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The economic impact of COVID-19 on Turkish-Azeri bilateral relations

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ABSTRACT

While the economic instability of the international system resurrected debates about the future of the World Order, diving against the current and studying in a destabilizing pandemic context a bilateralism touted for its durability and solidity seemed academically attractive. Thus, the purpose of this research paper is to verify whether COVID-19 is causing fatal economic disruptions among the *iron alliances*, or if on the contrary one is witnessing an "unnatural" strengthening. By reconciling empirical data (reports of the Central Bank, the OSCE, press articles) and academic papers, this study analyzes the surprising Turkish-Azeri economic consolidation before questioning its still-perceptible limits in the short and long term. This work concludes that through the neorealist prism, Ankara and Baku managed to transform *Covidian* negativity into an element of strategic economic cooperation aimed at repairing financial loopholes on a national scale.

#strengthening #neorealism #limits #prospects #opportunities #agreements #liberalization #war #rights #instrument #asymmetry #resources

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
CBA	The Central Bank of Azerbaijan
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
RTA	Regional Trade Agreement
WWII	Second World War
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
VAT	Value Added Tax
EU	European Union
WHO	World Health Organization
PTA	Preferential Trade Area
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement

LITERATURE REVIEW

On January 22, 2020, three cities in Hubei province were placed under quarantine by the Chinese government to limit the progression of the COVID-19 virus. This decision of sanitary confinement prohibits *per se* the inhabitants from leaving a certain geographical area, thus limiting their movement and their economic activities. The World Trade Report 2021 (WTR21) indicates that the advanced economy deployed monetary and fiscal support equal to 25% of GDP in 2020 to boost recovery. This security framework is part of the understanding of the spreading nature of a pandemic, but *de facto* leads to a decrease in demand and production, and the gradual elimination of existing labor. [Kejzar, Velic; 2020]. The impact on the global market had indeed fallen by 9.6% in 2020 due to a supply shock caused by containment measures and a demand shock due to distancing measures affecting the "face to face" trade and services (WTR21). According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), global export losses had reached \$50 billion in April 2020 alone. Thus, Baldwin and Freedman statement about the pandemic's distortion of international trade and its great impact on the ever-decreasing global demand appears logical. (Baldwin and Freedman; 2020). Vidya and Prabheesh (2020) also point the finger at this reduction problem, this time highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on the processes of interconnection and global trade density. The existing literature therefore reports on the difficulties suffered by the economic functioning of the state due to the current health context and seems to include COVID-19 in a multidimensional macroeconomic shock landscape harmful not only on international trade, but also on bilateral economic relations. (Bodnar, Le Roux, Lopez-Garcia, Szorfi, Bekaert, Pedauga, Pan; 2020, 2021). Barbero (2021) will note, for instance, the negative effect that the pandemic has on bilateral trade when two states have common regional trade agreements, or when the importing and exporting country have identical income levels. This impact of COVID-19 is surrounded by an ideological questioning regarding global cooperation. The basic needs and the concept of realist survival (Morgenthau) have thus made us forget even more the Kantian concepts of liberal democratic universalization advocated by authors such as Fukuyama at the end of the 20th century. The health crisis therefore marks a return of the *Nation-State* and underlines the personal framework of current interstate interactions, notably in the bilateral framework. As a matter of fact, the literature seems more favorable to bilateral

trade in the pandemic context, with the intensity of exchanges and the intention to trade more with each other having for instance positive consequences, especially in the pairs of countries with a free or regional trade agreement (Saraf and Duval; 2016). Indeed, UNCTAD research paper No. 70 (Nicita, Saygili; 2021) confirms the resistance of a bilateralism within the framework of an ATR by mentioning a difference of 3 percentage points with respect to a two-sided trade without RTA. Saif, Ruan and Obrenovic also do not exclude the positive changes in dealing policy that COVID-19 can lead to in a context of bilateral economic instability, and contrast barriers (border closures, low foreign investment rates) to new opportunities (new market segments, increased sales of medical products, growth of the technology industry). Even though COVID-19 has been a source of economic worries that had not been felt since the WWII¹, it is not a symbol of a destruction of bilateralism, thanks to new concepts such as digital transformation, production diversification or open innovation (Saif, Ruan and Obrenovic; 2021). In addition, the impact of the lockdown on bilateral trade seems to be weakening as time passes (Antoine Berthou, Sebastian Stumpner; 2021). However, the mutual exchanges between the countries that our paper studies reveal a greater complexity. To the well-known asymmetry² of the export field is added a post-COVID-19 decline. Azerbaijan's export products to Turkey indeed decreased from US\$2.88 billion in 2019 to US\$2.59 billion in 2020 before the trend reversed and reached the figure of US\$2.82 billion in 2021, according to data from the United Nations COMTRADE. At the level of imports from Turkey, the figures followed the same path, with the figure of US\$ 1.76B in 2019 having decreased to US\$ 1.56B in 2020, before the trend reversed and reached the figure of US\$ 1.84B in 2021. Moreover, the main export products of Azerbaijan to its neighbor have not changed: that is petroleum oils and gaseous hydrocarbons. Economic exchanges between Azerbaijan and Turkey, even in times of COVID-19, are as expected subject to a recurring problem that the IMF already highlighted in its 2016 report: regional control of the oil and gas sector is not evidence of a stable economy. The Turkish and Azeri national economy, although the government maintains energy relations with a greater number of energy partners than the one of must therefore continue the road of self-sufficiency of their non-oil sectors in order to achieve developed economic diversification and improve growth in the long term [Guliyev, 2021].

¹ the results published in the world Bank's latest global economic outlook report nevertheless reveal encouraging results in terms of global growth: -5.5% in 2022, -4.1% in 2022 and -3.2% in 2023.

² Turkey continues to be ranked among the top exporters of Azerbaijan, while Baku does not occupy the first places of the top exporters of Turkey.

The global health catastrophe around which our topic revolves is studied exclusively at the national level. With regard to the case of Turkey, there is no doubt that the challenges that COVID has brought to the economy are numerous. Professors Ebru Voyvoda and Erinċ Yeldan report on the impact of supply and demand, trade and production value chains, and consumer spending (Voyvoda, Yeldan; 2020). Other sources focus more on the study of the stock market and the most affected sectors such as the banking sector or metal production (Öztürk, Şişman, Çitak; 2020). The serious budget deficit of the public sector, the pressure on the national currency (Ikizer, Karanci, Gul, Dilekler; 2021) and the stagnation of fixed capital investments have also disrupted the national economy, *de facto* reducing the consumption of citizens. Despite having a more diversified economy than Azerbaijan, Turkey has also suffered from the recent oil price shocks, resulting in a slowdown in its economy (Prio, Mideast Policy Brief 04, 2020). In addition, the health context recalled the painful past of Turkish inflation, reaching more than 36% in December 2021 (TurkStat). According to the OECD Economic surveys, the tourism and hospitality sectors have proven to be the most problematic for the economy, due to the high potential that Turkey's geographical position offers (OECD; 2021). However, its border with Iran (a country that has experienced the most sustained COVID epidemic in the Middle East) and with Syria (a transitional route for a migrant population with precarious health conditions) have turned this advantage into an economic and health danger. Another pandemic challenge was the underscoring of a growing distrust on the part of international partners in the Turkish economy, in particular because of an increasingly strong interference of the executive on the CBA. The national economy is therefore confronted with the problem of *willpower without weapons*, that is, the problem of economic measures made impossible by the policy of political over-control. The tense regional geopolitical context and the development of an illiberal democratic state seems to lead to high macroeconomic uncertainty and a loss of confidence on the part of foreign investors. The doubt was finally accentuated by a state that was still found not to comply with international standards regarding the shadow economy and the fight against terrorism. With a Turkish lira collapsing by 48% against the dollar in 2021, the country can expect an increase in the cost of living and pressure on wages. The remarkable decline in poverty and unemployment of the 2000s was replaced by an unemployment rate that rose to 13.6% in 2020, symbolizing the end of the difficult post-2018 economic recovery (World Bank: Turkey Economic Monitor; 2020). Thus, despite a demand in industrial production remained strong (World Bank, Turkey Economic Monitor, Navigating The Waves; 2021), growth was still running at a slow pace in 2021, while the hope of monetary stabilization was destroyed in March of the previous year by the replacement of the governor of the central

