

**AZERBAIJAN IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE:
REGIONAL POWER AND GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGIES**

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Summary: This article analyzes Azerbaijan's position as a regional power and its geopolitical strategies in the post-Soviet space. Azerbaijan's strategic location, rich energy resources, and developing transit infrastructure are identified as key factors enhancing its regional influence. The country's multi-vector foreign policy—particularly its balanced relations with Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Western states—is examined as a critical element in strengthening its regional standing. Complex regional conflicts, especially the Karabakh conflict, are highlighted for their role in shaping Azerbaijan's security and diplomatic strategies. The article thoroughly assesses the political, humanitarian, and security impacts of the Karabakh conflict and emphasizes the significance of new geopolitical realities that emerged after the Second Karabakh War in 2020, such as the opening of the Zangezur Corridor as a strategic transit route. It also addresses the challenges and risks Azerbaijan faces in asserting itself as a regional power. The study underlines the importance of pursuing multi-dimensional diplomacy, a balanced foreign policy, economic diversification, innovation, and social development. Recommendations include deepening regional integration, modernizing energy and transport sectors, resolving conflicts peacefully, and expanding security cooperation. This article offers valuable academic and practical insights into Azerbaijan's evolving role in the dynamic geopolitical landscape of the post-Soviet region.

Keywords: Post-Soviet space, regional power, geopolitical strategies, Karabakh conflict, Zangezur corridor, energy diplomacy, transit routes, security policy

Xülasə: Bu məqalədə post-Sovet məkanında Azərbaycanın regional güc kimi mövqeyi və geosiyasi strategiyaları dərinlən təhlil edilir. Azərbaycanın strateji mövqeyi, zəngin enerji ehtiyatları və inkişaf etməkdə olan tranzit infrastrukturunu regionda onun təsir gücünü artıran əsas faktorlardır. Məqalə Azərbaycan xarici siyasətinin çoxvektorlu xarakterini, xüsusən Rusiya, Türkiyə, İran və Qərbi dövlətləri ilə balanslaşdırılmış münasibətlərini və bu siyasətin regionda Azərbaycanın mövqeyinin möhkəmlənməsində oynadığı rolunu araşdırır. Post-Sovet məkanında yaranmış mürəkkəb münaqişələr, xüsusilə Qarabağ münaqişəsi, Azərbaycanın regional təhlükəsizlik və diplomatiya strategiyalarını formalaşdırmaqda mühüm rol oynayır. Məqalədə Qarabağ münaqişəsinin regiondakı siyasi, humanitar və təhlükəsizlik təsirləri geniş şəkildə qiymətləndirilir. Eyni zamanda, 2020-ci ilin sonunda baş vermiş İkinci Qarabağ Müharibəsi sonrası yaranan yeni geosiyasi reallıqlar, xüsusilə Zəngəzur dəhlizinin açılması kimi strateji tranzit marşrutlarının regional inteqrasiya və əməkdaşlıq baxımından əhəmiyyəti ön plana çıxarılır. Azərbaycanın post-Sovet məkanında regional güc kimi fəaliyyətində qarşılaşdığı çağırışlar və risklər də məqalədə diqqət mərkəzindədir. Məqalə Azərbaycanın regional güc kimi mövqeyini möhkəmləndirmək üçün çoxşaxəli diplomatiya və balanslaşdırılmış xarici siyasət strategiyalarının, həmçinin iqtisadiyyatın diversifikasiyası, innovasiya və sosial inkişafın gücləndirilməsinin zəruri olduğunu vurğulayır. Azərbaycan üçün gələcəkdə regional inteqrasiyanın dərinləşdirilməsi, enerji və nəqliyyat sektorlarının modernləşdirilməsi,

münaqişələrin sülh yolu ilə həlli və təhlükəsizlik əməkdaşlığının genişləndirilməsi kimi istiqamətlərdə siyasət aparmaq tövsiyə edilir. Bu məqalə post-Sovet məkanında Azərbaycanın dinamik geosiyasi mühitdəki mövqeyini anlamaq və gələcək strategiyaların formalaşdırılması üçün akademik və praktiki baxımdan önəmli töhfə verə bilər.

