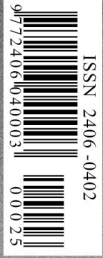


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THE AGE OF MINILATERALISM



*Navigating a
Fragmented World*



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AZERBAIJAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

NAVIGATING REGIONAL SECURITY IN A FRAGMENTED WORLD

Fuad Chiragov

SINCE my Director Farhad Mam-madov and I wrote our last joint piece in the Spring 2018 edition of *Horizons*, in which we discussed the challenges that small states face in navigating the evolving global geopolitical landscape, much has changed in the South Caucasus and the world. Unfortunately, the pessimistic forecasts from the stated piece have come true regarding the time of geopolitical inter-regnum, where the old-world order is dying, and a new one is emerging—a transition from a period of certainty to one of uncertainty fraught with many risks, calamities, tectonic shifts, and threats. Since then, two layers of the Pandora's box have been opened for the South Caucasus: first, the 44-Day War between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, and second, the war in Ukraine.

Shifts in the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus were underway

even before the Ukrainian conflict. In 2020, in a bid to restore its territorial integrity and uphold international law, Azerbaijan found itself compelled to disrupt the established 30-year post-Cold War equilibrium in the South Caucasus. Since then, a new equilibrium has yet to be established, leading to increased dynamism and complexity in the geopolitics of the region. New actors, such as Türkiye, Iran, the EU, the United States, and even China and India have become involved, further complicating the situation. The war in Ukraine has accelerated the ongoing transformation. Russia, on the other hand, employed military power to violate international law and the territorial integrity of another country in Ukraine. The world, including the South Caucasus, has been fundamentally altered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The common thread in both cases is the challenge they pose to international

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President Ilham Aliyev and the Azerbaijani military on the third anniversary of their victory in the 44-Day War in Khankendi

law—where international law stops working effectively. In one scenario, a state had to employ force to reinstate international law due to the lack of action by the international community in response to a violation. In the other, a state resorted to the use of force, thereby violating international law.

The emergence of a new reality after the 44-Day War significantly unsettled policy elites among most regional and some global powers, leading them to attempt to prevent such a reality from setting in. The results of the 44-Day War sparked competition

in the region, and efforts to alter this new reality persist to this day. Many of the aforementioned powers were content with the status quo before the 44-Day War and were uninterested in changing it. These policy circles only agreed to change the previous status quo when it was against the interests of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan and Türkiye had long been the sole dissatisfied parties with the former status quo. Azerbaijan required and still requires enormous intellectual energy and diplomatic skill to compel regional and global powers to accept the new reality. In an attempt to achieve its goals,

Azerbaijan continues to face immense pressures from both regional and global powers.

Competition in the South Caucasus is inherent, inevitable, deeply rooted in history, and will persist. Traditionally, this rivalry involved three regional powers: Iran, Russia, and Türkiye. Some factions in neighboring countries openly exhibit post-imperial traumas, harboring maximalist historical claims and expectations concerning the South Caucasus. An alarming example of this is the dangerous escalation of tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan over the past two years, driven by Iranian radical elements. President Ilham Aliyev's diplomatic initiatives effectively neutralized this threat without compromising Azerbaijan's national interests.

Realizing that the results of the 44-Day War will frustrate and mobilize radical elements in neighboring countries—and that the competition in the region will only intensify—Azerbaijan and Türkiye attempted to alleviate concerns about the new reality by leveraging it for everyone's benefit in the region. The two countries proposed the 3+3 format to signal their readiness for cooperation, emphasizing that Türkiye and Azerbaijan will not treat the outcome of the 44-Day War as a zero-sum game.

It's crucial to recognize that there are two types of competition: constructive and destructive. Ideally, Azerbaijan and Türkiye can steer the competition in the direction of constructive engagement. Through the 3+3 format, Azerbaijan aims to guide this competition toward a more constructive path, fostering the reconciliation of interests, and facilitating open discussions on all regional issues that would involve all of the region's countries.

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At the same time, Azerbaijan has had to grapple with the formidable power and influence of the Armenian lobby in Western countries, which

has held its sway over decisionmakers, public opinion, and media. The impact of the Armenian lobby is not overstated. Late political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski once acknowledged it as one of the three most influential ethnic lobby groups within the American political system. Western states, where the Armenian lobby has traditionally wielded significant power in domestic politics—particularly during election periods—now face a dilemma. Their grand strategies demand an immediate peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia, along with the integration of Armenia into regional infrastructure and connectivity projects. Signing the peace treaty with Azerbaijan presents an opportunity for Armenia and the West to effectively diminish Russia's influence over

Armenia. However, as electoral democracies, these Western countries continue to face the challenge of having to satisfy the demands of the Armenian lobby. Azerbaijan's clear message to the West is that it cannot have it both ways. In other words, it cannot appease the Armenian lobby and also achieve a peace treaty by forcing Azerbaijan to compromise on its interests.

