

# **AZERBAIJAN AS A MIDDLE POWER: THE POLICY OF BRIDGE-BUILDING AND STRATEGIC BALANCE IN THE CASPIAN SEA**

**NATALIA CASTRO**



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## Introduction

In an increasingly unstable international order, states' survival and influence depend less on rigid alignments and more on their ability to manage interdependence and forge connections. As the international system moves away from bipolar or unipolar configurations towards a fragmented multipolar landscape, states with intermediate capabilities are rediscovering strategies based on flexibility, adaptability, and diplomatic dexterity. Rather than directly confronting the great powers or accepting peripheral positions, these states choose to expand their room for manoeuvre by acting as intermediaries, facilitators and connectors between different geopolitical spaces.

Located at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, Azerbaijan occupies a unique strategic position in the Caspian region. Bordered by Russia to the north, Iran to the south, Georgia and Armenia to the west and the Caspian Sea to the east, it is a hub connecting multiple geopolitical and economic zones. This location is reinforced by the country's strategic energy and regional transit assets, which give it the capacity to project influence beyond its immediate environment. In this sense, Azerbaijan is a particularly illustrative case for analysing the international behaviour of states that, without being major powers, manage to exert influence through active positioning strategies.

Historically, the location of Azerbaijan has made it a hub for trade, cultural exchange and political disputes. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, it has gradually established itself as a major player in the Caspian region by leveraging its natural resources, developing strategic infrastructure and practising pragmatic diplomacy. This has enabled it to assert its agency in a complex geopolitical environment. Following the dissolution of the USSR, Azerbaijan faced significant challenges, including the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and severe economic instability. However, exploiting its energy resources, particularly oil and natural gas, has provided a foundation for economic growth and building international partnerships. Today, its role as a key energy exporter, as well as a transport and communication hub, further reinforces its growing centrality in the Caspian region<sup>1</sup>.

However, despite Azerbaijan's increased international credibility, academic literature on the country remains analytically limited. Most studies adopt one of three predominant approaches to the country: its post-Soviet transition; its status as an energy producer and transit state; and its involvement in regional conflicts. While these perspectives highlight important aspects of Azerbaijan's development, they often portray its foreign policy as reactive, circumstantial or influenced by the great powers. Consequently, they find it difficult to explain the coherence, continuity and versatility of Baku's diplomatic

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<sup>1</sup> Suren Tadevosyan, "A Small State with Growing Influence: Balancing Azerbaijan in Global Energy Policy," *Journal of Political Science: Bulletin of Yerevan University* 3, no. 3 (2024): 34–

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<https://doi.org/10.46991/JOPS/2024.3.9.034>.

behaviour within different institutional frameworks, or its ability to participate in Western, Eurasian and Global South spaces simultaneously without aligning with a single bloc. In this context, Azerbaijan's behaviour towards other countries is often characterised as opportunistic rather than strategic, which obscures the logic underlying its international positioning.

However, the evolution of Azerbaijani foreign policy since 2020 suggests an explicit aspiration to transition from a small power to an emerging middle power. This process has been driven by various factors, including the reconfiguration of the status quo after the territorial conflict with Armenia ended, initiatives to diversify the economy, and sustained investment in infrastructure to improve regional connectivity. Beyond its material capabilities, this shift is evident in a pattern of behaviour characterised by an active search for mediation opportunities, the establishment of cross-cutting diplomatic networks, and selective participation in various institutional frameworks<sup>2</sup>. In this sense, the notion of a middle power is particularly useful when considered in behavioural terms, taking into account the roles that states choose to play in the international system, rather than just the magnitude of their resources.

From this perspective, the concept of a 'middle power' is particularly relevant when analysing Azerbaijan's foreign policy in the post-2020 period. It allows us to understand

how the country is navigating a multipolar environment characterised by systemic competition. As an emerging middle power, Azerbaijan has developed a strategy aimed at maximising its relative autonomy by managing its relationships with various actors, such as Russia, the European Union, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), simultaneously. Its ability to maintain functional links in heterogeneous institutional spaces reveals a logic of prudent and adaptable positioning in a context of growing strategic uncertainty.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine Azerbaijan's middle power strategy by analysing what we refer to here as a 'bridge policy'. This refers to the country's deliberate efforts to capitalise on its geographical location and connectivity infrastructure, with the aim of expanding its influence and promoting regional integration. By acting as a link between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, Azerbaijan has established itself as a significant actor in contemporary Eurasian geopolitics. This strategy is evident in the development of transport corridors such as the Middle Corridor and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, as well as in Azerbaijan's active participation in regional and international organisations.

