

Azerbaijan's Prospects in International Relations Based on the Example of the Uk

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Abstract: *After gaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan emerged as a sovereign actor on the global stage, crafting a foreign policy rooted in national interests, regional stability, and global integration. For a newly independent country, establishing strong international relations is vital to its survival and growth. First, diplomatic recognition by other nations is crucial. Without recognition, the country may struggle to assert its sovereignty and participate in global affairs. Recognition also helps prevent foreign interference and affirms the country's legitimacy on the world stage. Security is another key concern. New countries often face internal challenges and external threats. Forming alliances and engaging in diplomatic dialogue can help secure peace and stability. International support can deter aggression and foster a safer environment for nation-building. Economically, international relations open doors to trade, investment, and aid. Newly independent states usually lack sufficient resources and infrastructure. Through partnerships, they can attract foreign investment and enter global markets, boosting economic growth and improving living standards. Additionally, aid and technical assistance from established nations and international organizations help develop essential sectors like health, education, and infrastructure. Moreover, participation in international organizations enhances the new country's voice in global decisions. It gains access to forums where it can advocate for its interests, collaborate on common challenges like climate change, and benefit from shared knowledge. Culturally, engaging with other nations promotes mutual understanding and helps the new country shape its identity internationally. It allows cultural exchange and learning, which enrich the society. In summary, international relations provide newly independent countries with recognition, security, economic opportunity, development support, and a platform for global engagement, all of which are crucial for their sustainable growth and stability.*

Key words: *international relations, independence, Azerbaijan, support, recognition.*

Introduction

One of the foremost priorities for Azerbaijan after independence was gaining international recognition and establishing diplomatic ties. The country quickly joined the United Nations in March 1992, followed by memberships in other significant international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

(OSCE), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and later, the Non-Aligned Movement. These steps helped integrate Azerbaijan into the global community and laid the foundation for diplomatic and economic cooperation. The unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia heavily influenced Azerbaijan's early foreign policy. As Armenian forces oc-

cupied Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding Azerbaijani regions during the early 1990s, Azerbaijan sought international support for its territorial integrity. The country appealed to the United Nations, which passed several resolutions affirming Azerbaijan's sovereignty and calling for the withdrawal of Armenian forces. At the same time, Azerbaijan actively participated in the OSCE-led Minsk Group peace process, although the conflict remained frozen for decades. During the presidency of Heydar Aliyev, who came to power in 1993, Azerbaijan adopted a more pragmatic and balanced foreign policy. Recognizing the country's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia and its rich energy resources, Aliyev sought to use these advantages to build partnerships with both Western and regional powers. One of the major milestones in this effort was the signing of the "Contract of the Century" in 1994 with a consortium of Western oil companies, which allowed for the development of the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli oil fields in the Caspian Sea. This agreement marked Azerbaijan's entrance into the global energy market and attracted significant foreign investment.

The development of international relations of Azerbaijan after it got its independence in 1991

After gaining its independence in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan embarked on a complex journey of establishing and developing its international rela-

tions. The early years of independence were marked by political instability, economic hardship, and the ongoing conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. These challenges shaped Azerbaijan's initial foreign policy decisions and compelled it to engage with a broad array of international actors in pursuit of security, economic development, and national sovereignty.

The development of energy infrastructure became a cornerstone of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. With support from the United States and other Western countries, Azerbaijan promoted the construction of oil and gas pipelines that bypassed Russia and Iran. The most notable projects were the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline, which connected the Caspian region directly to European and global markets. These initiatives not only strengthened Azerbaijan's economic independence but also elevated its geopolitical importance.

