



# 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 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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