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**Asia in 2025:
Great power rivalry, contested politics,
and global disorder**

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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AZERBAIJAN 2025: FOREIGN POLICY BEHAVIOUR IN A FRAGMENTING EURASIAN ORDER

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The year 2025 marked the consolidation of a conjuncture that expanded Azerbaijan's capacity for autonomous action within an evolving regional order. Emerging from the interaction between systemic shifts and domestic consolidation, this context enabled Baku to recalibrate its foreign policy posture and reassert its agency across multiple and interconnected regional scenarios. These span the Middle East, the wider Near Eastern space, the Black Sea region, and Central Asia, where Azerbaijan occupies a position of both geographic and civilizational relevance.

The article examines how Azerbaijan has translated renewed agency into observable foreign policy practices and evaluates how this translates into enhanced decision-making autonomy and expanding multiregional influence. It argues that Azerbaijan exemplifies a wider pattern in small-state behaviour whereby agency is leveraged to mitigate structural constraints and project influence beyond material capabilities, adopting role conceptions commonly associated with middle powers. However, while such behaviour is not unprecedented in Azerbaijani foreign policy, recent trends point to a shift away from the cooperative and status quo-oriented practices typically associated with established middle powers. Instead, Baku increasingly exhibits traits commonly associated with evolving forms of middle-power behaviour, including a more assertive, domestic-driven, and selectively revisionist posture toward shaping regional dynamics. Overall, the case illustrates an emerging hybridization of middle-power behaviour, combining cooperative brokerage with selective contestation in pursuit of greater strategic autonomy and multiregional influence.

KEYWORDS – Azerbaijan; middle-power behaviour; foreign policy-making; revisionism.

1. Introduction

By 2025, building upon trajectories that had progressively taken shape over the previous decade, Azerbaijan found itself operating within an exceptionally favourable context at both the domestic and international levels. This altered opportunity structure significantly widened Baku's diplomatic latitude, enabling a shift from a largely reactive posture to a more proactive and agenda-setting foreign policy. At the core of this reconfigured conjuncture lay the restoration of full control over Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding districts, which had remained outside Baku's effective authority

since the 1991-1994 war with Armenia. The reassertion of territorial integrity after the 2020-2023 conflict represented not only a material shift in control over a contested territory but also a powerful source of domestic legitimacy and symbolic capital. It consolidated state authority, redefined the parameters of national sovereignty, and, crucially, reduced the structural constraints that had long circumscribed Baku's external action. By restoring full effective control over Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding districts, Baku decisively overcame what had been described as a «mutilated sovereignty syndrome» [Ceccorulli et al. 2016] – a structural condition in which incomplete territorial control constrained both state consolidation and strategic agency. For nearly three decades, the imperative of restoring territorial integrity functioned simultaneously as both the primary driver and the principal constraint of foreign policy, structuring diplomatic priorities, and limiting strategic flexibility. The reassertion of sovereignty did not merely alter the regional balance of power. It reduced the existential salience of the territorial question and enabled a partial reorientation of Azerbaijan's external posture beyond a single-issue agenda, thereby expanding the range of policy options within the evolving regional environment.

The expansion of Baku's policy options cannot, however, be explained solely by domestic consolidation and sub-regional power shifts. It must also be situated within the broader Eurasian context generated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The war has reconfigured patterns of great-power interaction across the post-Soviet space, transforming what had been described as a contested in-between region into a far more fluid and volatile strategic environment [Tyushka & German 2025a; 2025b]. In particular, the escalation from structured competition to open conflict between Russia and the collective West weakened Moscow's capacity to project uncontested dominance in its near abroad. At the same time, it intensified Western engagement with local actors, widening the manoeuvring space of states located between the two poles. Consequently, «geostrategic in-betweenness» in the post-Soviet space emerged not only as a condition of constraint but also as a potential resource, enabling states to leverage their positionality in pursuit of compensatory or opportunistic strategies [Tyushka 2025]. For several post-Soviet in-between states, this has translated into a recalibration of foreign policy options, a diversification of external partnerships, and a more assertive articulation of agency within an increasingly fragmented regional order [German 2024].

Building upon the favourable conditions outlined above, Azerbaijan has pursued a more assertive foreign policy posture, reflecting a deliberate activation of agency combining enhanced strategic autonomy with an increasing capacity to shape agendas and broker alignments across adjoining strategic perimeters. In turn, this renewed activism has reinvigorated debates within national academic and policy-oriented circles alike around Azerbaijan's standing as a middle power. Across this literature, the attribution of middle-power status to Azerbaijan rests on three interrelated and

often intertwined arguments. First, a material-strategic argument links this status to enhanced energy leverage and military capabilities, as well as to the reconfiguration of the regional status quo after 2020 [Ibrahimov 2024]. Second, a behavioural argument emphasizes activism in multilateral and minilateral settings, diversified institutional engagement, and the bridge-building role across geopolitical divides and regional chessboards as markers of middle-power conduct [Jafarova 2024; Ibrahimov 2024; Castro 2026]. Third, an ideational and reputational argument foregrounds soft power, norm entrepreneurship, and multicultural diplomacy as instruments through which Azerbaijan projects both legitimacy and influence beyond its material weight [Asgarov 2024; Jafarova 2024].

