

Trump Foreign Policy Impact in the Caucasus:

**Projecting Azerbaijan-USA relations
for the next four years
and beyond**

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Introduction

On 20th January, Donald John Trump, an American businessman and TV entertainer is going to be 45th President of the United States of America (US). This is a hard-to-be comprehended statement by the academic and research communities, who did not expect the result of the US presidential elections to turn out this way.

The possibility of Trump's victory was repeatedly denied by the major research centres, and each scandal encouraged researchers to re-state their predictions on the soon-to-be collapse of the Trump election campaign.

Needless to say, these predictions were proven false by the final election results.

Nevertheless, in the end, the academic and policy research communities have not produced research on what Trump's presidency would look like. The same stands true for the foreign governments of the EU, Russia, China, and the rest of the world.

In order to figure out who is the new US President and what he can do, the world has entered into a phase of intensive research on Trump. This paper is an attempt to puzzle out Trump's foreign policy for the Caucasus and Azerbaijan.

In light of the recent economic and regional developments, the outcomes of the Trump Presidency for Azerbaijan and the region are more than important. The economic stagnation in the region, lack of structural reforms, and inborn geopolitical instability in the Caucasus, as well as rising religious extremism at the borders, makes research on this topic pre-eminent. With understanding how the US foreign policy can affect the regional processes, we also can see predict the trends in security and bilateral relations.

Apparently, the US-Azerbaijan relations, which began after the disbandment of the Soviet Union, will have another turn. Having close security and energy security relations in the 1990s and mid 2000s, the government of Azerbaijan was not favoured by Washington because of its human rights records. Nevertheless, Donald Trump is also known as a businessman, who was involved in the business affairs in Azerbaijan. It is a matter of great interest to what extent Donald Trumps business activity can affect his foreign policy vision in the region, and can it alter the trend of the recent years?

Another issue, which needs to be addressed, is how lasting Trump's foreign policy will be. There is a belief in the brief Presidency of the Republican Candidate. Donald Trump relinquishing most of his power to his Republican advisers will have no real influence over on-going processes; hence there is no need for a special research on Donald Trump.

Small amount of data available on Trump and his presidency makes this task

more difficult. Donald Trump has not addressed the issues on the world order and global policy. His background as businessman and entertainer provides little to build upon for policy analysis and to understand what Trump's foreign policy will in fact look like.

Given the lack of comprehensive information on this, we should analyse and understand 'Trumpism' first, in order to suggest points on Donald Trump and his foreign policy perspectives. 'Trumpism' is "the philosophy and politics espoused by Donald Trump" – which made him elected president of the US.

In the subsequent part of article, we will attempt to understand 'Trumpism' and its ideological roots. In the following sections, a historical perspective on Azerbaijani-US relations and its determinants will be revealed. Next, we will try to understand how these determinants might evolve during the presidency of Donald Trump and affect the relations between US and Azerbaijan. Finally, the conclusion for the article will be presented.

1. 'Trumpism' and similar ideas in the liberal societies

In order to move over the foreign policy, this paper will first review 'Trumpism' as the new reality in the US establishment.

All the way to the Election Day, political opponents and media mocked Donald Trump. Trump's personality gained significant attention, maybe more than his ideas. The ideology Donald Trump was promoting during the election campaign is not new to US history. Supported by marginal groups, this time, it found its way into the White House¹.

'Trumpism' is a phenomenon, which has not been thoughtfully studied yet.

None of the research centres predicted Donald Trump's presidency. The pool results were surely predicting Hillary Clinton's high margin win over Trump. Trump's supporters were seen as 'unsophisticated' and doomed to lose. Yet, Donald Trump is the president-elect of the US. He threatens to demolish internationalism, which was the ideological basis of foreign policy since the political establishment in Washington in the 1950s.

Trump should not be considered to be simply temporary, a four-year project. The unexpected victory by Trump signal the latent processes in the political establishment and society of the US.