bank, testifying once again to the impact of a policy of state control on a body supposed to develop the economy by its independence. In addition to mentioning concrete measures such as travel restrictions or widespread testing, the literature mentions several budget policies of the AKP (withholding tax payments and VAT returns), as well as a 21-point stimulus plan to combat the challenges mentioned above (Mideast Policy Brief 04; 2020). In addition, according to the OECD economic surveys, the government's tax support has made it possible to preserve corporate liquidity and preserve employment and household income (OECD; 2021). The executive also offered loans for state-owned banks and tackled low budget transparency through the publication of a regular report on fiscal policy. Even if the innovation and technology sectors remain underdeveloped in Turkey, the literature recommends an improvement in employees' digital skills to regain a solid economic situation in the long term. The restoration of the independence of the central bank, the maintenance of the real policy rate, the commitment to the fight against global warming and the restoration of trust with foreign investors are also mentioned (Dennis Dlugosch, Rauf Gönenç, 2021). The dangers that COVID brings to the national economy and the measures to deal with them are fascinating, partly because they appear in a context of liberal anti-globalization. The literature expresses the political opportunism that the COVID offers to the AKP, wishing to create an image of a protective nationalist executive. The Turkish national economic situation would then mark a real break with the process of democratization and rapprochement with the West (for instance the previous attempt to join the EU) of the 2000s, which had seen Ankara increase its activism in international affairs, in particular thanks to its participation in the Iran nuclear agreement and its position as a non-permanent member of the UN (Parlar Dal 2018). This path towards anti-Western populism (Ayan; 2019) seems to end the geopolitical in-betweenness that Turkey assumed since the 19th century (Gulsah, Zarakol; 2019). Nevertheless, this political strategy requires a powerful economic situation, called into question by the repercussions of this same COVID-19. Will Turkey always be that artificial bridge Huntington was talking about in 1996? Can the West become a strong institutional ally, or will it always remain for Ankara another whose self-conception must be detached? Henceforth, literature testifies to a significant lack of confidence between Turkey and the West, due precisely to Ankara's rise of populism, rise of ultra-nationalism and western skepticism.

There is no need for the quantity and complexity of the challenges of the Turkish national economy to be jealous of those that Azerbaijan is currently facing. The major impact of COVID unsurprisingly headed towards the energy sector with a collapse in the oil price

(Amirova, Baylar; 2020). Thus, between the first half of 2019 and 2020, the oil and gas sector shrank by almost 3%, forcing OPEC members to reduce oil production, affecting domestic daily production and increasing the pressure on the national currency (CESD; 2020). This phenomenon is reminiscent of the fall in the oil price in 2014, which also had a significant impact on the economies of hydrocarbon-dependent countries. Azerbaijan's current account balance had decreased, its currency was experiencing a sharp devaluation due to the equalization of its foreign exchange reserves, and GDP growth had fallen sharply. The study by Vugar Bayramov and Gulnara Abbas, which highlighted the huge percentage of 90% of mineral exports between 2009 and 2014, then reported on the correlation for Azerbaijan between dependence on hydrocarbons and economic diversification and recommended fighting with corruption (Transparency International; 2016) through a process of liberalization (Bayramov, Abbas; 2017). It would therefore seem that the COVID has allowed a real awareness of the pre-covid national economic weaknesses. The second challenge of the COVID concerns the recently expanding tourism sector (Mayis, Shafa, Leyla, Hijran, Ulker 2021). As a result of the suspension of incoming and outgoing passenger flights, the tourism industry has stagnated, and the total number of tourists coming to Azerbaijan has decreased by 92% (CESD; 2020). As a result of these two economic negatives, the demand for goods and services is decreasing, the mining industry is declining, as well as the foreign trade turnover (-25% in the first half of 2020 compared to the previous year, according to the data of the State Customs Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan). A recent OECD report on market research in Azerbaijan presented an oligopolistic Azeri market structure as a result of global inflationary pressures, with the development of complex distribution channels leading to higher prices in the food sectors, but also in the construction and cement products market (OECD, Mammadov, No. 18, 2022). Just like the study of its Turkish neighbor, the literature also mentions a lack of trust between the Azeri government and its Western partners. Azerbaijan has indeed recently refused an offer of 95 million from the world Bank to help the country counter the impact of the virus on society (World Bank; 2021). While this refusal could come from the fact that the Azeri government considers the pandemic over (Hasanov), it could also come from dissatisfaction at the level of negotiations (Aghayev). However, this spirit of caution has somewhat abated with the signing of the three-year program between Baku and the European Union to strengthen the Azerbaijani government's capabilities in terms of its economic priorities until 2030 through, for example, improving social inclusion, stimulating economic reforms, or strengthening public sector governance (World Bank; 2022). Regarding the measures that the Azerbaijani government has put in place to maintain the national economic balance, the CESD

report states that Azerbaijan remains in 2020 the country of the post-Soviet space having allocated the largest share of its GDP to counter the challenges mentioned above. Underdoing the falling oil prices, the economy has diversified, especially in the private sector (Guliyev; 2020). In the first half of 2020, industrial production in the non-oil and gas sector increased by 11.2% compared to the previous year (CESD; 2020). According to the assessment of the Ministry of Economy, Azerbaijan's non-oil exports will exceed three billion dollars by 2024. A recent World Bank report confirms this positive trend by indicating the increase of 57.8% year-on-year in December 2021 in non-energy exports. (World Bank, 2022). Regarding monetary devaluation, a moratorium on late fees and interest rate penalties, guarantees on insurance premiums or risk weighting on mortgage loans have been proposed by the CBA (CESD; 2020). The impact on the tourism sector has been mitigated thanks to an allocation of more than three billion dollars from the government and through financial support noticeable in the entrepreneurship sector, the hotel industry or at the level of touristic agencies. In addition to measures such as the closure of borders or the suspension of economic activities, the government has put in place an Action plan and signed a decree to create a coronavirus Response Mechanism and maintain economic growth. Along with measures such as closing borders or suspending economic activities, the government supported programs aimed at strengthening the health system, expanding social protection (social security and employment) and encouraging entrepreneurship. Indeed, as the COVID-19 Active Response and Expenditure Support [CARES], which provides substantial budgetary assistance and meets national financial needs, has shown, the Azeri government has deployed a significant number of assistance programs for vulnerable households (women and children with the prevention of female staff, psychological assistance, multiplication of online courses and training of volunteers to care for the elderly...), contract employees, individual entrepreneurs, unemployed and low-income people. As a concrete example, Baku has undertaken direct financial support (\$47 million) to 300,000 individual entrepreneurs in crisis-affected sectors such as tourism and hospitality (partial payment of salaries, temporary tax exemptions...). At the same time, a presidential decree was signed to create a Coronavirus Response Fund and encourage legal entities to make donations to maintain good momentum [CESD; 2021]. Finally, the Aliiev government has developed a "defense-by-attack" system by contributing to global efforts to combat the pandemic, including through the payment of \$5 million to the WHO strategic preparedness and response plan (operational support, accelerating the pace of research...). For its part, the Central Bank of the Republic of Azerbaijan has tackled the restructuring of business and mortgage loans while reducing the rates of its payment services for its customers. The

