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Between Fortress and Open Door: Azerbaijan Policy on Security, Secularism and Hybrid War

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Introduction

The South Caucasus has always been a crossroads where empires, regional powers and outside interests compete. In a world now marked by open wars, sanctions and information conflicts, small and middle states in this region are watched closely by global powers. Azerbaijan is one of them.

In a recent speech at the ruling party congress, President Ilham Aliyev set out how the government views the country's security after the 2020–2023 period, i.e. the liberation of Karabakh. Azerbaijan sees its security as resting on four pillars: hard power, economic independence, a diversified foreign policy without bloc membership, and a secular state that can withstand hybrid war waged through social media and, increasingly, artificial intelligence. This article examines each pillar and then considers the challenges.

War won; peace is to built

The starting point is that Azerbaijan's security was won, not given. For almost three decades, Karabakh and the surrounding districts were under Armenian occupation. Baku came to see the OSCE Minsk Group's mediation led by France, Russia and the United States as an effort to freeze the conflict until facts on the ground hardened into accepted legal reality – the Armenian occupation.

The military campaigns of 2020 and 2023 reversed that. They also changed what peace means in the region. Because Azerbaijan restored its internationally recognised borders, a settlement can now be built on the principle of territorial integrity. Western capitals defend that principle loudly in other conflicts but long ignored it in Azerbaijan's case.

Yet, Baku, after achieving victory, has not indulged in advancing further, despite some predictions of Western experts and think tanks. Azerbaijan proposed the main principles of the peace treaty. Thus, Azerbaijan is not only a beneficiary of the new stability but its architect. It both ended the occupation and put forward the normalization with Armenia that followed.

Yet stability is not permanent; it has to be defended every day. Defence rests first on a strong army. The second foundation, which President Ilham Aliyev stressed particularly, is economic and financial independence. A state burdened by foreign

debt or dependent on a single economic patron cannot pursue a truly sovereign foreign or domestic policy. Low external debt and energy revenues are therefore treated not just as economic indicators but as instruments of national security.

Independence without isolation

An independent foreign policy does not mean withdrawal from the world. The opposite is true: a state that wants to act independently needs as many options as possible. Azerbaijan builds those options through multilateral platforms such as the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of Turkic States, the newer C6 format and others.

What Baku avoids is membership in military-political blocs. Neither NATO to the west nor the Russian-led CSTO to the north is on the agenda. Instead, Azerbaijan deepens security ties bilaterally and trilaterally, above all with Türkiye and, increasingly, in an Azerbaijan–Türkiye–Uzbekistan format, which recently held joint exercises in Karabakh.

The logic is that of a middle power in a contested neighbourhood. Joining one bloc would make Azerbaijan an adversary of the other and limit its room to manoeuvre between Russia, Iran, the West and other global actors. Flexible partnerships deliver practical security cooperation without that cost.

Hybrid war, disinformation and AI

The newest threat is not so much military armaments but narratives. Hybrid war means shaping people's minds through social media, and it moves faster than any state response. A single fake story can spread within hours, and even a careful rebuttal rarely erases the first impression.

The format matters as much as the content. Fewer people read long texts; many react to headlines, Instagram images and short TikTok clips. Romania's 2024 presidential elections, where TikTok became a decisive tool, manifest such transformation.

Azerbaijan has long faced such campaigns from several directions, including Azerbaijani-language outlets created abroad and coordinated attacks in social media from neighboring countries.

Human psychology makes these campaigns effective. People prefer one simple explanation to several complex ones, and usually it comes in the form of various conspiracy theories, including about “the world government of rich”. A rise in oil prices may be caused by war, production decisions and the energy transition together, but “a world government is behind it” is easier to absorb. Online, a

mundane dispute between two people can be reframed as one community attacking another. Rumours of this kind fueled violence at the start of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict in the late 1980s.

Artificial intelligence adds a new layer. Large language models such as ChatGPT or Claude do not produce neutral truth from nowhere. They learn from what exists online, so they tend to reproduce the dominant view. In political science and international relations, that view is largely formed in Western media and academia. For example, decades of Armenian diaspora lobbying have shaped the relevant material about the history of Karabakh or causes of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Thus, an AI model may repeat Armenian narratives about the conflict by default. Users should ask explicitly for the positions of both sides but they rarely do that.

What kind of response should be against influence of online fake stories and organized propaganda campaign? First, law enforcement should act firmly, within the law, against those who spread provocations deliberately, as distinct from people who share false content unknowingly. Second, and more lasting, is education: schools, journalists, YouTube channels and "socially responsible influencers" must explain issues, because a government press release alone no longer persuades anyone on its own.

Secularism as a security pillar

With the Armenian threat resolved, the next challenge is religious radicalization, encouraged from outside but able to find support inside. Armenian nationalism never had a constituency within Azerbaijan. Religion is different: it is personal, emotional and important to many people, which makes it easier to exploit.

Here we should draw a careful line between spiritual values and the secular order. Only a secular state can guarantee every citizen's religious rights, because it belongs to no single group. Azerbaijan is home to Shia and Sunni Muslims, Christians and Jews; and the secular framework keeps peace between them.

The Middle East represents important and tragic lesson – what happens when religious radicalization is permitted. In Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shias, and between religious communities more broadly, has lasted for decades. Lebanon's civil strife began in the 1970s, and fifty years later the country is still an arena for outside powers. A war with an external enemy ends at a border; a civil, sectarian war, once ignited, is almost impossible to extinguish.

Radical movements also have a recognizable method. They seize on everyday grievances such as water and gas shortages, corruption or a badly handled natural

disaster response, and present themselves as the force of "moral purity." The result, as the experience of ISIS in Iraq and Syria showed, is women barred from education, imposed religious dress codes and public executions.

The historical lesson manifests that majorities do not decide such outcomes. The Bolsheviks had little popular support in 1917 and dissolved the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 once elections showed they lacked a majority. ISIS, too, was a small, armed, fanatical core. Both grew out of real social and economic hardship. Even if most Azerbaijanis value secular life, an organised group of five or ten percent could do lasting damage. Therefore, the government needs to focus on the factors: law enforcement as the guardian of the Constitution, and civic education from school onward so that citizens understand why these values matter to their country.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan's emerging new security doctrine combines old and new thinking. The old part is familiar: a strong army, a sound economy, and freedom from dependence on any single power or bloc. The new part recognises that a state can lose stability without a single foreign soldier crossing its border, through a viral clip, a manufactured sectarian incident, or an online campaign.

In this vision, secularism is not an abstract ideology but practical infrastructure for peace in a diverse society. It sits next to the army and the budget as a pillar of national security. Whether the approach succeeds will depend on balance: firmness against organised provocation, combined with openness to legitimate criticism and investment in an educated, discerning public. Here the goal of education is not to tell citizens what to believe but to help them understand why certain values matter for their country. In an age of hybrid war, that may prove to be the most durable defence of all.

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