



CENTER OF ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
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BULLETIN

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

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I. Coronavirus Pandemic

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a pandemic sweeping across the globe with severe and uncertain implications. The virus, originated in Wuhan, China, has spread at increasing rates. World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the pandemic status of COVID-19 and urged the countries to adopt relevant measures to contain the spread. Multiple countries have taken drastic steps in order to combat the spread of the virus. Borders have been closed, travel restricted, group gatherings limited, and even entire cities quarantined.

Azerbaijan has taken its own steps to limit the spread and has contributed to the global struggle in battling the virus. Pertinently Azerbaijan shares a border with Iran which has one of the highest rates of COVID-19. On 1 March 2020, Azerbaijan closed the borders with Iran in order to stem the spread of the virus. In the following weeks Azerbaijan conducted bilateral agreements to temporarily close the border with Georgia, as well as suspending travel to and from Turkey. Further, the government also limited the travel to and from other countries. AZAL, the national air carrier, is implementing charter flights to bring many Azerbaijani nationals to home, keeping two regular routes to London and Moscow every Thursday.

Azerbaijan has recorded 163 cases of coronavirus as of 29 March 2020. The

government has banned large public events such as weddings and closed some businesses including cinemas, museums and theaters as well as suspending schools and universities, limited the working hours of café and restaurants. Importantly, Azerbaijan has also cancelled Novruz festivals, the largest and important holiday for the country attesting to the seriousness of the matter.

Relevantly, Azerbaijan has taken the necessary steps to combat the virus and has been in close cooperation with the WHO. Azerbaijan welcomed a team of WHO specialists from 9-13 of March to work with the national response team in creating a 3-6 month response and preparedness plan (WHO, 12.03.2020). Further, Azerbaijan has donated \$5 Million to the Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (SPRP) of WHO which has a fundraising target of \$675 Million. Thus, Azerbaijan continues to closely monitor the situation. The virus, though it has physically separated countries through the closure of borders, has strengthened some relationships, as the countries recognize that by helping another country, they help themselves. Azerbaijan also supports global efforts both to protect national security and to contribute to curbing the pandemics.

The far-reaching effects of the virus are yet to be seen, but the virus has already damaged the global economy. The virus has caused a global recession, and oil prices have significantly dropped. If

these negative dynamics continues, it will also negatively affect all oil exporting countries. As Azerbaijan's strategic reserves amount to the country's GDP (approx. 56 mln. USD), the government is well prepared to weather economic effect of the global crisis. However, the government of Azerbaijan has assembled a task force to properly mitigate the negative economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the government of Azerbaijan and other governments have warned about the gravity of the virus, they have also emphasized the importance of staying calm, and stemming the spread of misinformation.

Ilham Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan announced the allocation of one million manats (approximately 588 million USD) to support organizations, businesses and other ventures affected by the coronavirus crisis. President Aliyev also donated all his annual salary to the special fund to fight COVID-19. Many large companies responded to the call to contribute to the fund which accumulated around 90 million manats as of 29 March 2020.

II. Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan relations

Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, President of Turkmenistan paid an official visit to Azerbaijan on 11 March 2020. Following the official welcome ceremony, President Berdimuhamedov had a one-

to-one meeting with his counterpart, Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and leaders discussed the bilateral relations between the two countries, regional issues and the international matters of mutual concern. Heads of the states held an expanded meeting with their delegations and seventeen documents were signed, which serve the development of the bilateral relations of the two countries.

Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are the strategic partners. During this visit, two countries' leaders signed "A declaration on the strategic partnership" which outlines the main directions for mutual cooperation and covers all important issues and sectors. Mutual cooperation on numbers of sectors has been mentioned in the recent documents and in the joint statement of the presidents. However, three areas are given special treatment: Business to Business cooperation (B2B), transport and transit potential, and energy sector.

In order to promote entrepreneurial activity, it is important to create favorable economic relations which are based on the strong financial and legal conditions. The documents were signed to open the direct air link between the two capital cities, and easing the visa regulations for the citizens of both states which will serve to the expansion of the B2B activities. It is believed that as Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are energy-rich countries and as there is a substantial drop in the oil prices in the

global market, mutual cooperation on B2B activities between the two nations, especially on the non-oil sectors will serve to some extent as a shock absorber against the pressure caused by the unpredictable global economic and financial circumstances.

Transport and transit potential of the two states was also mentioned in the document, as it is one of the key parts of the B2B cooperation as well. In this context, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor (in which Afghanistan could connect to Europe via Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey), Turkmen-Azerbaijani Joint Commission on Transport, Transit and Logistics (which aims to further develop the maritime, automobile, rail and air transportation, effective resolution of transit and import-export cargo transportation), and other projects within the Trans-Caspian region are considered to be the most vital issues to focus on. Additionally, close cooperation between Turkmenbashi Port and Baku Port which was also mentioned in the joint statement of the presidents, can bring other countries' attention to the space between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan for their transport and cargo.

In the energy sector, state leaders also made positive statements and showed their intention to further develop their relations in this field. a. As the Southern Gas Corridor nears completion and as Turkmenistan could also be a potential supplier (via the prospective Trans

Caspian Pipeline) , it is believed by some experts that the possible participation of Turkmenistan in such trans regional projects will be useful for the regional energy security.

III. American-Israeli Political Action Committee (AIPAC) annual conference

During AIPAC annual conference which is the largest gathering of America's pro-Israeli community held on 1-3 March 2020 in Washington, D.C. Azerbaijan became the first Muslim-majority state to have a cabinet-level minister to give a speech at the conference. Samir Sharifov, Finance Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan participated the conference and talked about the relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel and also delivered the remarks by Mehriban Aliyeva, First Vice President of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan-Israel relations already have positive dynamics. The two nations established the intergovernmental commission in December 2016. Countries are cooperating in various sectors, such as education, tourism, energy and agriculture. Azerbaijan is the supplier of 45% of Israel's oil imports, which demonstrates the importance of Azerbaijan for Israel's energy security. The general trade turnover almost doubled within a year and amounted to \$ 1.3 billion in 2018 between the countries. Approximately, all trade

turnover accounted for Azerbaijani products exported to Israel.

During the conference, Minister Sharifov mentioned that the cooperation with Israel is not confined to the energy sector. This statement shows that there is a huge potential of an economic partnership in the non-oil sector, such as agriculture, pharmaceuticals and IT, and etc ., as Israel is regarded as one of the world's leading states in these areas. Azerbaijan and Israel have a significant amount of military trade. The good relationship between these two nations is not only about economic, energy and political cooperation, but also about the shared cultural values, as the Jewish community lived in Azerbaijan for many years; and estimated 30000 continues to settle in this country. Azerbaijan is one of the few countries that has never been affected by anti-Semitism, as First Vice President Mehriban Aliyeva also noted in her remarks that "Azerbaijan had also embraced thousands of Jews who tried to escape Nazi oppression during World War II and became a second home for them."

In the meantime, Azerbaijan stands for the two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and is ready to contribute to the strengthening peace in the Middle East.

Most of the experts believe that this growing relationship between the two states and Azerbaijan's presence at the AIPAC conference can help to facilitate

open ties between Israel and other Muslim-majority countries.