

# BAKU DIALOGUES

## POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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*Interview*


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# Strategic Equilibrium

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## Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy

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*Hikmat Hajiye*


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*Baku Dialogues:*

Good afternoon, Mr. Hajiye. Thank you for receiving us today. Our intention is for each issue of the re-launched *Baku Dialogues* to feature a conversation with a prominent decisionmaker from what we are calling the Silk Road region—this part of the world that looks west past Anatolia to the warm seas beyond; north across the Caspian towards the Great Plain and the Great Steppe; east to the peaks of the Altai and the arid sands of the Taklamakan; and south towards the Hindu Kush and the Indus valley, looping down around in the direction of the Persian Gulf and across the Fertile Crescent.

And we're honored that you will be the first to be featured in our pages in this way. The editorial premise of *Baku Dialogues* is that one of the few strategic sempiternities in this tumultuous era of change—characterized by centrifugal geopolitical trends hastened by the pandemic—is that this area, this part of the world as we have sketched it out, will maintain its position as a critical seam of international relations, as one of our authors put it.

And what's particularly interesting is that the Silk Road region does not really have a “go-to” geopolitical hub that is an exclusive and integral part of the region. Here the predominant reality is something else: a combination of formal treaties and informal understandings; and there's also some tension, obviously; and frozen conflicts that occasionally flare up into skirmishes—like the one we've seen recently at the border between Armenia

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and Azerbaijan. But as a rule of thumb, no one power dominates, equilibrium is maintained, and a general balance is kept. In other words, the meta-narrative is that the Silk Road region is no longer a mere object of international relations. From this we get to the first question, which is about statecraft. A former ambassador of a great power posted until recently in Baku described Azerbaijan's foreign policy as akin to “strategic balancing on a tightrope.” How did Azerbaijan learn to walk the geopolitical tightrope?

*Hajiye:*

We all know that today Azerbaijan has good relations with its neighbors—except one, for obvious reasons—and that the country plays a crucial role in the development of the region. The development of mutually beneficial relations with neighbors, based on understanding and respect, is the foreign policy priority of Azerbaijan as defined by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev. The realization of economic projects and the increase of prosperity was the result of the establishment of an atmosphere of partnership, both with regional and other partners. And one can refer to such a successful foreign policy with the academic term “strategic balancing.” But we can more properly classify it as an independent and pragmatic foreign policy based on the national interest.

It should be emphasized that in our modern history, such a foreign policy was formulated by the National Leader of the Azerbaijani People, Heydar Aliyev, and that this policy is now being effectively continued by President Ilham Aliyev. In taking a deeper look into such a policy, I think we can focus on two aspects: first, the will—the desire—of having partnership relations with neighbors. In order to understand this aspect, we can look deeper into our own society: a society that has an enormous experience of tolerance and a society that operates within an atmosphere—an environment—of multiculturalism. So definitely, these factors have influenced the friendly foreign policy of Azerbaijan.

The second aspect is the self-sufficiency of our country. Today we do not need to be on someone's side in order to gain benefits. We just pursue our national interests in the

conduct of our foreign policy and enjoy cooperation with our partners. We believe that only such a friendly and cooperative environment can lead to international economic development and prosperity.

I believe that today, thanks to such a successful foreign policy as practiced by Azerbaijan, our country is a driving force of regional development and a platform for international dialogue.

And even if you will conduct a comparative analysis of the respective foreign policies of the region's countries, I think you will definitely come to the conclusion that the foreign policy of Azerbaijan, based on self-sufficiency and good neighborhood policy, is a formula of success.

### *Baku Dialogues:*

You have defined Azerbaijan's international relations in conceptual terms as the "Four Ms": multi-vectoralism, multi-regionalism, multilateralism, and multiculturalism. Let's go through the Four Ms two at a time, if you agree, starting with multi-vectoralism and multi-regionalism. How do these two terms form the basis of Azerbaijan's external engagement?

### *Hajiyev:*

With regards to the multi-vectoralism—and I have already touched on this in my previous answer—Azerbaijan is keen to build good neighborly relations and ties of cooperation with all its partners. The foreign policy concept of Azerbaijan is not an exclusive but an inclusive one. We are open for all horizons that bring economic prosperity and development to our country. And I think it's fair to say that today, Azerbaijan is not just pursuing multi-vectoral initiatives, but that we have become a regional driving force of such a policy.

