



STRATEGIC HEDGING IN AZERBAIJAN'S RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

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ABSTRACT

Considering the dynamics of Azerbaijan's relations with Russia and the distribution of factors determining the course of relations, it is possible to observe that there are many elements of strategic hedging. Post-independence Azerbaijan has built its foreign policy on versatility and balance in the challenging conditions of the South Caucasus geography. In particular, this foreign policy has determined the general framework of the development of Azerbaijan's relations with Russia. The historical contexts and stories with Russia made it necessary to determine this policy. The article focuses on the question of strategic hedging in Azerbaijan's relations with Russia. Since independence, Azerbaijan's relations with Russia have followed an up-and-down course. This course has shaped the functioning and framework of relations between the two states. On the one hand, Azerbaijan has emphasized its strategic relations with Russia, while on the other hand, it has established multidimensional strategic cooperation mechanisms with Türkiye and the West. In this respect, it is possible to say that Azerbaijan has prioritized hedging by implementing the strategy of acting independently from Russia and acting cautiously in its relations with Russia. In this article, strategic hedging in Azerbaijan's relations with Russia is tested through three case studies. In this context, Azerbaijan's policies and priorities in the Russian-Georgian, Second Karabakh and Russian-Ukrainian wars are analyzed.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Russia, strategic hedging, balancing, foreign policy

AZERBAIJAN'IN RUSYA İLE İLİŐKİLERİNDE STRATEJİK HEDGİNG

ÖZ

Azerbaycan'ın Rusya ile ilişkilerinin dinamikleri ve ilişkilerin seyrini belirleyen faktörlerin dağılımına bakıldığında stratejik hedging'in birçok unsurunun bulunduğunu gözlemlemek mümkündür. Bağımsızlık sonrası Azerbaycan, Güney Kafkasya coğrafyasının zorlu koşullarında dış politikasını çok yönlülük ve denge üzerine inşa etmiştir. Bu dış politika özellikle Azerbaycan'ın Rusya ile ilişkilerinin gelişiminin genel çerçevesini belirlemiştir. Rusya ile yaşanan tarihsel bağlar ve hikâyeler bu politikanın belirlenmesini gerekli kılmıştır. Makale, Azerbaycan'ın Rusya ile ilişkilerinde stratejik korunma sorununa odaklanmaktadır. Bağımsızlığından bu yana Azerbaycan'ın Rusya ile ilişkileri inişli çıkışlı bir seyir izlemiştir. Bu seyir iki devlet arasındaki ilişkilerin işleyişini ve çerçevesini şekillendirmiştir. Azerbaycan bir yandan Rusya ile stratejik ilişkilerini öne çıkarırken, diğer yandan Türkiye ve Batı ile çok boyutlu stratejik işbirliği mekanizmaları kurmuştur. Bu açıdan Azerbaycan'ın Rusya'dan bağımsız hareket etme ve Rusya ile ilişkilerinde temkinli davranma stratejisini uygulayarak riskten korunmayı önceliğini söylemek mümkündür. Bu makalede, Azerbaycan'ın Rusya ile ilişkilerinde stratejik korunma üç örnek olay üzerinden test edilmektedir. Bu bağlamda Azerbaycan'ın Rusya-Gürcistan, İkinci Karabağ ve Rusya-Ukrayna savaşlarındaki politikaları ve öncelikleri analiz edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Azerbaycan, Rusya, stratejik korunma, dengeleme, dış politika

Introduction

Hedging is a risk management strategy used to offset potential losses to which an individual or organization may be exposed. Hedging strategies involve risk and cost. In this context, it is necessary to consider potential risks, including counterparty and regulatory risks, before

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hedging. Hedging has recently become an important part of International Relations (IR) literature.

