phenomenon through its active presence in Afghanistan. Moreover, Azerbaijan worked with the United States and its Western partners in various areas and was also present in the framework of NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Afghan policymakers considered the role of Azerbaijan important not only in furthering postwar reconstruction efforts but also in the modernization of the country's infrastructure. The assistance of the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) in 2008, which entered Afghanistan actively and worked closely with the Afghanistan Natural Disaster Management Authority, also strengthened Afghanistan's trust in Baku.

In addition, other issues were instrumental in strengthening relations between the two countries. For instance, starting in 2010, the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy (the forerunner of ADA University) began conducting specialized training courses for Afghan civil servants and diplomats. The country also donated hundreds of thousands of books to Afghanistan more than a decade ago now, with

several high-level and high-profile ministerial visits taking place over the years. Azerbaijan also contributed to Afghanistan's technological modernization through various programs. Moreover, Baku became a significant logistics hub for American and Western civilian and military aid programs, as hundreds of thousands of NATO flights bound for Afghanistan passed through the country. Lastly, a contingent of Azerbaijani troops helped to provide security to the country's main international airport in Kabul.

At the same time, Afghanistan assumed importance in Azerbaijan's diplomatic conception and posture from the early days of its renewed independence. In fact, since the 1990s, Azerbaijan has considered Afghanistan to be essential to the region's stability and security as well as an influential variable in its political-security and economic equation.

This role was highlighted when Türkiye—a close partner to both Afghanistan and Azerbaijan—got Azerbaijan involved in Afghanistan's reconstruction. Ankara's catalytic role led Baku to support Afghanistan's post-Taliban playmaking process, which eventually resulted in Azerbaijanis coming to Afghanistan to stand alongside their Western colleagues.

As noted above, Baku welcomed a Turkish-led initiative to address Afghanistan's challenges through trust-building measures within the Istanbul Process, taking a leadership role in two pillars and actively participating in others.

In short, Azerbaijan held to the view that reducing threats in Afghanistan and creating promising opportunities in the country would contribute greatly to stability throughout Central Asia, the rest of the Silk Road region, and even farther afield, which would in turn pave the way for sustainable economic growth and development in the region.

Determining Constants

But that trajectory is no longer the main one. It is hard to forecast how long the Taliban will rule the country this time around. In many ways, however, its return to Kabul has not deconstructed the underlying constants that can still serve as a foundation for continuity in relations between Azerbaijan and Afghanistan. These may become inactive or even dormant in the short run, but briefly enumerating them can help both sides understand why maintain a modicum of relations in the interim may be beneficial—

both at the decisionmaking and people-to-people levels. After such a survey, we can discuss aspects of the present Taliban period and how these impact upon the bilateral relationship.

Both countries stand to benefit from cultivating predictable ties with regional actors like China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Türkiye, and the United States. With the exception of the latter, all fall within the geographic purview of the Silk Road region—whether in whole or in part. Whether Baku or Kabul like this or not, in one way or another all the enumerated actors have assumed foreign policy postures that result in each of them showing geopolitical and geo-economic interest in both Afghanistan and Azerbaijan (and the countries in between). A sophisticated approach to foreign policymaking by the two countries may therefore produce numerous advantages not only to the actors enumerated above but also to the two countries at issue in this essay. Azerbaijan has demonstrated an ability to conduct such a multi-vector foreign policy to a much greater extent than has Afghanistan. Thus, Afghanistan can and should engage more actively with Azerbaijan when its domestic circumstances allow for such overtures. In doing so, Baku could provide knowhow and guidance for how Kabul ought

to enhance its diplomatic standing and maneuverability, given its particular constraints.

In addition, the peoples of Afghanistan and Azerbaijan have historical, linguistic, religious, and ethnic ties and commonalities, which points the way towards the possibility of the cultivation of stronger and deeper cultural opportunities between them. Four can be highlighted here. *First*, the presence of Turkic ethnic groups in Afghanistan, which can bridge the physical distance between the two states. *Second*, Afghans maintain deep respect for the Persian literary achievements of various Azerbaijani writers and poets, in particular Nizami Ganjavi and Khagani Shirvani. *Third*, both countries are Muslim. Azerbaijan is majority Shia and contains a sizeable Sunni minority; Afghanistan is the opposite. Azerbaijan's tradition of peaceful coexistence, which to some extent existed and may still exist in some Afghan cities, is a model that could be emulated. *Fourth*, the presence of a growing number of Afghan students (and alumni) in Azerbaijani universities, assuming they return to their home country upon the completion of their studies or subsequently, could be of great benefit for cementing future ties.

