

Friends with All, Captive to None

Baku's 360 Degree Diplomacy and Sovereign Leverage

Can you think of a head of state who is simultaneously Israel's [closest partner](#) in his region and able to [converse directly](#) with Iran's president without interpreters? A leader who was [warmly received](#) by Donald Trump in the Oval Office and, only three weeks later, [honored](#) with a full ceremony in Beijing during the World War II commemoration? This same country positions itself as an active voice of the Global South, has recently chaired the Non-Aligned Movement, and counts the European Union as its largest trading partner. It is a Shiite-majority state that maintains fraternal ties with Sunni Türkiye, [works closely](#) with the Gulf monarchies and [Pakistan](#), and—unlike any other Eastern Partnership country—hosts no Russian troops on its soil, legally or illegally. Most recently, it restored full territorial integrity, undoing the losses suffered 26 years earlier in a time of weakness and turmoil. The country is Azerbaijan and

the leader is Ilham Aliyev, whose geopolitical maneuvering commands respect even among critics of his domestic rule.

In an era defined by the triumph of radical transactionalism in diplomacy, with two historically unfriendly powers—Russia and Iran—in decline (the first mired in its war of conquest in Ukraine; the second weakened by its confrontation with Israel, internal unrest, and loss of regional proxies), and an American administration under Donald Trump, who disdains spreading democracy and elevates force as the supreme tool of foreign policy, the stars are perfectly aligned for Azerbaijan to seize the upper hand.

From Collapse to Comeback

Yet, Azerbaijan started from a low point. In the 1990s, it suffered a harrowing defeat in the First



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Nagorno-Karabakh War against Armenia—backed then by Russia—and lost control of nearly 20% of its internationally recognized territory. The [territorial loss](#) triggered the displacement of almost 700,000 refugees and internally displaced persons—almost 10% of its population—who required urgent humanitarian aid. The constrained 1994 [Bishkek Peace Treaty](#) was harsh on Azerbaijan but afforded it breathing space without formally recognizing the territorial loss or Armenian control over Nagorno-Karabakh.

At that time, Azerbaijan was also under a U.S. arms [embargo](#)—pushed through by lobbyists from the Armenian diaspora in Congress—and plagued by corruption and clan-based governance that hindered economic development. Yet, battered but not extinguished, Azerbaijan began to recover, banking on two initial strengths: its vast hydrocarbon reserves and its ethno-cultural proximity to Türkiye (although not as deeply historic as often thought).

Under President Heydar Aliyev—a former Soviet intelligence officer and Politburo member—Azerbaijan built a firm [alliance](#) with Türkiye (“One Nation, Two States”), including military cooperation, and began exporting its oil and gas directly to Western markets with Western partners, deliberately bypassing the Russians. Refusing to let Moscow control its resource wealth—a bold move in the region at the time—became the cornerstone of Azerbaijan’s regained sovereignty and independence. Today, that foundational strategy has borne remarkable geopolitical fruit.

The “contracts of the century” with Western energy companies and U.S. security assurances for pipelines circumventing Russia in the 1990s placed Azerbaijan and, crucially, transit-reliant Georgia, firmly on the global geopolitical map. The growing U.S. interest in the region from the late 1990s through the 2000s helped preserve Azerbaijan’s

autonomy while allowing it to maintain delicate ties with two challenging neighbors: Russia and Iran. Both pressured Baku—the former through militarized Nagorno-Karabakh, the latter via Shiite solidarity—yet, Azerbaijan kept its footing.

Western engagement proved insufficient to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict—even with near-successful proposals like the [2001 Key West Talks](#) or the 2007 [Madrid Principles](#)—because Russia, a co-chair of the OSCE [Minsk Group](#), had no incentive to see resolution and quietly encouraged intransigence from Armenia. With U.S. interest waning under the Obama administration, Azerbaijan—now wealthier than Armenia—started preparing its defense capabilities for a possible military solution. With renewed military reform, strengthened ties to Türkiye, and technological and intelligence cooperation with Israel, Baku laid the groundwork that would pay off a decade later.

