
US-Azerbaijan Relations Go Through Tension, Yet Maintain Strategic Alliance

By Alman Mir

Eurasia Daily Monitor - 16/5/2008

As the presidential elections in Azerbaijan are approaching, the issue of Western influence in those elections and the perceived threat of the West's support for the color revolutions is once again emerging in the country. In this context the role of the United States is particularly highlighted, and in recent weeks comments coming from the State Department have damaged bilateral relations.

On April 28, while speaking at the Peace Corps 2008 Worldwide Country Director Conference, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice answered a question about democracy in the South Caucasus as follows: "there is important work to be done there to bring that part of the Caucasus [Azerbaijan] closer to standards that we thought they were once meeting. And it has been a disappointment. Now, one of the problems has been that because of the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, all kinds of bad policies are tolerated, let me put it that way, or excused by political leaders. ... So there is more that we could do there. I would love to see more volunteers in that part of the world, both in places that are starting to move up and places that are still mired in the kinds of problems that you have in Azerbaijan" (www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/04/104120.htm).

This remark caused a great deal of dismay in Azerbaijan, particularly because the public and officials in the country believe that the recent post-election violence in Armenia should draw more criticism from Washington than the developments in Azerbaijan. The foreign ministry spokesman Khazar Ibrahim immediately reacted by saying, "We read the statement and must say that the evaluation of the situation in our country is not at all realistic and is an example of double standards" (www.day.az, April 29). Ibrahim also added that Baku had the impression that Washington had lost its sense of reality in the region.

Timur Huseynov, the analyst for the most popular news site www.day.az, called Rice's remarks "surprising in light of the strategic relations that the two countries enjoy."

The negative turn in bilateral relations continued when United States Ambassador to Azerbaijan Anne E. Derse held a press conference on May 1 and announced that the U.S. government would spend \$3 million on the forthcoming presidential elections in Azerbaijan. These funds are to be spent on political debates, election monitoring, NGO support and strengthening political parties. Although not a large sum under current Azerbaijani conditions, the act itself raised many eyebrows in official circles. Ramiz Mehtiyev, the head of president's apparatus and one of the most influential politicians in the country, angrily responded that this act constituted "interference in the domestic affairs of the country" (www.day.az, May 3).

Subsequently, the opposition newspaper Musavat speculated that senior government officials had a closed meeting, in which Mehtiyev's remarks were discussed and in which the president and the foreign minister expressed concern that they might damage bilateral relations. The daily suggested that officials in Baku try to normalize relations with Washington (Musavat, May 5). Indeed, on May 7 Mehtiyev made a new statement, saying that U.S.-Azerbaijan relations were "on a high level."

Whether the meeting took place or not remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that in Baku there is growing frustration with what it perceives to be Washington's interference in Azerbaijan's domestic affairs. Through most of 2007 and 2008 U.S. officials have continuously criticized Azerbaijan for its problems with freedom of the press. Last week, President Bush even included Azerbaijan among the five countries with the biggest problems with press freedoms.

Azerbaijani officials, on the other hand, believe that the United States does not appreciate the current stability and economic achievements in the country and misunderstands the historical pace of the development of Azerbaijan. In private conversations, officials of the ruling party often point to the problems of race discrimination, slavery, gender barriers, beating of journalists and corruption in U.S. history as proof that not everything can be achieved immediately. Democracy takes time.

There are two other factors that add to the growing irritation in bilateral relations: strengthening Azerbaijan's economic potential, which bolsters the spirit and bargaining position of government officials, and the recent vote on Nagorno-Karabakh at the UN General Assembly, in which the United States voted against the Baku-sponsored resolution. Officials in Baku believe that a country that voted against the most crucial document for Azerbaijan does not have the moral right to call itself a friend or to give advice on domestic affairs.

Despite the tension, however, it is unlikely that Azerbaijan will make significant changes in its foreign policy orientation.