Lastly, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan have a number of converging interests and shared threats that will remain constant in the time ahead. *One*, the fight against terrorism, religious extremism, and the trafficking in illicit drugs. The networks engaged in these activities are transnational by design and ideology, and enhanced cooperation between Baku and Kabul would be mutually beneficial. This is particularly the case given the likelihood that a number of radicalized Azerbaijani citizens have found refuge in or near Afghanistan. Ironically but not surprisingly (given current domestic political dynamics), it may be in the interest of both the National Resistance Front as well as the Taliban to work discretely with Baku to counter the threat posed by terrorist groups operating within the country (whose members may include Azerbaijani citizens). Moreover, a post-Taliban Afghanistan ought to have at least an equal interest to work with countries like Azerbaijan in eradicating such groups.

Two, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan share trilateral or multilateral platforms. Regarding the former, we can mention the Afghanistan-Azerbaijan-Türkiye trilateral format. Ankara's reliability and support has been vital

to both countries. The fact that Hamid Karzai's successor as president, Ashraf Ghani, had purposefully deteriorated Afghanistan's relations with Türkiye because Ankara had supported rivals Abdullah Abdullah and Abdul Rashid Dostum, has made it easier for the Taliban to reach various understandings with that country. This in turn could be useful for Azerbaijan.

Regarding the latter, we can mention the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). Under both Karzai and Ghani, Afghanistan overemphasized relations with neighbors as well as regional arrangements that were championed by its Western allies. The potential benefits for Afghanistan of greater engagement with OIC and ECO were relegated to the sidelines without any systemic examination of how these could benefit the country's development.

Baku's victory in the Second Karabakh War demonstrates what a relatively small army can achieve on the battlefield if trained and equipped properly for its own needs. The rapid collapse of the Afghan Army, which had been generously financed by the West, demonstrates what can happen if local conditions and priorities are not taken into account.

Opportunities were missed to engage countries like Azerbaijan, which is a member of both OIC and ECO, within these and similar multi-lateral platforms. I should add that ECO was formally central to Afghanistan's development plans during this period, but the country's leadership did not take full advantage. For example, the signing of an

investment support agreement between Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Türkiye did not live up to its potential; neither did Azerbaijan's support and assistance to the Special Fund for Afghanistan Reconstruction within the framework of ECO—in part because building the TAPI pipeline, which could have been leveraged to finance ECO projects, was not prioritized enough.

Three, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan have a converging interest in enhancing their respective military capabilities. Baku's victory in the Second Karabakh War demonstrates what a relatively

small army can achieve on the battlefield if trained and equipped properly for its own needs. The rapid collapse of the Afghan Army, which had been generously financed by the West, demonstrates what can happen if local conditions and priorities are not taken into account. In this sense, Azerbaijan is a role model that Afghanistan could emulate in the time ahead. Moreover, Baku has developed a security apparatus that could be of interest to Afghanistan down the road. In short, Azerbaijan could easily be in a position to transfer its military and security experience and knowhow to a post-Taliban Afghanistan.

The Taliban Challenge

Obviously, the unpredictable variable in any discussion of Afghanistan-Azerbaijan relations is the effect of the return of the Taliban to power, which happened in August 2021. During the period when it first ruled the country, this radical organization sheltered radical Muslim citizens of Azerbaijan—

and there is no guarantee that it is not doing so again. This may in fact include ISIS members with Azerbaijani citizenship. The geographic linkages between these groups is a related threat.

Afghanistan is the safety belt of Central Asia, and its fall back into the hands of religious extremists continues to represent a great threat to the national interests of all the Silk Road region states, including Azerbaijan.

This is just one reason why, to date, Baku has greatly hedged its engagement with the Taliban. This has severely constricted the overall development of relations between the two countries—again, for perfectly understandable reasons. Reviving TAPI might be one way forward—and the conflict over Ukraine has made the project even more attractive

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than it was when it was first seriously put forward, in the 1990s. This is, of course, far from likely: both foreign investors and most foreign governments still consider the Taliban as being too radical—and for good reason.

But the bottom line is that Afghanistan and Azerbaijan have—at least in the longer term—multiple political, economic, and security interests in common. The most critical alignment of these interests is in regional cooperation, where the two countries may again work together to undermine the significant threats posed by extremism.

The internal dynamism of power shifts and government change within Afghanistan is indisputable. Still, there are constant

determining factors in the history of two states and people-to-people relations, leading to future references. The fact is that Afghanistan and Azerbaijan are two core states of the Silk Road region. The multifaceted potentials in the bilateral relations between Kabul and Baku are the long-term driving factors that define state-to-state ties, at least in the abstract. For better or worse, and notwithstanding geographical distance, the two countries will remain locked in what may again amount to a strategic gaze at one another. **BD**

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