The present article builds upon, but also moves beyond, this emerging narrative. On the one hand, it starts from the assumption that Baku, maximizing limited material resources and leveraging targeted policy instruments to «punch above its weight», conforms to a long-standing pattern among small states in the post-Cold War order, behaving in ways typically associated with middle powers. On the other hand, the article examines the extent and patterns of Azerbaijan's middle-power-like conduct in 2025, situating the case within the evolving spectrum of behavioural repertoires observable across this composite category. The objective is not classificatory, and the purpose is not theory-building but theory-informed empirical analysis. The objective is therefore primarily empirical: the middle-power framework is employed here as an analytical and heuristic lens to assess how observable patterns of Azerbaijan's diplomatic conduct align with, adapt, or diverge from behavioural repertoires identified in the literature.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the conceptual evolution of the middle-power debate and introduce the analytical framework adopted. Section 3 examines those strands of Azerbaijan's external engagement that display continuity with a long-standing strategy of maximizing limited material resources through targeted diplomatic activism, a behaviour commonly associated with traditional and emerging middle powers. Section 4 turns to more recent foreign policy patterns that suggest an ongoing hybridization of Azerbaijan's middle-power behaviour, combining repertoires associated with different variants within this heterogeneous category.

2. Middle-Power Behaviour in a Changing International Order

The diffusion of material power, the regionalization of the international system, and the waning of great powers' influence have reactivated debates on middle powers, whose number increased significantly over the last two decades [Institute for Economics & Peace 2026]. Yet, few concepts in International Relations remain as elusive as that of middle-powerness [Robertson

2017], not least because of the persistent difficulty in establishing clear categorical boundaries. Attempts to define middle powers through aggregate quantitative indicators have failed to produce stable thresholds, thereby exposing the conceptual limitations of purely rank-based approaches [Cooper et al. 1993]. As a result, the debate took a behavioural turn: a middle-power came to be defined not by what it *possesses*, but by what it *does*. This qualitative shift placed emphasis on a diplomatic style characterized by a propensity «to promote cohesion and stability in the world system» [Jordaan 2003, p. 165]. Middle powers were commonly portrayed as internationalist in orientation, multilateral in method, and normatively committed to «good international citizenship», thereby contributing to the stability of the liberal international order [Cooper et al. 1993]. Their behaviour is also typically associated with the practice of niche diplomacy, defined as «concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns» [Evans & Grant 1991, p. 323].

Derived from historically contingent models and affected by tautological vulnerabilities [Robertson 2017], the behavioural approach has come under sustained pressure since the beginning of the century. This trend resulted from the emergence of new middle powers, whose foreign policy conduct departs significantly from the institutional and normative patterns associated with traditional cases. In a seminal work introducing a distinction between «traditional» and «emerging» middle powers, Jordaan [2003] highlighted both constitutive and behavioural differences. Emerging middle powers differ from their traditional counterparts in that they tend to occupy a semi-peripheral position in the global political economy, combine recent or incomplete democratic consolidation with pronounced domestic inequality, and exercise significant – sometimes dominant – regional influence. At the behavioural level, the key distinction lies in their orientation toward global order: whereas traditional middle-powers typically pursue an appeasing and system-reinforcing internationalism, emerging ones adopt a reformist posture, while remaining broadly committed to the stability of the existing order.

The distinction between traditional and emerging middle powers only temporarily restored analytical clarity to a concept strained by empirical expansion, as the subsequent proliferation of behavioural repertoires further destabilized the model. As foreign policy practices expanded to include assertive regional activism, coercive diplomacy, selective multilateralism, and norm contestation, the assumption of a coherent middle-power behavioural core became progressively untenable.¹

1. Jordaan himself later acknowledged this tension, ultimately suggesting that states displaying counter-hegemonic tendencies should no longer be classified as middle powers, effectively restricting the term to «mid-range states that actively work to stabilise the liberal hegemonic order» [Jordaan 2017, p. 396].

In response, the literature coined new labels and concepts aimed at capturing «heterodox» behavioural repertoires. A first strain of the literature frames behavioural discrepancy in terms of *status quo* versus *revisionist* middle powers [Moeini et al. 2022], arguing that the latter engage in rule-contesting or order-revising strategies rather than system legitimizing practices. Revisionism is understood here in terms of targeted challenges to Western dominance, governance asymmetries, or liberal normative hierarchies. Aydın [2021] further enriches this picture by showing that emerging middle powers often adopt a dual strategy toward the liberal international order: they are neither outright revisionist nor fully *status quo*, but instead pursue selective engagement combined with normative contestation. While benefiting from institutional embeddedness within the liberal order, they simultaneously criticize its distributive injustices and governance asymmetries. In this sense, they operate as «internal critics» of the order.

A related but analytically distinct category is that of «unusual middle power» developed by Öniş and Kutlay [2021]. In this formulation, emphasis lies on hybridity of foreign policy behaviour. On the one hand, unusual middle powers combine multilateral engagement with unilateral assertiveness, oscillating between cooperative brokerage and hard-power projection; on the other hand, this behavioural pattern is linked to domestic dynamics, as foreign policy activism becomes intertwined with regime consolidation and internal legitimacy-building. Assertive external postures, strategic autonomy narratives, and selective institutional engagement are not only systemic strategies but also tools for regime strengthening. Building on this line of inquiry, Aydın-Düzgüt [2023] introduces the category of «authoritarian middle powers» to capture cases in which regime survival strategies reshape the external orientation toward the liberal order. In such instances, contestation is not only strategic but also ideational: authoritarian-leaning middle powers increasingly reject the liberal normative core while remaining functionally embedded within the institutional architecture of the order.

