

BAKU DIALOGUES

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Between Eurasia and the Middle East

Azerbaijan's New Geopolitics

Svante Cornell

Azerbaijan's geopolitics have changed considerably in the last decade, along with the growing general instability in its neighborhood. Gone are the days symbolized by the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline's construction, when a relatively stable balance existed between a loose Russian-led alignment including Iran and Armenia, and an informal entente between the United States and Turkey, which supported the independence of Azerbaijan and Georgia and the construction of direct energy transportation routes to Europe.

From 2008 until today, the geopolitical environment has shifted in several important ways. First, it is more unstable and unpredictable. Second, the threshold of the use of force has decreased dramatically. And third, to a significant extent,

the geopolitics of Eurasia and the Middle East have merged, bringing increasing complications.

Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy Priorities

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is determined by a set of priorities that have remained essentially unchanged since the mid-1990s. First and foremost among these is the strengthening and consolidation of the independence and sovereignty of the country. Independence is something that many states can take for granted; but this is not the case in the South Caucasus.

Many Azerbaijanis are well aware that the country's first attempt at independence in 1918 was ended by a Soviet invasion two years later. After independence was restored in

1991, Azerbaijan has similarly had to confront a reality in which outside powers cannot be trusted to respect the country's sovereignty. Moscow, of course, makes no secret of its claim to a "sphere of privileged interests" in

the former Soviet Union "but not only," to use former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev's 2008 formulation. Iran, with a large ethnic Azerbaijani population and a theocratic form of government, has also shown hostility to Azerbaijan: high-ranking Iranian figures have speculated loudly on the necessity of Azerbaijan to "return" to the Iranian realm. Even Turkey, Azerbaijan's closest ally, has occasionally exhibited behavior akin to that of a domineering big brother. And Western states, with which Azerbaijan sought to build close relations, have not shied from interfering in the country's internal affairs to promote their preferred political priorities.

This is a geopolitical reality Azerbaijan shares with two of its immediate neighbors, Armenia and Georgia. But those states are both considerably weaker than Azerbaijan and have essentially accepted the need to rely on

Azerbaijan has embarked on a foreign policy that seeks to maintain functioning relations with all neighbors and avoid making itself dependent on any particular power for its security.

a particular external force for their respective security. Armenia, in order to safeguard the conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh and adjoining territories, mortgaged its independence to Russia in exchange for mili-

tary and political support. Georgia, seeing Russia as the main threat to its independence, has appealed for Western support.

While Azerbaijan largely shares Tbilisi's analysis of the regional situation, it has embarked on a foreign policy that seeks to maintain functioning relations with all neighbors and avoid making itself dependent on any particular power for its security. Azerbaijan has embarked on a foreign policy that seeks to maintain functioning relations with all neighbors and avoid making itself dependent on any particular power for its security. While this was a bold proposition for a relatively small country surrounded by large powers, it has been a successful policy for several reasons. First, Azerbaijan's oil and gas resources provided it with financial resources that allowed it to build security and military institutions as well as improve the living

standards of its population. Second, Azerbaijan's society is considerably more cohesive than Georgia's. Put together, these have meant that foreign powers have fewer levers to use to destabilize the country internally. And third, the commitment by Azerbaijan's leadership to a stable and cautious foreign policy course translated these conditions into an actual viable strategy.

The second factor determining Azerbaijan's foreign policy has been the conflict with Armenia, and the latter's occupation of one-sixth of Azerbaijan's territory. The restoration of the country's territorial integrity is second only to the consolidation of its independence as a priority for the Baku government. This has led Azerbaijan to design a foreign policy geared toward this goal. It has made Azerbaijan relatively hostile to those countries that have supported Armenia, such as Russia and Iran, and positively predisposed to those that took Baku's side early on, such as Turkey, Israel, and Pakistan. But Azerbaijan has been forced to accept the continued dominant influence of Russia on the conflict, and thus to seek to reduce Russia's tendency to lean toward Armenia in the conflict. It has also led Azerbaijan to take on an active role in a number of multilateral organizations in order to cement broad international support for its

territorial integrity. Most important, it has led Baku to pursue a robust defense posture, with the aim of building a military capable enough to force Armenia to make meaningful concessions in negotiations.