In IR, hedging is considered as a strategy that places utmost importance on realizing the economic, territorial and political interests of small states vis-à-vis relatively large states as much as possible, while at the same time avoiding confrontation with large states through various diplomatic, legal and economic means. This concept is very important in the context of better understanding and conveying the foreign policy strategies of small states. In this context, strategic hedging has found its place in many studies in IR literature. In this article, various literatures that investigate strategic hedging are utilized. In this context, the main aspects and hypotheses of the research on strategic hedging by authors such as Goh (2005), Medeiros (2005), Kuik (2008, 2021), Lim & Cooper (2015), Korolev (2016, 2019), Smith (2018), Ciorciari & Haacke (2019), Yuzhu (2021), Gonzales-Pujol (2024) are mentioned. The review of the relevant literature facilitates the understanding of strategic hedging in Azerbaijan's relations with Russia, which is the main topic of the article.

Identifying the elements of strategic hedging in Azerbaijan's relations with Russia is the main problematic of the article. In this context, the fictional basis of the article is based on a comprehensive analysis of Azerbaijan's relations with Russia. It is possible to assume that Azerbaijan has an ambivalent perspective in its relations with Russia. On the one hand, Azerbaijan's foreign policy prioritizes building strong cooperation with Türkiye and the West, on the other hand, it maintains its existing strategic relations with Russia. Therefore, this foreign policy strategy is more than a balancing act; it shows that Azerbaijan has a cautious and cautious policy towards Russia in order to hedge its bets. This assumption guides the content, scope and the general fictional framework of the article.

The article aims to test strategic hedging in Azerbaijan's relations with Russia through three case studies. These three cases are Azerbaijan's Russian-Georgian, Second Karabakh and Russian-Ukrainian wars respectively. The argument that the three case studies more clearly reveal Azerbaijan's foreign policy stance and priorities in its relations with Russia has contributed greatly to the shaping and at the same time maturing of the fictional basis of the article.

Conceptual Framework of Hedging Strategy

Hedging strategy started to make a strong entry into the IR literature since the mid-90s. Hedging was borrowed by IR scholars to describe some of the phenomena they observed in IR that did not fit the expectations of classical theories. In recent years, more and more scholars have borrowed the terminology of hedging from finance to describe the behavior of small countries. They have also defined hedging as the third strategic option, parallel to offsetting and bandwagoning (Yuzhu, 2021, p. 3).

A hedging strategy allows small states to minimize risks and maximize returns in a way that allows ruling elites to focus on their internal affairs without speculating on who will be the more dominant power in the future (Kuik, 2021, p. 313). Hedging refers to a national security or adjustment strategy undertaken by one state against another, involving a mix of cooperative and confrontational elements. In this context, it is often compared to balancing or bandwagoning, concepts developed during the Cold War to describe alternative strategies of resisting or adapting to a powerful or threatening great power (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019, p. 1). Lim & Cooper (2015) believe that the emergence of hedging as a theoretical concept is a consequence

of the fact that mainstream international security theories do not offer precise insights into how subordinate states should respond to a rising power beyond the balancing-reaction dichotomy.

According to Ciorciari & Haacke (2019), a hedging strategy attempts to address risk, which can be defined as potential security-related threats. Accordingly, steps to mitigate risk may include the development of protective options that function like insurance, but they do not normally involve obtaining a security commitment, let alone a guarantee of coverage. Only when faced with clear and present threats should states choose between resisting or adapting to the source of the threat - a different decision from how to preserve options in the face of security risks that may materialize.

Recently, there have been notable attempts to introduce the concept of hedging as an alternative to balancing and bandwagoning (Korolev, 2016, p. 375). Hedging has become a *de jure* strategy, especially for small powers that find themselves in increasingly unstable regional environments. Both in practice and in literature, hedging has been mythologized as an ideal foreign policy for small powers. This is because hedging involves avoiding the costs of balancing or bandwagoning (Smith, 2018, p. 1). 'Hedging', in short, refers to a type of state behavior that emphasizes relative equidistance in relations with other powers and combines both engagement and containment. Hedging is an alternative to 'balancing' and 'bandwagoning' (Korolev, 2019, p. 420).