Azerbaijan - Russia: Emancipation from the Evil Stepmother

The situation of today’s extreme tension between Moscow and Baku has deeper roots than the incident of December 2024 when an Azerbaijan Airlines passenger [plane was shot down](#) by the Russian Air Defense, followed by the ruthless killing of two Azerbaijani citizens by Russian law enforcement in Yekaterinburg. These incidents are serious but they are not the cause of the deterioration in relations. Rather, they are symptoms that reveal just how far apart the two countries stand and how differently they see the world.

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Russia has never digested its imperial complex. It sees no need to apologize for the downing of a civilian aircraft belonging to what it still perceives as a former province of its empire. As in previous cases — [Malaysia Airlines over Ukraine](#) or [Korean Air](#) in the 1980s — there were no apologies, no regrets. Even Iran's Ayatollah regime admitted its mistake when it shot down a Ukrainian passenger plane in Tehran in January 2020 and [paid](#) compensation. According to sources, Russian envoys even asked Azerbaijan to share responsibility with Ukraine, arguing that it was the presence of Ukrainian drones in Russian airspace that had triggered their air-defense systems that downed the Azerbaijani plane.

Baku, however, sees itself as a sovereign power, increasingly confident in recent years, unwilling to bow to anyone. By refusing to blame Ukraine, Azerbaijan defied its former master. Russia then considered this an unfriendly act and refused to apologize to Baku. Azerbaijan's decision to bring the case before international courts further highlights the rift between the two states.

Subsequent Azerbaijani declarations of support for Ukraine's territorial integrity only deepened the rift. Moscow retaliated using its main lever: the large Azerbaijani diaspora in Russia (over 1.5 million people). The killings of Azerbaijani citizens, manhunts in Russian cities, and harassment of long-established businessmen recalled the Kremlin's anti-Georgian campaign in 2006 when Putin punished Tbilisi's pro-Western course.

Azerbaijan responded as Georgia once did: several Russian intelligence officers working under the cover of Sputnik journalists were [arrested](#). Unlike Georgia, however, which expelled them, Azerbaijan is keeping them in custody. These are unmistakable signs: relations are badly damaged and reconciliation will not come easily.

The Roots of the Discontent

As we noted earlier, the conflict's origins run much deeper—what we are witnessing is merely their concrete manifestation. Putin once declared, “*Wherever a Russian soldier has set foot, that land is ours.*” After the 9 November 2020 ceasefire and the arrival of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Kremlin assumed the territory was effectively theirs. Just as in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the 1990s, Russia's so-called “peacekeepers” acted more as “piece-keepers,” clinging to imperial fragments. Yet within three years, Azerbaijan—backed by Turkish planning and support—regained full control of Nagorno-Karabakh. For Moscow, the loss of this lever in the Caucasus was nothing short of humiliating.

Türkiye's expanding influence in the South Caucasus—on top of its rivalry with Russia in Syria, Libya, the Black Sea, and the Balkans—only deepened the Kremlin's resentment. At the same time, Baku's firm backing of Ukraine's territorial integrity after 2022 further irked Moscow. Mass rallies in Baku in solidarity with Kyiv, shipments of humanitarian aid, and steady oil supplies all underscored Azerbaijan's alignment with [Ukraine](#). With the Nagorno-Karabakh question resolved, Azerbaijan has gained the confidence to push back against Russian dominance and decades of imperial condescension. Russian commentators bristled when Ilham Aliyev, in a recent *Al Arabiya* [interview](#), bluntly referred to the “1920 Bolshevik invasion” and the ensuing Soviet occupation of Azerbaijan—an episode long downplayed by Baku to avoid confrontation with Moscow. Now, Aliyev is assertive enough to say it openly.

Azerbaijanis have not forgotten Soviet violence — the January 1990 massacre in Baku (Qara Yanvar, “[Black January](#)”) or Russia's involvement in the [Khojaly massacre](#) of 1992. While not instrumental-

ized politically for years, these memories run deep. They explain, for instance, why Baku celebrates Turkish victories in football but not Russia's.

Heydar Aliyev, the father, was the first to seek Western alignment. His senior foreign policy adviser, Vafa Guluzadeh, said as early as 1999 that NATO bases were the only true defense against Russia. Under Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan [closed](#) the Russian Gabala Radar Station in 2012 and [signed](#) the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support with Türkiye (2010), strengthened by the [Shusha Declaration](#) of 2021.