Changes in Geopolitics

For the two first decades of its independence, Azerbaijan was a key part of a relatively stable geopolitical environment, centered on the development of the east-west corridor connecting Europe with Central Asia. Put in a very simplified way, this period saw a geopolitical alignment uniting those forces that supported the development and expansion of the east-west corridor against those that opposed it. This corridor began with the development of Caspian oil and gas resources, and subsequently expanded to military transit for American and NATO operations in Afghanistan. More recently, it has developed into a civilian transportation corridor—a land bridge connecting Europe and Asia—in which the Port of Baku plays a key role as well.

The outside forces supporting the corridor were led by the United States and Turkey, whose policies at the time aligned closely and were coordinated, while European states played a secondary role. In Central Asia, China gradually emerged as a supporter of

the corridor as well. Outside forces opposing the corridor were led first and foremost by Russia, which viewed the development of the corridor as a threat to its efforts to re-establish a sphere of influence among former Soviet states in what is now termed by some as the Silk Road region. Because it feared the corridor would lead to a surge of Western and Turkish influence in the region, Iran joined with Russia in opposition to its development.

Among regional states, Georgia and Azerbaijan were enthusiastic supporters and prime beneficiaries of the corridor. Only Armenia, which was left isolated as a result of its occupation of Azerbaijani territory, was solidly subsumed under the Russian-Iranian alignment. Central Asian dynamics were less clear: neutral Turkmenistan avoided most international entanglements, while Kazakhstan sought to walk a tightrope, being a key part of Russian-led cooperative institutions while simultaneously welcoming the corridor's development. East of the Caspian, only Uzbekistan was able to firmly stake out an independent and assertive position, but its relationship with the West suffered from controversy over its domestic policies.

This geopolitical balance was relatively stable until the mid-2000s. It came to be challenged by two developments: first,

the renewed assertiveness of Russia under Vladimir Putin; and second, the growing injection by the United States of normative concerns in its foreign policy toward the region.

The rise of Putin, and his growing aggressiveness toward regional states, raised the cost of embracing a pro-Western foreign policy. It also increased the downside of engaging in an opening of the political system, with Russian subversive activities increasing in scope and intensity—as the United States would itself discover, Moscow developed skill at exploiting the vulnerabilities of open societies. Meanwhile, President George W. Bush's "Freedom Agenda" came to differentiate among regional states on the basis of their domestic political system: focusing particular support on those countries that experienced "color revolutions" while adopting an increasingly frosty stance toward countries that did not engage in significant political reform.

The 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia effectively brought an end to the stability of regional geopolitics. This effectively undermined the logic of the east-west corridor, as it led the United States to neglect its ties with geopolitically crucial countries like Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, and in fact contributed to driving a wedge between

Azerbaijan and Georgia, contrary to earlier efforts to support the budding strategic partnership between these states.

It indicated that the threshold for the use of massive force against a sovereign state had been dramatically lowered in the region; but also indicated that the willingness of outside powers to step in to support the east-west corridor when push came to shove was relatively limited. More importantly, it indicated that Western states either saw the corridor as a feat that had already been accomplished, or one in which they were not willing to invest considerable resources.

For states in Central Asia and the Caucasus, these developments indicated that outside (read: Western) backing for their sovereignty and territorial integrity would

be limited to diplomatic support and economic aid; and that such support may not be sufficient to counter an armed challenge from either Russia or Iran. Western security guarantees came to be seen as the opposite of robust, to put it euphemistically. Granted, the Russian invasion of Georgia failed to result in the ouster of

the Saakashvili government; but the message had been heard loud and clear across the region: cross Russia at your own peril. Only two years later, this message was reiterated in Kyrgyzstan, as Moscow endorsed the ouster of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev after his government had failed to deliver on a promise to Moscow to remove America's military base in the country. **BD**

