

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

Vol. 6 | No. 3 | Spring 2023

Heydar Aliyev, 1923-2003 Assessing His Legacy

Heydar Aliyev and the Building of Azerbaijani Statehood
Svante E. Cornell & S. Frederick Starr

Heydar Aliyev as Architect and Founder
M. Hakan Yavuz

Unpacking ‘One Nation, Two States’
Ayça Ergun

Shaping the Words of a Culture
Elnur Gajiev

Geopolitical Outlooks

The Future of Global Uncertainties
Bilahari Kausikan

‘Appeasement’ and the Current Crisis
Christopher J. Fettweis

Central Asia in Contemporary Geopolitics
Urs Unkauf

Armenia’s Challenges

The Pashinyan Conundrum:
Predictably Unpredictable, Consistently Inconsistent
Onnik James Krikorian

Armenia-Türkiye Relations:
Attempts at Normalization
Könül Şahin

bakudialogues.ada.edu.az



Heydar Aliyev and the Building of Azerbaijani Statehood

Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr

Heydar Aliyev, nation affirmer and state builder, was among the most significant statesmen of his era. Of humble origins in a place distant from Baku, he gained early prominence within his native Azerbaijan and then rose quickly in the Soviet hierarchy during the late 1960s. By the 1980s he was among the leading power players in Moscow and decisionmakers of the Soviet Union. This experience was crucial when he returned to lead his native Azerbaijan in the 1990s in far from ideal circumstances. Thanks to his strategic thinking and ability to chart a complex path among national, regional, and world leaders, Heydar Aliyev set Azerbaijan firmly on the track that led it to become the successful middle power it is today.

Svante E. Cornell is Director of the American Foreign Policy Council's Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and co-founder of the Stockholm-based Institute for Security and Development Policy. S. Frederick Starr is Chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Distinguished Fellow for Eurasia at the American Foreign Policy Institute. The views expressed herein are their own.

The Soviet Era

In July 1969, Heydar Aliyev acceded to the post of First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, marking the beginning of his remarkable domination of the republic's political scene, which, with only a brief interlude, would last for more than three decades. Heydar Aliyev was born to a modest family in Nakhchivan in 1923, graduating from the local Pedagogical Institute at the young age of sixteen. He made a career in the Azerbaijani security services, beginning with the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, and joined the Communist Party in 1945.

Aliyev rose rapidly through the ranks, becoming deputy head of the Azerbaijani branch of the KGB

in 1964. His more specific activities in the security services, and indeed, throughout the Soviet period, are the subject of much speculation. Unfortunately, answers to most questions pertaining to this formative period of his career will

be gained only when the Russian government reopens Soviet-era archives, as it began to do after 1991 but then reversed course and closed them again. This, more than anything else, accounts for the fact that an authoritative biography of this foundational figure has yet to appear.

Many sources point to Heydar Aliyev's work in the KGB's Eastern Division, whose jurisdiction included Iran (where he may have worked during the short-lived, Soviet-backed "Azerbaijan People's Republic") and the Middle East. After a stint as head of the Azerbaijani KGB, he was elevated to the rank of head of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan. Nor did Aliyev's rise end there. In 1976, he became a candidate member of the Politburo in Moscow, the highest decisionmaking authority in the

Thanks to his strategic thinking and ability to chart a complex path among national, regional, and world leaders, Heydar Aliyev set Azerbaijan firmly on the track that led it to become the successful middle power it is today.

Soviet Union. By then, he was considered so necessary and effective in Azerbaijan that he was asked to continue in his position in Azerbaijan. When Yuri Andropov succeeded Leonid Brezhnev as Soviet leader in 1982, Aliyev became a

full member of the Politburo and a deputy prime minister of the Soviet Union—the third-highest position in the Soviet empire. A close associate of Andropov, Aliyev retained his high-ranking positions until 1987, when Mikhail Gorbachev, as part of his efforts under perestroika to recentralize power, rein in the national republics, and eliminate potential rivals, removed Aliyev from power.

Two aspects of Aliyev's Soviet career proved of key importance to the building of modern Azerbaijan. First, during his time as the head of the Communist Party, Aliyev actively facilitated the national revival that was germinating in Azerbaijan; second, his experience at the USSR's highest levels provided him with a crucial understanding of regional and world politics, which he was to apply to the

task of building Azerbaijan's place in the world during the 1990s up until his death in 2003.