Russia's Limited Leverage on Azerbaijan

Mistrust of Russia has led Baku to keep its land border with Russia closed for more than five years – officially for COVID but in practice due to fear of Russian hybrid tactics. As a result, Russian influence in Azerbaijan is far weaker than in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, or pre-2022 Ukraine.

Moscow's leverage is limited, too. There is no viable pro-Russian party in Azerbaijan and trade volumes remain modest (USD [4.8 billion](#) in 2024 versus Armenia's USD [12 billion](#) with Russia despite its much smaller size). Azerbaijan is immune to energy blackmail as it is itself an energy exporter. Its alliance with Türkiye – NATO's second-largest army – provides strong security guarantees, reinforced by the visible [presence](#) of Turkish F-16s landed on the Ganja airfield during the 2020 war. Russia, bogged down in Ukraine, would risk unrest among its own 20 million Muslims if it moved against Azerbaijan given Baku's friendly ties with the North Caucasus and Volga Turkic-speaking republics.

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Trump and Washington: Rediscovery of a Strategic Ally

Donald Trump's return to power marked a significant improvement in U.S.-Azerbaijani relations. During his first presidency, ties were pragmatic, focused on energy and counterterrorism, but not politically deep. The U.S. largely stayed out of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, distracted by its own elections.

In his second term, however, Trump rediscovered Azerbaijan as a valuable ally, especially given its strategic location bordering Iran. Israel largely facilitated this rediscovery, Baku's close security partner, which acted as a bridge to Washington.

Aliyev frequently [criticized](#) the Obama and Biden administrations for pro-Armenian bias and invoked Trump's favorite phrases – “Deep State,” “Washington Swamp,” “Swamp Frogs” – even endorsing the theory of the “stolen” 2020 election. His anger was particularly focused on the reactivation of Section [907 of the Freedom Support Act](#) which restricts U.S. aid to Azerbaijan. Although waived in 2001 and temporarily reinstated under Biden (for U.S. [use](#) of Azerbaijani logistics during the 2021 Kabul evacuation), the waiver was rescinded immediately afterward – something Baku considered unfair and humiliating.

Parallel diplomacy involving Steve Witkoff, Israeli intermediaries, and Trump's family circle paved the way for a spectacular rapprochement, culminating in the [Azerbaijan-Armenia Peace Agreement](#) at the White House. The accord created the TRIPP Corridor (Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity) linking Azerbaijan proper with Nakhchivan via Armenia – a historic breakthrough boosting both U.S. prestige and Azerbaijan's position.

Trump has since openly admired Aliyev who, together with Armenia's Pashinyan, nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. Aliyev, a long-ruling strongman who restored territorial integrity, aligned with Washington on key issues, and controls a hydrocarbon-rich state, is seen by Trump as an ideal foreign leader. In return, Trump [issued](#) a waiver on Section 907, a highly symbolic gesture for Baku.

Today, Trump views Azerbaijan as a key ally in the South Caucasus and beyond. Baku is even being considered for inclusion in the Abraham Accords, despite already recognizing Israel. Azerbaijan also seeks to mediate between Central Asian states and Washington, further raising its significance. In exchange, the U.S. supports Azerbaijan as a bridge for energy and trade between Asia and Europe, strengthening European energy security at Russia's expense.

The Balancing Triangle: Türkiye, Israel, and Iran

One of the major challenges of Azerbaijani diplomacy is reconciling what seems irreconcilable: maintaining good relations simultaneously with Türkiye, Iran, and Israel. The hostility between Iran and Israel is well known but Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also has extremely tense relations with Tel Aviv. Traditionally, Türkiye was the Muslim-majority country with the closest ties to Israel but

since the AKP came to power and Ankara sought to reassert itself as the leader of the Muslim world, relations quickly deteriorated. Türkiye has tried to present itself as the champion of the Palestinian cause, which led to several serious clashes with Israel, starting with the Mavi Marmara [incident](#) in 2010 and culminating in the further breakdown of relations following the Hamas terrorist [attack](#) on 7 October 2023, and the ongoing Israeli military operation in Gaza.

