

# Foreign Policy Directions of the Republic of Azerbaijan

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**Abstract.** The article examines the key directions of the foreign policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The main foreign policy partners of Azerbaijan (Russia, the Republic of Turkey, Iran, the USA and the European Union) were identified, and current issues of interaction with these countries were analyzed. A conclusion is drawn about the multidirectional nature of Azerbaijan's foreign policy and the desire for pragmatic economic cooperation at the regional and macro-regional levels. In the field of security, military and military-technical cooperation, Azerbaijan, in followup the 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and then the dissolution of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, after January 1, 2024, strengthens cooperation with the Republic of Turkey. For Azerbaijan, the importance of creating regional transport communications and intensifying economic cooperation with its closest neighbors has increased.

**Keywords:** Republic of Azerbaijan, foreign policy, economic cooperation, military cooperation of Azerbaijan, transport corridors, Nagorno-Karabakh

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## Introduction

The Republic of Azerbaijan, due to its geographical location and historical conditions (the territory of Azerbaijan was previously part of the Ottoman, Persian and Russian empires), is located at the crossroads of civilization. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the foreign policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan has developed as a multi-vector policy aimed at pragmatically building economic cooperation with interested parties. Based on the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, which Azerbaijan joined in 2011, Azerbaijan's foreign policy did not aim to join military-political alliances in the medium or long term. At the same time, in the status of a newly formed independent republic after the collapse of the USSR, Azerbaijan formulated and defended its national interests in foreign policy.

The key issue in Azerbaijan's foreign policy was the resolution of the issue of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh.

In connection with current changes in the military-political situation in the South Caucasus region (fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh on September 19-20, 2023 and the signing on September 28, 2023 by the President of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic S. Shahramanyan of the decree "On the dissolution of all state institutions and organizations of the Nagorno-Karabakh republic until January 1, 2024"), as well as the early presidential elections that took place on February 7, 2024 in Azerbaijan, following which the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan I. Aliyev was re-elected for a fifth term, the analysis of the continuity of key directions of the foreign policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan is significant. Within the framework of the multi-vector foreign policy of Azerbaijan, the article examines the main foreign policy partners of the Republic and identifies the agenda for interaction between them.

## Materials and methods

Research materials: state documents in the field of foreign policy of Azerbaijan, materials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, analytical and news materials posted on the information resources of the authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan and its main foreign policy partners.

Current dissertation research [1, 10, 12, 14–15, etc.], materials from publications in scientific journals [2–9, 11, 13, etc.], results of monitoring communication modes of post-Soviet countries conducted by the National Communication Development Research Institute were analyzed (NIIRK).

When preparing the article, methods of content analysis and event analysis were used to identify key current issues of interaction between Azerbaijan and its foreign policy partners.

## Discussion

Since the formation of the modern Republic of Azerbaijan (the constitutional Act "On State Independence of the Azerbaijan Republic" was adopted on October 18, 1991), Azerbaijan has been actively interacting with its large neighbors – Russia, Turkey, Iran. Taking into account the deepening cooperation of the Republic of Azerbaijan with Turkey, we can consider the dynamics of Azerbaijan's relations with neighboring Armenia and Georgia. In addition to the immediate regional environment of the Republic of Azerbaijan, a significant vector of its foreign policy is relations with countries outside the South Caucasus region and the Greater Middle East – the United States, the European Union.



## Interaction between Azerbaijan and Russia

Russia has traditionally been a significant foreign policy partner for Azerbaijan. The countries are connected by a common land border, a maritime border in the Caspian Sea (the length of the border between Azerbaijan and Russia is 390 km), a common historical past (Azerbaijan was part of the USSR, the territories were part of the Russian Empire following the results of the Russian-Persian wars and the conclusion of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmanchay (1828) peace treaties<sup>1</sup>).