These classifications do not appear mutually exclusive types of middle powers. Rather, they represent analytically distinct but overlapping dimensions of heterodox deviation from the classical middle-power script. Taken together, they point to three core variables along which contemporary middle-power behaviour varies and may be analyzed under a coherent analytical framework. First, systemic orientation, namely the state's attitude toward the liberal international order – ranging from *status quo* legitimization to selective contestation and internal revisionism. Second, strategic repertoire, or the instruments and modalities of international action – ranging from classical multilateral brokerage, bridge-building, and coalition management to coercive diplomacy, minilateralism, and autonomy-seeking activism. Third, the domestic-external nexus, capturing the extent to which foreign policy activism is linked to regime consolidation, status-seeking narratives, and domestic legitimacy dynamics. Recast in these terms, the

evolving middle-power debate offers a practical analytical grid rather than a purely classificatory exercise. The three dimensions identified above serve here as an interpretative framework to examine Azerbaijan's foreign policy in 2025 – highlighting patterns of continuity, adaptation, and emerging inflection points.

3. Continuities in Baku's middle-power behavior

Over the course of 2025, Azerbaijan intensified its efforts to project a form of good international citizenship primarily through the deliberate cultivation of strategic «niches». This vector of foreign policy unfolded along two principal tracks: mediation diplomacy and aid diplomacy. The former constitutes a classical hallmark of traditional middle-power behavioural repertoires and represents a particularly noteworthy niche through which such states project influence beyond their material weight. In the Azerbaijani case, the recent activation of this vector of foreign policy should be interpreted against the backdrop of a broader «polycrisis» affecting its adjoining strategic perimeters. Rather than constraining Baku's agency, this environment of overlapping tensions expanded its diplomatic room for manoeuvre. It enabled the country to consolidate a bridge-building role that leverages its in-between condition, understood not merely in geographic terms but also in cultural and strategic ones. Situated at the intersection of Euro-Atlantic, Eurasian, and Middle Eastern arenas, Baku sought to capitalize more systematically on this liminal condition and its balanced ties with rival actors to position itself as a credible mediator and facilitator of dialogue. Mediation diplomacy therefore emerges not as episodic activism but as a deliberate niche strategy [Yagubova 2025] consistent with established middle-power repertoires.

In 2025 Azerbaijan's mediation diplomacy unfolded along two principal tracks. The first concerns relations between Turkey and Israel, a particularly significant vector insofar as the sharp deterioration of bilateral relations over the past decade – recently intensified by tensions linked to Syria – placed two pillars of Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy on a potential collision course. Close security ties with Ankara and dense defence and energy cooperation with Tel Aviv enabled Baku to initiate a calibrated «quiet diplomacy» [*Al Arabiya* 2025, 3 June] and to act as a discreet facilitator of dialogue in a high-mistrust environment. This triangular dynamic resulted in the opening of a «Baku Process», whereby Azerbaijan acted as a potential stabilizing intermediary limiting escalation risks [Khanin 2025, 21 November]. In early 2025, amid concerns over potential military incidents in Syria, Baku hosted technical talks aimed at establishing a deconfliction mechanism between the parties [*Reuters* 2025, 10 April; *Times of Israel* 2025, 10 April], inaugurating multiple rounds of discussions conducted under

Azerbaijan's auspices [*Al Arabiya* 2025, 3 June; *Times of Israel* 2025, 3 June]. This mediation vector is particularly significant not only because it leverages Azerbaijan's strategic in-betweenness, but also because it mobilizes its cultural and civilizational positioning.² The mediation effort also draws on Azerbaijan's cultivated image as an interfaith bridge, with commentary framing its role as consistent with a narrative of Muslim-Jewish coexistence and dialogue [Eichner 2025, 14 April].

The second track of mediation diplomacy concerns the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In mid-2024, at the request of Ukraine and the European Union, Azerbaijan sought to facilitate negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow over a Russian gas transit agreement set to expire at the end of the year [*Reuters* 2024, 13 June]. Azerbaijani authorities subsequently signalled their readiness to host broader rounds of negotiations in Baku, presenting the country as a neutral venue for dialogue aimed at de-escalation [*Report* 2025, 26 July]. While the mediation of gas transit proved unsuccessful and the proposal to host negotiations did not materialize into concrete follow-up initiatives – due in part to the subsequent deterioration of bilateral relations between Baku and Moscow – this track remains analytically significant. On the one hand, it illustrates the extent to which Azerbaijan's calibrated positioning creates a perception of relative balance and the potential to act as an intermediary on a strategically sensitive issue at the intersection of energy security and wartime diplomacy; on the other hand, it demonstrates the diplomatic capital generated by Azerbaijan's in-between posture and to the explicit willingness of its leadership to translate that positionality into mediation initiatives.