Medeiros (2005), in his study, mentions that while the US-China relations are progressing on the basis of engagement and harmony, i.e. cooperation, these states are also pursuing security-based balance policies on Asian countries in a realist manner, and are also conducting significant national modernization efforts in the military field. (Medeiros, 2005, p.145). Hedging, in this context, has a hybrid character, which on the one hand favors cooperation towards the status quo and on the other hand embodies an undeclared factionalization.

Goh (2005) analyzed the response of Southeast Asian countries to China's rise in the context of hedging. According to Goh's definition, hedging generally refers to taking action to hedge against unintended consequences by betting on multiple alternative positions. Hedging can be defined as a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation where states cannot decide on simpler alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning or neutrality. Instead, states develop a middle position that avoids or avoids having to choose one side at the expense of the other (Goh, 2005, p.2).

Hedging can also be considered as a manifestation of the power hierarchy. In this context, we can talk about a strategy employed by a relatively weak state against a relatively strong state. Kuik (2008) connects the framework of this strategy to the anarchic state of international politics and emphasizes that relatively weak states avoid getting too close to the great powers and likewise avoid moving too far away from them. Relatively small states are afraid of losing their independence if they get too close to the great powers, which could ultimately lead to the loss of independence of these relatively small states and call into question the legitimacy of the elites of that state in domestic politics. Worse, it could unnecessarily drag states into potential Great Power confrontation and leave them with the consequences of "backing the wrong horse". The main problem for small states is that while they know that the power structure will fluctuate at some point, it is almost impossible for them to determine how and when this will happen.

This is because the distribution of power is a systemic process that cannot be controlled by a single actor and the commitment of a Great Power is always subject to change (Kuik, 2008, p. 165). Kuik (2008) argues that economic pragmatism, binding-engagement, limited bandwagoning, limited bandwagoning, dominance-denial and indirect balancing are the main tools of the hedging strategy of Southeast Asian states against China.

Gonzales-Pujol (2024) highlights three approaches in the literature, which he calls securitist, integrative and relationist, to describe how scholars understand hedging. Securitists argue that security should be the primary focus when examining hedging. The securitarian approach is based on the literal meaning of the verb 'hedge' and emphasizes the countermeasures a state takes against a potentially aggressive rising power. In this context, the securitarian approach tends to distinguish between hedging and engagement behavior. According to Gonzales-Pujol (2024), this ignores how the IR literature has expanded the meaning of hedging to include not only security but also foreign policy strategy as a whole. Hedging has the potential to explain foreign policy comprehensively, so it makes little sense to limit explanations to security dynamics. The second group, holists, see hedging as a multidimensional strategy that encompasses the core areas of foreign policy: economics, diplomacy and security. The inclusion of these different domains has led integrativists to consider hedging as a strategy of contradictory behaviors and to formulate a much more comprehensive approach. The third approach, relationalists, also sees hedging as a comprehensive strategy but explains it in terms of multiple relationships between international actors (Gonzales-Pujol, 2024, p. 196).

Korolev's (2019) study, which differentiates hedging from balancing and bandwagoning, is particularly important for understanding the issue. In his study, Korolev argues that while balancing is a system-level phenomenon, hedging is the result of non-systemic causal factors and argues that there are three conceptual reasons for this. First, balancing is the behavior of great powers and is directed against the strongest power or the greatest threat in the system, whereas hedging involves a large number of players, large and small, and involves a mix of multifaceted day-to-day policies that do not necessarily target system leaders in various areas of state interests. Thus, system-level variables better explain offsetting, while hedging is more directly affected by other non-systemic causal forces. Second, because hedging is a non-linear strategy and a 'join-and-counter strategy' that includes elements of both offsetting and bandwagoning, it does not lend itself to systemic single-cause explanations. To present hedging as being caused by systemic pressure would mean explaining both offsetting and bandwagoning by the same state, towards the same state and at the same time with the same variable. In this case, rigorous explanations are impossible as any evidence would fit the theory. Third, hedging is better suited to the 'foreign policy' approach rather than the 'international politics' approach (Korolev, 2019, p. 423).

