

Azerbaijan And Iran : Dangerous Liaisons ?

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As the international community debates ways to respond to Iran's nuclear research, Azerbaijan has begun to explore new avenues of cooperation with the Persian Gulf state - a trend that local analysts say could present Baku with a difficult decision if Iran is referred to the United Nations Security Council for potential punitive measures.

In recent weeks, representatives of President Ilham Aliyev's administration and the government have emphasized Azerbaijan's neutrality in the increasingly bitter dispute between Tehran and the international community over the Islamic Republic's decision to resume nuclear testing.

Questioned about Azerbaijan's position on the Iranian nuclear program, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov commented in a December 2005 interview with EurasiaNet that "the development of peaceful nuclear programs is a sovereign right of every nation which chooses to do so." On January 16, roughly a week after Iran defied an international ban to resume testing, an Azerbaijani foreign ministry spokesperson stated that Baku's policy position remains unchanged.

Energy and geopolitics explain much of the friendship. Iran can offer Azerbaijan lower prices for natural gas than it currently receives from the Russian energy giant GazProm, which recently nearly doubled prices for gas exports to the South Caucasus state. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan, which has worked hard to strengthen ties with the US government and presidential administration, can offer Iran the chance to appear "a good neighbor," only interested in regional stability.

In the past year, the two countries have reached agreements on military, energy and technical matters, including arrangements for natural gas swaps, Iran's Ambassador to Baku Afshar Suleymani told the official Iranian IRNA news agency on January 11, adding that political, economic and cultural relations "have developed fairly well."

The upbeat assessment follows a long line of high-level meetings between Iranian and Azerbaijani officials in 2005. President Aliyev and Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad met three times in 2005, starting off with a three-day-long official visit by Aliyev to Tehran in January. In November, Baku was the first destination abroad for newly appointed Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki.

The last meeting took place on December 20, 2005 in Nakhchivan, an Azerbaijani enclave that has gone without natural gas for the past 15 years as the result of an Armenian blockade in connection with the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute over the territory of Nagorno Karabakh.

During the meeting, Iran and Azerbaijan agreed to a deal that will supply Nakhchivan with 250 million cubic meters of gas in 2006 in exchange for Azerbaijani gas exports to Iran's northeastern regions.

"Relations between the two friendly and fraternal countries [Azerbaijan and Iran] are rapidly developing. There is mutual understanding, cooperation and friendship between us," Aliyev said during the Nakhchivan ceremony. Ahmadinejad added that "Iran will always be with Azerbaijan, in its good and bad days."

But in its relations with Iran, Azerbaijan must tread a delicate

line. In recent years, President Ilham Aliyev has sought to win greater acceptance for Azerbaijan among pan-European organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and Council of Europe, and with the US, which has extensive energy interests in the country and has undertaken a program of military cooperation.

In a December 29, 2005 interview with the local newspaper Express, Novruz Mammadov, head of the presidential administration's foreign policy department, however, commented that relations between Azerbaijan and Iran "cannot be considered in the context of the West's attitude towards a neighbor[ing] country."

The interview contained some of the strongest pro-Iranian and anti-Western messages made to date by an Azerbaijani official.

Mammadov took particular issue with the West's criticism of election violations during Azerbaijan's November 2005 parliamentary vote.

"Unfortunately, the West, which opposed red revolutions in the 20th century, now suddenly has become a fan of revolutions," he told the newspaper. "Some forces in the West would like Azerbaijan to be a weak, vulnerable country. They wanted to break us, but failed."

The perceived lack of strong US and international support for Azerbaijan in response to Armenia's blockade of Azerbaijan and to a 2002 territorial dispute with Iran over a Caspian Sea oil field fuelled much of Mammadov's ire. "[T]hose who see problems in our friendship with Iran today are enemies of Azerbaijan," he said.

However, the official emphasized that the West may benefit from Azerbaijan's status as a country that links both East and West.

"Azerbaijan is eastern and a Muslim country, while directed toward the West," Mammadov said. "In this case, the West should support us because it needs Azerbaijan as a bridge to the East. However, some forces in the Western countries act negatively in this regard."

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Tahir Taghizade , however, stated that he does not see anything negative in the West's reaction to the recent Azerbaijani-Iranian rapprochement. "The US understands the position repeatedly expressed by the Azerbaijani government: The rush for integration into the international community should not harm [our] friendly relations with neighbouring countries. It is the basic principle of our foreign policy," Taghizade said.

Local experts tend to support the government's position on this issue. "Since the crisis has not yet reached its peak, Azerbaijan is free to keep its neutrality and even develop friendly relations with Tehran," commented Ilgar Mammadov, an independent political analyst.

"Sooner or later, the crisis will be solved and the tension over the Iran issue will diminish in the world. Then, the superpower will be occupied with other problems, but Azerbaijan will always have to live in the neighborhood of a strong Iran."

Mammadov, however, expressed surprise that the US has so far not expressed concern about the ties between Azerbaijan and Iran, and suggested that President Aliyev has undertaken the role of an unofficial "messenger" for communications between Tehran and the West amidst the nuclear testing stand-off. "Otherwise, it is very difficult to explain the lack of emotions in the West to recent events," he said.

At the same time, Tehran has been surprisingly reticent about

US-Azerbaijani military cooperation, formerly a target for tough criticism by Iranian diplomats. Plans were recently announced for the US to modernize one radar station near the Iranian border at Lerik and one near the border with Georgia at Agstafa, APA news agency reported. The work comes in addition to two radar stations installed by the US close to Azerbaijan's borders with Russia and Iran to monitor Caspian Sea traffic.

Asked about the stations during a November 28, 2005 press conference in Baku, Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki said that "I am confident that Azerbaijan and Iran will never allow anyone to take hostile actions against one or the other."

However, some experts in Baku argue that Iran's recent clashes with the international community could eventually put Azerbaijan in danger, particularly if military force becomes part of the response.

"Iran wants to benefit from the difficulties the US is experiencing in Iraq and Afghanistan and use the time for speeding up its nuclear program in hopes that it will possess a nuclear weapon before the crisis in the Middle East is resolved," independent political analyst Rasim Musabekov said. However, given a forceful response by the international community, Azerbaijan will be in "a very risky situation," he added.

Analyst Ilgar Mammadov agreed: "If the tension between Iran and the West reaches its highest point, Azerbaijan will be forced to make a painful choice."

Editor's Note: Rovshan Ismayilov is a freelance journalist based in Baku.