With regards to multi-regionalism, Azerbaijan is evidently situated on the crossroads of civilizations. We are the biggest economy in the South Caucasus and are the initiator of several successful projects in this region. But we do not limit ourselves to just this geography. We try to act wider afield. Such a wider perception of our geographic presence and belonging is also an important part of our foreign and economic policy. What I mean is that Azerbaijan tries to serve as a bridge between

different geographies in this part of the world through various political and economic projects.

And nothing could be more natural: Azerbaijan has multiple geopolitical identities. For instance, Azerbaijan is in the South Caucasus and it is also both a Caspian and Black Sea basin country. It is at the same time a far-eastern country of the West. And it is also a Central Asian and CIS country. Our multiple geopolitical identities in a natural way stimulate our multi-regional and multi-vectoral policy. In other words, Azerbaijan cannot confine itself to the boundaries of only one geopolitical framework.

In practical terms, we can mention such multi-regional political formats as, for example, the recent meeting of the presidents of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan. Or let us look at the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) and Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) projects, which are linking together the Caspian, Mediterranean, and Adriatic basins. So today Azerbaijan is bridging several regions, be it in political or economic spheres, and this is our vision of multi-regional connectivity.

### *Baku Dialogues:*

One of these regions, in a political sense, is Europe—or more precisely, the European Union. So let's follow up on that. Last year, President Aliyev expressed pessimism that an agreement would be reached with the EU on a new trade deal by the June 2020 EU Eastern Partnership Summit. And he was right. By and large, the parts of the text that had not been agreed when he expressed pessimism still have not been agreed in the interim. How would you characterize the current negotiations with Brussels in terms of Azerbaijan's future course of relations with the European Union?

### *Hajiyev:*

We have always emphasized that we want to have close cooperation and partnership with the European Union, as the EU is very important, in political and economic terms, at both regional and global levels. As President Aliyev said during the Summit of Eastern Partnership countries, which took place in mid-June 2020 in the format of a video

conference, cooperation with the European Union is one of the main priorities of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. What is important to underline here is that we want to have cooperation as an equal partner. Indeed, the EU has great capabilities and resources, be it in financial, institutional, or other spheres. However, as a fully self-sufficient state Azerbaijan also has assets to offer to the EU, including in the spheres of energy security, transport, security, the fight against illegal migration, trade, and others.

Now, as both sides clearly perceive the nature of their relations as one of equal partners, we are continuing to work on a new bilateral agreement—one that is expected to cover several spheres of cooperation and constitute a legal basis for our relations. The finalization of this agreement is high on the agenda of both sides, and I believe that we can achieve a good result with both sides making an effort.

Today Azerbaijan is the EU's main South Caucasus trade partner. The largest part of the EU's exports to the South Caucasus are destined for Azerbaijan—and vice versa: more than 50 percent of Azerbaijan's exports are directed towards EU markets.

Another important aspect is the security dialogue between Azerbaijan and the EU. Last year we organized a security dialogue here in Baku and discussed such important aspects of cooperation as the fight against terrorism, illegal migration, radicalism, and so on. We are on the forefront of this fight and we believe that there is an enormous area for cooperation between Azerbaijan and the EU in these security dimensions.

Moreover, the EU has a new strategy regarding Central Asia, and Azerbaijan is ready to play a bridging role in building this connectivity between the EU and the Central Asian region. We enjoy good relations with both the EU and Central Asian countries, and we have made it clear that we are willing to offer our capacities to help further link these two regions—both politically and economically.

### *Baku Dialogues:*

President Aliyev has spoken of Azerbaijan's "fraternal" relations with Turkey. He has asserted that he knows of no two other countries in the world that are as close to each other as Turkey and Azerbaijan. Would you say that Turkey is Azerbaijan's closest strategic partner? How is this perceived by your other strategic partners?

### *Hajiyev:*

As I mentioned earlier, Azerbaijan tries to have good relations with all its partners and we are not aiming to differentiate among them. However, relations with Turkey deserve special attention. As National Leader Heydar Aliyev once said: "Azerbaijan and Turkey—one nation, two states." These words spring out of historic ties and a legacy of cooperation between our two countries, and now they set the framework for the future of our bilateral relations.