At first sight, it would appear unlikely that a Communist Party leader with a past in the security services would tolerate, much less facilitate, a national revival. But the time during which Aliyev was most active in Soviet politics was a very peculiar one. The Brezhnev era was a time of relative stability and calm, following the upheavals of the Stalin and Khrushchev periods. Stalin's reign in particular, as everyone knows, had been characterized by war and terror: in Azerbaijan, the country's Stalinist-era leader, Mir Jafar Baghirov, had gone so far as to launch a massive campaign to destroy the literary and cultural *intelligentsia* of the country and thereby eradicate the collective memory of the Azerbaijani people.

Thanks to his close relations with key figures in Moscow, Aliyev

probably enjoyed more governing leeway and Azerbaijan more internal autonomy than existed in most of the other Soviet republics at that (or any other) time in the history of the Soviet Union. The manner in which he harnessed this autonomy reflected his personal priorities and, increasingly, those of Azerbaijan.

Two aspects of Aliyev's Soviet career proved of key importance to the building of modern Azerbaijan. First, during his time as the head of the Communist Party, Aliyev actively facilitated the national revival that was germinating in Azerbaijan; second, his experience at the USSR's highest levels provided him with a crucial understanding of regional and world politics.

Baghirov's tenure had led to the suppression and deaths of large numbers of writers, musicians, and artists. During Aliyev's reign, Soviet agencies in Azerbaijan relaxed their pressure on the *intelligentsia*, allowing greater creative freedom to writers and academics. This gave rise to the rebirth of patriotic literature in the Azerbaijani language, and to an impressive revival of the Azerbaijani *intelligentsia* overall. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, literature with strong national-patriotic overtones was being openly published in official journals issued by the Azerbaijani Union of Writers. Leaders of the 1918-1920 Azerbaijan People's Republic, including Mehmedemin Rasulzade,

were posthumously rehabilitated. As historian Audrey Altstadt observed in *The Azerbaijani Turks* (1992), this was no mere oversight; rather, it bore "the marks of a coordinated and conscious effort." As she concludes, "because Aliyev cannot be regarded as weak, uninformed, lax, or obtuse, it can be supposed that he permitted, perhaps encouraged, this upsurge of national self-investigation, this exploration of historic identity, and this expression of national pride."

Other recent accounts have gone further. In a rare and largely approving biography of Aliyev published in 2000, Turkish journalist Irfan Ülkü affirmed that Aliyev consciously acted as a protector of the emerging Azerbaijani *intelligentsia*. Ülkü, who spent time with Aliyev in 1991 in Nakhchivan, argues that Aliyev conducted his work informed by an explicit intention of ensuring that Azerbaijanis took control of their own republic, whose institutions through most of the Soviet era up to that point had been controlled by members of other ethnicities or nationalities. This is in fact precisely what Aliyev did. As historian Tadeusz Swietochowski notes

in *Russia and Azerbaijan* (1995), Aliyev "consolidated the native *no-menklatura* [...] of his thirty-five chief clients and protégés, almost all were ethnic Azerbaijanis."

In the process of making these changes, Heydar Aliyev gained in both self-confidence and effectiveness. With time, he felt sufficiently secure to make symbolic gestures to Azerbaijani nationhood that were widely noticed and appreciated. Aliyev continued the process of reclaiming Azerbaijani history, now fully rehabilitating Nariman Narimanov—the first Soviet ethnic-Azerbaijani leader of the Azerbaijan SSR who had been posthumously condemned in the 1930s for his alleged nationalism.

Heydar Aliyev's tenure during the Soviet era proved critical to laying the foundations for modern Azerbaijani statehood.

He also brought back to Azerbaijan the remains of Huseyn Javid, a great Azerbaijani poet who had fallen victim to the 1937 purges and died in 1941 in a remote part of Siberia. Aliyev's senior position in the Soviet hierarchy did not carry with it the right to speak on foreign affairs, but in November 1982 Aliyev nonetheless boldly announced to foreign journalists, including Richard Owen of *The Times*, that he hoped for the eventual reunification of northern

and southern Azerbaijan (the latter a reference to majority ethnic-Azerbaijani lands then and now ruled by the Islamic Republic of Iran).