Açar sözlər Post-Sovet məkan, regional güc, geosiyasi strategiyalar, Qarabağ münaqişəsi, Zəngəzur dəhlizi, enerji diplomatiyası, tranzit marşrutları, təhlükəsizlik siyasəti.

Резюме: В статье проводится всесторонний анализ положения Азербайджана как региональной державы и его геополитических стратегий в постсоветском пространстве. Стратегическое положение страны, богатые энергетические ресурсы и развивающаяся транзитная инфраструктура рассматриваются как ключевые факторы, усиливающие влияние Азербайджана в регионе. Особое внимание уделяется многовекторной внешней политике Азербайджана, особенно сбалансированным отношениям с Россией, Турцией, Ираном и западными странами, что способствует укреплению его позиций на региональном уровне. Сложные конфликты в постсоветском пространстве, в частности Карабахский конфликт, рассматриваются как значимые факторы, формирующие стратегии безопасности и дипломатии Азербайджана. В статье подробно оцениваются политические, гуманитарные и вопросы безопасности, связанные с конфликтом, а также подчеркивается важность новых геополитических реалий, возникших после Второй Карабахской войны в 2020 году, в частности открытия Зангезурского коридора как стратегического транзитного маршрута. Также рассматриваются вызовы и риски, с которыми сталкивается Азербайджан на пути к укреплению своей роли в регионе. В качестве рекомендаций выделяются необходимость проведения многоплановой дипломатии, сбалансированной внешней политики, диверсификации экономики, развития инноваций и социальной сферы. Предлагается углубление региональной интеграции, модернизация энергетического и транспортного секторов, мирное урегулирование конфликтов и расширение сотрудничества в сфере безопасности. Статья представляет собой значимый вклад в академическое и практическое понимание роли Азербайджана в динамично меняющемся геополитическом контексте постсоветского пространства.

Ключевые слова: Постсоветское пространство, региональная держава, геополитические стратегии, Карабахский конфликт, Зангезурский коридор, энергетическая дипломатия, транзитные маршруты, политика безопаснос

Geopolitical landscape of the post-Soviet space

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of 15 new independent states completely changed the geopolitical order in the Eurasian space. Each of these states began to develop along different political, economic and cultural trajectories. The previous ideological unity gave way to competing interests, balanced security policies and new forms of cooperation. Against the background of these processes, the post-Soviet space became an arena for the collision and cooperation of global powers. From a geopolitical point of view, this space has entered the sphere of interest of three main centers of influence: the Russian Federation, the West (the USA and the EU) and, more actively, recently, the People's Republic of China. Russia, considering this region as its "near abroad" and historical sphere of influence, is trying to maintain its influence through the CIS, the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union [4, p.

56]. The West, on the other hand, is trying to expand its sphere of influence in the region through the promotion of democratic institutions, energy cooperation and security initiatives. China, on the other hand, is trying to gain access to European markets through the “One Belt, One Road” initiative [5, p.43]. The states in the region are pursuing a balancing policy that seeks to maximize their interests among these powers. For example, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are trying to integrate into both Western and Asian markets through energy projects and transport corridors. On the other hand, states such as Armenia and Belarus are more integrated into the military and economic structures of Russia.

In addition, frozen conflicts in the region (Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria) remain a serious threat to stability and, as they coincide with the interests of geopolitical powers, it is difficult to achieve consensus on the resolution of conflicts. This reality demonstrates the weakness of geopolitical stability in the post-Soviet space and constantly changing risks. Thus, the post-Soviet space acts as a complex and dynamic system in today's geopolitical realities, where elements of both confrontation and cooperation exist. Azerbaijan, taking a unique position in this geopolitical landscape, claims to be both a regional power and a factor of stability.

