

Azerbaijan, Russia, and the Middle East

Jun 16, 1995



Brief Analysis

On June 16, 1995, Ambassador Vafa Guluzade, principal foreign policy advisor to Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev, addressed a session of The Washington Institute's Policy Forum on Azerbaijan's relations with Russia and the Middle East. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Although Azerbaijan is now an independent state, it faces many obstacles in its efforts to democratize and install a market economy. Russia and Iran are trying to control and influence Azerbaijan to further their own goals. In order to be truly free, Azerbaijan needs the support of the West to resist these stronger powers.

RUSSIA

Russia, which still harbors expansionist and imperialist views, is Azerbaijan's biggest enemy and its largest barrier to full independence. Some Russians seek to revive the Russian empire and see the newly-independent states as Russian colonies. Russia is able to manipulate the republics by keeping them in a state of dependence, and by playing one state off against another. Azerbaijan, unlike the other Caucasus and Central Asian republics, was able to end the Russian troop presence on its soil and thus diminish Russian influence. This has caused Russia to view Azerbaijan as its main obstacle to control over the region, and in turn has created a Russian policy, in cooperation with Iran, to suppress Azerbaijani independence. Russia also exerts pressure on the republic by inciting Armenia against it. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan will only be solved when Russia's influence is terminated.

Russia, however, is not the unified country it was in the Soviet period. Its government is divided between pro-imperialist forces and those who want to establish good relations with the republics. Ultimately, the Russian Federation is likely to collapse. It cannot remain intact if it continues to shoot its own people, as in Chechnya; conversely, a free market economy, which destroys totalitarian systems, could also cause disintegration of the federation.

IRAN

Iran, which has 25 million ethnic Azeris living near the border with Azerbaijan, is fearful of a strong and independent Azerbaijan that could possibly incite a separatist movement. However, these two peoples, which have the same roots, have been living under different forms of governments and in different cultures for years. While the Iranian Azeris identify closely with Islam and are unsure of their identity, Azeris of independent Azerbaijan know who they are: "We are Turks. We are Azerbaijanis." Nevertheless, nationalist consciousness is growing in "southern [i.e., Iranian] Azerbaijan." Baku cannot "openly" call for unification, but unification will eventually happen.

Iran is spending a lot of money in an attempt to influence Azerbaijan and spread its fundamentalist brand of Islam. For example, it is building mosques and distributing Qur'ans in refugee camps along the border. Although Azerbaijan is dependent on Iran for access to Nakhichevan, Azeris, who lived under 70 years of atheism, are not easily influenced by Iran and its Islamic fundamentalism. Iran, which is supporting Armenia by supplying them with fuel for tanks, nevertheless needs to maintain economic relations with Azerbaijan, which borders the Caspian Sea and its oil, and thus cannot risk destroying the republic.

TURKEY

The Azeris identify most closely with the Turks and consider themselves to be the same people. Azerbaijan sees Turkey, which is more advanced in capitalism and market economy, as its window to the West. During the Soviet period, when Azerbaijan was not free, Turkey was viewed as the motherland. During the Elchibey presidency (1992 - 1993), Turkey used these sympathies to achieve its own goals, and economic relations were mostly one way, with the flow of goods going only from Azerbaijan to Turkey. Under Aliyev, this is changing. Baku does not want Turkey to be its new big brother; rather, it seeks to maintain good relations with Ankara on an independent and equal basis.

ARMENIA

The conflict with Armenia is largely due to Russian pressure and influence. Russia, which is not interested in resolving the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, wants Armenia in a state of hostility with all its neighbors in order to increase Armenia's dependency on Moscow. Russia's recognition of "the Armenian genocide" just two months ago is seen as a move to strengthen the link between the two states.

Azerbaijan is ready to give full autonomy to Nagorno-Karabagh, but Armenia seems to want independence for the enclave. Azerbaijan is willing to give Nagorno-Karabagh "de facto independence, but not de jure."

Despite a year-old cease-fire, the Minsk process has failed to solve the conflict with Armenia. The negotiators come to the peace talks without strong instructions from their governments, and the mediators think their only responsibility is to bring the two sides together, rather than find a solution. In order for the Minsk process to work, the governments involved must have a clear policy, and the representatives must have concrete instructions.

MIDDLE EAST

Azerbaijan places "great importance" on relations with Israel. The Azeris sympathize with the Jews, many of whom made important cultural contributions to Azerbaijan, and the Azeris believe that the Jews have a right to their own state. Although Azerbaijan, lacking funds, does not have an embassy in Israel, there is nothing to hamper relations between the two countries.

Azerbaijan has minimal relations with the Arab states, due more to shortage of finances and time than to desire. Cooperation with the Arab countries will come in time. In the Arab world, Azerbaijan has embassies only in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

THE WEST

With powerful neighbors to its north and south, Azerbaijan looks to the West as its guarantor of independence. Azerbaijan needs the support of the United States and Western Europe to protect it from the influences of Russia and Iran, whose actions run counter to democracy and capitalism. Because U.S. and Azeri interests coincide -- fighting Russian expansion and Iranian fundamentalism -- the two countries should work together in combating these forces.

The United States must also work to encourage Armenia to move away from Russia by assuring it of continued Western support. A U.S. economic presence in the region will ensure Armenia's security and reduce its fears of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Russia.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Melissa Vinitzky. ❖

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