

# ANALYSIS OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF AZERBAIJAN IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF NEOREALIST THEORY: IN THE EXAMPLE OF THE KARABAKH PROBLEM

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## ABSTRACT

After Azerbaijan gained its independence, the main problem in its foreign policy was the Karabakh conflict with Armenia. Among the different approaches to solve this problem in foreign policy was the view that a cooperation or conflict-based approach could explain interstate relations and the classical theories of international relations can discuss them; this has been the dominant view in the foreign policy of Azerbaijan.

We conducted a literature review in developing the conceptual framework for this study. The effect of the anarchic international system on the foreign policy of Azerbaijan, the attitude of the sovereign states and international political organizations in the system, the strategy of Azerbaijan that started with the balance policy, and the 44-day Armenia-Azerbaijan war will be examined from the perspective of neorealist theory. From this, it will be possible to reveal the importance of the balance policy in Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

This study aims to include the approach to the security problem in the foreign policy of Azerbaijan since its independence, and the strategies it has created to solve the Karabakh problem, using a certain theoretical framework.

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, foreign policy, neorealism, security, international system

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## INTRODUCTION

In the decision-making process regarding the foreign policy of Azerbaijan, two main options have emerged. The first of these was the option of shaping its foreign policy according to the basic principles of international law by resorting to dialogue, and the second was the option of solving the current problem in foreign policy by resorting to force. The problem, as has been discussed by the classical theories of

international relations, is also vital for small states when choosing their own foreign policy. In this respect, one of the academically debated issues has been to adopt either a realism-based or a liberalism-based approach in foreign policy. These two existing approaches have covered a long period for Azerbaijan to decide on foreign policy.

Since gaining its independence, these two approaches in foreign policy have been a constantly discussed subject by society and

academics.

There are limited steps that small states can take in foreign policy and in the decisions that they have made accordingly. However, we can state that the neorealist theory covers the main problems in explaining the international system, either in interstate relations or international systems. In this sense, the power of the theory to explain practical events emerges as an essential process.

For these reasons, in this study, first, the basic principles of realism are briefly expressed, and attention paid to the main arguments of neorealist theory while explaining international politics. Then, the foreign policy priorities of Azerbaijan and the decisions taken by international political organizations regarding the Karabakh conflict are briefly mentioned. Azerbaijan has always felt the reflections of the anarchic international system on itself during the 26-year ceasefire process, which was carried out in accordance with international law. The effects of these processes on Azerbaijan's foreign policy are examined and the failure of the international organization in foreign policy is examined in the theoretical framework.

Azerbaijan has been concerned about the attitudes and behaviors of the great states that dominate the region from the day it gained its independence to the present day. As a result of this concern, it has tried to maintain bilateral and multilateral relations based on the balance policy. Although Azerbaijan has attached importance to the dialogue process with international organizations during the ceasefire process, it has also increased its military budget every year by using the advantage of its economic relations.

It is observed that the effect of the balance policy in Azerbaijan's foreign policy has continued for a long time, and most of the steps taken in practice are adapted to this strategy.

The main argument of the neorealist theory is that the ultimate goal of states is survival. For Azerbaijan, solving its territorial integrity has been one of the main goals in foreign policy. The 44-day war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which started on September 27, 2020 (Jafarova et al., 2021, p.20) and the security-oriented developments after it make this study more effective in the perspective of neo-realist theory (Welt and Bowen, 2021, p. p 3-4).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The first assumption of realism is that the nation-state, commonly shortened as state, is the primary actor in international relations (Rösch and Lebow, 2018, p. 6). Other bodies, such as individuals and organizations, exist, but their influence is limited. The second assumption is that the state is a unitary actor. National interests compel the state to speak and act in unison, especially during times of conflict. The third assumption is that decision-makers are rational actors because rational decision-making serves national interests (Antunes and Camisao, 2018, p. 1).

