
Reconsidering Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy on the 25th Anniversary of Restored Independence

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Abstract

2016 marked the 25th anniversary of the restoration of Azerbaijan's state independence. Able to reinstate independence twice in the past century- in 1918 and 1991- Azerbaijan carries on its ancient and prolific tradition of statehood. This also means twice ridding itself of occupation in a single century and makes state sovereignty the greatest accomplishment and asset for the country. Throughout a 25 year journey under such complicated circumstances, Azerbaijan has gone from being a country with a stagnant economy to becoming the leader nation in the South Caucasus. This nation has become a reliable energy security partner, and has evolved from being a recipient of international aid to a donor country. Initially, an average member of the international community, Azerbaijan eventually reached the level of non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2012-2013). This article reviews the evolution of the foreign policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan over the last 25 years.

Key Words

Azerbaijan, Independence, Energy Security, Balanced and Multi-Vector Foreign Policy, Transportation Corridor.

Introduction

By the late 20th century, a new world order had emerged in the aftermath of the Warsaw Pact's dissolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Regarding its significance, that phase can only be compared to the new political system that followed the Treaty of Westphalia. Changes transpiring in the dawn of the 1990s predetermined the establishment of the new world order. Geopolitical perturbations accompanied the transition from a bipolar to a unipolar world. The unification of Germany, the breakup of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia as well as the geopolitical shifts caused by the Western orientation of the Central and Eastern European countries culminated in the rise of Eurocentrism and Euro-Atlantic integration.

At the same time, the number of local conflicts and wars around the

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world was on the rise. Observations demonstrate that these minor conflicts played a vital role in the shaping of the new world order. Furthermore, neglect of the principles of international law by the big power centers in the course of military-political clashes and lack of a fair attitude towards the local conflicts engendered doubts about the new order within the system of the international relations. The 20th century was characterised by an increasing number of hotbeds around the world and the commencement of the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world.

It would be helpful to review the foreign policy courses of the newly-independent nations of the late 20th century. Following the collapse of the USSR, three of the 15 former union republics- Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia- immediately chose the path of Euro- Atlantic integration. All three eventually became European Union and NATO member states owing to the consistency of that strategic choice. Meanwhile, the rest, albeit joining the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States, were unable to pursue a steady foreign policy line over the next 25 years. Georgia and Ukraine serve as an example. There has been an absolute divergence between the orientation poles that both nations pursued in the first 15 years of their independence and their choices in the following period. In Moldova also,

the ardent pro-Westerners along with the political circles representing the pro-Russian population, have shown themselves capable of influencing the country's strategic choices.

Local conflicts that erupted in the wake of the collapse of the previous system have had a profound impact on the foreign policy of the countries in the Central Asia and all across the post-Soviet space. If, in Central Asia, foreign policy is all about the rivalry over water resources, ethnic conflicts rest at the heart of the problems in the Caucasus, Moldova and Ukraine.

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Those were the geopolitical circumstances under which the Republic of Azerbaijan declared its independence on 18 October 1991. This nation has come a long way in those 25 years in terms of its foreign policy. There is a direct link between gaining a deserved foothold in the system of international relations, proving itself

as an equal partner, and the ability to pursue a foreign policy that meets the realities of the new world order.

The foreign policy of independent Azerbaijan can be divided into three phases. The first stage was characterized by the chaos that also characterized the whole political life of the country during the early years of independence between 1991 and 1993. The second phase covers the years Azerbaijan had been led by its National Leader Heydar Aliyev between his rise to Presidency on 15 June 1993 and 12 December 2003 when he passed away. That was a period of stabilization in the aggravated relations with the country's neighbors and the shaping of the founding principles of an independent foreign policy under Azerbaijan's National Leader Heydar Aliyev. The third phase, which covers the period between 2003 and the present, is characterized by the ascending foreign policy course taken as Azerbaijan has transformed itself into a leading nation of the South Caucasus and a reliable partner in broader international relations.

Azerbaijan went through an incredibly complex and arduous period in the early years of its independence. Armenia was pushing forward with the occupation of the country's territories while, due to the crumbling of the previous system, the economy went into a recession, thus also derailing domestic stability.