Azerbaijan's relations with the United States and European countries steadily improved during the late 1990s and 2000s. The U.S. recognized Azerbaijan as a strategic partner, especially after the 9/11 attacks, when Baku supported the global fight against terrorism and allowed NATO forces to use its airspace and facilities for operations in Afghanistan. Azerbaijan also began cooperating with NATO through the Partnership for Peace program and contributed to peacekeeping missions in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In parallel, Azerbaijan developed its ties with the European

Union through the European Neighbourhood Policy and later the Eastern Partnership initiative. While Azerbaijan did not seek EU membership, it pursued closer cooperation in trade, energy, and political dialogue. The EU became one of Azerbaijan's main trading partners and supported reforms in governance, rule of law, and civil society.

Relations with Russia remained cautious but cooperative. Although Azerbaijan opted for a more independent path than some other former Soviet republics, it maintained pragmatic ties with Moscow, especially in areas like security, trade, and regional coordination. Russia played a key role in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process and retained influence in the South Caucasus, prompting Azerbaijan to balance its ties between Russia and the West carefully.

Turkey emerged as one of Azerbaijan's closest allies. The two countries share deep ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties, and their strategic partnership was institutionalized through numerous military, economic, and political agreements. Turkey was the first country to recognize Azerbaijan's independence, and it played a crucial role in supporting Azerbaijan during both the post-independence years and the Second Karabakh War in 2020. Joint energy projects like TANAP (Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline) further strengthened this alliance. Azerbaijan also sought to build relations with other regional powers, including Iran, with which it shares a long border and cultural ties.

However, relations with Iran were often strained due to concerns over Iran's ties with Armenia and the presence of a large Azerbaijani population in northern Iran. Despite these tensions, both countries maintained a functional relationship, especially in trade and border cooperation. In the 2010s, Azerbaijan pursued a more assertive and multidimensional foreign policy. It increased engagement with Asian and African countries, sought stronger roles in international organizations, and positioned itself as a reliable partner in promoting regional connectivity. Hosting high-profile events such as the First European Games (2015), the Islamic Solidarity Games (2017), and the Baku International Humanitarian Forum helped raise Azerbaijan's international profile. A major turning point came in 2020, when Azerbaijan launched a military operation to retake parts of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories. The 44-day war ended with a ceasefire brokered by Russia, leading to Azerbaijan regaining control over significant areas. This development had major implications for regional geopolitics and Azerbaijan's foreign relations, as it reshaped the balance of power in the South Caucasus. Following the war, Azerbaijan enhanced its cooperation with Turkey and Russia in managing post-conflict developments and launched new regional infrastructure projects to improve connectivity, including the Zangazur Corridor. In the years since, Azerbaijan has focused on reconstruction efforts in the liberated

territories, promoting regional integration, and enhancing its international¹. As a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Azerbaijan chaired the organization from 2019 to 2023 and advocated for multilateralism and equitable development, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, Azerbaijan's foreign policy since independence has evolved from survival-orientated diplomacy to a more confident, multi-vector strategy that seeks to balance relations with major powers while asserting national interests. Its geographic position, energy resources, and regional conflicts have shaped a pragmatic approach that emphasizes sovereignty, economic development, and strategic partnerships.

The history of relations between Azerbaijan and the UK

After Azerbaijan gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the United Kingdom was among the first Western countries to recognize its sovereignty. This early recognition set the stage for the development of strong and mutually beneficial diplomatic, political, and economic relations between the two countries. Over the decades, the Azerbaijan–UK relationship has evolved from basic diplomatic engagement to a strategic partnership, especially in the fields of energy, trade, education, and security cooperation. Formal diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan and the United Kingdom were established in 1992.

The opening of embassies in London and Baku shortly afterward symbolized a commitment to bilateral engagement. Since then, both sides have worked to develop a relationship based on mutual respect, shared interests, and pragmatic cooperation. The UK quickly became interested in Azerbaijan's geopolitical importance in the South Caucasus, as well as its vast oil and gas resources. The foundation of the Azerbaijan–UK relationship was laid in the early 1990s through cooperation in the energy sector. One of the most significant moments in bilateral relations came in 1994, with the signing of the “Contract of the Century” – a landmark oil agreement between the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) and a consortium of international companies, led by British Petroleum (BP)². BP emerged as the largest foreign investor in Azerbaijan's energy sector and has remained a key player in the country's oil and gas development ever since. This deal marked the beginning of Azerbaijan's transformation into a major energy exporter and cemented the UK's role as a crucial economic partner. BP's involvement in the development of the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli (ACG) oil fields and later the Shah Deniz gas field significantly boosted Azerbaijan's economy and deepened the bilateral relationship. The construction of key energy infrastructure projects – including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) – further strengthened this partnership. These