This policy reflects broader foreign policy objectives, extending beyond a strictly geo-economic dimension. By playing a connecting role, Azerbaijan aims to promote regional stability, facilitate dialogue between parties

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<sup>2</sup> Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Geopolitical Keystone: Azerbaijan and the Global Position of the Silk Road Region," *Baku Dialogues: Policy Perspectives on the Silk Road Region* 4, no. 1 (2020): 26–39.

<sup>3</sup> Roshan Ibrahimov, "Azerbaijan as an Emerging Middle Power after the 44-Day War and Reshaping Foreign Policy," *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives* 5, no. 2 (2024): 109–138.

with conflicting interests and contribute to the development of a more flexible, multipolar order. This article analyses the theoretical basis of this strategy and its practical applications, as well as its implications for Eurasian multipolarity. It demonstrates how middle powers can influence regional governance, even in a context of competition between great powers. The article argues that this bridge policy is not merely a structural consequence of Azerbaijan's geographical location, but rather a deliberate middle-power strategy aimed at maximising autonomy and managing interdependence in a context of systemic competition.

### **Beyond Capabilities: Azerbaijan as a behavioural middle power**

In order to understand Azerbaijan's positioning on the international stage after 2020, it is important to establish the theoretical basis for conceptualising middle powers, and in particular the criteria by which their behaviour can be analysed in contexts of systemic competition. The concept of a middle power is not a new category in the literature on international relations; on the contrary, it has been widely debated and reformulated, leading to approaches that go beyond definitions based exclusively on material capabilities and incorporate behavioural, relational, and strategic dimensions.

From a classical perspective, middle powers are understood to be states that are situated in an intermediate

position within the global power hierarchy. They differ from both the great powers, which have the capacity for unilateral systemic projection, and the small powers, which have restricted margins of action. In this context, Carsten Holbraad emphasises the moderating role of middle powers, highlighting their contribution to reducing international tensions, their commitment to multilateralism, and their tendency to stabilise the international system<sup>4</sup>. While this view is useful for defining the general systemic role of these actors, it tends to favour a normative logic that does not always explain complex strategic behaviours in highly competitive environments.

In response to these limitations, contemporary approaches have progressively shifted attention away from fixed power thresholds towards behavioural definitions. Along these lines, authors such as Cooper, Higgott and Nossal contend that the defining characteristics of middle powers are specific patterns of behaviour, including diplomatic intermediation, consensus building, active participation in multilateral frameworks and the ability to manage complex strategic environments, rather than the magnitude of their material resources. This behavioural emphasis is particularly relevant in contexts of high systemic uncertainty, where influence is exercised relationally and situationally rather than through direct coercion.

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<sup>4</sup> Carsten Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), 205.

From this perspective, middle power status is closely linked to the ability to assert agency in asymmetric power contexts. Such states tend to develop flexible and selective foreign policies aimed at maximising their manoeuvrability while preserving strategic autonomy. Recent approaches to emerging middle powers suggest that these types of actors do not necessarily seek to alter the international order; rather, they aim to operate within it pragmatically, adapting their alignments and strategies in response to changing dynamics<sup>5</sup>. Strategic adaptability therefore emerges as a distinctive feature, understood as the ability to recalibrate relationships with multiple relevant actors simultaneously without becoming subsumed into a single axis of power. This adaptability often involves using specific geographical, economic, or cultural attributes as sources of relational power.

This analytical framework is particularly useful for analysing the situation in Azerbaijan. Since gaining independence in 1991, the country has faced severe structural constraints. During the 1990s, these conditions significantly limited its capacity for international projection, aligning it more closely with the profile of a small post-Soviet power than with that of an actor with autonomous regional influence. However, from the 2000s onwards, Azerbaijan embarked on a gradual

process of state strengthening, driven by the systematic exploitation of energy resources, institutional consolidation and the progressive professionalisation of its foreign policy.

This process intensified throughout the 2010s, reaching a turning point after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. The recovery of strategic territories and the diplomatic management of the post-conflict scenario demonstrated a substantial increase in the country's military capabilities and greater confidence in its ability to influence complex regional dynamics. Various analyses agree that this period marked Azerbaijan's transition to becoming an emerging middle power, characterised by greater diplomatic proactivity and more ambitious international engagement<sup>6</sup>.