This new reality forced regional states to reconsider their foreign policy approaches. It led several states, Azerbaijan prominently among them, to turn away from an overtly pro-Western stance

toward a policy of non-alignment. This implied that the country would not seek membership in Western institutions like NATO and the EU, while it would simultaneously

reject membership in Russian-led institutions like the emerging Eurasian Economic Union. In Central Asia, Uzbekistan adopted a similar approach, as did Tajikistan. Moreover, it led regional states to focus on strengthening their state institutions—not least in the security sector—in order to be able to withstand, on their

The 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia effectively brought an end to the stability of regional geopolitics.

own, outside powers' "hybrid warfare" designed to undermine and compromise their statehood.

Gradually, in Central Asia, the new geopolitical environment led to a newfound urge among leaders in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, primarily, to develop mechanisms of regional coordination and cooperation to prevent foreign powers from engaging in "divide and rule" policies in the region. In the South Caucasus, by contrast, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict made such regional cooperation impossible, and thus reinforced Moscow's intent to manipulate the conflict to prevent regional states from coming together.

From Eurasia to the Middle East?

A further development over the past decade has been the gradual merger of the geopolitics of the South Caucasus and the Middle East. In a sense, the South Caucasus has historically been connected to the Middle East, and from a long-term perspective, its integration into the Russian empire from 1828 to 1991 could be considered a historical anomaly. Still, in the first two decades of independence, Middle Eastern dynamics had only a minor influence on the region; it was connected much more closely with the dynamics of Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region.

This changed gradually as Soviet-era psychological boundaries began to fade and regional dynamics began to intertwine. The decisive moment was the 2011 Arab upheavals. As several Middle Eastern states descended into civil strife, the regional powers that surrounded the South Caucasus emerged as key players in these conflicts as well. While Iran had always been closely focused on Middle Eastern affairs, the growing involvement of both Turkey and Russia in the geopolitics of the Middle East were key factors in the process that connected the South Caucasus to that region.

In this perspective, Turkey's transformation is of utmost importance. In the several decades after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of Turkey as a nation-state, the country had, for most practical purposes, acted as part of "the West" and both turned its back from and sought to stay out of Middle Eastern entanglements. Moreover, its policies were closely aligned with those of the United States and Europe. This gradually began to change as the Cold War was coming to an end and was accelerated with Recep Tayyip Erdogan's arrival on the political scene. From then on, Turkey pursued increasingly unilateral policies designed to establish itself as a "manager of change" in

the region, to quote then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.

In practice, this policy sought to bring the Muslim Brotherhood to power across the region, particularly in Syria and Egypt. Turkey intervened in the Syrian civil war, agitated for the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and then emerged as the major backer of the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood regime led by Mohammed Morsi. More recently, Turkey has involved itself in the civil war in Libya, as the main external backer of the Tripoli government led by Fayaz al-Sarraj, providing weapons as well as fighters to back up that government.

Russia's return to Middle East politics has been equally dramatic. The Kremlin identified a vacuum in 2013, when U.S. President Barack Obama reneged on his stated "red line," which implied that America would intervene against Syria's president Bashar al-Assad should his regime use chemical weapons. Moscow initially took the lead in removing most chemical weapons from Syria, thus establishing itself as a key arbiter of the conflict. Subsequently, Moscow agreed with Tehran on a joint effort to prop up the Assad regime, and inserted its military forces into Syria in 2015. This brought Moscow and Tehran in confrontation with Ankara,

which backed the opposition to Assad.

As a result, Turkey shot down a Russian jet over the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015, leading to a rapid deterioration of the previously relatively friendly relations between the two powers. Aggressive Russian actions against Turkey, including substantial sanctions, a tourism embargo, and covert actions led to considerable consequences for Turkey, not least in the economic realm. By the summer of 2016, Turkey was forced to apologize for the incident, in an effort to normalize relations. Following the failed July 2016 coup against Erdogan, Turkish-Russian relations again improved rapidly, not least because Ankara blamed the United States for involvement in the coup. But by 2018-2019, the relationship soured again, as Ankara and Moscow were unable to agree on a common approach in Syria; meanwhile, they found themselves on opposing sides of the civil war in Libya, given Russian support for the Benghazi-based government and the Libyan National Army.