projects helped Azerbaijan diversify its energy exports and gave Europe access to Caspian energy resources, reducing dependence on Russian supplies. The UK government consistently supported these projects, recognizing both their strategic and commercial value. Throughout the 2000s, the UK became one of the largest sources of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Azerbaijan. The economic relationship expanded beyond energy to include sectors such as construction, telecommunications, banking, and education. British companies, especially in the oil services sector, found opportunities in Azerbaijan's growing economy. The British-Azerbaijani Chamber of Commerce and Industry was established to promote business ties and support commercial exchanges between the two countries. In addition to strong economic cooperation, the UK and Azerbaijan have maintained an active political dialogue. Regular high-level visits by government officials and participation in international forums have allowed both sides to discuss regional security, economic development, and mutual interests. The UK has consistently supported Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, including during the long-standing conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. During the 2020 Second Karabakh War, the UK called for a peaceful resolution and emphasized the importance of the OSCE Minsk Group format while maintaining a neutral position. After the ceasefire agreement, British officials ex-

pressed support for stability in the region and the importance of post-conflict reconstruction. The UK's position has generally been aligned with the broader Western policy of supporting peace, stability, and regional cooperation in the South Caucasus. Education and cultural ties have also become important elements of the Azerbaijan-UK relationship³. A growing number of Azerbaijani students have studied in the UK, often funded by state scholarship programs such as the State Program on Education of Azerbaijani Youth Abroad. British universities have become a popular destination for Azerbaijani students pursuing degrees in a wide range of disciplines. English-language education has grown in popularity in Azerbaijan, and institutions like the British Council have played an active role in promoting cultural exchange and English learning. Bilateral cooperation has also extended to governance, public administration, and the rule of law. The UK has supported various programs in Azerbaijan aimed at strengthening institutions, promoting transparency, and supporting civil society. At the same time, Azerbaijan has worked to improve its international image, including through hosting high-profile events such as the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest, the 2015 European Games, and the Formula 1 Azerbaijan Grand Prix – all of which attracted British tourists, media, and businesses. Security cooperation between Azerbaijan and the UK has included joint work on counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and maritime secu-

rity in the Caspian Sea. Azerbaijan has contributed to international peace-keeping efforts, including missions in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan, often in coordination with NATO and Western partners, including the UK. This cooperation has contributed to mutual trust and understanding on regional and global security issues⁴. In the post-Brexit era, the UK has sought to enhance bilateral relations with non-EU countries, including Azerbaijan. In 2021, a Strategic Dialogue format was established between Baku and London to further strengthen cooperation across political, economic, and security dimensions. As part of this process, the two sides have engaged in negotiations on a new comprehensive bilateral agreement to replace earlier EU-based frameworks, aiming to expand cooperation in trade, energy transition, education, and technology. The issue of energy transition and climate change has increasingly featured in Azerbaijan–UK dialogue. With Azerbaijan hosting the 29th UN Climate Change Conference (COP29) in 2024, cooperation with the UK – a former host of COP26 in Glasgow – has gained new importance. The UK has expressed support for Azerbaijan's efforts to promote green energy and sustainable development, while British companies have shown interest in participating in renewable energy projects in the Caspian region. The bilateral relationship also involves parliamentary diplomacy and people-to-people contacts. Parliamentary friendship groups, visits by MPs, and participation in multilateral forums

such as the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly have helped build mutual understanding. Azerbaijani diaspora in the UK and British expatriates in Baku contribute to the cultural and social links between the two countries. In conclusion, the history of relations between Azerbaijan and the United Kingdom has been characterized by steady growth, mutual benefit, and strategic cooperation. What began as a diplomatic engagement in the early 1990s has developed into a multi-dimensional partnership, underpinned by strong economic ties, particularly in the energy sector. As global challenges evolve and new opportunities emerge in trade, education, green energy, and regional security, the Azerbaijan–UK relationship is likely to remain an important element of both countries' foreign policy agendas.

