

The Evolution of Azerbaijan's Balanced Foreign Policy since 2003

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Relevance. Azerbaijan's geopolitical position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and its rich energy resources, have placed it at the center of regional and global interest. Since 2003, Azerbaijan has pursued a balanced foreign policy aimed at maintaining constructive relations with both Western and Eastern power centers. In the context of increasing geopolitical rivalry, regional conflicts, and shifting global alliances, the country's ability to maintain diplomatic balance while safeguarding national interests has become especially significant. The relevance of this topic lies in its potential to contribute to the understanding of how small and mid-sized states can maneuver within a complex international system without aligning rigidly with one geopolitical bloc. Furthermore, studying Azerbaijan's foreign policy evolution provides valuable insights into regional stability, post-conflict diplomacy, and energy geopolitics in the South Caucasus.

Since 2003, Azerbaijan has pursued a balanced foreign policy to strengthen its regional and global role. This period witnessed significant geopolitical changes, influenced by rising energy capacity, growing transit potential, regional conflicts, and global power competition. Navigating these dynamics, Azerbaijan maintained constructive relations with global and neighboring powers, aiming to protect national interests and ensure long-term stability. From 2003 to 2010, the focus was on regional cooperation, large-scale energy infrastructure (like the BTC pipeline), and enhanced security. The country carefully balanced its relations with the West, Russia, and Iran, avoiding alignment with any single bloc. Between 2010 and 2016, Azerbaijan adopted a more flexible diplomatic stance. It played an active role in international forums and supported peaceful efforts regarding the Karabakh conflict, emphasizing sovereignty and territorial integrity. The 2016–2023 phase brought more assertive foreign engagement. The 2020 Second Karabakh War marked a turning point. Post-war, Azerbaijan prioritized reconstruction, regional connectivity, and pragmatic diplomacy. It pursued a multi-vector approach, maintaining equilibrium between actors like Turkey, Russia, the EU, and China. Findings suggest this balanced strategy safeguarded Azerbaijan's independence and enhanced its international reputation. By leveraging its strategic location and energy resources, Azerbaijan emerged as a reliable, stable partner.

The purpose of this article is to examine the evolution of Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy from 2003 to 2023 by dividing it into three major periods: 2003–2010, 2010–2016, and 2016–2023. Each of these periods represents shifts in Azerbaijan's strategic priorities, external environment, and internal capacities. The article seeks to analyze how Azerbaijan has adjusted its foreign policy tools and alliances in response to regional developments, security challenges, and global transformations. The study aims to provide a systematic and comprehensive understanding of Azerbaijan's foreign policy trajectory, evaluating the consistency of its balanced approach and its impact on national interests and regional positioning.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, balanced foreign policy, diplomacy, historical relations, foreign policy evolution, geopolitics of the South Caucasus

Еволюція збалансованої зовнішньої політики Азербайджану з 2003 року

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Актуальність. Геополітичне положення Азербайджану на перехресті Європи та Азії, а також його багаті енергетичні ресурси поставили його в центр регіонального та глобального інтересу. З 2003 року Азербайджан проводить виважену зовнішню політику, спрямовану на підтримання конструктивних відносин як із західними, так і зі східними центрами сили. В умовах посилення геополітичного суперництва, регіональних конфліктів і зміни глобальних альянсів особливо значущою стала здатність країни підтримувати дипломатичний баланс при збереженні національних інтересів. Актуальність цієї теми полягає в її потенціалі сприяти розумінню того, як малі та середні держави можуть маневрувати в межах складної міжнародної системи без жорсткого приєднання до одного геополітичного блоку. Крім того, вивчення еволюції зовнішньої політики Азербайджану дає цінну інформацію про регіональну стабільність, постконфліктну дипломатію та енергетичну геополітику на Південному Кавказі.

