



Does the pro-US strategic orientation of Azerbaijan increase the stability and security of the state?

Introduction

Azerbaijan, the former Soviet Republic, has entered a new period of change, with many significant internal and external factors to challenge its stability and security. Azerbaijan has a long history of war against Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This conflict has led Azerbaijan to become one of the poor countries during the 1990s. However, Azerbaijan is rich in natural resources particularly oil in the Caspian Sea, but it seems that this country has not been able to improve its economy appropriately. It is inevitable that the issue of oil has attracted the attention of the major powers, Russia and the US. Therefore, both countries have attempted to play a major role in helping Azerbaijan solve both internal and external challenges, as this may lead to Russia and the US directly benefiting from oil resources. These days, it is commonly accepted that Azerbaijan is a pro-western government in several ways: it held western democratic style election in 2003 and it gets economic support and aid from the US. I will argue that the pro-US policies of Azerbaijan improve Azerbaijan's quality of life in some ways. Despite this, I will argue that overall the pro-US strategic orientation of Azerbaijan may decrease stability and security of the state. I will examine what Azerbaijan's pro-US policies are, and then what ways that pro-western policy may increase the tensions between Azerbaijan and neighboring countries; Russia and Iran. This essay will argue that the Azerbaijani government itself is one of the troublemakers in relation to the country's stability.

The influence of the US

According to Jane's defence report (2005), at first, the US viewed Azerbaijan as an important opportunity to limit Russian dominance in Central Asia region. The US also



claimed that Azerbaijan has one of the poor records in relation to democracy and human rights which posed serious obstacles to strengthening relationships between the two countries. However, because of the war on terrorism, the relationships between the US and Azerbaijan has expanded significantly after September 11, 2001. Azerbaijan has facilitated the US military during the military campaign in Afghanistan and in Iraq. More importantly, the US Congress announced in October 2001, that the US recognized Azerbaijan's "support for the US campaign against international terrorism". (Jane's defence report, 2005)

The influence of the US has increased significantly not only with oil industry investments but also with the US security interests in Central Asia. Berman states that the Bush administration started a series of joint military exercises in the Caspian Sea in order to train Azerbaijan's naval fleet to protect the oil-rich nation's offshore drilling platforms. Importantly, The US also has negotiated with Azerbaijan having the US military bases in Azerbaijan. As a result, Azerbaijan's pro-US policy will increase tensions between Azerbaijan and Russia and between Azerbaijan and Iran. However, there are several advantages for the Azerbaijan in the pro-US policy because it allows much economic support and aid from the US.

The pro-US policies of Azerbaijan improve Azerbaijan's quality of life

According to Jane's defence report (2005), the government relationships with the US continued to improve through February 2002 after US President Bush announced the long standing Freedom Support Act on US aid to Azerbaijan and will spend US\$50 million in direct US aid. This will help Azerbaijani to improve their quality of life and human opportunities in the long-term.

Baran (2002: 223) maintains that the United States has actively promoted democracy and market principles through U.S. Agency for International Development



(USAID) programs under the Freedom Support Act (FSA). The level of USAID assistance has been humanitarian, and USAID began to focus on economic needs as well as democratization because of the changing needs of the region. As in the USAID country profile:

National Interest: Located in the Trans-Caspian energy corridor, Azerbaijan is a strategically important link to the region's energy export system. In order to benefit from Azerbaijan's strategic position and resources, it is essential that the country develop a market-oriented, transparent and corruption-free economic, legal and regulatory system. A prosperous and democratic Azerbaijan is also [a] key to stability in the Caucasus and the strengthening of western ties through the Caspian to the Central Asian Republics.

The idea of USAID programs is "to support a stable government that empowers citizens and is governed by the rule of law and promotes the basic welfare of the population."

(USAID's report, 2004)

According to Dr. Wynne Russell, the USAID has played a major role in increase social stabilization in many ways. It has provided the humanitarian aid and created a better condition in refugee camps, and also encourage people to support a democratic system. She also pointed out that USAID would improve the legal framework and strengthen civil society. She also argued that USAID will provide the long-term democracy in Azerbaijan by encouraging people to identify, prioritize and solve problems on their own from local to government level. Dr. Russell said that it has been a successful democratic process for the people. They are involved the political system from the local communities, which are a basic and a powerful requirement of democracy in the long-term democratic process.

The tension between Azerbaijan and Russia

To begin with the pro-US Azerbaijan strategy has significantly increased the tension between Russia and Azerbaijan. In the past, although Azerbaijan tried to maintain



a good relationship with Russia, it seemed that Russia preferred a strategic partnership with Armenia. Therefore, Azerbaijan turned to align itself politically and economically with Western interests instead. Aras (2002:92) points out that Azerbaijani leaders aim to counter a developing process of a Russian-Armenian-Iranian groups in order to prepare means to fight against Armenian forces supported by Russia.

However, Cornell (2002:10) argues that Russia nowadays is more concerned in losing its influence on Azerbaijan because it is a vital component of Russia's policy in term of controlling oil export routes. Therefore, Russia has tried to interrupt this formation of a Turkish-Israeli-Georgian-Azerbaijani axis supported by the US. in order to retain influence over the South Caucasus. As a result, Berman (2004:65) states:

“Russia's approach to Azerbaijan has been more subtle. Through a variety of diplomatic carrots and sticks, ranging from offers of military aid to the abrupt cessation of gas supplies, Moscow has attempted to woo Baku away from its West-ward trajectory.”