Alongside mediation diplomacy, aid diplomacy constitutes a second pillar of Azerbaijan's niche-building strategy. Institutionalized in 2011 through the creation of the Azerbaijan International Development Agency (AIDA) within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this policy instrument has, for over a decade, served as a structured and multiregional channel of external action [Frappi 2019]. The most recent OECD data confirm a sustained upward trend in Azerbaijan's external assistance, which increased from approximately US\$ 16 million in 2014 to around US\$ 60 million in 2024 [OECD 2025, 11 June]. While Azerbaijan remains far from the international commitment to achieve a 0.7% ODA/GNI ratio by 2030, the steady expansion

2. This dual strategic and civilizational positioning had already become visible in mid-2024, when reports indicated that Lebanon had approached Azerbaijan to explore possible mediation channels with Israel prior to operations against Hezbollah. Beyond the immediate episode, this development can be read as an instance of early signalling of mediation capacity. In the same vein, regional analyses further suggested that such a role could position Baku as a facilitator in broader diplomatic realignments, including potential efforts to revitalize or expand the framework of the Abraham Accords in a post-Gaza environment [Khanin 2024, 24 July; Khanin 2025, 21 November].

of its aid envelope has nonetheless positioned the country, in OECD formulation, as an «emerging provider of development co-operation, sharing its experience of economic transformation to an upper middle-income country» [OECD 2025, 11 June]. Aid diplomacy has thus become both a pillar of Azerbaijan's projection of good international citizenship and a manifestation of status-seeking behaviour: through the selective provision of development and humanitarian assistance, Baku signals responsibility, competence, and upward mobility within the hierarchy of international actors.

In 2025, humanitarian diplomacy also functioned as an instrument embedded within broader foreign policy calculations. This was particularly visible in Azerbaijan's calibrated posture toward the Russia-Ukraine war, built upon a cautious balancing strategy: avoiding open condemnation of Russia in international forums and refraining from joining Western sanctions regimes, while reiterating its steadfast commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity. This posture was complemented by tangible humanitarian support to Kyiv. By early 2026, Azerbaijan's cumulative assistance to Ukraine was estimated at over US\$ 45 million [Butun 2026, 27 January]. Such support was channelled both through AIDA and through the active involvement of the state oil company SOCAR. Significantly, SOCAR directed part of its assistance toward strengthening the resilience of Ukraine's energy sector at a time when energy infrastructure had become a primary target of Russian military strikes, affecting also Azerbaijani-linked assets in the country [Kennedy 2025, 11 August].

The diversification of spatial and sectoral areas of intervention has traditionally characterized Azerbaijani aid diplomacy [Frappi 2019]. Nevertheless, the African continent – and particularly Sub-Saharan Africa – has remained a consistent priority of engagement. This orientation has been corroborated by the most recent trends in the provision of development assistance, which – although limited in absolute terms – remain concentrated in a restricted yet strategically coherent set of domains.³ Still, aid diplomacy toward Africa is less about scale than about status and positioning, further illustrating how this niche is embedded within broader foreign

3. The most recent available data report approximately US\$ 400,000 in official development assistance (ODA) directed to African countries in 2023 [OECD 2025, 11 June]. This figure appears to have increased significantly in 2024, reportedly exceeding US\$ 10 million in humanitarian projects implemented by AIDA. In terms of sectoral priorities, the energy sector remains central, combining hydrocarbon expertise with an expanding emphasis on renewables and climate diplomacy – an agenda further reinforced in the lead-up to Baku's hosting of COP29. Governance and public-sector reform constitute a second pillar of engagement, while a third dimension concerns human capital development, including scholarship programs and technical training initiatives designed to foster long-term institutional cooperation and elite linkages. These figures do not encompass commercial investments with economic spillover effects in African countries, estimated at approximately US\$ 130 million in 2024 [Hasanly 2025, 24 September; Baku Network 2025, 22 April].

policy strategies. It reflects a strategic prioritization of partnerships with the Global South, an established feature of emerging middle-power activism in Jordaan's [2003] understanding. It also reflects a model of South-South co-operation grounded in knowledge transfer and institutional capacity-building, through which Baku leverages its own experience of economic transformation [Frappi 2019; Mahammadova & Guliyev 2025].

Thus, while mediation and aid diplomacy illustrate Baku's niche-building strategy, they also point toward a broader behavioural orientation, namely a preference for multilateral engagement anchored in the Global South. This preference does not disclose disengagement from Euro-Atlantic institutions. On the contrary, by strengthening ties within Global South networks while maintaining dense economic and institutional connections with the Global North, Azerbaijan explicitly aims at positioning itself as a relational intermediary [PRA 2024, 18 December] – yet another demonstration of the attempt to leverage the country's multidimensional in-betweenness. Strengthening participation in Global South multilateral frameworks provides Azerbaijan with opportunities to «enhance its diplomatic visibility, bolster international legitimacy, and increase the market competitiveness of its non-oil sectors» [Garayeva et al. 2025, p. 2]. This strategy has been pursued primarily through the engagement with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Serving as Chair from 2019 to 2023 – an unprecedented one-year term extension endorsed by member states – Baku consolidated its position within one of the largest multilateral groupings of the Global South contributing to the enhancement of its institutional and operational profile. Crucially, cooperative mechanisms launched and institutionalized under Azerbaijan's chairmanship – most notably the Parliamentary Network and the Youth platform – provided the structural avenues through which this engagement was also sustained beyond the formal conclusion of its mandate.⁴

