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Is Azerbaijan a Middle Power?

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Middle powers have been at the forefront of many international initiatives that demand the coordination of resources and the promotion of values. Traditionally, middle powers are so named simply because they are neither great nor small. Scholars in the field, however, see beyond the mere geographic meaning of middle powers and rightly portray their importance in terms of more than just their physical criteria. In an attempt at classification, scholars such as Marijke Breuning divide states into great/superpowers, middle powers, regional powers and small powers, with middle powers defined as the “states that can wield a measure of influence, albeit not through the projection of military might.”¹

Marijke Breuning stated that “*middle powers* are usually affluent states that employ their resources to foster peace and lessen global economic inequality” and are *norm entrepreneurs* that “advocate for the adoption of certain international standards and work diplomatically to persuade the representatives of other states to also adopt these norms.”² Carsten Holbrad in his identical work defined middle powers as “... moderating and pacifying influences in the society of states, reducing tension and limiting conflict among the great powers; or as principal supporters of international organizations, evincing a particularly high sense of responsibility.”³

Such countries play important roles in the area of international development cooperation, and the decision-makers of such countries typically advocate for more development aid and sustainable development. Examples of such states are Canada, a G8 member that has self-proclaimed itself a middle power to promote its role in the international environment; Norway, which, for example, facilitated negotiations between the representatives of Israel and Palestine in the run up to the Oslo Accords in 1993; and the Netherlands and Sweden—which also claim to as norm entrepreneurs—whose work in the field of mediation, good offices, and environmental issues falls into the middle-power category. There is no consensus on the eligibility criteria; however, it is often advanced countries with purposeful activism on international affairs whose names make it onto the list.⁴

1 Marijke Breuning, *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Comparative Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 150

2 Ibid.

3 Carsten Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics*, (The Macmillan Press, 1984) p. 205

4 Marijke Breuning, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, p. 150

Another interesting element in this categorization is the distinction that some authors make between the concepts of middle powers and small states. It is underscored that the latter is not so easily defined, covers diverse group of states, and is not solely confined to geographic size, as it is a relative concept. In this context, small states are described as “those that have a rather limited capacity to exert influence on other states” and rarely resort to force in international relations.⁵

In this work, I argue that, despite its relatively small geographic size, Azerbaijan, a country in the South Caucasus, is also assertively making its name as a middle power. The country has come a long way to become a regional leader with all the energy and infrastructure projects that it is implementing together with its international partners, such as Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum oil and gas pipelines and the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) megaproject, which has already become operational in Fall, 2020.

However, those projects are not merely profit-oriented; they also aim to contribute to the energy security and stability of the region and wider neighborhood, including Europe. Security means stability; stability and profit facilitate sustainable development. However, energy and infrastructure projects aside, Azerbaijan’s rising international profile in recent years and its role as a norm entrepreneur should be closely examined as the country, I would argue, has earned the title of middle power by virtue of its initiatives and emphasis on certain values that unite societies, alongside its serving as a bridge between often competing geopolitical spaces.

The country has long made the promotion of tolerance and multiculturalism one of its central platforms in international affairs, and, specifically, there is an established International Center on Multiculturalism in Azerbaijan that implements the state’s initiatives and vision in this area. Azerbaijan declared 2016 as the Year of Multiculturalism. It is a multiethnic and multi-confessional state where national minorities and freedom of religious belief are respected. Tolerance is therefore endemic to Azerbaijani society.

Moreover, Azerbaijan’s emphasis on multilateralism is no less important. Its belief in the power of international institutions and increasing weight in international affairs elevated it to the status of non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2012–2013. One hallmark initiative promoted by Azerbaijan was the conduct of a high-level, open debate on “Strengthening partnership synergy between the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation

5 Ibid., p. 151

(OIC)” during its second-term presidency of the council in October 2013, which was the first ever high-level debate in the Council on this topic.

Azerbaijan’s commitment to multilateralism is further manifested in the most recent initiatives it has taken to bring together countries of diverse as well as similar faiths, identities, and interests. Further, it was Azerbaijan that initiated the creation of what has now become the driving force behind international efforts to stabilize the global oil market, OPEC+. The establishment of this united format of OPEC and non-OPEC countries amid fluctuating oil prices to tackle the challenges in the global oil market stems from the idea that President Ilham Aliyev proposed during the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, 2016.⁶ He said that “it would be nice if the main OPEC and non-OPEC countries could come together and agree with each other.”⁷ Azerbaijan’s appeal to the concerned oil producing countries found widespread support among the relevant oil producing states, and so OPEC+ came into being and has since been acting on the forefront of all developments associated with the global oil market. Azerbaijan’s emphasis on international cooperation, and the importance it attaches to the role of international organizations, in this case paid off well for the common objectives of the oil-producing states and achieved balance in the global oil market.