З 2003 року Азербайджан проводить збалансовану зовнішню політику для посилення своєї регіональної та глобальної ролі. Цей період став свідком значних геополітичних змін, на які вплинули зростання енергетичного потенціалу, зростання транзитного потенціалу, регіональні конфлікти та глобальна конкуренція за владу. Орієнтуючись у цій динаміці, Азербайджан підтримував конструктивні відносини зі світовими та сусідніми державами, спрямованими на захист національних інтересів та забезпечення довгострокової стабільності. З 2003 по 2010 рік основна увага приділялася регіональній співпраці, великомасштабній енергетичній інфраструктурі (наприклад, трубопроводу BTC) і посиленню безпеки. Країна ретельно збалансувала свої відносини із Заходом, Росією та Іраном, уникаючи приєднання до якогось окремого блоку. У період з 2010 по 2016 рік Азербайджан зайняв більш гнучку дипломатичну позицію. Вона відігравала активну роль на міжнародних форумах і підтримувала мирні зусилля щодо карабаського конфлікту, наголошуючи на суверенітеті та територіальній цілісності. Етап 2016–2023 років приніс більш активну зовнішню взаємодію. Друга карабаська війна 2020 року стала переломним моментом. Після війни Азербайджан надавав пріоритет відновленню, регіональним зв'язкам і прагматичній дипломатії. Вона дотримувалася багатовекторного підходу, зберігаючи рівновагу між такими гравцями, як Туреччина, Росія, ЄС і Китай. Результати свідчать про те, що ця збалансована стратегія зберегла незалежність Азербайджану та підвищила його міжнародну репутацію. Використовуючи своє стратегічне розташування та енергетичні ресурси, Азербайджан став надійним і стабільним партнером.

Метою цієї статті є дослідження еволюції збалансованої зовнішньої політики Азербайджану від 2003 до 2023 року шляхом поділу її на три основні періоди: 2003–2010, 2010–2016 та 2016–2023 роки.

Ключові слова: Азербайджан, збалансована зовнішня політика, дипломатія, історичні відносини, зовнішньополітична еволюція, геополітика Південного Кавказу

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Introduction.

The concept of a balanced foreign policy is primarily explained within the theoretical frameworks of neorealism and constructivism in international relations. According to this approach, small and medium-sized powers pursue internal and external balancing strategies in order to safeguard their security and economic interests amidst global power dynamics. Azerbaijan has been one of the states that has successfully implemented this approach at a practical level in the 21st century. For Azerbaijan, situated on the geopolitical map of the South Caucasus, such a balanced approach has necessitated the coordinated management of relations with the region's key actors Russia, Iran, and Türkiye. Additionally, cooperation with the West, as well as partnership relations with NATO and the European Union, have become essential elements of this balancing strategy.

After restoring its independence in 1991, the Republic of Azerbaijan entered the system of international relations as a sovereign state. Despite the numerous challenges of the transitional period, the country quickly began to define the contours of an independent foreign policy and to establish its position as a sovereign actor in the international arena. From the outset, the primary priorities of Azerbaijan's foreign policy have been the restoration of its territorial integrity, the safeguarding of national security, the expansion of cooperation with international organizations, the protection of economic interests, and the pursuit of an active role in regional stability. Azerbaijan's strategic geographic location serving as a bridge between the Caucasus, the Caspian region, and the Middle East has created both opportunities and challenges in its foreign policy. This reality has compelled the country to pursue a balanced and multi-vector diplomatic course. The abundance of energy resources has further enhanced Azerbaijan's significance in the international relations system, transforming it into a reliable partner and strategic player. Particularly in the 21st century, starting from 2003, Azerbaijan entered a new phase in its foreign policy. During this period, the country's leadership adopted a more flexible, goal-oriented, and rational approach in international affairs, implementing a policy of diplomatic balance among various power centers namely, the West, Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and China. This balanced diplomacy has contributed not only to the formation of Azerbaijan's image as a reliable partner at the regional level but also to its increased activity and credibility within global multilateral organizations. The two decades from 2003 to 2023 represent a significant period of structural transformation in Azerbaijan's foreign policy, marked by critical regional and global developments and the consolidation of the country's geopolitical position. During this time, Azerbaijan emerged not only as an energy exporter and transit country but also as an actor engaged in conflict resolution, initiating proposals, and actively participating in multilateral diplomacy. This article systematically analyzes Azerbaijan's foreign policy across three key stages: 2003–2010, 2010–2016,

and 2016–2023. For each period, the main directions, diplomatic priorities, shifts in the international relations system, and Azerbaijan's role in regional politics are examined comparatively. The purpose of the article is to analyze the changes in Azerbaijan's foreign policy during these phases, to explore their causes and consequences, and to demonstrate how the country has evolved into a more active and influential actor within the system of international relations.

Analysis of Previous Research and Publications.