However, it would be analytically insufficient to view Azerbaijan solely as a middle power on the basis of its accumulation of material capabilities or economic strengthening. Although energy resources, geostrategic location and infrastructure development are relevant enabling conditions, they alone cannot explain the consistency, continuity and versatility of the country's behaviour. In particular, they do not account for its ability to maintain functional relations with actors of different levels of power, or for its participation in diverse institutional frameworks without

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<sup>5</sup> Mirmehdi M. Aghazada, "Azerbaijani–Iranian Relations in the Context of Rivalry between International and Regional Actors in the South Caucasus," *Post-Soviet Studies* 3, no. 7 (2024): 269–280.

<sup>6</sup> Huseynov, Vasif, "Azerbaijan's Balancing Act under Pressure: Quest for Alternative Regionalism," in *Does the EU Need a Strategy for the South Caucasus?*, ed. Christoph Bilban, Frederic Labarre, and George Niculescu (Vienna: UNSER HEER, 2024), 85–99.

compromising its strategic autonomy.

From a behavioural perspective, Azerbaijan's distinctive international positioning stems from its ability to leverage its structural attributes through deliberate insertion and mediation strategies. Its foreign policy has been characterised by sustained pragmatism, aimed at preserving autonomy in a regional environment characterised by competition between major powers and overlapping power dynamics. This behaviour suggests that middle power status is not mechanically derived from available resources, but actively constructed through strategic decisions aimed at managing interdependence and uncertainty. In this context, Jafarova emphasises that promoting multiculturalism and tolerance is central to Azerbaijan's international profile. This commitment is institutionalised through the International Centre on Multiculturalism and reinforced by declaring 2016 the Year of Multiculturalism. This consolidates the state's identity as multi-ethnic and multi-faith, and demonstrates its respect for minorities and religious freedom<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, Azerbaijan's status as a middle power is not solely expressed in the accumulation of capabilities or its participation in multiple institutional frameworks, but fundamentally in the way it navigates relationships in an environment characterised by overlapping interests and competition between

major powers. Therefore, the key to analysis lies not only in identifying the Azerbaijani state's attributes, but also in understanding how it strategically mobilises them to expand its room for manoeuvre and assert its decision-making autonomy.

This logic of action, based on intermediation, connectivity, and managing flexible links, constitutes the operational core of its recent international behaviour. The following section therefore, examines the bridge policy as the concrete strategic expression through which Azerbaijan translates its status as a middle power into sustained regional integration and Eurasian projection.

### **The Bridge Policy: Strategic Intermediation and Management of Interdependence in the Caspian**

The so-called 'bridge policy' represents Azerbaijan's strategic approach as a middle power in the Eurasian region. Rather than being a formalised doctrine, it is a pattern of action that aims to position the country as a functional connector between regions, actors, and divergent interests. This strategy takes advantage of Azerbaijan's geographical location, transit infrastructure, and diplomatic capacity. Through this strategy, Baku seeks to transform regional interdependence into a political resource, thereby expanding its margin of autonomy in a context of systemic competition and

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<sup>7</sup> Jafarova, Esmira. 2020. "Is Azerbaijan a Middle Power?", *Modern Diplomacy*.



fragmentation of the international order. This policy forms part of a strategic hedging approach, which is an active form of risk management that seeks to maximise benefits and minimise vulnerabilities without committing to rigid alliances. While not presented as a formal, codified doctrine, the persistence, consistency and reproduction of this strategy over time allow it to be identified as a deliberate foreign policy pattern rather than an ex post rationalisation.

In the literature on international relations, hedging has been conceptualised as a strategy mainly adopted by middle powers in contexts of high systemic uncertainty. Kuik defines it as behaviour that combines elements of cooperation and prevention with regard to multiple great powers, avoiding full alignment or open confrontation<sup>8</sup>. Unlike balancing or bandwagoning, this strategy does not seek to counteract or subordinate itself to a dominant actor directly, but rather aims to maintain multiple strategic options.

