

The (pan-)Turkic Caucasus The Baku-Ankara alliance and its regional importance

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The Nagorno-Karabakh war of autumn 2020 and the military parade organised in Baku after its end, which was jointly hosted by the presidents of Azerbaijan and Turkey, Ilham Aliyev and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, highlighted the potential of the alliance between both countries. The close ties between Baku and Ankara result from a strategic choice made almost three decades ago. The diverse activities they have undertaken to strengthen their cooperation have varied in intensity over that period, but their overall direction has remained unchanged. As a result, Azerbaijan has gradually distanced itself from Russia, and through its cooperation with Turkey, it has moved closer (albeit mainly economically) to the West. Ankara, on the other hand, has strengthened its position in the South Caucasus. This has led to the formation of an Ankara-Baku axis, which presents a challenge to Moscow because it limits Russian influence in the region. However, the Turkic duo has been taking care not to antagonise Russia directly; one expression of this approach is their acceptance of Moscow's key role in resolving the Karabakh conflict.

Two countries, one nation...

Independent Azerbaijan has never been particularly interested in pursuing integration with either the Euro-Atlantic organisations or the Moscow-controlled post-Soviet formats. This is due to the country's location, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its raw material resources which make it so attractive to foreign partner. The distrust of the ruling elite in Baku has also played an important role: they suspect that the West wanted – and still does want – to organise a 'colour revolution' in Azerbaijan, and believe that Russia intends to destabilise the situation in the country with the help of the Azerbaijani diaspora and the national minorities (while Iran is accused of wanting to spread radical Shia Islam). Nevertheless, Baku has tried to maintain good relations with all of these actors.

In the mid-1990s, Azerbaijan responded to Washington and Brussels' increased interest by actively participating in the NATO Partnership for Peace programme; a decade and a half later it joined the EU Eastern Partnership, albeit without applying for a DCFTA-type agreement (a bilateral treaty with the EU is still being negotiated).¹ In turn, the fear of confrontation with Moscow and the authoritarian

¹ Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas. Such agreements have been concluded between the European Union and Ukraine, Moldova & Georgia. This agreement does not cover the energy resources which constitute the bulk of Azerbaijani



nature of the Azerbaijani state opened it up to the influence of Russia, even though Moscow was both creator and defender of the *status quo* in Karabakh, which was unfavourable for Baku. In the 1990s, Russia eventually came down on Armenia's side, and in 2008 it recognised the independence of the Georgian para-states, which Baku interpreted as a warning against trying to restore Azerbaijan's territorial integrity by force. The country remains a member of the CIS, and also belonged to the CSTO until 1999.² In 2016, Moscow forced Baku and Yerevan to end several days of armed clashes and became a key intermediary in the peace process, which the West tacitly accepted.³ These clashes mark Azerbaijan's first attempt to revise the *status quo*. It had already received strong political support for this attempt – in confrontation with Moscow's position – from Turkey.

Since the collapse of the USSR, Ankara and Baku have been bound together in a special relationship, formally an alliance, but wherein Turkey – regardless of its domestic developments – is not only a political partner for Azerbaijan, but also a guarantor of its security⁴ and a model for its development.

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In the 1990s, Turkey was primarily Azerbaijan's ally in the latter's confrontation with Armenia, but also – as a pillar of NATO and a strong candidate for EU membership – its ‘window to the West’; since the turn of the century, it has been Azerbaijan's partner in large infrastructure projects; and after Erdoğan reinforced his power and solidified the pillars of the so-called ‘New Turkey’ (mid-2010s),⁵ an example of assertiveness in foreign policy and the authoritarian model of government. At the same time, Turkish support has bolstered Azerbaijan in its relations with Russia. For Ankara, in turn, the relationship with Baku had a strong symbolic trait in the initial period after the collapse of the USSR, related to the pan-Turkic ambitions of the then president Turgut Özal; but over time, the emphasis shifted to the two states' common economic and energy interests, which took on a strategic dimension. Azerbaijan remains a bridgehead for Turkey's possible further political expansion in the South Caucasus, and its influence there is an important asset in Ankara's multi-level relations with Moscow (Russia is a constant point of reference for both partners).

The alliance of both countries – in which the weaker Azerbaijan still retains its subjectivity, avoiding the position of a ‘younger brother’ – is strengthened by their ethnic and linguistic closeness, as expressed in the maxim ‘Two states – one nation’ (Turkish: *iki devlet, bir millet*, Azerbaijani: *iki dövlət, bir millət*).⁶ The expression was first used by Heydar Aliyev, president of Azerbaijan in 1993–2003.