A significant body of research and institutional reports has explored Azerbaijan's foreign policy, regional role, and strategic alliances, although comprehensive, periodized analyses of its balanced foreign policy over the past two decades remain relatively limited. Several academic studies and institutional sources provide valuable insights into specific dimensions of Azerbaijan's foreign relations. For instance, Akbulut Özpay (2018) and Akpınar (2005) analyze the geopolitical significance of transregional infrastructure projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, highlighting Azerbaijan's strategic role in East-West energy and transport corridors. Similarly, the APA News Agency (2019) underlines Azerbaijan's position within both the East-West and North-South international transport initiatives, connecting these frameworks to the country's broader geoeconomic strategy. In terms of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, the Aliyev Heritage Library (2020) offers a detailed institutional perspective on Azerbaijan-Israel relations, reflecting the diversity of Azerbaijan's diplomatic outreach. Aslanlı (2018) and Çevikel (2023) provide in-depth assessments of Azerbaijan-Türkiye political and economic relations, positioning this partnership as a cornerstone of Azerbaijan's regional alignment. With regard to security and conflict, Asker and Özpinar (2021) examine the military and strategic dynamics of the 44-Day War in 2020, portraying the event as a turning point in Azerbaijan's assertive foreign policy in the post-conflict era. The Ministry of Defence of Azerbaijan (2018) similarly frames the April 2016 battles as a precursor to this shift in posture. At the broader geopolitical level, Hamzaoglu (2020) discusses Azerbaijan-EU relations within the context of the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, providing insight into Azerbaijan's cautious yet pragmatic engagement with Western institutions. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan (n.d.) emphasizes the country's active leadership within the Non-Aligned Movement, underscoring its commitment to multivector diplomacy. Finally, Mammadov (2005) provides historical background on Azerbaijan's political evolution, which is essential for understanding the foundations of its foreign policy decisions. Despite these valuable contributions, there remains a lack of comprehensive and chronological analysis that tracks the evolution of Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy approach across clearly defined time periods. This article addresses that gap by providing

a periodized and integrated evaluation of Azerbaijan's foreign policy from 2003 to 2023, taking into account strategic, economic, and security-related developments within each phase.

Research Methods. This article presents a historical-analytical study of the foreign policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the 21st century. The research primarily analyzes official documents, reports of international organizations, scholarly publications, and diplomatic statements. A comparative analysis of the changes in Azerbaijan's foreign policy across different periods has been conducted, thereby identifying the key aspects of the country's balanced foreign policy strategy.

Scientific Novelty. The scientific novelty of this article lies in the systematic analysis of the concept of balanced foreign policy within the context of Azerbaijan's foreign policy in the 21st century. Unlike existing studies, this work provides a comparative analysis of different phases of Azerbaijan's foreign policy (2003–2010, 2010–2016, 2016–2023), examining the implementation and outcomes of balanced diplomacy from new perspectives within both regional and global contexts.

Research results.

Between 1991 and 1992, immediately after restoring its independence (Mammadov, 2005), Azerbaijan faced severe political, economic, and security challenges. A new and strategic phase in the country's foreign policy began with the return of Heydar Aliyev to political power in 1993. Prioritizing Azerbaijan's national interests, Heydar Aliyev advanced a balanced and multi-vector foreign policy strategy aimed at strengthening the country's position within a complex regional and global environment. Heydar Aliyev's balancing policy was designed to ensure national security, accelerate economic development, and maintain a flexible stance within the international relations system by creating equilibrium among various centers of power. By balancing relations with key regional actors such as Russia, Western countries, Türkiye, and Iran, he established a favorable diplomatic environment for Azerbaijan. The main elements of Heydar Aliyev's foreign policy strategy included: Strategic cooperation with Russia: In the early years of independence, normalizing relations with Russia was a priority to ensure Azerbaijan's security. Heydar Aliyev worked to develop ties with Russia, striving to preserve stability in the South Caucasus. Opening towards the West: Securing access to Western markets for energy exports became a crucial strategic goal. Heydar Aliyev fostered close cooperation with Western companies and the United States, laying the groundwork for major energy projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (Akpınar, 2005). Friendship and strategic partnership with Türkiye: Strengthening relations with Türkiye, based on cultural and historical ties, played an important role in Azerbaijan's regional security. Heydar Aliyev regarded Türkiye as both a strategic and political ally. Policy of good-neighborliness with Iran: Despite geographical

proximity and religious-cultural ties, relations with Iran were maintained on the basis of mutual respect. This was significant for ensuring security along the country's northern and southern borders. As a result of Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy under Heydar Aliyev, the country, although burdened by regional conflicts, increased its international standing, strengthened its economic foundations, and gained diplomatic support regarding its territorial integrity. This strategy was further developed during the Ilham Aliyev era, laying the foundation for Azerbaijan's contemporary foreign policy course in the 21st century.