Thus, Heydar Aliyev's tenure during the Soviet era proved critical to laying the foundations for modern Azerbaijani statehood. This becomes clear if Azerbaijan's trajectory is briefly compared with that of Central Asian states. It is true that Azerbaijan, unlike its Central Asian neighbors, had succeeded in achieving independent statehood in 1918. But in other respects, their Soviet experiences had been roughly similar. Like Azerbaijan, they had been assigned the task of supplying raw materials to the Soviet command economy and were subjected to efforts of russification, which particularly targeted the national elites and intellectuals. In spite of these parallels, Azerbaijan developed a much more robust national movement during the 1980s, which culminated in the emergence of the Azerbaijan Popular Front in 1988. And while its establishment was triggered by the emerging conflict with Armenia over the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and related issues, the reassertion of suppressed Azerbaijani identity began in the 1970s and flourished under Aliyev during the 1980s.

As we have seen, Heydar Aliyev's Soviet-era career remains the subject of much speculation and uncertainty, particularly as it pertains to the power politics in Moscow in the mid-1980s and the role Aliyev played in the fading years of the USSR. Until the Soviet archives are again made accessible to historians, however, a deeper account of this period is not possible. Still, it is clear that Aliyev developed an acute understanding of regional and global geopolitics during his years in the top leadership of the Soviet Union. This is perhaps best illustrated by Aliyev's reaction when U.S. President Bill Clinton dispatched former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski to Baku in 1995. It is said that in this conversation, Aliyev recalled how Brzezinski had deeply frustrated Soviet leaders during Jimmy Carter's presidency, fondly reminiscing about the times when the two statesmen had been on opposite sides of the Cold War.

Nakhchivan Interlude

As will be discussed below, Aliyev was successful in translating his geopolitical experience at the helm of a superpower to the needs of a small and nearly failed state that had just lost a war, which was Azerbaijan's condition

when he returned to lead it in the summer of 1993. Before examining Heydar Aliyev's return to lead Azerbaijan, however, a word is in order concerning his brief return to his native Nakhchivan, which writer-adventurer Thomas Goltz eloquently described in his memoir *Azerbaijan Diary* (1998).

After his fall from grace in 1987, Aliyev remained in Moscow for some time, but moved back to his native Nakhchivan in 1990. What triggered his return was the bloody Soviet crackdown on peaceful protesters in Baku on 20 January 1990. Aliyev made a public statement in Moscow condemning the crackdown—an unprecedented act for someone of his political background—and subsequently left the Soviet capital. It was from the remote vantage point of his hometown that Aliyev contemplated his return to the political stage in Baku.

Once back in Nakhchivan, Aliyev was elected to Azerbaijan's Supreme Soviet in 1990 and then elected to head Nakhchivan's provincial assembly (the latter made him *ex officio* Deputy Speaker of Azerbaijan's Supreme Soviet). This occurred despite the growing conflict between Aliyev and the last Soviet-era Azerbaijani leader, Ayaz Mutalibov, who had been appointed by Moscow immediately

following the brutal suppression of the Baku uprising in January 1990. During the chaotic period of the USSR's terminal decline, neither Mutalibov in Baku nor the Soviet authorities in Moscow were able to exert power over Nakhchivan—an exclave located between Armenia and Iran, with a short border with Türkiye but none with mainland Azerbaijan.

The first year of Azerbaijan's renewed independence saw chaos in Baku that was caused by the struggle for power between Mutalibov's government and the rising Popular Front, led by Soviet-era dissident and pan-Turkic nationalist Abulfaz Elchibey. This took place just as the conflict with Armenia escalated to full-scale war. However, Heydar Aliyev did not get involved in the politicking in Baku. Instead, he basically governed the newly renamed Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic independently, conducting feverish diplomacy with both Iran and Türkiye. His efforts to build relations with Tehran helped provide Nakhchivan with a secure source of Iranian natural gas. Even more consequential were his efforts to develop relations with Türkiye. One of the first matters to which Ankara gave attention following the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence was to rebuild the bridge connecting Türkiye with

Nakhchivan, the only actual border between Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Aliyev's efforts ensured that this bridge would henceforth be able to support the weight of tanks—a less than subtle indication to Yerevan that Ankara might involve itself directly in any Armenian attempt to expand the conflict to Nakhchivan.

Aliyev's efforts soon paid off: Turkish President Suleyman Demirel and Aliyev struck up a positive relationship that developed rapidly thereafter. Demirel soon concluded that the chaotic bickering in Baku had to end: he began urging Aliyev to return to the Azerbaijani capital, at the same time urging now-President Elchibey to invite Aliyev to return.