...and zero problems

Three decades of multidimensional cooperation between Ankara and Baku have laid the foundations for them to realise their common interests in the region, independent of Moscow. Of particular importance

exports; moreover, in the opinion of local experts, the requirement to open up to EU goods and services could significantly weaken the local agriculture and banking sector, and also threaten informal monopolies. Currently, the relationship between the EU and Azerbaijan is still governed by the 1999 agreement.

² The Collective Security Treaty Organisation. Although Azerbaijan withdrew from this group 22 years ago, it is still willing to buy arms from Russia, despite the fact that the participation of other exporters (mainly Turkey, but also Israel and Ukraine) has risen significantly in recent years. According to SIPRI, 65% of the weapons purchased by Azerbaijan in 2017–18 came from Russia. Moscow describes Baku as its ‘strategic partner’ (while Yerevan is its ‘strategic ally’).

³ W. Górecki, *The Gordian knot of the Caucasus. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh*, OSW, Warsaw 2020, www.osw.waw.pl.

⁴ When Turkey involved itself in the Karabakh conflict from the early 1990s and took Baku's side (including joining the blockade of Armenia), Ankara was drawing upon the Soviet-Turkish agreements of 1921 (the treaties of Moscow and Kars).

⁵ M. Chudziak, *The coup as a founding myth. The ideological pillars of the New Turkey*, OSW, Warsaw 2017, www.osw.waw.pl.

⁶ This is a unique case in the Turkic world, in which such proximity is a real starting point for building allied political and economic relations, although there have been suggestions of extending this formula to the unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

were the infrastructure projects, which have wider political and geostrategic contexts: these have enjoyed support from the West. They have included the following: the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline (BTC, launched in 2005); the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline (BTE, 2006); the trans-Anatolian gas pipeline (TANAP, 2018; this was very important for the EU; and it offers the prospect of an energy hub in Turkey); and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway (BTK, 2017). For Azerbaijan, the key role was played by the chance to export hydrocarbons onto the world markets (bypassing Russia and Iran) and the profits associated with it; for Turkey, securing their supplies was the essential motivation.⁷ Azerbaijan's importance for Ankara is complemented by the country's leading position as a source of capital: in the years 2002–19, the value of Azerbaijani investments in Turkey amounted to US\$19.5 billion (Turkish investment in Azerbaijan during the same period is estimated at US\$11 billion).⁸ Thus, Azerbaijan is responsible for 9.6% of all direct foreign investments in Turkey, making it the fourth largest investor in the country.⁹

Tensions between the two countries arose at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, when Islam began to play an increasingly important role in Turkey under the

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rule of the AKP (it is unquestioned that Azerbaijan is a secular state). In addition, as part of the ‘zero problems with neighbours’ doctrine, Ankara attempted to normalise its relations with Armenia in 2008–9; in Baku’s eyes, this would have made it impossible to force Yerevan to make any concessions over Nagorno-Karabakh. In the end, mainly thanks to pressure from Azerbaijan (which threatened to withdraw its deposits from Turkish banks), the Turkish-Armenian protocols assuming the establishment of diplomatic relations and the opening of the border were not ratified. Baku thus proved it was capable of enforcing its own interests and maintaining its independence. In 2010, Turkey and Azerbaijan concluded an agreement ‘On Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support’, which was, above all, an examination of the course of the Russo-Georgian war. Article 2 of it states that if one of the sides falls victim to a military attack or aggression by a third state or group of states, the parties will offer each other assistance “using all possible means”. On the basis of this agreement, Ankara gave Baku such political support during the clashes with Armenian forces in 2016, although the scale of Russian domination in the region at that time (and the fresh examples of the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas) prompted Azerbaijan to move closer to Moscow in the short term.¹⁰ As it turned out, this was primarily a tactical move.

The cultural dimension, including education, plays a very important role in Azerbaijani-Turkish relations. The activity of the Gülen Movement played a key role in building up a positive image of Turkey among Azerbaijani society. Thanks to it, among other factors, Turkish soft power has come to clearly predominate in Azerbaijan over that of Russia or the West.¹¹

⁷ Azerbaijan accounts for 21.2% of Turkey’s imports of natural gas.

⁸ Data from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs: ‘Economic relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan’, www.mfa.gov.tr.