Analysts and commentators from the West often lack the necessary empathy to comprehend Azerbaijan's behavior, along with that of other small states in the region. Western media and experts tend to oversimplify the policies of former Soviet countries, categorizing them as either "pro-Western" or "pro-Russian" without duly considering their geographical constraints and the intricate regional and historical context. Furthermore, there is a tendency among the media and experts to interpret the policies of nations in the heartland of Eurasia solely through a liberal lens of human rights and democracy, overlooking the complex dynamics at play. The heartland of Eurasia faces a delicate equilibrium of stability, entailing a nuanced struggle in regional power politics and a commitment to preserving national sovereignty.

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For the people of Azerbaijan, geography has posed challenges over the past three hundred years, and it appears that our geographical location will continue to present us with numerous problems, obstacles, and strategic surprises in the years and decades to come. Azerbaijan

holds a unique position as the only country situated between Russia and Iran, both of which are among the world's most sanctioned countries by the United States and the West more broadly. The proximity is evident, with the distance from Baku to the Russian border being just 200 kilometers, and 282 kilometers in the opposite direction, to the Iranian border. The term 'sandwiched

country' is frequently used by Azerbaijani diplomats and experts to describe this geopolitical reality. Azerbaijan can be metaphorically likened to a fortified castle perched on top of a hill, subject to influence and pressure from its powerful neighbors. This position also seduces non-regional powers into believing that they should use the territory of Azerbaijan as a bridgehead against its neighbors. It is thus very difficult to find a delicate balance and neutralize both the pressures of powerful neighbors and those of the outside powers

without risking direct confrontation with regional and global powers.

In our prior analysis, we underscored the importance for small states, including Azerbaijan, to adopt sophisticated and well-calculated foreign policies to navigate the intricate landscape of the geopolitical interregnum. While discussions on democracy, human rights, and minority rights are convenient in a more liberal context, they take on a different dimension in the heartland of Eurasia, where survival stands out as the paramount strategic goal for Azerbaijan since the early days of its independence. Recognizing the pragmatic need to prioritize survival over idealistic pursuits, Azerbaijan has crafted a nuanced and realistic foreign policy strategy. Such a strategy takes into consideration the country's geographical constraints and adapts to an increasingly fragmented world that poses threats to its security.

This strategy is underpinned by a set of principles aimed at presenting Azerbaijan as a predictable and reliable player in the eyes of regional and global powers:

1. Azerbaijan's cooperation with any country has not and will not be directed against a third country, especially neighboring nations.

2. As emphasized by President Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan's territory will not serve as a battleground for regional and global powers; Azerbaijan will not permit such use.
3. Azerbaijan is committed to preventing its territory from becoming a bridgehead for powers outside the region.
4. Azerbaijan refrains from interfering in the foreign policy choices of its neighbors unless those choices pose a direct threat to the national interests of the country.

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Some may argue that Azerbaijan's foreign policy toward Russia and Iran, which I describe as smart and well-calculated, appears to be bandwagoning, particularly when it comes to the country's policies in relation to Russia. While Azerbaijan's foreign policy is indeed constrained and meets some of Moscow's minimal expectations, this should not be interpreted as outright bandwagoning.

The minimal expectations that Russia holds for post-Soviet countries, in order not to be perceived as a threat, involve refraining from active participation in geopolitical projects orchestrated by the West to confront or contain Russia. Essentially, this means demonstrating a lack of aspirations to join NATO

or enter a customs union with the EU. However, the scope of Azerbaijan's available space to conduct an independent foreign policy is substantial, and it would be more accurate to characterize it as balancing, especially when viewed through the realist lens.

Contrary to the accusations of bandwagoning, Azerbaijan has solidified its military and political alliance with Türkiye by signing the Azerbaijani-Turkish Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support. This agreement, ratified by both countries' parliaments, establishes them as military and political allies, showcasing a strategic partnership that goes beyond mere bandwagoning with Russia. On the other hand, Azerbaijan has undertaken actions that can be perceived as detrimental to Russia's strategic interests. These actions include the establishment of oil and gas pipelines that circumvent Russia; Azerbaijan's support for Georgia, especially in 2007 and 2008; contributing to the energy security of Georgia; developing transport infrastructure that bypasses Russia; playing a key role in the integration of Turkic countries; and Azerbaijan's

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support for Ukraine in the aftermath of Russia's attack in 2022.

