

FROM CENTRAL EUROPE TO THE INDO-PACIFIC: AZERBAIJAN UNDERMINES UKRAINE'S WAR EFFORT

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The civilizational and geopolitical alliance between the autocratic regimes of Russia and Azerbaijan is increasingly evident, particularly in the duo's joint promotion of a non-Western regional order in the South Caucasus. This alliance is epitomized by the normalization of the use of force, ethnic cleansing, and behavior antagonistic to Western interests, values and norms, as evidenced by the analogous actions of Russia against Ukraine and Azerbaijan's actions against Armenia and the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Putin-Aliyev alliance has progressively acquired a formal framework, enhancing the strategic partnership established in 2008 to the level of 'Allied Interaction' amidst escalating competitive multipolarity between the global West and the non-West. This special relationship was underscored by the significant bilateral declaration signed by the two leaders in Moscow on February 22, 2022, two days prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹ As articulated by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Azerbaijan is an important strategic partner, a good neighbor, and a reliable ally of Russia."² Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev, reciprocating this sentiment in light of the withdrawal of Russian 'peacekeepers' from the ethnically cleansed Nagorno-Karabakh, emphasized that "Russia is a fundamental country in terms of regional security in the Caucasus and in a wider geography"³ and "Russia will never leave this region," suggesting that "other countries should be interested in maintaining good relations with it."⁴

However, the Putin-Aliyev pledge to enhance 'allied interaction' is not confined to the South Caucasus but extends to global strategic cooperation. This cooperation is driven in part by a joint vision to consolidate the geopolitical fight against so-called 'Western neo-colonialism,' as unanimously articulated by Aliyev and Putin's regimes, at the expense of the Western values and interests at large.⁵ Against this backdrop, ISA's analysis indicates that Azerbaijan's recent activities are undermining the Ukrainian war effort, to the benefit of Moscow.

1. Kremlin 2022. Декларация о союзническом взаимодействии между Российской Федерацией и Азербайджанской Республикой. 22 Feb. 2022. [Online] <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5777> (Accessed on 20/05/2024).

2. Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Об установлении дипломатических отношений между Российской Федерацией и Азербайджанской Республикой. [Online] https://azerbaijan.mid.ru/ru/news/ob_ustanovlenii_diplomaticeskikh_otnosheniy_mezhdu_rossiyskoy_federatsiey_i_azerbaydzhanskoj_respub/ (Accessed 05/04/2025).

3. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2024. Ilham Aliyev held one-on-one meeting with President Vladimir Putin. [Online] <https://president.az/en/articles/view/65564> (Accessed on 26/04/2024).

4. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2024. Ilham Aliyev attended the International Forum "COP29 and Green Vision for Azerbaijan". [Online] <https://president.az/en/articles/view/65580> (Accessed 01/05/2024). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia 2024.

5. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia 2024. Выступление Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова в ходе Форума сторонников борьбы с современными практиками неокolonизма – «За свободу наций!». [Online] https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1932745/ (Accessed on 19/02/2024).

BULGARIA-AZERBAIJAN DEFENSE PARTNERSHIP

First, there is the redirection of Bulgarian-manufactured artillery munitions, initially earmarked for Ukraine, to Azerbaijan. Sofia has been Baku's strategic partner since 2015, with a growing Azerbaijani role across the Bulgarian energy market (i.e., suppling natural gas and operating transit infrastructure).⁶

It is less known that Azerbaijan expressed interest in entering the Bulgarian defense sector around 2016-2017. According to a Bulgarian investigative journalist, who requested anonymity due to the sensitivity of the issue, Azerbaijan has sought to invest in DUNARIT Corporation, Arcus Co., and Armaco JSC, prominent Bulgarian military manufacturers. Azerbaijan was particularly interested in the production and import of Soviet-era mortar munitions and artillery ammunition, including 122-mm separate loading rounds.

