Azerbaijan-China relations

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The modern era of Azerbaijan-China relations began with the People's Republic of China's recognition of Azerbaijan's independence on December 27, 1991 and the establishment of diplomatic relations on April 2, 1992. China opened an embassy in Baku in 1992, and Azerbaijan opened one in Beijing in 1993. High-level visits began in 1994 with the official visit of Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev to China. President Ilham Aliyev made two official trips to China (2005, 2015) and traveled there three times to participate in various international events. The Chinese Foreign Minister has visited Azerbaijan four times (1996, 2004, 2010 and 2019).

In this article, I have tried to study the development of Azerbaijan's bilateral relations with the People's Republic of China in various areas since gaining independence.

Economic relations

Economics is at the forefront of Azerbaijan-China intergovernmental relations. It is well known that China's foreign policy is focused to a large extent on securing the country's economic interests on a global scale. With the exception of its own conflicts (Taiwan Strait, South China Sea), China usually does not interfere in world conflicts, plays no role in resolving them, and tries to spread its influence by economic means and through soft power. The famous Belt and Road initiative launched by Chinese leader Xi Jinping in 2013 should also be considered in this context. Azerbaijan, located on the historic Silk Road, is one of the countries supporting China's mega-project. During President Ilham Aliyev's official visit to China in 2015, a memorandum of understanding was signed to jointly promote the establishment of the Silk Road Economic Belt. This memorandum sets out priorities for the development of economic and trade

relations. Transport infrastructure projects implemented by Azerbaijan, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and Baku International Sea Trade Port, form the Trans-Caspian East-West Transport Corridor, a new route for cargo transportation from China to Europe. Azerbaijan believes that this transport route is the shortest way to bring goods from China to Europe and from Europe to China. In August 2015, the first freight train from China arrived in Azerbaijan via the Caspian Sea. In 2018, cargo was transported by 19 trains via the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway.

Analyzing the dynamics of Azerbaijan-China bilateral trade turnover over the past 5 years, we see significant growth. While the trade turnover in 2015 amounted to 561 million USD, in 2016 this figure reached 975 million, in 2017 – 1,298 million, in 2018 – 1,310 million, and in 2019 – 2,184 million. Last year, trade turnover increased by 66.7% compared to 2018, comprising 6.56% of Azerbaijan's total foreign trade. Azerbaijan's accounts for 43% of China's trade with the South Caucasus. But there is a positive balance in favor of China in trade between the two countries. Although Azerbaijan's exports to China last year were the highest ever (752 million USD), imports from China also rose sharply to over 1,432 million USD. Azerbaijan's exports are mainly crude oil and petrochemical products, while China exports a wide range of products (from electrical appliances to perfumes). There is also an imbalance in investments: while Chinese companies invest more than 800 million USD in Azerbaijan, the much smaller Azerbaijan invests 1,700 million USD in the Chinese economy. About 120 companies with Chinese capital operate in Azerbaijan. There is an Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation between Azerbaijan and China, and the 7th meeting of the commission was held last year.

Chinese companies are interested in the oil sector, the engine of the Azerbaijani economy. In 2018, SOCAR and BGP Inc., a subsidiary of the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), signed an agreement on the establishment of a joint venture.

BGP's main areas of activity include onshore, transition zone, and offshore exploration, as well as the acquisition, processing, and interpretation of seismic data through complex operations, the production of seismic equipment and the provision of related information and communication technology (ICT) services. CNPC is also expected to participate and join as a shareholder in the Oil and Gas Processing and Petrochemical Complex (OGPC) project built by SOCAR in the Garadagh district of Baku. SOCAR and CNPC signed a memorandum of understanding on this issue in 2016.

On April 24-27, 2019, a delegation led by President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev visited China to participate in the 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. Within the framework of this international forum, Azerbaijani and Chinese companies signed 10 documents in various areas worth 821 million USD. These include the construction of a tire plant in Sumgayit Chemical Industrial Park, the construction of a modern greenhouse complex on 300 hectares in Kurdamir, the creation of agro-logistical industrial parks in Guba, Khachmaz and Goychay, the creation of an Asia-Europe telecommunications corridor under the Azerbaijan Digital HUB program, the transportation of up to 2,500 containers in transit to Baku and to other countries through Azerbaijan along the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, the export of Azerbaijani wine and other alcoholic beverages to China, and the establishment of an Azerbaijan Trade House in Chengdu, China. Luo Weidong, head of the Eurasia Department of the Ministry of Commerce of China and co-chair of the China-Azerbaijan Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation, said that China wants to further increase imports of agricultural, chemical, and industrial products from Azerbaijan and increase cooperation in the creation of the Internet Silk Road and in the development of Silk Road online trade.