Ilham Aliyev once compared Azerbaijani-Israeli relations to an iceberg with nine-tenths hidden beneath the surface. This statement, [revealed](#) by WikiLeaks among thousands of leaked U.S. diplomatic cables, sparked wide debate and criticism in the Islamic world at the time. The discreet and unofficial nature of these ties reflects Azerbaijan's concern for preserving its relationships with Muslim friends and neighbors. Thus, although Baku and Tel Aviv have had diplomatic relations for over 30 years and enjoy close cooperation in defense and intelligence, Azerbaijan only [opened](#) an embassy in Israel in 2023 – and in Tel Aviv, not Jerusalem, again out of consideration for its other partners.

Israel is also a major client for Azerbaijani oil, [supplied](#) via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, accounting for around 40% of Israel's oil imports. For reasons of Islamic solidarity (Azerbaijan is a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, OIC, which provides important backing at the UN), Baku occasionally joins statements criticizing Israel – for example, regarding the [Gaza war](#) or [strikes](#) against Iran. Yet, these declarations do not affect bilateral relations which operate on a deeper level; in fact, they may even be pre-coordinated with Israeli authorities. This practice is not unique to Azerbaijan – oriental diplomacy follows unwritten rules quite different from those in Europe.

A full description of the scope of ties between Tel Aviv and Baku is beyond this article but it is worth

recalling that defense cooperation with Israel is almost as important to Azerbaijan as that with Türkiye. Israel openly supported a military solution for Azerbaijan's restoration of territorial integrity and Israeli weapons significantly [contributed](#) to Baku's victories in 2020 and 2023. Today, Israel [helps](#) Azerbaijan connect with the Trump administration while Baku mediates for Israel in informal contacts with certain Muslim or post-Soviet countries.

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Interestingly, the poor state of Turkish-Israeli relations has no impact on Azerbaijan's bilateral ties with either Ankara or Tel Aviv. Both Middle Eastern powers respect Baku's sovereign and transactional diplomacy and do not try to impose their views on it. On the contrary, it seems that Türkiye and Israel even keep the Azerbaijani channel open as a communication conduit for the future.

Enter Syria

After the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Syria was incorporated into Baku's Middle Eastern calculus. The Assads, long clients of Russia and Iran, had pursued policies broadly favorable to Armenia. Azerbaijan, aligned with Türkiye, severed all ties with Damascus at the outbreak of the civil war when Ankara supported the opposition. With Assad gone, however, relations have been restored. The new Syrian strongman, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has already [visited](#) Baku and Azerbaijan has begun exporting gas to Syria via Türkiye. At present, the volume [stands](#) at 1.2 billion m³, financed by Qatar, but this figure is expected to rise.

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The fact that the new Syrian leadership is signing contracts with Baku and buying Azerbaijani gas carries a clear geopolitical weight. Ahmed al-Sharaa, who needs to move toward normalization with Israel (still far from achieved), looks to Azerbaijan for support given that it is the only Muslim country maintaining excellent ties with Tel Aviv despite the Gaza war. The broader aim is to forge an alliance chain linking Azerbaijan, Israel, Türkiye, and Syria—with backing from the United States and the Gulf monarchies—designed to weaken and isolate Iran.

Cautious Appeasement of Tehran

And then there is Iran. Relations with Tehran have always been fraught. The former imperial patron still views Azerbaijan—at least in its imagination—as a “lost province.” The two countries' historical narratives and national identities hardly align, their political systems are diametrically opposed (Islamic Republic vs. secular Republic), and their geopolitical alliances place them on rival sides (Iran-Russia vs. Azerbaijan-Türkiye-Israel).

Yet, despite these seemingly irreconcilable differences, Aliyev has pursued a policy of accommodation with Iran, centering on his ties with President Masoud Pezeshkian—a pragmatic moderate inclined toward a softer line at home and abroad, unlike the hardline Revolutionary Guards and the religious establishment. Pezeshkian, himself from Mahabad in Iranian Azerbaijan, speaks fluent Azerbaijani. Aliyev even quipped in an interview that the Iranian president, who has already [visited](#) Azerbaijan twice—including a stop in [Shusha](#), the historic Nagorno-Karabakh capital reclaimed from Armenia—knows Azerbaijani poetry better than he does, a sign of their personal rapport.