Amid limited availability of Soviet/Russian standard ammunition on the global market and Ukraine's artillery deficit, Bulgarian defense manufacturers appear to have redirected supplies to Azerbaijan. Data from Flightradar24 indicates regular cargo flights by the Il-76MD fleet of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces from mid- February to mid-March (six confirmed round flights) between Burgas and Baku. This suggests Azerbaijan's involvement in Bulgarian military production — and the partial disruption of supplies to Ukraine. A source in the Ukrainian Defense Ministry suggested the prioritization of Azeri weapons deliveries somewhat affected the quantity and timing of Bulgarian supplies to Ukraine. This corresponds with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's complaint following negotiations with the Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov in Kyiv. Zelensky raised concerns that only 30 percent of artillery shells promised by Bulgaria had reached Ukraine within the given time frame.⁷

Although these disruptions in military supplies to Ukraine may be relatively minor, Azerbaijan's role has geopolitical significance. These targeted disruptions enable Baku to expand its strategic value vis-à-vis Moscow.

TAPPING SLOVAKIA: DIVERSION OF ARMS TO UKRAINE

Second, there is evidence that Azerbaijan has played a role in delaying Czech and Slovak arms deliveries to Ukraine. Slovakia-Azerbaijan relations have blossomed under the government of Robert Fico, who assumed his third stint as prime minister in October 2023. Fico, a vocal opponent of military support for Ukraine during parliamentary elections, reduced military aid to Kyiv in March-April 2024.⁸ This policy shift has affected the production and procurement of joint artillery platforms and other significant lethal military equipment with the Czech Republic, which are critical for Ukraine.

Amid Fico's authoritarian drift — characterized by the consolidation of domestic power and pro-Russian policies — Azerbaijan has managed to influence Slovak and Czech military export production processes, redirecting some equipment previously earmarked for Ukraine.

6. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2024. Ilham Aliyev and President Rumen Radev made statements to the press. [Online] <https://president.az/az/articles/view/65772> (Accessed on 08/05/2024).

7. Brzozowski, A. 2024. Ukraine says only 30% of promised EU artillery shells received. [Online] <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/ukraine-says-only-30-of-promised-eu-artillery-shells-received/> (Accessed 19/04/2024).

8. "After their PM halts Ukraine aid, Slovaks dig deep to help", BBC News. 19 April 2024. [Online] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-68843542> (Accessed on 11/05/2024).

While visiting Baku on May 7, Fico and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed the Joint Declaration of Strategic Partnership, along with documents around defense industrial cooperation. (The two sides aim to establish joint Azeri-Slovak military production.)⁹ Interestingly, Fico's visit to Baku coincided with the disclosure that the Czech/Slovak company Excalibur Army plans to deliver over 70 units of the 155mm/L45 DITA self-propelled howitzers to Azerbaijan, representing the largest order of Czech/Slovak artillery systems since 1989.¹⁰ In this context, Fico's joint statement with Aliyev is notable, "when I heard [Aliyev's] position on Ukraine, I thought it was the position of the Slovak government. That is, we have a very similar position."¹¹

Following Fico's visit, the Slovak government was accused of prioritizing military deals with Azerbaijan over commitments to Ukraine. (Slovakia previously earmarked 16 Zuzana 2 howitzers for Ukraine.) In particular, Slovak MP Juraj Krupa noted that the Slovak Minister of Defense prioritized orders from Azerbaijan — and the Czech manufacturer — over an existing contract with Ukraine.¹² Azerbaijan's interventions in Slovakia, along with Bulgaria, are poised to exacerbate Ukraine's artillery shortfalls, to the benefit of Russia's recent advances.

AZERBAIJAN AND RUSSIA COLLABORATE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The third development that may influence the dynamics of the war in Ukraine appears to be a joint Azerbaijani-Russian intelligence operation against France in its overseas territory, the Pacific Ocean archipelago of New Caledonia. On May 16, protests by the indigenous population of New Caledonia evolved into violent riots against French authorities. According to the French government, the escalation of violence was stoked by Azerbaijan's intelligence services in possible coordination with Russia.