Rather than privileging a single institutional axis, Azerbaijan's multilateral activism and engagement with the Global South are pursued across heterogeneous institutional frameworks, including BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). While Baku formally applied for BRICS membership in mid-2024, it also signalled interest in upgrading its current dialogue partner status within the SCO [Huseynov 2024, 16 October; Mammadov 2024, 18 July]. Both paths – and particularly the latter – gained traction also as a result of the growing entente between Azerbaijan and China. This process culminated in April 2025 with the signing, on the occasion of a visit to Beijing of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, of a Joint

4. The continued operationalization of these mechanisms in 2025 is evidenced, *inter alia*, by the Fourth Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement Parliamentary Network held in Tashkent in April 2025, as well as by the sustained activities of the NAM Youth Organization, including the Youth Week convened in Baku in early 2026 [Non-Aligned Movement Parliamentary Network 2025, 6 April; TURKPA 2025, 6 April; *Azernews* 2026, 5 February].

Statement establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership that included support for Azerbaijan's enhanced legal status within the SCO [APA 2025, 23 April] – potentially extending to full membership, according to President Xi Jinping [Report 2025, 1 September].⁵

A further illustration of Azerbaijan's multiregional agency is its formal accession to the consultative framework of Central Asian states [Cutler 2025, 17 November], transforming the so-called C5 format into a broader C6 mechanism and anchoring Baku more structurally within Central Asian evolving regional diplomacy. While Azerbaijan's participation in the C5 format builds on a long-standing path of cooperation sustained by ethno-linguistic bonds, it also reflects Baku's capacity to capitalize on opportunities created by the current regional context. On the one hand, these opportunities derive from the growing need among Central Asian states to diversify their external relations amid heightened uncertainty in regional power balances [Drost et al. 2025]. On the other, they stem from the economic and strategic prospects generated by growing international interest in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), an overland corridor linking East Asia and Europe bypassing Russia to the north and Iran to the south. Now central to the regional strategies of both the EU and China [Drost et al. 2025; Sahakyan 2026], the TITR consolidates Azerbaijan's role as key a Caspian transit hub – a position in which Baku has long invested through sustained diplomatic and economic efforts [Frappi 2022].

Azerbaijan's bridging role and regional positioning were further reinforced by the recent «diplomatic breakthrough» [Gurbanov 2026, 8 January] in Azerbaijani-US relations, after several years of lingering tensions. Regional connectivity occupies a central place in the «Charter on Strategic Partnership» that the two countries committed to elaborate through a memorandum signed during the trilateral Washington summit of August 2025 [DoS 2025a, 8 August], attended by Donald Trump, Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. In the same context, linking regional connectivity to the broader peace process over Nagorno-Karabakh, the three leaders endorsed a preliminary agreement for the construction of a transport corridor connecting Azerbaijan with the Nakhchivan exclave through southern Armenia [DoS 2025b, 8 August] – the so-called Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity. In addition to enabling Armenia to comply with one of the provisions of the 2020 ceasefire agreement, the project would strengthen the development of the TITR while signalling renewed US engagement in addressing the regional transit di-

5. Azerbaijani participation in SCO-linked economic platforms – such as the SCO International Investment and Trade Expo in 2025 – further illustrates an effort to embed economic diplomacy within Eurasian institutional architectures. Additional consultations between Azerbaijani officials and the SCO Secretariat in late 2024 and early 2025 underscore the continuity of this engagement beyond the affiliation issue [MoE 2025, 21 July; *News.az* 2026, 22 January].

mension within the peace process and in supporting wider Eurasian connectivity initiatives.

Against this backdrop, Azerbaijan's participation in the C6 format further consolidates its bridge-building role across overlapping regional arenas. It also illustrates a layered pattern of institutional embeddedness, combining regional consolidation within Central Asia, strengthened trans-Caspian connectivity toward Europe, and alignment with renewed US-backed connectivity initiatives.

4. The hybridization of Baku's middle-power behaviour

Alongside the behavioural repertoire discussed above, Azerbaijan's foreign policy in recent years has also displayed patterns commonly associated with heterodox middle powers, notably the selective use of coercion and the renegotiation of asymmetric relationships in pursuit of greater strategic autonomy.

Azerbaijan's use of coercive instruments is most evident in the negotiations with Armenia over a peace treaty following the 2020-2023 war. The process culminated in March 2025 with the signing of a 17-point Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and Inter-State Relations, later initialled in a non-legally binding form at the August 2025 Washington summit. Leveraging a marked asymmetry in military, diplomatic, and negotiating power, Azerbaijan deployed a broad repertoire of incentives and disincentives to steer Armenia toward acceptance of its proposed peace terms. Consequently, diplomatic engagement and gestures of cooperation have coexisted with elements of coercive bargaining and more or less explicit signals of military pressure.⁶ This approach is reflected both in the conduct and in the partial outcomes of the negotiations, as well as in the issues that remain unresolved. Chief among these is the demand that Armenia amend its Constitution to remove references to the 1990 Declaration of Independence and the territorial claims over Karabakh contained therein. In a post-war bargaining environment marked by clear asymmetries, such a request amounts to an exercise in «coercive diplomacy, with effects that are not insignificant in their detrimental impact on [Armenian] sovereignty» [Della Malva 2025, p. 249].