The above initiatives testify to the fact that Azerbaijan has acted as a middle power and norm entrepreneur that both “advocated for the adoption of certain international standards and work diplomatically to persuade the representatives of other states to also adopt these norms” and worked to provide “moderating and pacifying influences in the society of states” and as a notable supporter of international organizations, thereby showcasing a particularly high sense of responsibility.

Moreover, the country also acquired a valuable chance to assert itself as a middle power and norm entrepreneur through its chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the second largest global entity after the UN with 120 members, for the period of 2019–2022, as well as of the Turkic Council, GUAM, and TRACECA in 2020. The 7th Summit of the Turkic-Speaking States and the 18th Summit of the NAM were held under Azerbaijani chairmanship in October 2019, while the 2nd Summit of World Religious Leaders was held in Baku

6 Vusal Mammadov, “Escape Window: How Does Azerbaijani President’s OPEC+ Model Justify Itself?” <http://www.aztv.az/en/news/4819/escape-window-how-does-azerbaijani-presidents-opec-model-justify-itself-markcommentmark>, accessed on May 14, 2020

7 “President Ilham Aliyev attended Energy Security round table as part of Munich Security Conference,” *APA News Agency*, <https://apa.az/en/foreign-news/President-Ilham-Aliyev-attended-Energy-Security-round-table-as-part-of-Munich-Security-Conference-coloredUPDATEDcolor-312830>, accessed on 14 May, 2020

in November 2019. Possessing the central role in these organizations and once again focusing on the issues of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue have given Azerbaijan further opportunities to act as a norm entrepreneur and middle power that, once again, stands for multiculturalism, tolerance, interfaith dialogue, multilateralism, and global partnership by making its voice heard through such versatile institutions.

Azerbaijan's initiatives with the Turkic Council and NAM continued in the new, COVID-19-induced reality. Online special meetings of the two organizations were convened in April⁸ and May⁹ 2020, respectively, that focused specifically on global efforts to deal with the consequences of the pandemic and sought to agree more specific, united actions to alleviate the negative effects of COVID-19 on the member states of the two organizations. A focus on unity, multilateralism, international cooperation, and commitment to common objectives was the crux of those meetings. It was repeatedly underscored that only through effective multilateralism and consistent adherence to the common values that unite all the affected states will they be able to overcome these challenges. Azerbaijan also acted as a norm entrepreneur and middle power as it repeatedly stood for sustainable development, having allocated about US\$10 million to the World Health Organization (WHO) to support its efforts in the midst of the COVID-19, especially to help needy populations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.¹⁰ Moreover, as noted above, the large-scale energy projects that Azerbaijan implements with its international partners contribute to the energy security and sustainable development of its immediate neighborhood as well as Europe.

In line with its broader foreign policy objectives Azerbaijan also vowed to promote multilateralism, international cooperation, and solidarity within the NAM during its 2019–2022 chairmanship. Among the important outcomes of the abovementioned online NAM summit on May 4, the idea proposed by President Ilham Aliyev that NAM countries could initiate convening a special online session of the UN General Assembly on COVID-19 at the level of heads of states and governments gained particular traction.¹¹ This initiative voiced the innate belief of many that more should be done by international organizations to stave off the repercussions of COVID-19 and unite global efforts through fostering greater

8 Vasif Huseynov, "Azerbaijan Hopes to Minimize Ramifications of Coronavirus Crisis," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 17 Issue: 52, <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-hopes-to-minimize-ramifications-of-coronavirus-crisis/>, accessed on May 14, 2020

9 Esmira Jafarova, "Non-Aligned Movement is United Against COVID-19," *EURACTIV*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/azerbaijan/opinion/non-aligned-movement-is-united-against-covid-19/>, accessed on 14 May, 2020

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

cooperation and multilateralism, as opposed to pursuing isolationist and national agendas in the face of this calamity.

