

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

Vol. 6 | No. 3 | Spring 2023

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Heydar Aliyev As Architect and Founder

M. Hakan Yavuz

There is a story that Charles de Gaulle one day declared to Finance Minister Antoine Pinay, “the facts may prove me wrong, but history will prove me right,” to which Pinay replied, “but, *mon Général*, I thought history was written with facts.” At the centenary of his birth, Heydar Aliyev’s impact on Azerbaijani’s post-Soviet destiny has emerged as holistic, even if it is not yet fully appreciated in some part of the globe. Heydar Aliyev, like Charles de Gaulle, rescued his nation from collapse, reconstituted the state’s institutions, and set the course for his country to become aware of its potential. He crafted present-day Azerbaijan and its institutions, along with the memory and culture of his nation’s rise to independence. The formation of the Second Republic and Azerbaijan’s eventual military victory in the 2020 Second Karabakh War strategically bookmark Heydar Aliyev’s national

accomplishment and legacy. At its center stands the economic renewal of the country and the effectual redrawing of the strategic map of the Silk Road region.

Similar to how de Gaulle had to address the divisive war in Algeria, Aliyev had to deal with the First Karabakh War. He astutely found the breathing space he needed to revamp the nation’s institutional infrastructure. In the early 1990s, ordinary Azerbaijanis were not yet adequately prepared to fight and win against Armenian military power (supported actively by Russia), as the concerns of achieving economic viability in a newly independent republic were manifestly a more urgent priority. Aliyev sought to find the ideal path for saving his country’s face and pride in ending the First Karabakh War without making the sorts of concessions to the Armenian side

M. Hakan Yavuz is Professor of Political Science at the University of Utah. His most recent book is the 2022 co-edited volume (with Michael Gunter) The Karabakh Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan: Causes and Consequences, published by Palgrave/Macmillan. The views expressed herein are his own.

that would humiliate and demoralize the Azerbaijani people. This was a difficult yet courageous decision. To extend the time and space for ensuring Azerbaijan’s nascent yet fragile state as an independent republic, he found a narrow path to end that war without a conclusive peace agreement by negotiating a ceasefire that would not

cede Azerbaijan’s rightful claim to its territorial integrity. His unwavering stance that Azerbaijan could only be whole with all of its Karabakh territory included proved prescient—as the facts of history have sustained.

This essay examines the historical context that compelled Aliyev to carry forward his certain idea of what Azerbaijan should become in the formative years of the Second Republic. Aliyev was astute enough to realize how prophetic his leadership challenges were regarding expectations of a military victory in Karabakh, which discounted the possibility that Armenia could ultimately prevail.

The formation of the Second Republic and Azerbaijan’s eventual military victory in the 2020 Second Karabakh War strategically bookmark Heydar Aliyev’s national accomplishment and legacy. At its center stands the economic renewal of the country and the effectual redrawing of the strategic map of the Silk Road region.

According to contemporaneous notes taken by Ilhan Kesici, now a Turkish member of parliament and the late-Süleyman Demirel’s nephew-in law, after the defeat in the First Karabakh War, Aliyev told Demirel, then president of Türkiye, “yes, we lost the battle, but I am sure this defeat will lead to the

rebirth of a powerful Azerbaijan since time and justice are on our side and we will win.” As de Gaulle did when he went into temporary exile in London after France fell to the Nazis, Aliyev spoke up for Azerbaijan, reviving the essential honor that his country’s citizens would need in rebuilding their spirit of nationhood.

The first section of the essay summarizes Aliyev’s biographical details and his worldview orientation, along with his rise to power. The remaining section provides an overview of the key strategies Aliyev deployed in his efforts at the nation- and institution-building.

Life and Worldview

Heydar Aliyev was born on 10 May 1923 in Nakhchivan. He studied at the Nakhchivan Pedagogical School and graduated in 1939. He went on to study at the architectural department of the Industrial Institute of Azerbaijan (now known as the Azerbaijan State Oil Academy), but World War II conditions prevented him from finishing his education. In 1941, he became a civil service employee and worked for the state security agencies of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1944, he was sent to work in the channels of state security, which became the base for his steady professional and administrative rise and growing reputation. Aliyev eventually was promoted to the post of deputy chairman of the State Committee of Security, and in 1967 became its chair. Leading up to this period, he earned the military rank of lieutenant general and received higher education training as a promising public official in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). In 1957, he graduated from the department of history of Azerbaijan State University.

Aliyev was elected as the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of

Azerbaijan in 1969. He transformed the Azerbaijani economic and transportation systems between 1969 and 1982, the years of his tenure. During this period, he also built extensive networks with the nation's diverse sectors, while cultivating his unique brand of Azerbaijani republicanism. Elected a candidate (non-voting) member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Soviet Union's Communist Party in 1976, Aliyev was promoted to a full member of the Politburo in 1982 and, concurrently, First Deputy Chairman of the USSR's Council of Ministers. Aliyev had entered the highest-ranking inner sanctum of the Soviet Union leadership—the highest position ever held by an Azerbaijani in the Soviet Union. For twenty years, he served as a member of parliament of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and for five years as deputy chairman of the Supreme Soviet. In 1987, he was forced to resign from the Politburo because of irreconcilable disagreements with the policies of then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

After his removal from the Politburo, Aliyev returned to Nakhchivan, where he resolved to work towards his homeland's independence. Unfolding events in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), the forced exodus of

ethnic-Azerbaijanis from Armenia, and the Red Army's massacre of Azerbaijanis in Baku fortified and solidified his own identity as an Azerbaijani. He never hesitated to defend Azerbaijan's claims to territorial integrity, as he spoke publicly against the massacre in Baku and used fast-moving events of the time to nurture and strengthen the distinct symbols of Azerbaijani republicanism that ultimately would be enshrined in the political memory of future generations of Azerbaijani citizens and the nation's governing framework. Later, as President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Aliyev pursued a balanced foreign policy so as not to anger the Russian Federation whilst never compromising with the historically validated sovereignty of Azerbaijan. For instance, he consistently refused to allow new Russian military bases in the country, even though some of his fellow political figures suggested that it could help Azerbaijan to free Karabakh from occupation conclusively.

Even what might have seemed like small events in Aliyev's life became consequential for the evolution of his political thinking, especially to understand that revolutionary republican values could speak to ordinary Azerbaijanis looking for alternatives to those of

Soviet communism. Aliyev had set out to brand socialism in a purely Azerbaijani frame.

From his experiences in Nakhchivan, Baku, and Moscow, one then can flesh out a portrait of Aliyev as the effectual founder of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Heydar Aliyev was a product of the experiences of the clash between the Russian brand of Soviet imperialism and Azerbaijani nationalism—not just ephemeral ideals but organic ones that would certainly grow under his imposing presence. He had the political instincts to perform a complex and subtle geopolitical dance with his dual formative loyalties, ensuring he would never set aside his Azerbaijani roots in Nakhchivan. Crafting his own brand of Machiavellianism, he could stand reliably as a Soviet recruit while keeping the fight going for the rights of his people and for the preservation of the cultural and linguistic roots of Azerbaijani society.