In this regard, Azerbaijan's 'bridge' policy is a particularly clear empirical manifestation of this logic. Historically, the country's location has made it a key region for trade, cultural exchange and military campaigns. In the contemporary context, its importance has increased as it has established itself as a critical

link between major global powers and regional economic centres. This position enables Azerbaijan to influence and mediate in dynamics that transcend its borders, providing strategic corridors for intercontinental energy and transport connectivity<sup>9</sup> .. By positioning itself as a connection node between Europe, Central Asia, Russia, Turkey and the Middle East, Azerbaijan not only exploits its geographical location, but also transforms it into a strategic resource for managing relationships with actors that often have divergent interests. This strategy enables Baku to mitigate the risks associated with excessive reliance on any single power while enhancing its systemic value as an indispensable partner<sup>10</sup>.

Azerbaijan's foreign policy reflects this approach, combining selective cooperation with diversification of ties. In the energy sector, for example, Azerbaijan has strengthened its position as a strategic supplier to Europe via the Southern Gas Corridor, while also consolidating its collaboration with the European Union without significantly damaging its ties with the Russian Federation<sup>11</sup> .. This behaviour corresponds to what Kuik refers to as 'risk-contingency hedging', or the creation of strategic insurance against uncertain future scenarios<sup>12</sup>.

Guliyev then emphasises that energy exports are one of the main

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<sup>8</sup> Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 2 (2008): 159–185.

<sup>9</sup> Gojayeve, Laman, "The Geopolitical Architecture of the Caucasus–Caspian Region: A Theoretical-Conceptual Perspective,"

*Politykus* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.24195/2414-9616.2025-4.27>.

<sup>10</sup> Gvosdev, "Geopolitical Keystone".

<sup>11</sup> Gojayeve, *The geopolitical architecture of the Caucasus-Caspian region*.

<sup>12</sup> Kuik, "How Do Weaker States Hedges?"

instruments through which Azerbaijan projects itself internationally. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline are prime examples of how these resources have been utilised to bolster Azerbaijan's regional and global standing<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, Azerbaijan's energy diplomacy extends beyond mere resource extraction; it seeks to establish the country as a dependable energy partner for Europe, particularly in light of European efforts to diversify its supply sources. As Hajikhalilov points out, the Southern Gas Corridor is a prime example of Azerbaijan's role as a critical energy supplier and a bridge between the Caspian Basin and European markets. This strengthens the country's economic ties and political influence<sup>14</sup>.

At the same time, the country maintains a deep strategic alliance with Turkey based on cultural, linguistic and military affinities, while also developing pragmatic defence and technology ties with Israel and maintaining functional diplomatic channels with Iran despite structural tensions<sup>15</sup>. This

plurality of relationships is not a sign of a lack of strategic coherence, but rather a deliberate diversification strategy, typical of middle powers operating in highly contested regions. Notably, despite its close ties with Turkey, Azerbaijan has maintained a constructive relationship with Iran, emphasising dialogue and cooperation over confrontation<sup>16</sup>.

From a broader perspective, Azerbaijan's active engagement in multilateral initiatives and regional connectivity schemes also demonstrates its bridge policy. Projects such as the Middle Corridor and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway facilitate trade and transit while reinforcing the country's strategic importance within transregional economic and logistics networks<sup>17</sup>. A cornerstone of this geo-economic strategy, the Middle Corridor connects Europe with China via the Caspian Sea, offering an alternative to the Northern Corridor (which crosses Russia) and the Southern Corridor (which crosses Iran). Sustained investment in infrastructure, such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, has enabled

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<sup>13</sup> Guliyev, Farid, “Renewable Energy Targets and Policies in Traditional Oil-Producing Countries: A Comparison of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 14, no. 1 (2023): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366523117772> 0.

<sup>14</sup> Tughray Hajikhalilov, “A Comparative Analysis of European and Turkish Soft Power (Geo)Strategies in Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Case Studies of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan” (master’s thesis, Istanbul Bilgi University, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Shukurlu, Farid & Shumunov, Joseph, “Azerbaijan’s Active Non-Alignment: How

Baku Is Pivoting to Greater Power,” *Baku Dialogues: Policy Perspectives on the Silk Road Region* 9, no. 1 (2025): 62–81, <https://doi.org/10.60119/IEVP9392>.

<sup>16</sup> Amiri, Mehdi, & Fallahi, Ehsan,. 2023. “Geopolitics of Iran's Bilateral Relations with Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan from 2013 to 2021”. *Central Eurasia Studies*, Vol.15(2): 73-101. DOI: 10.22059/jcep.2023.333666.450039

<sup>17</sup> Çolakoğlu, Selçuk. 2022. “Strategic Opportunity for the Middle Corridor?” *Baku Dialogues: Policy Perspectives on the Silk Road Region*, Vol.6, no.1: 60-72.