Today we are fully cooperating with Turkey on both bilateral and multilateral levels. Together we have become stronger and this is our rational choice based on the wills of our peoples and our respective national interests. We provide each other with reciprocal support in various multilateral institutions where we are members, and I can give many examples where Azerbaijan and Turkey fully supported each other in numerous forums. So, the Baku-Ankara relationship is characterized as a strategic partnership—and even further, I would say: our relationship is like one between brothers.

Besides, the partnership between Azerbaijan and Turkey has led to successful regional energy and transportation projects. These have made great contributions to the development and prosperity of the entire region.

I also want to stress that such close relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey are not directed against any other one of our partners. We don't think in terms of how one partnership can harm another; on the contrary, we're in favor of synergies among such partnerships. As a practical example, I can mention several trilateral regional formats involving Azerbaijan, Turkey, and a third country. These have now

become almost institutionalized and thus contribute to regional peace, security, and regional economic development. And we are very glad and proud that Azerbaijan is not just participating in these formats, but is one of their main driving forces.

### *Baku Dialogues:*

We propose to stay for a moment longer in Azerbaijan's immediate neighborhood and ask you about Georgia. In many ways this relationship is a model for bilateral ties across the Silk Road region—especially the way frictions and misunderstandings are managed. What are the takeaways for others in the region in terms of emulating how the Baku-Tbilisi relationship works?

### *Hajiyev:*

I mentioned earlier how Azerbaijan, together with Turkey, is creating regional prosperity through economic projects. Some of these projects are also realized in close partnership with Georgia. Our joint initiatives and projects have already proved to be successful. Besides, we enjoy fruitful historical relations. And on the basis of the fact that we enjoy fruitful cooperation, any issue that comes up between our countries is duly resolved in a brotherly manner.

Today Azerbaijan is one of the main investors in Georgia and our main energy and transportation routes pass through this country. So, our cooperation is essential for regional development and prosperity. I believe our relations with Georgia can be characterized as a model of historic and pragmatic cooperation. Of course, not all are happy from such a model of success, and as a result we see several destructive attempts against it. But as I said, we are very clear on this matter: such attempts can never be successful in the end.

And coming to takeaways for others in the region, I think this is very important matter. Thus, this aspect of your question perfectly fits into our argument about resolving the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Azerbaijan always states that the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict will bring not just peace, but also more economic prosperity to the region. And in this regard, the main takeaway with reference

to your question is for Armenia. They must be noticing how regional economic projects are providing better life conditions for the peoples of the participating states—how, for example, Azerbaijanis and Georgians are benefitting from such cooperation in their daily lives. And if Armenia carefully watches this, maybe one day Armenians will understand that their aggressive stance and occupation policy will lead them nowhere, and even further isolate from all regional development initiatives. And of course, this means more political and economic isolation for Armenia, and even further worsening of socio-economic conditions for the population. So, Armenia can easily change this negative tendency by learning from the takeaway of the successful cooperation model between Azerbaijan and Georgia.

### *Baku Dialogues:*

We can come back to the Armenia-Azerbaijan question a little later. But let's turn our focus to big-picture regional issues. One could say that the strategic anchors of the unique set of arrangements that make up the Silk Road region are its "middle powers." And a few months ago you made reference on Twitter to an essay making the case that Azerbaijan is one such middle power, after being considered a failing or even failed state just 30 years ago.

Both the term middle power and the concept traces its origins back to at least Giovanni Botero, a late sixteenth-century political and economic thinker and diplomat, who published his most famous work *The Reason of State* in 1589. In that book, Botero makes a tripartite division between great, middle, and small "dominions" or powers. A middle power, in his telling, has "sufficient force and authority to stand on its own without the need of help from others." And Botero goes on to explain why: leaders of middle powers tend to be acutely aware of the dexterity required to maintain security and project influence in a prudential manner beyond their immediate borders; and because of that, middle powers are apt to have facility in properly managing their finances and promoting trade with their neighbors and their neighbors' neighbors. So we can turn our focus to great power interests, which are not congruent—in the Silk Road region in general and Azerbaijan in particular. You have strong relations with the United States, Russia, and China. They each see themselves as having legitimate interests here, which tend not to be defined in the same way.