On 9 June 1993, Heydar Aliyev landed in Baku on board a Turkish government jet made available by Demirel. The conditions for his return to mainland Azerbaijan were not auspicious: a renegade Russian-supported military commander named Surat Huseynov had recently deserted the frontline in the war with Armenia, proceeded to barricade himself and his forces in their headquarters in Ganja, Azerbaijan's second-largest city. The site had recently been vacated by Russian military forces. These Russian troops had hastily departed their premises six months ahead

of their scheduled withdrawal, without notifying the Azerbaijani government, but leaving behind large supplies of armaments. Their intention was clear: to back Huseynov's uprising and thereby bring an end to the nationalist but inept Elchibey-led government.

Indeed, soon enough, Huseynov's forces began advancing on Baku unopposed, as the regular army melted away. (To his immense credit, Elchibey left Baku for his own native village, also in Nakhchivan, thus leaving the reins of national leadership to Aliyev.) But Heydar Aliyev managed to forestall this Russian-led coup attempt. Elected Speaker of the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet, he succeeded in striking a deal whereby coup-maker Huseynov was appointed prime minister whilst retaining the highest office in the land for himself. Less than a year later, Aliyev would, in dramatic fashion, publicly expose Huseynov's coup attempt against himself. This led to Huseynov's abrupt departure for Moscow, where he hoped to drum up support from his Russian backers.

Heydar Aliyev's Nakhchivan interlude is of central importance, representing both the culmination of his past and the gateway to his future. It signified his final break

with Moscow and demonstrated the elder statesman's uncanny ability to regroup and refocus his energies on new challenges of statecraft. It also caused him to develop a vision of Azerbaijan's foreign relations that relied heavily on kindred Türkiye but also sought normal relations with Iran and, most importantly, saw Azerbaijan's substantive independence from Russia as the lodestar of its foreign relations.

Building Independence

On 1 August 1997, and as cameras flashed, a beaming Heydar Aliyev stood next to U.S. President Bill Clinton in the White House. The contrast between this celebratory moment and the extremely fraught time only four years earlier, when he returned to Baku, was astonishing. In less than four years, Heydar Aliyev had consolidated power in Azerbaijan and survived at least two serious coup attempts. He had eradicated or incorporated the various militias that had formed in the early 1990s, thereby restoring the government's monopoly over the use of force. He had also tabled the conflict with Armenia by agreeing to a ceasefire in May 1994. Later that same year, he had struck a mammoth agreement with multinational oil

companies that was quickly dubbed the "Contract of the Century." And, as the photo-op with Clinton showed, Aliyev had placed Azerbaijan on the world map, benefiting from the country's critical geographical location and energy resources to make it a serious regional player: a sovereign and engaged subject of international politics and not just an object to be manipulated by outside forces.

The consolidation of power was itself a huge task: in late 1993, Azerbaijan did not have a proper constitution or a modern parliament, operating on the basis of Soviet-era documents and *ad hoc* arrangements. Aliyev was elected to the presidency in 1993, and a new Constitution, adopted in 1995, laid the ground for a political system heavily dominated by the executive branch. More concerning during the early years of Aliyev's return to Baku was the erosion of the state's monopoly over the use of force, which had been caused by the power of armed militias that had proliferated during the First Karabakh War. While these units fought the common enemy, they also engaged in organized crime and smuggling, and even vied for power in the capital. Not only did Aliyev have to contend with Huseynov's forces, but in 1995 he had to deal with a poorly integrated faction within the

Ministry of Internal Affairs that had planned an attempt on the president's life. By decisively dealing with two (perhaps more) coup attempts, Aliyev managed to do away with armed challengers to the state and to his own tenure as president.