As a consequence of the 44-Day War, Russia found itself in a position of having to share influence in the region with one of its historical rivals (Türkiye) for the first time in over 200 years. After the 44-Day War, President Aliyev referred to Türkiye as a stabilizing power in his speeches. Why did Azerbaijan opt for Türkiye as its primary military and political ally? The answer is simple and straightforward: it goes beyond ethnic, linguistic, and cultural affinity. Unlike other regional powers, Türkiye actively seeks open markets, a free-market environment, and robust communication infrastructure. Türkiye is confident in its competitiveness and believes it can excel in economic and soft power competitions in the region. The socio-demographic transformation in Türkiye over recent decades—led by the cities known as the “Anatolian tigers” and their interests—has been a driving force behind Türkiye's assertive and independent foreign policy in its neighborhood.

The Anatolian tigers' interests require access to new open markets and resources in Russia, Iran, Central Asia, and the broader Eurasian region. This imperative and interests necessitate steering clear of overt confrontations with Russia and Iran, which could turn the region into a theater of bloody wars. It urges the resolution of all contradictions and discrepancies through the path of constructive competition. Consequently, immediately after the 44-Day War, Türkiye proposed and advocated for the creation of a "3+3" format for the region, encompassing the three South Caucasus countries plus Iran, Türkiye, and Russia. This reflects a shared vision between Azerbaijan and Türkiye for a regional security architecture.

The year 2023 marked a series of profoundly significant events for Azerbaijan, namely the restoration of full sovereignty and control over its territory, the elimination of the grey zone, and the eradication of all threats to security within its internationally recognized territory for the first time since gaining independence. On September 20th, 2023, President

Ilham Aliyev delivered a historical speech addressing the people of Azerbaijan following the local anti-terrorist measures and the restoration of sovereignty in Karabakh. The address also conveyed messages to the people of Armenia and the international community, emphasizing that "This region has been a place of quarrels, wars, and bloody clashes for centuries. Enough is enough!" This historic address from the President of Azerbaijan encapsulated crucial provisions and messages that elucidate the strategic vision and current policy of Azerbaijan regarding the future security architecture of the South Caucasus. The contents of this appeal

articulate ideas about the new reality, challenges, sources of threats, and new opportunities and prospects for development. In his address, President Ilham Aliyev also for the first-time expressed optimism that Azerbaijan and Armenia could resolve their outstanding issues, reach a peace treaty, and initiate collaborative efforts among the South Caucasus nations in a tripartite format for future cooperation.

Some voices are still trying to portray Azerbaijan's initiatives within the

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3+3 format as an anti-Western endeavor. It is true that certain countries participating in the 3+3 format may seek to exploit it for their competitive interests against the West. Moreover, not all actors in the West are eager to see cooperation in the South Caucasus based solely on constructive and mutual interests. Evidently, some countries aim to transform the South Caucasus into a battleground for their global interests. At the same time, it is no secret that Azerbaijan has recently expanded its cooperation with the West, particularly in the realm of energy, transport, and infrastructure projects. The expansion of Azerbaijan's cooperation with the West is clearly demonstrated by Baku's unwavering efforts to implement its Balkan and Eastern European strategy after the 44-Day War. These efforts involve establishing interdependent relations and connecting Azerbaijan with the mentioned regions through various energy and infrastructure projects. In essence, Azerbaijan's message is clear: the country is open to constructive cooperation with states outside the region under frameworks that do not jeopardize the interests of the region's countries. Looking eastward, Azerbaijan has been actively developing its

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Central Asian strategy in recent years, positioning itself as a geopolitical linchpin connecting various regions in the heart of the Eurasian continent.

A notable example of the aforementioned principle of not interfering in the foreign policy choices of our neighbors until they pose a direct threat to Azerbaijan can be seen in the relationship with Georgia. Despite Georgia's declared priority of integrating into the pro-Western, Euro-Atlantic space, Baku has consistently supported Tbilisi during its most challenging times. Notably, Azerbaijan extended assistance to Georgia in 2006 and 2007 when Russia disrupted gas and electricity supplies during a harsh winter. Today, Georgia stands out in Eastern Europe as a country that enjoys full energy security, immune to such external influence and pressure. This example also serves as Azerbaijan's clear message to Armenia: should Armenia choose to pursue a pro-Western foreign policy, it should not be directed against Azerbaijan. Therefore, Azerbaijan will not tolerate a mere substitution of the support Armenia formerly received from Russia to act against Azerbaijan with Western support in the future.

On October 26th, 2023, a historic event unfolded in the South Caucasus—the inaugural meeting of the Prime Ministers of the three South Caucasus countries. This gathering marked the initial step towards regularized meetings of officials from the three countries in the future, aligning with the tripartite format proposed by President Ilham Aliyev on September 20th, 2023. Preceding this meeting, President Aliyev visited Georgia, reiterating crucial messages about peace agreements and the collaboration of the South Caucasus nations. Unexpectedly, on December 7th, Armenia and Azerbaijan issued a joint statement, a notable departure from previous practices as it lacked the signature of any mediator involved in the peace process. The statement underscored a shared belief in a historic opportunity to achieve long-awaited regional peace. Both countries affirmed their commitment to normalize relations and forge a peace treaty based on the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. The statement also disclosed an agreement for the exchange of 32 detained Armenian military servicemen for 2 Azerbaijani servicemen, driven by humanistic values and goodwill. Additionally, by the end of December

2023, Azerbaijani and Armenian officials consistently expressed that the parties were on the brink of concluding a peace treaty in the near future. In essence, the South Caucasus stands on the verge of geopolitically groundbreaking and game-changing moments in decades.