Conveying the truth about Azerbaijan in the international arena also proved to be a challenge. The Armenian diaspora, with its over 100-year-old, well-structured organization, and the Armenian lobby, being its principal benefactor, had managed to keep Azerbaijan under a kind of information isolation on the international scene. It was no coincidence that during that time, at the behest of the Armenian diaspora, the U.S. adopted a legislative act that prohibited assistance to Azerbaijan- despite the latter being the actual victim of military aggression, and the country whose territory was occupied. Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act adopted in 1992 read, "United States assistance under this or any other Act may not be provided to the Government of Azerbaijan until the President determines, and so reports to the Congress, that the Government of Azerbaijan is taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh".¹ At the time, that unfair and biased attitude was displayed by other countries as well. All of that produced enormous challenges for the diplomacy of a new sovereign subject of the system of international affairs, the Republic of Azerbaijan.

In the first years of Azerbaijan's independence, the major foreign policy obstacles were, on the one hand, ongoing pressure by the Armenian diaspora

and the Armenian occupation and on the other hand, the incompetency and amateur performance of the duties on behalf of the individuals that then stood at the country's helm. Due to the impulsive nature of the foreign policy and the lack of a systematic approach, the specifics of the geopolitical location of Azerbaijan were not taken into account, and pressing issues received no conceptual consideration.

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The lack of conceptual approach in its foreign policy, alongside utopian and detached-from-reality objectives, exacerbated Azerbaijan's relationship with some countries, especially its immediate neighbors. As a result, Azerbaijan found itself isolated in the international arena, its ties with most of the neighboring countries aggravated, and, owing to the efforts of the Armenian diaspora, the country found itself in an information blockade. Therefore, the first phase of independent Azerbaijan's foreign policy can be described as the lost years.

The Phase of Developing Key Foreign Policy Principles and Directions

The shaping of key foreign policy principles and directions commenced in 1993 with the National Leader Heydar Aliyev's return to power. The foreign policy strategy that he had initiated was aimed at rescuing the country from imminent collapse, restoring its territorial integrity and identifying future development strategies. That type of foreign policy completely altered the country's position in the international arena. Escaping international isolation, pursuing a balanced foreign policy, integrating into the global economy, channeling the country's economic potential towards solidifying of its foreign policy positions, arranging a concerted performance by Azerbaijanis living abroad, and ultimately transforming the country into the region's economic powerhouse, constituted the conceptual pillars of that strategy.

A balanced foreign policy, multi-vector cooperation, equal relations, reliable partnership and a pragmatic political course, underpinned by the principle of independent policy, were the factors brought about by the introduction of Heydar Aliyev's visionary strategy into the foreign policy concept of independent statehood. Azerbaijan

began to conduct a balanced and multi-vector foreign policy, taking into consideration the uniqueness of its location in the region. Those were the founding principles that shaped the second phase and that continue to be the case today. Azerbaijan made its strategic choice in the second phase, and the sustainability and consistency of that choice have been a primary reason for its success.

An independent policy based on national interests is the cornerstone of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. It must be noted that there is only a handful of nations capable of pursuing an independent foreign policy in a modern world in which the process of globalization is utterly saturated.

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Meanwhile, the geopolitical significance of our country's geographic location compounds that choice. The Caucasus have remained a geopolitically sensitive arena of perpetual rivalry throughout their history. The enduring presence of the bearers of different civilizations, cultures and faiths have left a noticeable

imprint on the political processes in the region. One of the eminent figures of classic geopolitical thought, Karl Haushofer, classified the Caucasus as an historical confrontation zone, and equated it to the Bosphorus, Gibraltar, and the Suez Canal regarding its geographic relevance.²

Owing to its strategic importance, many analysts view the Caucasus on a par with the Balkans and Central Asia. Those three stand out for their geopolitical weight, as well as for their geographic significance stemming from the role of being at the crossroads of different civilizations. It is no coincidence that all three regions are regarded as hot spots in the new world order, where the geopolitical environment is undergoing transformations accompanied by persistent ethnic-religious conflicts.³

Global and regional power centers have always sought to keep the Caucasus within their influence orbit. The struggle for influence in the Caucasus among the major Eurasian powers has historically occurred in the environment of ethnic and religious divergence in the region, deprived of a national consolidating force. Constant infighting between the clans and isolationism has regularly undermined this region, making it vulnerable to external interference.⁴

Therefore, it is rather challenging to implement an independent and

balanced foreign policy based on national interests, in a region that is so sensitive from the geopolitical point of view. This is evident in the foreign policy course of the three countries in the South Caucasus. Armenia is the region's outpost state, where most of the strategic assets are foreign-owned. Georgia encounters problems due to its orientation towards a single pole and due to the inconsistency of its foreign policy outline. For that reason, an independent and balanced foreign policy course distinguishes Azerbaijan from the rest regarding its geopolitical relevance.