A key to Heydar Aliyev's success was his understanding of the importance of external legitimacy, which he advanced by prudently managing the competing interests of foreign powers. In this effort, he shrewdly utilized Azerbaijan's oil reserves as an instrument of foreign policy. He built the unprecedented oil consortium mainly with Western multinationals, including American companies such as Amoco, Unocal, Exxon, and Pennzoil, as well as European companies like Norway's Statoil and the consortium's operator, British Petroleum (the latter's share doubled after its acquisition of Amoco in 1998). He also looked further afield, inviting Japanese, Turkish, and Saudi interests to join. In a measure to placate Russian objections to the deal, Aliyev

even divided Azerbaijan's own 20 percent share and provided half of that to Russia's Lukoil, thereby deftly driving a wedge between Russian energy interests and the Russian hawks that aimed to kill the deal. Aliyev's only failure was with Iran. He initially promised Tehran a symbolic 5 percent share of the consortium, but U.S. pressure eventually forced him to renege on this, at great diplomatic cost to himself. However, when the Shah Deniz gas consortium was developed several years later, Aliyev ensured that Iran's national oil company obtained a 10 percent share of that project.

Problems with Armenia did not end with the 1994 ceasefire agreement that ended the First Karabakh War. Unresolved also was the problem of international opinion, which in the early stages of the conflict had been massively pro-Armenian. This resulted from the international influence of the Armenian diaspora and also Azerbaijan's inexperience at strategic communication—particularly

A key to Heydar Aliyev's success was his understanding of the importance of external legitimacy, which he advanced by prudently managing the competing interests of foreign powers. In this effort, he shrewdly utilized Azerbaijan's oil reserves as an instrument of foreign policy.

with Western audiences. However, Armenia's overreach and its ethnic cleansing of close to one million Azerbaijanis living within the borders of Armenia and in the former NKAO and adjoining districts of Azerbaijan allowed Baku to being to turn the tables. By 1996, Azerbaijan achieved a major diplomatic victory: at the OSCE's Lisbon summit, Baku gained support for basic principles for the resolution of the conflict that affirmed Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. However, the OSCE being a consensus-based organization, Armenia used its opposition to veto the project. Nonetheless, the OSCE issued a rare Chairman's statement that supported a solution based on the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, with appropriate self-government for the ethnic-Armenians of the former NKAO. This was supported by all OSCE participating states, except Armenia. Yerevan's diplomatic position never recovered from this setback.

The Karabakh crisis did not end with this announcement by the OSCE. After more than two decades of failed negotiations, Heydar

Aliyev's successor, his son Ilham Aliyev, would eventually resort in 2020 to military means to resolve that conflict. The fact that both key Western powers and Russia met the onset and outcome of the Second Karabakh War with relative indifference testifies to the degree that Azerbaijan had managed to shift international opinion on the conflict and neutralize Armenia's advantage. The foundations for this shift had been set by Heydar Aliyev's government in 1996. A year later, Armenia's President Levon Ter-Petrosyan had declared that Armenia had to sue for peace, for its position would only weaken over time. Unfortunately for Armenia, Ter-Petrosyan was overthrown in 1997, and replaced by a hardline government with leaders hailing from the former NKAO itself. But events in 2020 validated Ter-Petrosyan's conclusion.

What Aliyev Left Undone

Heydar Aliyev's achievements, of course, did not come for free. Whether by default or design, he left at least three major matters

Heydar Aliyev's achievements, of course, did not come for free. Whether by default or design, he left at least three major matters unaddressed and unresolved.

unaddressed and unresolved. First, down to his death in 2003, Heydar Aliyev had to accept the fact that Armenia, albeit with substantial backing from Russia, had militarily defeated Azerbaijan's forces in 1994. He sought repeatedly to achieve a negotiated solution to the conflict that respected Azerbaijan's red lines as he defined them, in order not to leave this critical issue unresolved for his successor to handle. When in 1999 he acquiesced to an American-led peace proposal involving a land swap, it resulted in the resignation of three close aides. The deal never came to pass, as a result of a likely Russian-orchestrated killing of the Armenian leadership through an act of terror in the Armenian parliament in November 1999. Still, Aliyev did not give up the quest for peace. In 2002 he sought to revive talks with Ter-Petrosyan's successor, Robert Kocharyan: he offered the full restoration of economic relations for the return of four of Azerbaijan's Armenia-occupied districts. In spite of this major concession, Yerevan refused. As a result, addressing the country's main foreign policy problem was left to Ilham Aliyev. Only in 2020, thanks to Ilham Aliyev's diplomatic acumen and the transformation of Azerbaijan's military, did Azerbaijan emerge victorious,

having secured the restoration of Azerbaijani control over more territories than a negotiated settlement would likely have yielded. However, victory came at a great cost in human lives on both sides.