response to the impact of COVID-19 on the national economy has sometimes been shown to correlate with Turkish government responses. Thus, at the same time as proposing tax reductions or temporary exemptions from VAT, the government was able to take advantage of external assistance such as the signing of a 200 million swap with the European bank allowing local businesses affected by the crisis to receive foreign currency credit support. Moreover, just like Turkey, the eco-system and the improvement of the digital sector are pointed out in the literature as instruments for a stable economic recovery over the long term. Although economic growth remained strong in December 2021 (+5.6%), imports increased (24% year-on-year in December 2021) and the manat remained stable (1.7 manat per USD), inflation continued to increase with rising food prices, and investment at the demand level decreased by 7.3% year-on-year in 2021 (World Bank, 2022). Quite often, agriculture seems to be the weak point of the Azeri economy in times of covid. While the other sectors were finally able to raise their heads slightly, agriculture continued to contract until the end of last year. However, important reforms have been implemented in the agricultural sector in Azerbaijan to improve the food security system and to support local agricultural producers. Just like Turkey, the crisis is all the more brutal for the national economy because it breaks a pre-covid economic growth rate, with an Azeri economy that grew by 2.2% in 2019 (World Bank, 2022). Does the current pandemic represent the suffocation of Azeri economic liberalization's nascent breath, or is it, on the contrary, the beginning of an awareness to reach a new horizon of development?

The literature on the economic Turkish-Azeri relationship remains more cautious. It offers a potential academic dualism *potential/lack of* and fights against the adages of impeccable bilateralism by mixing the positive dynamism of mutual investments (Kardas, Macit, Ismailova Gamlet; 2015, 2017), the little surprising energy cooperation and the potential for transformation of scale from state-transit to state-hub that it implies (Bülent Aras ; 2014) with the disagreements regarding the monopolistic environment of the Turkish internal energy market or the untapped potential for cooperation of the non-oil sector (Nurmammadov; 2016). However, studies on the economic exchanges of the two states do not contextualize them through the current pandemic.

This literature flaw is highly surprising. The spirit of Turkish-Azeri cooperation in a strategically advantageous South Caucasus region remains an academically well-known fact (Bulen, Akpınar; Karagiannis, Kardas). In a context of opposition between a European Union whose values prevent any productive cooperation (Dmitrieva, 2021) and a Russia too present in its near neighbor, the tendency from the *Baku-Ankara duo* to build in this period of external

shock a bilateral energy exit door to cure national ills could have questioned the intellectual curiosity of a greater number of researchers. Some (largely empirical) data still allow us to direct our thinking on the subject. The Turkish pro-government Daily Sabah informed the attentive reader about the Turkish and Azeri joint regional investment projects, continuing President Aliiev's statement on possible cooperation with the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) group regarding the natural gas reserves discovered by Ankara in the Black Sea. Numerous articles also mention the desire of SOCAR CEO Zaur Gahramanov to combine Petkim and STAR Refinery and the bilateral investment of petrochemical facility in the Turkish province of Izmir. This desire to fight together against the negative effects of COVID-19 was also studied by the diplomatic correspondent Behlul Cetinkaya, who mentions the ratification of the protocol of the ninth session of the Turkish-Azerbaijani Intergovernmental Joint Commission when analyzing current economic issues, and the expansion of Baku-Ankara cooperation in the field of food security, communication, transport, and education (Behlul Cetinkaya; 2021). Although he wishes to point the finger at the differences in economic priorities between the two countries, the author O'Byrne also supports the trend of bilateral cooperative strengthening, in particular by mentioning the current talks between the Azeri oil company SOCAR and the Turkish state gas import company Botas Surun (O'Byrne; 2021). Thus, based mostly on recent empirical data such as the statements of the virtual forum on Turkish-Azerbaijani investment organized by the Council on Foreign Economic Relations of Turkey (DEIK), the literature is optimistic about the launches of hundreds of projects by Turkish entrepreneurs in Azerbaijan and about a future trade volume of 15 billion dollars between the two states (Ergocun, 2021). It should be noted that the figure that represents almost three times the current rate could be explained by the gravity equation introduced by Jan Tinbergen in 1962. This economic theory is very present in the literature on bilateral economic relations (Zhu, Zainuddin, Shukor, Zulkifli, Barbero, JJ de Lucio, Rodríguez-Crespo; 2021). Through its Newtonian influence, it teaches us that the closer two states are geographically (as is the case of Azerbaijan and Turkey), the more they tend to establish strong trade relations, thanks to a more attractive transport sector and stronger cultural ties.

This desire to believe in a prosperous future is supported by two sources. The first one comes from the APA-Economics calculations based on the State Customs Committee and establishes the new positive trend of bilateral trade turnover between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Indeed, having reached 4,509 billion dollars in 2020, recording a decrease of 7.7% compared

to 2019³ (USD\$ 4.509B), it managed to increase to USD\$ 4,661B in 2021, which represents an increase of 3.4% compared to the pre-pandemic period. This improvement in commercial turnover reflects a COVID-19 that carries a message not only negative, revealing the economic weak points of the states it affects (inflation, devaluation, corruption). In the case of the Turkish-Azeri economic relationship, it allows an update of the old bilateral weaknesses and their transformation into concrete solutions. The pre-COVID-19 academic literature reported for instance a legislative basis that did not comply with the ambitions of reducing Turkey-Azerbaijan transactional costs and pointed to the absence of a free trade agreement, which would have made it possible to gain competitiveness vis-à-vis Russian exports (Arim, Guney, Quliyev, Korhan, Durmus, Nurmammadov). Yet, the economic benefits of the new preferential trade agreement signed in 2020 and the visa-free travel format have revealed encouraging results in the short term⁴ and could totally create a new breath on the previous analyses. The Susha Declaration signed in 2021 by the two presidents to improve economic cooperation in the field of energy and industry in particular appears as proof of continuity of a pandemic that removes doubts and accelerates concrete and evolutive bilateral measures. The increase in trade turnover also comes from the strong investment of Turkish capital on the Azerbaijani economy, to the tune of 530 million euros according to Azerbaijani Economy Minister Cenk Eynehan.