Azerbaijan has conducted a subversive campaign against France since late 2020. Amid Yerevan's 2020 military defeat, French President Emmanuel Macron, supported by the French Senate, backed Armenia and the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. The French government also condemned Azerbaijan's wanton use of force, which culminated in the violent ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023.¹³ During this period, Azerbaijan has adopted a confrontational approach to pressure France into abandoning its supportive policies around Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia's military reinforcement. As part of this effort, Baku has skillfully instigated, consolidated and instrumentalized the grievances of ethno-political minorities in France against Paris.

9. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024. Azerbaijan-Slovakia documents were signed. [Online] <https://president.az/az/articles/view/65747> (Accessed on 20/05/2024).

10. "Defence Turk: Azerbaijan to buy DITA wheeled self-propelled howitzers", Caliber.Az 06 May 2024. [Online] <https://caliber.az/en/post/238301/> (Accessed on 20/05/2024).

11. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024. Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Robert Fitso made statements to the press. [Online] <https://president.az/az/articles/view/65748> (Accessed on 20/05/2024).

12. "Slovakian Government Accused of Sending Barrels Intended for Ukraine's Zuzana 2 to Azerbaijan for DITA Instead", Defense Express 08 May 2024. [Online] https://en.defence-ua.com/industries/slovakian_government_accused_of_sending_barrels_intended_for_ukraines_zuzana_2_to_azerbaijan_for_dita_instead-10419.html (Accessed on 20/05/2024).

13. "French Senate adopts resolution calling for recognition of Artsakh". ArmRadio, 25 November 2020. [Online] <https://en.armradio.am/2020/11/25/french-senate-adopts-resolution-on-the-need-to-recognize-artsakh/> (Accessed on 11/04/2024).

Baku's approach mirrors Moscow's challenge to the U.S.-led post-Cold War unipolar agenda. Both Putin and Aliyev advocate for a non-democratic, illiberal world order under the guise of opposing so-called Western neo-colonialism.¹⁴ In recent years, Baku has cultivated ties with Corsican, French Polynesian, and New Caledonian independence movements, among others, through the establishment of the so-called Baku Initiative Group (BIG). The collective goal of this group is captured in its political slogan, "toward full liquidation of colonialism."¹⁵ The BIG platform — which promotes overtly anti-French, Euro-skeptic narratives — includes around 14 ethno-political movements from both France proper and its overseas territories.¹⁶ Azerbaijan's campaign against French interests has also been promoted across other channels, including the Non-Aligned Movement, the Islamic Cooperation Council, and bilateral engagements with authoritarian allies such as Russia and China.

The French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin openly revealed Azerbaijan's direct involvement in the anti-French insurgency in New Caledonia. The minister stated, "This isn't a fantasy. I regret that some of the [New Caledonia] separatists have made a deal with Azerbaijan."¹⁷ Politico, through sources in French intelligence, also revealed that Azerbaijani and Russia hybrid activities in New Caledonia have been detected for weeks, even months, "pushing the narrative of France as a colonialist state."¹⁸ Boasting of Azerbaijan's involvement in stirring anti-Paris sentiments in French overseas territories, policy influencer Farhad Mammadov, a protégé of presidential foreign policy advisor Hikmat Hajiyev, maintained that the "systematic efforts to weaken France must continue unabated." Mammadov also warned, "that even if the French side initiates normalization, Baku should not relent. This is not only Azerbaijan's reaction to [...] France's aggressive policy in our region; it is also a mechanism for positioning Azerbaijan in future discussions on the world order."¹⁹

It is also important to note that Baku and Moscow's reactions to unrest in New Caledonia were strikingly similar, animated by ideologically tinged rhetoric. For instance, in response to Georgian President Salome Zurbashvili's invitation to Emmanuel Macron to visit Georgia on its Independence Day to "finally liberate the Caucasus from Russian influence," the spokesperson for Russia's Foreign Ministry sarcastically remarked that the "only people Paris can free are the indigenous inhabitants of New Caledonia from the French yoke."²⁰

14. "Алиев призвал покончить с политикой неокOLONИализма, проводимой европейскими державами". TASS Agency, 1 May 2024. [Online] <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/20689957> (Accessed on 11/05/2024).