Relevance and purpose of the topic. Three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet space still remains a geopolitically unstable and competitive region. The wealth of energy resources in this region, the strategic position through which transport corridors pass, and the existence of historical and ethnic conflicts have led to a clash of interests between great powers. In such circumstances, the strengthening of Azerbaijan's position as a regional power, its flexible and multilateral foreign policy, have made it a particularly important actor in the post-Soviet space. Especially in 2020, against the background of new realities that emerged after the 44-day Patriotic War, significant changes are observed in Azerbaijan's geopolitical position and strategic approaches. Another important factor that increases the relevance of the topic is the profound transformations taking place in the system of international relations. The Russia-West confrontation, the Ukrainian war, energy security issues, and increasing competition over transport and transit routes have further increased Azerbaijan's importance in the regional and global system. In this regard, analyzing how Azerbaijan's geopolitical strategies affect the role it plays in the post-Soviet space is of great scientific and practical importance.

The aim of the study is to assess Azerbaijan's place and role in the new geopolitical order emerging in the post-Soviet space, to analyze its strategies and diplomatic maneuverability as a regional power, and to draw scientific conclusions about the sustainability of this policy in terms of future prospects. In addition, the study will focus on Azerbaijan's energy policy, security approaches, and activity in regional initiatives as the main analytical directions.

Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy Priorities After Independence

One of the main challenges facing the Republic of Azerbaijan after regaining its independence in 1991 was the formation of a flexible and multilateral foreign policy strategy in line with national interests. Against the backdrop of the complex geopolitical realities and security threats of the region, Azerbaijan's foreign policy focused on several main directions: protecting state independence, ensuring territorial integrity, integration into international organizations, efficient use of energy resources, and establishing balanced diplomatic relations. In the early years, especially in 1991–1993, Azerbaijan's foreign policy was characterized by a certain instability and lack of experience. However, starting in 1993, under the leadership of the national leader Heydar Aliyev, a more systematic and pragmatic foreign policy concept was

formed [6, p. 54]. The basis of this concept was balanced diplomacy and multilateral cooperation. One of the main priorities was the resolution of the Karabakh conflict within the framework of international law. Azerbaijan, in addition to participating in the OSCE Minsk Group negotiations, has made diplomatic efforts to gain recognition of the country's territorial integrity by the international community. In this context, resolutions and decisions of international organizations such as the UN, the Council of Europe, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation are considered important diplomatic achievements.

Energy diplomacy occupies a special place in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. The "Contract of the Century" signed in 1994 and the BTC (Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan), TANAP and TAP projects implemented in the following years have increased Azerbaijan's international prestige and positioned the country as an energy supplier and transit center in the region [21, p.232]. Through these projects, Azerbaijan has established a strategic partnership with the West and strengthened its geopolitical balance policy through energy. At the same time, Azerbaijan has prioritized active cooperation with international organizations. A member of the UN since 1992, the country has tried to pursue a foreign policy based on international law by joining the Council of Europe, the Non-Aligned Movement, the OIC and other organizations. In particular, the election of a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2011 has demonstrated Azerbaijan's growing prestige in the international community. A balanced foreign policy has enabled Azerbaijan to establish parallel relations with Russia, Iran, Turkey, the West and China. This approach has served to maintain a neutral position among the competing great powers in the region and reduce security risks.

Thus, after independence, Azerbaijan has formed a flexible, multifaceted and national interest-based foreign policy model. This model has created the basis for the country's stability, economic development and international prestige.

The Place of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the Post-Soviet Space. The Republic of Azerbaijan is a state of special strategic importance in the post-Soviet space from a geopolitical, economic and cultural perspective. Located in the South Caucasus region, Azerbaijan has pursued a multi-directional foreign policy by establishing mutual relations with regional powers such as Russia, Iran and Turkey, as well as global actors such as the European Union and the United States. This position has created conditions for Azerbaijan to act as a regional power, become an important actor in the post-Soviet space, and become a directing party rather than a shaping party.