Considering the conceptualizations of hedging in literature, it is possible to talk about the desire of small states to survive and the existence of a pragmatism in this context. At the same time, hedging offers relatively small states a choice. It is also possible that these options may ultimately pave the way for a new approach to risk.

The hedging approach offers an alternative to balancing and bandwagoning by small or medium-sized states, which constitute the majority on the world political map. In this context, the hedging strategy especially allows relatively small states to maneuver in an environment of

uncertainty and risk. This maneuvering allows them to minimize uncertainties and risks. By providing a hedge against the consequences of unforeseen changes, hedging helps small states stabilize the situation. However, it should be emphasized that this approach is subject to another debate. The contest over who will be the first to take the helm makes it difficult to predict where the hedging policy will lead. It may also invite the emergence of brinkmanship, a policy of aggressive risk-taking.

Azerbaijan's Relations with Russia: Bandwagoning, Dominance- Denial, Binding-Engagement, Strategic Hedging

Azerbaijan's relations with Russia have undergone major and dramatic fluctuations since independence. In this context, the memory of the historical trauma caused by Russia continues to be a determining factor in bilateral relations today (Kuchins, Mankoff & Backes, 2016, p. 16). Vafa Guluzade, who served as an advisor to the President of Azerbaijan on foreign policy issues between 1990 and 1999, argued that Russia has not given up its expansionist and imperialist views and is Azerbaijan's greatest enemy and the biggest obstacle to its full independence (Izmodenov, 2004, p. 9).

Historically, Russia in its various incarnations, first as the Romanov Empire and later as the Soviet Union, has dominated the South Caucasus for centuries and remains a force to be reckoned with. Azerbaijan's previous loss of sovereignty to the Russian Empire/Soviet Union and Putin's geopolitical ambitions are creating a sense of insecurity in Baku. In a sense, Moscow is perceived as an existential threat to Baku. This persistent sense of insecurity forces Azerbaijan to seek allies that can balance Russia's assertive foreign policy (Guliyev, 2021, p. 10). In general terms, Russia has seen the South Caucasus as a continuation of the North Caucasus, which is included in its sovereignty. In this framework, it has tried to prevent the intervention of any power other than itself in the region (Şeker, 2011, p. 593). Russia could not accept the presence of an independent Azerbaijan state, which was economically stronger than other South Caucasus states and pursued a western policy, on its southern borders, which was of vital importance for Russia. Even though Moscow officially recognized the independence of Azerbaijan within the framework of modern world reality, it wanted to see this country as weak, dependent and pro-Russian (Gasimli, 2001, p. 256).

As the first president of post-soviet Azerbaijan, Ayaz Mutalibov counted on strategic cooperation with Russia. During his short term, Azerbaijan was basically bandwagoning with Moscow (Valiyev&Mamishova, 2019, p. 270). Under Mutalibov, the Azerbaijani government was unable to pursue a fully independent policy. In this period, Azerbaijan conducted its relations with other states through Russia (Merdan, 2013, p. 54). Mutalibov, thinking that Russia would help him in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, displayed a pro-Russian attitude. However, Russia took a pro-Armenia stance (Şeker, 2011, p. 595). In the context of the policies of the Ebulfez Elchibey period, Azerbaijan's relations with Russia can be characterized by hesitation and suspicion. It is possible to observe this approach during the presidencies of both Elchibey and Heydar Aliyev, who came to power in 1993. Azerbaijan under Elchibey ensured the expulsion of Russian troops from Azerbaijan and did not join the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Elchibey's foreign policy approach, which ignored Russia and turned towards Türkiye, disturbed Moscow (Sapmaz, 2022, p. 264). Since its independence, Azerbaijan has seen Türkiye as a counterweight to Russia's power (Remler, 2020, p. 13).