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Still, decades of mistrust and rivalry cannot be erased so easily. Iran's long-standing fear that Israel might use Azerbaijani territory as a launchpad for strikes is now compounded by anxiety that new transit corridors—whether between Armenia and Iran or between Russia and Iran—could be disrupted following the Washington-brokered peace deal. The U.S. role in securing the Zangezur Corridor, even indirectly through a private company, only heightens Tehran's suspicions.

Aliyev, keen to avoid any conflict in Iran—both because of the potential unrest among Iran's 20 million ethnic Azerbaijanis and the catastrophic risks to Azerbaijan's oil infrastructure, its economic life-line—is working to defuse tensions by addressing Iranian concerns. He has assured Pezeshkian that the new TRIPP Route will not sever Iran's access to Armenia. On the contrary, Baku plans to fold this new road into the North-South connectivity network: goods bound for Iran from the north, instead of detouring across the Caspian (through Astara, where 250 km of railway remain unfinished on the Iranian side), could pass through Zangezur and reach the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan which is already connected to Jolfa and Iran's rail system.

Whether such assurances will persuade Tehran remains uncertain. For now, the fact that an American firm—even a private one—has been tasked with overseeing traffic along the Zangezur route is unlikely to inspire much confidence in Iran.

Azerbaijan and the EU: Business First, Politics Later

Azerbaijan has long abandoned the idea of European integration. I recall that back in 2010, when the Eastern Partnership countries [initiated](#) negotiations on Association Agreements with Brussels, my Azerbaijani colleague showed remarkably little enthusiasm. “We must first translate into Azerbaijani all the European texts, including the *Acquis Communautaire*, which many provisions of the Agreement – especially its economic part, the DCFTA – refer to,” he told me. I immediately understood that Baku would neither sign the Association Agreement, with its preamble rooted in the European rule of law model, nor negotiate the DCFTA, whose basic condition was the absence of monopolies and oligopolies. Indeed, that is exactly what happened: after a few rounds of negotiations, Baku withdrew.

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On the other hand, Azerbaijan has always been, and remains, very interested in its energy partnership with the EU. In this field, the interests of both sides converge, leaving wide room for cooperation. The EU has long sought to diversify its fossil fuel supplies to reduce its dependence on Russia while Azerbaijan aims to increase its exports to stable markets. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the EU embargo on Russian oil and gas, [agreements](#) between the EU and Azerbaijan have enabled increased exports through the Southern Gas Corridor, consisting of pipelines running from Baku through Georgia and Türkiye, and linking up with the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP).

In 2024, Azerbaijan [exported](#) 12.9 billion m³ of gas to the EU – nearly a 60% increase as compared to 8 billion [in 2021](#). The objective is to [reach](#) 20 billion m³ by 2027. The EU and eight of its member states (Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, and Slovenia) now [account](#) for more than half of Azerbaijan’s global gas exports. The same [applies](#) to oil, with Italy remaining the leading destination, followed by Israel, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Germany, and others.

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Baku believes that domestic politics should not be part of discussions with the EU. Instead, dialogue should focus mainly on economic, energy, and transport issues. The commercial corridor from China – the Middle Corridor, electricity exports, and the laying of fiber optic cables to create a digital IP corridor (Digital Silk Way) across its territory between Europe and Asia – are all priority topics Baku wishes to discuss with its European partners. The EU, for its part, has welcomed the Washington agreements signed with Armenia which include the creation of the TRIPP Corridor.

China and the Global South Dimension

An important component of Azerbaijan’s 360-degree diplomacy is its positioning as a Global South state. Ilham Aliyev himself, in a recent interview with Chinese television, [declared](#) that Azerbaijan was a “member of the Global South.” Among the former Soviet republics, Azerbaijan is the country that belongs to the largest number of multilateral organizations uniting Southern states. It is an active member of the Organization of Islamic Coop-

eration (OIC), the Non-Aligned Movement (which it chaired for two consecutive terms), and the Organization of Turkic States, among others. In 2024, Azerbaijan hosted COP29 (29th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), further boosting its international visibility.