Azerbaijan to establish itself as a vital transit hub in global supply chains.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, Azerbaijan has actively sought to diversify its economic alliances. While Europe remains a key market for its energy exports, the country has strengthened its relations with Turkey, Central Asia and China. Its cooperation with Turkey, as seen with the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), strengthens Azerbaijan's position as a vital energy hub connecting East and West <sup>19</sup> . Similarly, Azerbaijan's participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) highlights Baku's desire to capitalise on its geographical location for mutual economic and strategic benefit. This behaviour aligns with the distinctive feature of contemporary middle powers identified by Cooper, Higgott and Nossal: the ability to exert influence through network building, intermediation and diplomatic bridge-building rather than direct coercion<sup>20</sup>. In Azerbaijan's case, this intermediation extends beyond the diplomatic sphere to encompass energy, logistics and culture.

Another area in which Azerbaijan has strengthened its strategic profile is energy infrastructure. The Southern Gas Corridor, comprising TANAP and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), is a prime example of how

Azerbaijan is leveraging its energy resources to enhance regional connectivity, diminish Europe's reliance on Russian energy and bolster its strategic significance in the continental energy market. Additionally, Azerbaijan has promoted digital connectivity by investing in information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, aiming to position itself as a regional digital hub and diversify its economic base<sup>21</sup>.

However, the bridge policy is not without its challenges. Its geostrategic location exposes the country to persistent risks, including competition between major powers, economic vulnerabilities, and unresolved regional tensions. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains a potential source of instability that could impact Azerbaijan's regional influence <sup>22</sup> . Nevertheless, these challenges also present Azerbaijan with opportunities to demonstrate its leadership and strategic resilience. By leveraging its diplomatic expertise and carefully managing alliances, Azerbaijan can address these challenges and continue to play a pivotal role in the region. Its ability to mediate in regional conflicts and promote economic integration will

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<sup>18</sup> Ediger, Volkan Ş., & Durmaz, Duygu. 2016. "The new geopolitical game in the Caspian region: Azerbaijan-Turkey energy relations". *Turkish Policy Quarterly*. Vol.15(2): 131-149.

<sup>19</sup> Şihaliyev, Emin. 2023. "Iran's Armenia and Azerbaijan Policy: Geopolitical Realities and Comparative Analysis". *Journal Of General Turkish History Research*. Special Issue for the 100th Anniversary of the Republic of Turkey, pp. 329-340

<sup>20</sup> Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott, and Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers*.

<sup>21</sup> Şihaliyev, "Iran's Armenia and Azerbaijan Policy".

<sup>22</sup> Amiri, Mehdi & Fallahi, Ehsan. 2023. "Geopolitics of Iran's Bilateral Relations with Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan from 2013 to 2021". *Central Eurasia Studies*, Vol.15(2): 73-101. DOI: 10.22059/jcep.2023.333666.450039

be crucial to maintaining its status as a middle power.<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, its 'bridge policy' plays a stabilising role in the regional environment. By avoiding exclusive alignments and promoting cross-cutting cooperation schemes, Azerbaijan helps to mitigate tensions between major powers with overlapping interests in the South Caucasus and the Caspian region. This behaviour aligns with Holbraad's notion of middle power diplomacy, whereby middle powers tend to play moderating roles and favour pragmatic solutions in contexts of systemic rivalry.<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, the bridge policy should not be viewed as a passive or merely reactive stance, but rather as an active strategy for navigating international uncertainty. Through strategic hedging, Azerbaijan is able to preserve its autonomy, maximise its economic benefits, and strengthen its profile as a relevant player in various geopolitical spheres. The ability to navigate between poles of power without becoming trapped in binary alignments is one of the most distinctive features of its status as a middle power in the contemporary Eurasian order.

## **Institutional participation and multilateral projection**

As discussed above, Azerbaijan's foreign policy has undergone

significant changes in the post-Soviet era, with a turning point in 2020 when the country began to assert itself more visibly as a middle power within the Eurasian geopolitical framework. A key aspect of this evolution has been its proactive and discerning involvement in international organisations and multilateral structures. Rather than responding to a rigid alignment logic, this pattern of engagement reflects a strategy aimed at preserving strategic autonomy, expanding diplomatic manoeuvre space and projecting influence in multiple directions.