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An independent foreign policy primarily rests on the aspiration to forge equal relations with all countries. Azerbaijan is affiliated with no military-political block and focuses on beneficial cooperation with countries of all shapes and sizes. Azerbaijan does not tolerate the language of pressure,

and cooperation with foreign partners is based solely on reciprocity. This is an essential element that defined the country's foreign policy direction developed in the second phase.

The integration processes that the Republic of Azerbaijan has been involved with are also economic and cultural, rather than military-political. One of the foreign policy priorities of the early years of independence-Euro-Atlantic integration- covered the period of evolution of the country's legislature, identification of favorable trade opportunities, intensive contacts, and cooperation based on mutual interests. At the same time, Euro-Atlantic integration does not conflict with the country's desire to join alternative integration processes and pursuit of bilateral cooperation based on an equal footing. In short, Euro-Atlantic integration by no means impairs Azerbaijan's leeway in its independent foreign policy. At the same time, equal partnership remains the core of that integration.

The status of being a reliable partner on the international scene is another major principle of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. That aim certainly requires a strong political leader and skillful use of the country's economic potential. The place and role of every nation in history are determined by the extraordinary

mission of a brilliant individual who dares to assume the responsibility of playing an indispensable role in the fate of that nation's history and to build solid traditions of statehood thanks to his or her own wisdom and vision. For the Russians that person was Peter the Great, just like George Washington to the Americans, Winston Churchill to the British, Charles de Gaulle to the French, Otto von Bismarck to the Germans, Mao Zedong to the Chinese, and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to the Turks; to the Azerbaijanis, that man was Heydar Aliyev.⁵

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In this sense, starting from 1993, increasing interest towards our country in the international arena and the implementation of enormous energy projects under the political leadership of Heydar Aliyev transformed Azerbaijan into a trustworthy partner, first regionally and then in the wider geography.

The energy policy shaped by the National Leader Heydar Aliyev and further enhanced under the incumbent

President Ilham Aliyev aimed to uphold the country's national interests. That strategy helped Azerbaijan to secure one of the leading roles in various regional and global projects. Today, Azerbaijan is a steadfast partner in the energy security area and plays a significant role in ensuring the energy security of European countries.⁶

It all started back in 1994, with the signing of the "Contract of the Century". For the first time in history, Azerbaijan unlocked the Caspian Sea for joint development by multinational companies, and managed to attract multi-billion dollar investments in the petroleum industry. Appropriate infrastructure connecting the Mediterranean Sea with the Black Sea was created. Back then, many considered delivery of the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian Sea to the Western markets a fantasy. Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia turned the fantasy into reality, when they completed the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline.

Thus, what we call the second phase, spanning 1993-2003, became the time of establishment of all of the founding principles of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. In the third millennium, Azerbaijan is already recognized in the international arena as a country that conducts an independent foreign policy backed by

national interests, a nation that pursues equal cooperation with every nation and international organization, and a dependable partner that implements multi-vector and diversified foreign policy.

New Foreign Policy Horizons

In the third phase, which started in 2003, President Ilham Aliyev has continued the independence path with the well-established traditions and managed to cement Azerbaijan's international position and elevate it to the next level. In the new millennium, Azerbaijan is no longer a mediocre player on the global scene, but an initiator of and participant in many regional-scale projects, as well as a country known for its international prominence.

Committed to an independent policy course that corresponds to its national interests, Azerbaijan develops different projects; continues equal engagement with its partners, both on a bilateral and multilateral basis; duly confronts the international pressure exerted by the Armenian diaspora; and communicates the truth about our country to the wider global audience. At this stage, Azerbaijan's foreign policy goes beyond just one direction and targets mutually beneficial cooperation across the board.