The second source comes from the intellectual analysis of CSED Chairman Vugar Bayramov, who states, based on Azerbaijan's recent liberation of Karabakh territories that a multilateral cooperation platform (Turkey, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia) would be beneficial for the regional economic situation, the latter having suffered heavy losses as a result of the post-2019 health context. Future connectivity with Nakhichevan would allow not only an increase in non-oil exports from Azerbaijan, but also direct access to the Caspian Sea for Turkey (Bayramov, Riyaz ul Khaliq; 2021). A neo-realist approach is therefore noticeable and supports the vital importance of the liberation of the Karabakh territories in a context of weak international supervision and economically strategic awareness of a region-corridor to European and world markets (Khashaab, Abdollahib; 2022). Neorealism asserts that COVID-19 not only showed the weaknesses of liberal globalization but proved that States

³ The decline in commercial turnover is linked to the Turkish currency and debt crisis that has shaken the Turkish economy since 2018 and which intensified following the departure of Central Bank Director Naci Agbal in the midst of a health crisis. It is expressed in high inflation, a fall in the value of the Lira, and an increase in the costs of loans, which has a negative effect on Azeri companies that have invested in Turkey.

⁴ 60% of tourists to Turkey in the third quarter of 2021 came from Azerbaijan.

remain through their power of mobilization the major actors of the international system in an age where nationalism is intensifying at the expense of communication.

There is currently no research paper analyzing the impact of COVID-19 on Turkish-Azeri economic relations. The academic sun on this subject does not seem to be rising yet, not least because the pandemic darkness is not yet over, to quote the famous Persian mystical poet Rumi. This work therefore appears as a new intellectual corridor towards *covidian* bilateralism. It is also part of a distortion landscape where empirical and ideological data outnumber academic research. This gap can be explained by the young nature of the topic. Analyses still lack ageing and need more solid and cautious conclusions as to the clarity of the proposed projects, and their real effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID 19 on the economic and geopolitical level is characterized by three amplifying trends: a historical continuity with more serious health consequences than the previous Corona epidemics (Chinese respiratory syndrome of 2003 and Arabian of 2012), an expected⁵ but ultimately uncontrollable appearance⁶ (More than 5,826,356 deaths were reported between December 31, 2019 and the sixth week of 2022 according to the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control) and a general awareness regarding the responsibility of globalization on the spread of the virus in the world [Lancet; 2021]. While the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and the autumn banking crisis of 2008 had put an end to the idyllic opening of national economies to the world market, COVID-19 has made the task of defending the liberal economic order more complex, as multilateral cooperation and the governance of the system have proved so friable.

Today, is added to the economic recession sometimes considered even more terrible than the Great Depression of the 1930s⁷ caused by the shocks of supply/demand reduction, inflation, currency devaluation, rising oil prices and rising unemployment the geopolitical recession, which Columbia University professor Ian Bremmer defines as a fracturing of world politics that allows global risks to develop, not destroy themselves. The health crisis is developing under a macabre cloud of liberal guilt through a double dimension of inversion-revelation. The Director of the Institute of International Relations (IFRI) Thomas Gomart explains the first by the transformation of a West exporter of universal values into a West receiver of the techno-political advantages of the Asian continent⁸. The reversal dimension also concerns the very form of the world economy, which finally seems to be redirecting to a pre-

⁵ Kelvin K, Ivan F, Hung. « From SARS coronavirus to novel animal and human coronaviruses » | Journal of Thoracic Disease, June 2013.

⁶ Liliana, Bianchi, Cadum, Anthonj | Risk Perception and COVID-19 | Environmental research and Public Health | IJERPH Volume 17 Issue 9 | April 2020.

⁷ Nouriel Roubini | Coronavirus pandemic has delivered the fastest, deepest economic shock in history | March 2020.

⁸ IFRI | COVID-19 : choc sanitaire et géopolitique | Politique étrangère, vol. 85, n° 2, summer 2020

modernity characterized by an almost exclusive exchange of goods and a classic pattern of idle capital-labor production. The second dimension of revelation is expressed through the faster disappearance of companies, the multiplication of the number of relocated activities or the immense impact that the rise of oil can cause in hydrocarbon exporting countries. The pre-existing economic weaknesses at the national level are becoming more glaring and call for a new awareness of governance in macroeconomic terms.

The lack of hope that Azerbaijan and Turkey will bring to international cooperation and multilateralism forces them to accelerate their format of informal bilateralism under the prism of a neo-realist desire for national economic security. The strengthening of the adage "One Nation; Two States" through the development of Turkish-Azeri economic exchanges is therefore part of a landscape that pessimists would consider to be regionally localized, and not globalized, recalling the expression of the « People-as-One versus the external Other » (Lefort, 1988). Even if they pursue a policy of Trumpian detachment towards a Western world considered by their elites to be dysfunctional and not in line with their values, Turkey and Azerbaijan are providing significant external assistance. Since 2020, more than 136 countries and eight international organizations have appealed to Turkey to combat the negative economic effects of COVID, in particular thanks to Ankara's effective organizational structure and strong state traditions⁹ (World Health Organization ; 2020). Azerbaijan's state news agency reports \$5 million donation to WHO from Baku¹⁰, as well as sending Azeri medical supplies to China, Iran, and Bosnia. Even with so much divergence, the relations between states therefore appear as what Keohane would describe as a neorealist cooperative divergence, that is, the fact of giving preference to relations between states even in the event of disagreements [Keohane; 1986]. Thus, even if the impact of COVID-19 has had the effect of a brutal catalyst by breaking the encouraging growth of the Azeri and Turkish national economy, its effect could fade thanks to a new neo-realist bilateral breath based on a new unifying fraternal dynamic promoted by the military heyday in Karabakh.

First of all, the consolidation of Turkish-Azeri two-sided trade has to be studied, while the national health context is marked by the lack of diversification and political over-control. However, this trend needs to be nuanced by exploring areas where bilateralism is still underutilized.

⁹ World Health Organization | Regional Office for Europe | TURKEY'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19: FIRST IMPRESSIONS | July 2020.

¹⁰ AzerTac | Azerbaijani government donates \$5 million to WHO to fight coronavirus | March 2020.

I] The strengthening of Turkish-Azeri economic relations, or how COVID-19 has turned into an advantageous neorealist instrument.

While the Coronavirus epidemic has still not ended (according to data from the World Health Organization, 7,032 new cases were detected in Azerbaijan only on February 9, for 111,996 cases on the same day in Turkey), Turkey and Azerbaijan have revealed their intentions to achieve a mutual exchange rate estimated at \$15 billion in turnover by 2023 [Cahit Bagchi, Yagub Safar; 2021]. This commercial ambition, however, in a period of national economic slowdown (Bayraktar, Gulnara; 2021), reflects a real sense of hope in the future of trade between the two States. Ankara and Baku seem to be working to create through their two-sided economic hope a *corona-focused* Caspian diplomacy. Serbia and China, countries with a geopolitically favorable position, could then serve as a model, while the strengthening of their cooperation (humanitarian aid, promising declarations, reciprocal economic donations) has also taken place in a context of political exploitation and pandemic soft power [Santic, Antic; 2020]. Thus, Turkish-Azeri economic relations in times of COVID possess a monochrome dimension. In case of good results in terms of multidisciplinary joint projects, they would reflect on a bilateral scale the remarkable international scientific unit that has made it possible to fight against COVID-19 [Hiscotta, Alexandridia , Muscolinia , Tassonea , Palermoa, Soultiotib, Zevinia; 2020]. If they fail, they will reveal the limit of the popular expression of "Two States, One nation". Two trends can offer the reader an intellectual basis on which to rely to answer this question.

A] COVID-19 has impacted commercial turnover, but its consequences remain limited...

