



# COMMENTARY

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## Azerbaijan and U.S. Foreign Policy

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The pomp and circumstance of a presidential visit raises the opportunity to ask questions about the United States' ability to satisfy its diverse range of foreign policy aims – the promotion of democracy and open societies; the expansion of free trade and U.S. business interests abroad, and the strengthening of nonproliferation regimes and antiterrorist coalitions. The recent state visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao was a potent representation of the complex tradeoffs U.S. foreign policy can face.

Though not on the level of great power politics, the visit of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to Washington this week represents the equivalent challenge of a bilateral relationship in which power disparities are large, but America's leverage to promote its full set of desired goals is constrained.

Energy policy and democracy promotion are at odds in U.S. foreign policy in Azerbaijan, just as they are elsewhere in the world. In Azerbaijan, however, they further contend with efforts to resolve a simmering regional conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, to secure the Caspian-Black Sea zone connecting Asia to Europe, and, now, to alter Iranian attitudes and behavior regarding nuclear development. On all these fronts, the United States seeks Azerbaijan's support. Is it any wonder, then, that President Aliyev is coming to the White House?

Azerbaijan should be courted. It provides new sources of oil and gas to western markets, and is poised to transport even greater energy flows from Central Asia across the Caspian. With regard to transit security, Azerbaijan is arguably more important than its Caucasus neighbors Georgia and Armenia, sharing borders with Russia, Iran, and Turkey and, via the Caspian Sea, Central Asia. U.S. security assistance in the Caucasus has shifted accordingly, complementing the existing partnership with Georgia with a substantial new package for Azerbaijan. We should also not forget Azerbaijan's unique relationship with Iran: Azerbaijan's co-ethnics make up a substantial minority to the south.

While the Bush administration has reason to engage Azerbaijan on energy and security, it should also continue to promote greater democracy and good governance in Azerbaijan, as drivers of stability in the volatile Caucasus region. President Bush can use the opportunity of Aliyev's visit to emphasize the importance of a clean vote in Azerbaijan's repeat parliamentary elections, scheduled for May 13 in ten districts, as well of ending politically-motivated court cases against opposition activists.

Azerbaijani's authoritarian politics are not the main barrier to closer U.S.-Azerbaijani cooperation, however. Instead, it is the traditional bias of U.S. foreign policy favoring Armenia, Azerbaijan's adversary in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Section 907 of the congressional Freedom Support Act restricted government assistance to Azerbaijan from 1992 to 2002, on the assumption that Azerbaijan was the aggressor in that conflict – a conclusion that was at best uneven once Armenian troops occupied Azerbaijani territory. A presidential waiver of Section 907 was enacted when U.S. interest in engaging Azerbaijan in the war on terror overcame residual support for keeping restrictions in place.

Even with the waiver, the United States has continued to tilt toward the Armenian side in negotiations. U.S. officials have lamented the "lost opportunity" to transfer Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia in the 2001 Key West negotiations and more recently promoted a settlement involving a referendum that would eventually allow Nagorno-Karabakh to formally secede from Azerbaijan. With self-determination rather than territorial integrity as its prism for mediation (as in Kosovo), the United States has indisputably privileged the Armenian position.

Proper or not, U.S. reluctance to favor Azerbaijan's point of view on Nagorno-Karabakh is a hindrance to ensuring Azerbaijan's full cooperation on other security issues that matter to Washington. Carrots in the form of security assistance may buy Azerbaijan's support for a time, but its energy wealth is more than sufficient to provide for its own security – except, that is, to liberate the occupied territories and return Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani jurisdiction. To achieve these goals, Azerbaijan still requires international mediation.

Unless mediation is perceived to be more in Azerbaijan's favor, or Azeris themselves redefine the importance of Nagorno-Karabakh to their security, we can expect Azerbaijan to accommodate U.S. security interests only insofar as it has other reasons to do so. Joint efforts with the United States to promote Caspian security may constitute a win-win endeavor; participation in a "coalition of the willing" against Iran, even if only a sanctions-based one, does not.

Azerbaijan does not want to pick a fight against Iran. Its economic ties with its southern neighbor are picking up speed, its co-ethnics would be hostage to punitive action, and its association with the United States could prompt lasting animosity. In the absence of a broad international consensus on Iran, the United States would be wise not to rely on Azerbaijan to help impose forceful measures against its neighbor.

Fortunately for Aliyev's meeting at the White House, there is always oil, democracy, terrorism, and ethnic conflict to talk about instead.

On March 30, 2006, **Araz Azimov**, deputy minister of foreign affairs of Azerbaijan, delivered a presentation addressing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution process, Azerbaijan's regional and energy policies, and Azerbaijan's Euro-Atlantic agenda. You can listen to an audio recording of his remarks here:

[http://www.csis.org/component/option,com\\_csis\\_events/task,view/id,947/](http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_events/task,view/id,947/)

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