Our country joins integration processes without hindering its foreign policy agenda. It was as part of this phase that Azerbaijan reaffirmed its independent foreign policy course by becoming a member of the Non-Aligned Movement in 2011.⁷

The greatest international accomplishment of the last 25 years has undoubtedly been Azerbaijan's election, as a non-permanent member, to the UN Security Council for 2012-2013.⁸ Our country represented the Eastern European group and secured the seat thanks to overwhelming support coming from 155 UN member states. Throughout the election process Azerbaijan's competitors were Armenia, Slovenia and Hungary. Intimidated by Azerbaijan's rising relevance, Armenia opted to pull out at the initial stage. That decision was a clear manifestation of how Azerbaijan had been able to breach the information blockade imposed by the Armenian diaspora on the international scene in the early years of our independence. Azerbaijan eventually secured the full support of the European Union and finished ahead of Slovenia and Hungary- yet another example of our country being recognized as a steadfast partner.⁹

Azerbaijan added a new cooperation format to its foreign policy in the third millennium. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation had been the priority for the first years of independence. The new phase saw the introduction

of more integrated relations and trilateral cooperation formats. Given the presence of certain trends in the region, the realization of such trilateral cooperation formats required greater flexibility. Azerbaijan is the initiator of several trilateral projects. Azerbaijan-Iran-Turkey, Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey and Azerbaijan-Russia-Iran are the platforms for addressing regional matters as well as an important initiative calling for the development of cooperation ties. At the same time, they also display the importance that Azerbaijan attaches to mutually beneficial relations with its neighbors, with the exception of Armenia.¹⁰

The comprehensive development of collaboration with its strategic partners is one of the priority directions for Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Since its independence, Azerbaijan has signed Treaties of Strategic Cooperation with 17 different countries. Along with its traditional partners, the list also includes new countries. Eight of those countries are European nations (Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Croatia, Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic). Others include the Turkic nations with whom Azerbaijan shares historic roots (Turkey, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan), as well as traditional partners in the post-Soviet space (Russia, Ukraine and Georgia). We also enjoy strategic relations with Pakistan- a nation that fully buttresses Azerbaijan in every international platform.

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Among our strategic partners, relations with the Turkic-speaking countries are of particular importance. The relationship with those countries is determined not just by a high level of political and economic cooperation but also by common roots, religion, history, culture and values. Ties between Azerbaijan and Turkey are characterized by the motto "one nation-two states". No other two countries in the world share so much affinity and pursue such similar foreign policy goals.

Azerbaijan has always proven its reliability in relationships with its partners and neighbors. No matter the situation- Georgia suffering from an energy crisis, the U.S. conducting anti-terrorism operations, or Russia and Iran being subjected to sanctions- all of those countries witnessed Azerbaijan's worthiness. Those were the milestones along Azerbaijan's journey to non-permanent membership in the UN Security Council. With its unique positioning as a member of both the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Council of Europe, Azerbaijan used its presence in the Security

Council to advocate for concerted efforts in tackling global problems and defending the rule of international law and the principle of justice.

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Energy policy has immensely contributed to Azerbaijan’s ability to gain the status of a reliable partner. In the first decade of the new millennium Azerbaijan, together with Turkey and Georgia, managed to build a vast energy infrastructure. The Baku- Tbilisi- Ceyhan oil pipeline commissioned in 2006 was a historic project that has not just enabled Azerbaijan’s access to the world markets but also introduced a new globally important supply corridor. The project was a breakthrough in terms of energy infrastructure in the region and across the entire continent.

Azerbaijan also contributes to Europe’s energy security when it comes to natural gas supply. We all know that development of the Shahdeniz field in the Azerbaijan sector of the Caspian Sea placed our country within the ranks of

the world’s major natural gas exporters. The commissioning of the Baku- Tbilisi- Erzurum gas pipeline was a remarkable event for the region. This pipeline was the starting point for the delivery of gas to the European markets through Georgia and Turkey. The second decade of the third millennium is witnessing the construction of the Trans-Anatolian (TANAP) and Trans-Adriatic pipelines (TAP). If in the 20th century Azerbaijan required foreign support for the realization of such projects, nowadays, Azerbaijan carries the significant financial burden of those projects that will play a serious role in ensuring Europe’s energy security.