Take the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which the United States has increasingly examined—critically—within a geopolitical framework of rivalry with China. It can be said that, regardless of its ultimate success, BRI will inevitably transform the politics and economics of globalization in the twenty-first century—starting with this part of the world. BRI envisions a surge of interdependence across the Silk Road region, and massive investment to improve connectivity. This is an incredibly ambitious vision. Not surprisingly, BRI has been met with excitement, but also concern, in many parts of the world.

How would you qualify Azerbaijan's reception of the BRI concept? How do you see the future of engagement—both nationally and more importantly, regionally—within the framework of BRI? How will this positive—let us call it a sonorous resonation—attitude toward BRI affect the strategic course of relations with Russia and the United States?

*Hajiyev:*

As you know, Azerbaijan has its own historic role in the context of the ancient Silk Road. By geographic default, you could say, it had influenced our history, culture, architecture, and, of course, our economy. And immediately after regaining our independence we started to project our economy with reference to all that. In other words, the aim was to revive the ancient Silk Road based on new technologies. In practical terms, positioning ourselves as a transportation and energy hub has been a main component of this policy. Among others, I can mention such successful projects as the TRACECA corridor, the BTK railroad, the building of Alat Port, and so on.

So, the Silk Road concept, of course, is not a new concept or a new dimension for us. But certainly, the launch of BRI by China—a country that is quite an influential part of the Silk Road, both in terms of economic and political components—gave a new spirit for the revitalization of the ancient Silk Road. And because of our historical inheritance regarding the Silk Road, we definitely have had a positive perception of BRI; and we feel ready to contribute towards its wider realization. We also enjoy very fruitful political and economic relations with China—this was another impetus for us to join to this initiative.

In our view, BRI is purely an economic project, and as we all know, we now live in an interdependent and economically connected world. So we don't see any antagonism between our possible participation in BRI and our bilateral relations with other important partners. International trade is an important and useful element of our globalized world, where all partners to some extent benefit from its further development.

*Baku Dialogues:*

Your response helps us get further into the subject of middle powers. Just as a bit of background: scholars like Carsten Holbraad, who wrote an entire manual on middle powers in international relations and drew heavily on the work of Botero, gave additional criteria for a country to achieve middle power status. All of this is certainly familiar to you: some degree of national affluence; the exercise of a moderating or even pacifying influence in the international system, which can even go so far as to positively affect relations between great powers; and actively supporting multilateralism and the work of international organizations. Another scholar, Marijke Breuning, gave a name to that: “norm entrepreneurship.” By this she means that middle states, as norm entrepreneurs, “advocate for the adoption of certain international standards and work diplomatically to persuade the representatives of other states to also adopt these norms.” So would you recognize Azerbaijan in this definition? Is it prudent for a middle power to formulate its grand strategy on such a basis? In other words, through what sort of conceptual framework does Azerbaijan engage with the world, within the context of the last two of the Four Ms you mentioned earlier—namely multilateralism and multiculturalism—given present geopolitical realities and constraints?

*Hajiyev:*

We see multilateralism as an essential tool of international relations and in this regard and we highly appreciate the role of the United Nations system, alongside other regional and international organizations. We consider them as platforms for dialogue and cooperation—as institutions providing support and expertise for those who are in need. In this regard, for us, their role in the system of international relations is crucial. I can provide many examples of how Azerbaijan is not just engaged within these organizations, but

also how we actively promote their value among others in the international community.

We are currently chairing the Non-aligned Movement (NAM), which is the second largest international institution in the world—after the UN—with 120 member states. Our aim is to develop even further the NAM platform—the NAM voice—within the UN by playing our part to ensure more coordination and cooperation among its members. As an example, I want to emphasize the successful proposal made by President Aliyev, in his capacity as NAM chair, to convene a special session of the UN General Assembly dedicated to COVID-19, via videoconference. This is good example of how we see the role of multilateral institutions. Why? Well, we believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is a global threat and that we need to unite in the fight against it. And the most appropriate platform for such unity is the UN—the General Assembly has a unique convening power, and it needs to be better utilized. And we are happy that this proposal was widely supported by most of the members of the international community.