According to Amina Bayramova, an analyst at the Center for the Analysis of Economic Reforms and Communication in Azerbaijan, the volume of import / export operations has not been seriously affected by the health crisis [Bayramova; 2021]. In the field of defense, for

example, the volume of imports from Turkey, which already included a positive trend in December 2019 increased by almost 40% in one year [Turkish Ministry of Commerce, 2020] and only strengthened in the covidian period (especially through the Karabakh war of 2020) with the strengthening of the production of Turkish defense armaments to Azerbaijan [Kerimkhanov; 2020]. According to the 2020 world firepower ranking, Azerbaijan has the most powerful army in the South Caucasus. The favorable import/export orientation on the military-economic level has *ipso facto* transformed the impact of COVID for Turkish-Azeri bilateralism into a geostrategic opportunity; the role of a powerful and stable regional military duo Ankara-Baku has developed and offered the statements of political elites a boost of legitimacy on a national scale. On a larger level, the volume of trade between Turkey and Azerbaijan in 2021 amounted to \$ 4.661 billion, which is 3.4% more than the volume of trade before the pandemic (APA -Economics; 2022). Moreover, even though Azerbaijan's exports to Turkey decreased from \$2.88 billion in 2019 to \$2.59 billion in 2020 and imports from Turkey increased from \$1.76 billion in 2019 to \$1.56 billion in 2020 (UN COMTRADE; 2021), exports increased again by 8.5% in 2021, while imports experienced an even more encouraging increase of 18%. (State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan; 2021). Even if the import/export duo does not achieve the results of Sino-US relations (615.2 billion in 2020), its encouraging results show the ability of both governments to maintain the pressures of covid-globalization and organize their own trade policies based on the main driver of bilateral relations; trade [Jenkins; 2010]. Even when commercial failures occur, such as the return by Azerbaijan of about ten tons of fresh peppers imported from Turkey because of the presence of pests, disputes are settled quickly and discreetly, in this case by the introduction of new regulations concerning the import of vegetables from Turkey. 2022 confirms the minimal impact of the pandemic on Turkish imports from Azerbaijan. A difficult winter, a reduction in Iranian distribution and the rise in energy prices have indeed led Turkey to increase its imports and increase the volume of its foreign trade [Muş; 2022]. In response, the Azeri oil company SOCAR decided to export more natural gas to Turkey [Ahmadov; 2021]. In the long term, Baku plans to export about ten billion cubic meters of natural gas to Turkey by 2025, counting on the renewal of the Shah Debiz-1 gas contract, the termination of which could have caused significant losses of oil and gas revenues for the Azeri economy [David O Byrne; 2021]. Thus, the global health crisis gives the Baku-Ankara duo an opportunity to strengthen their energy exchanges in the short term, while building long-term economic stability that will benefit their company on a national scale and that will attract European trading partners, eager to end their dependence on Russian gas while integrating a market with stable equilibrium. Indeed, in the long term, Ankara could use the

increase in its imports from Azerbaijan to detach itself even more from Gazprom's high tariffs. By putting Baku and Moscow in competition, Ankara is allowing its Azeri ally to gradually join its market while creating a Russian-Azeri competitiveness where the flexibility strategy of the Azeri company SOCAR could well emerge victorious. It is interesting to note the highly positive impact of recent military events on the regional (Karabakh) and international (Ukraine) scale on the development of Turkish-Azeri trade bilateralism. Are Ankara and Baku creating a new "*defense, gas and discretion*" trend in post-Covid bilateralism, focused on the development of military-energy exchanges?

By localizing the impact of COVID to certain economic sectors, the amortization of its consequences through the development of the bilateral process seems even more obvious. Thus, while the temporary closure of the borders between Azerbaijan and Turkey on March 15, 2020 could have dealt a fatal blow to the national economy, with a visitor rate having been decreased by 92% in 2020 in Azerbaijan (CESD; 2021) and a profit having decreased by more than 65% in Turkey in the same year (Daily Sabah, Global Times ; 2021), the year 2021 saw an increase of 98.74% in the number of Azeri citizens traveling to Turkey. This trend continued in January 2022 with more than 36,191 Azeri citizens visiting Turkey, representing an increase of 1.4% over the year 2021 (Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism; 2022). The State tourism agency of Azerbaijan reports similar facts. In 2021, the largest share of tourists visiting Azerbaijan came from Turkey. Even though the coronavirus has caused the country's tourism revenues to fall and the annual total number of tourists still does not reach the pre-covid level, Azerbaijan still received the first prizes in the category of "Europe's Leading Cultural Destination" at the World Travel Awards, which indicates the immense potential that the tourism sector has managed to safeguard [Azernews: Caspiannews, 2022]. The tourist achievement was made possible thanks to the pre-summer easing of air travel restrictions between Azerbaijan and Turkey, with Turkish and Azeri citizens today having to present only a PCR test, as well as a vaccination certificate or a guarantee of post-illness recovery. The role of the joint Turkish-Azerbaijani project (meeting of Azeri and Turkish experts) to make the Karabakh region an attractive historical, scientific and cultural destination for tourists should also be noted. Alongside, Azerbaijan has established a partnership *expedia.com/hotels.com* by targeting citizens of the Middle East, including Turkey (Ismayilova; 2021). Thus, the tourism sector displays the limit of the economic impact of COVID-19 on any bilateral relationship including a political, historical, religious, and ethnic basis. As in the case of Sino-Japanese tourism [Su, Pham, Dwyer; 2022], the rate of visitors between two states does not depend exclusively on an

economic link, but rather on the multidisciplinary pattern of government and societal ties. The public panic that the pandemic causes to potential visitors certainly leads to a decrease in demand in the tourism industry, but it proves to be inexorably temporary, given the attraction that Turkey and Azerbaijan have for visitors from both countries (cultural sites, similar language, shared traditions...). Moreover, the recovery of highly symbolic territories in Karabakh has allowed post-war tourism to offer new opportunities for enrichment in Ankara and Baku, reflecting what senior lecturer Adam Weaver would describe as profitable antagonism, that is, the creation by arms of a tourist potential [Adam Weaver; 2011].

At the level of the key energy sector, the literature reports a set of dramatic consequences of COVID-19 for the Turkish and Azeri national economy, highly dependent on hydrocarbon resources and whose diversification policy in the non-oil sector was only beginning to become visible (Prio, Mideast Policy Brief 04, CESD; 2020). However, the intensification of gas deliveries by the Azeri company AGSC to Turkey (following the suspension of Iranian deliveries) was in line with initiatives proving the inevitability and protective nature of Turkish-Azeri cooperation. In April 2021, the contract that offers Turkey 11 bcm of Azerbaijani gas was updated until the end of 2024 (Daily Sabah, CaspianNews; 2021). Last year, Baku hosted the first Azerbaijan-Turkey energy Forum and brought together experts from both countries in the field of hydrocarbons, petrochemicals, electricity and renewable energy (Azerbaijan State News Agency; 2021). Thus, according to the member of the Board of Directors of the Baku Center for Analysis of International Relations Dr. Esmira Jafarova, Azerbaijan's role as an exporter of energy security has by no means disappeared during COVID-19. On the contrary, Azerbaijan increased its gas exports to Turkey via TANAP by 20.1% in 2021. COVID-19 is suffering from the increasing number of commitments by states to climate change and the use of renewable energies. The affected hydrocarbon industry is gradually being replaced through a global energy transition policy that Turkey and Azerbaijan are jointly strengthening to achieve a free market model and a competitive and quality diversification policy [Online Seminar; Shabazov, Tammes; 2021]. Following the Sino-Indian rapprochement model [Singh; 2005], the two-sided energy projects (Shah Deniz II, SCPX, TANAP, TAP) have made it possible in this climate of transformation to reduce investor concerns and create a general tranquility to reduce the consequences of COVID on two economies aware of their energy dependencies, recalling the thought of Martin Luther King JR on the need to "live together as brothers or perish together as fools."