The importance of Azerbaijan-the UK relations

The relationship between Azerbaijan and the United Kingdom has become increasingly important over the past three decades, evolving from basic diplomatic ties into a strategic partnership with far-reaching significance. This importance can be observed across multiple dimensions, including energy security, economic development, regional stability, education, and cultural cooperation. As both countries seek to respond to changing global dynamics, their partnership has gained new relevance, not only for their national interests but also for the

broader regional and international context. One of the key foundations of Azerbaijan–UK relations is energy cooperation. The United Kingdom, through British Petroleum (BP), has been the leading foreign investor in Azerbaijan’s energy sector since the early 1990s. BP played a central role in the signing of the “Contract of the Century” in 1994, a groundbreaking agreement that opened Azerbaijan’s offshore oil fields to international development. Since then, BP has led or co-managed major energy projects in the country, including the development of the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli oil fields, the Shah Deniz gas field, and the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and South Caucasus pipelines. This collaboration has not only transformed Azerbaijan into a significant energy exporter but has also enhanced the UK’s role in ensuring Europe’s energy security. Azerbaijan’s gas exports through the Southern Gas Corridor – of which BP is a major partner – offer an alternative to Russian supplies, strengthening energy diversification for the European continent. Given the geopolitical tensions surrounding global energy supplies, this dimension of Azerbaijan–UK relations has strategic importance that extends far beyond bilateral economic benefits. The UK’s investments have also contributed significantly to Azerbaijan’s economic modernization⁵. British companies are among the most active foreign investors in Azerbaijan, operating in sectors such as oil services, banking, construction, communications, and

logistics. This economic partnership has created jobs, transferred technology, and enhanced the capabilities of the local workforce. The strong presence of British firms has helped integrate Azerbaijan more deeply into the global economy and promoted a more business-friendly environment. Beyond energy and trade, political and diplomatic cooperation between Azerbaijan and the UK is another pillar of their relationship. The two countries have maintained regular dialogue on regional and global issues, including peace and security in the South Caucasus, counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and international law. The UK has consistently supported the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and has expressed its interest in a peaceful and lasting solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict within the framework of international law. In the aftermath of the 2020 Second Karabakh War, the importance of UK-Azerbaijan relations in maintaining regional stability has become even more pronounced. The UK has taken a balanced approach, supporting conflict resolution and reconstruction efforts while encouraging dialogue between Azerbaijan and Armenia. With increased attention on the South Caucasus from global powers, the UK’s engagement in the region reflects its broader foreign policy goals of promoting stability, peace, and development in strategically important areas. Another important area of cooperation is education and human capital development. The UK is one of the most popular destinations for Azerbaijani

students pursuing higher education abroad. Thousands of Azerbaijani students have graduated from UK universities, many of them supported by state scholarship programs such as the State Program on Education of Azerbaijani Youth Abroad. These graduates have returned to contribute to Azerbaijan's public and private sectors, enriching the country's human resources and spreading British educational values such as critical thinking, innovation, and professionalism. The British Council, active in Azerbaijan since the 1990s, has played a crucial role in promoting English-language learning and cross-cultural dialogue. Through its programs and events, the Council has helped build bridges between the two societies, fostering deeper mutual understanding. English proficiency has grown significantly in Azerbaijan, partly due to the strong reputation of British education and cultural outreach. This soft power dimension of the UK-Azerbaijan relationship strengthens people-to-people ties and ensures the long-term sustainability of bilateral cooperation. Security and defense cooperation also add strategic weight to Azerbaijan-UK relations. Azerbaijan has been a reliable partner in supporting international peacekeeping missions, including in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The UK and Azerbaijan have collaborated on issues such as border security, counter-narcotics, cyber defense, and maritime safety in the Caspian Sea. These areas of cooperation have helped address com-

mon security threats and contribute to regional and international stability⁶.