6. A case in point is the Azerbaijani narrative of «Western Azerbaijan», which refers to the territory of present-day Armenia as the historical homeland of Azerbaijani communities displaced from the region in several waves during the twentieth century. While Azerbaijani official discourse frames the issue in cultural and humanitarian terms – particularly in terms of right of return and preservation of historical heritage – Armenian analysts have argued that the narrative may carry broader political implications, warning that it could implicitly challenge the legitimacy of the territorial status quo. For the Azerbaijani narrative, see PRA [2025, 21 May]; for the Armenian perspective, see Hayrapetyan [2025, 27 May].

Turning to the conduct of the negotiations and their outcomes, Azerbaijan's coercive approach was accompanied by lawfare tactics and generated effects extending well beyond the bilateral relationship between the parties. The recourse to lawfare – understood as the strategy of using or misusing legal instruments to achieve warfighting objectives [Dunlap 2008] – is reflected not only in the reciprocal resort to international courts after 2020 [Uraz 2025], but also in the fact that «the mutual withdrawal of claims and the commitment not to take actions against each other» constituted one of the conditions imposed on – and accepted by – Yerevan for the signing of the March agreement [*Armenpress* 2025, 13 March]. A further condition accepted by Armenia concerned the commitment not to allow the deployment of foreign forces along the interstate border. This requirement directly affects the presence of the EU civilian monitoring mission in Armenia (EUMA): a «so-called observation mission» that was extended violating previous agreements without Azerbaijan's consent which, in President Aliyev's words, «did not strengthen trust but, on the contrary, undermined it», demonstrating in turn how the EU «unequivocally took Armenia's side in the normalization process» [PRA 2025, 7 Jan]. The negotiating conditions advanced by Baku illustrate how the coercive management of the peace process also served to constrain the involvement of third parties, shaping not only the bilateral settlement but the broader regional diplomatic environment.

Azerbaijan's insistence on excluding third-party deployments along the interstate border reflects a broader preference for a strictly bilateral negotiation framework. Consistent with this approach, Baku has also sought to reshape the institutional setting of negotiations by advocating the dissolution of the largely ineffective OSCE Minsk Group, which had been entrusted with mediating the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict since the early 1990s. Azerbaijan therefore introduced an additional negotiating condition vis-à-vis Armenia, requesting that Yerevan align with Baku in formally calling for the termination of the Minsk process. Armenia's eventual acceptance of this demand led to the issuance of a Joint Appeal in Washington, based on which the OSCE Ministerial Council formally dissolved the mechanism in early September [OSCE 2025, 1 September].

Azerbaijan's increasingly assertive pursuit of autonomy-maximizing strategies also translated into attempts to expand its room for manoeuvre by recalibrating asymmetric relationships with larger partners. This trajectory is particularly visible in Baku's recent interactions with major actors such as Russia, France, and the EU, where growing capabilities and shifting regional dynamics have encouraged a more self-confident renegotiation of established patterns of engagement.

The restoration of full sovereignty over Karabakh – symbolically marked by the early withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers deployed after 2020 [*Reuters* 2024, 17 April] – combined with Moscow's «Ukraine distraction», reduced structural asymmetry in Russian-Azerbaijani relations and

formed the backdrop to the most serious bilateral crisis since the early 2000s. The confrontation was triggered by the the Russia accidental shooting down of an Azerbaijan Airlines aircraft flying toward Grozny in December 2024, which sparked Baku's demands for accountability and compensation from Moscow in what national outlets portrayed as a matter of «national dignity» [Guliyev 2025, 30 July]. Tensions escalated during the first half of 2025 as Baku restricted the activities of several Russian media outlets and peaked in summer, after a Russian police operation in Ekaterinburg targeting Azerbaijani diaspora, followed by a wave of arrests in Azerbaijan targeting employees of the news agency Sputnik [Rahimli 2025, 7 July]. A process of gradual de-escalation began in autumn, when Presidents Aliyev and Vladimir Putin met on the margins of the CIS summit in Dushanbe, signalling a willingness to «bury the hatchet» [Ostiller 2025, 10 October] after Russia publicly acknowledged responsibility for the aircraft incident. The crisis illustrates Baku's attempt «to impose new rules on Moscow» [Kitachaev 2025, 7 July], a renegotiation dynamic aimed at asserting greater autonomy in a shifting regional order where Azerbaijan retains growing bargaining chips vis-à-vis Russia.⁷

A similar renegotiating rationale emerges in the recent deterioration of Azerbaijan's relations with France, reflecting not only a degree of self-confidence comparable to that displayed in its dealings with Russia, but also the hybridization of its middle-power-like behaviour. The accusations levelled by Baku against Paris revolved around two main strands. First, in response to the intensification of diplomatic ties and military cooperation between France and Armenia, Azerbaijani officials accused Paris of providing Yerevan with «offensive, lethal weapons that present a real threat to Azerbaijan» [PRA 2024, 18 December]. Second, reacting to repeated French calls for the protection of the rights of Karabakh Armenians and guarantees for the return of refugees who fled the enclave following the September 2023 military operation, Baku framed Paris's position as unacceptable interference in the country's internal affairs [PRA 2023, 5 July]. More broadly, France was accused of pursuing an «anti-Azerbaijan policy within various international organizations and at the parliamentary levels» aimed at «strengthening its influence in the South Caucasus» [PRA 2024, 1 February].

