

Azerbaijan-based political analyst Ilgar Velizade talks about the foreign policy priorities of Azerbaijan, Central Asia's spot in it and future development of economic ties with the countries in the region in his interview to analytical portal CABAR.asia.

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*Ilgar Velizade. Photo: vzglyad.az*

**CABAR.asia: What are the foreign policy priorities of Azerbaijan? Where is the country looking today - west, east, north or south?**

**Ilgar Veladze:** Generally speaking, the policy of Azerbaijan is traditionally multi-vector one and focuses on strengthening of its position both in European and Asian directions.

Azerbaijan finds it necessary to have sustainable foreign policy, which is not influenced by the environment determined by main centres of power.

Baku is not following the mainstream of Western, Russian or any other policy in the region, trying to keep the balance of Western interests and Russian interests instead and to achieve

its own objectives. In 2011, the country became a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, which implies non-participation in military and political blocs and projects, which is the basic element of Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

We can also add that Azerbaijan is a member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Council of Europe, active participant of pan-European security system of OSCE, a member of a whole range of regional organisations such as Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, CIS, Economic Cooperation Organisation. Moreover, it's important for the country to establish regional formats of cooperation, where it can play central role, such as Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan, Turkey-Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan, and recently developing format of Moscow-Baku-Tehran. In these formats Azerbaijan feels itself much more comfortable.

**What is the place of Central Asian countries in the foreign policy of Azerbaijan?**

**How would you evaluate the level of relations with this region as of today?**

Central Asia is a priority partner for Azerbaijan in fact, not in word. Particularly, Kazakhstan. We are partners in such organisations as Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, Economic Cooperation Organisation, CIS, in the format of Caspian cooperation; we are implementing the Trans-Caspian transport route in association with Kazakhstan. These relations help us establish trilateral cooperation such as Baku-Astana-Ankara or Baku-Astana-Moscow.

Cooperation with Turkmenistan has also gained certain momentum. In various years, it was complicated due to unsolved territorial issues in the basin of the Caspian Sea. Interests regarding the Serdar-Kapaz gas field in the Caspian Sea still diverge, but in recent years the parties have decided to ignore these conflicts and focus on the implementation of mutually beneficial projects, particularly, transport-logistical projects. Thus, today the Trans-Caspian pipeline project implementation is being actively discussed and Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan act as key players.

Development of Azerbaijan-Uzbekistan relations is also of great concern. Uzbekistan, despite no access to the Caspian Sea, is sometimes seen as a participant of Caspian processes because it is closely tied by transport routes with the Caspian Sea and Caspian ports. Today some portion of Uzbek goods is transported through the territory of Azerbaijan and their volume is going to be increased. During the state visit of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to Turkey and European countries in recent years, he signed very important agreements that provide for enhancement of economic cooperation.

It requires transport support and Uzbek goods would be transported to Europe via the transport infrastructure of Azerbaijan, and European goods could be transported to Uzbekistan. This year president of Uzbekistan is expected to visit Azerbaijan to start the new stage of bilateral cooperation because the countries have not made high-level visits to each other after the change of power in Uzbekistan.

As for Tajikistan, last year president Emomali Rahmon made a visit to Baku and signed

significant agreements. The sales with Tajikistan are at a minor level, but if it gets connected to transport and other projects, the sales could be increased and relations could be intensified.

As for relations with Kyrgyzstan, a long-expected summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States was held in Bishkek last year after a long-term break. The president of our country took part in the summit, held bilateral talks, meetings. Certain investment cooperation projects have been determined under Atambaev's rule and under the current government of Kyrgyzstan, in particular, construction of the oil refinery in Kyrgyzstan with the participation of Azerbaijan-based company, SOCAR, has been discussed. However, all these projects have not been implemented due to a variety of political reasons and possibly due to the unstable investment climate in Kyrgyzstan. These projects could be revisited in new conditions.

Kyrgyzstan is the farthest country from Azerbaijan among other Central Asian states. Logistical support plays a major role here. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Uzbekistan railway route is under construction now. If it is extended to the Caspian Sea, economic ties with Kyrgyzstan may intensify.

We have great relations with all countries in the region in the political sphere. All these states observe the principles and approaches of the international law, particularly, support territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, which is very important to us in terms of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijan is a participant of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and the countries hold intense consultations under this initiative.

Azerbaijan has become an observer of SCO recently, which is an essential condition for political rapprochement between Azerbaijan and Central Asian states. Finally, we can say that mutual interests are diverse and I think the implementation of transport projects will contribute more to rapprochement between Azerbaijan and Central Asia.

**Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a military bloc with the participation of Armenia, which is hostile towards Azerbaijan. How does it affect development of cooperation between Azerbaijan and these countries?**

If we look at the dynamics of bilateral visits, the leaders of these states have made visits to Azerbaijan recently. These leaders have not visited Armenia. A visit of Tajik president to Yerevan a few years ago is an exception. The contacts between the governments of these countries and of Armenia are limited to the issues of CSTO, EAEU, etc. They have no direct contacts.