The geographical position of Azerbaijan, with access to the Caspian Sea, its location between Europe and Asia, and its location on the main energy and transport corridors, has made it the center of regional integration. Projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, TANAP and Baku-Tbilisi-Kars have strengthened this role of Azerbaijan, ensuring that the country becomes a strategic actor in European energy security and a bridge between Asia and Europe [12, p.65].

While many countries in the post-Soviet space have faced internal political instability and institutional weaknesses, Azerbaijan has been able to manage these problems relatively successfully. This factor has also allowed it to take a more active role in regional initiatives, as well as to act as an initiator of energy and transport projects.

Azerbaijan has also expanded its cooperation opportunities through its membership in regional organizations such as the CIS, GUAM, and the Organization of Turkic States. As a formal member of the CIS, Azerbaijan appreciates the opportunities for economic and political dialogue on this platform, but has refrained from joining military integration (for example, the

Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This approach demonstrates Azerbaijan's balanced and independent foreign policy course based on national interests.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan is also distinguished in the post-Soviet space by its religious and ethnic diversity, and these features have contributed to the promotion of multiculturalism in the region. Through initiatives such as the Baku Process and the International Humanitarian Forum, Azerbaijan is active not only in the political and economic spheres, but also in the field of humanitarian diplomacy.

In general, Azerbaijan's place in the post-Soviet space is determined not only by geographical and economic parameters, but also by its diplomatic activity, stability model and proactive policy. It is now recognized and accepted as a regional power not only within the former Soviet space, but also in the wider Eurasian space.

Advantages of geostrategic position

The geostrategic position of Azerbaijan – being in the center of the South Caucasus, on the western coast of the Caspian Sea, at the crossroads between Europe and Asia – has given the country regional and global importance. This position is of great importance both in terms of the export of energy resources and the development of East-West and North-South transport corridors [2, p.34]. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway projects passing through the territory of Azerbaijan are practical manifestations of these advantages. In addition, Azerbaijan's strengthening of ties with Central Asian countries across the Caspian Sea makes it an important energy and logistics center not only for the South Caucasus, but also for Eurasia as a whole.

Cooperation with Regional and International Organizations

Azerbaijan's position in the post-Soviet space necessitated its active participation in various international and regional organizations. Although Azerbaijan has been a member of the CIS since 1993, its activities in this organization have been limited mainly to economic and humanitarian cooperation. Azerbaijan has maintained its independent security strategy by not joining the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization). Instead, it has actively participated in the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) organization established in 1997, supporting the promotion of alternative regional cooperation formats in the post-Soviet space. In recent years Azerbaijan's integration efforts have been strengthened further within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). At the initiative of Azerbaijan, this organization has become a more functional platform, and after 2020, real steps have been taken towards strategic cooperation in the Turkic world. The increase in Azerbaijan's role in the fields of transport, energy, information and security within the TTS has strengthened its regional leadership [27, p. 46].

Multivector foreign policy model

One of the main pillars of Azerbaijan's foreign policy is the multivector (multidirectional) policy model. This model is based on establishing parallel and balanced relations with various power centers such as Russia, the West (especially the European Union and the USA), Iran, Turkey and China. Multivector policy serves the goals of Azerbaijan's energy security, protection of territorial integrity, economic development and increasing its international prestige [24, p.43].

This policy model creates conditions for Azerbaijan to establish pragmatic cooperation with both regional powers and global actors, without joining certain blocs, while preserving its sovereign decision-making capabilities. For example, while Azerbaijan maintains close relations with the European Union within the framework of the "Eastern Partnership", it also

continues cooperation with Russia in the economic and trade sphere and participates in the "One Belt, One Road" initiative with China.

Energy policy and regional integration

One of the main pillars of Azerbaijan's geopolitical strategy is energy policy. After independence, the country's rich oil and gas reserves were brought to international markets and energy resources were transformed into a tool of foreign policy, which served both Azerbaijan's economic development and its strengthening of its position as a regional power. Energy policy also allowed Azerbaijan to act as an initiator and active actor in regional integration initiatives.

