
Russian-Azerbaijani Relations : New Stage Of Development

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The year of 2008 is very important for Azerbaijan, since the presidential election is to take place in the country this year. Besides, the year of 2008 is important for the entire South Caucasus. The Russian-Caucasian relations may break new horizons, and this can concern Georgia, Azerbaijan and even Armenia. I believe that Russia and the Caucasian states will understand each other better in spite of the current strained relations between Moscow and Tbilisi.

As for the Russian-Azerbaijani relations, I think that they will develop within the framework of the diversification of Azerbaijan's foreign policy and economic relations. In Russia this new trend is being adapted to, it is understood that the new independent states are guided by the national interests rather than by nostalgic feelings.

Moscow and Baku will continue getting used to each other. Something will be taken painfully. For example, new oil and gas routes through Azerbaijan will meet with Russia's rejection.

The parties will pin their great hopes on new Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. Anyway, he does not make strongly-worded statements that we used to hear. Of course, this is good.

The important question is how the territorial conflicts will be settled. This year drastic decisions will not be taken. I do not know when they will be taken. But I feel that pragmatism tells.

One can say that formerly Russia could use the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to influence the participants of the conflict - Armenia and Azerbaijan. But I believe that now these countries are likely to use the conflict to influence Russia. For example, when it is said that if Russia does not change its position on the conflict, Azerbaijan will bring about a rapprochement with the West.

Alexey VLASOV, general director of the Information and Analytical Center for Study of the Social and Political Processes in the post-Soviet space, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow The hopes or apprehensions of the experts who believe that after the change of power in Russia the Kremlin's foreign policy will be changed drastically are unlikely to be realized. In the short term the policy, which Vladimir Putin conducted during his second presidential term, will be followed.

How is that connected with the South Caucasus? I think that neither Russia nor the Western states have produced the new rules of the game that should be clearly formulated due to the dynamic development of the situation in the South Caucasus as well as in Central Asia.

The chaotic processes, which will be still more intense after the Kosovo precedent, result from the unbalanced strategy of the Russian Federation. It is not clear if we should proceed from the "closed concepts", namely the South Caucasian problems should be resolved within the region with Russia acting as a moderator, or we should go over to "open strategies" and say that the EU and NATO have certain interests in the South Caucasus and

Central Asia. If that is so, we must sit down at the negotiating table together with the Western politicians and draw up the rules of the game.

For today Russia's foreign policy, there are no synchronous actions in different areas. That's why the policy pursued towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia differs from the policy pursued towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Rasim MUSABEKOV, political scientist, Baku If the Caucasian conflicts are not settled, the relations between the regions' states and with Russia are unlikely to become stable. Azerbaijan's foreign policy must focus on elimination of consequences of Armenia's aggression against Azerbaijan that led to the occupation of not only Nagorno-Karabakh but also the territory where there were six times as many people as there were the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians.

I believe that this is the major impediment to the development of the Azerbaijani-Russian relations. When Vladimir Putin was the Russian President, those relations became much better and much more pragmatic. The economic relations' potential is not exhausted. Azerbaijan is the largest market in the Caucasus. Many Azerbaijanis speak Russian.

As regards the security issues, Azerbaijan does not try to reduce the problems to the mass media squabbles. I believe that if Azerbaijan does not see the change of Moscow's attitude in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement, it will be extremely difficult to stop Azerbaijan's drift in the Western and NATO direction.

The stage when Russia tried to prevent Azerbaijan from developing the Caspian Sea energy resources became a thing of the past. This country implemented the large-scale projects concerning the oil and gas exploitation and supplies to the world markets sidestepping Russia. Today Azerbaijan is getting Russia's competitor as oil and gas exporter, though not very serious, in the international markets.

There is a different kind of interest in building the relations with Azerbaijan. Gazprom displays an interest in the purchases of the Azerbaijani gas. This is reasonable and can be negotiated pragmatically.

At present there is a clash of positions on the Transcaspian projects of the energy supplies. If Azerbaijan reaches the agreement with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, this will be difficult to stave off. If there are consumers and suppliers of those energy resources, it will be almost impossible to prevent those projects from being implemented.

Rashad RZAQULIYEV, head of the Foundation of Social Developments, Baku We should view the Russian-Azerbaijani relations in the context of shaping the Eurasian policy. It is Russia that plays a certain role in the formation of a new fair order in Eurasia. In this respect Russia's position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement will be an important and serious part of the big geopolitical game.

If Russia fails to stop a split of the Eurasian space by the foreign forces, then at least the Nagorno-Karabakh issue can change the geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus.

The past experience does not allow us to hope that Russia will change its position on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. In my opinion, Azerbaijan itself should be concerned about its territorial integrity and sovereignty. I'm sure that Azerbaijan is able to resolve those problems or will be able to do that in the near future.

The problem is different. The global political situation is formed by a small group of the states. The Russian political elite must continue to be conscious of their responsibility for their country as well as for the large area that is historically and culturally connected with Russia. The maintenance of order in the South Caucasus should proceed from Russia's national interests.

The material is based on the experts' addresses during the video conference Moscow-Baku "Russian-Azerbaijani relations: New Stage of Development". The video conference was organized by the Russian News and Information Agency RIA Novosti on May 13, 2008.

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