B] COVID-19 has allowed the birth of a new unifying fraternal dynamism.

Turkey and Azerbaijan have done more than limit the negative effects of the corona-economy: they have transformed them by a neo-realist approach into a solid unifying "rethinking" already advocated by the World Bank reports in 2020 [Protecting People And Economies: Integrated Policy Responses To Covid-19; WorldBank 2020]. Thus, opposing the divisions of a Europe without borders and the transatlantic pandemic divide [Karsic, 2020], Ankara and Baku opted for strengthening a partnership between two strong governments in an uncertain world, and this with the ultimate aim of achieving their national economic goals. The long-awaited visa-free and passport-free regime for Azeri and Turkish citizens in case of direct travel without passage through a third country (Yesevi, Tiftikcigil / Ismayilov, Graham; 2015/2016) was thus made possible from the first of April 2021. The Free Trade agreement has not yet been implemented, but a preferential trade agreement was finally born in February 2020 (Mammadov, Aghazada; 2021), constituting only a few months after the first case of COVID detected the first stage of bilateral economic *integration*. This new agreement reduces the quota and duties of a list of 15 goods to 0 (Bayramov, 2021). The new economic dynamism in the Turkish-Azeri bilateral relations, however, was really built through the joint signing of the Shusha Declaration in June 2021. The agreement, which involves the opening of the Zangazur corridor and the construction of a Turkish consulate general in Shusha, concerns a significant number of sectors such as industry, defense, communication and energy. Possessing a commercial potential similar to the former Kars Agreement of October 1921, the treaty promotes joint scientific research, mutual technical cooperation, while intensifying efforts to diversify the national economy and trade exports. Recalling the *Russki Mir* doctrine through its cultural, linguistic and commercial promotion dimension, it officially marks the Turkish-Azeri geopolitical presence in the Russian zone of influence while linking Baku and Ankara to a common future destiny in the industrial, military and energy fields, thanks to the establishment of a roadmap aimed at consolidating mutual strategic investments through the construction of hundreds of kilometers of roads and technology transfer [Daily Sabah, 2021]. Even if the economist Vusal Gasimili mitigated the importance of this bilateral symbolism by warning of the future Azeri intransigence in the event of Turkish commercial interference in its market, it is difficult not to see in this treaty the concrete formation of a new center of Turkish-Azeri socio-economic integration where the diplomatic alliance and economic interests combine to the historical dimension of a place that represents the ancient cultural cradle of the Turkish world. Contrary to the statements of some opposition members who speak of an advertising formalization [Alizade; 2021], the agreement outlines the second major step towards a free

trade agreement after the implementation of the preferential trade agreement of March 1. This economic heartland is further protected by a diplomatic-security cooperation, with the confirmation of a common Turkish-Azeri vision on key concepts such as independence or territorial integrity or the principles of the Charter of Nations. COVID-19 is therefore finally part of a new bilateral landscape of cooperative prosperity, national dignity and Russian-Armenian expansionist unity. The pandemic could not prevent the formation of a new regional bilateral supervision reflecting the promise of joint meetings on regional developments in the field of security (fight against terrorism, illegal immigration, organized crime ...) and shared economic interests (development of technological products, creation of new routes, increased investments ...) [Mehdiyev; 2022] [Veliyev; 2021].

These long-considered but finally signed agreements due to the urgency of national economic recovery have been added to a set of new projects between the Turkey and Azerbaijan between 2020 and 2022. Baku and Ankara have decided to sign several agreements in the field of mining, textiles, transport logistics, architecture or at the level of small and medium-sized enterprises (Bayramova; 2021). Investments by Turkish companies like Türkiye Petrollari in Azerbaijan have increased (Cahit Bagci; 2021). In addition to these various initiatives, a strategic partnership between the public legal entity of the Azerbaijan Institute for Standardization (AZSTAND) and the Turkish Institute for Standardization (TSE) for the distribution of more than 9000 Turkish national standards in Azerbaijan in the field of health, environment or goods became effective (Ministry of Economy of Azerbaijan; 2022). The benefit of the facilitation of trade and standardization of joint projects was also made possible thanks to the memorandum of understanding signed between the Minister of Economy of the Republic of Azerbaijan Mikayil Jabbarov and the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Demiroren Holding, Yildirim Demiroren to improve the organization of production and sale of pharmaceutical products through the establishment of a joint enterprise in Azerbaijan. Built in the Pirallahi industrial park, this Turkish-Azerbaijani company will be organized with the participation of the Azerbaijani Investment Company and will allow the employment of at least 150 local people, another symbol of the resistance that bilateralism launches against the health consequences on the labor market.

In the field of education, transport, communication, and food security, all strongly affected by the crisis, it is important to note the ratification of the protocol of the ninth session of the Turkish-Azerbaijani Intergovernmental Joint Commission on the Economy by Turkish Vice-President Fuat Oktay and Azerbaijani Prime Minister Ali Asadov in February 2021 in Ankara

(Turkish Ministry of National Education; 2021). While the agricultural sector remained highly affected by the coronavirus crisis, demonstrating the difficulty of the government to implement effective measures in the economic recovery of this sector nationwide, the expansion of the agrarian insurance system was decided during a visit to Turkey by Deputy Minister of Agriculture Sadigov (AzerNews; 2021). At the same time, Turkey supplied agricultural drones to Azerbaijan (multispectral drone, pesticide spraying drone, mapping software...) within the framework of the project "Detection of Surface and Vegetation Reflection Indices for Multipurpose Analysis of Multispectral Images based on Drones" in cooperation with the Azerbaijan Agrarian Science and Innovation Center and the Faculty of Agriculture of Ankara University.

What if the idealism of the formula "One nation, two states" turned into a concrete economic reality? By taking advantage of the health context and relational preferences, the post-90 continuity of Turkish-Azeri economic relations seems to reach a surprising first stage of integration in a highly conflicted geographical area. As a symbol, the new Ankara-Baku dynamism has led since 2020 to the deterioration of Iranian-Azeri relations with the multiplication of military exercises, and the lack of security assurances regarding Iranian transit to Nakhchivan [Experts Briefing; 2021]. In the face of an increasingly uncertain world and an increasingly fragile societal trust, Muslim bilateralism is taking a major risk; that of contradicting the economic determinants of a PTA (Turkey remains much more economically powerful than its partner) to propose an innovative economic policy whose control-centered neo-realism would replace the weak COVID-response of a failed globalized liberalism.

C] Territorial liberalization in Karabakh, an anti-Covid economic factor.