Regarding multiculturalism, I want to mention that there are strong traditions of tolerance and multiculturalism in our society: we have inherited these values from our history. And today multiculturalism is a state policy. We are not just exercising these values within our own society, but we are actively trying to promote them on international level as well. For example, I want to mention the Baku Process initiated by President Aliyev in 2008, which later grew into an institutional platform for intercultural dialogue. As you know, every two years Azerbaijan hosts the World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue in partnership with such international organizations as the UN Alliance of Civilizations, UNESCO, and others. So today, in our turbulent world full of hate and extremism, Azerbaijan actively promotes multicultural values.

Furthermore, I want to emphasize the visit of Pope Francis to Azerbaijan in 2016, when he praised the level of tolerance in our country and called Azerbaijan a bridge between cultures. And in February of this year, President Aliyev had a very successful visit to the Vatican where he again met with Pope Francis.

So, the uniting factor of the Four Ms concept is the cognate “multi.” Azerbaijan’s foreign policy is based on this approach: we want cooperation with different partners, in different regions, and in promoting tolerance among different cultures.

### *Baku Dialogues:*

Educational opportunities could be construed to be also a part of the “norm entrepreneurship” practiced by middle powers. After all, Azerbaijan has been providing students from member-states of the Turkic Council and the Non-aligned Movement with generous scholarships for studies in higher educational institutions in the country. Some of these students have chosen to study at ADA University, the institutional host of *Baku Dialogues*. Welcoming students from abroad is part of the university’s strategic vision to become a world-class university in this country by 2025. What stands at the heart of Azerbaijan’s commitment to promote educational opportunities for students from abroad? How does this benefit not just Azerbaijan, but the entire Silk Road region?

### *Hajiyev:*

We all know that quality education is a core driver for the development of any society. This is why education is high on Azerbaijan’s agenda. And today Azerbaijan has become a strong member of the international community, with its own great experiences to share. So our country does not just focus on itself—we do not just look inward—but we also offer opportunities to other members of the international community. We are glad that our country has become a destination for foreign students and I am strongly convinced that here they can gain not just academic knowledge, which is at a very high level, but also benefit from our rich tradition of tolerance and multiculturalism.

You know, we are receiving several students from the countries of Silk Road region. And I find that quite symbolic. The Silk Road is not just about trade, transportation, and the economy; it is also about other forms of connectivity like cultural exchanges, sharing experiences, learning from each other, and education. So the presence of foreign students from Silk Road region countries here in Azerbaijan demonstrates

the role of Azerbaijan in the Silk Road region as a whole, and it shows how the Silk Road is again becoming a living organism through the sharing of cultures, education, and experiences.

### *Baku Dialogues:*

We've already addressed the Belt and Road Initiative—the contemporary Silk Road and the region that forms its core, which as you've noted places pride of place to connectivity. But Azerbaijan's emphasis on connectivity predates BRI. Azerbaijan has gone from being a "land-locked country to a land-linked country," as you've said. Can you therefore share with us the conceptual framework behind this logic? What is Azerbaijan's comparative advantage? And if you could, leave the hydrocarbon aspect of it aside, for the moment. We will come to that in the next question.

### *Hajiye:*

As I have already said, Azerbaijan is located on the crossroads of continents. This is a geopolitically complex region, but also a region of opportunities. With a successful economic and foreign policy, Azerbaijan can reap the benefits of its location. Yes, we don't have access to open seas and in geographical terms we are land-locked country. But we have been able to become a transport-logistic hub, which is a crucial element in modern international economics. Two important transport corridors pass through Azerbaijan: the east-west and the north-south transversals. And of course we're also part of the Silk Road—of the Belt and Road Initiative—as I already mentioned.

But one should consider that such a situation—of us moving beyond the traditional confinements of being land-locked—cannot be perceived as a given. Rather, this is a result of the successful economic and foreign policy of the President of Azerbaijan. Tremendous efforts and lots of resources were allocated for this to become a reality. To name a few achievements in the economic and infrastructure fields: building highways, our international port, development of air carrier infrastructure, and so on. And of course, I need to come back to something I said earlier: all of this is integral to the policy of building cooperation with our foreign partners.

So today we contribute to international trade and the broader economy as a main hub in this region. Virtually no regional economic projects are being implemented without the participation of Azerbaijan. This means that we have been able to transform our geographic reality of being a land-locked country into our economic success—into our economic reality of having become a land-linked country.

