

# Azerbaijan Punches Above its Weight in Regional Geopolitics



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August 21, 2025

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Throughout much of the post-Soviet era, Azerbaijan remained a territorially fragmented state, with roughly 20 percent of its internationally recognized lands under occupation of the neighboring Armenia and nearly 700,000 people forcibly displaced. During this period, Baku largely depended on the goodwill of major powers and international institutions to rectify the injustice. Peace negotiations mediated by international actors were repeatedly undermined by the Armenian side, whose leaders, backed by Russia – Yerevan’s military ally within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – disregarded international

appeals, including four United Nations Security Council resolutions calling for the withdrawal of occupying forces.

This status quo persisted until September 2020, when Azerbaijan, drawing on its strengthened military capabilities and growing international partnerships, launched a military operation to liberate its occupied territories. The collapse of the separatist regime in the formerly occupied territories and the subsequent full restoration of its territorial integrity in late 2023 marked the beginning of a new era in Azerbaijan's domestic and foreign policy. Azerbaijan substantially strengthened its geopolitical standing in May 2024, when Russia's peacekeeping mission in Karabakh left the region ahead of the schedule (November 2025) agreed earlier in November 2020. This made Azerbaijan the only post-Soviet country in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus that has no Russian troops on its soil.

Thus, today's Azerbaijan is markedly different. Amid an increasingly tense geopolitical environment in and around the region, Baku has managed to preserve its independent stance, resisting pressure from major powers while seeking to develop mutually beneficial relations wherever possible. The country has also embraced a more active role in international diplomacy, taking on leadership responsibilities in several global platforms, most notably the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which unites 120 member states. Azerbaijan's neutral, stable, and prominent position has also enabled it to serve as a venue for dialogue between rival powers, including Israel, Syria, and Türkiye. Although rising regional tensions continue to exert pressure on Baku, Azerbaijan remains committed to its neutral, multivector foreign policy, recognizing that abandoning this approach could carry significant strategic risks.

### **Strategic Autonomy Amid the Russia-West Confrontation**

One of the major tests for Azerbaijan's foreign policy in recent years has been the fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing confrontation between Russia and Ukraine's allies. From the outset of the war, Baku has consistently expressed strong support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. Since 2022, Azerbaijan has provided over \$42 million in aid to Ukraine, including humanitarian supplies, energy support, and infrastructure reconstruction. Additionally, Baku has contributed to demining efforts, child

rehabilitation programs, and the provision of shelters for war-affected populations. Azerbaijan has maintained this position despite threats from certain political circles in Russia.

In July, Azerbaijan signed a deal to supply natural gas to Ukraine – an agreement expected to be crucial for the latter during the upcoming winter season. In early August, Ukraine reported that Russian drones had targeted a gas interconnector in the southern Odesa region, part of the infrastructure used to import Azerbaijani gas. In their telephone call, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky condemned the attacks and vowed that they will restore the damaged system soon.

While firmly supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and providing humanitarian assistance, Azerbaijan has deliberately avoided military involvement in the conflict, seeking to maintain cooperative relations with Russia based on mutual interests wherever possible. Nevertheless, Baku adopted a firm stance following the crash of an Azerbaijani Airlines commercial plane over Russian territory in December 2024. According to Azerbaijani authorities, the aircraft was shot down by Russian Armed Forces, resulting in the death of all 38 people on board. Azerbaijan continues to demand that Russia accept responsibility, provide compensation, and hold those responsible accountable.

Since the incident, bilateral relations have sharply deteriorated through a series of negative developments ranging from raids in Russia against ethnic Azerbaijanis to cyber-attacks against Azerbaijani media outlets and the cancellation of high-level visits – reaching an unprecedented low in the post-Soviet period. Through all this crisis, Azerbaijan, although much smaller than Russia in many aspects, has made it clear that it will no longer tolerate Russian ambitions to dominate the region or dictate the direction of its foreign policy.

In parallel, Baku has been careful to avoid entanglement in geopolitical games that could provoke Moscow and jeopardize its national interests and security. This balanced stance has been maintained even as Azerbaijan deepens its relations with other major powers. By refusing to become a proxy in the confrontation between Russia and the West, Baku has preserved the flexibility to protect its national interests, mediate between adversarial

powers, and deepen cooperation with a wide array of partners – from Europe and the United States to Türkiye, China, and the Global South.

Azerbaijan's diplomatic outreach has been remarkable in recent years. In June 2021, the country signed a declaration with Türkiye boosting allied relations including undertaking mutual defense commitments. Just a few months later, in February 2022, Azerbaijan and Russia signed a Declaration on Allied Interaction, formalizing Moscow's support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty. This was followed by a Declaration on Strategic Partnership with China in July 2024, which was swiftly elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during President Ilham Aliyev's state visit to China in April 2025. Most recently, in August 2025, Azerbaijan and the United States launched the preparation works for a Charter on Strategic Partnership which will upgrade the bilateral relations between the two to the highest level ever. Simultaneously, Azerbaijan has elevated its relations to the level of strategic partnership with 10 European Union member states and signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership in the field of energy with the EU.