⁹ See ‘Turkey: Foreign Investment’, Santander Trade Portal, December 2020, www.santandertrade.com. Azerbaijan’s main trading partner is the EU, which in 2019 accounted for 36.7% of its turnover (€10.912 billion). The EU predominated in exports (51%, followed by Turkey with 14.6%), while its share in imports amounted to 16% (Russia 16.7%, and Turkey 12%). Data from *European Union, Trade in goods with Azerbaijan*, European Commission, webgate.ec.europa.eu.

¹⁰ A. Jarosiewicz, ‘In the clutches of the Kremlin. Azerbaijan’s security policy’, *OSW Commentary*, no. 222, 31 August 2016, www.osw.waw.pl.

¹¹ Institutions associated with the Gülen Movement (including 13 high schools and a university) operated in Azerbaijan until 2016. Previously, the organisation had cooperated with the authorities in Ankara for over a decade, promoting pan-Turkic attitudes and the Turkish Sunni version of Islam. Baku turned a blind eye to this activity, seeing it as a factor that counterbalanced the influence of Iran. After the unsuccessful coup in Turkey, attributed to supporters of the Gülen Movement, Erdoğan’s intervention led to the state-owned oil company SOCAR seizing the movement’s assets in Azerbaijan (D. Safarova, ‘Azerbaijan: University, Paper Closed as Anti-Gülen Cleanup Continues’, *Eurasianet*, 20 July 2016, www.eurasianet.org).

Georgia in the (pan-)Turkic embrace

Georgia, as a participant in the region's infrastructure projects, is also an indispensable link in the Ankara-Baku axis. This is motivated not only by the local topography, but also by the fact that the borders between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey are still closed today.¹² Tbilisi derives tangible and immeasurable benefits from this – as it does by diversifying its foreign policy – but at the same time it is increasing its dependence on both Ankara and Baku (due to economic constraints, particularly concerning energy, and the nature of its relationship with Russia).

Taken together, Georgia's trade with Turkey and Azerbaijan is almost equal to its trade with the EU, Tbilisi's main trading partner. In 2019, the entire Union accounted for 23.4% of Georgian foreign trade (€2.68 billion), while Azerbaijan and Turkey made up 22.4% (€2.57 billion). Turkey ranks second in imports, and Azerbaijan second in exports (in both cases after the EU).¹³ In some parts of the country, Turkish capital clearly predominates (for example Turkey accounted for 75% of foreign investments in Adjara, according to data from 2017),¹⁴ and is also present in strategic facilities such as the Batumi port and the airports in Batumi and Tbilisi (which are operated by TAV Airports Holding). In 2018 and 2019, citizens of Azerbaijan predominated among tourists visiting Georgia (1.42 million, or 16.4%; and 1.53 million, or 16.2% in each year), and Turkish citizens were fourth (1.1 million, or 12.6%; and 1.16 million, or 12.3% in each year).¹⁵

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to membership of both. Interference by Ankara and Baku in its internal affairs seem to be the price Tbilisi must pay to have its pro-Western aspirations respected. Mikheil Saakashvili recalls that as president (in 2004–2013) he received phone calls from President Erdoğan, who was intervening in the cases of Turks who had various problems in Georgia.¹⁶ In May 2017, an opposition Azerbaijani journalist, Afgan Mukhtarli, went missing in Tbilisi (and found himself under arrest in Baku); he had probably been kidnapped by the Azerbaijani special services, with some involvement from Georgian ones. The head of the Azerbaijani state oil company SOCAR, Rovnag Abdullayev, got involved in the campaign ahead of the Georgian parliamentary elections in autumn 2020 on behalf of the ruling Georgian Dream party; on 21 October, he visited several towns inhabited by the Azerbaijani minority (in the province of Kvemo Kartli) and met local people; in one town he laid a cornerstone for the construction of a sports complex. He was accompanied by the local governor, the mayor of Marneuli (and at the same time the candidate of Georgian Dream for deputy) and the Georgian deputy minister of development, among others.¹⁷ Similar situations had already occurred during previous campaigns.

¹² This situation will not change significantly even if the communication routes are opened or unblocked, as provided for in the statement by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia on 10 November 2020 (see W. Górecki, 'Górski Karabach: normalizacja pełna niewiadomych' [Nagorno Karabakh: a normalisation full of unknowns], OSW, 26 November 2020, www.osw.waw.pl. There is no need for new transit pipelines or railways.

¹³ *European Union, Trade in goods with Georgia*, European Commission, webgate.ec.europa.eu.

¹⁴ A. Azaryan, 'Економіка Грузії в контексте турецького впливу', FMG News, 29 June 2017, www.fmgnews.info.