Moreover, the election of Trump should neither be considered as a victory of the Republican Party, nor should the Republican Party be blamed for his rise. Bernie Sanders of the Democrat Party and Donald Trump of the Republican Party were basically addressing the same audience. The significant support by the 'marginal' Democrats gained by Bernie Sanders, indicates that 'Trumpism' exists in the Democratic Party also. Bernie Sanders seems to be a more sophisticated version of Donald Trump.

In addition, one should also consider the outcomes of the 'Brexit' referendum in the bigger picture.

The victory of Donald Trump, the rise of Bernie Sanders, and 'Brexit' all signal the latent processes in liberal societies, in general. This chain of events demonstrates that the 'Trumpism' is neither temporary, nor accidental. In fact, one may argue that similar phenomena are appearing in one form or another across many liberal societies and their political arenas (The rising support for the National Front with Marine Le Pen in France, or Geert Wilders of the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, for instance).

Therefore, 'Trumpism' and Trump will have significant effect over the US foreign

¹ David Greenberg. An Intellectual History of Trumpism; URL: <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/trumpism-intellectual-history-populism-paleoconservatives-214518>. Published: 11 December 2016

policy for the next four years and beyond. 'Trumpism' or similar cases will last longer than Donald Trump's presidency.

Considering the fact that 'Trumpism' is about 'isolationism', which strongly contradicts liberalism and similar phenomena, which can be found in other liberal-democratic societies, Trump's victory is essentially about the decline of liberalism and globalisation.

The review of recent literature on the discontents of the globalisation reveals thought-provoking points^{2 3 4}.

Globalisation, as it was promised, may decrease the gap between poor and rich in the developing world, but it definitely caused a widening of the gap between these two groups in the developed Western countries. In addition, the gap between developed liberal countries and developing poor countries also increased.

As a result of this increasingly wide gap, migration from poor developing countries to developed rich countries takes place. As the results of Globalisation and access to information, nowadays, people in poor developing countries have more visual information on the lifestyle of people in the developed countries. It allures many ordinary people from other cultures to migrate.

Performing a reputable job with the protection of human rights and other fundamental rights, the governments of developed Western countries made their countries a destination for many bright minds from the developing countries. As a result, rising number of 'aliens' cause loss of national and personal identity in the liberal societies; physical insecurity comes about to surface.

Donald Trump virtuously played on this point during the election campaign.

The increased number of migrants creates social tensions and causes policy disruptions, which decision-makers in developed countries were not ready to solve. Thus, economic insecurities arise and gradually social tensions and policy disruptions lead to xenophobic statements and populism.

Donald Trump was well known for his xenophobic declarations during the election campaign, and his support can be defined precisely as 'populist'.

In addition, this essentially assists populist politicians in gaining more support in

² S. M. Kang'ethe. Panacea and Perfidy of Globalisation as an Engine of Social Development in Developing Countries. *Hum Ecol*, 47(2): p. 193-200 (2014)

³ M. McMillan, D. Rodrik. Globalization, Structural Change, and Productivity Growth, with an Update on Africa. *World Development* Vol. 63, p. 11–32, 2014

⁴ Michael Schuman. Marx's Revenge: How Class Struggle is shaping the World. *Time* <http://www.soc.iastate.edu/Sapp/soc506MarxRevenge.pdf> Published: 25 March 2013

several developed countries. The rise of nationalist forces in France, radical lefts in Greece, the Brexit, and finally Donald Trump's victory in the US illustrates these consequences.

Because of the unsolved problems and policy disruptions, there is a huge distrust towards existing political establishments and the global elites. Typical representatives of the existing political establishment – such as Hilary Clinton in the US – did not prevail as a decent candidate for this segment of voters.

In addition, the actions of the FBI a few days prior to the election – as it was evaluated by the Hilary Clinton election campaign – may also have played a role in Trump's victory. This indicates that the support for Donald Trump stemmed from representatives not only of the general audience, but also of the elite and its political establishment. Donald Trump challenging the 'Global Warming' concept and calling it a "hoax" has definitely won the sympathy for him among fossil fuel lobbying circles.