With President Ilham Aliyev's accession to power in 2003 (Çevikel, 2023), Azerbaijan's foreign policy entered a new phase while preserving the principle of strategic continuity. This period was characterized not only by the continuation of the previous political course particularly a balanced and multi-vector approach but also by its institutional deepening and a more functional restructuring based on economic foundations. During this phase, Azerbaijan's foreign policy strategy evolved primarily around the use of energy resources as a geopolitical instrument, the strengthening of the country's role as a regional transit hub, and the expansion of political and economic integration with Western structures. The consolidation of domestic political stability and the acceleration of economic growth during this period significantly enhanced Azerbaijan's capacity for a more flexible and goal-oriented foreign policy. Key national interests, such as energy security and the diversification of energy exports, took center stage in the formation of international partnerships. In this context, the implementation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline projects marked a significant step in expanding Azerbaijan's strategic partnership framework westward (Akbulut, 2018). These projects not only served Azerbaijan's interests but also contributed to the development of alternative energy routes for the European Union and regional countries. Energy diplomacy emerged as a key instrument of Azerbaijan's foreign policy, functioning as a form of "soft power" that helped the country establish a reputation as a reliable partner in global energy markets. Azerbaijan's leadership role in initiatives to transport Caspian energy resources to the West elevated its status as a major geopolitical and economic actor in the region. In this regard, Azerbaijan managed to maintain stable relations with Russia by avoiding direct confrontation while simultaneously deepening energy cooperation with the West, thus preserving a strategic balance. Another significant achievement of this period was the institutionalization and strengthening of relations with the European Union. In 2009, Azerbaijan joined the Eastern Partnership initiative, marking a crucial step toward integration with European structures (Hamzaoglu, 2020). Within this framework, the country intensified its political dialogue, economic cooperation,

and legal alignment with the EU. Participation in the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly further demonstrated Azerbaijan's commitment to establishing a relationship with the EU based on mutual trust and partnership. The resolution of the Karabakh conflict remained a top priority in Azerbaijan's foreign policy from 2003 to 2010. During this period, Azerbaijan consistently defended the principle of territorial integrity in line with international law. Although diplomatic negotiations continued within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group, the status quo remained largely unchanged. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan actively sought to draw international attention to the occupation and emphasized relevant United Nations resolutions, thereby maintaining an assertive position on the diplomatic front. In summary, the period from 2003 to 2010 represents a phase in Azerbaijan's foreign policy history during which external positions were strengthened against a backdrop of internal stability. Economic tools were strategically employed to serve geopolitical objectives, and a careful balance was maintained among international actors. Azerbaijan's effective transformation of its energy resources into geopolitical leverage while adhering to a neutral diplomatic stance helped shape the country's image as a "reliable partner" in the international system during this era.

The period from 2010 to 2016 is characterized as a phase in which the Republic of Azerbaijan implemented its multi-vector foreign policy in a deeper and more systematic manner. This era is marked by Azerbaijan's consolidation of its strategic position in the international system, the pursuit of a balanced policy among various political poles, and the reinforcement of its status as a regional power. The balanced foreign policy strategy during this phase evolved within a framework that combined ideological neutrality with pragmatic interests. One of the priority directions of Azerbaijan's foreign policy in this period was the deepening of strategic alliance with Türkiye. The establishment of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council in 2010 significantly enhanced institutional cooperation between the two countries, leading to greater integration not only in diplomatic, but also in military-political, economic, and energy spheres (Aslanlı, 2018). Azerbaijan–Türkiye relations played a vital role in shaping new power balances within the regional security architecture and increased the influence of the Turkish factor in the South Caucasus. During this phase, Azerbaijan also adopted an active and selective diplomatic approach in its Middle East policy. Notably, the intensification of relations with Israel especially in the areas of security and military-technical cooperation played a significant role in strengthening Azerbaijan's defense capabilities and facilitating access to new technological resources (Aliyev, 2020). However, this dynamic simultaneously required a cautious and balanced approach in relations with Iran. In order to maintain good-neighborly ties and cultural-religious proximity with Tehran, Baku adopted a restrained