Owing to this confidence and trust in Azerbaijan's initiative by the NAM countries and the greater UN community, the proposal for convening the special session of the UN General Assembly in response to COVID-19 was supported by more than two-thirds of UN Member States, 130 in total.¹² So far, only 30 UN General Assembly special sessions have taken place, as they are different from regular sessions. COVID-19 continues to pose unseen and, so far, unaddressed challenge to our existence in the habitual system of international relations. Discussions about the modalities of this special session started in July 2020 and it is scheduled for December 3, 2020. Once again, Azerbaijan, as an ardent believer in the power of international institutions, cooperation, and solidarity, stood up to its role as a norm entrepreneur by initiating and summoning this special session of the UN General Assembly in response to COVID-19. Every effort matters, but one country is insufficient to cope with such a crisis if its efforts are not multiplied by the like-minded. Azerbaijan's efforts to achieve global solidarity were supported first within the NAM and later by the rest of the UN community, and our expectations from this special UN General Assembly session relate, first and foremost, to the message of solace—that we are not alone in this war.

Another distinctive feature of a middle power, as defined in Holbaard's work cited above, is "...reducing tension and limiting conflict among the great powers..." Azerbaijan has hosted several consecutive meetings between Russia and its western partners. The first¹³ took place in April 2018 between Valery Gerasimov, the head of Russia's General Staff, and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Curtis Scaparrotti, who met in Azerbaijan to discuss the situation in Syria, while the second¹⁴ occurred in December of the same year.

This practice continued in 2019 with a meeting in July in Baku between the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation General

12 Hikmət Hacıyev, "Dünyanın 130-dan çox dövləti Prezident İlham Əliyevin BMT Baş Assambleyasının xüsusi sessiyasının keçirilməsi təşəbbüsünü dəstəklədi", *AZƏRTAC*, https://azertag.az/xeber/Hikmet_Haciyev_Dunyanin_130_dan_chox_dovleti_Prezident_Ilham_Aliyevin_BMT_Bas_Assambleyasinin_xususi_sessiyasinin_kechirilmesi_tesebbusunu_destekledi-1523401

13 Georgi Gotev, "Top Russian, NATO generals choose Baku for talks on preventing military incidents", *EURACTIV*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/azerbaijan/news/top-russian-nato-generals-choose-baku-for-talks-on-preventing-military-incidents/>, accessed 14 May, 2020.

14 Georgi Gotev, "NATO: Baku is 'perfect venue' for talking to Russia," <https://www.euractiv.com/section/azerbaijan/news/top-russian-nato-generals-choose-baku-for-talks-on-preventing-military-incidents/>, accessed on 14 May, 2020.

Valery Gerasimov and NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe General Tod Wolters. The parties discussed issues including “European and global security, ways to prevent incidents between Russia and NATO and the prospects for resuming dialogue between military experts.” They also deliberated topics relating to the fight against terrorism and maritime piracy, alongside focusing on the situations in Afghanistan and Syria.¹⁵ In November 2019, a meeting was held in Baku between Valery Gerasimov and Chairman of the NATO Military Committee Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach. In February 2020, another meeting of Valery Gerasimov and Tod Wolters took place in Baku.¹⁶

The choice of Baku for such meetings between Russia and NATO officials is not coincidental, as Baku is increasingly proving itself as a geographic venue capable of accommodating diverse and often competing interests between different geopolitical spaces, thus once again hewing to the definitions attested above of the concept of a middle power.

Although a state’s middle-power status is often defined not merely by its military might, as also highlighted above, a critical review of the concept of a middle power also underscores the role of many sources of power, including military, in middle-power politics, stating that

A middle power is a state actor which has limited influence on deciding the distribution of power in a given regional system, but is capable of deploying a variety of sources of power to change the position of great powers and defend its own position on matters related to national or regional security that directly affect it.¹⁷

Moreover, other sources also argue that, besides a state’s leadership capabilities and rising influence in international politics, its military strength may also be a factor in defining a particular state as a middle power.¹⁸ Although being a middle power means a lot more than being in mere possession of strong military assets, some authors claim that the latter also plays a role in consolidating a state’s middle-power status.

15 “Meeting between NATO and Russia commanders in Baku,” *Caucasus Watch*, <https://caucasuswatch.de/news/1816.html>, accessed on May 15, 2020.

16 Elchin Mehdiyev, “MP: Russia-NATO meeting in Baku confirms that Azerbaijan perceived as reliable partner,” Trend News Agency, 27 November 2019, <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3154952.html>, accessed on May 15, 2020.

