
Azerbaijan : VP Cheney Was Reportedly Less Than Diplomatic in Baku

EurasiaNet Eurasia Insight: 8/9/2008

It seems that US Vice President Dick Cheney caused a scene during his recent visit to Azerbaijan when his hosts declined to follow his script.

Over the past few days, details have leaked out that indicate that Cheney's September 3 visit to Baku was a spectacular diplomatic failure. [For additional information see the Eurasia Insight archive]. A report published by the Russian daily Kommersant, which cited sources within President Ilham Aliyev's administration, said the Cheney visit started with a snub, as neither Aliyev nor Prime Minister Artur Rasizade were at the airport to greet the US vice president, who was the highest ranking American official ever to visit Azerbaijan. Instead First Deputy Prime Minister Yagub Eyubov and Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov greeted Cheney.

The visit apparently went down hill from there. Cheney publicly expressed Washington's strong commitment to ensuring the continued flow of energy westward from the Caspian Basin to Turkey along routes not under the control of Russia. Privately, he pressed Aliyev to make a firm commitment to sending Azerbaijani natural gas to Europe via the long planned Nabucco pipeline. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. Aliyev politely declined to take Cheney up on the offer.

"Aliyev made it clear that he values [good] relations with Washington, but that he is not about to start an argument with Russia," the Kommersant report said, adding that Azerbaijani aides described Cheney as becoming "extremely irritated" by Baku's decision to adopt a "wait-and-see position."

Compounding Cheney's displeasure, immediately following the discussions Aliyev reportedly telephoned Russian leader Dmitry Medvedev to inform the Kremlin about the substance of the US energy stance. Mammadyarov later departed for Moscow for further diplomatic discussions.

In a fit of pique, Cheney skipped a reception held in Baku in his honor, according to Azerbaijani sources.

Since Russia's incursion into Georgia, local political experts have wondered about the geopolitical impact on Azerbaijan. The entire US energy strategy in the Caspian Basin is predicated on Azerbaijan's unwavering commitment to the West. The commitment now looks more fragile than ever, and the Cheney visit may well have done more harm than good, in terms of retaining Azerbaijan's allegiance to Washington's energy agenda.

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav090808b.shtml>
