

Azerbaijan-Georgia Relations – from Distant Neighbors to Strategic Partnership

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Abstract. This paper examines the establishment and development of bilateral relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia, two key actors in the South Caucasus region. Given the region's geostrategic, geopolitical, and geoeconomic significance, its development and stability are closely linked to the nature of bilateral and multilateral dynamics of its constituent states. These relations are not only of bilateral relevance but also hold strategic significance in terms of regional and international energy security, transport connectivity, and political dialogue. Based on primary and secondary sources – particularly official data and reports from Azerbaijani and Georgian state institutions, as well as treaties, agreements, and other legal instruments forming the legislative framework – this study applies document analysis, historical-comparative methods, and comparative approaches. The research examines the priorities and development dynamics of diplomatic and political relations between the two countries following the restoration of their independence. The analysis reveals that Azerbaijan and Georgia have developed a sustainable and mutually beneficial model of cooperation, particularly in the fields of energy, logistics, and defense. Despite regional geopolitical risks and competing interests of international actors, a positive dynamic continues to prevail in their bilateral relations. The study concludes that the model of cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia holds strategic significance and considerable potential for ensuring regional energy security, contributing to Europe's energy diversification, reinforcing regional integration, and the advancement of the Trans-Caspian transport corridor. Currently characterized as strategic cooperation, the partnership is expected to evolve into a full-fledged strategic alliance, as evidenced by the consistent efforts of both sides in this direction. © 2026 Bull. Natl. Acad. Sci. Georg.

Keywords: South Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Georgia, bilateral relations, strategic partnership

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the disintegration of the bipolar world order and the emergence of new geopolitical realities in the international system, including the establishment of independent states within the borders of the former Soviet re-

publics. State independence granted these republics both the right and the responsibility to pursue autonomous foreign policies and to emerge as free actors on the international stage, taking on the role of responsible participants in global affairs. The ability of each state to conduct an independent

foreign policy is regarded as one of the fundamental attributes of statehood. Consequently, for newly independent Azerbaijan and Georgia, one of the primary tasks was the formulation of their foreign policy doctrines.

As neighboring post-Soviet countries, the establishment of mutual relations was a priority for both Azerbaijan and Georgia. From the early years of regained independence to the present period marked by a high level of cooperation, the bilateral relationship has held strategic significance and has played a vital role in shaping the regional configuration. Therefore, the study of Azerbaijan-Georgia relations is timely and important for understanding the dynamics of regional geopolitics.

The analysis of bilateral relations is primarily based on official documents as well as visits and meetings of state and government leaders. The development of relations is examined chronologically and divided into three conditional phases. The first phase spans the period from the restoration of independence by Azerbaijan and Georgia in 1991 until March 1996 and is identified as the formative stage of bilateral relations. The second phase, which conventionally begins with the visit of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, to Georgia on March 8, 1996, is characterized as a period of consolidation and the establishment of strategic cooperation; the third phase begins in 2003 and is assessed as the stage of strategic partnership.

The Formation of Azerbaijan-Georgia Relations

Towards the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan and Georgia ranked among the most politically turbulent republics. In both states, peaceful popular movements were met with brutal suppression by the Soviet regime. On April 9, 1989, the Soviet army violently dispersed a demonstration in Georgia, resulting in the death of 21 peaceful protesters (Government of Georgia, n.d.). This tragic event intensified public resistance in Georgia

and culminated in an independence referendum held on March 31, 1991. Subsequently, Georgia adopted its Act of Independence on April 9, 1991 (Government of Georgia, n.d.).

Similar processes unfolded in Azerbaijan, albeit in an even more violent form. Beginning in 1988, public protests erupted in response to Armenia's aggressive interference over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. These demonstrations were accompanied by widespread civil unrest and were met with a brutal crackdown by Soviet forces, culminating in the tragedy of January 20, 1990. In what became known as "Black January," 146 civilians were killed and nearly 800 were injured. The massacre ignited the national liberation movement and further strengthened the population's aspirations for independence.

On August 30, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Azerbaijan adopted the Declaration on the Restoration of State Independence (Gasimli, 2015) This was followed by the adoption of the Constitutional Act on the State Independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan on October 18, 1991 (Gasimli, 2015) Thus, Georgia regained its state independence on April 9, 1991, and Azerbaijan on October 18, 1991.