Only when he was a member of the Politburo did Aliyev realize that what Soviet/Russian imperialism had inflicted upon Azerbaijani bodies paled in comparison to what the phenomenon has done to Azerbaijani minds. He was acutely aware of the squalid ideological surrender that had endured for

many decades and recognized how to treat the symptoms and rehabilitate a genuine essence of national honor for his people in the project of the Republic of Azerbaijan that he ended up leading from June 1993 to October 2003. Aliyev's emerging legacy was a product of multilayered conflicts: imperialism and nationalism, socialism and nationalism, war and peace, and equality and supremacy.

Aliyev's worldview acknowledged and synthesized seemingly disparate threads—some ideological and sociocultural and others more pragmatic, technocratic, and administrative. He was an impassioned socialist and a humanist as a public servant. He understood the dualistic realities then in operation, remaining protective of Azerbaijani roots while retaining fidelity to the Soviet Union's existence and viability. An Azerbaijani, a Turk, and Muslim (at least culturally if not strictly religious, notwithstanding his July 1994 hajj), he envisioned a role that superseded his bureaucratic obligations, where he would take on the role as the liberating guide for the Azerbaijani body politic after the sobering losses and destruction that Azerbaijan suffered in the hostilities before, during, and after the First Karabakh War.

Becoming a politically regal figure just as de Gaulle had done in France, Aliyev knew enough how to judge and evaluate the political tempers of Azerbaijanis to ensure that any opposition would have to be so motivated and loud as to be heard while comforting and guaranteeing to the people that he always was the empathetic protector who guaranteed the lives of ordinary Azerbaijanis would not be disrupted to the detriment of the public welfare.

Aliyev ensured that he had a ubiquitous presence in Azerbaijan, which allowed him to reconcile deftly the perceptions of a politically stable Azerbaijan with an eye toward Westernization that would fit nicely into the fabric of his country's transforming society. He never felt truly at home in the Soviet Union; for him, Azerbaijani identity was less a position than a movement toward the realization of his country's empowerment as an independent state that would set the path to thrive economically and politically.

In rehabilitating and then reforming the nascent country's fragmented institutions, Aliyev understood that the power of charisma permitted a justifiable opportunity to blend in myth with the factual undercurrents of history, primarily

as a mode of instilling pride and confidence in a people who were dejected by the twin events of military defeat and a socialist economy on the verge of total collapse. To enhance his power, he sought to disarm the destruc-

tive power of parties in parliament that romanticized nationalistic ideals while failing to consider the pragmatic necessities of technocratic administrative projects to strengthen the country's governing core. As with Charles de Gaulle, Heydar Aliyev stood above the political fray because he comprehended just how vital a constructed sense of national dignity was to the project of national renewal.

He understood the circumstances in which he found himself, namely that national victories only came from the perseverance of overcoming struggle after struggle in an endless stream whereby a vanquished opponent would be shortly replaced by yet another who would seek to dilute and neutralize Aliyev's political legitimacy. He rose to the top of the Soviet central bureaucracy with his uncannily instinctive skills in

As with Charles de Gaulle, Heydar Aliyev stood above the political fray because he comprehended just how vital a constructed sense of national dignity was to the project of national renewal.

networking, coalition building, and convincing displays of trust and fidelity. His political ego certainly was complicated, as he chose the moments when he could be most vindictive against his opponents, but only in combination with a message that he believed that millions of Azerbaijani citizens were optimistic that their society could be humane and peaceful.

He followed Machiavelli's teaching that it is best to be both feared and loved and he was mindful that this was sometimes "difficult," as Machiavelli put; in such circumstances, he prudently followed Machiavelli's assessment that it is "much safer" to be feared and understood properly the Florentine's advice to guard against allowing such fear to descend into hatred. Heydar Aliyev also understood another core Machiavellian insight: "one should never fall in the belief you can find someone to pick you up." He was perhaps the only successful political leader in the South Caucasus who understood how to strategically incorporate Machiavelli's teaching into his own statecraft.

When he took over the collapsing state of Azerbaijan in mid-1993, Aliyev moved to encircle his country with the friendship of its neighbors so that he could focus on domestic affairs. He emphasized *rapprochement* between Russia and Azerbaijan, Iran, and Azerbaijan, and even between Armenia and Azerbaijan. There was little room for sentimentality in his foreign policy—even in his relations with Türkiye, where he made sure Ankara stayed on the side of Azerbaijan, ensuring the oil pipelines pass through Türkiye and thus making it dependent on Azerbaijani energy resources. As a long-serving member of the KGB and the Politburo, he also appreciated the contributions of culture and nationalism to foreign policy formulation.

Aliyev concluded that Türkiye needed Azerbaijan as much as Azerbaijan needed Türkiye and went about making this happen. To have access to Central Asia and have a powerful footprint in the Caucasus, Türkiye desperately needed Azerbaijan. Kesici recalls Demirel saying that “spending time with Heyday Aliyev is like having a full course on international relations.” Türkiye and Azerbaijan—as two states and one nation (a formulation Aliyev immortalized, with the emphasis on the former)—share

the same fundamental interests. Therefore, they have always been intertwined for their respective geopolitical existence.

Sudeif Imamverdiyev recalls how Aliyev once said to him,

Our people and our elite, unlike Russians, have a very narrow view of their life and the world they live in. Their main concern is how to improve their standard of living. There is no big idea or a big cause. We need a bigger vision than ourselves and a bigger goal than improving our standard of living. The Karabakh situation, in that sense, has become a blessing to rebuild the nation's soul and to have a national cause to rally and unite the people.

Aliyev's main goal was to rebuild the state and galvanize the nation for liberating its occupied territories. As recounted by Imamverdiyev, Aliyev's analysis of contemporary Türkiye is significant:

It is a country that lives in the greatness of its past and there is a deep sense of will among the ordinary people to become great again. History for Türkiye is not the past, it is not passé, but it is rather a vision of the future.

But this is not how Aliyev believed Azerbaijan saw itself. He did not believe in Azerbaijan as it had existed in various past iterations,

because it had been a fragmented and defeated country. In order for it to become a stable and prosperous state with a restored sense of security, such a realization would be impossible if the occupied territories were not freed from Armenian control.

Aliyev thus knew how to be simultaneously utopian and realist. No different than what de Gaulle had accomplished in postwar France, Aliyev knew the country needed a symbolic history of an exclusively Azerbaijani state character to instill pride in the citizens so that he could get on with the pragmatic politics of rehabilitating the governing institutions and, most ur-

gently, the military so that it would protect and recover the country's legitimate territorial integrity. His experience in the Soviet bureaucratic service did not go in vain. Perhaps, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, if the U.S. had considered the value of pride for the Russian people as opposed to the pragmatic facts of the collapse of its Soviet political structure and hierarchy, the sense of humiliating plunder would not have been so

evident. Instead, Russians could have been granted their own myth of believing in their own liberation.