“We want to be friends with all our neighbors and with the neighbors of our neighbors,” Aliyev once [said](#) in an interview, expressing the essence of his transactional diplomacy. Azerbaijan today [has](#) nearly 70 embassies worldwide and when consulates-general and permanent missions to international organizations are included, the number of missions exceeds 90. By comparison, Georgia [has](#) fewer than 40 embassies and around 50 missions of all types combined.

As a “member of the Global South,” Azerbaijan declares that it sees China as the leader of this group of countries. Azerbaijan has always staunchly supported the One China Policy and Beijing has reciprocated by supporting Azerbaijan’s sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh. Likewise, Azerbaijan backs China in its struggle against Uyghur separatism, despite the Uyghurs being a Muslim and Turkic-speaking minority.

Azerbaijan [was](#) among the first to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2015, signing a [strategic partnership](#) with China in 2024, later upgraded to a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#) in July 2025 – the highest level of bilateral relations. In 2025, Azerbaijani citizens were granted [visa-free travel](#) to China, a right that Azerbaijan had previously [granted](#) to Chinese citizens in 2024. China was the first and only country so far to benefit from such a regime – a unique privilege since Azerbaijan grants visa-free entry only based on reciprocity.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the Alat Port on the Caspian Sea make Azerbaijan central to the Middle Corridor, linking China to Europe via Cen-

tral Asia and the South Caucasus. Both Europe and China view this as a means to reduce their dependence on Russian routes. At Beijing's invitation, Azerbaijan participates in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an observer. However, its bid for full membership has so far been blocked by India (just as Pakistan blocked Armenia's candidacy).

The growing importance of China in Azerbaijani foreign policy is underscored by Aliyev's [attendance](#) at the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II in Asia, organized by China – even as he [boycotted](#) Russia's 9 May 2025 Victory Day celebrations, despite explicit [requests](#) from Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Tajikistani President Emomali Rahmon to use the occasion to mediate Azerbaijani-Russian tensions. It is also notable that the Chinese leadership [invited](#) both South Caucasian leaders, Aliyev and Pashinyan, shortly after the [signing](#) of their peace agreement and commitment to opening the Zangezur Corridor – signaling Beijing's interest in this project.

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In short, Azerbaijan seeks a mutually beneficial economic partnership with China, capitalizing on Russia's exclusion from global economic circuits. Baku looks for Chinese investments, which it considers politically less problematic, while China's support in multilateral formats strengthens Azerbaijan's position in various negotiations.

Contrast with Georgia

A comparative reflection on Azerbaijan's successful assertion of sovereignty and alliances, and Georgia's geopolitical [isolation](#) and drift under the Georgian Dream's leadership, offers some food for

thought for those affected by Georgia fatigue in Brussels and elsewhere.

The Georgian Dream government, eager for recognition from Europe but shunned because of its [slide](#) into authoritarianism, election falsification, and hostile rhetoric toward the West, often [complains](#) of being unfairly treated. It points to Baku, noting that although Azerbaijan is no more democratic than Georgia, the EU continues to conduct *business as usual* with it and the country suffers no European or American sanctions. Some in Brussels and other capitals, affected by *Georgia fatigue*, are also ready to conform to this new paradigm: *'Tbilisi itself suspended the European integration process which is a fait accompli. Now, we need Georgia as an important transit country and we can establish pragmatic relations with it, comparable to those we have with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, or even Uzbekistan and Algeria'* – as one can hear here and there. Another article in this issue deals with other aspects of the irrelevance of this comparison; here, I will focus only on foreign policy.

The analysis of Azerbaijan's foreign policy and its multiple successes stands in stark contrast to the emptiness and impotence of Georgian policy. Baku succeeded in restoring its territorial integrity and had it accepted by the entire international community, including Armenia. It stands firm in the face of Russia which [uses](#) various destabilization and hybrid warfare tactics against it. Through wise, long-term policy, Azerbaijan has minimized the Kremlin's leverage. Moreover, Baku openly [supports](#) Kyiv's struggle for independence and territorial integrity, helping in various ways without fearing Russian reprisals, which sometimes materialize as in the [bombings](#) of Azerbaijani oil refineries located on Ukrainian territory (Kremenchug, Odesa). Despite this, the Azerbaijani president publicly receives the insignia of the Ukrainian Army and delivers speeches of support to the Ukrainian people.

