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REP Roundtable Summary

The Geopolitics of Azerbaijan

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Azerbaijan has a balanced, interests-based policy, which satisfies the needs of powerful actors around it – President Aliyev has played the multi-vectoring game skilfully. Azerbaijan is only able to guarantee its national security by means of a balanced foreign policy. Azerbaijan is adapting to the shifting environment. This has allowed Azerbaijan has worked out a *modus vivendi* with regional actors, and those beyond the South Caucasus. The oil and gas wealth in the Caspian has helped to consolidate Azerbaijan's independence. The BTC and Baku-Supsa were Azerbaijani initiatives. The strengthening of US-Azerbaijan ties on security has opened the way for cooperation with Germany, France and the United Kingdom. The development of pragmatic relations has enabled Azerbaijan and its partners to find mutually acceptable solutions to regional problems. Azerbaijan is the most economically developed country of the South Caucasus, despite the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the refugee situation.

Recent changes in the political and economic environment present new challenges. Azerbaijan is starting to play a vital role in dialogue between civilisations. For example, a summit of religious leaders was recently held in Baku, in which the Armenian Patriarch took part. One participant at the roundtable asked if following the successful summit of religious leaders there might be a reciprocal visit to Yerevan. The speaker said it was possible, but difficult when 20% of your lands are under foreign occupation. Azerbaijan possesses a comprehensive strategic vision for Nagorno-Karabakh. It is time for Armenia to take proactive steps and withdraw from occupied territories. Only after that can we begin to talk about other projects.

Azerbaijan welcomed Iran's offer to mediate over Nagorno-Karabakh. Iran is a vital player in the South Caucasus, with which Azerbaijan has pragmatic relations. Iran has so far not offered any concrete action plan, and it is not clear how Iran sees its role – as part of the Minsk Group or an independent actor. Azerbaijan's position on Iran inevitably differs from that of the West. Iran is a neighbour of Azerbaijan. During the Bush administration, Azerbaijan tried to adopt a neutral stance as tension increased between Washington and Teheran. Azerbaijan is following developments closely and hopes there will be a peaceful resolution. Iran is not Iraq or Afghanistan. It is a very important actor in the Middle East and Caspian. What happens internally in Iran will have implications for the Middle East and the Caspian - Iran is a serious geopolitical player. We should not lose sight of this. Azerbaijan does maintain contacts with Azeri Iranians in Iran – they are brothers, though they don't intervene politically. Azerbaijan is still negotiating on Caspian delimitation at Deputy Foreign Minister level.

Turkey also plays an active role in the geopolitics of the South Caucasus. It has done a lot to promote stability and security. On Nagorno-Karabakh, we hope that the co-chairs, Russia, the US and France, will also make some proactive moves. France could do a lot as a member of the EU.

Baku is uncomfortable about Turkey-Armenia rapprochement. The Azerbaijani leadership was confident that the normalization process between Turkey and Armenia would stall. It knew that the Armenian leadership would insist on genocide recognition even though it was not stated in the protocols. Talks have now collapsed after Armenia suspended ratification when Ankara insisted that progress first be made on Nagorno-Karabakh. There is no doubt that Turkey will maintain its position, we are confident about this. Erdoğan's recent statements testify to this. Azerbaijan and Turkey will work together and coordinate policy.

Russia is a key geopolitical actor in the South Caucasus. Officially, Russia is interested in conflict resolution in the region. When one talks to Russian colleagues, they argue that the process needs time, and resolution will take years. Azerbaijan hopes Russia will contribute more to the process. It is the only power which could tell Armenia to withdraw its forces. Sargsyan went to France, the UK and the US to discuss the normalization process. On his way home he visited Russia and immediately announced afterwards that he would suspend ratification. What conclusion can we draw from this?

The US should talk directly with Azerbaijan on issues – and not consult with the Kremlin first. People are very pessimistic with regards to US policy (and western policy in general) in the region. US foreign policy is independent, but it also plays power politics. The approach is, at least, less schizophrenic than its predecessor, but it is also less engaged.

Azerbaijan is not a member of the CSTO; the OSCE is the priority for Azerbaijan. Russian and American interests coincide in Azerbaijan, but not on Georgia or Armenia. Russia is happy that Azerbaijan is pursuing an interests-based foreign policy; such an approach is predictable and creates no problems for Russia. Azerbaijan contributes to stability in the North Caucasus as well.

Azerbaijan is satisfied with its current level of cooperation with NATO. NATO is not a security actor in the South Caucasus. We have an action plan, but we don't see a realistic prospect of membership in NATO. Instead, we prefer to build a strategic partnership. The EU has shown economic interest in Azerbaijan. We would like the EU to be more active and assertive. It is in the EU's interest to see economic prosperity in Azerbaijan.

The upheaval in Ukraine and recent events in Kyrgyzstan testify to the fact that an evolutionary rather than revolutionary approach is preferable for newly independent states. Democracy needs to be built step by step. Coloured revolutions create geopolitical unrest and lead to the destruction of countries. The speaker argued that one could not call what happened in these countries democratic revolutions.

One participant asked why, given that Baku has offered various peace initiatives on Nagorno-Karabakh, it continues to talk about a possible military solution. The speaker argued that Azerbaijan has taken concrete steps towards conflict resolution. The Azerbaijani position on negotiations is clear. It is undertaking active diplomatic efforts, and accepted the new version of the peace accords which were rejected by the Armenians. The leadership is concerned by Armenia's large-scale military exercises in occupied areas. Despite its intensification of diplomatic efforts, Azerbaijan is obliged to maintain its military strength. Azerbaijan is living in conditions of war, its territory is still under occupation. It is natural, therefore, that a significant part of the budget should go on defence. Once the conflict has been resolved, there will be no need for it. Azerbaijan has to meet the challenge of Armenia's military procurements from Russia. This is about the sovereign right of Azerbaijan to liberate its lands.

Azerbaijan's relationship with China is growing. Its role in Central Asia is increasing fast. Lots of issues relating to Caspian security and energy development have a direct or indirect significance for China, and Azerbaijan has discussed them with the Chinese leadership. It has conducted discussions on transnational projects with China, but when it comes to pipeline projects much depends on Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. China could contribute a lot to these.