Heydar Aliyev's leadership in rallying the people of Azerbaijan to the cause of state and nation-building was exemplary. He demonstrated a keen understanding of the deep wound inflicted on Azerbaijani identity as a result of the Karabakh defeat. This understanding allowed him to connect

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with his people on a deeper level and give them a sense of purpose and belonging. Through his speeches and actions, Aliyev was able to galvanize the people of Azerbaijan and instill a sense of pride and determination.

He understood that the conflict over Karabakh was not just a territorial dispute but a matter of national identity, and he was able to articulate this sentiment effectively.

Aliyev's leadership was not just about rallying the people but also about ensuring that the state was strong and capable of protecting its citizens. He implemented policies that focused on economic development and modernization,

while also investing in the military and security forces. Aliyev's leadership in rallying the people of Azerbaijan was crucial in ultimately bringing about a resolution to the conflict over Karabakh. His rallying point was centered around the liberation of the occupied territories, particularly the city of Shusha. Heydar Aliyev recognized that the Armenian occupation of Karabakh was not only a territorial dispute and a violation of the country's sovereignty, but a deep wound on Azerbaijani identity.

The Failed State (1991-1993)

Ayaz Mutallibov (1938-2022), who was the newly-installed head of Azerbaijan's Communist Party at the time of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, declared independence for Azerbaijan in May 1991. The proclamation came easily enough, but the goal of sustaining and enhancing the country's independence proved to be more complex than what many realized at the time. The Communist Party was dissolved and within a week a presidential election took place in which the old communist elite ensured Mutallibov's election.

Yet, three forces threatened the fragile transformation to independence over the next several years. The onset of the First Karabakh War rode on a fresh wave of Azerbaijani nationalism but the economy was struggling to gain traction in the shift from tight state control to flexible market conditions. The security establishment, notably the military, was mired in a state of insufficient funding, lack of cohesion in the structure, and loss of commitment by units and divisions in the institution. In their place, private militia groups gained an upper hand but were too fragmented to coordinate and control. The string of defeats in the First Karabakh War, combined with a sudden surge of hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced peoples from Armenia and the occupied territories, produced a decline in those willing to accept the state authority as legitimate and led to societal fragmentation that verged on a loss of control.

The only dynamic force that seemed to supersede the growing state of chaos in the country was the ethno-nationalism-based Popular Front, established in 1988 and led by Abulfaz Elchibey (1938-2000), a minor Soviet-era Foreign Ministry official who became a dissident,

spent time in prison in the mid-1970s, and gradually emerged as Azerbaijan's leading anti-communist voice in the mid- to late-1980s who consistently defended and promoted Turkish nationalism.

Although Azerbaijan is located on the periphery of the Turkic world, its intellectuals played a formative role in cultivating strong sentiments of Turkish nationalism in what became the Republic of Türkiye. One cannot write about the intellectual origins of Turkish nationalism without acknowledging the role of Azerbaijani intellectuals such as Ali bey Huseynzade (1864-1940), Alimerdan bey Topcubasi (1863-1939), and, especially, Ahmedbey Agaoglu (1869-1939). Moreover, despite its comparatively smaller population, Azerbaijan had long prided itself on its secular and creative enlightenment. The first Muslim Republic was established in Azerbaijan; women were granted the right to vote in Azerbaijan before any other majority-Muslim country, the first opera to come from the Muslim world included a libretto cast in Azerbaijan; and the country has supported widespread appreciation for European music.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Azerbaijan simultaneously faced several identity crises. Immediately, a vacuum or void

emerged as the population wavered, alternated, and was confused about how to define and embrace a distinct Azerbaijani identity when many had only been familiar with a pan-Soviet identity for many decades. But the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, as well as the conflict over Karabakh and the massive ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanis from both the occupied territories of Azerbaijan as well as from neighboring Armenia, combined with the Soviet military intervention in Baku in January 1990, galvanized Azerbaijani Turkic identity under the leadership of Elchibey's Popular Front. All this produced a centripetal force to embolden a coherent and shared Azerbaijani Turkic identity.

With the conveniently expressed intention of preventing the massacre of ethnic Armenians during this period, Soviet troops attacked Baku and opened fire on the civilian population (more on this below). Known as "Black January," the massacre, according to official estimates at the time, left 147 civilians killed and at least 800 people injured. The attacks reinforced Azerbaijani nationalism, which was directed against Russians (in many ways the USSR's dominant nation) and Armenians. Aliyev returned to the political arena in 1990 by publicly remonstrating

Black January. He spoke publicly at the Azerbaijan Representation Office in Moscow the next day, condemning the massacre (“I consider [the Soviet military actions] to be illegal, hostile to democracy, totally contradicting the principles of humanism and the establishment of the legitimate state”) and called for those responsible for the crime committed against the people of Azerbaijan to be held to account. Soon thereafter, he resigned from the Communist Party, citing the Soviet Union’s refusal to account for all sides’ views and claims in the conflict over Karabakh.

Aliyev’s resignation was made public in July 1991, signaling his complete break from the Soviet Union’s agenda, especially in the context of the conflict over Karabakh. Aliyev was extremely disappointed with Gorbachev’s policies and concluded that the Soviet system was not going to survive. When the Kremlin organized a referendum to keep the Soviet Union intact in March 1991, Aliyev, then speaking on behalf of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, rejected the referendum and expressed his desire for Azerbaijani independence. In November 1992, at the constituent congress of the New Azerbaijan Party in Nakhchivan, Aliyev was elected chairman.

At the time of the Black January massacre in January 1990 and then Azerbaijan’s declaration of the restoration of its independence in May 1991, Mutallibov’s presidency was not seen as legitimate amongst many Azerbaijanis. While state institutions were in the hands of the corrupt Azerbaijani elite, nationalism gained a foothold initially against the corrupt elite and then against Russia and Armenia, as both of those nations sought to tie their allegiance tighter in the post-Soviet era. The radicalized dynamics of nationalism propelled the Azerbaijani Popular Front to power and its identity was stamped on the Popular Front leadership. Under Elchibey’s leadership, it called for Azerbaijan’s unconditional independence, stressing pan-Turkish nationalism and Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity to rebuff the Armenian claims on the former NKAO.

In the aftermath of Azerbaijan’s loss of more of its territories in Karabakh, Mutallibov was compelled to resign from his position as president in March 1992. However, just two months later, Mutallibov attempted to regain presidential power by forcing the parliament in Baku to declare the previous presidential elections null and void. He sought to capitalize on the public outrage over the loss of Shusha in

May 1992 to bolster his chances of reclaiming power. In response, Aliyev denounced Mutallibov’s actions as illegal and called upon the Popular Front to remove him from power and prevent him from attending a summit of the new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Moscow that was scheduled for later that month. Aliyev recognized that Mutallibov’s attempts to return to power were not in the best interest of Azerbaijan, as they would only further destabilize an already fragile political situation.

In June 1992, Elchibey emerged as the winner of the presidential election. Although he was quite popular at the time of his election, Elchibey was the sort of politician given more toward romanticizing political ideals than organizing the technocratic and administrative governing infrastructure the country sorely needed during its wartime transformation as a re-born, independent republic. Still, within one year of governing, Elchibey already had made an imprint on Azerbaijani history. He removed all Russian military bases and forces, replaced the Russian ruble with a new national currency, replaced the Cyrillic script as the written form of the language; and sent thousands of students at state expense to study in Türkiye (and only in Türkiye).