On October 30, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Azerbaijan adopted a declaration recognizing the independence of Georgia (Gasimli, 2015) That same year, Georgia also officially recognized the independence of Azerbaijan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, n.d.). Despite this mutual recognition, the formal establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations was delayed by nearly a year. It was only on November 18, 1992, that ties were officially formalized through the signing of the Protocol on Cooperation Between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs by the foreign ministers of both countries (History of Azerbaijan-Georgia Relations, 2013).

Eduard Shevardnadze's foreign policy strategy, following his election as Speaker after winning the 1993 parliamentary elections in Georgia, marked a

sharp departure from that of his predecessor. Shevardnadze's foreign policy strategy marked a sharp departure from that of his predecessor. His attitude toward Azerbaijan was marked by friendship and pragmatism. As a realist, Shevardnadze sought to foster peace and stability in a region fraught with tension. From the earliest days of his leadership, he initiated efforts to restore the multi-dimensional cooperation with Azerbaijan that had existed during the early 20th century, when both countries first gained independence, and continued in various forms throughout the Soviet era.

In this context, Shevardnadze's official visit to Azerbaijan in February 1993 was of significant importance for a region undergoing a critical transformation. The visit played a pivotal role in clarifying relations across several key domains: contributing to regional peace and stability; establishing political and diplomatic ties; fostering trade and economic cooperation; and demonstrating mutual support for territorial integrity.

A fundamental shift in bilateral relations occurred with the rise of Heydar Aliyev to power in Azerbaijan. His administration prioritized the development of relations with Georgia, particularly in light of state-building efforts, national security, and energy policy. These priorities resonated with Georgia's strategic interests, creating a foundation of overlapping goals and mutual understanding, which in turn positively influenced the dynamics of bilateral cooperation.

Frequent high-level meetings quickly began to bear fruit, and the two sides took effective steps within the framework of shared interests. In 1995, Georgia established its embassy in the Republic of Azerbaijan, further institutionalizing diplomatic engagement (Gasimli, 2015).

One of the key steps that brought the two states closer was the establishment of the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Georgia. On February 27, 1996, Hacan Hajiyev was appointed Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Azerbaijan to Georgia. On March 5 of the

same year, he presented his credentials to the President of Georgia (Hajiyev, 2000).

Thus, in the initial stage, several foundational issues were successfully addressed: a basis was established for the development of constructive diplomatic and political dialogue, as well as for the formation of a legal and contractual framework. After the restoration of state independence, the prevailing political forces in both countries did not initially create favorable conditions for establishing good-neighborly relations. In this regard, the creation of a sound political environment was of particular importance; a positive trend in the field of security and defense emerged following the signing of an agreement on cooperation and mutual activities between the Ministry of National Security of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the State Security Service of Georgia. This contributed to ensuring stability along the northwestern border of Azerbaijan; the intensification of mutual visits by state and government officials gave impetus to the development of economic cooperation. Officials from the neighboring state demonstrated particular enthusiasm in this area, as Georgian political and state leaders unequivocally acknowledged the difficulty of implementing political and economic reforms in Georgia without the support of Azerbaijan; the route for the transportation of Azerbaijan's energy resources through Georgian territory was practically agreed upon, and the outlines of a transit agreement were defined; significant steps were taken to prevent tensions arising from ethnic particularities in both countries. In particular, the mass departure of Azerbaijanis residing in Georgia was averted; mutual support was provided within the framework of international and regional organizations for the restoration of both countries' territorial integrity.

These steps laid the groundwork for the transition of bilateral relations to a qualitatively new stage. Heydar Aliyev's first official visit to Georgia marked the beginning of this new phase of development built on the aforementioned foun-

dition. The agenda of the visit, which took place on March 8, 1996, was shaped by the following key objectives: the establishment and refinement of the legal-contractual framework between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia across various spheres; the promotion of an environment of friendship and cooperation in the Caucasus; the formalization of cooperation in the field of security and defense; the signing of a transit agreement; the conclusion of agreements to broaden economic cooperation; and the discussion of issues related to ethnic groups at the level of heads of state.