This volatile situation had implications for the South Caucasus. Only days after Turkey accused Russia of violating its airspace while conducting raids in northern Syria in October 2015, Armenian authorities accused

Turkey of sending military helicopters into Armenian airspace. After Turkey shot down the Russian jet, Russia responded by deploying military helicopters to the Erebuni base near Yerevan. During the fall of 2015, Moscow also made a demonstration of strength by using warships in the Caspian sea to fire missiles at targets in Syria. There was no clear military rationale for using ships to fire these missiles; the move was interpreted instead mainly as a sign of Russia's military capabilities. It also served as a key reminder of the connection between the South Caucasus and Middle Eastern "theaters" of operation.

Other elements than these great power politics connect the Caucasus with the Middle East. The rising level of Middle Eastern tourism to Azerbaijan and Georgia is a small but culturally significant example of this. A factor that is more important from a political perspective has been jihadist recruitment to the conflicts in the Levant. This phenomenon, which has also affected Central Asia to a considerable degree, has shown how conflicts in

the Middle East, coupled with the region's ideological currents, can have an impact on populations elsewhere. In recent years, it has affected Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the North Caucasus, all of which have been sources of fighters, posing challenges for governments concerned with the activities of these radicalized individuals as they return to their home countries.

Azerbaijan is particularly vulnerable to developments in the Middle East, as the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have featured a strong element of sectarian violence pitting Sunni and Shia groups against each other. Whether these sectarian conflicts are the result of genuine communal tensions or have been manufactured by outside powers is beside the point:

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as in the Western Balkans of the 1990s, it is clear that once established, such sectarian tensions pose considerable danger of spreading. As a country that is majority Shia with a large Sunni minority, Azerbaijan's very social stability is connected to the conflicts in the Middle East. While there has thus far been little evidence

of the spread of sectarian enmity to Azerbaijan, the situation in the Middle East has led the Azerbaijani government to strengthen its commitment to the secularism of the state, which the leadership understands to be the sole guarantor of inter-communal harmony.

In sum, nearing the beginning of the fourth decade of its independence, Azerbaijan is more closely connected to Middle Eastern dynamics than it has been in two centuries. This process, moreover, is likely to continue to bring Azerbaijan in ever greater proximity to dynamics of the Middle East. This, in turn, requires Baku to spend greater energy in understanding the rapidly developing logic of the region's geopolitics.

Middle East Dynamics

The geopolitics of the Near East have changed fundamentally in recent decades. Today, the region is not defined primarily by the Arab-Israeli conflict, or even an Arab-Iranian rivalry. Instead, a trilateral rivalry has emerged for domination of the Near East, pitting three factions against one another: an Iranian faction, a conservative Sunni group led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and a radical Sunni group led by Turkey and Qatar. This novel situation is the result of an important shift

represented first and foremost by a transformed Turkey's bid to take a leading role in Near East politics, but also by the declining abilities of formerly leading Arab powers like Egypt, Iraq, and Syria.

The three groupings that have emerged are each led by a regional player contending for power and influence. All three exhibit considerable ambition; but all three also face grave internal challenges, which only raise the region's geopolitical stakes.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE lead a first group, consisting mainly of conservative Arab monarchies. This group views with considerable alarm both Iran's regional ambitions and the Islamist populism represented by Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are supported, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, by Egypt, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Jordan. Israel also forms a de facto part of this alignment, though Israel does so as an independent outsider, rather than as a full part of the alignment.

Saudi-Iranian animosity has been present for decades. Still, during the presidencies of Mohammad Khatami and Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, they were not directly hostile. The rivalry acquired new momentum after the American invasion of Iraq, and particularly after the Obama

administration's nuclear deal with Iran, which was followed by the rising power of two Crown Princes, Mohammed bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi and Mohammed bin Sultan of Saudi Arabia.

