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US-Azerbaijan Relations: Opportunities and Risks

Farhad Mammadov

 Mirza İbrahimov 8, Baku, AZ1005, Azerbaijan

 (+994 12) 596-82-39, (+994 12) 596-82-41

 E-mail: www.aircenter.az, info@aircenter.az

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The history of Azerbaijan–United States relations has developed with its own internal dynamics. At different times, issues such as energy, security and counterterrorism, investment, regional competition with Russia, NATO’s operation in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan’s proximity to Iran, and U.S. participation in the OSCE Minsk Group became priorities in Washington’s approach to Azerbaijan. Over the years, U.S. ambassadors in Baku have included Sovietologists, Turkologists, and diplomats with security backgrounds. At the present stage, the United States does not have an ambassador in Azerbaijan, and it will be important to see whom Washington nominates for this role, as today’s phase of bilateral relations spans several different areas, each with its own geographic context and strategic objectives.

The election of President Trump opened a new, more pragmatic and results-oriented stage in U.S.–Azerbaijan relations. The Trump administration consistently demonstrated openness to dialogue, strategic clarity, and a willingness to engage with Azerbaijan on the basis of mutual interest and respect.

By contrast, relations with the Biden administration were particularly difficult for Azerbaijan. It is important to examine the reasons for these difficulties and the failures of U.S. policy during that period so that the same mistakes are not repeated. President Biden’s entire term, beginning in 2021, coincided with the post-war period, yet Washington did not offer a coherent or consistent policy line. Instead of adopting an active and well-balanced approach, President Biden delegated this file almost entirely to Secretary of State Blinken, whose actions were ineffective and produced no tangible results.

In this context, it is important to recall how the post-war situation initially unfolded.

Following the 44-day Patriotic War, as a result of which Azerbaijan liberated its territories from decades of Armenian occupation, Russia played the leading role in mediating between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The Russian peacekeeping contingent was deployed in Karabakh, and Moscow was the primary actor in the process of opening regional transport links. Once the Biden–Blinken administration began functioning fully, in June 2021 Azerbaijan agreed to U.S. and Georgian mediation, with the United States taking the lead and Georgia serving as an intermediary in the release of several Armenian citizens who had been detained for violating Azerbaijan’s laws and whose status was not addressed by the 2020 ceasefire agreement. In return, Armenia provided some minefield maps, which later proved to be incomplete and insufficient for effective demining work.

This was the first such step taken without Russia's participation, and by doing so, Azerbaijan offered the United States an opportunity to engage in mediation and introduce a new approach to the settlement process.

Alongside these developments, Azerbaijan agreed to U.S. involvement in working on the text of the peace treaty, and multi-day negotiations between the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia were subsequently held in the United States. However, Secretary Blinken's Armenia-centric approach and President Biden's failure to understand Azerbaijan's legitimate expectations repeatedly created crises in relations between Baku and Washington. Blinken's manipulative and biased behavior undermined the process and further strained bilateral ties.

A foreign policy driven by ideology rather than facts on the ground, the pressure of Armenian lobbying groups, and additional tensions with Russia after its invasion of Ukraine made the U.S. position increasingly unpredictable. Blinken's key mistake was imposing preconditions on Azerbaijan, all of which were tied to Azerbaijan–Armenia issues. A clear example of his inconsistency was his position on the Lachin corridor, where he effectively supported maintaining Russian control in order to limit Azerbaijan's ability to restore its legitimate rights. Yet, while taking this stance toward Azerbaijan, he insisted that there could be no dialogue with Russia because of the war in Ukraine and the need to defend Ukraine's territorial integrity. Nevertheless, he sent American diplomats to meet Russian diplomats in Türkiye in August 2023 to discuss joint steps that would preserve Russian control over the Lachin route.

These inconsistent and illogical steps deepened the crisis in bilateral relations. On the one hand, guided by an Armenia-centric approach, they spoke about confronting Russia while at the same time supporting the Armenian authorities who were engaged in the re-export of sanctioned goods from Russia and the import of sanctioned goods into Russia. During the Biden–Blinken period, Armenia's dependence on Russia only increased, not decreased.

Azerbaijan, in fact, did far more than the United States to shift public sentiment in Armenia from pro-Russian to pro-Western. It was Azerbaijan's actions in Karabakh and along the Armenia–Azerbaijan border that created opportunities for the Pashinyan government to promote public disappointment with Russia and to increase trust in Western institutions and countries. Russian forces left Azerbaijani territory ahead of schedule. Armenia removed Russian troops from its border with Azerbaijan, which were deployed there in 2021. This occurred after Azerbaijan's proposal in the peace treaty that no third-party forces should be present on the joint border, a proposal Armenia effectively accepted in practice. All of this was the result

of Azerbaijan's actions; the West, meaning the United States and the European Union, played no role in these developments.

There are many such examples of the Biden–Blinken administration's lack of adequacy and detachment from reality. In summary, it can be said that the Biden–Blinken administration effectively undermined the outcomes of the 44-day war and prolonged the implementation of its results by several years.

This broader context also demonstrates why it is important to return to the fundamental outcomes of the 44-day war and assess where progress has been made and where it has been delayed.

There are four main outcomes of the 44-day war:

- The first outcome is the restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty. This is the only outcome that has been fully and decisively achieved, and it stands as a direct result of Azerbaijan's determined, responsible, and strategically coherent policy. It is a historic achievement that fundamentally reshaped the regional landscape.
- The second outcome is the establishment of **irreversible peace** between Azerbaijan and Armenia — and it is important to underline this word, because only irreversible peace can guarantee stability and prevent a return to past conflicts. This outcome remains in progress.
- The third outcome is the normalization of Armenian–Turkish relations, which is moving forward gradually.
- The fourth outcome is the opening of regional communications, a goal still in the implementation phase.