### *Baku Dialogues:*

Let's next turn to energy. Along with geography, which you have just discussed, Azerbaijan's other natural strategic advantage is hydrocarbon resources. One could say it forms the basis for everything else: it's the cornerstone of prosperity. But hydrocarbons can often be a curse, not just in the sense that they can destroy a country's economy if the resource is mismanaged, but also in the sense that their presence sometimes attracts undue and competing attention from great powers and ambitious aspirants. Azerbaijan has been able to avoid both of these dangers: the economic and the geopolitical. It is a reliable producing country and a reliable transit country. But it is more than that, as well. Befitting its middle power status, it continues to be a norm entrepreneur in the field of energy security and energy cooperation. Could you briefly outline the regional challenges Azerbaijan had to overcome and your vision of the future in the context of energy connectivity?

### *Hajiye:*

Energy projects continue to have an essential role to play within our economy. But we have to see not just the economic but also the political importance of these projects. In the early period of our independence, Azerbaijan faced a major threat in the form of foreign occupation. And of course, this was a major challenge which we had to contain. And secondly, not all regional states were supportive of these energy projects, as there were several other views and interests in this regard. And in such a complex geopolitical situation, our National Leader Heydar Aliyev successfully concluded the Contract of the Century with major international oil companies. And in the end this contract became the reason—the catalyst, even—of regional cooperation and development.



With regards to the future, I have to say that even though the world's hydrocarbon players are now investing in renewable energy resources, still, for the moment, fossil fuels are maintaining their tangible share in the world's modern energy system. And the world is becoming even more interconnected in terms of economy. So, energy connectivity is still actual and important, and Azerbaijan is happy to have its own tangible role in this process. Today we are not just exporting oil and gas, but we are also becoming a transit hub for other exporters. We have developed all the necessary infrastructure, which gives us an asset in negotiations with our partners on various energy transportation projects.

### *Baku Dialogues:*

Remaining on questions having to do with energy. Let's go back to the beginning—to the Contract of the Century, which you've mentioned. We could say that it points to the diplomatic artistry at the heart of Azerbaijan's energy policy. Heydar Aliyev came back to Baku and was elected chairman of Azerbaijan's parliament in June 1993, and a few days later assumed the function of president. In October 1993, he was elected president. This could be said to be the moment in which he consolidated power. And less than a year later—in September 1994—the Contract of the Century was signed. Again, you alluded to this in your previous answer. The internal circumstances were dire and the geopolitical vultures, one could say, were circling. He had to tread extremely carefully on the energy question. And he succeeded: he found a way to accommodate all stakeholders. To attract the West through partnership and without alienating Moscow—actually by incorporating Russian interests into the deal. This approach, which requires constant fine-tuning and a combination of prudential judgment and strategic foresight, continues to form the basis of Azerbaijan's energy policy. On the other hand, geopolitical circumstances have changed. At the very beginning of our discussion, we referred to centrifugal geopolitical trends quickened by the pandemic. With this in mind, can you lay out for us how Azerbaijan has been able to maintain its strategic energy posture, vis-à-vis the great powers in particular, in these challenging geopolitical times?

### *Hajiyev:*

First of all, the historic role of Heydar Aliyev should be emphasized, as you have done in your question. Thanks to his vision and foreign policy concept we were able to convince

the main international oil companies to invest in Azerbaijan. Establishing stability within the country and building partnership relations with regional countries—these were two of the main conditions for Azerbaijan to be able to attract strategic levels of foreign investment. And this all was successfully realized at that time. Azerbaijan was able to demonstrate that our energy projects will bring development and prosperity to our region, and that all participating sides will benefit from such cooperation. And of course, today we see the fruitful results of these projects.

### *Baku Dialogues:*

We have discussed one dimension of security—namely energy. There are two more to go. Let's start with hard security. Azerbaijan is institutionally affiliated with NATO through Partnership for Peace, which it joined in May 1994. Less than a year earlier, in September 1993, it joined the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and then in 1999 a decision was taken not to renew membership in the CSTO. So for a period of time, Azerbaijan was exclusively PfP-oriented. It modernized its military, deepened overall defense cooperation with NATO, participated in NATO forward deployments in places like Afghanistan, and so on. Then, in March 2016 Azerbaijan became a Dialogue Partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. But all in all, Azerbaijan seems to enjoy a much deeper level of engagement and cooperation in the security field with the Atlantic Alliance than with its alternatives. So the question can be formulated in the following manner: what lies behind Azerbaijan's strategic decision, which was made in 1994 and has been consistently maintained ever since, to favor security cooperation with the West?