Both can be termed authoritarian modernizers: the UAE has developed much farther on the course of modernization and is incomparably more liberal a society than Saudi Arabia. Mohammed bin Sultan, of course, has shown numerous instances of rashness and bad judgment, most infamously in the killing of dissident writer Jamal Khashoggi that took place in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. But he has done what no one else has done in Saudi Arabia: push back against the Salafi-Wahhabi clergy as well as against the more conservative elements of the House of Saud that had dominated the country since the 1979 siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Indeed, the social freedoms that have been introduced in the kingdom could scarcely have been imagined five years ago.

Events in recent years have confirmed that Riyadh's main aim is the preservation of the regime. Whereas earlier leaders saw the promotion of Salafi ideology as an instrument toward this goal, the fact that Salafi-jihadi extremists have targeted the kingdom itself has led a new generation of leaders

to conclude the opposite. In this process of reform, Saudi Arabia has become socially much more liberal yet politically more authoritarian.

Iran dominates a second faction seeking domination in the Near East, and is assertively trying to build what has come to be termed the Shia crescent. Tehran benefited considerably from America's troubles in Iraq, and particularly from the Obama administration's decision to effectively withdraw its presence from the country. With the growth of sectarian tensions across the Near East in the past decade, Tehran capitalized on the fear of the Salafi-jihadi extremists among the Shia as well as other non-Sunni groups across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

This process began in Lebanon over a decade ago, as Iran succeeded in installing Hezbollah as the most powerful force in Lebanese society and subsequently also in the Lebanese state. Tehran then abetted the sectarian violence in Iraq, making itself the benefactor and protector of Shia political groups and armed militias in that country. That, in turn, has provided Tehran with the ability to operate covertly in Iraq and to use Iraqi Shia militias for its larger foreign policy goals.

In Syria, Iran proved the decisive force in ensuring the survival of the Assad regime. It has utilized this

dependency to seek to install itself in southern Syria, forcing Israeli military intervention to prevent an Iranian presence directly on its border. In Yemen, Iran exercises considerably influence on the Houthi militias, who in turn have adopted the rhetoric and ideology of the Iranian regime, despite coming—like Syria's Alawites—from a very different branch of Shia Islam than the Iranian Jafari tradition.

On this basis, Tehran has succeeded in building a sphere of influence that is truly transnational: it ignores national boundaries and involves the undeclared deployment of Iranian troops and/or Iranian-controlled proxies in conflict zones in all these countries. This, along with Tehran's quest for nuclear weapons, has caused considerable alarm across the conservative Sunni bloc, as it has in the United States.

Turkey leads a third grouping that wants to dominate the region, and it is Ankara's return to the Near East that has played the greatest, but seldom acknowledged, role in reshaping the geopolitics of the Near East. Whereas Turkey was previously not a key factor in regional affairs, Ankara made a bid for leadership in the Near East in which its key partner has been Qatar. As mentioned, the pair sought to install a Muslim

Brotherhood regime in Egypt, and Ankara similarly meddled in the domestic affairs of Syria, Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco, where it worked to shore up or install friendly political forces. This included supporting Sunni militant groups in Syria to topple the Assad regime, thereby bringing Turkey in conflict with Iran, which worked assertively to secure the regime's survival.

Ankara's gambit, however bold, has not been successful. The conservative Sunni bloc succeeded in its efforts to ensure the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, while Iran and Russia forced Turkey to retreat in its ambitions in Syria, narrowing them to restraining Kurdish political aspirations there.

But these setbacks have not reduced Ankara's long-term ambitions. Turkey has developed a military presence abroad for the first time since Ottoman days, with Qatar, again, serving as a key ally—and Ankara arguably played a key role in halting the Saudi-led effort to seek regime change in Doha in 2017. But Ankara also has established a military presence in Somalia, and sought to develop one on Sudan's Suakin island, directly opposite Jeddah on the Red Sea. Most recently, Ankara has upped the ante in Libya, sending Syrian

extremist fighters and Turkish regular troops as well as arms to shore up the Tripoli-based government against the forces of the Libyan National Army endorsed by Abu Dhabi and Cairo, as well as Moscow and Paris.