political rhetoric and sought to avoid confrontation. As a result, Azerbaijan maintained its unique position as one of the few regional actors capable of sustaining diplomatic symmetry between Tehran and Tel Aviv. The years 2010–2016 also marked a new phase in relations with the Russian Federation. While Azerbaijan sought to deepen cooperation with Russia in traditional areas such as the economy and energy, this engagement was guided by a principle of mutual caution and the safeguarding of national interests. Following the Ukraine crisis and the subsequent deterioration in Russia–West relations, Azerbaijan prioritized geopolitical neutrality and pursued policies aimed at preserving regional stability. This pragmatic approach demonstrated Azerbaijan's capacity to act as an independent player within regional configurations. The expansion of Azerbaijan's multi-vector foreign policy was also reflected in its increased activity within the Non-Aligned Movement. From 2011 onward, Azerbaijan adopted a proactive role in the organization, strengthening relations based on solidarity and mutual interest with developing countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, n.d.). The Non-Aligned Movement became an effective platform for Azerbaijan to defend international law and counter double standards. This engagement supported Azerbaijan's position on the resolution of the Karabakh conflict based on UN Security Council resolutions and expanded the legitimacy of its stance on international platforms.

Relations with the European Union during this period intensified primarily in the spheres of energy and trade. While Azerbaijan expanded cooperation frameworks with Brussels within the context of a partnership dialogue, political integration and human rights issues at times created friction in bilateral relations.

Nevertheless, Baku sought to develop a model of cooperation that preserved national sovereignty and domestic stability without creating political dependency, thus maintaining engagement with the EU without compromising its core priorities. Efforts to resolve the Karabakh conflict through diplomatic means also continued throughout this period. Although no substantial progress was achieved within the OSCE Minsk Group framework, Azerbaijan actively defended its position in international forums such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Non-Aligned Movement. Azerbaijan's proactive approach in both the diplomatic and informational arenas was marked by a balanced yet principled policy line. In conclusion, the period from 2010 to 2016 was a stage during which Azerbaijan's foreign policy became more structured, its relations with new actors at both regional and global levels were developed, and its capacity for diplomatic maneuver was broadened. A flexible policy framework based on national interests was further refined.

This phase is characterized by the strengthening of Azerbaijan's subjectivity within the international system,

the effective use of balancing strategies as geopolitical tools, and the preservation of strategic autonomy.

The period from 2016 to 2023 represents a complex and decisive stage in the foreign policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan. This era is primarily characterized by fundamental changes in the regional and global geopolitical landscape, the renewed escalation of Azerbaijan's long-standing territorial conflict, and the subsequent post-conflict realities that necessitated the restructuring of foreign policy based on new strategic frameworks. During this time, Azerbaijan intensified its diplomatic maneuvers aimed at both securing national security and strengthening its economic-political sovereignty, adopting a multi-vector and pragmatic approach responsive to contemporary challenges. The April 2016 clashes marked a shift in the regional status quo and resulted in the strengthening of Azerbaijan's position (Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan, 2018). This military confrontation paved the way for more resolute and active diplomatic efforts by Azerbaijan. Since 2016, Azerbaijani diplomacy has increased its demands before the international community for the cessation of occupation and the restoration of territorial integrity, enhancing strategic communication and lobbying activities in this regard. Concurrently, the country's foreign policy institutions introduced new initiatives to ensure security and regional stability in the post-conflict context. The Second Karabakh War in 2020 constituted a turning point in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. The restoration of territorial integrity and liberation of occupied territories through the 44-day military operation fortified Azerbaijan's position in the international arena both legally and politically (Asker, & Özpınar, 2021). This victory not only fostered national unity and strengthened state institutions but also elevated Azerbaijan's status as a new geopolitical actor in the South Caucasus. The post-conflict period prompted a reassessment of the country's foreign policy priorities and ushered in a new phase of strategic planning. During this phase, Azerbaijan's foreign policy primarily focused on safeguarding national interests and securing long-term peace in the region. Azerbaijan intensified its relations with Western states, Russia, and Türkiye, thereby strengthening its multifaceted diplomatic engagements. Relations with Türkiye were developed at a strategic level, encompassing military-technical cooperation, political support, and regional security guarantees. These ties enhanced Azerbaijan's contribution to regional stability and expanded its geopolitical capabilities. Relations with Russia were based on balance and mutual interests; Moscow continued its mediation role in the process of restoring Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and played an important role in regional security matters. At the same time, Baku maintained ongoing dialogue with the European Union and NATO, paying particular attention to strengthening cooperation in energy, security, and economic sectors. Regional cooperation and integration assumed special significance in Azerbaijan's post-conflict

foreign policy. Within this framework, the development of the "East-West" and "North-South" transport corridors, (APA News Agency, 2019) the expansion of energy projects, and the promotion of regional economic integration became priority areas. Azerbaijan's initiatives aimed at attracting investments at both global and regional levels, as well as ensuring sustainable economic development and peace.