During the visit, several significant agreements were signed, including the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Strengthening of Mutual Security, the Declaration on Peace, Security, and Cooperation in the Caucasus Region, as well as agreements regulating oil transportation, and economic relations more broadly (Habibbayli, 2024). These agreements were of particular importance for the establishment of a contractual and legal framework for bilateral cooperation, especially in the sphere of economic relations. From this perspective, the visit can also be regarded as the starting point of a new phase in the strengthening and development of Azerbaijan–Georgian trade and economic relations.

Following this visit, efforts were made to steer bilateral ties toward strategic partnership. The Declaration on the Further Deepening of Strategic Cooperation between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia, signed in February 1997, along with agreements on the exchange of representatives between the Ministries of Internal Affairs, cooperation in the fields of education and culture, and other documents, constituted the legal foundation of strategic partnership between the two countries. In particular, the declaration was viewed as a serious programmatic document for both Georgia and Azerbaijan, outlining a clear and precise roadmap for future cooperation (Aliyev, 1998).

The second stage of Azerbaijan-Georgian relations was also closely linked to the development of energy cooperation. As noted earlier, although an

agreement had already been reached regarding the transportation of Azerbaijan's hydrocarbon resources through Georgian territory, delays in the implementation of the route occurred due to disputes over transit tariffs. Intensive negotiations and reciprocal visits played a crucial role in resolving this issue. The matter was ultimately settled during President Heydar Aliyev's visit to Georgia in February 2000. Following the signing of an agreement on the transit tariff and other related documents during the visit, Heydar Aliyev stated that the agreement reflected Azerbaijan's attitude toward Georgia, the deep bonds of friendship that united the two nations, the high-value Azerbaijan attached to this friendship, its commitment to strengthening and advancing these ties, and the lengths to which it was willing to go, including making new concessions, for the sake of this relationship (Aliyev, 2008).

The conclusion of this agreement accelerated the implementation of Azerbaijan's energy strategy, and the construction of the necessary pipeline infrastructure was initiated. In September 2001, during Eduard Shevardnadze's visit to Azerbaijan, the Agreement between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia on the Transit, Transportation, and Sale of Natural Gas via the South Caucasus Pipeline across the Territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia and Beyond was signed (Foreign policy of Azerbaijan, 2010). This marked the beginning of Azerbaijani gas exports to the West.

This phase was also characterized by the development of relations within the framework of multilateral cooperation. Notably, successful projects were implemented under the TRACECA Program; the GUAM Organization was established and became active; and the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral format was formalized during the 2002 Trabzon meeting (Habibbayli, 2024).

In sum, several priority issues were resolved during the second phase of bilateral relations. Political and diplomatic relations were strengthened, while spheres of influence were expanded through newly concluded agreements; a legal framework

was established for the export of hydrocarbon resources to the West, and the construction of pipelines was initiated; economic relations were further deepened, with increased emphasis placed on the development of humanitarian cooperation; alongside to bilateral relations, multilateral cooperation frameworks were also substantially advanced. Following the election of Ilham Aliyev as President of the Republic of Azerbaijan in October 2003, bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia were not only preserved but significantly deepened and expanded. This new phase of relations was marked by frequent reciprocal high-level visits. Notably, President Ilham Aliyev made eleven visits to Georgia during his presidency, six of which took place within the framework of bilateral cooperation. In parallel, reciprocal visits by other state and government officials intensified, cooperation across various sectors progressed, and numerous bilateral and multilateral initiatives were implemented.

On March 4, 2004, the Presidents of Azerbaijan and Georgia signed the Joint Declaration between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia (Foreign policy of Azerbaijan, 2009). Comprising a preamble and five chapters, the first chapter of the declaration affirmed the importance of strategic partnership between the two states and emphasized their shared determination to expand and deepen cooperation across diverse fields. It also confirmed that the evolving legal and contractual framework formed a reliable foundation for the comprehensive development of bilateral relations. The declaration encompassed virtually all aspects of the relationship between the two countries. As noted in its final section, the declaration was expected to give momentum to the Azerbaijan-Georgia strategic partnership and contribute to the positive development of both regional and global trends. The signing of this declaration, along with other key documents, laid the groundwork for a new phase in bilateral relations – one that may be accurately described as the stage of strategic partnership.