In recent years, climate change and energy transition have become increasingly important in the bilateral agenda. As the world shifts toward greener energy sources, Azerbaijan and the UK have found new grounds for collaboration in renewable energy and environmental sustainability. The UK, having hosted the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), has supported Azerbaijan in preparing for COP29, which Baku is set to host. This global event provides an opportunity to strengthen environmental diplomacy and develop joint initiatives on clean energy, carbon reduction, and climate resilience.

Trade relations have continued to evolve in the post-Brexit context. With the UK no longer a member of the European Union, it has sought to deepen trade ties with non-EU countries, including Azerbaijan. A Strategic Dialogue mechanism was launched to facilitate cooperation in areas such as finance, digital economy, education, and infrastructure. Negotiations for a comprehensive bilateral agreement are ongoing, aimed at creating a new legal framework for expanding mutual trade and investment.

Parliamentary diplomacy and civil society dialogue further enrich the bilateral relationship. Parliamentary friendship groups, exchange visits by MPs, and collaboration in multilateral organizations like the OSCE have fostered mutual respect and shared perspectives. The Azerbaijani diaspo-

ra in the UK and the British community in Azerbaijan serve as informal ambassadors, strengthening cultural ties and encouraging deeper engagement between the two societies.

Conclusion

The importance of Azerbaijan–UK relations lies in their multi-dimensional nature and their capacity to adapt to changing geopolitical and economic landscapes. What began as a partnership focused largely on energy has grown into a broad and strategic relationship encompassing diplomacy, trade, education, security, and sustainable development. The mutual interests of both countries – in regional stability, economic progress, and global cooperation – ensure that their ties will continue to evolve in the years ahead. In a world facing new challenges and shifting alliances, the Azerbaijan–UK relationship stands as an example of how countries with different histories and geographies can build a meaningful and forward-looking partnership. The future of Azerbaijan–United Kingdom relations is shaped by a dynamic combination of historical cooperation, evolving global challenges, and mutual strategic interests. Over the past three decades, the two countries have cultivated a relationship that began with energy collaboration and matured into a broad partnership encompassing trade, education, climate action, and political dialogue. Looking ahead, this relationship holds significant potential to expand further as both nations adjust

to changing geopolitical landscapes, economic diversification goals, and global transitions. While this partnership remains vital, the global push for decarbonization and sustainable energy is opening new avenues.

Azerbaijan is aiming to reduce its carbon footprint, diversify its energy sources, and become a regional leader in renewable energy. Hosting COP29 in 2024 positions Azerbaijan as an important actor in international climate diplomacy. The UK, having hosted COP26, can be a valuable partner in this process, offering expertise in wind power, hydrogen energy, green finance, and climate governance. British investment in Azerbaijan's renewable sector, particularly in offshore wind and solar energy, could accelerate Azerbaijan's green transition while also creating new commercial opportunities for UK companies. Joint ventures, pilot projects, and government-supported initiatives in sustainable energy and carbon reduction can serve as a foundation for a greener and more resilient partnership in the future. Another important area with strong future potential is trade and investment. In the post-Brexit era, the United Kingdom is looking to strengthen its trade relations beyond the European Union, seeking new bilateral agreements and partnerships. Azerbaijan, strategically located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, is enhancing its connectivity role through major infrastructure projects, such as the Middle Corridor, which connects Central Asia to Europe via the South Caucasus. The development of modern railways,