Starting from the collapse of the USSR and up to the present, the agenda of regular foreign policy negotiations between Russia and Azerbaijan at the bilateral level and in a multilateral format is: delimitation of maritime borders and oil and gas resources of the Caspian Sea, economic activity in the Caspian Sea (convening regular Caspian summits with the participation of heads of coastal Caspian states – Russia, Kazakhstan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan; meetings at the level of the foreign ministries of the Caspian states. The last meeting of the foreign ministers of the Caspian states took place on December 5, 2023<sup>2</sup>, and the last Caspian summit was in June 2022 in Ashgabat); settlement of the conflict around the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, in which Russia at all stages played an active mediating role both as part of the OSCE Minsk Group and at the level of regular trilateral negotiations between the heads of state of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan and bilateral negotiations between the heads of state of Russia and Armenia, Russia and Azerbaijan. From November 2020, a Russian peacekeeping contingent was introduced into Nagorno-Karabakh following the Statement of the Heads of State of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia dated November 9, 2020. In 2023, under the new conditions of the dissolution of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, Russia continued its mediation in the difficult process of normalizing relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan with the prospect of signing a peace treaty between them<sup>3</sup>. Russia is developing trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan.

In 2023, trade and economic cooperation between Azerbaijan and Russia developed. According to the State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan, from January 1 to November 30, 2023, Russia took first place in imports to Azerbaijan (18.14%), second and third places, respectively, China (17.43%), Turkey (13.23%). Russia accounts for 33.09% of Azerbaijan's non-oil exports (first place), Turkey – 24.02%, Georgia – 9.88%<sup>4</sup>. The structure of Russian

1 About the country. The Republic of Azerbaijan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Available from: [https://mid.ru/ru/maps/az/?PAGEN\\_1=28COUNTRY\\_CODE=az&](https://mid.ru/ru/maps/az/?PAGEN_1=28COUNTRY_CODE=az&)

2 On the meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Caspian Littoral States. 05.12.2023. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Available from: <https://mid.ru/ru/maps/az/1919237/>

3 Comment by the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, M. V. Zakharova, in connection with the Joint statement of the Administration of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia confirming the mutual intention to normalize relations and conclude a peace treaty between the two countries. 08.12.2023. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Available from: <https://mid.ru/ru/maps/az/1919806/>

4 Customs Statistics of Foreign Trade of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Reporting period: 01.01.2023-30.11.2023. State Customs Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan. P. 36-37. Available from: [https://customs.gov.az/uploads/foreign/2023/2023\\_11.pdf?v=1702901673](https://customs.gov.az/uploads/foreign/2023/2023_11.pdf?v=1702901673)

exports to Azerbaijan is mainly formed by grains, wood products, ferrous metal products, food products, paper and cardboard, equipment and vehicles, fuel and petroleum products<sup>5</sup>. In terms of exports to Azerbaijan, Russia took fifth place (3.44%), the first four places were taken, respectively, by Italy (45%), Turkey (16.20%), Israel (4.40%) and Greece (4.02%)<sup>6</sup>.

## Interaction between Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey

After the collapse of the USSR, Azerbaijan developed allied relations with Turkey in the security sphere. It should be noted the cultural closeness of the two countries – the Azerbaijani and Turkish languages belong to the Oghuz group of Turkic languages; both countries are secular, with the majority of the population in Azerbaijan and Turkey professing Islam (in Turkey – Sunni, in Azerbaijan – Shiism), Azerbaijan and Turkey are members of the Organization of Turkic States and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. During the conflict over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey supported Azerbaijan's position and in April 1993, among other things, blocked the land border with Armenia. In September 2010, the parties created a High-Level Council for Strategic Partnership in Istanbul<sup>7</sup>.