Azerbaijan's policy was in line with Kuik's (2008) dominance-denial strategy of preventing or postponing the emergence of great powers that could exert dominance over small states. In this process, Azerbaijan prioritized improving its relations with Türkiye and the West in order to break the domination and pressure that Russia was trying to establish. This priority involved shaping the message to Russia: "Do not dictate to us in a hegemonic manner, otherwise we will have no choice but to approach other powers". Thus, Azerbaijan's relations with Russia in the 1990s were extremely tense and there were numerous mutual claims and accusations (Izmodenov, 2004, p. 22).

This policy was largely maintained after Heydar Aliyev came to power in 1993. In terms of political orientation, Azerbaijan under the leadership of H. Aliyev had solid popular support for its anti-Russian stance (Cornell, 1999, p. 9). During this period, there were a lot of accumulated problems in Azerbaijan-Russia relations. Therefore, it was impossible to talk about partnership or cooperation. Both countries were in a state of confrontation, the exchange of messages and protest notes did not stop. Preparations were made to introduce a visa regime and restrict the entry of Azerbaijanis into Russia (Kerimova, 2019, p. 40). Although initially H. Aliyev's coming to power was considered a success for Russia, it soon became clear that it was not a complete success. Although H. Aliyev initially made moves to appease Russia, such as joining the CIS, he strongly opposed the redeployment of Russian troops on Azerbaijani territory. That H. Aliyev did not follow the policies the Russians desired can be seen from the fact that the Russians supported the coup attempt in October 1994 to remove H. Aliyev from power a year later (Aydın, 2002, p. 405).

Aware of the importance of Azerbaijan's natural wealth and strategic position, H. Aliyev aimed at economic development by developing a new oil strategy (Yılmaz, 2011, p. 111). Azerbaijan, acting in partnership with Türkiye and the West, tried to carry out this policy without confronting Russia. However, the dynamics brought about by Russia's near abroad doctrine and attitudes towards the formation of a dominant power led to certain changes in Azerbaijan's approach. During this period, Azerbaijan tried to build its relations with Russia within the framework of "let's maintain the status quo together, because you also have interests in this" approach. Thus, it aimed to influence the political preferences of the dominant power. "With Aliyev coming to power, in terms of general approach, it can be said that there were two different periods in relations with Russia. The first one is the period of June 1993-February 1994, which can be seen as the period of appeasement policy. The second one is the period between 1994-2003, which can be characterized as a period of not angering Russia by meeting Russia's "reasonable interests" in Azerbaijan but maintaining the previous government's policy of rapprochement with the West" (Cafersoy, 2001, p. 293). These two periods had elements of binding-engagement and aimed to influence Russia's political preferences in this context. Therefore, Azerbaijan aimed to interact with Russia in this way. On the one hand, the H. Aliyev administration tried to establish balanced relations with Russia, and on the other hand, it tried to reduce Russia's influence in Azerbaijan. In this context, it prioritized a foreign policy oriented towards Türkiye and the West (Yılmaz, 2011, p. 112).

In this process, the main direction of Azerbaijan's multilateral foreign policy has developed in the Western direction. In order to preserve its sovereignty and strengthen its independence, Azerbaijan has placed relations with Transatlantic institutions at the center of its foreign policy. Azerbaijan aimed to gain the support of Western countries and institutions in its energy

policies and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and to minimize Russia's influence on the South Caucasus and Azerbaijan. The entry of Western investors led by the United States of America (USA) into the South Caucasus region has meant that the regional states, and Azerbaijan in particular, have come under the political and economic influence of the USA (Kahraman & Merdan, 2019, p. 440). In this context, political and military cooperation with Russia was perceived as extremely cautious in Azerbaijan, while priority was given to integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures (Izmodenov, 2004, p. 23).

For many years after the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the most problematic country for Russia in the South Caucasus was not Georgia but Azerbaijan. This is because, unlike Georgia, where the Russian military presence continued until 2006 and border guards guarded the outer perimeter of the border until 1999, the last Russian army units were forced to leave Azerbaijan in May 1993 (Markedonov, 2019, p. 16).