Second, Heydar Aliyev did not manage to finalize the institutionalization of power in Azerbaijan that he had initiated. In most post-Soviet countries, the transition to independence led to the emergence of powerbrokers who merged their informal political and economic power in ways that would prove highly detrimental to political and economic development, and also highly resistant to change. Azerbaijan was no exception, and in many ways a prime example of this phenomenon. In Azerbaijan's case, these oligarchs and masters of intrigue even colluded with foreign powers to undermine presidential authority and thus compromise Azerbaijan's independence. For the most part, Heydar Aliyev's personal authority held these informal powerbrokers in check, but initially, several of them covertly refused to accept the authority of his successor. Indeed, only through a series of deft, methodical campaigns that took place between 2004 and 2015 (with a few even extending into the present) did Ilham Aliyev succeed in removing such challenges to state authority.

Third, Heydar Aliyev's presidential term was accompanied by a resolute centralization of power. While this brought an end to the raucous and disorderly politics of the early 1990s, Western observers began to complain of weakened electoral processes, local government, and certain individual rights. To be sure, both then and now few Azerbaijanis would desire a return to the politics of that period, which most remember as a period of chaos and deprivation, a time when Azerbaijan lost important parts of its territory, and an era of developmental abeyance. Since then, criticism of Azerbaijan's governance model has given rise to persistent friction with some of its Western partners and—perhaps most important—delayed the full development of its political culture, civil society, and media.

The Foundations of a Middle Power

During the 1990s, the South Caucasus saw the emergence of three states with very different approaches to international relations. Armenia made what amounted to a pact with the devil by accepting Russia's abrogation of its sovereignty as a price worth paying for the control over the

former NKAO and Azerbaijan's seven surrounding districts it had occupied during the First Karabakh War. However, this victory proved pyrrhic, for in 2020 Armenia's refusal to compromise resulted in fundamental losses. Defeat on the battlefield left it with less territory under its control than it would have obtained in any imaginable pre-2020 negotiated settlement with Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Armenia had isolated itself from major regional infrastructure projects that have developed over the past three decades. Today, Armenia is belatedly seeking to escape Moscow's influence, but Russian ownership of major assets in the Armenian economy, its major military presence that includes basing and border control rights, and its informal influence over the country's politics and administration makes this a formidable task—to say the least.

In many ways, Georgia followed the opposite path. Faced with enormous pressure from Russia, it bet hard on relations with the West—particularly on protection from the United States. But in August 2008, Moscow called this bluff and invaded Georgia, asserting effective control over two breakaway provinces and dealing a serious blow to Georgia's

sovereignty and territorial integrity. The country survived, but Russia succeeded to a significant degree in breaking its spirit. Notwithstanding its parliamentary politics, Georgia is now effectively controlled by an oligarch who runs the country from behind the scenes: his desire to preserve his own political and economic interests has led him and his government increasingly to distance Georgia from the West whilst professing an ongoing desire to join both the EU and NATO.

Azerbaijan, by contrast, sought a third way: to build independence by relying on its own resources, independent of any single foreign actor. Heydar Aliyev set the course for Azerbaijan to become a regional “middle power” or “keystone state.” While this strategy was greatly facilitated by the country’s advantageous geography and natural resources, it benefited in equal measure from the stability of its foreign policy and the steadiness with which the government advanced it. While Ilham Aliyev refined this approach and

adapted it to changing circumstances, it was Heydar Aliyev who, in the mid-1990s, first conceived and executed this pragmatic strategy, inculcating it into the government and society at large. This was manifested in his management of the relationships with Russia and Iran.

Heydar Aliyev’s personal standing and rapport with Russia’s Boris Yeltsin and his presidential successor, Vladimir Putin, enabled Azerbaijan, while joining Moscow’s Commonwealth of Independent States, to refuse Russian military bases on its territory. A similar balancing act with Iran combined a sober recognition of the existential threat posed by the regime in Tehran with an avoidance of the kinds of provocations committed by Elchibey’s Popular Front that had

Azerbaijan sought a third way: to build independence by relying on its own resources, independent of any single foreign actor. Heydar Aliyev set the course for Azerbaijan to become a regional “middle power” or “keystone state.”

so enraged Iran’s leaders. Aliyev sought close ties with America and Europe, and even opened a constructive relationship with Israel. Unlike his Georgian counterpart and former Politburo colleague Eduard Shevardnadze, how-

ever, Aliyev understood that it would be unrealistic and counterproductive for Azerbaijan overtly to seek NATO membership. Meanwhile, Aliyev also strengthened Azerbaijan’s links with Türkiye, going so far as to declare to the Turkish parliament in 1995 that “we are one nation, but two states.” Indeed, he made it clear that his first priority was to build up Azerbaijan as a sovereign and self-governing state, and that ties with Türkiye were but one of many means to that end, albeit an important priority.