By participating in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme with NATO, the Organisation of Turkic States, and by strengthening its ties with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Azerbaijan has developed a foreign policy that is consistent with the concept of a middle power. These instances not only expand its international presence, but also function as complementary platforms that enable it to interact simultaneously with Western and Eurasian actors, thereby reinforcing its role as an intermediary and a hub for strategic connectivity<sup>25</sup>.

Azerbaijan's involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)<sup>26</sup> forms a key part of its multilateral outreach.

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<sup>23</sup> Rail Safiyev, "Russia and Azerbaijan: Navigating Geopolitical Shifts," *Russian Analytical Digest* no. 310 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000661339>.

<sup>24</sup> Carsten Holbraad, *Middle Powers*.

<sup>25</sup> Hikmat Hajiyev, "Strategic Equilibrium: Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy," interview, *Baku*

*Dialogues: Policy Perspectives on the Silk Road Region* 4, no. 1 (2020): 186–206.

<sup>26</sup> The Non-Aligned Movement is an international organisation comprising 120 member states which emerged during the Cold War. Its main objectives are to maintain neutrality, promote independence, combat colonialism, and encourage cooperation

Established during the Cold War as a means of preserving states' independence vis-à-vis the great powers, the NAM has evolved into a political coordination forum for over 120 countries. The country's active participation in this framework is a strategic decision aimed at avoiding exclusive alignments and maximising its room for manoeuvre within an international system characterised by persistent power asymmetries. This gives rise to a strategy of non-active alignment (NAA)<sup>27</sup>.

Assuming the presidency of the NAM for the period 2019–2023 substantially reinforced Azerbaijan's international visibility. During this period, Baku consistently championed principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention, leveraging the forum to advocate for its own positions in global debates<sup>28</sup>. During the pandemic, initiatives such as the promotion of equitable access to vaccines demonstrated a deliberate effort to link diplomatic leadership with the provision of global public goods — a characteristic feature of middle powers — and highlighted Azerbaijan's commitment to solidarity and global equity.

Azerbaijan's participation in the NAM can be interpreted as a strategy to assert its agency within unequal

power structures. By using a broad multilateral framework, it has been able to amplify its international voice while presenting itself as a responsible actor committed to the international order. This approach allows Azerbaijan to defend issues that resonate with many developing countries without compromising its strategic flexibility, all the while demonstrating its diplomatic capabilities. This approach highlights Azerbaijan's adaptability and strategic position as a middle power capable of navigating complex global dynamics without succumbing to rivalries between major powers.

Cooperation with NATO through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme<sup>29</sup>, on the other hand, represents another key dimension of Azerbaijan's strategy. Since joining the PfP, Azerbaijan has used this mechanism to modernise its military capabilities, improve interoperability, and strengthen security cooperation without moving towards formal membership, which could alter regional balances. This selective engagement demonstrates a pragmatic approach to security diplomacy, aimed at diversifying partners and mitigating strategic risks.<sup>30</sup>

As De Mares and Caro-Vargas point out, Azerbaijan's participation in joint exercises, training programmes

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among developing countries. Inspired by the Bandung Conference (1955), it was formally founded in Belgrade in 1961 by leaders such as Nehru, Nasser and Tito. The fundamental principles of the NAM are respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and peaceful coexistence.

<sup>27</sup> Shukurlu, Faris, & Shumunov, Joseph, "Azerbaijan's Active Non-Alignment".

<sup>28</sup> Ibrahimov, "Azerbaijan as an Emerging Middle Power".

<sup>29</sup> The PfP programme was launched in 1994 with the aim of fostering trust and cooperation between NATO and non-member states, particularly with regard to defence planning, military interoperability, and crisis management.

<sup>30</sup> Shukurlu, Faris, & Shumunov, Joseph, "Azerbaijan's Active Non-Alignment".



and peacekeeping missions has not only strengthened its defensive capabilities, but also demonstrated its commitment to international security standards, reflecting a pragmatic approach to security diplomacy. Azerbaijan's contribution to NATO-led missions, such as the deployment of Azerbaijani peacekeepers to Afghanistan, reinforces its image as a cooperative security provider. This attribute is relevant to Azerbaijan's positioning as a middle power and demonstrates the country's willingness to play a constructive role in global peacekeeping efforts<sup>31</sup>. At the same time, Azerbaijan has carefully balanced this rapprochement with NATO with the preservation of functional relations with Russia. This approach reflects a logic of risk management rather than ideological alignment, and is consistent with foreign policy strategies that aim to avoid excessive dependencies and keep multiple options open in a volatile regional environment<sup>32</sup>.