In terms of forecasting Donald Trump's foreign policy, the real question to be asked is which of the election promises will Donald Trump actually realise? If election promises should not be achieved, the Republican Party is going to suffer significant reputational damage.

In sum, Trumpism is about changing landscape in the US society. The US does not feel itself physically secure and economically stable. Bringing solution to the existing problems is not possible for the next year in the USA. This means, 'Trumpism' will be in the USA for a long time. The determinants of the US-Azerbaijan relations should be reviewed and new foreign policy should be based on this assumption.

2. Determinants of Azerbaijan-US relations. Historical Perspective

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Bush (senior) Administration did not follow any differentiated foreign policy toward the newly established Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries.

Soon, it became apparent that the only way to deliver the natural resources of the Caspian basin to the world market, bypassing Russia and Iran, is through Azerbaijan. This concept became popularised by the famous book of Zbigniew Brzezinski 'The Grand Chessboard', which called Azerbaijan "the cork in the bottle containing the riches of the Caspian Sea"⁵.

With its geographical position between the Black and Caspian Sea, neighbouring Central Asia to the east, the Middle East to the south, and Eastern Europe to the west, hence connecting Europe to Asia and Russia to Iran, Azerbaijan had a choice to be European, Middle Eastern, and Asian.

Its unique location was also stated by the former Ambassador of the US to Azerbaijan, Richard Morningstar: "They say that Azerbaijan is in a very dangerous place - which it is. You know, drive three hours to the Iran border and two-and-a-half hours to Dagestan (Russia)"⁶.

Basically, the geographic position of the country created platforms for the US-Azerbaijan relations in the 1990s and early 2000s: Energy and security.

In many cases, energy and security issues are intertwined in the US-Azerbaijan relations.

The collapse of the Soviet Union created ethnic instability in the region, which caused security problems for Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan was not satisfied with Moscow's actions in 1988-1991, when the Soviets still were in power. Many in Azerbaijan believed the patronage of officials in Moscow helped separatist movement in Nagorno-Karabakh to gain ground. In addition, the national-freedom movement narrative in Azerbaijan was strictly against Russian supremacy and military presence in the country following the events on the 20th January 1990 in Baku. Azerbaijan was among the first to free itself from Russian military presence - no Russian bases were allowed in the country.

As the countermeasure, Russia intensified its relations with Armenia, thus the long-standing Russian-Armenian military cooperation was established. The 102nd Russian military base in Gyumri was considered to be a 'security guarantee' against Azerbaijan, because of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski. The Grand Chessboard. Basic Books, 2007

⁶ RFRL The US Ambassador Richard Morningstar: "Who Will Stand Up For Azerbaijan's Independence?" <http://www.azadliq.org/a/25390248.html> Published: 19 May 2014.

In spite of the fact that, the de-russianisation of the Caucasus was in line with US foreign policy priorities, the government of Azerbaijan was not content with the infamous 907th Amendment to the 'Freedom for Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets Support Act'. This amendment banned Azerbaijan from receiving aid provided by the US government to the newly formed CIS countries.

The low presence of Azerbaijan in the policy communities in Washington and established lobbying activity of Armenian Diaspora, created an amendment, which would be on the agenda for US-Azerbaijan relations for a long time. Despite the efforts made by the Bill Clinton administration, this amendment affected the US-Azerbaijan security relations for a long period.

Nevertheless, the energy security-related cooperation between Azerbaijan and the US was successful. Due to its distrust towards Moscow, Azerbaijan was willing to create a transport corridor for fossil resources that does not pass over territories of Russia and Iran.

This action deeply hurt Russian interests in the region. Vafa Guluzade, then the assistant to the President of Azerbaijan, remembers the reaction of the Russian diplomats, who were present in the signing ceremony of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. According to him, they were very displeased and V.Kazimirov, Russian Co-Chair to OSCE Minsk Group, “downed a full glass of vodka to the bottom”⁷.

Azerbaijan was the main actor who could build pipelines from the former Soviet Union to the world market by bypassing Russian territories.