Azerbaijan joined China's initiative of China and became a co-founder of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The

agreement on the establishment of the bank was signed by 57 countries on June 29, 2015 in Beijing. Azerbaijan has a trade mission in China. Azerbaijani Trade Houses have been opened in Urumqi, Liuzhou, and Shanghai.

Political relations

The government of Azerbaijan attaches great importance to the development of bilateral political relations with the People's Republic of China, a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the world's second largest economy. This is confirmed by the fact that President Ilham Aliyev visited the country five times (officially and unofficially) during his 17-year presidency. In formulating its foreign policy, Azerbaijan pays special attention to the extent to which partner states support the principle of territorial integrity and the inviolability of existing borders in international law. The Chinese government, in turn, is very sensitive to its problems in the Xinjiang Uyghur (East Turkestan) and Tibet Autonomous Regions, as well as Taiwan, and urges its partners to take a position in accordance with its interests. Therefore, the interests of China and Azerbaijan generally coincide on the issue of territorial integrity. The joint declaration signed between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Chinese leader Hu Jintao during the former's official visit to China in 2005 reflected the sensitivity of both sides on these issues. Article 9 of the declaration states:

"Azerbaijan confirms that there is only one China in the world, the government of the People's Republic of China is the only legitimate state representing China, and Taiwan is an integral part of Chinese territory. Azerbaijan reaffirms its commitment not to establish any official relations with Taiwan, not to have any official contacts with it, and opposes the efforts to establish 'two Chinas,' 'one China, one Taiwan,' or an 'independent Taiwan.' Azerbaijan understands and supports China's efforts to ensure and strengthen peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits and the Asia-Pacific

region in general. “

In Article 11, China reaffirms its support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan and calls for the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, supporting the peaceful settlement of the conflict and the efforts of the international community toward this end.

The joint declaration signed between Aliyev and Chinese leader Xi Jinping during the former’s visit to Beijing in 2015 also reflects the common approach of the parties to each other’s problems. Article 2 of the declaration states:

“The parties will continue to support each other’s positions on issues related to efforts to strengthen state independence, sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity. Azerbaijan reaffirms its support for the principle of a united China, opposes any form of ‘Taiwan independence,’ recognizing that the Taiwan issue is entirely China’s internal affair, reaffirms its refusal to establish any official relations with Taiwan, and supports the Chinese government’s efforts to unite the country. China reaffirms its support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan and calls for adherence to UN Security Council resolutions on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, supports the peaceful settlement of the conflict, and supports the efforts of the international community toward this end. The Parties state that neither has participated in any alliance or bloc against the sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of either country, have not taken steps to conclude such agreements with third parties, have not allowed the establishment of organizations and groups in their territories that harm the other’s sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity, and have banned their activities in their territories.”

The sixth article states that “the parties believe that the protection of human rights at the international level should

be based on unshakable principles such as respect for the sovereignty of all countries and non-interference in their internal affairs, and oppose the application of double standards on human rights issues, as well as the politicization of these issues and interference in the internal affairs of other states under the guise of protecting human rights."

The declaration signed in 2015 differs from that of 10 years earlier. The parties undertook not to participate in any alliance or bloc against each other, to prevent the establishment of organizations and groups in their territories that would harm the security and territorial integrity of the other party, and to ban the activities of such groups in their territories. It should be noted that this obligation mostly concerns Azerbaijan. The Chinese government is seriously concerned about the global activities of the Uyghur emigré community and its anti-Chinese propaganda. For this reason, the Chinese government requires other countries not only to hinder the activities of Uyghur organizations, but also to refuse asylum to Uyghur migrants and to detain and extradite them to China. It is no accident that there is no instance of any Turkic-speaking Uyghur who left China legally or illegally coming to Azerbaijan. However, in July this year, Azerbaijan did not sign a statement to the UN in support of the "fight against terrorism and separatism" in China's Uyghur Autonomous Region. Presumably because of the Uyghurs' historical and cultural ties to Azerbaijanis, or to avoid isolating themselves from the West, which criticizes China for its human rights, the Azerbaijani government chose not to join the list of 46 countries who actively support China on this issue, even though it supports China in bilateral formats.