Azerbaijan's active participation in the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS)<sup>33</sup>, formerly the Turkic Council, enhances its international profile by

adding a regional and cultural dimension, and highlights its commitment to regional solidarity and cultural diplomacy. As a founding member, Azerbaijan has played an active role in consolidating this platform and promoting initiatives that strengthen political, economic, and infrastructural cooperation among Turkic-speaking states. The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway project is one example of how this regional coordination translates into tangible connectivity within the so-called Middle Corridor, thereby reinforcing Azerbaijan's role as a Eurasian logistics hub<sup>34</sup>.

Beyond the economic benefits, the OTS has also served as a means of cultural diplomacy and soft power projection. Promoting a shared identity based on language and cultural heritage consolidates regional leadership and expands Azerbaijan's influence beyond its immediate environment. By promoting shared cultural heritage, language and traditions, this identity component reinforces its capacity for mediation between different regional spaces<sup>35</sup>. This cultural dimension of Azerbaijan's foreign policy enhances

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<sup>31</sup> Kelly D. Mares & Soraya Caro-Vargas, “The Emergence of Azerbaijan as a Regional Power: Between Tensions and Neutrality,” in *Handbook of Regional Conflict Resolution Initiatives in the Global South* (London: Routledge, 2022), 147–170,

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003287018-14>.

<sup>32</sup> Huseynov, Vasif. 2024. “Azerbaijan’s Balancing Act under Pressure: Quest for Alternative Regionalism.” In *Does the EU Need a Strategy for the South Caucasus?*, edited by Christoph Bilban, Frederic Labarre, and George Niculescu, 85–99. Vienna: UNSER HEER.

<sup>33</sup> Founded in 2009, the OTS promotes cooperation between Turkic-speaking

countries in areas such as politics, economics, culture and education. As a founding member, Azerbaijan has played a key role in shaping the organisation's agenda and priorities.

<sup>34</sup> Naghiyev, Elnur, *Foreign Policy of Azerbaijan: Maintaining Relations with the West, Turkey and Russia*, Vilnius: Vilnius University, 2023, <https://epublications.vu.lt/object/elaba:192822946/>.

<sup>35</sup> Huseynov, Vasif. 2025. “Azerbaijan’s Quest for a Third Path”. *Baku Dialogues: Policy Perspectives on the Silk Road Region*, Vol.8, no.2: 70–85.

its soft power and reinforces its position as a regional leader within the Turkic world.

Finally, Azerbaijan's engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)<sup>36</sup> demonstrates its commitment to deepening Eurasian integration and broadening its strategic alliances. Although Azerbaijan is not a full member, its observer status and active participation in SCO forums have enabled it to strengthen its relations with key players, such as China and Russia, particularly with regard to trade, energy, and infrastructure<sup>37</sup>. As Aliyev argues, this engagement forms part of a deliberate strategy to diversify alliances and connectivity. In this context, Azerbaijan is leveraging its geographical position to integrate into initiatives such as the Belt and Road. In this context, the Middle Corridor is establishing itself as an alternative transit route for Eurasia, reinforcing the country's strategic importance<sup>38</sup>. Azerbaijan's ties to the SCO also demonstrate its pragmatic approach to regional security. By collaborating with the SCO, Azerbaijan has sought to address shared security challenges such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and transnational crime. This collaboration enhances Azerbaijan's

security and reinforces its role as a responsible and cooperative regional actor.

As Huseynov rightly observes, Azerbaijan's institutional engagement demonstrates its adaptability and resilience in the face of a rapidly changing global order. Its institutional engagement reveals a consistent foreign policy practice aimed at maximising options, managing risks, and projecting influence in multiple directions without compromising strategic autonomy<sup>39</sup>. It is this pattern of behaviour, rather than the accumulation of material capabilities, that underpins its characterisation as a behavioural middle power, and that reinforces the article's central argument: the bridge policy is not merely an instrumental complement, but rather the structuring axis of its international insertion in a multipolar environment that is undergoing transformation.