The regional pandemic landscape has taken advantage of weakened international supervision to project its nationalist colors. Aware of the Minsk Group's lack of impact in the slowed-down creation of a peace process, Azerbaijan, with the help of Turkey, liberated about ten thousand square kilometers of Armenian occupation. In the midst of the pandemic, he chose to add to this symbolic military victory a process of economic liberalization. The economic revitalization of Karabakh is thus planned and will transform the so-called "ghost" cities into smart cities thanks to the arrival of modern technologies (cold-resistant houses, installation of solar and hydroelectric power plants, waste management...) in the villages and to the development of agriculture. To carry out this economic-territorial transformation, Azerbaijan is demonstrating a sense of effective governance through the construction of a coordination headquarters

synchronizing the main government agencies and the establishment of a Recovery Fund for Karabakh. If the political promises are followed by real Turkish-Azeri cooperation, and the construction of new transport routes is combined with an increase in public and non-public investments, then Karabakh may well turn from a fratricidal war with enormous economic consequences into a development zone for mining, tourism, agriculture, food industry and green energy. Economic liberalization is indeed developing the innovation of the latter sector, while displaying the climate ambition of both partners, and by building an image of environmentally conscious states (reduction of desertification, respect for biodiversity...) and respecting the initiatives of the UN [Azertac; 2021]. At the 4th Energy and Natural Resources summit organized with the support of the Turkish Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, Turkish companies, for instance, reportedly showed serious interest in participating in projects for the construction of wind power plants in Lachin and Kalbajar with a view to making Karabakh an economically attractive green energy zone.

However, a problem obscures the new business opportunities presented by this liberalization approach, considered by a significant number of IR scholars as the essential instrument for the progress of a society (Bumann, Hermes & Lensink, 2013). While Western liberal scientists insist on its anti-state benefits, neorealists and Marxists consider it more as 1) not inclined to increase national economic productivity (Greenwald, 1989; Hidalgo, 2014) and 2) a government insecurity tool. In this light, it is hard to see the Turkish and Azeri rulers voluntarily losing power in favor of economic regulation based on decentralization. In a globalized world weakened by the pandemic and having shown its limits in resolving frozen conflicts, there is nothing to suggest that they will emancipate themselves from any economic process and that free groups will flourish, thus opposing the very definition of liberalization that implies the free access of a sector to autonomous economic agents and the reduction of state pressure on national economic activity. Nevertheless, no matter to this opposition between governmental neorealism and non-state economic autonomy, Turkey and Azerbaijan are aware of the character of protection of national production that any liberalization possesses. The Turkish Ministry of Trade encourages trade and the multiplication of preferential trade agreements in order to develop the logistics operations of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars route and to determine a competitive tariff at the Caspian crossing points. In addition, this process would make it possible, through the opening of the Zangezur transit corridor, to gain direct access to the Caspian Sea (Bayramov, 2021) and thus to see its export rate increase with domestic companies able to address the Asian and Central Asian markets directly. Indeed, by reviving the Muslim heritage of Karabakh,

developing regional tourism or promoting the cultural and architectural wealth of the Turkish world, the Ankara /Baku duo seeks not only to promote their bilateral trade but also to fight on a national scale against the current period of unpredictability of the health climate. If one considers COVID-19 as a valid opponent in the game of the security dilemma, then the balance of power is complete. The effects of the Corona virus are certainly visible in the national economy of other opponents, but they have grasped the appeal that a military victory could offer to two states with close ties and rigid control. Many bilateral economic projects have been born out of this legitimate violence, and the notion of statehood has been strengthened among a population reassured by the foreign policy dictated by their respective elites.

Yet, the efforts to turn COVID into a weapon of bilateral strengthening cannot completely hide the existing economic weaknesses in Turkish-Azeri relations.

II] The limits of Turkish-Azeri economic cooperation in times of COVID: between sectoral inadequacies and geopolitical dangers.

A] Improvements slowed down by incomplete economic cooperation.

The preferential trade agreement signed during the pandemic period represents a first form of economic cooperation, but at the moment it concerns only a limited number of products [Mus; 2021]. Representing an encouraging step forward by covering preferential tariffs for a small number of products / services, the absence of NAFTA-style agreements on the movement of capital, goods and people and grouping a large number of goods returns this first battle won to a half-hearted victory. Moreover, even today there is a noticeable asymmetry between the Turkish and Azeri infrastructure network, preventing cross-border exchanges from achieving the hoped-for results. The quality of Azeri infrastructure may be high compared to other Eurasian countries, but it only allowed Azerbaijan to reach the 123rd place in the World Bank Logistics Performance Index due to inefficient logistics services and limited competence of transport operators [World Bank; 2018]. The internship in Baku, which the author of this research paper carried out, allowed him to see with his own eyes the high price of the cost of transport and the difficulties at the level of urban-rural connections. In 2020, the OSCE report on investments in Azerbaijan's sustainable infrastructure supported this personal point of view, pointing to the lack of modernization and the decrease in state spending on transport infrastructure [OSCE; 2020]. It is interesting to note that less than 0.3% of domestic infrastructure spending is earmarked for the country's railway network [ITF, 2019]. Turkey has a much more sophisticated road and rail network, enabling faster and more sustainable connectivity. Ankara seems to have more capacity to combat the impact of COVID-19 through its infrastructure investments and economic stimulus attempts. This architectural asymmetry supports the idea of an important bilateral economic potential based on geographical proximity and cultural-ethnic similarities [Li, Wang, Zhenhua] but also the absence of a trade mechanism equivalent to a second category economic integration (free trade system).

The pandemic highlighted another weak point of Turkish-Azeri bilateralism: women's participation in the economic market [World Bank; 2022]. While Turkey has always lagged behind in terms of female participation in the national labor market, the pandemic has exacerbated this trend drastically, with only 29% of women participating in the labor force compared to 66% of men [Demirgüç-Kunt; 2022]. The impact of COVID-19 on health services and jobs related to education and culture have caused Turkish women to lose years of apprenticeship and training, while increasing gender-based and domestic violence. On the other hand, a 2021 World Bank report mentioned hundreds of male-only professions in Azerbaijan even today, especially in the field of transport, agriculture and energy. Unfortunately, this unequal restriction harms businesses and national economic development, undermining the immense potential that women skilled workers can bring on a macroeconomic scale. A year earlier, in its report on women's employment in Azerbaijan, the World Bank had already warned of legal obstacles in Azerbaijan regarding women's participation in the national labor force. The report told us that the country has the highest gender pay gap in Europe and Central Asia, with a difference of almost 50% [World Bank; 2020]. By riding this wave of inequality, Baku is hampering its efforts to diversify energy and is showing an unattractive face vis-à-vis its European partners. Thus, the two partners can already make the following observation: without a real improvement in the professional situation of women at the national level, their mutual economic cooperation will never reach the full potential hoped for, especially during the pandemic, when sectors such as hospitality, food or tourism (including a significant rate of female workers) are the first affected.

B] Is bilateral economic development a short-term trend?