The choice of the Trans-Adriatic pipeline project as the main export route for the delivery of the Shahdeniz gas to Europe demonstrates that implementation of any global scale project in this region without Azerbaijan’s consent and involvement is inconceivable. With an estimated price tag of US\$45 billion, the implementation of the Shandeniz-2, TANAP and TAP projects will ultimately redraw Europe’s energy map.¹¹

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Azerbaijan's energy policy has solidified the country's posture on the international scene and also, quite naturally, enhanced the sustainability of its economy. Azerbaijan's GDP has tripled over the last 12 years, resulting in budget growth by 20 times over the course of this period. Meanwhile poverty levels have dropped from 40% down to five.¹² The country's foreign exchange reserves today stand at around US\$ 40 billion.¹³

The international community recognizes these accomplishments. The World Economic Forum ranks Azerbaijan 40th in its Global Competitiveness Report.¹⁴ The World Bank places Azerbaijan in the "Upper Middle Income" countries group,¹⁵ and the UN Development Program's Human Development Index classifies Azerbaijan as a "high human development" country.¹⁶

Economically potent Azerbaijan has become a regional center and has gained economic leverage in the Mediterranean and Black Sea basins. Today, Azerbaijan's investments are a significant factor in Turkey, Georgia, Romania and Ukraine. On the other hand, Azerbaijan is gradually transforming itself into a transit country and a transportation hub. One of the alternative transportation routes for the Central Asian countries runs through

Azerbaijan. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad connection, which will link different regions with the North-South international transportation corridor, will provide still greater opportunities for bolstering economic cooperation. Thus, economic diplomacy has become a primary direction of Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

Reflection of multicultural values in the foreign policy is aimed at propagating the "Azerbaijani Model of Multiculturalism" around the world.

One of the most important aspects of the country's foreign policy is the presence of multiculturalism principles, and this reflects its true essence. Indeed, multiculturalism in Azerbaijan is a mirror of the public sentiment and of a thousand- years-old lifestyle. Reflection of multicultural values in the foreign policy is aimed at propagating the "Azerbaijani Model of Multiculturalism" around the world. Nowadays we see enduring clashes of different religions, cultures and overall divergence. Therefore, it is very relevant that a lifestyle based on tolerance and harmony, the one accepted as Azerbaijan's state policy, is showcased to the world. In this sense, it would

be helpful to review how relevant multicultural values are in Azerbaijani society.

Azerbaijan sits at the crossroads between the East and the West, between Islam and Christianity, and combines the legacy of different civilizations and cultures. Azerbaijan serves as a bridge between the East and the West, and as a point of convergence. Azerbaijan has for centuries absorbed the values that conformed to its natural peculiarities, and eventually developed a growth model of its own, which makes this country a bearer of both Western and Eastern values.

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Historically, representatives of different faiths and cultures coexisted peacefully in Azerbaijan, and that has only enriched this society. Azerbaijan is a Muslim country where the Christians and the Jews have lived side-by-side for centuries. Multiculturalism that implies coexistence based on mutual respect between the representatives of different values is regarded as a lifestyle in Azerbaijan. Throughout history, our country has remained free of religious, ethnic or any other discrimination.

Being an integral part of the Turkic civilization, Azerbaijan honors individual values. The tradition of statehood that has endured throughout every historical phase, as well as the superiority of natural customs and traditions in the society, monotheistic religious views, family values, tolerance towards the bearers of other civilizations, and habits of coexistence make up the founding principles of our lifestyle.¹⁷

The traditions that have evolved throughout the centuries are now an inalienable part of our lives. A statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, delivered at the opening of the 7th UN Alliances of Civilizations Global Forum held in April 2016 in Baku, clearly conveys the society's stance on multiculturalism in Azerbaijan, "Azerbaijan for centuries was a place where religions, cultures, civilizations met. We are not only a geographic bridge between East and West, but also a cultural bridge. For centuries, representatives of religions, cultures lived in peace and dignity in Azerbaijan. Religious tolerance, multiculturalism always was present here. There was no word "multiculturalism", but ideas were always present".¹⁸

In the new millennium, changes in the philosophy of coexistence among

different civilizations, cultures, faiths and even peoples is one of the greatest challenges. The globalization simply cannot survive while being deprived of the coexistence of different cultures. The world no longer accepts the notions of a monocultural or monoethnic society or a country. Moreover, in international relations, no country can prosper in an isolated environment, be it in the political, economic or cultural domain. Humankind can only thrive when there is respect for different values. True, there is a handful of monoethnic countries around the world. Some find themselves isolated for geographic, historic or political reasons. Otherwise it is the embodiment of a chauvinistic and intolerant policy. For example, Armenia stands as a monoethnic country in our region.