For this assumption, realism is a statist viewpoint. The theory assumes that states in the international system encounter repeated threats and challenges (Walt, 1998, p. 30). Threats to a state and its ability to maintain its survival are based on power, particularly military power (Mearsheimer, 2006, p. 79).

Realism explores the process within this paradigm, assuming the main goals of states to be survival and the necessities to survive; in fact, these are their justifications for existing. States place a premium on security and respond to the demands of the international system (Stein, 2001, p. 12812).

Morgenthau, who is the main defender of both the neorealist theory and the realist theory, said that, small states need a balance of power in their foreign policy to protect their sovereignty (Morgenthau, 2006, p. 196). Likewise, Robert Art stated that balancing is an important option (Art, 2005, p. 183). As a continuation of this, according to Waltz, when confronted with a clear military and political threat, one of the options that the state would employ is the balancing plan (Schweller, 2006, p. 9). No matter how balancing is performed, however, it is an expensive option, and the probability of failure of the state applying this strategy is quite high (Mowle and Sacko, 2007 p. 67).

According to Waltz, since all states have to do their best to protect their assets and interests, and while the most capable prevail, the least capable are the most vulnerable. Although the functions of all states are the same, they might perform them to different standards. To mitigate the disadvantages of anarchy, everyone will endeavor to maximize their security (Waltz, 2001, p. 4, Norris, 2002, p. 18).

Waltz, Morgenthau and realists accept the

anarchic feature of international relations and the thesis that there is no central absolute authority in the system and that the units in this structure must take care of themselves. They also accept the fact that states are structurally similar to one another and that the international system emerges as a by-product of the unit activity that forms it (Brown, 2007, p.37). According to Waltz, the main goal in international relations is not power, but security, and the basis of the international system is the balance of power (Waltz, 1979, p. 6).

Waltz criticized his predecessor political scientists, either because they connect foreign policy to human nature in general or because states exhibit different behaviors for different reasons, but prefer the same foreign policy in the end (Waltz, 1979, p. 67).

In his book, *The Theory of International Politics*, considering that international politics is affected by many concepts such as national economy, national politics, and international politics, Waltz first tried to establish the structure of international politics (Waltz, 1979, p. 67).

Mearsheimer, one of the key names of realism today, criticized Waltz's view that the state is in a constant state of defense in a "security dilemma" and therefore tries to increase its power as defensive. In his work *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer supported "offensive realism" against "defensive realism" (Walt, 1998, p. 37). States that maximize power to survive cannot fully ensure their security as they will be under the threat of a hegemon other than themselves (Craig and Valeriano, 2018, p. 89).

According to Mearsheimer (1995), the competition of states for power, which he calls "aggressive realism", is because five different elements come together and give their characteristic features to the international system. These are, respectively (Mearsheimer, 2008, pp 61-62, Sevim, 2013, pp 48-49):

1. The main actor of the system is the great powers,
2. Every state has an offensive military capability,
3. States can never be confident of the intentions of other states,
4. The ultimate purpose of states is survival,
5. States are rational actors.

## METHODOLOGY

We adopted a qualitative approach in our study, with data consisting of secondary data sources, such as scientific articles written in this field and internet resources. The data in our study were analyzed using the descriptive analysis method, as a basic reliable descriptive analysis can confirm the results of more complex and accurate analysis (Hair et al., 1998).

This article was assessed using the analytical-explanatory methodology. The disciplined configurative case study, which uses established theories to explain a case, was chosen as the primary method of the study (Eckstein, p. 99). Accordingly, a case is taken and examined within a theoretical framework that has already been established. The purpose of this method is to analyze the case under research while confirming the applicable theory.

Ideas derived from the discipline or original contributions to contribute to the existing theory do not aim to reach scientific law-like generalizations (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 20). The original value of this study is that it will explain the foreign policy of Azerbaijan in different periods from a purely scientific perspective, the perspective of neo-realist theory, which is one of the main theories of international relations.

### Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy Priorities and Balance Policy

It is possible to state that four strategic principles are among the main tasks of the foreign policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan and that it shapes its foreign policy within the framework of the following principles, based on Bagirov, 200, pp. 178-179 and Ismayilov, 2014, pp. 80-81):

- Strengthening independence (statehood);
- Recognition in the world and strengthening the position of our state in the international community;
- Ensuring the territorial integrity of the country and eliminating the consequences of the military aggression of Armenia against Azerbaijan;
- Ensuring the economic and energy security of the republic, carrying out a successful "oil policy", etc.

Since its independence, Azerbaijan has had to

conduct foreign policy while having to take into account the fact that Russia's covert presence remains there although Russia's dominant position in the post-Soviet region has officially ended. Russia has tended to keep Azerbaijan dependent on itself by taking every opportunity to prevent the integration of new states into the Euro-Atlantic community. Azerbaijan, which tended to turn to the West in the first years of its independence, faced defeat in the Karabakh conflict. The war not only put a stop to Azerbaijan's pro-Western objectives, but also highlighted a threat to the country's national security. Meanwhile, Baku's energy-oriented projects and the priority of protecting the country's national independence were in jeopardy (Valiyev and Mamishova, 2019, p. 1-2).

When we look at the last ten years of independence, it can be said that Azerbaijan has felt obliged to pursue a balanced foreign policy. The Azerbaijani leadership took into account the challenging and complex geopolitical and geographical situation of Azerbaijan and tried to carry out its foreign policy in this regard. It is possible to state that focusing on Russia, the USA, or the Islamic world has played a vital role in the decision-making process of Azerbaijan foreign policy. Different experiences in practice not only made the process difficult, but also revealed very limited options. By integrating with the West and NATO, as Georgia did, a turn in foreign policy would have been met with a harsh attitude from Russia and would have resulted in the deportation of nearly 2 million working Azerbaijani citizens residing in Russia. Becoming dependent on Russia, as neighboring Armenia did, will mean that the great humanitarian sacrifices of the independence movement have been in vain and that Azerbaijan is doomed to remain under Russian control and stay away from European integration. Due to the possibility that harmony with the Islamic world may disquiet the Americans and Europeans, who are the primary power behind investments in Azerbaijan, the decision-making process has been carried out very sensitively (Aliyev, 2013, p. 4, Ismailzade, 2004, p. 6).

According to Stephen Walt, another neorealist thinker, when states calculate their security needs, they can respond to exterior dangers. This can be done either by joining a specific coalition to protect security from a threatful state (balancing behavior) or by advancing toward

reconciliation and making foreign policy that corresponds with the source of the external threat (progress together) (Valiyev and Mamishova, 2019, p. 15).

When we examine the relations of Azerbaijan with Russia and Iran, the country has had to be careful in the region due to the aggressive capacity of both states, occasional problems in diplomatic relations, and the following characteristic: Both states divided Azerbaijani lands into two parts, north and south, with the 1813 Treaty of Gulistan and the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay (Bakhov, 1966, p.111; Yeşilot, 2008, pp. 188-192). Since these two states provided significant political and military assistance to Armenia in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Azerbaijan had difficulties establishing its territorial integrity. Policies with these states, which occupied a necessary position in the region, played a decisive role in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. We can briefly state the reasons as follows;

*Vital issues in relations with Russia:*

- The influence of Russia in the Caucasus in general, and the Karabakh problem in particular;
- The residence of more than 2 million Azerbaijani population living in Russia;
- The necessary place of Russia in the economic policy of Azerbaijan;
- The membership of Azerbaijan in the Commonwealth of Independent States.

*Vital issues in relations with Iran:*

- There are a large number of Azerbaijani Turkic population in Iran;
- The majority of Azerbaijani Muslims are Shia;
- Azerbaijan is in the north of Iran as an independent state;
- Azerbaijan is obliged to provide transportation to Nakhchivan via Iran;
- Azerbaijan has good relations with the USA and Israel;
- Iran has good relations with Armenia.