These outcomes are interconnected, and there is a clear understanding of how they should be pursued and in what sequence in order to fully realize the results of the war.

The election of President Trump, or, as President Ilham Aliyev noted, more precisely the defeat of Kamala Harris, had a significant impact on the position of the Pashinyan government. Since the spring of 2025, Armenia's approach to the peace treaty has become more constructive and pragmatic. This opened the way for a breakthrough in the peace process, which was agreed in Abu Dhabi and formalized in Washington on August 8 with the participation of U.S. President Trump, to whom we express our gratitude.

Following the signing of the Joint Declaration in Washington, there is now a clear understanding of how and within what timeframe these outcomes can be achieved. The peace process is developing in a bilateral format. Both Azerbaijan and Armenia consider the bilateral format the only viable option. The United States has become the only country that, with the consent of both Azerbaijan and Armenia, will have a role in one communication project, TRIPP, the implementation of which will create conditions for the overall unblocking of regional transport routes.

The trilateral summit in Washington and the adoption of the Joint Declaration were important milestones in the peace process. After this meeting, numerous statements were made and concrete steps were taken to strengthen the peace agenda between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Conditions were created to enable direct people-to-people contacts and to involve representatives of civil society from both sides in a bilateral format. I am part of this effort as well. A visit to Yerevan has already taken place, and we are expecting representatives of Armenian civil society in Baku soon.

U.S. participation in the TRIPP project has eased tensions surrounding this initiative, which forms part of the Zangezur corridor. The final decision that will be adopted between the governments of Armenia and the United States, and coordinated with Azerbaijan, will create a new situation in the peace process.

Thus, the peace process and the implementation of the outcomes of the 44-day war are transforming regional dynamics that were shaped 30 years ago. This transformation is taking place against the backdrop of greater sovereignty among regional states and the weakening role of external actors. The United States plays an important role in this transformation, not only at the negotiating table but also on the ground. And this has become possible as a result of decisions taken by the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The peace agenda has also had a positive impact on U.S.–Azerbaijan relations. During a meeting with an American diplomat, I was asked the following question: what interest does the United States have in raising relations with Azerbaijan to the level of a strategic partnership?

I appreciate such simple and pragmatic questions. They resemble the famous interview question about how to sell a pen: the answer depends on understanding the real needs of the person in front of you. Let me try to answer this question — and, in turn, the question of why Azerbaijan needs a strategic relationship with the United States.

So, why does the United States need a strategic relationship with Azerbaijan?

- **First**, the transformations in the South Caucasus arising from the outcomes of the war will shape regional dynamics for the next 20–30 years. With the TRIPP project, the United States has a real opportunity to secure its place in the new regional configuration.
- **Second**, the United States has already formalized its relations with Central Asia, and in the coming years the most predictable physical access route to Central Asia will run through the South Caucasus, where Azerbaijan plays a key role.
- **Third**, after the U.S.–Central Asia summit, the Organization of Turkic States has become one of the most predictable regional platforms, uniting U.S. allies and partners, and its objectives align with U.S. interests. Azerbaijan is an active member of the Organization of Turkic States.
- **Fourth**, Azerbaijan is shaping a new role for itself in the Middle East, where its positions and strategic approaches coincide with those of the United States. In particular, neither Azerbaijan nor the United States is interested in escalation between Türkiye and Israel or between Syria and Israel.
- **Fifth**, historically, Azerbaijan has been an ally of the United States’ allies — Türkiye, Israel, and several European countries. Today, U.S. policy is more pragmatic, yet the factor of “the ally of your allies” has not lost its relevance.
- **Sixth**, in the future the United States may regain interest in the direction of Afghanistan, where Washington will need either to confront or to engage. It is worth recalling that Azerbaijan maintains an embassy in Kabul.

And why does Azerbaijan need a strategic relationship with the United States?

- First, during the period of conflict with Armenia, when Azerbaijani territories remained under Armenian occupation, Azerbaijan pursued a policy of balance in which the United States was one of the key elements. After the victory in the war and the restoration of territorial integrity, the structure and form of this balance are changing. Azerbaijan values its relations with the United States because it does not seek membership in military-political blocs or customs unions, giving priority instead to bilateral relations.
- Second, a new regional reality is emerging, and it is important for Azerbaijan to help shape regional arrangements in which geopolitical competition among major powers does not escalate into conflict. Strategic relations with the United States are useful for Azerbaijan in establishing a stable regional balance of power.

- Third, President Trump’s policy of moving away from ideological foreign policy and avoiding interference in the internal affairs of other states creates a foundation for elevating bilateral relations and overcoming long-standing obstacles such as Section 907, which for decades unfairly restricted U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan and undermined trust between the two countries.
- Fourth, sectoral cooperation in technology, artificial intelligence, logistics, asset management, and investment represent important economic interests for Azerbaijan and areas where engagement with the United States is of practical value.
- Fifth, U.S. involvement in the TRIPP project contributes to a predictable environment for the unblocking of regional communications and, at the same time, serves as a certain guarantee against revanchism.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight the risks that may arise in the process of forming a strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and the United States. The activities of Armenian lobbying groups in the United States, including their use of religious narratives, may create obstacles to the establishment of such a strategic relationship. Initiatives such as the “Peace Act,” as well as religiously framed messages voiced in Tucker Carlson’s podcasts, can pose threats to the current process. It should be emphasized that such initiatives harm Azerbaijan, Armenia, the peace process, and the realization of U.S. interests in the region.

At this historical moment, the United States and Azerbaijan share mutual interests and converging priorities that create a solid basis for elevating the relationship and overcoming existing obstacles.

Author: Farhad Mammadov, Director of the Center for Studies of the South Caucasus

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