### *Hajiyev:*

The reason Azerbaijan has a partnership with NATO is very simple. NATO is a strong regional political-military block with its own capabilities and institutional military experience. After gaining independence, Azerbaijan pursued a policy of building good relations with all international partners, and NATO was one of them. We were keen to benefit from NATO's military experience in building up our own national army and developing our own military capabilities. And the Partnership for Peace was an existing instrument that was offered by NATO.

So, bearing this in mind, we joined this instrument. Today we enjoy excellent relations with NATO; and sharing experiences is one of the core components of this cooperation. And of course, building partnership with NATO as an institution definitely contributed to the positive relations which we are having with our Western partners.

### *Baku Dialogues:*

We now turn to the third and most fundamental aspect of security for Azerbaijan—its number one national security threat. And because this is the core issue, we have chosen to reserve a consideration of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and other occupied territories for the very end of our conversation—although you made reference to it earlier. We want to give you the opportunity to state the official position of Azerbaijan on this fundamental question not just for this country but in the context of the legitimacy of the principles upon which stands the international system as a whole. And then we can discuss further.

### *Hajiyev:*

The position of Azerbaijan on this issue is very clear and was mentioned on several occasions by President Aliyev. This conflict should be resolved within the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan, based on the norms and principles of international law, the four relevant UN Security Council resolutions, the Helsinki Final Act, and of course, the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Security Council resolutions demand the unconditional and full withdrawal of Armenian troops from all occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Also, the Security Council resolutions condemn the occupation of Azerbaijan's lands through the use of force and underline the inadmissibility of gaining territory by the use of force. Thus, for the resolution of the conflict, the armed forces of Armenia should be withdrawn from the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and the seven surrounding regions, and there should be a condition for Azerbaijani IDPs to return to their homes in dignity and security. So, Nagorno-Karabakh is and will be as an integral part of Azerbaijan. As President Aliyev has said: "Nagorno-Karabakh is Azerbaijan, and exclamation mark."

### *Baku Dialogues:*

Next, we'd like to ask you to address the recent escalation of tensions along the Azerbaijan-Armenia state border, which centers on an area several hundred kilometers north of the line of contact. Azerbaijan says Armenia started it, Armenia says Azerbaijan started it. And of course this took place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. So what are your thoughts on this? In your view, what were the reasons this happened?

### *Hajiyev:*

Let me start with the reasons. This was a new and well-prepared act of aggression by Armenia against Azerbaijan. This act is a logical continuation of the statement of the Armenian defense minister regarding a "new war for new territories." The reasons are linked to both the domestic and foreign policy of Armenia. First, through such acts Armenia is trying to distract the attention of its population from the country's existing socio-economic problems. In addition, due to the government's mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, Armenia is experiencing huge challenges in that regard.

Secondly, the location of these deliberate attacks were not accidental. Thus by launching an attack on the state border with Azerbaijan, Armenia tried to do four things. One, involve third parties in the conflict, namely the Collective Security Treaty Organization. However, this was both a failure and miscalculation. The CSTO did not support Armenia, for the simple reason that Azerbaijan enjoys fruitful relations with all its members, except Armenia. Two, distract the international community's attention from Armenia's occupation of nearly 20 percent of the territories of Azerbaijan. Three, target Azerbaijan's critical infrastructure, including oil and gas pipelines. Four, cast a shadow over the successful initiative of the President of Azerbaijan concerning the UN General Assembly's special session on COVID-19, which I have already mentioned.

The Armed Forces of Azerbaijan responded effectively and the attack was repulsed; Armenia achieved none of the aims. Unfortunately—because of this act of aggression—twelve Azerbaijani servicemen were killed. It should also be

emphasized that Armenia deliberately attacked the civilians living alongside the state border, using heavy artillery. As a result, one civilian died and some civilian infrastructure was heavily damaged. This is a clear violation of international humanitarian law, including the relevant Geneva Conventions.