Geopolitical significance of oil and gas projects (BTC, TAP, TANAP)

With the "Contract of the Century" signed in 1994, Azerbaijan entered a new stage in the production and export of oil. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, which was implemented as a result of this contract, transported Azerbaijani oil through Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean Sea, excluding Russia and Iran as an alternative route. The BTC pipeline became an important tool for implementing energy exports independently of politics and became one of the main pillars of Azerbaijan's sovereign energy strategy [21, p.46].

In the field of gas transportation, the TANAP (Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline) and TAP (Trans-Adriatic Gas Pipeline) projects confirmed their key role in Azerbaijan's gas exports to Europe within the framework of the "Southern Gas Corridor" concept. Azerbaijani gas is delivered to Turkey through TANAP, and to the European market through TAP via Greece, Albania and Italy. These projects have led to Azerbaijan being recognized not only as an energy producer, but also as a reliable transit country and strategic partner [6, p.25].

Azerbaijan-Turkey Energy Cooperation

Azerbaijan-Turkey relations have risen to the level of strategic partnership in the field of energy cooperation. Energy relations between the two countries have not only economic but also geopolitical significance. The TANAP project is one of the highlights of this cooperation and is in line with Turkey's policy of becoming an energy center. TANAP also serves as an important "gateway" for Azerbaijan's access to the European energy market.

In addition, the STAR Oil Refinery and SOCAR's investment projects in Turkey (Petkim, SOCAR Turkey Energy) have strengthened economic integration in the energy sector between the two countries. This cooperation is not limited only to mutual economic benefits, but also creates conditions for the coordination of regional policies of the two states and gives impetus to the formation of the South Caucasus Anatolian energy axis [17, p.130].

Role in European Energy Security

Azerbaijan is of strategic importance for the European Union as an alternative energy source and route. As a result of the implementation of the Southern Gas Corridor, Azerbaijan has become one of the important players in the energy security policy of the European Union. Azerbaijani gas acts as an important alternative for the EU, which wants to reduce its dependence on Russian gas.

Azerbaijan's energy policy, in addition to strengthening economic integration with Europe, also forms the basis of political cooperation. The Strategic Partnership Memorandum on Energy with the EU (2006) and recent cooperation initiatives on "Green Energy" further deepen Azerbaijan's energy partnership with Europe [9]. Thus, Azerbaijan has become not only an energy exporter, but also a subject participating in the formation of energy security policy.

Security strategies and military-political alliances

The security strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan is closely related to its regional position, experience of ethnic conflict, and location in a region where the interests of great powers clash. Since the first years of state independence, the country's main security priority has been to

implement an independent security policy by ensuring territorial integrity and protecting against external influences. Within this framework, Azerbaijan has established security partnerships at both the regional and global levels, while at the same time trying to maintain a balanced approach.

The Karabakh conflict and new realities after the 2020 war
The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been a key issue on Azerbaijan's national security agenda for many years. In the early 1990s, Armenia's military aggression against Azerbaijan resulted in the occupation of 20% of its territories, which led to long-term military-political instability. As a result of the 44-day Patriotic War that broke out in the fall of 2020, Azerbaijan largely restored its territorial integrity and a new geopolitical reality was formed in the South Caucasus. Security approaches have also been renewed in the post-war period. Azerbaijan's coordination of its military power with modern technologies and strategic allies, including the intensity of its military-technical cooperation with Israel and Turkey, played an important role in achieving this victory. At the same time, the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces in the region and cooperation within the framework of the trilateral declaration have brought the need for additional diplomatic coordination to Azerbaijan's security policy [7, p.243].

Balancing policy between Russia, Iran and the West

An important element in Azerbaijan's security policy is the principle of balancing. In relations with Russia, Azerbaijan has tried not only to avoid tension, but also to keep strategic communication channels open. Cooperation within the CIS and coordination with Moscow in the energy and transport sectors are real expressions of this policy. However, Azerbaijan has maintained its military sovereignty by refraining from joining military structures such as the CSTO led by Russia.