By contrast, every day Georgia moves further from the dream of reunification, rewriting history through an illegitimate parliamentary commission that [blames](#) its own country for the war of aggression against the secessionist provinces — Russia’s proxies. No Georgian Dream leader even dares to utter the word Russia when speaking about military aggression; instead, only the West is endlessly accused of imperialism, oppression, moral depravity, and warmongering — in perfect [alignment](#) with the Russian narrative.

Estranged from Europe, The Georgian Dream’s Georgia has neither sought nor wanted to find a powerful ally that could help defend its sovereignty and independence if needed. Azerbaijan enjoys a fraternal alliance with Türkiye and deep cooperation with Israel; Georgia remains alone and defenseless in front of Moscow which, though weakened and bogged down in Ukraine, would have no difficulty in swallowing an unprotected country if it wished.

Azerbaijan optimizes its sovereignty and seeks to avoid all forms of interference in its affairs, above all Russian interference, and secondarily Western or Iranian interference. Georgian “sovereignism,” by contrast, has only one [target](#): the West and the mysterious “Global War Party,” and “Deep State” which makes it appear simply as rhetoric serving Russian interests — just as earlier speeches on Georgia’s “[neutrality](#)” did.

Finally, both Azerbaijan and Armenia managed to win the goodwill of the Trump administration and draw it back into the region, providing guarantees for peace between the two former enemy countries. By mutual agreement, Aliyev and Pashinyan sidelined Russia from the conflict resolution process and invited the United States to return to a region where its influence had been waning since Putin’s invasion of Georgia in 2008. Instead of attracting American interest in Georgia to make the country more secure against Russian ambitions,

the Georgian ruling elites [write](#) accusatory letters to the American president, quite unprecedented in the history of diplomacy. It is becoming clear that Ivanishvili and his party’s initial support for Trump was based on the same hopes as Moscow’s: that Trump’s victory would cement Russia’s domination of the post-Soviet space and definitively transfer Georgia into Russia’s sphere of influence.

Ivanishvili’s foreign policy is simply that of Russia’s desiderata in the region: less Europe, less U.S., less Türkiye, and unchallenged Russian domination. With such a partner, even pragmatic relations are hard to build. A government that deliberately sabotages its European future when given a historic opportunity is not a government acting in the national interest — it serves a foreign power. And a government that accuses everyone who disagrees with it of being foreign agents ends up looking unmistakably like a foreign agent itself. Those Europeans who make comparisons with Azerbaijan should think twice.

The Azerbaijan Exception

Through a combination of transactional diplomacy, regional balancing, and careful management of great-power rivalries, Baku has leveraged its geography and energy assets into genuine sovereign influence.

Azerbaijan illustrates how a small, resource-rich, Shiite-majority state can carve out strategic space in a turbulent neighborhood. Through a combination of transactional diplomacy, regional balancing, and careful management of great-power rivalries, Baku has leveraged its geography and energy assets into genuine sovereign influence. Restoring territorial integrity, anchoring Europe’s energy diversification, positioning itself along the Middle Corridor with China, and drawing U.S. atten-

tion via the Armenia peace track have all reduced Russia's coercive options while containing Iran's hostility. At the center of this approach lies consistency without ideology: align where interests converge, avoid binding commitments, and keep Türkiye as the core security pillar.

Still, the model comes with vulnerabilities. It relies on sustained Turkish support, U.S. engagement that may shift with electoral cycles, China's economic pragmatism, and delicate crisis manage-

ment with Moscow and Tehran. To consolidate its gains, Baku will need to institutionalize peace with Armenia, broaden its partnership with the EU beyond hydrocarbons, diversify transit corridors to reduce single-point risk, and bolster resilience against hybrid threats and diaspora-driven pressures. If it succeeds, Azerbaijan will remain what it seeks to be: a state friendly to many but dependent on none—an enduring example of small-power statecraft in an unsettled multipolar world ■