All the reasons mentioned above appear as essential parts of constructing regional policy aspects of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. The decision-making process in foreign policy and, accordingly, the practices of the Azerbaijani state have brought difficulties both at the military stage and at the integration stage with the world states.

### **International Organizations and Neorealist Perspectives in the foreign policy of Azerbaijan**

Azerbaijan is a member of the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), NATO's Partnership for Peace, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership, the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Council of Europe, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), the Treaty Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the World Health Organization (WHO), the Non-Aligned Movement, the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-speaking Countries (TURKPA), the International Organization for Migration, and the Asian Development Bank. The importance of international organizations in the foreign policy of Azerbaijan has emerged as an important process since the first years of independence (Doing Business Azerbaijan Overview, 2019; p. 6).

Along with the state formation process, Azerbaijan has not only made diplomatic attempts to become a member of many international organizations, but has also tried to solve its territorial integrity problem by expecting concrete steps from these organizations, especially the United Nations, with respect to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. Therefore, in this study, the approaches of the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which have a say in the sovereignty of a state, will be discussed by keeping the political aspect of international organizations in the foreground in the foreign policy of Azerbaijan. Regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, we see the inactivity of both organizations and the logical result of this inactivity in Azerbaijan's tendency to resort to war as a last resort for its territorial integrity. Azerbaijan, acting on the principles advocated by the neorealist theory, ignored international organizations by criticizing their inadequacy in foreign policy at the level of the president and acting in a tendency to solve its problem with Armenia at the level of the state, which is the main actor in international politics.

Although Azerbaijan used the balance policy as

a strategy, the start of this war caused serious diplomatic crises for its security with Russia in foreign policy during and after the war, which is the main actor that dominates the system.

Russia took initiatives at two levels of international effort to mediate a resolution of the Karabakh conflict. One of them was the co-chairmanship, together with the USA and France, of the OSCE Minsk Group, which was established in 1992 to solve this problem. We can see these two factors as another reason for us to see the role of Russia in the solution of the problem (Fuller, 2013, p. 5). In April 2016, the 44-day war again led to the conflict resolution efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs. The main problem with the peace process led by the Minsk Group was that the OSCE did not seem determined enough and focused on conflict management rather than conflict resolution (Mammadov, 2016, pp. 168-170).

However, due to the fragile peace process and the unsuccessful attempts of international organizations in this regard, Azerbaijan started the 44-day war with Armenia on September 27, 2020. Seeing the war as a last resort, the Azerbaijani government sharply criticized the activities of international organizations in the absence of progress in relations with Armenia.

### **The 44-Day War**

Despite the four resolutions (822, 853, 874, and 884) adopted by the United Nations in 1993 demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all occupying forces from Azerbaijani territory, Armenia continued its occupation, thereby violating a fundamental principle of international law.

The escalation of the fighting in Karabakh directly and indirectly resulted in massive losses on both sides. Azerbaijan has long supported a peaceful conclusion of the conflict, and there was hope for a peace agreement once Armenia's new government took office in 2018.

On the other hand, the new Armenian government wasted an opportunity to de-escalate the violence and assist in finding a peaceful settlement. When the Armenian Prime Minister questioned the Madrid Principles in early 2020, tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan grew. Simultaneously, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan sabotaged the peace talks by raising reservations about the

format.

Border clashes in the Tovuz district of Azerbaijan in July 2020 damaged all peace efforts in the region. The Tovuz district is a critical region that ensures the major transportation routes and energy connections to global markets. For example, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, the South Caucasus natural gas pipeline (SCP), and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway pass through the Tovuz district.

Later, on September 27, 2020, the Armenian army carried out large-scale military provocations against Azerbaijan. It was the largest and most serious escalation since the 1990s.

The conflict ended on November 10, 2020, when Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia signed the Tripartite Declaration. According to the agreement, Russia deployed 1,960 armed soldiers, 90 armored personnel carriers, 380 vehicles, and special equipment in the Karabakh region. Furthermore, the Joint Russian-Turkish Center for Monitoring the Ceasefire Regime and All Military Operations in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Zone was established in the Aghdam district to monitor the implementation of the terms of the ceasefire agreement.