These initiatives held strategic importance by fostering mutual trust among regional actors and creating new formats of cooperation. Additionally, during this period, Azerbaijan's diaspora policy and international humanitarian diplomacy were implemented in a more systematic and multifaceted manner. Comprehensive programs were carried out to strengthen the cultural and political unity of Azerbaijanis living abroad and to enhance the country's international image. This also served to reinforce Azerbaijan's position on respect for international legal norms and human rights. In conclusion, the years 2016–2023 manifested in Azerbaijan's foreign policy as an adaptation to post-conflict realities, the prioritization of national interests, and the development of a flexible multi-vector strategy at regional and global levels. During this period, Azerbaijan maintained internal stability, significantly strengthened its position within the international relations system, and successfully implemented its national security strategy. This strategic approach consolidated Azerbaijan as a leading regional actor in the South Caucasus and established an important foundation for long-term peace and development.

Conclusions.

Since 1993, the foreign policy strategy of the Republic of Azerbaijan has been shaped as a balanced model, grounded in national interests and aligned with regional and global power dynamics. This policy, initiated under the leadership of Heydar Aliyev, aimed to integrate a newly independent state facing regional conflicts into the international system while preserving its sovereignty and consolidating its position in global affairs. Heydar Aliyev's political foresight laid the foundation for a model that, on one hand, enabled Azerbaijan to maintain mutually beneficial relations with neighboring countries such as Russia, Iran, and Türkiye, and on the other hand, fostered the development of cooperative ties with Western countries, the European Union, NATO, and the United States. This multi-vector and balanced approach allowed Azerbaijan to avoid falling under the exclusive influence of any single power bloc, establishing itself as an independent actor on the world stage. From 2003 onward, under the leadership of President İlham Aliyev, this foreign policy course was further refined and gained strategic depth. Between 2003–2010, 2010–2016, and particularly from 2016–2023, Azerbaijan consistently strengthened its position within the international system, increased its geostrategic significance through energy and transport projects, and actively participated in regional cooperation formats.

The 2020 Second Karabakh War, which resulted in the restoration of the country's territorial integrity, demonstrated the effectiveness and purposefulness of Azerbaijan's diplomatic and military-political strategy. In the post-conflict period, Azerbaijan's foreign policy entered a new phase, marked by initiatives aimed at promoting peace and cooperation in the region and reaffirming its commitment to international law and the principles of multilateralism. Simultaneously, the country's growing economic potential, diplomatic initiatives, and active participation in international platforms have contributed to its emergence as a globally recognized and respected actor. Consequently, Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy model in the 21st century can be characterized as one grounded in political realism and pragmatism, reflecting an approach that is both adequate and adaptive to the contemporary international system. This model not only safeguards the country's independence and sovereignty but also ensures its active engagement in regional and global processes, positioning Azerbaijan as a center of stability and cooperation. Going forward, the continuation of this policy will be of strategic importance for the protection of national interests, economic development, and further consolidation of Azerbaijan's stature in the international arena. In the early decades of the 21st century, the emergence of a multifaceted and dynamic international

order has underscored the fact that only states with stable, coherent, and strategically grounded foreign policies are capable of withstanding multifarious geopolitical pressures. Within this context, the Republic of Azerbaijan has exemplified a pragmatic and balanced foreign policy approach, successfully safeguarding its national interests amid the evolving regional power equilibrium, while simultaneously adhering to internationally recognized legal norms and principles. Azerbaijan's model of balanced diplomacy has not merely ensured its resilience in the face of complex geopolitical challenges but has also facilitated its transformation into a proactive and agenda-setting actor within both regional and broader international frameworks. This strategic posture has positioned Azerbaijan as a pivotal nexus for major energy and transport initiatives, while concurrently serving as a platform for fostering regional stability and advancing diplomatic engagement. Looking ahead, the preservation and adaptive refinement of this strategic orientation through the incorporation of more agile and responsive policy mechanisms will be critical in further enhancing Azerbaijan's influence and relevance within the evolving architecture of the international system. Accordingly, in the context of the 21st century, foreign policy in Azerbaijan is not merely instrumental but constitutes a fundamental component of its strategic trajectory and political identity formation

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