This, then, is the foundation of the notion of Azerbaijan as a “middle power” that his successor, Ilham Aliyev, has successfully built upon—perhaps even to a degree that Heydar Aliyev himself may not have dreamed possible. But such an outcome was not foreordained, even after he managed to consolidate power in the mid-1990s. It is difficult to overstate both the scale of the stakes at the time and the fragility of the Azerbaijani state at the moment of Heydar Aliyev’s return to Baku in June 1993. After all, Azerbaijan’s

nationalist, Popular Front-led government had opened talks with international oil companies for the development of the country’s large oil and gas resources in the Caspian Sea. If Huseynov’s Russian-backed coup had succeeded, the development of Azerbaijan’s oil and gas reserves would have been taking place under strong Russian influence. Even if Western companies had succeeded in striking a deal to develop the oilfields, the result would almost certainly have been exported through Russian-controlled pipelines. In all likelihood, Western companies would have agreed to this, as they had done in Kazakhstan in 1993.

The implications of such a development for the broader region would have been immense. It is all too easy to forget Moscow’s efforts in the 1990s to bring independent-minded Georgia under its wing. These included fomenting ethnic unrest in the South Ossetia and Abkhazia, then helping trigger a civil war between Georgia’s government and paramilitary formations, and, finally, attempting

It is difficult to overstate both the scale of the stakes at the time and the fragility of the Azerbaijani state at the moment of Heydar Aliyev’s return to Baku in June 1993.

to assassinate Shevardnadze himself. At the very time Aliyev was striving to consolidate independent rule in Baku, Russia forced Shevardnadze to accept the presence of Russian military bases on Georgian territory and Russian control over Georgia's border with Türkiye. A lesser authority figure in Baku surely would

have buckled under equivalent pressure, which undoubtedly would have been forthcoming.

There is no doubt that had Aliyev failed to derail Surat Huseynov's pro-Russian coup, the Russian army would also have returned to Azerbaijan, thus stifling the country's ability to forge an independent statehood. Similarly, had Heydar Aliyev remained in Nakhchivan, there would likely have been no east-west energy and connectivity corridor, and the entire South Caucasus would have remained under primary Russian influence. And following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, when the

Heydar Aliyev was one of the defining statesmen of the post-Soviet world. He laid the foundation for Azerbaijan's emergence as a stable middle power able to determine in own fate. But his legacy is also significant for the broader swaths of land where Europe meets Asia and the Near East. As a result, he certainly left his mark on the world at-large.

United States needed suddenly to prosecute a war in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan would certainly not have been among the first countries to cooperate unconditionally with the Pentagon—which is exactly what Heydar Aliyev did, notwithstanding reservations expressed by several members of his cabinet.

Turning to the present, Central Asian countries would not have been able to consider the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus as a viable energy corridor to the West, which would have left Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in a much weaker position to oppose Russian efforts to dominate their region.

Overall, Heydar Aliyev was one of the defining statesmen of the post-Soviet world. His legacy is most obvious for Azerbaijan, as he laid the foundation for the country's emergence as a stable middle power that is—to a much more significant degree than its neighbors—able to determine in own fate.

He provided his country's subsequent leaders with the confidence to prioritize Azerbaijan's national interests as they see them, and to say “no” both to regional and great powers that seek to encroach on those interests.

But his legacy is also significant for the broader swaths of land where Europe meets Asia and the Near East. Indeed, his leadership was crucial in preventing the broader South Caucasus, this crossroads of Eurasia, from falling back under the

control of colonial overlordship. As a result, he certainly left his mark on the world at-large.

Heydar Aliyev was one of the defining statesmen of the post-Soviet world. He laid the foundation for Azerbaijan's emergence as a stable middle power able to determine in own fate. But his legacy is also significant for the broader swaths of land where Europe meets Asia and the Near East. As a result, he certainly left his mark on the world at-large. **BD**

bakudialogues.ada.edu.az