After the 44-day Karabakh war 2020, Turkey and Azerbaijan signed the Declaration “On allied relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan” on June 15, 2021 in the city of Shusha. In accordance with the Declaration, the parties agreed to hold joint consultations and provide each other with the necessary assistance in accordance with the UN Charter in the event that “in the opinion of one of the parties, there is a threat or aggression from a third state or states against its independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability or security of internationally recognized borders”<sup>8</sup>. Turkey and Azerbaijan also agreed to strengthen “mutual cooperation in order to increase the competitiveness of the East-West Middle Transport Corridor passing through the territory of the two countries”<sup>9</sup>. In addition to Turkey, Israel is a significant partner of Azerbaijan in the field of military-technical cooperation, in particular, the purchase of various types of weapons. As V. Sazhin notes, “over the past 10–14 years, the military forces of Azerbaijan have been almost entirely equipped with Israeli UAVs, and only in the last year (2023 – author's note) the situation

5 Interview of the Russian Trade Representative for Sputnik Azerbaijan news agency. 27.12.2023. Trade Representative Office of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Available from: [https://aze.minpromtorg.gov.ru/news?id=3b22d\\_ba1-454d-40a0-bfbb-d9400ce8535e](https://aze.minpromtorg.gov.ru/news?id=3b22d_ba1-454d-40a0-bfbb-d9400ce8535e)

6 Customs Statistics of Foreign Trade of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Reporting period: 01.01.2023-30.11.2023. State Customs Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan. P. 36-37. Available from: [https://customs.gov.az/uploads/foreign/2023/2023\\_11.pdf?v=1702901673](https://customs.gov.az/uploads/foreign/2023/2023_11.pdf?v=1702901673)

7 Bilateral diplomatic relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Türkiye. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Republic of Azerbaijan. Available from: <https://mfa.gov.az/en/category/europe/turkey>

8 №: 724/23, Press release on Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov's meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Available from: <https://mfa.gov.az/az/news/no72423>

9 The Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey. June 16, 2021. The official website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan İlham Aliyev. Available from: <https://president.az/ru/articles/view/52122>

began to change somewhat towards the diversification of foreign, primarily Turkish, sources of drones”<sup>10</sup>.

The Shusha Declaration can be considered as “the beginning of a new stage of relations aimed at deepening cooperation” between the two countries [8:860]. On January 29, 2024, President of Azerbaijan I. Aliyev received a delegation led by the Chairman of the Parliamentary Commission on National Defense of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, former Minister of National Defense of the Republic of Turkey Hulusi Akar. The parties emphasized the importance of the Shusha Declaration and, among other things, noted the importance of joint military exercises<sup>11</sup>. Türkiye also links the further normalization of relations with Armenia with the prospect of signing a peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia<sup>12</sup>.

Georgia participates in infrastructure corridors connecting Turkey and Azerbaijan [2:124]. Among them are the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline (South Caucasus gas pipeline), the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway.

### Interaction between Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran

The following can be identified as significant factors of interaction between Azerbaijan and Iran:

- about 15–20% of Iran’s population are Azerbaijanis<sup>13</sup>, who live mainly in the north-west of Iran [4:722], and in areas densely populated by Azerbaijanis, the Azerbaijani language is also widespread (it has no official status)<sup>14</sup>;
- the common maritime border of Iran and Azerbaijan lies in the Caspian Sea, which required both parties after the collapse of the USSR to resolve disputes over the delimitation of the southern part of the Caspian Sea, including regarding the exploration and development of Caspian oil and gas resources. Iran has signed but not ratified the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea (2018).

Since the Second Karabakh War (2020), negotiations have been ongoing between Azerbaijan and Armenia on the delimitation of their borders, accompanied by military incidents between them, Iran opposes geopolitical changes in the South Caucasus region<sup>15</sup> – changing the borders of the sovereign states of the South Caucasus, including by force, entails particular risks for the territorial integrity of Iran.