From the early years of this phase, efforts were made to institutionalize strategic partnership relations. Political and diplomatic ties were further strengthened through the signing of new legal instruments, such as the Joint Communiqué in June 2004 and the Joint Declaration in 2015 (Aliyev, 2018). In the energy sector, cooperation led to the commissioning of major regional energy infrastructure projects, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main oil export pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, and later, the Southern Gas Corridor (Tsereteli, 2013). SOCAR (State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic) made its first foreign investment in Georgia, and several enterprises under SOCAR Georgia began operating within the country. Since 2022, significant steps have been taken to enhance cooperation in the field of renewable energy – an indicator of the evolving and forward-looking nature of bilateral energy relations.

Trade and economic cooperation have also reached a high level of development, with a steady increase in bilateral trade turnover. Azerbaijan has consistently ranked among the top foreign investors in Georgia.

Given the priority both states place on ensuring national security, safeguarding territorial integrity, and enabling the implementation of energy and transportation projects, cooperation in the fields of security and defense has been preserved and further reinforced. Notable efforts have been made in both bilateral and trilateral formats, particularly within the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey framework.

Azerbaijan-Georgia cultural and humanitarian cooperation is deeply rooted in history and has been further expanded and developed in the modern era. Cooperation in the cultural sphere has been shaped and elevated through high-level visits and meetings by heads of state and other officials; events held under the auspices of international organizations; celebrations of jubilees, holidays, and other commemorative days; the establishment of cultural centers; the activities of the Tbilisi State Professional Azerbaijani Drama Theatre and the Qakh

State Georgian Drama Theatre; house museums dedicated to prominent Azerbaijani literary figures who lived in Georgia; as well as cultural days, festivals, competitions, conferences, concerts, exhibitions, and other events. Together, these elements have brought the level of cultural cooperation to a high degree of development.

The multifaceted nature of bilateral relations, their broad scope, and the tangible outcomes achieved confirm that the third phase of Azerbaijan–Georgia relations can rightly be characterized as a strategic partnership. President Ilham Aliyev has highly valued the dynamic evolution of these relations, stating that the strategic partnership has reached the level of an alliance. He emphasized that both countries are actively cooperating in numerous fields, providing mutual support not only bilaterally but also within international organizations, and implementing projects that are of critical importance not only for the two countries themselves but also for the broader region and Europe as a whole (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022).

In this regard, Georgia's position is in full alignment with that of Azerbaijan. During his visit to Azerbaijan in January 2025, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze underlined that the friendship and brotherhood between the two nations are based on deep historical traditions and rest upon the foundation of strategic partnership. He expressed confidence that this partnership would continue to develop in the same spirit, stressing that both sides approach their strategic and national interests with mutual respect (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2025).

Thus, the third phase of Azerbaijan–Georgia relations, which began in 2003 and continues to the present day, can be evaluated as follows: bilateral relations were elevated to the level of strategic partnership; in addition to bilateral ties, the Azerbaijan–Georgia–Turkey trilateral cooperation format was further developed; jointly implemented energy projects contributed significantly to Europe's energy security; alongside cooperation in traditional energy sectors, collaboration was also

established in the field of renewable energy in response to the challenges of the modern era. As a result of this cooperation, important steps were taken toward the implementation of the Black Sea Submarine Cable Project; engagement in prominent international transport corridors, including the Middle Corridor and the Lapis-Lazuli route, has added a strategic dimension to bilateral cooperation in the realms of transportation and communications.

Conclusion

The current state and prospects of bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia allow for the following key generalizations: the dynamics of bilateral relations is closely linked to the energy factor; political relations are underpinned by numerous joint projects, rendering them unparalleled in the region; the emergence of new geopolitical configurations, shaped by developments both globally and regionally, has increased the strategic significance of the Middle Corridor, thereby deepening the convergence of Azerbaijani and Georgian interests; if the new opportunities that have arisen in the post-Second Karabakh War context are utilized effectively, they could pave the way for lasting peace in the South Caucasus, reduce security threats, and generate substantial political and economic benefits.