Relations with Iran are more complex. Iran's military-political closeness to Armenia and Azerbaijan's growing partnership with Turkey and Israel have strained Tehran-Baku relations from time to time. However, Azerbaijan, taking into account its religious-cultural ties and economic ties with Iran, tries not to damage these relations completely.

In relations with the West, Azerbaijan participates in cooperation programs with NATO, conducts a security dialogue with the European Union, but does not join military blocs. This policy is an indicator of Azerbaijan's desire to remain balanced and neutral and become a factor of stability in the region [24, p.110].

Cooperation with Israel, Pakistan and NATO

One of Azerbaijan's closest partners in the field of military-political cooperation is Israel. Israel plays an important role in the modernization of Azerbaijan's defense industry. Cooperation in the field of unmanned aerial vehicles and electronic warfare technologies, in particular, has yielded significant results in the 2020 war.

Relations with Pakistan are developing both at the political and military-strategic levels. Pakistan, as the only country that does not officially recognize Armenia, fully supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. Military exercises, agreements in the field of defense industry and diplomatic coordination between the two countries indicate Pakistan's growing role in the South Caucasus.

Azerbaijan also operates within the framework of long-term cooperation with NATO. Through the "Partnership for Peace" program and the "Individual Partnership Action Plan" (IPAP), Azerbaijan conducts information exchange, military exercises and defense reforms with NATO in the field of security. Azerbaijan has also actively participated in NATO missions, especially in peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan.

Regional initiatives and diplomatic activity of Azerbaijan

The Republic of Azerbaijan acts as an active and effective actor in the post-Soviet space not only on energy and security issues, but also with diplomatic initiatives. Against the backdrop of geopolitical changes in the region, Azerbaijan has further intensified its diplomatic efforts towards regional integration, the development of transport relations and becoming a unifying pillar of the Turkic world, especially after 2020.

Zangezur Corridor and Middle Corridor Initiative

One of the key elements of the trilateral statement of November 10, 2020, signed after the 44-day war, was the opening of a transport link between the western regions of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic – the Zangezur Corridor. This corridor is of strategic importance not only for Azerbaijan, but also for Turkey, Central Asia and even China. The Zangezur Corridor, combined with the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), creates an alternative trade route between Europe and Asia [13, p.32].

Within this framework, Azerbaijan is implementing a strategy to become one of the transport hubs of the region by developing logistics, railway and port infrastructure. The Baku International Sea Trade Port, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the Alat Free Economic Zone are important components of these initiatives.

Activity in the Organization of Turkic States

One of the important directions of Azerbaijan's diplomatic activity is its activity within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). After the victory in the Karabakh war, Azerbaijan increased both its military-political and ideological influence in the Turkic world. The idea of President Ilham Aliyev, “we are now not only in the South Caucasus, but also in the center of the Turkic world,” expresses the political framework of this activity.

Within the framework of the OTS, Azerbaijan takes initiatives to expand transport connections, establish digital and customs platforms for a unified Turkic world, and cooperate in the defense industry. Through this organization, Azerbaijan both strengthens its integration with Central Asia and claims a leading role in the formation of a pan-Turkic identity and a model of economic cooperation [26, p.45].

Strengthening the role of a bridge between Central Asia and the Caucasus

With Azerbaijan's diplomatic activity, Central Asian countries, especially Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, are deepening their relations. This cooperation is built not only on the Turkic identity, but also on specific economic and infrastructure projects, transport and logistics initiatives and regional security issues. Azerbaijan's bilateral and multilateral diplomatic activities with these countries contribute to the formation of a new map of cooperation in the post-Soviet space.

Thus, Azerbaijan, with its initiative and diplomatic activity, has turned from a passive participant into an active shaper in the post-Soviet space. The Zangezur corridor and the Middle Corridor, integration efforts within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States, as well as deepening cooperation with Central Asia, practically demonstrate Azerbaijan's claim to leadership in the region.

Conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space and Azerbaijan's Position

The post-Soviet space is a region with complex and multilateral interactions in the political, economic and security spheres of the newly independent states formed after the collapse of the USSR. A number of long-term conflicts within this space have had a negative impact on the geopolitical stability of the region and have seriously shaped the security architecture of the South Caucasus region, including Azerbaijan. As a state located at the center of these conflicts,

Azerbaijan has an important geopolitical position both for ensuring its territorial integrity and for establishing peace and stability in the region

The Karabakh conflict and its regional implications

The Karabakh conflict is a territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan that began in 1988 and escalated into armed conflict in the 1990s. As a result of the Second Karabakh War, which broke out in the fall of 2020, Azerbaijan regained part of its territorial integrity. This conflict remains one of the longest and most complex conflicts in the post-Soviet region, and its effects have a serious impact not only on the two states, but also on the regional security balance. The conflict has led to humanitarian crises, waves of migration and increased political tensions in the region, as well as stimulating the intervention of foreign powers in the region [6, p.25].

In the process of resolving the conflict, Azerbaijan has strengthened its position and shown activity in the diplomatic field relying on the principles of international law, in particular the resolutions of the UN Security Council. At the same time, this conflict has led to the reshaping of Azerbaijan's military and security strategies [7, p.56].

Zangezur Corridor and New Geopolitical Realities

The new political realities that emerged after the 2020 war, especially with the opening of the Zangezur corridor, have accelerated economic and geopolitical transformations in the region. The Zangezur corridor is an important transit hub that directly connects Azerbaijan and Turkey with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, as well as has the potential to create new transport and trade routes between Central Asia and Turkey [11, p.30].

This corridor symbolizes a change in the balance of power in the region not only in an economic sense, but also in a political aspect. With the opening of the corridor Azerbaijan increases its transit opportunities, promotes regional integration, and strengthens its position in the post-Soviet space. At the same time, this affects the interests of regional actors such as Russia and Iran and causes changes in their positions [1, p.55].

The interaction of regional powers (Russia, Iran, Turkey)

The interaction of regional powers in the post-Soviet space, especially Russia, Iran and Turkey, plays an important role in Azerbaijan's geopolitical strategies. Russia, preserving its influence from the Soviet era, remains the dominant power in the South Caucasus and demonstrates cooperative and competitive positions with Azerbaijan at various levels. Azerbaijan's balanced attitude towards Russia is important for ensuring security in the region [18, p.123].

Relations with Iran are also complex; religious, ethnic and geopolitical factors both bring relations closer and strain them. The presence of the Sunni and Shiite populations of Azerbaijan, as well as regional energy and transit routes, along with cooperation between the two countries, also cause factors of competition and distrust [16 p.88].

Turkey is a strategic partner for Azerbaijan. There are ethnic, cultural and historical ties between the two countries, which leads to an increase in Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus. Turkey plays an important role in changing the balance of power in the post-Soviet space by supporting Azerbaijan in both diplomatic and military and economic spheres in its regional policy [28, p.34].

These three regional powers have different interests, strategic plans and maneuvering opportunities in the geography where Azerbaijan is located. Azerbaijan carefully balances its

mutual relations with these actors while building its geopolitical strategies and has done multifaceted work to maintain peace and stability in the region.

Opportunities and limitations of Azerbaijan as a regional power

Azerbaijan's position as a regional power in the post-Soviet space is associated with its strategic geographical location, rich energy resources and active diplomatic policy. However, at the same time, the complex geopolitical conditions in the region and internal development factors also determine the limitations of Azerbaijan's power.

Strengths and potentials

Azerbaijan's main strength is its rich energy resources. In particular, the oil and gas fields in the Caspian Sea ensure the country's economic stability and allow it to play an important role in international energy markets [22, p.34]. Along with the export of energy resources, Azerbaijan attaches great importance to the development of transit corridors in the East-West and North-South directions. This turns the country into a regional transport and trade center.