<sup>10</sup> Sazhin V. The visit of the President of Israel to Azerbaijan – results. 08.06.2023. International life. Available from: <https://interaffairs.ru/news/printable/40745?ysclid=lsn8vt41id224022694>

<sup>11</sup> İlham Aliyev received a delegation headed by the Chairman of the National Defense Commission of the Turkish Parliament. The official website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan İlham Aliyev. Available from: <https://president.az/ru/articles/view/63403>

<sup>12</sup> Political relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey. Available from: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkiye-and-azerbaijan.ru.mfa>

<sup>13</sup> The Islamic Republic of Iran. About the country. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Available from: <https://mid.ru/Pu/maps/ir/>

<sup>14</sup> The Islamic Republic of Iran. General information. The Consulate General of the Russian Federation in Washington. Available from: [https://rasht-iran.mid.ru/ru/ob\\_irane/obshchie\\_svedeniya/](https://rasht-iran.mid.ru/ru/ob_irane/obshchie_svedeniya/)

<sup>15</sup> Iran FM meets Armenian president in Davos says Tehran advocate peace in Caucasus. 18.01.2024. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Iran. Available from: <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/738515>

Despite the tension in diplomatic relations between Iran and Azerbaijan in 2023 (on January 27, 2023, an armed attack was carried out on the Azerbaijani embassy in Iran<sup>16</sup>), Economic cooperation remained between the parties. On October 6, 2023, a ceremony was held to lay the foundation of a road bridge and border-customs infrastructure between Azerbaijan and Iran in the area of the village of Agband, Zangilan region, in accordance with the “Memorandum of Understanding between the governments of Azerbaijan and Iran on the creation of new communication links between the East Zangezur economic region of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Region republic through the territory of Iran”, signed by Azerbaijan and Iran in 2022 in Baku<sup>17</sup>. Transport routes connecting Azerbaijan with the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, passing through Iran, serve as an alternative to the transport corridor through Armenia (Syunik region), connecting Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic: Armenia and Azerbaijan have not yet reached mutually beneficial agreements on the issue of its creation and operation.

### Azerbaijan’s interaction with the United States and the European Union

After the collapse of the USSR, the import of Azerbaijani energy resources is important for the European Union (Azerbaijani oil and gas reserves are located on the shelf and adjacent waters of the Caspian Sea). The United States supported the construction of oil and gas pipelines designed to transport Azerbaijani oil and gas to the European market as part of the policy of diversifying energy supply sources, which is consistently pursued by the European Union. Azerbaijan participates in the European Neighborhood Policy, as well as in the Eastern Partnership program, without setting membership in the European Union as a long-term goal. According to the European Commission, the European Union accounts for about 52% of Azerbaijan’s trade, the share of Azerbaijan’s exports to the EU is 66%, and the share of imports from the EU is 16%. The commodity structure of Azerbaijan’s imports to the EU consists mainly of mineral fuels and lubricants<sup>18</sup>.

The United States and the European Union, along with Russia, acted as mediators throughout the settlement of the conflict over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh (the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs are Russia, France and the United States), and then the negotiations on the relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. On January 23, 2023, the European Union decided to establish a civilian mission in Armenia with the aim of ensuring stability in the border areas of Armenia, strengthening confidence directly on the border between Armenia

<sup>16</sup> Press Release of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the results of 2023:1-2. Available from: <https://mfa.gov.az/files/Annual%20Press%20Release%20%282023%29-ENG.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> EU trade relations with Azerbaijan. Facts, figures and latest developments. European Commission. Available from: [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/azerbaijan\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/azerbaijan_en)

and Azerbaijan<sup>19</sup>. On December 11, 2023, the EU Council of Foreign Ministers decided to increase the number of people in the civilian mission from 138 to 209<sup>20</sup>.

Diplomatic tensions in relations between the European Union, the United States and Azerbaijan are associated with the prospects for negotiations to normalize relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The European Union as a whole stands for a peaceful course of negotiations and, in particular, against violations of the territorial integrity of Armenia<sup>21</sup> in conditions when Armenia and Azerbaijan are still negotiating to consolidate new borders between them and the prospects of unblocking transport corridors in the South Caucasus region after the 44-day Karabakh war (2020) and the cessation of the existence of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic from January 1, 2024.

On October 5, 2023, the European Parliament, with 491 votes in favor, 9 votes against, and 36 votes abstaining, adopted a resolution that, in accordance with the traditionally significant human rights agenda for the EU, drew attention to the humanitarian component of the conflict over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh: Members of the European Parliament condemned the military actions of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh on September 19, 2023, after which about one hundred thousand ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh were forced to leave it. In the resolution, members of the European Parliament called on the EU to reconsider the EU's relations with Azerbaijan<sup>22</sup>.