17 Dong Min-Shin, “A Critical Review of the Concept of Middle Power,” 4 December 2015, <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/60016>, accessed on November 27, 2020

18 Meltem Muftuler Bac, “Middle Power Politics,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/middle-power>, accessed on November 27, 2020

Building on Holbraad’s work, other scholars concur that one can define middle powers by a quantitative assessment of their GPD, population, military expenditure, trade, and similar material factors. It is argued in this regard that “although not as powerful as major powers, middle powers can be treated as secondary states whose possession of material capabilities can, to some degree, influence the international system through their active engagement in global governance.”¹⁹

Carsten Holbraad refers to the role of military capabilities in middle power politics in his above-mentioned seminal work—without, however, making the military a defining factor in a state’s middle-power role. For example, he argues that “middle powers could be trusted to exercise their diplomatic influence and military power in the interest of international society, that they were capable of being less selfish than great powers and more responsible than small states.”²⁰

In this sense, and building on the above assertions, Azerbaijan also boasts strong military capabilities and its armed forces score high in the leading military indices.²¹ The events that unfolded very recently in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict²² between September 27 and November 10, 2020, demonstrated Azerbaijan’s military prowess. From the outset of the 44-day-long war, Azerbaijan’s military superiority was clear. International military experts often refer to this as a “fifth generation war” owing to the widespread use of military drones by Azerbaijan.

19 Moch Faisal Karim (2018), “Middle power, status-seeking and role conceptions: The cases of Indonesia and South Korea,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, DOI: 10.1080/10357718.2018.1443428, p.3.

20 Carsten Holbaard, *Middle Powers in International Politics*, p. 59.

21 “Azerbaijan Military Strength, 2020”, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=azerbaijan, accessed on 27 November, 2020

22 The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan broke out with armed military aggression by the Republic of Armenia against Azerbaijan and the latter lost twenty per cent of its internationally recognized territories to the former in the course of the first Karabakh War (1988–1994). It should be remembered that Armenia continued to occupy the Nagorno-Karabakh region and seven adjacent districts of Azerbaijan for about three decades in blatant disregard to the norms and principles of international law, including the four UN Security Council Resolutions (822, 853, 874 and 884) that, in 1993, demanded an immediate, unconditional, and full withdrawal of all occupying forces from the internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan. The negotiations towards the peaceful resolution of the conflict that started in the early 1990s under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group were unsuccessful, owing to the maximalist and unconstructive position of Armenia, which refused to liberate Azerbaijan’s occupied territories and feigned engagement in the peace talks. During these years, Armenia many times violated the ceasefire that was in place since 1994 and, on September 27, 2020, launched a massive attack against Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan responded by undertaking a counteroffensive that lasted for 44 days from September 27 to November 10.

Azerbaijani armed forces managed to liberate over 300 population centers, cities, villages, and strategic heights. As a result of Azerbaijan's military gains, Armenia capitulated. On November 10, a trilateral peace declaration was signed by the Russian Federation, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The declaration, which reflected Armenia's practically complete capitulation, obliged Armenia to return to Azerbaijan all remaining occupied territories and Azerbaijan finally restored its territorial integrity. Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War also showed that, in line with the above critical review on middle powers, the country is also capable of defending its "own position on matters related to national or regional security that directly affect it".

In conclusion, there might be different outlooks in the scholarly literature as to what actually constitutes middle power. The ones chosen for this work have given some description of the concept, sufficient to be utilized as an analytical framework. In an attempt to argue whether Azerbaijan fits into the concept of a middle power, the work has highlighted many initiatives and policies implemented by the country in recent years that have encapsulated the values of cooperation, multilateralism, multiculturalism, interfaith dialogue, and sustainable development and provided a bridge for dialogue.

Objectively, our world would have been a better place had all the above values and initiatives been instilled into the fabric of our societies and foreign policy choices. Widespread acceptance of these values and norms could bring more dialogue, understanding, and peace to the anarchic nature of the international system. Norm entrepreneurs and middle powers are therefore valuable for the premium they place on these and other types of value systems that build, unite, improve, and consolidate our collective home. It seems that Azerbaijan is on the right track, and its ambition to qualify for *norm entrepreneur* and *middle power* status should be taken at face value.

ANALYSIS

PLURILATERALISM AND THE RISE OF AZERBAIJANI DIPLOMACY

Recent Azerbaijani diplomacy implicitly indicates how mistaken are many Western journalistic commentaries that criticize U.S. President Donald Trump's supposed abandonment of international cooperation. To a close observer, it has now become obvious that "America First" does not mean "America Only". For all his emphasis on bilateralism, Trump does not oppose what diplomats and political scientists call "plurilateralism".

Plurilateralism is intermediary between bilateralism and multilateralism. It refers to agreements made by a limited number of states—more than two but not a large number—concerning particular topics in which they have a special interest. It is just this sort of diplomacy that Azerbaijan has been recently exemplifying in its leadership of the Turkic Council and Non-Aligned Movement, including their recent virtual summits.