Nonetheless, Elchibey’s nationalist, pan-Turkic rhetoric—especially his anti-Iranian position—sparked concern in Ankara. Fazıl Gazenferoglu, who worked for the Legal Office of the Presidency of Azerbaijan during Elchibey’s tenure, wrote in a 1998 book that “Elchibey’s Turkish rhetoric strengthened the nationalist movement in Türkiye, which, in turn, made politicians of different political lines in power uneasy and very uncomfortable. This encouraged Turkish leaders to look for an alternative leader for Azerbaijan to replace Elchibey. This person was Heydar Aliyev.” The entire Turkish government encouraged the switch, no doubt gravely concerned with Elchibey’s consistently harsh criticism of Iran (more than once, he described it as a “doomed state.”) With no sense of the danger this could trigger, he even predicted publicly that within five years Azerbaijan would be reunited with its “lost” territories, located in Iran. Elchibey’s illusory desires genuinely rattled Ankara, whose officials warned him repeatedly to restrain his rhetoric, with Elchibey repeatedly ignoring their requests. Understandably, this sort of rhetoric also greatly unnerved Tehran.

As Elchibey raised his voice against Russia and pulled Azerbaijan out of the newly-formed

CIS, Russia committed itself to Armenia and used its military might to undermine the Popular Front government (Iran also came to side with Armenia as a result of Elchibey's policies). Russia armed and encouraged the mutinous Colonel Surat Huseynov, the commander of a militia unit in Ganja, to overthrow Elchibey. Meanwhile, Elchibey and many parliamentarians called on Aliyev to lead the country, which Aliyev ultimately accepted, primarily because of the clear and present danger to Azerbaijani sovereignty represented by the fact that it was in many ways a failing if not a failed state. Indeed, in a state of mutiny, Azerbaijan was on the brink of disintegration—it was widely-felt that Armenian forces would take full advantage of the budding political chaos.

Against this backdrop, Heydar Aliyev arrived in Baku on 9 June 1993 for meetings with parliament before going to Ganja four days later to negotiate with Huseynov directly, who agreed to lay down his arms and declare his allegiance to the presently constituted state. This was precisely the evidence Azerbaijan's political establishment looked for in believing that Aliyev was uniquely predisposed to the task of establishing civility, stability, and consensus to the still young independent republic.

Six days after he arrived in Baku, Aliyev was elected speaker of the parliament. This was on 15 June 1993. Eight days later, parliament granted him presidential powers, citing emergency provisions to resolve the power vacuum and to ensure the country's constitutional processes could be maintained and adapted accordingly to orderly governing needs.

In this context, it is appropriate to remember the words of the current president, Ilham Aliyev: "It is easier to gain independence than to keep it." It was thanks to the statecraft of the elder Aliyev that the country would succeed in not only keeping its independence, but in strengthening and consolidating it. Azerbaijan has now matured into a thriving independent republic, mastering the narrow divide between the influential powers of both East and West. This would have been impossible without Aliyev's return to power. Indeed, the date on which Aliyev became the de facto leader of the country is known as National Salvation Day (15 June 1993).

Now out of power, Elchibey took refuge in his village in Nakhchivan and gave interviews about the events of his short-lived, chaotic presidency. Speaking about parliament's decision to turn to him

for leading the country, Aliyev described the political environment at the time: "There was a civil war here. People were shooting at one another. Everybody had an armed unit of his own. It took me two and a half years to restore order."

But unrest was still plainly evident. Alikram Hummatov, a colonel of the Azerbaijani army, kept the crisis going. On 21 June 1993, Hummatov declared the establishment of the Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic on Lankaran television. This was an attempt to prevent Aliyev's appointment as president. Although historically there was no tension between ethnic-Azerbaijanis Turks and ethnic-Talysh, a small ethnic-Talysh group led by Hummatov sought to enhance its power by calling for some sort of autonomy. The group's failure to mobilize the Talysh to their irredentist cause resulted in a failure of the insurrection. Aliyev's focus was on the national landscape, rejecting the demands of a small, diverse, yet vociferous spectrum calling for the fragmentation of the nascent republic and an ethnic-based identity as championed by the likes of Elchibey. Aliyev offered stability and order whilst giving public assurances that economic policies would be prioritized by the new government.

The Reconstruction of the State

When the presidential elections took place in October 1993, Aliyev gained an overwhelming majority of the votes, thereby becoming formally the president of a war-torn country that was a failing and perhaps even failed state at that point. He appointed Surat Huseynov as prime minister, simultaneously testing his ability in the office while gaining time to consolidate his power against Huseynov and initiating the task of rehabilitating state institutions free of militia presence. In October 1994, when Huseynov again tried to seize power against Aliyev, he was completely defeated and some of his closest associates were punished. During his second attempt at mutiny, Huseynov was initially supported by Rovsen Javadov, the commander of the OMON Forces, a special branch of the security apparatus established by Mutallibov that numbered some 800 highly trained men. However, Aliyev used his negotiation skills to sway Javadov to his side and isolate Huseynov. Within the context of seeking to focus on domestic crises and the rebuilding of the military, Aliyev agreed to a ceasefire to end the First Karabakh War, which froze the conflict over Karabakh,

resulted in the onset of a period of (ultimately fruitless) diplomatic negotiations, and provided space for him to attract international diplomatic and economic support for the Azerbaijani state.

But Aliyev's more significant achievement—which became the linchpin in efforts to legitimize his leadership in Azerbaijan, especially on the urgent need to resuscitate and improve the economy—soon followed. On 20 September 1994, Aliyev signed what became known as the “Contract of the Century” to explore Azerbaijani energy resources in the offshore Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli oil fields. Prior to this historic achievement, Moscow and Tehran had opposed the presence of Western oil companies in Azerbaijan, but Aliyev found a way to accommodate both states' concerns. The Contract of the Century was signed as a result of Aliyev having taken the lead in bringing together a diverse group consisting of representatives from 11 international energy companies, the State Oil Company of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SOCAR), and six foreign governments. Aliyev's negotiations for this game-changing

deal were aimed at redefining the geostrategic map of the region and transforming Azerbaijan into a key player for promoting stability and security in the entire Silk Road region. His success has been immeasurable.

Subsequently, the Contract of the Century was to be augmented by major follow-up international agreements such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil export pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, which ultimately became the Southern Gas Corridor. In 2019, Richard Kauzlarich, a diplomatic and intelligence analyst who served as U.S. ambassador to Azerbaijan during this period, reflected on the “Contract of the Century,” and why it deserves its label. He offered several reasons:

U.S. government support for the signing and implementation of the Contract of the Century was necessary to provide Azerbaijan with any hope for political and economic development. In 1994, it was not clear that there would be enough oil to justify the development of offshore Azerbaijan oil and gas, or that there would be a pipeline grid that could move this energy to world

Heydar Aliyev redefined the geostrategic map of the region and transformed Azerbaijan into a key player for promoting stability and security in the entire Silk Road region.

markets. [...] The leadership of President Heydar Aliyev was also essential. He saw the advantage of a U.S. geopolitical role in the development and transportation of Azerbaijan's oil, to balance against Iranian and Russian efforts to undermine Azerbaijan's independence.