In response, Russia intensified its support to Armenia. Up to 9/11, the start of the US anti-terrorism campaign, relations remained stable. Azerbaijan was not satisfied with the 907th Amendment, yet the country took an active role in advancing energy security and geopolitical interests of the US in the region.

With the US moving its antiterrorism agenda globally, Azerbaijan had its contributions to make. Azerbaijan has participated in the US led military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, given its geographic position, Azerbaijan has provided logistical support for the military operations for ISAF.

Following Barack Obama’s win in the 2008 elections, there was another point to be added to the list of determinants of US-Azerbaijani relations: human rights. Under Obama’s presidency human rights advancement in Azerbaijan become a priority.

The human rights record of Azerbaijan created complications for the relations between Western countries and Azerbaijan. The local government accused the

⁷ Axar.az. Vafa Guluzade disclosing 20 year old secret
<http://axar.az/news/gundem/29899.html> Published: 20 September 2014

US to have actively supported the 'Arab Spring' and other anti-governmental movements around former Soviet Union countries. International human rights and media organisations were accusing Azerbaijan for violating rights of political and civil activists, journalists, and representatives of religious communities.

The United States Congress held hearings on the human rights issues in Azerbaijan, threatening to extend the Magnetsky Act to Azerbaijani officials. With this new legislation, the activities of US and EU donor organisations and local NGOs cooperating with them were put on hold.

Another deteriorating factor, which affected US-Azerbaijan relations during Obama's presidency, was the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement and the role played by the US in this. Azerbaijan was strongly against signing Turkish-Armenian protocols, opening Turkish-Armenian borders, and letting Armenia to avoid its economic isolation, which was build up by Baku since the 1990s. Azerbaijan wanted to achieve a comprehensive settlement for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict first.

Recently, there were positive signs of changing the current legislation on NGOs and allowing civil society to cooperate with foreign donor organisations.

In addition, in response to the victory of the Republican Party Nominee in the presidential elections in the US, high-ranking officials in Azerbaijan expressed their approval. Traditionally, Azerbaijan has strong relations in regional security issues with Republican Party representatives in the White House.

Another positive sign in the relations with Western countries is the announced new comprehensive agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan. The public narrative rarely draws a distinction between the EU and US activity in Azerbaijan. It is considered that the EU and the US have similar agendas in the country. Previously, Azerbaijan had failed to sign the Association Agreement with the EU alongside Ukraine and Georgia. Recently, the EU announced the launch of negotiations on a new comprehensive agreement with Azerbaijan. It offers a renewed basis for political dialogue and mutually beneficial cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan.

In conclusion, right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan had little strategic value to the US. In the short period of time since, understanding the unique geopolitical position of Azerbaijan made it an ideal partner for Western countries to deliver the Caspian Basin resources to the world market. So far Azerbaijan has cooperated with Western countries on (i) energy security, (ii) geopolitical interests, and (iii) human rights issues.

In order to understand the future foreign policy by Trump toward Azerbaijan and Caucasus region, we will see how these three determinants will be reshaped.

3. Azerbaijan and the future of its Balanced politics

The first reaction of Azerbaijani officials to the last election results in the US was positive. On November 12th 2016, the Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration, Chief of the Foreign Relations Department of the Administration, Novruz Mammadov made a clear statement disclosing sympathy for the Republican party:

“... Democrats were more concerned on democracy and human rights issues... Armenian diaspora in the US has strong leverage over them. Nevertheless, as the result of the last elections some significant pro-Armenian members of Senate are left with no seat. This is a significant event. We have better understanding with Republicans”⁸.

On the following day, the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev also revealed his positive remarks on Donald Trump winning the election: “Trump deserves great respect”⁹.

There are several outtakes from these statements:

- Donald Trump’s anti-Muslim rhetoric during the election campaign has no effect on the foreign policy of Azerbaijan, which has strong secular traditions.
- Azerbaijan expects the Republican establishment in Washington to be less exposed to Armenian influence. This may signal eagerness of Azerbaijani officials for a new impulse on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by the US.
- High-ranking officials are satisfied with the Democrat President leaving the office for a Republican one. The human rights issue, which has put strong limitations on US-Azerbaijani relations in recent years, is expected not to play as much of an important role as it used to.