15. "Fransa müstəmləkəçiliyinə qarşı Bakı Təşəbbüs Qrupu yaradılıb - BƏYANAT". Report Azerbaijan, 06 July, 2023. [Online] <https://report.az/xarici-siyaset/fransa-mustemlekeçiliyine-qarsi-baki-tesebbus-qrupu-yaradilacaq-beyanat/> (Accessed on 01/05/2024).

16. "Bakı Təşəbbüs Qrupu və Fransanın son koloniyalarında müstəqillik mübarizəsi aparan 14 hərəkət Yeni Kaledoniyaya dəstək bəyanatı yayıb". Azertag, 16 May 2024. [Online] https://azertag.az/xeber/baki_tesebbus_qrupu_ve_fransanın_son_koloniyalarında_musteqillik_mubarizəsi_aparan_14_herekat_yeni_kaledoniyaya_deste_k_beyanati_yayib_video-3004666 (Accessed on 20/05/2025).

17. Telematin (French TV) video Tweet of French Interior Minister's interview. [online] <https://twitter.com/telematin/status/1790993081564881274> (Accessed on 17/05/2024).

18. "France accuses Azerbaijan of fomenting deadly riots in overseas territory New Caledonia." Politico, 16 May 2024. [Online] <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-accuse-azerbaijan-fomenting-deadly-riot-overseas-territory-new-caledonia/> (Accessed on 17/05/2024).

19. "Mneniye FM" (t.me/mneniyefm). Telegram Channel of Farhad Mammadov. 29 May 2024.

20. "Захарова прокомментировала приглашение Макрона в Грузию". RIA Novosti, 19 May 2024. [Online] <https://ria.ru/20240519/zakharova-1947020000.html> (Accessed 19/05/2024).

Amid the Kremlin's growing strategic partnership with Baku, Gregory Karasin, the chair of Russia's Federation Council Committee on International Affairs, recently announced Moscow's plans to open a diplomatic mission in the ethnically cleansed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The noteworthy decision is likely attributable to the Azeri-Russian operation in New Caledonia.²¹ An anonymous source within Russia's Foreign Ministry interpreted Moscow's gesture as a "sign of appreciation" for the pair's effective collaboration on the global stage in recent months.

The Azerbaijan-Russian intelligence operation in New Caledonia may compel Paris to reconsider its plans to dispatch troops to Ukraine, a possibility that President Macron did not rule out in April. (France is considering guarding border areas with Belarus.) Paris' efforts to mobilize direct military support for Ukraine among European actors were fiercely opposed by the Kremlin, with Putin's administration vowing to retaliate by targeting French personnel.²² A former diplomat from the Embassy of France in Ukraine, during a private conversation with ISA, suggested that increased involvement of French political and military resources in New Caledonia would likely hamper President Macron's preparations and plans to send troops to Ukraine.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Azerbaijan's undermining of Ukrainian supply chains — and defense capabilities — constitutes a relatively new challenge for Kyiv and provides Moscow with additional leverage vis-à-vis the West. The Azeri-Russian subversion campaign against France may upset Macron's nascent plans to intervene in the Ukrainian theatre, narrowing Kyiv's bandwidth to repel Russian advances. Hence Moscow's interest in curtailing French resolve. Overall, Azerbaijan's malign activities and growing partnership with Russia highlights the increasing effectiveness of authoritarian coordination — and its growing threat to Western interests.

21. "Скоро начнется подготовка к открытию генконсульства России в Ханкенди - Григорий Карасин". TrendAz 27 May 2024. [Online] <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3904848.html> (Accessed on 27/05/2024).

22. Russia Foreign Ministry. 2024. [Online] https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1952348/ (Accessed on 21/05/2024).

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