The engagement of Turkey in the peace process was vital for lasting peace in the region, and the tripartite declaration was an important document that stopped military operations. According to the Trilateral Declaration of November 10, 2020, Armenia returned the Aghdam, Kalbajar, and Lachin districts to the control of Azerbaijan. Although the 44-day war lasted only six weeks, it was one of the largest conflicts in the post-Soviet region. According to official figures, about 7,000 combatants and more than 100 civilians were killed on both sides of the war, while unofficial statistics show the figure as more than 10,000 (Jafarova et al., 2021, pp. 4-11).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, Azerbaijan's approach to its foreign policy towards its security problem since its independence and the strategies it has created to solve this problem were examined in the perspective of neorealism. While doing this, the it primarily examined the studies pioneered by Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer. At the same time, incorporating another neorealist

writer's (Stephen Walt) idea of balancing behavior and bandwagoning behavior, which is necessary to explain the subject, has made the the examination of the theory even more effective. Moreover, Walt's idea of balancing behavior is important for explaining the balance policy covering 26 years in the foreign policy of Azerbaijan, and his idea of bandwagoning behavior is essential for examining especially the relations of Azerbaijan with Turkey and other allies.

The main focus of the study is the foreign policy of Azerbaijan strategy, which began by operating under liberal theory assumptions but evolved due to the anarchic nature of the international system and the insufficiency of international institutions in solving Azerbaijan's political crisis.

At the same time, the study has tried to present the factors that were effective in the process of the formation of the balance policy of Azerbaijan. After independence, the foreign policy arguments of the Azerbaijani presidents differed fundamentally from one another as they tried to carry out the process toward a balance policy.

The Azerbaijani state tried to prioritize the decisions of international law that threaten the sovereignty of states, tried to guide the world public within the framework of legal information, and made efforts not to use military force in the Karabakh conflict. Furthermore, it tried to maintain diplomatic relations within international organizations.

This process continued in the periods of Haydar Aliyev and Ilham Aliyev, including the period of Elchibey. Acting on the basic assumptions of liberal theory, these diplomatic attempts, which stated that the violation of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan was not an acceptable situation, failed in the United Nations Security Council and within the framework of the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe for a long time; Azerbaijan could not turn the situation against it in its favor.

Accepting that Russia and Iran are both historically and culturally the dominant powers in the region, we can state that these two states are the main actors in the system while examining developments in Azerbaijan.

Russia and Iran have the capacity for aggressive foreign policy rather than peaceful policies because of their historical empires. Russia

established the Commonwealth of Independent States to keep the states which once were under the control of the USSR still under its control.

The policies of Azerbaijan to get rid of the sphere of influence of Russia have not historically gone unpunished. Therefore, Azerbaijan has intended to strengthen its relations with the dominant states in the system by acting rationally in foreign policy. Due to all these factors, Azerbaijan pays attention to being balanced in its foreign policy with the Western powers, based on the balance policy.

Due to the result arising from the anarchic structure of the international system and all the concerns mentioned above, Azerbaijan strengthened its alliance relations with Turkey in its foreign policy, started a 44-day war with Armenia, and succeeded in liberating most of its occupied historical lands as a result of the war.

The main target in this study is the foreign policy strategy of Azerbaijan as a small state. When we consider the current problems in the field of international relations, however, such as the effect of the anarchic international system in the region and the full establishment of sovereignty, the scientific importance of the study will be investigated in the coming years.

This study, which incorporates the perspective of neo-realist theory, one of the main theories of international relations, will lead to studies by including realist-liberal-based discussions in Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

As has been stated, Azerbaijan has been trying to solve the Karabakh problem within the framework of international law for a long time and to continue the process by prioritizing the functionality of international organizations.

The issue of whether international organizations are sufficient to solve the main problems is one of the issues that can be examined in detail in other studies.

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