The final point exposes the future of the cooperation on human rights. Considering Trump’s “Make America Great Again” campaign slogan, we can assume the disinterest of the Trump Administration on the issues, which can deteriorate Washington’s influence in the region. The strict position of the US administration on Azerbaijan’s human rights records should be expected to loosen.

The cooperation on energy security issues, one of the cornerstones of US-Azerbaijan relations (and also EU-Azerbaijan relations), is not promising in the long run, mainly due to the depleting oil reserves of Azerbaijan. The country’s oil reserves have been industrially exploited since the 1840s, however, starting

⁸ Apa.az Novruz Mammadov: “On the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, Republicans show more understanding than Democrats” http://apa.az/xarici_siyaset/novruz-memmedov-qarabag-meselesinde-respublikacilar-nisbeten-daha-cox-anlasma-movqeyi-gosterir.html Published: 12 November 2016

⁹ Apa.az Ilham Aliyev: “Trump deserves great respect” http://www.apa.az/xarici_siyaset/azerbaycan-prezidenti-tramp-boyuk-hormetel-yayiqdir.html Published: 18 November 2016.

from 2011, oil production has been declining. By 2034, Azerbaijan's oil reserves are expected to be gradually depleted¹⁰. Azerbaijan is strong-willed for exporting its natural gas reserves to the world market and tries to implement the TAP/TANAP projects. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that Azerbaijan's natural gas resources are also limited.

Azerbaijan still keeps its strategic position as the “cork of the bottle” for Caspian Basin resources. However, the recent trends demonstrate the Central Asian states’ willingness to export their natural resources to China, rather than to West. If there are favourable diplomatic outcomes in this field, the energy security cooperation may gain momentum, but for now, there are no triumphal signs in this regard.

In order to elaborate on the US-Azerbaijan cooperation on security issues, we should also accept the fact that the region is usually disregarded in Washington. The Caucasus is the laboratory of geopolitics and “the seismograph of great power politics both nearby and far from its own confines”¹¹. For the US to be too distracted in the Middle East and Pacific Basin helps Russia and Iran in gaining ground in the region. In his 2011 visit to the region, Hillary Clinton, at the time the Secretary of State, also noticed that the disregard for the region by the US led Russia to gain more influence.

Taking into account the promised isolationism by Donald Trump, we should expect the current trend of negligence to hike.

In addition, in the District of Columbia, Trump could receive only four percent of electoral support, whereas Clinton gained more than ninety. Trump will have to live and work in a hostile environment - among people who do not share his vision. This means, we can witness a conflicting situation between the executive and the legislative branches: the policy pursued by the President will likely be blocked by Congress and challenged in the courts not infrequently. In turn, the US influence in the region may not be on the agenda for the establishment in Washington.

The paucity of American influence in the region will lead to rise of regional alliances. For the recent years, Azerbaijan has become part of two triangles: (i) Moscow-Baku-Tehran and (ii) Moscow-Baku-Ankara. Considering the current economic situation in Russia, one should also expect intensification of Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan-Belarus, Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan economic, energy and security relations. New, more sustainable regional alliances may take a shape.

¹⁰ Asian Development Bank. Country Partnership Strategy: Azerbaijan, 2014–2018. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/cps-aze-2014-2018-sd-02.pdf> Retrieved: 13 December 2016

¹¹ Stratfor. Robert D.Kaplan. The Caucasus: Laboratory of Geopolitics <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/caucasus-laboratory-geopolitics> Published: 01 January 2014

In spite of that, the “Make America Great Again” slogan (even with no detailed clarification provided to it) requires more engagement on security issues. Following up on this statement, we should expect a rise of wide range of issues that could have impact on US-Azerbaijan security cooperation.

So far, Washington being stuck in the Middle East was effectively used by Moscow in the Caucasus. Trump's pre-election statements indicate tolerance to Russia's growing influence in the region. Even so, China is not favoured by Trump. Beijing's influence in the region is growing. China has become a top investor in Georgia and Armenia. In some cases, China overcomes Iran already^{12 13}.