Overall, the Azerbaijan–Georgia relationship, which has evolved from a model of good-neighborly cooperation into a strategic partnership grounded in shared interests and reinforced by strong political will, constructive collaboration, and smart power strategies, is marked by durable and resilient ties. This partnership is steadily progressing toward a deeper strategic alliance. The key to regional stability and development lies in preserving and advancing Azerbaijan–Georgia cooperation, particularly in the realm of political and diplomatic relations. The evolution of relations between the two states is not only vital for their respective national development but also constitutes a fundamental pillar for the broader progress of the Caucasus region.

საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობები

აზერბაიჯან-საქართველოს ურთიერთობები – შორეული მეზობლობიდან სტრატეგიულ პარტნიორობამდე

ს. ჰაბიბაილი

აზერბაიჯანის მეცნიერებათა ეროვნული აკადემია, ფილოსოფიისა და სოციოლოგიის ინსტიტუტი, ენერგეტიკული უსაფრთხოების პოლიტიკისა და საქართველოსმცოდნეობის განყოფილება, ბაქო, აზერბაიჯანი

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის რ. მეტრეველის მიერ)

ნაშრომში განხილულია აზერბაიჯანის რესპუბლიკისა და საქართველოს – ორ მნიშვნელოვან აქტორს, სამხრეთ კავკასიის რეგიონში – შორის ურთიერთობების ჩამოყალიბებისა და განვითარების ეტაპები. რეგიონს გააჩნია გეოსტრატეგიული, გეოპოლიტიკური და გეოეკონომიკური მნიშვნელობა, რაც განაპირობებს იმას, რომ მისი განვითარება და სტაბილურობა მჭიდროდ არის დაკავშირებული მასში შემავალი სახელმწიფოების ორმხრივი და მრავალმხრივი ურთიერთობების ხასიათთან. აზერბაიჯანსა და საქართველოს შორის ურთიერთობები, როგორც რეგიონის ორ წამყვან ქვეყანას შორის, განსაკუთრებულ მნიშვნელობას იძენს. ეს ურთიერთობები არა მხოლოდ ორმხრივად არის მნიშვნელოვანი, არამედ სტრატეგიულ მნიშვნელობასაც ატარებს როგორც რეგიონული და საერთაშორისო ენერგეტიკული უსაფრთხოების, ისე სატრანსპორტო კავშირებისა და პოლიტიკური დიალოგის თვალსაზრისით. პირველადი და მეორეული წყაროების, განსაკუთრებით, აზერბაიჯანისა და საქართველოს სახელმწიფო ინსტიტუტების ოფიციალური მონაცემებისა და ანგარიშების, ასევე კანონმდებლობითი ჩარჩოს შემქმნელი ხელშეკრულებების, შეთანხმებებისა და სხვა სამართლებრივი დოკუმენტების საფუძველზე, ამ კვლევაში გამოყენებულია დოკუმენტური ანალიზი, ისტორიულ-შედარებითი მეთოდი და კომპარატიული მიდგომა. განხილულია ორ ქვეყანას შორის დიპლომატიური და პოლიტიკური ურთიერთობების პრიორიტეტები და განვითარების დინამიკა მათი დამოუკიდებლობის აღდგენის შემდგომ პერიოდში. ანალიზი აჩვენებს, რომ აზერბაიჯანსა და საქართველოს შორის ჩამოყალიბებულია მდგრადი და ურთიერთსასარგებლო თანამშრომლობის მოდელი, განსაკუთრებით ენერგეტიკის, ლოგისტიკისა და თავდაცვის სფეროებში. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ რეგიონში არსებობს გეოპოლიტიკური რისკები და საერთაშორისო აქტორების კონკურენტული ინტერესები, ორმხრივ ურთიერთობებში კვლავ შეინიშნება პოზიტიური დინამიკა. შეიძლება დავასკვნათ, რომ აზერბაიჯანსა და საქართველოს შორის თანამშრომლობის მოდელი წარმოადგენს სტრატეგიულად მნიშვნელოვან ფორმატს, რომელიც ეფუძნება ურთიერთსასარგებლო ინტერესებს და პასუხობს როგორც რეგიონულ, ისე გლობალურ გამოწვევებს.

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