## Conclusion

In recent decades, Azerbaijan has undergone a substantial transformation in its geopolitical positioning, evolving from a small post-Soviet power to a middle power with a more defined profile within

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<sup>36</sup> The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), established in 2001, has ten member countries. The original founders were China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. More recently, India, Pakistan, Iran and Belarus joined, forming an alliance focused on political, economic and security cooperation among its members. Azerbaijan has been a 'Dialogue Partner' of the SCO since 2015 and formally applied for observer status in 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Bárkányi, Peter & Vasa, Laszlo. Azerbaijan's Geopolitical Importance in the Middle

Corridor. *Hungarian Institute of International Affairs* (2023). 41-53.

<sup>38</sup> Aliyev, Nijat. 2025. "CICA and Azerbaijan - Does Membership Have Its Privileges?". *Baku Dialogues: Policy Perspectives on the Silk Road Region*, Vol.8, no.4: 84-97.

<sup>39</sup> Huseynov, Vasif. 2024. "Azerbaijan's Balancing Act under Pressure: Quest for Alternative Regionalism." In *Does the EU Need a Strategy for the South Caucasus?*, edited by Christoph Bilban, Frederic Labarre, and George Niculescu, 85–99. Vienna: UNSER HEER.

the Eurasian framework. This process cannot be explained solely in terms of material capabilities; rather, it is primarily a result of a foreign policy strategy characterised by flexibility, diversification of ties, and maximisation of options in an increasingly competitive international environment. In this sense, the concept of a 'middle power' is particularly useful for understanding Azerbaijan's behaviour on the international stage and its influence beyond its immediate surroundings.

At the heart of this evolution lies the so-called 'bridge policy', which is not only a consequence of the country's geographical location at the intersection of Europe, Asia and the Middle East, but also a deliberate strategy of international integration. By developing energy corridors, transit routes and diplomatic platforms, Azerbaijan is seeking to establish itself as a regional connectivity hub capable of linking diverse political, economic and strategic spaces. Initiatives such as the Middle Corridor and the Baku-Tbilis-Kars railway illustrate how this translates into concrete infrastructure that reinforces Azerbaijan's regional relevance and international visibility.

The institutional commitments analysed in this article form a key part of this strategy. Active participation in the Non-Aligned Movement, cooperation with NATO through the Partnership for Peace programme, leadership within the Organisation of Turkic States, and a pragmatic approach to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation all reveal a consistent pattern of foreign policy

aimed at avoiding exclusive alignments. Rather than seeking formal equidistance, Azerbaijan's behaviour reflects a logic of risk management and strategic balance, enabling it to interact simultaneously with Western and Eurasian actors while preserving its decision-making autonomy.

This behaviour is part of a wider international context characterised by a shift towards more fragmented and competitive multipolarity, where middle powers are gaining greater scope for manoeuvre. Azerbaijan has capitalised on its geographical and energy advantages to play an active role in promoting regional connectivity and cooperation in this scenario. The diversification of its energy exports, as seen with the Southern Gas Corridor project, strengthens its economic independence and contributes to the energy security of other countries, particularly in Europe. This consolidates Azerbaijan's reputation as a reliable strategic partner.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan's emphasis on dialogue, multilateral diplomacy, and cultural cooperation reinforces its image as a stabilising force in a Eurasian region characterised by ongoing rivalries. Its actions within regional organisations such as the Organisation of Turkic States demonstrate an expanded conception of its role as a bridge, transcending the strictly geographical to incorporate political, identity-based, and normative dimensions. This ability to operate on multiple levels reinforces its position as a middle power with a vocation for mediation.



No obstante, esta estrategia no está exenta de tensiones y límites estructurales, especialmente en escenarios de escalamiento regional o reconfiguración brusca de las relaciones entre grandes potencias, lo que plantea interrogantes sobre su sostenibilidad a largo plazo.

La experiencia de Azerbaiyán demuestra cómo las potencias medias pueden desempeñar un papel significativo en la configuración del orden internacional contemporáneo, no como actores subordinados ni como meros beneficiarios del sistema, sino como agentes activos capaces de moldear las dinámicas regionales mediante estrategias de intermediación, conectividad y equilibrio flexible. En un sistema internacional cada vez más interconectado y competitivo, resulta clave comprender estas estrategias para evaluar las futuras dinámicas de gobernanza y estabilidad globales. Investigaciones futuras podrían profundizar en análisis comparativos con otras potencias medias emergentes para evaluar el alcance, las variaciones y los límites de este tipo de estrategias en distintos contextos regionales.

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