Berman (2004:60) also claims that Russia has tried to stop the increasing of the US influence into an area, which “Russia considers its own backyard.” He also maintains that Russia is concerned that the US is trying to minimize Russia's presence in the region by encouraging the countries of the Caucasus with western style of policies which may mean that Russia no longer has monopoly over Caucasus economics and its politics.

Another example of tension with Russia was shown in early June 2004, Russia conducted large-scale military exercises, “Mobility 2004,”. Berman claims that it was a clear signal to the countries that “Moscow possesses both the will and the firepower to project force.” Russian Foreign Ministry made a clear statement that the exercises were actually meant to express to neighboring states and to the US that “any place is within our reach.” (Berman, 2004: 66)



In short, it is probable that on the one hand, Russia still needs to control Azerbaijan because of the benefits of oil and gas from the Caspian Sea and geopolitical security factors. On the other hand, as Dr. Wynne Russell stated that Russia prefers to strengthen relationships with Armenia and to maintain the military engagement in Armenia as a good alliance in this region. It is likely that the conflicts between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh still exist and Azerbaijan will use their resources to deal with this conflict.

The tension between Azerbaijan and Iran

Despite its population composed of over 90 percent Shia Muslims, Azerbaijan is likely remaining free of extremist Islamic influence. According to Baran (2002:226), the population of Azeris live in Iran is about 15–25 million, which is more than in Azerbaijan itself (about 7 million), and they shared cultural heritage, however, there has been more conflict than cooperation between the Iran and Azerbaijan.

Aras (2002:92) claims that the visiting of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to Azerbaijan in 1997 implied the important role of Azerbaijan in the new geopolitics of the Central Asia region. This led to the strong reaction by Iran. The next day later, Iran state radio blamed Azerbaijan for hosting the Israel's prime minister. According to Aras (p.92), "Baku has been playing a dangerous game by receiving the Zionist regime's expansionist prime minister. By doing this it has destabilized its own ties with Islamic states in the region and the world." He also says that Armenian foreign minister Alexander Arzumanyan considered close cooperation between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Israel to be very dangerous for the region.

It is important to note that Azerbaijan claims that Iran was seeking to destabilize Azerbaijan by sponsoring activities of radical Islamic sects. They also believed that Iran was behind the training and funding of radical Islamic groups in Azerbaijan. It can be seen that radical Islamic support by Iran is one of serious security threats to Azerbaijan.



(Jane's defence, 2005) Therefore, one of the best solutions for Azerbaijan's strategic security is to strengthen ties with the US, against the most dangerous threat of Iran.

From Iran's points of view, the security dilemma in this region is more concerned; the new players entering the scene connected with Caspian oil are very likely to increase tensions. Azerbaijan is one of the most important actors to challenge Iran's security by strengthening with the US. Therefore, it is probable the Azeri people who live in the south along the Iran-Azerbaijan border are insecure because of the tension between the two governments.

Apart from tensions between Azerbaijan and neighboring counties, the Azerbaijani government itself may also decrease the own security and stability. It is well known that widespread corruption is an important obstacle to the country developments, and has undermined the prospect of foreign investment. Dr. Russell stated that Azerbaijani government is one of the most corrupt governments in the world¹. Political corruption seems to be common within Azerbaijan at all levels, for example, from education-graduated results to political projects. Dr. Russell said that people think that the corruption is normal daily life in Azerbaijan, and this corruption needs to be worked out as the first priority. Importantly, it can be argued that oil revenue often goes to the pay of government officials rather than to be spent in the basic human needs such as education and infrastructure. Baran (2002:231) points out that corruption has the most harmful effect on national security because it makes the countries vulnerable to internal social problems such as lack of good quality of life. In sum, the corruption at all levels and lack of transparency about budget allocations had led to Azerbaijan becoming more and more unstable.

Conclusion

It is generally accepted that nowadays the oil and gas reserves of the Central Asia are vital to the US geopolitical and economic interests in the 21st century. Importantly, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory led



Azerbaijan to develop relationships with the US in order to balance Russia's power in the region. On the one hand, the pro-US policy provides great opportunities for Azerbaijan in terms of national security interest and aid from USAID, particularly humanitarian. Also, energy development from oil and gas in the Caspian Sea will improve Azerbaijan's economy and energy security. In theory, it promotes the independence and economic development of post-Soviet states in that region. However, in practice the pro-US has increased tensions with neighboring countries especially, Russia and Iran, which they do not want the US dominance within the Central Asia. These tensions may pose a threat to Azerbaijan stability and security.

Expert interview

Dr. Wynne Russell, who has works as an occasional consultant to USAID's mission in Azerbaijan. This expert interview focused on topic of 'Conflict Assessment in Azerbaijan'. The interview was held on May 5, 2005 at Australian Defence Force Academy.



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ⁱ "As the Corruption Perceptions Index 2004 shows, oil-rich Angola, Azerbaijan, Chad, Ecuador, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Libya, Nigeria, Russia, Sudan, Venezuela and Yemen all have extremely low scores," said Peter Eigen, the chairman of Transparency International. BBC news report, **Oil wealth 'can cause corruption'** <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3758798.stm>>