In a similar vein, the neighbouring Central Asian region has long been on the periphery of US foreign policy. Exploiting this opportunity, through its investments and policy advancements, China is currently taking a leading role in the region. The new foreign policy team in the White House will do its best to limit Chinese advancement from Central Asia to the Caucasus. According to the pre-election statement, Trump's foreign policy strategy is all about limiting Chinese ascendancy and especially its economic advancement.

The East-West Transport Corridor, which passes through Azerbaijan and Georgia, allows China to advance its economic and political interests in the region. Overall, the actions that may support the “Making America Great Again” campaign will open new possibilities for the security cooperation in the region.

Moreover, one should not forget about Trump's rhetoric on the Iranian Nuclear Deal.

In the context of the US leaving the playground to Russia, another point to be taken into account is the balanced foreign policy of Azerbaijan. In its volatile geopolitical context, in order to advance the national agenda, Azerbaijan needs to maintain its balanced foreign policy. So far, Azerbaijan was successful in holding its balanced position between Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the West. With Washington having increased focus on internal issues, and less interest in the region, Azerbaijan will lack one of the major points in its balanced foreign policy. In order to compensate for the weakening position of the US in this, Baku would favour Washington to other regional powers.

With human rights issues taking a less prominent place on the new agenda of US-Azerbaijan relations, Azerbaijan is more than willing to have strong security relations with the political establishment in Washington, which could also lead to a comprehensive resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

¹² The Diplomat. Emil Sanamyan. China in the Caucasus
<http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/china-in-the-caucasus/> 06 February 2016

¹³ NY Times. Andrew Higgins. With City of Towers, China Puts Its Economic Stamp on Caucasus <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/30/world/europe/with-city-of-towers-china-puts-its-economic-stamp-on-caucasus.html> Published: 29 October 2016

Furthermore, analysing Trump's, and his family member's, recent behaviour, we could state that, under Trump's presidency, personal business interests will take over the foreign policy interests. His recent appointments also indicate this trend. Considering the fact that Azerbaijani officials have established strong links with Donald Trump before his presidency, this relationship will likely have a strong effect on US-Azerbaijan relations.

Conclusion

With his unexpected rise and victory in the US presidential elections, Donald Trump has widely shocked experts and policy makers. The long chain of events in the liberal-democratic societies in the EU and US demonstrate both the cause and the scale of the event.

With the rise of populism across the EU, Brexit in the UK, and the victory of Trump in the US, one can declare that the Caucasus and the processes in this complex region will likely not take a prominent position on the agenda.

Trump's victory is not accidental and will have a lasting effect on US history. In four years, Trump may not be re-elected, but the rise of Bernie Sanders also demonstrates that the marginal trends in the US policy will be strongly observed. In turn, it will affect the foreign policy agenda in one way or another.

With the disbandment of the Soviet Union, because of its geographic position, Azerbaijan has played an important role in advancing geopolitical interests and the energy security agenda of the US in the region. Azerbaijan was the first country in the region to free itself from Russian military presence, and build pipelines, which essentially ended Russia's monopoly over the transportation of oil and gas from the Caspian Basin to the world market. In many instances, Azerbaijan's foreign policy correlated with the US security interests in the region.

For the past years, Azerbaijan's human rights records, and distrust towards the international donor organisations by the Azerbaijani government, have led to deterioration in their relations with the US. With the Republican nominee Donald Trump winning the Presidency of the US, the government in Azerbaijan has hopes for rebuilding these relations.

Under Trump's presidency, US-Azerbaijan relations might have new twists. The personal relations built with Trump before his presidency will likely also affect US-Azerbaijan relations.

The President of Azerbaijan and high-ranking officials in the Presidential Administration have given positive responses to Trump's win right after the election day.

With new security concerns worldwide, the new establishment in Washington and new social reality in the liberal economies, the US-Azerbaijani relations need to be re-thought.

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