Azerbaijan has managed to preserve its own historical traditions against the backdrop of cultural intransigence, the aggravation of West-Islam relations, and the surge of different phobias around the world. In this sense, Azerbaijan has been taking appropriate steps aimed at contributing to intercultural dialogue in the global arena, and this has remained a major component of our foreign policy. The foundation of a new cultural bridge between the West and the East was laid in Baku in 2008, when the city hosted the conference of the Council of Europe's

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Culture Ministers. What made that event special was that their colleagues from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation were also invited. As a follow-up to that process, Azerbaijan initiated and hosted another event in 2009, where the ministers of culture from European countries were able to participate in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation Culture Ministers' Conference in Azerbaijan.

Since 2011, Azerbaijan's initiative has become a consistent platform. Every two years Azerbaijan hosts the World Intercultural Dialogue Forum. Baku also hosted the 7th UN Alliances of Civilizations Forum in 2016. That event demonstrated the "Azerbaijani Model of Multiculturalism" to the rest of the world. From this perspective, multiculturalism is a new dimension of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. This is also a thought-provoking challenge for all of humankind.

Nagorno-Karabakh: “Hot” Rather Than “Frozen” Conflict

The biggest challenge that Azerbaijan has encountered in the independence years is the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In the international arena, restoration of territorial integrity is our primary objective. It is no secret that for over 20 years Azerbaijan’s historical part- Nagorno-Karabakh and its seven adjacent provinces- have remained under occupation by Armenia. As a result of that military aggression and the policy of ethnic cleansing, 20% of our territory has been occupied and over one million people have become refugees and internally displaced persons.

Azerbaijanis were subjected to genocide in the active phase of the conflict. Overnight, on 25-26 February 1992, the armed forces of Armenia, backed by the remainders of the ex-Soviet troops stationed in Khankendi, invaded the city of Khojaly and perpetrated a genocide. As a result, 613 civilians, including 63 children, 106 women and 70 elderly were brutally murdered, some tortured to death.¹⁹

Since the early days of independence the most important task that Azerbaijan’s foreign policy faced has been to communicate the truth about

our country to the wider international audience and expose Armenians’ deceptions. Worldwide recognition of the Khojaly genocide was identified as a primary objective at the 2011 annual gathering of members of the diplomatic service of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

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Since then, 13 national parliaments (2012-Mexico, Pakistan and Columbia; 2013-the Czech Republic, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Peru, Romania, Panama and Jordan; 2014-Sudan and Honduras; 2015-Guatemala; 2016-National Council of Slovenia), as well as 19 states in the U.S. and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (2012) have officially recognized the Khojaly Genocide.²⁰ All of this is testimony to Azerbaijan’s having succeeded in delivering the truth about our country to the world.

The OSCE Minsk Group was ostensibly established in March 1992 for the resolution of the conflict. As of December 1996, three countries had performed the duties of the Minsk Group as co-chairs- Russia, the U.S. and France. Regrettably, the conflict still remains unresolved. Although

there has been a ceasefire in place since 1994, armed incidents along the Line of Contact have regularly happened. No progress has yet been made in the negotiations process. Armenia is not interested in the resolution of the problem and aims to keep it frozen. Apparently, both Armenia and the co-chairs are satisfied with the situation as long as a large-scale war is avoidable. However, recent tensions in April 2016, provoked by Armenia, which entailed significant loss of life, and armed clashes with both sides using heavy weaponry, once again demonstrated that the conflict is not in fact frozen, and could ignite at any moment. This event prompted immediate action on behalf of the co-chairs and riveted the attention of the international community to this dispute.