The main point in the relations between Azerbaijan and the West is the oil agreements signed in 1994, which went down in political history as the "Treaty of the Century". With this 1994 treaty, Azerbaijan declared that it would pursue a Western-oriented foreign policy. This treaty not only occupied an important place in the history of post-independence Azerbaijan but was also the first step towards a new energy strategy. The most important result of the treaty was the recognition of Azerbaijani oil in the world market (Mirzaliyeva, 2016, p. 1). Thus, the H. Aliyev administration managed to attract the attention of foreign organizations to the Caspian reserves by signing an \$8 billion deal with a consortium of Western companies. This agreement envisaged the extraction and exploitation of an estimated 4 billion barrels of oil in the Guneshli, Azeri and Chirag fields. It was estimated that 511 million tons of crude oil would be produced in these fields over a 30-year period, generating a profit of 50 billion dollars at today's exchange rates (Abdullayev, 1999, p. 262).

The Boris Yeltsin administration was not happy with Azerbaijan's cooperation with Western companies. Because the US had declared the Caspian basin as a region of strategic interests. In this situation, Russia looked negatively at initiatives such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan project, which would bring Azerbaijani oil to Western markets. In this process, Russia tried to prevent economic cooperation in the Caspian Sea, especially by asserting its own impositions on the legal status of the Caspian Sea. Russia, which does not want the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus and Central Asia region to be out of its control and seeks to prevent the spread of the influence of Western states led by the US in the region through the sea, has claimed that the Caspian Sea is a "lake" or a "special water basin" by putting forward the thesis of joint sovereignty (Kahraman & Merdan, 2019, p. 436).

One of the security-oriented issues in relations was the status of the Gabala Radar Base. Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992, Russian troops were withdrawn from Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, the Gabala early warning system, one of the most important radars of the Soviet Union, remained in Azerbaijan's possession and continued to be leased and used by Russia (Asker, 2011, p. 2). In 2002, the base was again leased to Russia for 10 years. The Gabala base has been a subject of controversy in Azerbaijan. Some non-governmental organizations and politicians demand the closure of this base, stating that it negatively affects the environment and human life. Others, on the other hand, state that the base does not pose a danger to

Azerbaijan and are in favor of extending the lease period in return for certain conditions (Asker, 2011, p. 3).

Another problematic area in Azerbaijan's relations with Russia during this period was the Chechnya issue. Azerbaijan, like Georgia, sympathized with the Chechen cause. During the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, small groups of Chechens fought on the side of the Azerbaijani army, which strengthened the bond between the Chechen and Azerbaijani peoples. During the Second Russo-Chechen War, some 100 Chechens wounded in Russian artillery attacks were treated in Azerbaijani hospitals in accordance with a 1997 agreement between Azerbaijani and Chechen health authorities (Kelkitli, 2008, p. 83). "Azerbaijan's tacit non-military support for the Chechen cause was justified by the country's fear that a successful Russian military operation in the North Caucasus would embolden Russian military circles to put heavy pressure on Azerbaijan to stop cooperation with the West and halt projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline" (Valiyev, 2011, p. 5). However, in the political atmosphere that emerged after Putin's visit to Baku in 2001, the Azerbaijani leadership drastically changed its position on Chechnya and in this context started to support Moscow's theses on the Chechen issue.