¹⁵ Second and third places were taken by citizens of Russia and Armenia. Data from Geostat, www.geostat.ge/en.

¹⁶ "He called me every time any Turkish restaurant had problems in Georgia – and it happened almost every week. He called [...] when our border guards were detaining Turkish fishermen because they were fishing in our waters. Then he started making phone calls about Turkish prisoners, including those tried for murder, and demanding that they be transferred to prisons in Turkey". M. Саакашвили, *Пробуждение силы. Уроки Грузии – для будущего Украины*, Харьков 2016, p. 254.

¹⁷ For example see 'SOCAR построит в Кизил-Аджло спортивный комплекс', Report, 21 October 2020, www.report.ge.

Trial by fire

Ankara's support for Baku in the Karabakh war in autumn 2020 was a logical continuation of the strengthening of Azerbaijani-Turkish relations, and another example of the assertive policy Turkey has been pursuing in its neighbourhood. However, one might say that on this occasion there was 'less quantity but more quality'. In a way, the war concentrated the processes which had already begun, but at the same time it took them to a new level: calling the *status quo* into question went against the interests of Moscow, which had been defending it. This indicated the possibility that the balance of power in the South Caucasus could change.

There is no doubt that a military operation aimed at retaking the Armenian-controlled lands had been considered for a long time, although the decision to launch it was probably only taken in the summer of 2020. It can be assumed that the Turkish leadership took an active part in this process, as it was necessary to consider a possible military response from Russia, and Azerbaijan would not have dared to take such a risk on its own. The development of such a large-scale military operation meant posing an open challenge to Moscow, which has traditionally been interested in holding the balance of power in the region: 'managing' the Karabakh conflict, on a basis of upholding good relations with both Yerevan and Baku, was the Kremlin's main instrument for upholding its influence in the South Caucasus.

The prelude to the war was Azerbaijan's unprecedented purchases of Turkish arms. In the first nine months of 2020, they reached a value of over US\$123 million – six times more than in the previous

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year – and included drones and ammunition.¹⁸ The two states' military cooperation gained momentum after the clashes with Armenian forces in July, during which Azerbaijan suffered heavy losses.¹⁹ Later that month, manoeuvres with the participation of Turkish land (artillery, armoured vehicles) and air forces (F-16 planes and Bayraktar drones) began in Azerbaijan and lasted two weeks. Turkish instructors also took part in them; these individuals issued a series of anti-Russian declarations, something entirely unprecedented.²⁰

From the start of the war, President Erdoğan and other leading Turkish politicians gave Azerbaijan their strong support. Most of their statements contained demands for the total withdrawal of Armenian forces from Azerbaijan's internationally recognised territories, as well as much criticism of the West, which they accused of strengthening Yerevan out of a sense of 'impunity' by adopting an unwavering pro-Armenian stance over the years. The main reason for Moscow's more reserved reaction to the outbreak of the fighting, it seems, was precisely the fact of Ankara's involvement, which would have made any possible Russian intervention even more costly. In avoiding direct confrontation with Turkey, Russia could at the same time explain its passivity by the fact that the fighting was taking place in territories which *de jure* belonged to Azerbaijan, and therefore not covered by the guarantees Moscow had previously made to Yerevan; this allowed it to retain at least minimal credibility as an ally of Armenia.²¹

¹⁸ E. Toksabay, 'Turkish arms sales to Azerbaijan surged before Nagorno-Karabakh fighting', Reuters, 14 October 2020, www.reuters.com.

¹⁹ K. Strachota, 'Ostre walki między Armenią i Azerbejdżanem' [Fierce fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan], OSW, 16 July 2020, www.osw.waw.pl.

²⁰ T. Menteş, 'Azerbaycan yalnız değil', Yeni Şafak, 28 July 2020, www.yenisafak.com.

²¹ Turkey is part of the OSCE Minsk Group, but is not part of the decision-making group of the co-chairs (France, Russia, the US).