The Contract of the Century exemplifies Heydar Aliyev's strategic vision of positioning Azerbaijan as the most reliable, predictable, stable, secure, and friendly non-Western oil and gas supplier to Europe, to paraphrase a September 2022 assessment made by *Baku Dialogues* Co-Editor Damjan Krnjević Mišković at a European Commission-organized conference in Brussels. This vision led to the consolidation of Azerbaijan's independence from Russia and garnered support from Western countries, which recognized Azerbaijan's position and its right to independence. Furthermore, the agreement solidified the alliance between Azerbaijan and Georgia, while also incentivizing Türkiye to fully commit to Azerbaijan's security.

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Türkiye's relations with Azerbaijan warmed considerably and Türkiye gave full support to Aliyev. The clearest indication of this transformation in bilateral relations came with Aliyev's visit to Ankara in February 1994. On that occasion, Aliyev signed an Agreement on the Development of Friendship and Comprehensive Cooperation and a Protocol on Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with Demirel as well as 15 agreements on trade, investment, and scientific and cultural cooperation. As stated in the treaty, “in the event that one of the parties is attacked by a third country or countries, they will take the necessary measures to eliminate the attack and take the necessary defensive measures.” (The August 2010 Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance and the June 2021 Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations, builds on this original formulation.)

Yet, some rogue elements within the Turkish state did not want Aliyev. For instance, a coup attempt against Aliyev was carried out by some Azerbaijani elements, including members of the OMON

forces, in March 1995. Led by Colonel Rovsen Javadov, who led the OMON, with the participation of rogue Turkish intelligence officers and, as Aliyev inferred in an interview to the NTV network on

6 May 1997, the Turkish ambassador to Azerbaijan. As soon as Demirel learned about the coup attempt, he called Aliyev and informed him about the plan. The plot was foiled, and its chief protagonists dealt with appropriately. Understandably, that attempted coup momentarily poisoned Azerbaijani-Turkish relations. However, the personal trust and cooperation that Demirel and Aliyev had built up restored bilateral ties in short order. Simply put, Demirel saw Aliyev as Azerbaijan's best prospect for achieving political stability.

There were other coup or assassination attempts to assassinate Aliyev, who emerged more powerful after each major crisis. One could argue that Aliyev firmly secured his power without subsequent major challenges by October 1998, when he began his second term—a more peaceful

The historical verdict recognizes Heydar Aliyev as the principal architect of a New Azerbaijan, which emerged from the ashes of a military defeat and its status as a failing if not failed state.

period in domestic affairs, during which he was able to more fully focus on the state's institution-building process. His presidential message remained consistent: enhance the independence of Azerbaijan, free

the occupied territories, and create a stable and prosperous Azerbaijan. He moved to strengthen the Azerbaijani economy, built up the nation's military institutions, and engender closer ties with Russia, Türkiye, and Iran to strengthen the security belt around Azerbaijan.

At the dawn of the new independence era, political leaders in Azerbaijan came and went swiftly because they were unable to gain the upper hand in stabilizing the nascent republic, a situation that changed when Aliyev took office as president in June 1993 by a parliamentary decision (as noted above, he was directly elected by the people in October 1993). Thirty years later, the historical verdict recognizes Heydar Aliyev as the principal architect of a New Azerbaijan, which emerged from the ashes of a military defeat and its status as a failing if not failed state.

The dramatic reforms of the country's governing infrastructure proved more important than his efforts of giving Azerbaijanis a reason to celebrate their identity. He cultivated a culture of patriotism that was subtler but no less holistic than the outright, unapologetic, single-minded, and exclusivist nationalism promulgated by other leaders in the former Soviet Union (and elsewhere) in the first years of the post-Cold War era, including that of his predecessor. The governing bureaucracy and institutions were either revamped or new ones established to codify, regularize, and synergize the rules and norms of a functioning government for the benefit of Azerbaijani society. In the process, Aliyev neutralized political rivals by legitimizing the state's authority to implement its rules and to levy punitive measures on those that tried to upset, usurp, or take unconstitutional control of the nascent and thus still fragile institutions of the state. Aliyev sought an integrative approach to the building up of the country's capacity to generate revenues, collect taxes, and invest in public works and industries related to the country's natural resources.

Aliyev's project of rehabilitation, reconstruction, and national strength had six broad outcomes. *First*, establishing law and order by

eliminating rogue elements within the security establishment; *second*, drafting a new constitution to enhance the power of the executive and establishing new state institutions; *third*, providing a durable ceasefire with Armenia by freezing both the conflict over Karabakh and with Armenia itself; *fourth*, attracting international investment to extract Azerbaijani hydrocarbons and export them to Türkiye and Europe; *fifth*, pursuing non-confrontational and good neighborly relations with surrounding countries; and *sixth*, setting the foundation for the geopolitical and geo-economics redrawing of the map of the South Caucasus and the rest of the Silk Road region.

Ceasefire but No Peace

Aliyev was resolute from his earliest days as the country's new leader. In a 24 August 1993 address to National Assembly, he proclaimed,

Azerbaijani statehood will be defended, and the rights of the Azerbaijani people will be protected. As the chairman of the Azerbaijani parliament and Acting President, I declare that with the people around me we can find a way out of this situation. We shall take decisive, serious steps, try to establish stability in Baku and other regions, in

towns, districts, settlements, and villages, strengthen our struggle against crime, and overcome this difficult situation in Azerbaijan. You can be confident in it.

The last thing Aliyev wanted was confusion to feed underlying chaotic dynamics. In the early 1990s, Azerbaijan absorbed a combined total of nearly 1 million refugees from Armenia and internally-displaced persons cleansed by the Armenian occupation forces in Karabakh. This number represented about 13 percent of the country's total population. Moreover, the war left 240,000 disabled, along with 20,000 dead. At the time, the country was too poor to provide for the population's basic needs, as Aliyev's first goal was to end the conflict as expeditiously as possible to stabilize a rattled, disgruntled society while keeping open all options for the state's short- and long-term objectives to liberate Karabakh. To overcome Russia's effectually unconditional support for Armenia, Aliyev felt it wise to re-join the CIS to ensure Azerbaijan had a constant presence at the table. Working with Türkiye, Aliyev also mobilized international support to persuade the UN Security Council to pass four major resolutions in 1993 (822, 853, 874, and 884). These resolutions, as well as other international (and national) documents, provided

the legal ground for Azerbaijan to free its territories in the Second Karabakh War.

On 5 May 1994, with Russia as a mediator, the defense ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a ceasefire that would go into effect on 12 May. Neither on that occasion nor any other, Aliyev refused to sign anything more than a ceasefire with Armenia because he was confident that time, international law, and justice were on his side. Aliyev was aware of the costs of the occupation for Armenia, along with how Armenia perceived the magnitude of its military victory. His instincts suggested that the Armenians would do everything but act rationally, which meant that a mutually-acceptable, negotiated solution could not be achieved during this period.