On January 9, 2001, Putin paid an official visit to Azerbaijan. This was the first visit of the Russian President to independent Azerbaijan. This visit marked the beginning of a new stage in the development of Russian-Azerbaijani relations. Describing Putin's visit to Baku in 2001 as historic, Azerbaijani President H. Aliyev stated that "relations had gone through difficult processes, the problems in bilateral relations were artificial, and with this visit they opened a new page" (Shahmuradov, 2010, p. 196). With Putin's coming to power, Russia's Azerbaijan policy has been dominated by the energy factor and economic cooperation in general. Russia was involved in the BTC project during this period (Yılmaz, 2011, p. 112). "Let's maintain the status quo together, because you also have an interest in it" approach in Azerbaijan's relations with Russia may be an important conclusion that characterizes this period. In this process, Azerbaijan began to prioritize economic cooperation in terms of ensuring these interests. Putin's visit and the documents signed marked the beginning of Russia's great return to Azerbaijan (Gasimli, 2001, p. 269). Putin's presidency, however, did not undermine Heydar Aliyev's efforts to preserve Azerbaijan's autonomy, especially in terms of energy geopolitics. To this end, in 2002 Azerbaijan and a consortium of leading international companies signed an agreement on the construction of a safe and efficient South Caucasus (or Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum) pipeline system (Valiyev & Mamishova, 2011, p. 278). In this process, Azerbaijan tried to maintain its close relations with Russia while maintaining its existing relations with the West, especially in the energy and military fields. Thus, Azerbaijan maintained balanced relations with both sides. In this case, Azerbaijan kept hedging to a large extent at the center of its foreign policy.

Unlike the Western-Turkish Bloc, Azerbaijan, which has been under the rule of first Tsarist Russia and then the USSR for nearly 200 years, has almost the same political-administrative system as Russia. Important positions in the state administration were held by former communist and komsomol leaders. These people, who determined and implemented the domestic and foreign policy of the state, were closer in mentality to Russia than to the democratic Western-Turkish Bloc. Russia's most important foothold and foothold in Azerbaijan was this ruling cadre. Although this ruling cadre tried to display a pro-Western approach in terms of its outward appearance, it was unable to go beyond the authoritarian and communist understanding of governance in terms of its thinking, activities, business skills and principles (Gasimli, 2001,

p. 264). However, it is possible to say that this tendency has started to weaken since the mid-2000s. In this context, the five-day Russia-Georgia war in August 2008 played an important role in this process. Much later, in 2019, the position of groups close to Moscow was partially weakened by the liquidation of Ramiz Mehdiyev and his team, who had served as the Presidential Administration Head for many years and was portrayed as “Russia's man” in the Azerbaijani press. Since taking office in 2003, President Ilham Aliyev has strengthened his position. In this process, it is observed that a younger group of political elites started to have a say in the country's governance compared to the past, while the politicians who had once been around H. Aliyev lost their influence (DEIK, 2013, p. 4). Although I. Aliyev largely continued H. Aliyev's foreign policy in Azerbaijan's relations with Russia, this process still had its own characteristics. In this context, the article analyzes how Azerbaijan applied strategic hedging in its relations with Russia through three cases. These cases are the Russia-Georgia, second Karabakh and Russia-Ukraine wars.

Russian-Georgian War and Azerbaijan's Stance

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia, like Azerbaijan, was a country that Russia sought to influence. In this context, Georgia's efforts to establish closer ties with the West, particularly its aspirations for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), drew Russian reaction. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War marked an important moment in the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus, with far-reaching implications for Georgia's territorial integrity and regional stability (Bochorishvili, 2023).

Türkiye and Azerbaijan were concerned about the war and the destabilization of the region because of the transportation between them through Georgia. Since any unrest in this region could cause economic problems for both Türkiye and Azerbaijan, these states approached the developments in Georgia cautiously (Alptekin, 2021, p. 121). The five-day war between Russia and Georgia made Azerbaijan more wary of Russia and reduced the likelihood of a military conflict over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. In addition, Russia's military actions on Georgian territory caused Azerbaijani society to change its views on the benefits of cooperation with NATO (Eurasianet, 2009).