Resolutions of the European Parliament are non-binding, but contain recommendations to the EU executive authorities. Azerbaijan did not send an invitation to the European Parliament to observe the early presidential elections (February 7, 2024). On December 26, 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan declared two employees of the French Embassy in Baku persona non grata and ordered them to leave the republic within 48 hours<sup>23</sup>. As a retaliatory measure, France also declared persona non grata on December 27, 2023 and expelled two employees of the Azerbaijani Embassy in Paris<sup>24</sup>.

Azerbaijan also refused to hold a meeting on November 20, 2023 in Washington at the level of the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia<sup>25</sup> after the speech of US Assistant Secretary of State D. O'Brien on November 15, 2023 during a hearing in the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs on the future of Nagorno-Karabakh. D.

19 EU relations with Azerbaijan. European Council. Available from: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/azerbaijan/>

20 Bulletin Quotidien Europe, 2023. № 13312, 13.12.

21 Bulletin Quotidien Europe, 2024. № 13334. 24.01

22 European Parliament resolution of 5 October 2023 on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh after Azerbaijan's attack and the continuing threats against Armenia (2023/2879(RSP)). Available from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0356\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0356_EN.html)

23 №:741/23, Press release on the designation of two employees of the Embassy of the French Republic to the Republic of Azerbaijan as personae non-gratae. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Azerbaijan. Available from: <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/no74123>

24 Baku and Paris suffered a diplomatic scandal with an "agent accent". EurAsia Daily. Available from: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2023/12/28/baku-i-parizh-postig-diplomaticheskij-skandal-s-agenturnym-akcentom>

25 №:654/23, Commentary in response to groundless remarks by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James O'Brien at the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe hearing. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Azerbaijan. Available from: <https://www.mfa.gov.az/en/news/no65423>

O'Brien noted, in particular, that the United States insists on ensuring access to the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the approximately 100 thousand Armenians who left the region must be provided with reliable information about the possibility of returning to their places of residence in Nagorno-Karabakh if they do so choose. On the issue of the transport corridor, he noted that the corridor should be created only with the consent of Armenia and without the use of force<sup>26</sup>.

## Conclusion

Azerbaijan's foreign policy after the collapse of the USSR consistently developed as a multi-vector one. In the energy sector (oil and gas transportation), Azerbaijan consistently interacts with Russia, Turkey, and the European Union. Georgia acts as a transit country for the transportation of Azerbaijani oil and gas. Transport communications between Azerbaijan and Armenia did not operate until the issue of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh was resolved by Azerbaijan in 2023, and became the agenda of bilateral relations after the 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and then the dissolution of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic on January 1, 2024. On the key issue for Azerbaijan – the creation of a transport corridor through the Syunik region of Armenia, connecting Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, Armenia and Azerbaijan have not yet reached agreements. As an alternative, cooperation between Azerbaijan and Iran has intensified to create transport communications between the East Zangezur economic region of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through the territory of Iran.

In the security sphere, in particular, in resolving the issue of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh until September 2023, and then within the framework of the negotiation process to normalize relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan interacts with the main mediators – Russia, the USA, France (in 2023 Azerbaijan negatively assessed France's mediation in this issue), the European Union. In the field of military and military-technical cooperation, cooperation between Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey and Israel has consistently developed. Diplomatic tension in relations between Azerbaijan, the EU and the United States in the new conditions of the military-political situation in the South Caucasus after 2020 and September 2023 is associated with the further progress and potential results of the negotiation process between Azerbaijan and Armenia on the signing of a peace treaty between the parties and, in particular, settlement of humanitarian issues that arose after the cessation of the existence of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. In general, the need to develop regional transport communications and intensify economic cooperation with its closest neighbors has increased in Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

26 The future of Nagorno-Karabakh. House Foreign Affairs Committee. 11.15.2023. Available from: <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/the-future-of-nagorno-karabakh/>



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