
Vice President Cheney's Visit To Baku Raises Speculations

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On September 3, US Vice President Dick Cheney arrived in Baku as part of his tour to the region of the former Soviet Union. The visit was the first such high-ranking visit by a US official and drew much attention because of the recent events in Georgia and the escalation of the US-Russian rivalry in the South Caucasus. In the wake of the visit, one line of questioning occupied the minds of local and international observers: Why did Cheney come, and did he get what he wanted? In this respect, interesting facts emerged about the trip.

Foremost, it should be noted that Cheney chose Azerbaijan and not Georgia as his main base for the trip, staying in Baku overnight and spending more time on meetings in Baku than in Tbilisi. This comes as a surprise because it was the Georgian-Russian conflict which was cited as the main reason for his trip to the region. Perhaps Cheney wanted to convey the importance of Azerbaijan to US national interests.

While in Baku, Cheney met with the US embassy staff, foreign oil companies, and President Ilham Aliyev to discuss the situation in the region. Cheney and Aliyev discussed bilateral relations, as well as the recent events in Georgia.

Russian media rushed to speculate that Cheney received a cold shoulder in Baku. Moscow-based Kommersant newspaper even stated that Cheney was so upset about the results of his talks in Baku that he even refused to attend the gala-dinner organized in his honor. Both the US embassy and the newspaper itself later denied this speculation. However, the level of warmth shown towards Cheney in Baku does raise certain questions.

Cheney was met at the airport not by President Aliyev or Prime Minister Artur Rasizadeh, as is usually the case, but by Deputy Prime Minister Yagub Eyyubov. The dispatch of a lower level official indicates that the Azerbaijani political leadership wanted to show the Kremlin that it is not overly excited about the visit of the American official, and that Baku does not intend to take sides in the US-Russian rivalry in the Caucasus.

Indeed, Baku, unlike Tbilisi, prefers to stay away from antagonizing Moscow or taking sharp foreign policy decisions towards NATO and the US. Instead, President Aliyev prefers to maintain cordial relations with Moscow and develop the spirit of partnership with Russia while slowly integrating into the Euro-Atlantic space and exporting energy resources to the European markets. In Baku, it is believed that ostracizing Russia and overlooking Russian interests in the region will only destabilize the situation, as the events in Georgia demonstrated.

President Aliyev was quite aware that Cheney's visit was under the careful watch of Moscow. It is not a surprise that President of the Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev called President Aliyev immediately after Cheney's visit to discuss the situation in the region. That is why President Aliyev was especially careful in his remarks with the US official not to side with Washington in any hot issues facing the region.

Local media reported that energy and security issues were the main items on the discussion list between President Aliyev and Vice President Cheney. Both have known each other for more than a decade and have already built a solid partnership. President Aliyev highlighted the large role that the US plays in

regional energy projects and security arrangements. But at the same time, President Aliyev used the moment to discuss bilateral US-Azerbaijan relations. On this issue, Azerbaijan has some reasons to be unhappy.

During the March 2008 voting of UN General Assembly Resolution 10693, the resolution supporting the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, the United States voted against the text of the resolution. This truly became a heart-breaker in Baku, and officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs promised to keep it in mind, while considering relations with the US. For more than 17 years, the United States has promised to respect Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, but at the same time continues funding the Nagorno-Karabakh regime, maintains section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, and refuses to pressure Armenia to liberate occupied territories of Azerbaijan. In Baku, this is seen as an act of double standards.

Moreover, the slow and weak response to the Georgian crisis demonstrated to Azerbaijan that the US does not have any practical means to protect the South Caucasus states from Russian aggression. As Hikmet Hajizadeh, a member of the opposition Musavat party's Supreme Council, told an Azeri newspaper, "Today, [the] US has no concrete capacity to protect Azerbaijan from Russia" (Day.az, September 3).

Keeping these factors in mind, why should then the Azerbaijani leadership display a "welcome sign" to the US leadership? After all, despite years of Azerbaijan's assistance to the US in the energy and security matters, Washington has still yet to deliver anything practical to Azerbaijan. As political analyst Rasim Musabeyov notes, "Words alone are not enough. Real actions of Washington must be impressive too" (Day.az, September 3).