Ankara repeatedly declared its readiness to engage in direct military involvement in the conflict – provided that Baku requested such support. However, Turkey consistently denied the media reports and statements by politicians (including Presidents Emmanuel Macron and Vladimir Putin) that it had organised the transfer of militants from Syria (the numbers claimed ranged from 900 to 1500) and sent Turkish air forces (including F-16 aircraft) to the fighting. From Turkey’s point of view, these reports created a favourable climate around the conflict: they testified to its determination and its vital interests in the region (in the Armenian narrative, it was at war not so much with Azerbaijan, but with an Azerbaijan-Turkish-Arab coalition). Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that Turkish officers took part in the fighting: together with their weapons and equipment, they could have remained in Azerbaijan after both armies’ summer manoeuvres (and indeed they may still be there now). According to some speculation, Turkey will build a military base in Azerbaijan in the future, and it is these personnel who will make up its core staff.²²

The victory parade organised in Baku on 10 December, which Aliyev co-hosted together with Erdoğan, was a symbolic culmination of the two states’ cooperation so far, and a public demonstration of the new level of their relationship. On this

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occasion, the Turkish leader proposed the idea of establishing a ‘Platform of Six’ to foster regional cooperation; this indicates Ankara’s readiness to participate in managing the South Caucasus.²³

Summary

Over three decades, Azerbaijan and Turkey have managed to build up a strong and mature relationship based on a commonality of interests, and which – so it seems – is already proving resistant to cyclical fluctuations. One can speak of an axis linking Baku and Ankara which consists of a close political and economic relationship, as well as a transport and communication infrastructure which is becoming a permanent element of the region’s landscape.

The Karabakh war of 2020 – the peak in the development of the Baku-Ankara alliance so far – was an egregious example of the progressive erosion and disintegration of the ‘post-Soviet space’, understood as a community of fundamental experiences and references. Thus Turkey, a state outside of that system, in alliance with a post-Soviet country, has overthrown the local *status quo* against the will of the key actor in this area (which Russia considered itself to be, but which other entities, including Russia’s Western partners, also saw themselves). The Turkic duo achieved their success without open conflict with Moscow, something which was helped by the distance of both partners from the West. Therefore, the revision of the *status quo* did not fit in with the scenario of post-Soviet ‘colour revolutions’, arranged (as the Kremlin believes) in Washington and Brussels (the West’s sympathies in the Karabakh conflict are with the Armenian side).

Azerbaijan and Turkey’s effective violation of Russia’s monopoly in the security sphere means the emergence of a power centre that could compete with Moscow in the region. Turkey has strengthened its position as an external player, while at the same time unquestionably being part of the region

²² F. Tastekin, ‘Why Erdogan seeks fresh military mandate for Azerbaijan’, Al-Monitor, 19 November 2020, www.al-monitor.com.

²³ This Platform would include three countries in the region – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – and three of their neighbours – Iran, Russia and Turkey. The name refers to the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, the format proposed by Erdoğan (then the prime minister) in 2008 after the Russo-Georgian war, demonstrating the consistency with which Turkey aims to expand its influence in the Caucasus.

in the broader sense (in the same way that Russia is – and which the West aspired to be at the turn of this century). This means that from now on, any calculations involving the South Caucasus must take Ankara's position into account. However, this does not change the fact that Russia is – and in the near future will remain – a key player in this region, the one with the widest range of instruments, especially political and military. Its tactical success and its ad hoc significant strengthening of its position – by ending the fighting and deploying its peacekeepers to the conflict zone – testify to its diplomatic skills rather than to the real strength of the state, as well as its absolute will to keep the South Caucasus within the zone of its exclusive influence. The decision to establish a ceasefire control centre jointly with Turkey, as well as the statements by President Putin (who said in a television interview that Ankara had not violated international law, and compared Russian-Turkish relations to those between Germany and France),²⁴ prove that Moscow is taking Ankara's interests into account and, in a way, is even authorising them.

As it seems, the region's political architecture in the immediate future will largely depend on the state of relations between Russia and Turkey, which will have to take Azerbaijan's position into account. It should be remembered that both these countries' interests clash not only in the South Caucasus, but also in other theatres, including Syria and Libya, and perhaps even in Ukraine (Ankara's military cooperation with Kyiv, which is of concern to Moscow); their relationship contains elements of both confrontation and cooperation (nuclear energy; the sale to Turkey of S-400 missile systems). There are many indications that the next four and a half years – that is, the agreed period for the Russian peacekeepers' presence in Nagorno-Karabakh – will be decisive for the future balance of power. One should assume that Moscow will want to guarantee itself an extension of the mandate at that time, while Ankara will want the mandate to expire, or possibly to co-opt a Turkish contingent into it. It cannot be ruled out that in the absence of any compromise, another war will break out, one in which this time Turkish forces would participate openly.

²⁴ *Войны в Карабахе можно было избежать: откровенное интервью Владимира Путина*, Sputnik на русском, 17 November 2020, www.youtube.com.