In another dimension of its foreign policy, Azerbaijan has emerged as a rising player in the Middle East. Uniquely for the region, Azerbaijan – a Muslim-majority country – has successfully maintained friendly relations with all Muslim states while simultaneously developing a multifaceted partnership with Israel. This diplomatic balancing act has enabled Baku to play a mediating role, particularly between Türkiye – its closest ally – and Israel. Azerbaijan has also served as a constructive platform for negotiations not only between these two countries but also between Israel and Syria. Additionally, Azerbaijan has taken a role in the reconstruction of Syria. As part of this process, Baku has begun exporting natural gas to Syria, with initial shipments of 1.2 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year transiting through Türkiye, and volumes expected to rise to 2 bcm annually.

### **Critical role in regional energy and connectivity projects**

Azerbaijan has also become an indispensable partner for Europe's energy security, particularly in the wake of the continent's efforts to reduce dependency on Russian fossil fuels. As the starting point of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) – a 3,500-kilometer network of pipelines stretching from the Caspian Sea to Southern Europe – Azerbaijan

delivers natural gas from the Shah Deniz field through Georgia and Türkiye to the European market. Since the commissioning of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) in late 2020, Azerbaijani gas has reached Italy, Greece, and Bulgaria, with volumes steadily increasing each year. In July 2022, Baku and Brussels signed a memorandum of understanding to double gas exports to the EU by 2027, underscoring the strategic importance of Azerbaijan's role in diversifying Europe's energy supplies and mitigating geopolitical vulnerabilities.

Beyond pipeline gas, Azerbaijan is actively expanding its contribution to Europe's broader energy transition. The country is investing in large-scale renewable energy projects, including solar and wind farms along the Caspian coast, with the aim of exporting green electricity to the European grid through undersea cable projects in the Black Sea. These initiatives complement Azerbaijan's position as a reliable oil supplier via the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and its role as a hub for energy transit from Central Asia. By combining hydrocarbons with emerging green energy exports, Baku is positioning itself as a future-oriented partner in the EU's decarbonization agenda. This makes Azerbaijan one of the guarantors of Europe's energy security amidst the continent's efforts to diversify its suppliers and ensures sustainable independence from Russia in this field.

In parallel to its role in energy security, Azerbaijan has become an indispensable player in regional connectivity, particularly along the East–West transport routes. At the heart of this role is the Middle Corridor – the only viable transcontinental trade route linking Europe and Asia that bypasses both Russia and Iran. Originating in China, this route runs through Central Asia, crosses the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, and continues via Georgia and Türkiye to Europe. In the wake of disruptions to the northern route through Russia and the southern route through Iran, the Middle Corridor has gained unprecedented geopolitical relevance. For Western powers, Azerbaijan's territory offers the most reliable and strategically secure land–sea bridge to reach Central Asia without transiting the territories of two major rivals, thereby elevating Baku's position in the EU's and the United States' connectivity strategies.

A major breakthrough in this context came with the Washington Agreement of August 8, 2025, which announced the opening of the Zangezur Corridor (renamed to the Trump

Route for International Peace and Prosperity – TRIPP) with direct involvement of the United States. Running from mainland Azerbaijan through Armenia's Syunik province to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, the corridor will significantly shorten transit times between Türkiye and Azerbaijan and integrate more seamlessly into the Middle Corridor network. Its opening not only promises substantial economic benefits but also carries deep geopolitical implications: it reduces Armenia's isolation while tying it into Western-backed connectivity projects, reinforces Türkiye's strategic depth in the South Caucasus, and further limits Russia's traditional dominance over regional transport arteries. By taking part in this US-brokered deal, Azerbaijan has positioned itself as a central facilitator of East–West integration under a framework that aligns with Western strategic interests.

At the same time, Azerbaijan's geography also makes it a critical actor for Russia's own connectivity ambitions. The North–South Transport Corridor – linking Russia to South Asia via the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Iran – depends on Azerbaijani territory as the shortest and most efficient land bridge between the two ends of the route. Even amid recent political tensions with Moscow, Baku's control over this segment means that Russia cannot effectively access key South Asian markets without cooperation from Azerbaijan. This dual role – simultaneously facilitating Western access to Central Asia through the Middle Corridor and enabling Russian access to South Asia via the North–South Corridor – underscores Azerbaijan's unique and indispensable position in the emerging global connectivity landscape.

## **Conclusion**

Azerbaijan's trajectory over the past three decades vividly illustrates how a small state, once heavily constrained by territorial loss and geopolitical dependence, can transform itself into a decisive regional player. Through a calculated blend of military strength, principled diplomacy, and strategic partnerships, Baku has not only restored its territorial integrity but also positioned itself as a central actor in multiple theaters of Eurasian geopolitics. Its success in balancing relations among rival powers, leading multilateral platforms, and mediating between adversaries speaks to a foreign policy rooted in strategic autonomy and an acute understanding of the regional power balance. This

ability to navigate complex geopolitical currents without compromising sovereignty is at the heart of why Azerbaijan today “punches above its weight.”

At the same time, Azerbaijan’s indispensability in Europe’s energy security, its pivotal role in East–West and North–South connectivity, and its emerging contributions to global energy transition further amplify its strategic relevance. By anchoring the Southern Gas Corridor, driving the development of the Middle Corridor, and engaging in projects that align with both Western and Russian connectivity ambitions, Baku has embedded itself in the critical infrastructure of regional and intercontinental trade and energy flows. In a geopolitical environment where routes, resources, and relationships are increasingly weaponized, Azerbaijan’s capacity to remain indispensable to multiple, often competing, actors ensures that its voice carries far beyond its size.

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