The Turkic Council (officially called the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States) was established in 2009. Currently having five member states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan) and one observer state (Hungary, although linguists today do not generally consider Hungarian to be a Turkic language), it promotes cooperation among the executives of its members. It also cooperates with, but is not connected in a formal organizational way, the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-Speaking Countries (TurkPA, which includes all five previously mentioned except Uzbekistan), of which Azerbaijan's Milli Majlis is also currently the Chair.

As Dr. Esmira Jafarova recently noted, there is a good case to be made for considering Azerbaijan as a nascent "middle power", i.e. a state that can "wield a measure of influence, albeit not through the projection of military might". Middle powers often operate through plurilateralism, which allows them leverage influence on focused issues and issue-areas by motivating joint action. Both multilateralism and especially plurilateralism serve Azerbaijani diplomacy in

this manner, for in a networked world the value of a «node» is enhanced by its connectedness with other nodes.

In the years immediately following its new independence, Azerbaijani diplomacy, driven by energy projects, was more Western-oriented than it is today. Indeed, in retrospect, the first clue that Azerbaijan might come to occupy the status of a middle power came in the 1990s. That was when it led the region in the implementation of important energy and infrastructure projects that guaranteed its own independence as well as that of other newly independent states. Such projects include the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil export pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, which became the South Caucasus Pipeline and was the first building-block of the Southern Gas Corridor.

That diplomatic orientation towards the West, however, diminished over roughly the past decade. One reason for that was the disinterest of the Obama Administration in the South Caucasus region as a whole. That disinterest was driven in part by its idiosyncratic approach to defining U.S. national interests, which included an effective renunciation of traditional American diplomatic lines.

The Obama Administration's disinterest was also driven, in part, by a desire not to offend the Armenian-American community, particularly in California where they play a significant political role. One remembers, for example, that Matthew Bryza served only one year as U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan, in a temporary appointment, because President Obama was either unable or unwilling to force the his approval through the U.S. Senate, which at the time had a Democratic Party majority, including both Senators from California.

The Trump Administration, however, has reversed that disinterest and is now intensely interested in the region and in Azerbaijan. Both the new U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan and new U.S. Ambassador to Georgia are exceptionally highly experienced. This testifies to the Trump Administration's renewed interest also in energy projects in the region, in order to curb the influence today not only of Russia but also of China.

In December 2019, President Trump signed the “Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020”, which included, as its Title XX, legislation called the “European Energy Security and Diversification Act of 2019”. Under its terms the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP), already a Project of Common Interest of the European Commission and which can be configured to fit into the European Green Deal, may be considered for support from various U.S. Government agencies. The TCGP follows the same route as the Trans-Caspian International Trade Route (“Middle Corridor”), itself likewise a plurilateral venture for connectivity and trade.

The post-Cold War world is probably more conducive to the proliferation of middle powers than previous international systems. This is not only because there are simply more numerous independent states. Moreover, the internet and other electronically mediated communications have increased the potentials for states without traditional power-projection capabilities to network and cooperate. Also because the number of potential middle powers is also greater, they may do this with like-minded other middle powers. In this way they can promote of common interests to create subtle but significant medium-term shifts in the configuration of international affairs, usually outside the military-strategic focus of Realpolitik.

In recent decades, the agenda of international politics has expanded far beyond traditional military and security issues. This has happened because populations have become better educated and more participant in the domestic affairs of states. Consequently, they make more political demands on their leaders, for social welfare for example; and the leaders of national executives find it in their interest to cooperate with other leaders in these non-traditional issue areas, not to mention transnational questions like the management of migrant and refugee flows.

Canada established itself as a middle power in the late 1950s through its emphasis on international trade cooperation and U.N.–based activities such as peacekeeping. These were mainly multilateral initiatives and were implemented at a time when the number of independent states in the world (judged by U.N. membership) was roughly half of what it is today. In the changed international environment, there are now debates in Canada about whether the country remains a middle power or what that means for its diplomacy if it does so remain.

It is certainly in Azerbaijan’s interest to promote a middle-power profile for itself, but this does not have to follow the Canadian model. Plurilateralism as a diplomatic instrumentality has proliferated since the end of the Cold War, and this would seem to be working well for Azerbaijan. Located in the center of the volatile Russia-Turkey-Iran triangle, the country benefits from extending a network of substantive well-woven ties beyond the region, in order to secure its situation in the unstable local environment.

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