Hikmet Çetin was Türkiye's foreign minister from November 1991 to July 1994 and held many discussions with Heydar Aliyev during this period, which puts him in a singular position to evaluate the Azerbaijani statesman. In a 12 January 2023 interview with me, Çetin recalled Aliyev's words:

The Armenians will never be able to digest Karabakh and the seven regions. On the contrary, their so-called victory will consume Armenian resources and its economic

and demographic potential. The worst thing is that they will become more dependent on Russia to keep those lands and they will never be able to free themselves from the Karabakh nationalists. Time and justice are on our side. We need time to address our economic conditions and unify our people. I need to build institutions and prepare our population to be patient for the freedom of our territories. The Armenian victory will become their worst nightmare and it will consume all their energies. Our defeat will become our rebirth!

Aliyev was correct and, in his long-term prediction, prophetic. Çetin recalled that Aliyev told him that,

The Armenians had bitten off more than they could chew. Let them bite and while each bite will be painful for us, it also will prepare us better for the final confrontation. They have no option but to compromise their sovereignty with Russia to keep those territories. The worst that the Karabakh Armenians will do is to manipulate Armenians in Armenia and exhaust their resources.

On the basis of his many conversations with Aliyev, Çetin was able to assess Heydar's legacy. In the same interview with me, Çetin stated the following:

President Heydar Aliyev's main concern was stability and order in Azerbaijan. He was

always suspicious of Russia and never liked Gorbachev. He always had good relations with Demirel and visited Ankara several times to brief Demirel. They had very good relations. For Aliyev, Türkiye under no circumstances would allow Armenia to humiliate Azerbaijan.

It is important to understand that the Armenian war against Azerbaijan over Karabakh was not just another slight bump in the road in bilateral-communal relations under the Russian and Soviet systems. Not the Karabakh *conflict* but the *outcome* of the First Karabakh War itself represents the transformation of relations. The latter was just another phase in a protracted conflict with consequences that were not yet revealed in either their scale or scope. The consequences have been more devastating in Armenia than in Azerbaijan. It ruined Armenia, made it hostage to its conquest, and drained its resources; whereas it had become a vindicating blessing for Azerbaijan to consolidate its national unity and to focus on improving the public welfare.

Yerevan's military victory in the First Karabakh War and the conquest of 20 percent of Azerbaijan's sovereign lands tempted Armenia to entertain wild dreams of entering

Baku with their tanks—a venture that would be impossible to realize because Armenia did not have sufficient resources to successfully conduct a large-scale invasion.

Armenian nationalism was heightened by irredentist sentiments that obscured realities and lured both its citizens and its sizeable and influential diaspora into perpetuating illusions that clearly were unachievable. Armenia became addicted to its unsubstantiated capacities for nationalism without considering the political ramifications it could have leveraged to stabilize the country's own domestic landscape. The objective of turning the occupied territories into a de facto extension of Armenia's homeland was never possible—certainly not in a negotiated settlement and, as it turned out, not on the battlefield.

Probing the depth of impact of the Armenian military victory reveals that it was hardly decisive or transformational in its political outcomes. The victory became a dangerous misapplication of political opportunity in the hands of the “Karabakh clan,” whose leading members exercised no restraint in consuming the resources that rightly belong to Armenians at home and across its diaspora. Instead of strategic measures, resources fed a global propaganda machine that

obscured the geopolitical practicalities and the short-sightedness of the country's economic picture. Politically, Armenian leaders used this to mask their failures so that the citizenry would not notice the huge infrastructure weaknesses in their economy and society.

Aliyev's political instincts were vastly superior to those of his counterparts in Armenia (especially in the post-Levon Ter-Petrosyan period), who were convinced that Azerbaijan could be reduced to a cowering status. Azerbaijan moved steadily (and often quietly) to its status as a normalized state focused on improving the daily public affairs that mattered for any functioning country.

Meanwhile, Armenia persuaded its people that military alertness would preserve its “invincibility.” Victory in war is never free of context, conditions, and contingencies. Winning on the battlefield leads to new challenges. When the U.S. as a major ally returned from World War II victoriously, it turned its attention immediately to building an economy that was no longer operating on a wartime premise. With defeat as Azerbaijan's context, Aliyev knew which goals to pursue to change the country's destiny: reframe, refresh, and rejuvenate a true sense of national

pride in unifying the country's identity; ameliorate and rehabilitate its institutions, strengthen its diplomatic profile, and rebuild and modernize its military. About a month prior to the ceasefire that ended the First Karabakh War, Aliyev went to the frontline in the Fuzuli district, speaking to the assembled Azerbaijani soldiers with a confidence that did not seem exaggerated:

You defend the honor of your mothers and fathers, your country, and your land. I believe that our just struggle will win. A day will come when all the Azerbaijani lands will be liberated, and all our citizens return home. The Armenian armed forces' position is within a kilometer's distance from the place where I am speaking. I am telling you and let the Armenian occupants hear, too: we are for peace, we want to put an end to the war. We want to apply all means for this purpose, achieve a ceasefire through the negotiations and end the war, but on one condition: the Armenian occupant forces must leave the Azerbaijani lands and ensure the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. We are negotiating on these conditions.

Having secured the much-needed ceasefire, Aliyev set out on his next major task: constitutional reform. In June 1995, he formed a constitutional committee to draft the new

document. On 12 November 1995, the new constitution was overwhelmingly accepted and came into force later that month. The new constitution enhanced the position of the president by giving the officeholder extensive powers to run the country. It was as strong a presidential system that engendered the political backing Aliyev needed to pursue the country's rebuilding project.

National Identity and Memory

When Aliyev was Speaker of the Parliament of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, he adopted the national flag of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (1918-1920) as Nakhchivan's flag on 17 November 1990. Aliyev also asked the Supreme Council of the Azerbaijan SSR to adopt the same flag as the national flag of Azerbaijan. On 5 February 1991, this request was approved by the Supreme Council of Azerbaijan.

Aliyev knew how to create a compelling narrative that sounded hopeful yet realistic to his people. He combined a sense of survival and agony with his confident assurance that the disaster on the battlefield would not be repeated

while also making it clear that the matter of Karabakh and Azerbaijan's historical territorial claims would not be negotiated away. Relatedly, Aliyev

Heydar Aliyev cultivated a breadth and depth of sensitivities in composing a national identity that could be widely accepted.

proclaimed 31 March as the Day of Genocide against Azerbaijanis by Armenians. The commemoration became a vital emotional bond for Azerbaijanis, equating the value of memory to preserving and sustaining their dignity.

The memories of great bloodshed in Azerbaijan were recent and still raw: neither event had been absorbed fully for its emotional impact to be able to be assessed unemotionally. After all, the conflict over Karabakh had seen more than 20,000 civilians murdered and the events of Black January, as noted briefly above, had barely been processed or that grief had progressed through the stages of comprehending it fully. Azerbaijanis' nation-building did not begin with the onset of the Karabakh tragedy and the ethnic cleansing from Armenia, but it certainly was motivated by the events leading up to Black January.