All three of the faction-leading major powers have considerable domestic challenges. Saudi Arabia's leadership faces a rapidly growing, pampered, and in many ways ultra-Orthodox population, not to mention a restive and suppressed Shia minority. The success of the modernization process is by no means assured, and the country's transition to an economy that is not dominated by oil is questionable at best. At stake is the survival of the country itself and the Saudi dynasty. Iran also faces mounting domestic dissent. The Islamic Republic has largely exhausted itself in intellectual terms, its legitimacy among the population undermined by its economic failures and foreign adventurism, and its legitimacy particularly weak among the large ethnic minorities in the country, including tens of millions of ethnic-Azerbaijanis and Kurds concentrated in the country's northwest. Large-scale protests periodically force the regime to engage in brutal repression to maintain power. And in Turkey, Erdogan's efforts to introduce a new, Islamist-tinged

presidential system is faltering in the midst of economic mismanagement and the remarkable resilience of Turkish society to his vision of a "New Turkey."

This means that the stability of the trilateral geopolitical rivalry is tenuous. Considerable domestic shocks in any one of these major players is bound to have serious repercussions and may even usher in a paradigm shift across the region. But it also means that the stakes for each of the three powers could not be higher; and their understanding of the cut-throat nature of regional politics is exemplified by the risks they have all been willing to take, and the sums they have been willing to invest, in conflict zones where their interests have clashed.

While the rivalry is trilateral, its intensity varies considerably. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is no doubt the most intense and deep-seated. But the intra-Sunni conflict is beginning to approach it in terms of intensity. As it has played out over Egypt and now in Libya, the stakes in the Turkish-Qatari rivalry with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi appears to rival those of the Saudi-Iranian confrontation. Ankara sought to maximize use of the Khashoggi affair to discredit the Saudi leadership; as was revealed in summer 2019, the Saudi leadership retaliated by a systematic plan to undermine

Erdogan’s power in Turkey. The GCC monarchies—and particularly Abu Dhabi—view the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood across the region as a mortal threat. Their concerted assault on Qatar indicated the seriousness with which they viewed the matter. By comparison, the rivalry between Turkey and Iran appears ever-present but manageable, ebbing and flowing without ever reaching the boiling point.

Implications for Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan, happily, finds itself at the periphery of this trilateral rivalry. Still, it needs to navigate the stormy waters of the region cautiously, as it has important relationships with all three sides. With Iran, Azerbaijan shares a common majority religion as well as a long history. But Iran has also been a threat to Azerbaijan’s independence and has developed close relations with Armenia that have effectively enabled the economic survival of the Armenian-occupied territories in Azerbaijan.

Because of Iran’s proven ability to create internal turmoil in Azerbaijan through support for Islamist groups, Baku has sought to maintain a

distance from Tehran while simultaneously seeking to build a functioning relationship—not least in the economic realm. While Azerbaijan does not side with Tehran, and never will, it is also cautious not to become a target of Iranian actions.

Turkey is another matter: Azerbaijan and Turkey share close linguistic, cultural, economic, and military ties. In fact, Turkey is Azerbaijan’s sole solid backer among the great powers. This is something the Azerbaijani leadership acknowledges and values highly, particularly as it forms the sole counterweight to Russian and Iranian backing of Armenia. Yet

Turkey is Azerbaijan’s sole solid backer among the great powers.

Turkey’s own ideological transformation has been a cause for concern in Azerbaijan. Erdogan’s embrace of Islamism as a guideline in

Turkish foreign policy has been met with skepticism in Baku, as has Ankara’s enthusiasm for regime change in countries like Egypt. The increasing Islamization of Turkey, furthermore, is a poor fit with Azerbaijan’s doubling down on secularism as state policy. Azerbaijan’s ties with Israel were developed very much in conjunction with Turkey two decades ago; but Baku

then found itself under fire from Ankara because of its close ties to the Jewish state. Significantly, Baku did not let such Turkish criticism affect its priorities.