Of course, as always, Armenia tried to blame Azerbaijan for these events. This is nonsense. Azerbaijan deploys the State Border Service along the dominant part of the state border with Armenia. This clearly demonstrates that Azerbaijan has no interest in escalation at that destination.

This was another destructive attempt to mislead both internal and external audiences. Again, to repeat: the result was failure. Armenia has to understand that sooner or later Azerbaijan will restore its territorial integrity. The political-military leadership of Armenia needs courage to accept this fact and act accordingly.

Finally, I want to touch upon the issue of the global struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic, in the context of Armenia's recent act of aggression. As you know, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres declared a global ceasefire for the world to be able to better concentrate on the fight against the pandemic. Armenia joined this initiative and widely publicized its decision. A little bit later, they started this deliberate act of aggression. This is nothing but hypocrisy. It is important that the international community reacts to such behavior in a very clear manner.

### *Baku Dialogues:*

But let us take a step back. Azerbaijan lives in “conditions of war,” as President Aliyev has reminded audiences for a number of years. So yes: there is a general ceasefire, there is a line of contact, and there is a peace process. But peace remains elusive after more than 25 years of mediation and direct talks: the war has not come to an end. The stalemate is cementing. The one million refugees and IDPs have not returned home. The reality of the occupation has not changed. The status quo—the frozen conflict—favors Yerevan: it continues to hold what Baku claims by recourse to law is its own—a position, as you have outlined, that is

consistent with a plain reading of the relevant Security Council resolutions and OSCE core documents.

There seem to be two ways to resolve the issue. One is military and the other concessionary. But the military approach is not something anyone wishes, so let us leave that discussion for another time. The second is concessionary. What Azerbaijan has been offering is evidently not enough for Armenia to yield. And those who have a mandate to mediate so far appear unwilling or unable to trigger the implementation of a phased approach on that or any other basis. Otherwise there would be no ongoing stalemate.

Perhaps it could be helpful to ask you to paint us a strategic picture of Azerbaijan's vision for peace. Before you take up your answer, we would ask you to please consider what Heydar Aliyev said on the day the Contract of the Century was signed: “I want to say frankly, not all our desires have found their expression in the contract, but we understand that any contract must satisfy the interests of both sides.” The question is this: what is the concessionary basis for peace—and it seems that both sides will need to make difficult concessions, and both sides are constrained by their respective narratives; so, again, what is the concessionary basis for achieving a breakthrough?

### *Hajiyev:*

Concessions are important elements of conflict resolution, but of course within certain reasonable frameworks. In our case we have to make it clear that the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan cannot be questioned in any circumstances. It is not a matter of discussion or negotiation. The basis for a resolution of the conflict is the restoration of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. As I mentioned earlier, the armed forces of Armenia should withdraw and IDPs must return to their homelands. The basis for such arguments lies both within historical reality and international law. So, from both historic and legal perspectives, this is the only founding ground for the resolution of the conflict.

Unfortunately, today we witness illegal activities realized by Armenia in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. In this regard, I want to specially emphasize the policy of illegal settlement, illegal extraction of mineral resources and their



delivery to black markets, money laundering, and the promotion of illegal visits of foreigners to these territories. All these facts clearly demonstrate that Armenia is not sincere in the negotiation process and is not interested in achieving a resolution of this conflict at all. The current leadership of Armenia tries to undermine both the substance and format of the negotiations.

The fact that Azerbaijan is still continuing to participate in this process of negotiations—what we call a policy of strategic patience—is already a great concession from our side. Because for the moment, doing so is our rational choice, derived from all the possible means enabling us to restore our territorial integrity.

Azerbaijan is very clear in its position that we are ready to accommodate peacefully the Armenian inhabitants of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. We see them as our citizens and we believe that Azerbaijanis and Armenians of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan will be able to live together in peace. But of course, as I said earlier, first of all the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan should be restored. Today we live in the twenty-first century and changing internationally-recognized borders by force is totally inadmissible in our civilized world. The situation resulting from such an occupation cannot be imposed as a reality. The status quo of occupation must end.

Azerbaijan retains all its rights to liberate its territories from occupation under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. The responsibility for such development completely lies on the shoulders of the leadership of Armenia.

### *Baku Dialogues:*

Thank you, Mr. Hajiyevev, for the interview. **BD**

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