ports, and logistics hubs makes Azerbaijan a vital link in global supply chains, which the UK can tap into. In recent years, both countries have expressed interest in expanding bilateral trade beyond oil and gas. Sectors such as agriculture, information technology, finance, logistics, tourism, and digital services offer new possibilities for growth. The establishment of a Strategic Dialogue in 2021 between the two governments marked an effort to identify key areas of collaboration and streamline investment processes. A future bilateral trade agreement, currently under discussion, is expected to further remove barriers and create a more predictable legal and regulatory framework for businesses from both countries. Education and human capital development will likely remain an important pillar in Azerbaijan–UK relations. Thousands of Azerbaijani students have studied in the United Kingdom, and UK universities are widely regarded for their academic excellence and innovation. In the future, academic cooperation can go beyond individual scholarships and expand to institutional partnerships—such as dual degree programs, research collaborations, faculty exchanges, and joint innovation centers. British universities may find opportunities to establish campuses or research hubs in Azerbaijan, especially as the country continues to invest in higher education and technological development. In the area of regional security and diplomacy, the future of Azerbaijan–UK relations may involve

closer coordination in addressing complex challenges in the South Caucasus and beyond. The United Kingdom, while no longer part of the European Union, maintains global diplomatic influence and has shown interest in supporting peace and stability in the region. Azerbaijan, following the 2020 Second Karabakh War, is focused on reconstruction, reintegration, and promoting regional connectivity. The UK can play a constructive role in these efforts, offering support for mine clearance, infrastructure development, and reconciliation projects in the liberated territories. Public diplomacy and civil society dialogue are expected to play a greater role in the bilateral relationship. Encouraging youth exchanges, think-tank cooperation, joint cultural programs, and media collaboration can deepen mutual understanding and broaden the base of the relationship beyond official institutions. The growing Azerbaijani diaspora in the UK and British residents in Baku will also contribute to people-to-people diplomacy. From an economic perspective, Azerbaijan’s vision for a diversified, knowledge-based economy aligns well with the UK’s global strengths in finance, education, technology, and services. The future relationship may increasingly focus on innovation, entrepreneurship, and digital economy partnerships. With Azerbaijan launching several initiatives to digitalize its public services and infrastructure, British technology and advisory firms are well-positioned to contribute.

Notes

- ¹ ***, Azərbaycan, *Böyük Britaniya: Əməkdaşlıq və tərəfdaşlıq (1991-2001): "Azərbaycan-Böyük Britaniya Gənclər Cəmiyyəti"*, Əbilov, Zeynalov və oğulları, 2001, p. 449. and E. Məmmədli, *Azərbaycan-Böyük Britaniya münasibətləri: (1991-2003-cü illər)*, B.:Adiloğlu, 2003, p. 173.
- ² Azərbaycan-Böyük Britaniya: Əməkdaşlıq və tərəfdaşlıq (1991-2001): "Azərbaycan-Böyük Britaniya Gənclər Cəmiyyəti", *op. cit.*, and İ.H. Əliyev, *İnkişaf məqsədimizdir*, [95 vol.], vol.7, Azərneşr, Bakı, 2011, p. 408.
- ³ İ.H. Əliyev, *İnkişaf məqsədimizdir*, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, 2008, p. 424 and Idem, vol. 7, 2011, p. 408.
- ⁴ Azərbaycan-Böyük Britaniya: Əməkdaşlıq və tərəfdaşlıq (1991-2001): "Azərbaycan-Böyük Britaniya Gənclər Cəmiyyəti", *op.cit.*; İ.H. Əliyev, *İnkişaf məqsədimizdir*, vol. 7, *op. cit.* and Ə. Həsənov, *Müasir Beynəlxalq Münasibətlər və Azərbaycanın Xarici Siyasəti. Dərslik*, Azərbaycan nəşriyyatı, Bakı, 2005, p. 751.
- ⁵ Azərbaycan-Böyük Britaniya: Əməkdaşlıq və tərəfdaşlıq (1991-2001): "Azərbaycan-Böyük Britaniya Gənclər Cəmiyyəti", *op.cit.*
- ⁶ *Ibidem.*

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