Thankfully, in the past five years, Erdogan has begun to soften the country’s Islamist leanings somewhat, and instead, Turkish nationalism has risen in importance as state ideology under Erdogan’s coalition with the nationalist party.

This may cause trouble for some of Turkey’s neighbors but is a blessing for Azerbaijan: it means a stronger endorsement of Azerbaijan’s position in the conflict with Armenia compared to Erdogan’s earlier stance, which included opening for the possibility of a rapprochement with Yerevan. Ankara’s strong response to the July 2020 skirmishes on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border is illustrative of Turkey’s assertive support for Azerbaijan.

By contrast, in ideological terms, Azerbaijan would seem to have most in common with the conservative Arab powers. Similar to them, Azerbaijan is pursuing a policy of authoritarian modernization; also like them, Azerbaijan’s leadership is hostile

In the past decade, the geopolitical environment surrounding the South Caucasus has become more unpredictable.

toward the ideological zeal pursued either by the Iranian regime or, intermittently, by Ankara and Doha, while it has cordial relations with Israel. And like the Arab powers, Azerbaijan is interested in regional stability and the maintenance of the status quo, and sees the emergence of upheavals and internal conflicts not as an opportunity but as a significant threat to its own stability.

Azerbaijan’s position at the geographic outskirts of the Middle East is a blessing in this regard, as it may help the country maintain cordial relations with the various protagonists in Middle Eastern affairs.

Still, Azerbaijan must follow developments in the region more closely, as they risk having an impact on its own freedom of maneuver. The Turkish-Israeli relationship is a key example: the sudden downturn in Turkish-Israeli relations led Ankara to demand a shift in Azerbaijan’s own approach to Israel. It is not difficult to imagine similar situations in the future, potentially as a result of new flare-ups between Turkey and Iran, or between Turkey and the Sunni powers.

Unenviable Environment

In the past decade, the geopolitical environment surrounding the South Caucasus has become more unpredictable. Regional powers and their proxies are more prone to use force than previously, and the unresolved conflicts of the region appear further from solution than ever. While the geopolitics of the region are increasingly connected to those of the Middle East, the region's own unresolved conflicts remain a key vulnerability that are available to outside powers seeking to maximize their influence. Chief among these is the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, which has been on a trajectory of escalation for the past decade, mirroring broader regional developments.

An increasingly unstable regional environment makes it that much harder for Baku to seek a negotiated solution to the conflict with Yerevan—not least because of what appears to be the growing acceptance of the use of force in regional affairs, and a concomitant decline of multilateral institutions tasked with conflict resolution. This in turn appears to fuel Armenia's increasingly bold approach to the conflict, which appears to include the rejection of agreed-upon principles of the negotiation process. This puts Azerbaijan in a very difficult conundrum. On the one hand, Azerbaijani leaders may conclude

that the negotiation process is useless, leaving the use of force as the only option to restore its territorial integrity. As the events of July 2020 have shown, a considerable section of the Azerbaijani public appears to have concluded as much. Still, a large-scale escalation of the conflict is almost certain to bring the intervention of several regional powers, with highly unpredictable consequences that could threaten a larger conflagration and jeopardize the very sovereignty of the country.

In conclusion, the environment in which Azerbaijani leaders must design and execute a foreign policy strategy has become even less enviable. Over the past decade, the country's adoption of a policy of mixing assertiveness with caution—while increasing reliance on its own resources at the expense of entanglements with foreign powers—has served it well. The growing merger of Eurasian and Middle Eastern geopolitics has made Azerbaijan's position more challenging, and there is little hope that the environment will improve in the coming decade. For Azerbaijan, the key task in the coming years will be to build enough leverage over regional powers to ensure that they take the country's interests into consideration when designing responses to the crises that are sure to emerge. **BD**



CASPIAN CENTER FOR ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT



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Held annually in July, in partnership with the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) and BP in Azerbaijan, the Baku Summer Energy School (BSES) is our flagship two-week certificate program. It brings together world-renowned scholars, academics, and policymakers to examine and gain a better understanding of the energy and environmental issues with a particular focus on the Caspian region.