Moreover, Azerbaijan is an important political and economic partner in the region for these countries. The role of Armenia for them is highly questionable. Despite its unwilling membership in CSTO and EAEU, it is not a serious partner to Central Asian states both

politically or militarily.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan is developing military-technical cooperation with Kazakhstan. Together we are ensuring security in the Caspian Sea. It's more important for Kazakhstan to have such a partner and a friend as Baku. Kazakhstan has always supported territorial integrity of any country and been against any forms of territorial aggression and separatism. It would be illogical if Astana turned its coat just because it was a member of CSTO. The same can be said about Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It's absolutely unfavourable for them to put their relations with Azerbaijan at risk for the sake of some obscure ideas.

**The sales between Azerbaijan and Central Asian states are not that good. What is the reason and what measures could help boost the sales?**

The sales are not good because these countries are mainly exporting agricultural products and energy resources, just like Azerbaijan. These countries do not offer any goods that would be interesting to Azerbaijan. Demand and supply won't contribute to the increase in sales.

If we speak about what these countries have to offer to Azerbaijan and vice versa, we can draw on the materials of joint intergovernmental commissions. Development of transportation-communication component, i.e. development of transit potential, feasibility of creating logistics centres, role of tourism, cooperation in the service industry, creation of joint investment projects, is being discussed almost everywhere.

In particular, joint ventures can be created in petrochemical, petroleum refining sectors, agricultural sector, and even in mining industry. This applies especially to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, whose mining industry is developed the most, yet requires additional investments. It's also possible to take part in hi-tech park projects in each other's territories. There's a need for a higher technological level of cooperation instead of trade.

**Which spheres of economy are most attractive for Azerbaijan-based investors in Central Asia?**

I think they are oil refining, petrochemical industry. Today Kazakhstan is considering the participation of Azerbaijan-based SOCAR in the construction of an oil refinery. Participation in the mining sector is also of interest, although this sector usually involves globally recognised companies with their sales network. However, acting as a co-investor in these projects is quite possible, particularly, in the sphere of metal mining and working. Also, Azerbaijan together with Central Asian states is implementing the Trans-Eurasian fibre optic project. Now local operators are being connected to it and the system is being improved, and this process may intensify cooperation between our states in the sphere of transportation-telecommunication.

**Which opportunities for cooperation did the signing of the Convention on the legal status of the Caspian Sea in 2018, whose negotiations took 20 years, offer to Azerbaijan and Central Asian region?**

One of the focuses of the Convention is to make a transport hub out of the Caspian Sea. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have recently created a very good port infrastructure, which needs to be improved. Kazakhstan has extended the port of Aktau, built the new port of Kuryk. Turkmenistan opened the new port in Turkmenbashi last year. Now the point is to fully load this infrastructure.

The convention on the status of the Caspian Sea offers opportunities in this area. However, they should be pursued under interagency agreements and specific decisions.

Tourism has a good development potential on the Caspian Sea. However, travel infrastructure, especially on the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea, is developed insufficiently. Avaza (a tourist area in the east of the Caspian Sea – *editor's note*) was built in Turkmenistan, but it has some visa issues, etc. Moreover, the logistics is not functioning properly and tourists may not travel via this route.

**You have mentioned good prospects for cooperation in the transport sector. In addition to the mentioned projects, China is taking measures to revive the Silk Route, which historically passed through the territory of Central Asia and Azerbaijan. Which prospects does this project offer for cooperation in the region?**

I can add that participation of non-regional players facilitates the dialogue between Azerbaijan and Central Asian countries and breaks the new ground for its development. The interest demonstrated not only by China, but also by India and Pakistan to the use of transport-logistics opportunities of the region contributes to development of cooperation between the countries in the region. In particular, China has initiated and lend money for a whole range of transport-logistics projects in Central Asia.

For this purpose, a network of transport corridors within Central Asia is being established to connect it to the Caspian Sea. Azerbaijan uses this situation, in a good sense, and tries to participate in the creation of the common system extended towards the Black Sea. Here both Azerbaijan and Central Asia act in consolidation. The same can be said about the Lapis Lazuli corridor, which connects Azerbaijan with Turkmenistan and Afghanistan.

**Numerous Azerbaijani diaspora communities reside in Central Asian states. How do they help to develop relations?**

The Azerbaijani diaspora communities are mostly active in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. These diaspora communities facilitate cooperation between Azerbaijan and Mangistau region of Kazakhstan and direct flight Aktau to Baku was opened not least because of the diaspora's contribution.

The diaspora contributes to the development of people-to-people contacts, causes more interest to Azerbaijan among local communities. However, I would like to see more organised and active performance of the diaspora, which could have a positive impact on the nature and dynamics of bilateral relations.

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