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is grounded not in ideology, illusions, or wishful thinking but in realpolitik, focusing on survival in challenging times and safeguarding national interests.

Much like in our previous analysis, I anticipate an expansion in the geographical scope of calamities, tectonic shifts, and threats worldwide, with the possibility of other frozen conflicts resurfacing. In light of these prospects, Azer-

baijan's foreign policy is grounded not in ideology, illusions, or wishful thinking but in realpolitik, focusing on survival in challenging times and safeguarding national interests. Given the potential for the South Caucasus to become a battleground for global powers, fostering peace and cooperation among the countries in the region becomes increasingly crucial. This doesn't imply that Azerbaijan refrains from expressing its expectations and aspirations for the international order it envisions or from actively contributing to global impact. As a small state, Azerbaijan is invested in fortifying a rules- and law-based international system,

advocating for equitable resolutions to disputes irrespective of the size of one's territory.

To achieve this goal, Azerbaijan has revitalized the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) since assuming its chairmanship in 2019, and its proactive efforts led to the unanimous extension of its chairmanship until the end of 2023. Azerbaijan committed significant resources to revive this international platform. Before Azerbaijan assumed the chairmanship of NAM, many dismissed the group as an obsolete institution as one lacking relevance in contemporary global affairs. However, under Azerbaijan's stewardship, the movement experienced a resurgence on the international stage. Throughout its leadership, Azerbaijan initiated substantial measures to

formalize the movement, laying the groundwork for its potential evolution into a formal organization. This dedicated effort reflects Azerbaijan's belief in NAM's significant potential and the enduring relevance of the third world. Azerbaijan firmly advocates that the destiny of the world should not be solely determined by a select group of powerful nations. Instead, NAM members should also play a pivotal role in shaping the future global order. Recognizing that the current world order, predominantly influenced by major powers, has reached an impasse and cannot be sustained in its current form, Azerbaijan called for reform of the UN Security Council and the addition of new members, including one from the rotational chairs of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and NAM. ●

MINILATERALISM'S (LIMITED) INROADS IN THE BALKANS

Stefan Antić

AT the risk of resorting to clichés while describing the state of the world in early 2024, the words that come to mind are ‘fragmented,’ ‘de-globalizing,’ and increasingly ‘conflict-ridden.’ Yet, what matters more than slapping on an appropriate label is how the world’s actors—be it states, alliances, or organizations—will survive and prosper in its changing structure. The formats of cooperation that will emerge in the coming years as successful or failing models will be crucial in shaping the world order for the better part of the twenty-first century.

After a decade of unproductive summits that relied on the international system as we knew it during the height of the unipolar moment, the world of global multilateral formats is gone. Some relics of old multilateralism, which include the United Nations,

will remain for the sake of preserving the bare minimum of communication required between main stakeholders, and maintaining the necessary contours of international law. However, these institutions will not fundamentally shape dynamics in different corners of the world, where ad hoc, issue- and interest-driven smaller partnerships have already emerged as more effective frameworks of conducting policy and projecting power. Somewhat appropriately titled “minilateralism,” this type of coordination among states holds promise of delivering on the pressing needs of various actors in the absence of a truly international structure.

As of 2024, minilateralism already presents itself as a series of geopolitical rallying points. Minilateral arrangements are predisposed to exhibit a multitude of overlapping

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A map of CEFTA participating countries

priorities, sometimes even inviting the participation of the very same actors in multiple rival projects. While such behavior is certain to occasionally annoy and disgruntle great powers, minilateral formats may enable the big and powerful to advance their international initiatives and protect vital interests where they may be endangered. But these minilateral arrangements, in turn, favor the policy visions of most middle powers even more, since their value increases exponentially within such groups. Furthermore, it provides them with the luxury to cherry-pick the best features of all worlds, selecting suitable partners for each issue without

many repercussions for other relationships maintained by middle powers. Moreover, it shields them from the difficult position of having to choose sides in conflicts that will be supported, if not altogether ignited, by great powers.

But what about small states? How will the minilateral geopolitical trends affect them? Are they destined only to rally behind major security guarantors to preserve peace? Is joining major economic blocs the only hope such states have of achieving development? Should they be allowed to formulate minilateral partnerships of their own, or are these too unavoidably tied to supervision of