In Baku's response to French pressure, the dispute was framed not merely as a bilateral disagreement but as part of a broader struggle against lingering colonial practices in international politics. Accordingly, the re-

7. A particular case in point comes from regional infrastructural politics, as Baku holds a pivotal position in the «International North-South Transport Corridor» linking Russia with Iran and the Persian Gulf through Azerbaijani territory. In 2025, trilateral cooperation intensified through agreements aimed at expanding the corridor's western route, increasing cargo transit targets, and coordinating tariffs and logistics services along the Russia-Azerbaijan-Iran axis [Asia News Monitor 2025, 16 October].

sponse was articulated primarily through forums in which it had cultivated engagement with the Global South – and particularly through NAM, a privileged platform to level accusations against Paris of pursuing «neo-colonial policies» [PRA 2023, 5 July]. Moreover, from late 2023 onwards, Baku also sought to mobilize partners across the Global South through a series of initiatives centred on decolonization. The government supported the creation of the Baku Initiative Group (BIG), an international platform bringing together activists, scholars and political representatives from territories still associated with various forms of colonial governance, with particular attention to French overseas territories.⁸ Through publications, public events, and conferences organized in prominent international venues – including meetings associated with the UN Special Committee on Decolonization – the initiative promoted debates on colonialism and neo-colonialism while drawing particular attention to France's policies. By internationalizing the dispute, Azerbaijan reframed its confrontation with France within a broader Global South discourse, leveraging multilateral arenas and transnational networks to contest Paris' normative claims while projecting itself as a defender of sovereign equality and post-colonial justice. The BIG activities also testify to the recurring instrumental use of legal and normative discourse in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. For instance, its stated commitment to the «promotion and protection of all human rights [...] in countries under the control of other states» [BIG n.d.], sits somewhat uneasily alongside Baku's longstanding practice of rejecting allegations of human-rights violations, illustrating how legal and normative arguments may be selectively mobilized as part of a broader strategy of diplomatic contestation.

An analogous effort to renegotiate the terms of engagement and expand Baku's room for manoeuvre can also be observed in relations with the EU. The dynamics triggered by the war in Ukraine and the ensuing rupture in EU-Russia relations have significantly enhanced Azerbaijan's strategic relevance in both energy security and transcontinental transport connectivity, thereby strengthening its bargaining position vis-à-vis Brussels. This trend has consolidated the parameters of an interest-based relationship marked by selective engagement, whereby Baku actively cooperates with the EU in areas of strategic relevance while simultaneously resisting normative conditionality [Simão 2018; Van Gils 2017; Delcour & Wolczuk 2021]. Although Baku has long responded to European criticism

8. It is worth noting that Azerbaijan has been accused of fomenting the pro-independence unrest that erupted in New Caledonia in spring 2024. Representatives from the territory – together with those from other French overseas collectivities and regions (French Guiana, Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Polynesia, and Corsica) – have been among the most frequent participants in the initiatives promoted by the Baku Initiative Group (BIG). The Initiative has also devoted one of its reports to the island's colonial legacy [BIG 2024]. On the 2024 riots and the alleged Azerbaijani involvement, see Dubow [2024, 22 May].

through counter-narratives framed around allegations of double standards and anti-Azerbaijani bias [Van Gils 2017], recent reactions suggest a qualitative shift in tone. Baku's rhetoric has become markedly more assertive following a series of European Parliament (EP) resolutions condemning Azerbaijan for violations of human rights and civil liberties,⁹ as well as the EU's increasingly active involvement in South Caucasus security dynamics – developments widely interpreted in Baku as reflecting a pro-Armenian bias, as already seen. These reactions can be analytically grouped into two partially overlapping yet distinct strands. The first strand is primarily politico-diplomatic in nature. Azerbaijani officials have consistently framed EU criticism and initiatives as infringements upon the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs, while EU security cooperation with Armenia has been portrayed as a threat to the country's territorial integrity and as undermining peace and stability in the region [MFA 2024, 25 October]. At the same time, Baku's rhetoric has increasingly invoked the language of sovereign equality and reciprocity. This framing has been reinforced by claims that Azerbaijan «does not depend on» and does not «expect anything from» the EU [PRA 2025, 7 January].

Alongside this framing, Azerbaijani discourse has increasingly incorporated a second, more explicitly ideational and value-based dimension. European criticism is not only rejected as politically biased but also portrayed as reflecting broader patterns of double standards, hypocrisy, and – particularly in the case of the EP – even «political corruption» [PRA 2024, 13 November]. Within this narrative, EU policies and its normative agenda are depicted as selectively applied, imbued with anti-Muslim sentiment and instrumentalized for political purposes. This framing aligns with what Azerbaijani officials describe as a broader tendency among some Western countries «to interfere in the internal affairs of Azerbaijan by using the issue of human rights as a pretext» [PRA 2024, 2 April]. Moreover, by intervening in the domestic processes of sovereign states, the EU is portrayed as displaying forms of colonial behaviour [PRA 2025, 9 April].