China's soft power: Confucius Institutes

Azerbaijan-China relations in the field of culture and education have also been developing recently. A department of Chinese language has been functioning at the Faculty of

Oriental Studies at Baku State University since 1997. The creation of this program was made possible thanks to the personnel and technical support of the Chinese Embassy in Azerbaijan. In 2002, at the invitation of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, a bilateral student exchange began under a cooperation agreement signed during the visit of a delegation of the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan to China. About 500 Azerbaijani students are currently studying in China.

Realizing that a strong economy and a strong military force are not enough to become a superpower, China is trying to develop its soft power and increase its cultural appeal, similar to the US experience. China's main instrument of soft power is the Confucius Institutes. The main task of this non-profit organization established by the state is to spread and popularize the Chinese language and culture throughout the world. China, which opened the first Confucius Institute in South Korea in 2004, has since formed a network of these institutions around the world. Azerbaijan is no exception in this regard.

The first Confucius Institute in Azerbaijan was opened in April 2011 at Baku State University with the participation of the Chargé d'Affaires of the Chinese Embassy. The institute was established on the basis of an agreement signed between Anhui University in China and Baku State University. According to the agreement, Anhui University annually sends high-level specialists in Chinese language and culture to the institute, providing it with textbooks, teaching aids, and audiovisual materials. Students of the Confucius Institute at BSU have an internship at Anhui University every year. In April 2013, a branch of the Confucius Institute at BSU was opened at Khazar University. The event was also attended by the Chinese Ambassador to Azerbaijan Hong Tsuin. The next Confucius Institute in Azerbaijan was established in June 2016 at the Azerbaijan University of Languages □□(AUL). The institute was established in cooperation between the Office of the Chinese

Language Council International (Hanban) of the Ministry of Education of China and AUL. The Chargé d'Affaires of the Chinese Embassy in Azerbaijan assessed the opening of the Confucius Institute at AUL as an important event in the development of Azerbaijan-China cooperation, especially in the field of education. In March 2018, a Confucius Center was launched at the University of Azerbaijan. The center was established in cooperation with the Confucius Institute at Baku State University (BSU).

Military cooperation: Does China expect parity between Azerbaijan and Armenia?

Azerbaijan-China cooperation also encompasses military issues. The two countries periodically sign agreements on "free military assistance by China to Azerbaijan." The first such agreement was signed in December 2009 in Beijing. The three-article document states that China will provide free military property assistance to Azerbaijan in the amount of 3 million CNY. The next such agreement was signed in January 2013 in Beijing. China once again provided free military property assistance to Azerbaijan in the amount of 3 million yuan. Finally, the latest agreement with the same content was signed in April 2018 in Beijing.

What exactly is the military property gifted by China to Azerbaijan? According to *Azeridefence*, after the agreement signed in 2013, various types of winter and summer tents, medical tents, 10 rubber boats, and 24 RAFT-A-10 life rafts were sent from China to the Azerbaijani army for their units.

The joint declaration signed by the leaders of the two countries in 2015 states that the parties are ready to continue practical cooperation in the exchange of military delegations, the training of military personnel, military assistance, and other forms. According to the agreement reached in the field of military education, representatives of the Azerbaijani Army are studying in China as part of a

Russian-language group at the “High Strategic Command” course.

For comparison, Armenia-China military cooperation has also been expanding recently and has sometimes caused concern in Azerbaijan. For example, China sold eight Typhoon missile systems to the Republic of Armenia in 1999, and some AR1A missile systems in 2013. During the visit of the Armenian Defense Minister to China in 2017, China signed an agreement on the provision of free military assistance to Armenia in the amount of 10 million yuan.

Although not directly related to military cooperation, it should be noted that Armenia and China signed an agreement on visa-free travel in May 2019. This fact indicates the high level of relations between the two countries. (Azerbaijan applies a simplified visa procedure for Chinese citizens.)

In other words, although China supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, it is also developing relations with Armenia.