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Azerbaijan has international law on its side with regards to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The international community and all of the international organizations buttress the idea of

Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, with many documents passed to that end. The UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act, UN Security Council Resolutions 822, 856, 874 and 884, the UN General Assembly Resolution of 2008, as well as decisions and resolutions adopted by the Non-Allied Movement, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, NATO, the European Parliament, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and other international institutions constitute the legal grounds for the resolution of this conflict and are underpinned by the norms and principles of international law. All of these documents reaffirm Azerbaijan's sovereignty, territorial integrity and the inviolability of its internationally recognized borders.

However, the lack of a fair attitude in the system of international relations continues to obstruct the resolution of this conflict. The present day world order is governed not by international law but at the behest of the big power centers. For them, application of double standards concerning the Armenia-Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is, of course, a standard practice and the scales are tipped in one side's favor due to Azerbaijan being a Muslim nation and Armenia representing the Christian world. From this perspective, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict can be considered a geopolitical fault line in light of resurging Islamophobic trends around the world.

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Over the course of these years, Azerbaijan's foreign policy has focused on building a solid legal base for the just resolution of the conflict in line with the country's territorial integrity, across all the international platforms, and the documents passed are a clear demonstration of the country's success in doing this. Protraction of the resolution of the conflict stems from the lack of efficient mechanisms within international law and the conflicting geopolitical interests of the global powers.

The Republic of Azerbaijan celebrated the 25th anniversary of its independence in 2016. In this quarter century, the country has succeeded in taking its rightful place in the system of international relations. To date, Azerbaijan has established diplomatic ties with 177 countries and is represented with 91 diplomatic

missions in foreign countries and international organizations, while 62 foreign diplomatic missions operate in Baku.

Despite its complex geopolitical location and tumultuous development path, for all these years, Azerbaijan has managed to conduct an independent and balanced foreign policy backed by its national interests. Equal engagement with all parties has enabled Azerbaijan to implement a mutually beneficial cooperation, transforming our country into an initiator of main regional-scale projects and a trustworthy partner.

Despite its complex geopolitical location and tumultuous development path, Azerbaijan has managed to conduct an independent and balanced foreign policy backed by its national interests.

Conclusion

When Azerbaijan restored its independence from a collapsing Soviet Union in 1991, the country faced enormous challenges as the old system crumbled and the new one was yet

to be established. At the same time, neighbouring Armenia was waging an all-out warfare against Azerbaijan, and trying to occupy Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region. In 2016, Azerbaijan's independence and independent foreign policy marked its 25th year. A retrospective analysis of this quarter-century-long policy reveals that, despite early challenges, Azerbaijan has successfully managed to not only strengthen its fragile statehood and enter into a path of sustainable development, but also pursue a very skillfully crafted foreign policy that has made the country a regional leader and globally respected actor.

Thus, the last 25 years of foreign policy of independent Azerbaijan can be divided into three phases. The first one, between 1991-1993 was characterized by the chaos that was the result of both objective difficulties generated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the war in Nagorno-Karabakh against Armenia (supported by a well-established international diaspora), and subjective problems generated by the incompetence of the country's early political leadership, whose decisions frequently failed to take into account harsh geopolitical realities in our region. The second phase covered the years between 1993 and 2003. This period was launched by Azerbaijan's National Leader, Heydar Aliyev, after his return

to power, and was characterized by a stabilization of aggravated relations with neighbors and the shaping of the founding principles of an independent foreign policy. The third phase has spanned from 2003 to the present, and through this period, under the leadership of President Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan has transformed itself into a leader nation of the South Caucasus and a reliable partner in international relations.

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While analysing the last 25 years of Azerbaijan's independent foreign policy, particular attention should also be placed on the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that has resulted in the deaths of about 30,000 people and the occupation of 20% of the internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan. Throughout the last 25 years, Azerbaijan has repeatedly declared the restoration of the country's territorial integrity as the key priority of its foreign policy.

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Azerbaijan gives preference to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, but also maintains the right to resort to military power to restore its territorial integrity as international peace efforts visibly fail due to the ineffectiveness of mediations and to Armenia's uncompromising position. As the rise of tensions in early April of 2016 once again demonstrated, the conflict is not frozen and could ignite at any time. Current efforts to maintain the status-quo are no longer sustainable.

Endnotes

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