If one goes beyond the two-sided solid scale of Turkish-Azeri exchanges, one also realizes the long-term instability of this partnership. The deterioration of Turkish-Russian relations after 2015 (Crimean referendum, aircraft crisis, operation in Ukraine...) also raises academic concerns about a possible confrontation in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. If this scenario come to light, it will be difficult for Azerbaijan to economically choose an exclusive partnership with one of its two allies. Azerbaijan, following the neorealist theory of the need for survival and expansion in a non-confident environment, will increasingly oppose Ankara to negotiate as an equal, even superior partner, *de facto* leading to possible disagreements on gas and oil prices. On the Turkish side, the numerous cross-border exchanges could reflect a dimension that is not fraternal, but indeed expansionist, as foreshadowed by the desire to create a common Turkish army [Press conference in Ganja; Shentop] and as felt by the increasingly frequent visits of

senior Turkish officials [Mamedov 2021]. If Ankara's ambition is to make Azerbaijan a Caspian window of Turkish nationalist power, then it will have every interest in increasing the Azeris' dependence on it. In the event of the installation of a Turkish military base on Azeri territory, there would no longer be doubts about the gradual transformation of an Azerbaijani state into a Turkish province. Can we witness a remake of the northern part of Cyprus? The point of view of the American political analyst Roland Benedikter regarding a Turkish political will for regional absorption would hinder the integrative potential of Turkish-Azeri bilateralism in the economic sphere. As a symbol of the fragility of Turko-Azeri economic positivism, the voices in Turkey denouncing the Azeri hostage-taking of Turkish-Armenian trade relations [Soltanov, 2016] have found a new lease of life in times of the Covidian economic crisis.

If one adds to these concerns the post-2020 period and the resumption of an Armenian-Turkish diplomatic dialogue with the appointment of Sardar Ali as the main actor in the Turkish-Armenian political normalization [Köse, 2021]: it will certainly always be able to count on the climate of animosity of the past relations of its two neighbors, but any attempt at regional stability will call into question its inseparable union with its former Muslim brother and will strongly impact their economic exchanges. The aggravation of the geopolitical differences between the Turkish and Azeri government would have a direct impact on the participation of Turkish entrepreneurs in Azeri economic life, proving the interrelation between domestic and foreign policy, and aggravating a business environment not immune to the consequences of values and ideas. As a result, the number of investments from Turkey could sharply decrease, *de facto* ruining two positive trends in the so-far-construction of a stable bilateral business environment:

- a) Real progress against corruption (public sector, education, customs...) allowed by the recommendations issued by the Istanbul anti-corruption action plan (IPA) and scrupulously respected by Azerbaijan in recent years [OECD; 2016], giving rise to a multiplication of meetings between Turkish-Azeri entrepreneurs/businessmen and international organizations.
- b) Extension since 2012 of the Azeri State Agency ASAN whose provision of services have reduced bureaucratic obstacles, difficulties in registering companies and corruption in the public sector, ending a pre-2012 lack of trust between the Turkish (renowned for their seriousness and reliability) and Azeri (guilty of the famous phenomenon of "*hörmet*") business circles [Bedirhanoglu; 2016].

CONCLUSION

Turkish-Azeri economic exchanges are developing today according to a *spinozite* conatus, that is, an appetite (national interests guided by a neorealist conception of international relations) accompanied by self-awareness (rational vision of a globalized world that has shown its limits and rigorous acceptance of a Hobbesian regional environment leaving little room for multilateral exchanges of trust). From this bilateral dynamism was born a corona-diplomacy based on the transformation of COVID from a state of financial consequence to an instrument of geopolitical-economic development taking its source in the unifying principle of "living together for each to advance". Concretely, Ankara and Baku have 1) maintained the negative pressure of the pandemic by strengthening their energy and tourism partnership and 2) transformed backlash into *imkani* through the signing of a preferential trade agreement and the Shusha Treaty combining military-diplomatic strengthening and economic prosperity in a historical and culturally symbolic area while 3) from the victory in Karabakh was born a project of economic liberalization based on the key concepts of sustainable development, technological innovations and effective governance.

However, COVID has also marked the still significant distance between bilateral strengthening and full economic cooperation. In addition to the still noted absence of a free trade agreement, the fragility of Azeri infrastructure and the low participation of women at the national level have been added. Moreover, the deterioration of Turkish-Russian relations, Turkish geopolitical ambitions and Azeri intransigence regarding any Turkish-Armenian rapprochement have somewhat tarnished the ambitious speeches of the officials. It is undeniable that the current trends are more oriented towards the development and increase of exchanges (exchanges > COVID) rather than a future of division and economic-diplomatic rupture [COVID > exchanges]. Nevertheless, it seems necessary to present the reader with concrete recommendations to continue this unifying dynamism and correct the still visible limitations.

Recommendation 1 = An even more business-friendly economic climate

- ***Turkish policy of reassurance towards Azerbaijan / Baku is not Nicosia*** | It might be suggested to Turkey to become aware of the fear that the Cyprus syndrome inspires in nations linked to the Ottoman world. The non-polarity of the international system has given new life to the realist theory and has led some scholars to speak of the 21st Century as the age of nationalism [Mearsheimer; 2020]. Thus, the issues of territorial integrity, national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs are at the heart of citizens' and political concerns, and Azerbaijan is no exception. It could be interesting for Ankara to multiply official declarations regarding Azerbaijan's *in aeternum* autonomy and strengthen its support for the development of Azeri soft power on an international scale (film events, promotion of literature, culinary competitions...)
- ***Azeri mediation policy towards a warming of Turkish-Russian relations / A step behind to jump forward*** = The declining export of Russian natural gas to Turkey and the recent Russian *снейперация* in Ukraine have sharply undermined post-Karabakh Turkish-Russian relations. To avoid seeing the ghost of *access to the warm seas* again and another military conflict between Ankara and Moscow, one could recommend Baku to play the appeasement card and invite Turkey to temporarily abandon its drilling and exploration operations in the Black Sea, in the Libyan conflict zone. This Turkish withdrawal would be highly appreciated by the Kremlin, the region's traditional energy supplier. In return, Baku may decide to apply, for a short time only, even more advantageous prices on its gas exports to Turkey.

Recommendation 2: Concrete measures in the medium term for assured results

- ***Infrastructure improvement / Spend wisely for consistent results*** = The following suggestions would make it possible to improve the existing infrastructure in Azerbaijan, which is essential to reach the second stage of economic cooperation:
 - a) To invite a significant number of Turkish experts and trainers to improve Azeri logistics skills.
 - b) To request Turkish economic assistance to create a high-quality infrastructure network and to encourage Azeri investments in this sector. Without improvement, bilateral trade in terms of manufacturing, tourism and agriculture will not achieve the expected results.
 - c) To improve transport routes, a process that will immediately lead to noticeable differences, but will force the Azeri government to adopt concrete measures to increase the budget allocated by the state.

- ***Increasing the number of female workers / Don't overlook the benefits of diversity*** = Based on the World Bank report, one could advise the Turkish and Azeri governments to take substantial legal measures to provide a much larger number of women (pregnant women or/and with young children) with work in appropriate sanitary and safety conditions and in sectors that are still considered too "male" (drivers, mechanics...). To restore its image internationally, the two governments could then decide to conduct joint media operations to publicly condemn wage and gender discrimination against the female community.

Recommendation 3 = Cautious steps towards a A-student bilateralism.

- ***Reaching the NAFTA level*** | Finishing what we started = To reach the second stage of economic cooperation, Baku and Ankara could receive as an advice the upcoming signing of the long-awaited free trade agreement initiated by the signing of the preferential trade agreement. For this, the latter could be expanded by increasing the number of products it would concern and could possibly be transformed into FTA. In addition, joint Turkish-Azeri humanitarian aid to Ukraine is advocated, as it would create a favorable climate for this new symbolic advance.

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