The sovereignty-first approach to international relations functions not only – as previously observed in the literature [Van Gils 2018] – as a defensive shield protecting the regime from external pressure, but also as a source of domestic legitimacy. In official rhetoric, imperial tendencies and the resulting propensity to interfere in the internal affairs of third countries

9. In 2024, the EP adopted by large majorities two resolutions in which it strongly condemned Azerbaijan for violations of human rights and international law, as well as the domestic and extraterritorial repression of civil society, calling, *inter alia*, for the suspension of the EU's energy partnership with the country [European Parliament 2024, 24 October; 2024, 19 December]. Two further resolutions followed in 2025, condemning the unlawful detention and sham trials of Armenian detainees, and the arbitrary arrest and sentencing of academics [European Parliament 2025, 13 March; 2025, 18 December].

are portrayed as being enabled by weak national leaderships: «If the leaders are weak, then the country is considered weak», which in turn opens the door to «foreign intervention, which actually undermines the moral and genetic fabric of those nations» [PRA 2025, 7 January]. Within this narrative, only strong leadership is portrayed as capable of upholding the principle of sovereignty by resisting imperial or neo-colonial interference and safeguarding national values from external attempts at corruption. A condition that Azerbaijani officials claim to have achieved.

5. *Conclusions*

This article has examined Azerbaijan's foreign policy through the analytical lens of middle-power behaviour, assessing how Baku mobilizes diplomatic instruments and strategic positioning in order to project influence beyond its material capabilities. Interpreted through an analytical framework centred on systemic orientation, strategic repertoire, and the domestic-external nexus, the observed patterns of conduct reveal an increasingly hybrid foreign policy configuration combining elements associated with traditional, emerging, and heterodox middle-power repertoires.

From the perspective of strategic repertoire, Azerbaijan continues to rely on instruments commonly associated with traditional and emerging middle-power diplomacy. Mediation initiatives, humanitarian assistance, and diversified multilateral engagement illustrate how Baku cultivates diplomatic niches that amplify its international presence. These initiatives leverage the country's multidimensional in-betweenness to sustain a bridge-building role across multiple regional arenas. This is further reflected in Baku's activism within established and emerging Global South platforms, as part of a broader strategy of institutional diversification aimed at strengthening diplomatic visibility and influence. At the same time, the coercive dimension of its negotiations with Armenia points to a hybridization of the country's strategic repertoire. Baku has leveraged its strengthened post-war position to shape both the terms of the peace process and the broader regional diplomatic environment: through a calibrated combination of incentives, legal pressures, and political demands, Azerbaijan has sought not only to secure a favourable bilateral settlement but also to redefine the institutional parameters of regional order in the South Caucasus.

In terms of systemic orientation, Azerbaijan's external conduct increasingly departs from the cooperative script traditionally associated with middle powers. Relations with the EU illustrate a gradual shift from normative misalignment to a broader value divergence. While Azerbaijan has long resisted EU political conditionality, recent rhetoric suggests that contestation now extends beyond specific policies to the legitimacy of the value framework underpinning European engagement. Thus, Baku's contesta-

tion increasingly extends beyond defensive rebuttal toward a more explicit ideological challenge to the normative authority claimed by the liberal order. In this sense, Azerbaijan increasingly approximates patterns associated with revisionist middle powers, insofar as revisionism is performed not as systemic opposition to the liberal international order, but as selective contestation of its normative hierarchies. Rather than disengaging from the institutional structures of the order, Baku challenges specific asymmetries and claims of normative authority, particularly where these are perceived to conflict with sovereignty-centred conceptions of international legitimacy. This shift is closely connected to the renewed centrality of sovereignty in Azerbaijan's foreign policy narrative. For nearly three decades, the principle of sovereignty had been primarily invoked to reaffirm Azerbaijan's claim to territorial integrity in the context of the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Following the restoration of full territorial control after the 2020-2023 war, however, its meaning and function have partially evolved. It now functions primarily as a normative shield against perceived external interference, providing the conceptual foundation for rejecting international criticism and resisting external pressure. Sovereignty-first rhetoric has therefore become a central pillar of Azerbaijan's broader autonomy-maximizing strategy.

The domestic-external nexus provides the third key dimension through which Azerbaijan's evolving behaviour can be understood and aligned with the heterodox middle-power repertoire. The sovereignty-centred rhetoric accompanying Baku's external activism together with the renegotiation of asymmetric relations with key external interlocutors also functions as an important component of regime legitimization. In this sense, foreign policy activism is not only a response to systemic opportunities but also an integral component of political narratives emphasizing strength, independence from external pressure, and resistance to perceived foreign interference. This dynamic aligns with recent scholarship on «unusual» and «authoritarian» middle powers, where external assertiveness and internal legitimacy become mutually reinforcing.

Taken together, these developments indicate the progressive hybridization of Azerbaijan's middle-power behaviour. Rather than abandoning cooperative practices, Baku has layered them with a more assertive and autonomy-driven repertoire that includes selective norm contestation, coercive bargaining, and the renegotiation of asymmetric relationships. Azerbaijan's foreign policy in 2025 thus illustrates how states positioned in geopolitical in-between spaces may increasingly combine cooperative and revisionist strategies in order to maximize both autonomy and influence. In this sense, Azerbaijan does not conform to a single middle-power model. Instead, it strategically blends multiple behavioural repertoires in pursuit of a proactive foreign policy that enables it to punch above its weight and to expand its agency within an increasingly fragmented Eurasian order.

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