

Iran's president visits Baku: seeking de-escalation

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On 28 April, a meeting took place in Baku between the Presidents of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, and Iran, Masoud Pezeshkian. Official statements highlighted the cordial atmosphere of the talks, emphasised historical and cultural ties, and expressed hope for a breakthrough in the two countries' traditionally difficult bilateral relations. During the visit, letters of intent were signed concerning, among other things, the expansion of transport infrastructure between the two countries (notably the North–South corridor connecting the Indian Ocean basin with Russia), the transit of Russian gas to Iran, and cultural and business cooperation. The event was accompanied by an economic forum.

Despite Pezeshkian's visit and its positive media framing, relations between Azerbaijan and Iran remain highly strained and were not publicly addressed by the leaders. The talks should be viewed as an Iranian initiative – albeit welcomed by Baku – to temporarily ease tensions and promote areas of economic cooperation that are mutually beneficial.

Commentary

- **Relations between Azerbaijan and Iran have traditionally been tense or hostile.** Historic Azerbaijan – a region inhabited by Azerbaijani (Turkic) people who, like Persians, follow Shia Islam – was ultimately divided in 1828, following the Russian conquest, into a Russian part (now the independent Azerbaijani state) and a Persian part (now within Iran). Around two-thirds of the territory and population of this historical region now lies within Iran (both President Pezeshkian and Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei are of Azeri descent). Since the early 1990s, the main axis of dispute has been Baku's fears of Iranian imperialism and revisionism, as well as the 'export' of Iran's religious-political model. From Tehran's perspective, a secular and nationalist Azerbaijan, which highlights its ties with ethnic Azeris living in Iran, poses a threat to the state's integrity. Since the re-establishment of Azerbaijan's independence, the strategic interests of the two countries have diverged. For example, Iran has traditionally supported Armenia in its conflict with Baku and cooperated closely with Russia. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, has enhanced its ties with Turkey, expanded economic cooperation with the West, and established strong relations – including in the security sphere – with Israel, which is now its main arms supplier. Baku has repeatedly accused Tehran of organising opposition movements and terrorist attacks in Azerbaijan, including an attack on its embassy in Tehran in January 2023. Iran, in turn, has repeatedly accused Azerbaijan of allowing Israeli forces to use its territory for subversive operations against Tehran.

- **President Pezeshkian's visit was primarily aimed at neutralising immediate threats posed by Azerbaijan.** Tehran is aware of the risk of renewed military conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia (namely, the potential armed seizure of the Zangezur corridor by Azerbaijan, which would cut Armenia off from Iran). Two weeks prior to the meeting, Armenia and Iran conducted joint military exercises explicitly directed at Baku. Moreover, for over a year, Iran has been the target of direct attacks by Israel and now faces the threat of a full-scale war with both Israel and the United States. In such a scenario, Azerbaijan would, at the very least, likely come under pressure to side against Tehran. During the visit, none of the sensitive or controversial issues were publicly addressed. At the same time, given its deteriorating economic situation and increasing international isolation, Iran is actively seeking markets for its goods and secure trade routes, including for gas transit. Regardless of ongoing tensions, further development of cooperation with Azerbaijan would benefit both sides, while raising the cost of direct confrontation. This aspect of the relationship was strongly emphasised during the visit, even though it was not reflected in any binding agreements.
- **Azerbaijan seeks to secure Iran's neutrality in the event of a potential renewed military confrontation with Armenia and to minimise the potential risks associated with Iran's conflict with Israel.** A tangible strategic interest for Baku involves the establishment of transport routes through Iranian territory running parallel to the Zangezur Corridor, in order to secure a land connection with the Nakhchivan exclave and, beyond that, with Turkey (even if an Azerbaijani-Armenian agreement is reached and a route through Armenia is designated). Baku is also interested in completing the construction of the Astara–Rasht railway line, which would link the two countries' rail networks and enable the transport of goods from Russia to the Persian Gulf. Each of these projects is underway but has yet to be finalised due to political considerations.
- **Effective de-escalation mechanisms and the development of economic cooperation between Iran and Azerbaijan are in the interest of both states.** Tehran, in principle, has gradually accepted Azerbaijan's growing influence in the Caucasus. Establishing stable relations with Iran would strengthen Baku's multi-vector policy and its international standing, while also enabling it to more effectively pursue its ambitions of becoming a key hub at the crossroads of major transport routes. A direct confrontation would be costly and risky for both sides. However, the future of bilateral relations largely depends on external developments – most notably, a potential Israeli (and US) attack on Iran or a hypothetical US–Iran agreement reached under the Trump administration. For Baku, the evolving balance of power among Turkey, Israel, and Russia will be a decisive factor in shaping its stance.