The diplomatic arena is also considered a strong point of Azerbaijan. Baku pursues a balanced foreign policy in the Caucasus, forming multifaceted cooperation with Russia, Turkey, Iran and Western actors. This policy allows the country to maneuver in the complex balance of power in the region [18, p.56].

At the same time, Azerbaijan is taking serious steps to diversify its economy and invest in technology and innovation, which will increase the country's long-term regional influence.

Challenges and risks

The balance of power in the post-Soviet space is constantly changing, and the challenges Azerbaijan faces in this context are multifaceted. One of the biggest geopolitical risks is the preservation of Russia's dominant position in the region and the occasional occurrence of conflicts of interest with Azerbaijan. Iran's increasing activity in the region also creates additional difficulties for Azerbaijan's security policy [16, p.89].

The lack of sustainability of domestic political and economic reforms and social problems may prevent the country from fully realizing its power potential. For example, the high dependence of the economy on the oil and gas sector still limits diversification, and instability in world energy markets puts Azerbaijan at risk.

In addition, the continuation of regional conflicts and geopolitical uncertainties limits investment and economic cooperation opportunities.

Regional Impact of Internal Development

Azerbaijan's socio-economic development and infrastructure modernization are increasing its influence in the region. Modernized transport and energy projects, including transit routes such as the Zangezur corridor, are strengthening the country's central role in regional integration [11, p.35].

Steps taken in the fields of education and technology are increasing Azerbaijan's innovation and human capital potential, which supports the country's regional leadership in the long term.

Internal stability and development create conditions for Azerbaijan to deepen its relations with neighboring countries and expand economic cooperation, which strengthens its position as a regional power in the post-Soviet space.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan's role as a regional power in the post-Soviet space is the result of its strategic position, rich energy resources and multi-vector foreign policy. The growing importance of Azerbaijan's energy resources in world markets, the development of transit transport corridors and its active participation in the settlement of conflicts in the region confirm its position as one of the important actors shaping the balance of power in the region. At the same time,

Azerbaijan's leading role in ensuring peace and stability in the region, in particular its achievements in resolving the Karabakh conflict, further strengthens its regional influence. However, the geopolitical competition in the region, the volatility of the balance of power and certain difficulties in internal economic and political development may prevent Azerbaijan from fully strengthening its position. Nevertheless, Baku has the potential to successfully manage these challenges by pursuing a multi-faceted and balanced foreign policy.

Future geopolitical strategies directions

One of the main directions in Azerbaijan's future geopolitical strategies should be to increase regional integration and transit potential. In particular, the implementation of strategic projects such as the Zangezur corridor creates an important platform for strengthening economic cooperation and security in the region.

In addition, diversifying Azerbaijan's energy policy and increasing investments in renewable energy sources and innovative technologies will ensure the country's long-term energy security and strengthen its regional leadership.

On the diplomatic front, Azerbaijan should continue its balanced foreign policy strategy and further strengthen its position between Russia, Turkey, Iran and the West. Peaceful resolution of regional conflicts and expansion of security cooperation will serve to increase Azerbaijan's geopolitical influence.

Recommendations and perspectives

1. Deepening regional cooperation: Azerbaijan should increase its activity in the Organization of Turkic States and other regional platforms, expanding opportunities for cooperation in the economic and security spheres.
2. Accelerating internal reforms: Priority should be given to diversification and innovation strategies to reduce the economy's dependence on the oil and gas sector. Social and political stability should be strengthened, and investments in human capital should be increased.
3. Modernizing energy security and transit infrastructure: Implementation of new energy projects and development of existing transit routes will strengthen Azerbaijan's role in the region.
4. Continuing multifaceted diplomacy: A balanced and flexible policy should be pursued in relations with regional and global powers, and an active role should be played in resolving conflicts.
5. Strengthening regional security: Along with increasing military potential, importance should also be given to the development of mutual trust and security cooperation.

In general, Azerbaijan should successfully implement both internal development and multifaceted foreign policy strategies in order to strengthen its position in the post-Soviet space and become a regional power. This is a necessary condition for the long-term stability and development of the country.

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