Although this essay has already discussed Black January, it is necessary to return to it again

presently. To express their deep dissatisfaction against the loss of territories and deportation of what at the time was already half million

people from their indigenous land, Azerbaijani residents of Baku organized a series of demonstrations in December 1989. The demonstrators called for the removal of the Moscow-imposed administration and demanded independence from the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet government responded ferociously, with the invasion and massacre summarized in a May 1991 Human Rights Watch report titled *Conflict in the Soviet Union: Black January in Azerbaizhan* thusly:

Late at night on January 19, 1990, Soviet troops stormed Baku, the capital of the Republic of Azerbaizhan. They acted pursuant to a state of emergency declared by the USSR Supreme Soviet Presidium, signed by President [Mikhail] Gorbachev and disclosed to the Azerbaizhani public only after many citizens lay wounded or dead in the streets, hospitals, and morgues of Baku. [...] Our most striking finding is that, on the night of January 9-10, heavily armed Soviet soldiers assaulted the city of Baku as though it were an enemy position intended

for military destruction. [...] Indeed, the violence used by the Soviet Army on the night of January 19-20 was so out of proportion to the resistance offered by Azerbaizhanis as to constitute an exercise in collective punishment. Since Soviet officials have stated publicly that the purpose of the intervention of Soviet troops was to prevent the ouster of the Communist-dominated government of the Republic of Azerbaijan by the nationalist-minded, non-Communist opposition, the punishment inflicted on Baku by Soviet soldiers may have been intended as a warning to nationalists, not only in Azerbaizhan, but in the other Republics of the Soviet Union. The subsequent events in the Baltic Republics—where, in a remarkable parallel to the events in Baku, alleged civil disorder was cited as justification for violent intervention by Soviet troops—further confirms that the Soviet Government [headed by Gorbachev] has demonstrated that it will deal harshly with nationalist movements.

In 1995, Gorbachev characterized his decision to send Red Army troops to Baku as the gravest mistake of his political life. And so it was. The attack triggered the popular acceptance of the inevitability of Azerbaijan's independence and, perhaps, marked the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union itself.

In 2000, Aliyev declared the event as one of the “darkest pages in Azerbaijani history” and proclaimed 20 January as Remembrance Day of the Martyrs, to remember the sacrifices of those who were killed in the mission of fighting for the independence of their country. In issuing the presidential decree, Aliyev, as customary, struck the proper historical tone for Azerbaijanis who sought solace for their grief and assurances for their dignity:

Despite the fact that on 20 January the people of Azerbaijan were subjected to military, political, and moral aggression, they nevertheless demonstrated to the entire world that they were true to the historical traditions of heroism and resolved to oppose the severest ordeals in the name of the freedom and independence of their motherland, not sparing even their own lives for this cause. The sons and daughters of our motherland, who were martyred in the name of the freedom and independence of Azerbaijan, during the bloody events of January 1990, have by their selflessness and determination to sacrifice themselves written a shining page in the heroic annals of our people. Even today the people of Azerbaijan are proud of their daughters and sons who were ready to give their lives in the defense of their national dignity.

Aliyev cultivated a breadth and depth of sensitivities in composing a national identity that could be widely accepted. This had been one of Elchibey's many shortfalls, who rode his own political wave by focusing heavily on Turkish nationalist rhetoric. Understanding that identity was multilayered, Aliyev prudently emphasized a broader spectrum of Azerbaijanism over Turkism by citing the historical record in proper contexts and stressing accounts of the country's territorial unity and integrity. Thus, for instance, the 1995 Constitution changed the name of the country's official language from Turkish to Azerbaijani. Aliyev had a profound understanding of the power of anxiety, fear, and humiliation caused by historical grievances and injustices. The traumatic experience of losing Karabakh in war and the subsequent humiliation left a lasting impact on Azerbaijani society. However, instead of seeking revenge, Aliyev recognized the potential of this collective pain and turned it into a positive social force, facilitating the reconstruction of Azerbaijani society and the state.

Heydar Aliyev's policies in the South Caucasus and the Silk Road region more generally exemplify the concept of complex interdependence, where actors depend on each other for resources, cooperation, and security. Recognizing the importance of building interdependent relationships between countries in this increasingly important region, Aliyev established a network of economic and political

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ties that made military conflict between neighbors a less desirable option. With the aim of integrating Armenia into this regional web of interaction, Aliyev made considerable efforts to resolve the Karabakh issue through diplomatic means. However, when Armenia refused to address the matter within the context of UN Security Council resolution and the OSCE Minsk Group-led peace process, he had no option but to ensure Armenia remained isolated from regional developments.

This approach is based on the notion that in a more interdependent regional system, the costs of conflict and the benefits of cooperation are higher than in a less

interdependent one. Therefore, building interdependence through mutually-beneficial economic and political relationships can promote peace and stability by reducing the likelihood of military conflict. Aliyev's efforts to establish interdependence across the Silk Road region demonstrate the potential of this approach to prevent tensions from escalating into violence, and is a direct precursor to the now text-based regional integration approach embraced by the Central Asian states.

Despite Aliyev's efforts, the Armenian political leadership failed to understand his vision, and the Second Karabakh War was forced on Azerbaijan. However, this outcome does not detract from the importance of interdependence in conflict prevention, but rather highlights the necessity of all regional actors understanding and working towards the common goal of peaceful coexistence.

Aliyev's Geo-Strategic Vision

Azerbaijan's strategic location in the Silk Road region, combined with its status as the largest state in the South Caucasus, has made it a highly

valued geopolitical player. The country is predominantly Muslim, but it maintains a secular government. Azerbaijan shares borders with three major powers—Iran, Russia, and Türkiye—that directly affect the foreign policy interests of the European Union and its member states as well as the United States (not to mention other great powers, like China). Thanks to Aliyev's statecraft, Azerbaijan was able to take its rightful place as the northern guardian of what political scientists Geoffrey Kemp and Robert Harkavy in 1997 termed the "strategic energy ellipse," a reference to the significance of two oil and gas basins in the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. Today, the network of pipelines transporting Azerbaijani hydrocarbon resources represent the only transportation route of its kind to the Mediterranean that bypasses both Russia and Iran. The importance of the Caspian Basin as an alternative source of energy has led to a significant increase in investment in the region, which has fueled economic growth and development.

As recounted by Hafiz Pashayev in the Fall 2020 edition of *Baku Dialogues*, Zbigniew Brzezinski had a particular fondness for Azerbaijan, referring to the country as a regional "linchpin" in his 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard* (speaking

at Georgetown University that same year, he called Azerbaijan the region's "most strategically critical country"). Brzezinski was one of many who recognized that, thanks to Heydar Aliyev, Azerbaijan was coming to play a crucial integrative role in the Silk Road region.

Reflecting both on Heydar Aliyev's legacy and Brzezinski's appreciation of it, Pashayev (who served as Azerbaijan's first ambassador to the United States, with his term encompassing the entire period of Heydar Aliyev's presidency), wrote in these pages that,

We are, in a sense, a quintessential 'borderland country,' a formulation made famous by prominent historian Tadeusz Swietochowski; but unlike quite a few other borderlands, the political and economic emancipation of today's Azerbaijan has helped to complete the transformation of our country from an object of great power competition—a geography to be won and lost by others—into a strong and independent actor in international affairs: a keystone state imbued with a strong and unified national identity in a part of the world that remains a critical seam of world politics.

Two other episodes involving Heydar and Zbig (as he was called by his friends) related by Hafiz m. in the pages of

Baku Dialogues speak to the overall point of this essay.

The first involves a special high-level luncheon held at Blair House, the official guesthouse of the U.S. president, during Aliyev's historic visit to America in July-August 1997, organized at Brzezinski's urging. "I remember how during the luncheon," Pashayev writes, "one of the American dignitaries had asked the president if the Soviet Union would still have collapsed had he, Heydar Aliyev, been in charge instead of Mikhail Gorbachev." Pashayev recounted Aliyev's answer: "The president replied 'no,' showing strong confidence in his leadership and managerial capabilities. A few minutes later, he came back to the subject: 'it would have collapsed later, because its economic system was not right,' he said, adding that he would have managed the collapse in a much more orderly fashion."

The second episode involving Aliyev and Brzezinski that Pashayev recounted in these pages took place during one of the distinguished American diplomat's periodic visits to Azerbaijan. He carried with him a speech Aliyev had recently given, which he took to represent the Azerbaijan statesman's definitive foreign policy posture—words with which

Pashayev indicates Brzezinski agreed:

I regard Azerbaijan's policy over the last ten years and in the future as independent of anybody's interests. It must be based on observing our own values. [...] We have no specific orientations in foreign policy. Our orientation is based on promoting by means of foreign policy activity the attainment of set objectives, the strengthening of Azerbaijan's place in the world, and also our economic development via mutually advantageous cooperation.

Another expression Brzezinski used in his 1997 book to describe Azerbaijan is this: "the cork in the bottle containing the riches of the Caspian Sea Basin and Central Asia." This, too, corresponds to Aliyev's awareness that the construction of a major oil pipeline in the region would have a profound impact on the political landscape. He recognized that this project would be a game-changer, as it would not only boost the economic growth of Azerbaijan but also enhance the independence and sovereignty of the country and the Silk Road region more broadly. The pipeline and everything that would result from its construction would establish a secure and reliable energy corridor that would bypass Russia and Iran, giving Azerbaijan greater control over its energy

resources and strategically reduce Azerbaijan's dependence on its northern and southern neighbors. Thus, Brzezinski firmly supported Aliyev's vision of creating a regional integration and promoting stability and security in the South Caucasus. Brzezinski's foresight and support for the pipeline project were instrumental in its success, which has had a transformative impact on the region's political and economic landscape.

Heydar Aliyev's geo-strategic vision was multifaceted, and its central focus was on establishing Azerbaijan's status as a regional power—a keystone state, as several *Baku Dialogues* authors have rightly put it—while simultaneously safeguarding its independence in an ever-changing regional and global environment.

Thus, Aliyev recognized the significance of Azerbaijan's relationship with the United States, which would need to be established and, over time, strengthened without alienating Russia or Iran. Through his statecraft, he convinced both Moscow and Tehran that a robust and stable Azerbaijan was fundamental to the stability of the South Caucasus and to serving as a gatekeeper to Central Asia. However, he was also determined to prevent Russia from dominating what the

Kremlin liked to call at the time its “near abroad,” particularly Azerbaijan.

Aliyev’s geo-strategic vision extended beyond the South Caucasus, with a particular emphasis on Azerbaijan’s alignment with Türkiye and the role Ankara and Baku could play together across the Silk Road region. He championed a policy of cooperation with Central Asian republics that would increase their autonomy and consolidate their independence vis-à-vis not only Russia, but also a rising China. Recognizing the significance of oil and gas in global affairs and the potential for conflict between Russia and the Western powers, Aliyev made it a priority to establish alternative and more secure pipeline transit routes. His decision to build the pipeline via Georgia and Türkiye not only increased Azerbaijan’s economic importance but also brought these countries closer together, thus strengthening Azerbaijan’s statehood and security.

In short, Aliyev’s geo-strategic vision centered on protecting Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity and promoting economic independence by becoming a connectivity hub for different regions. He aimed to counterbalance the influence of superpowers, maintain a strong and autonomous foreign policy,

and build a strong Azerbaijani army. His legacy continues to shape Azerbaijani foreign and security policy to this day.

Indeed, Heydar Aliyev’s leadership and vision were essential to this historic moment in Azerbaijan’s history. The signing of the Contract of the Century placed Azerbaijan among the world’s consequential nations while laying the foundation for the country to become a responsible and dependable partner. Additionally, the signing of the Contract of the Century brought hope and prosperity to the people of Azerbaijan. It conveyed a strong message to the world that Azerbaijan was stable and open for business, resulting in hundreds of billions of dollars of investments flowing into the country and enhancing the quality of life of its now more than ten million citizens.

Aliyev’s Legacy

The following five points summarize the holistic impact of Heydar Aliyev as the Gaullist architect and founder the second Azerbaijani republic:

One, when Aliyev came back to power, Azerbaijan moved toward a pragmatically-driven and balanced foreign policy while learning how

to accommodate Moscow’s interests and ease its suspicions. He acknowledged that in the post-Soviet era, Russia still perceived its role as a hegemon in the South Caucasus and, as a result, ensured that his foreign and domestic policies would not be seen as confrontational or threatening to Russia.

Two, Aliyev realized the geopolitical and diplomatic leverage of economic independence and worked effectively to bring Western oil companies to Azerbaijan so that he could strengthen his nation’s profile as an independent republic by courting favor with the West and presenting itself as a valuable partner to all relevant actors involved in great power competition.

Three, on the Karabakh issue, Aliyev stipulated that not one inch of Azerbaijani territory would be ceded or surrendered. Azerbaijan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity was not up for negotiation with Armenians or anyone else. On the domestic political front, he kept his word and the people gave him the patience, time, and space he needed to start rebuilding the army for what would end up being called the Second Karabakh War, which was

a consequence of no breakthrough being achieved at the negotiating table despite Azerbaijan’s good-faith efforts.

Four, Aliyev was not predisposed to rhapsodizing ideologically with respect to the Turkic aspect of Azerbaijan’s identity politics. Rather, he was a realist who believed that the most constructive features of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations arose from acknowledging mutual interests and economic partnerships, such as an energy pipeline with transit rights over Türkiye; this was predicated on emphasizing “two states” over “one nation.” By understanding Iran’s security concerns and its domestic challenges, Aliyev pursued a nuanced, sensitive policy in setting a climate for cordial neighborly relations with Tehran.

Five, Aliyev had seen a long period of Azerbaijan’s contemporary history dominated by its status as a Soviet republic but that he had been availed of the opportunity to set forth a longer project of the country flourishing as an independent state. He was resolute and absolute in believing the potential of his beloved Azerbaijan could be fully realized. **BD**