According to Valiyev, the August war put Baku in a very difficult situation due to the mismatch between public opinion and state policy. Public opinion in the country was on Georgia's side: People saw Georgia's struggle to retake the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as similar to Azerbaijan's attempts to regain control of Nagorno-Karabakh (Eurasianet, 2009). The five-day war dramatically changed the political situation in the South Caucasus. Although Azerbaijan was not directly involved in the conflict, the war forced Baku to reassess its foreign and domestic policy. Moscow's successful military intervention in Georgia forced Azerbaijan to distance itself from that country. Meanwhile, the failure of Western countries, particularly the United States, to respond adequately to Russia led to widespread disappointment among Azerbaijanis. The post-war situation suggested that Azerbaijan could be the next place where the US-Russia rivalry would unfold. The Russian government's decision to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia caused Azerbaijan to fear Moscow (Valiyev, 2009, p. 269). After the August war, Russia began to bring the South Caucasus under its geopolitical influence, which the West initially did not seriously prevent. This caused significant disappointment in Azerbaijan (Report.az, 2018). According to a poll conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center in 2007, 58

percent of Azerbaijan's population supported NATO membership, 35 percent were neutral, and 6 percent opposed joining the alliance. After the war, only 48 percent of the population supported NATO membership, while 44 percent remained neutral (Eurasianet, 2009).

The political declaration on the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, signed in Moscow in November 2008, and the meeting of the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia, Ilham Aliyev and Serzh Sargsyan, in the Russian capital in April 2009, showed that Moscow was ready to actively contribute to the settlement of the conflict and, in essence, was trying to seize the regional initiative (Silayev, 2009, p. 12).

Russia's Response to the Dynamics of the Regional Geopolitical Landscape during and after the Second Karabakh War

At the beginning of the Second Karabakh War, which started on September 27, 2020 and profoundly affected regional geopolitical dynamics, Russia's reaction and stance was rather cautious. On November 10, 2020, Russia mediated the ceasefire agreement reached between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Armenia was Russia's most important ally in the South Caucasus after 1991. In the context of its problems with Azerbaijan and Georgia, Moscow attached great importance to relations with Armenia. Russia saw the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space as a useful tool for its regional dominance. In this context, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was no exception. From the very beginning, Moscow was particularly interested in the deployment of Russian military forces in Nagorno-Karabakh in the name of mediation.

Azerbaijan, along with Russia's support for Armenia, managed to balance against Russia by receiving support from Türkiye. Azerbaijan's relations with both Russia and the West were strong during this period, creating a regional landscape in which Azerbaijan gained a strategic advantage by not being dependent on any one actor.

The 44-day war was also a reflection of the new geopolitical realities emerging in the region. Türkiye's growing political weight in the region and the emerging dialog between Türkiye and Russia, particularly in Syria, played an important role in the emergence of this reality. I. Aliyev's foreign policy was an example of how to conduct an independent foreign policy without arguing with Putin and maintaining good relations with Moscow (Baunov, 2020). In this context, Russia had important arguments to provide assistance to Armenia during the war, but there was no reason to "punish Azerbaijan". Neither in the Russian political elite nor in Russian society was there enough anger and resentment to use military force against Azerbaijan (Baunov, 2020). Armenia was a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and in this context expected military support from Russia, the dominant power of the organization. However, Putin stated on October 7, 2020 that "Russia has always and will always fulfill its alliance obligations, but military operations are not carried out on Armenian territory" (Kommersant, 2020). Thus, Russia decided that it was in its own interest not to take sides in this war in order to maintain its long-term influence over both Azerbaijan and Armenia.

For Russia, the "frozen" conflict in Karabakh between 1994 and 2020 suited it primarily because of its uncertainty. Moscow established allied relations with Armenia within the CSTO and at the same time continued to view Nagorno-Karabakh as an integral part of Azerbaijan. The interpretation of the scope of Russia's military guarantees remained fluid. Russia avoided giving a clear answer to the question of where the "red line" is in a hypothetical Azerbaijani

operation to recapture Karabakh and what would be the scale of military escalation that would decisively trigger Moscow's active intervention. The existence of an implicit Azerbaijan-Türkiye alliance forced Russia to be extremely cautious and prudent in its attempts to secure a ceasefire (Krivopalov, 2022, p. 151). In the 11 months preceding the outbreak of hostilities, Azerbaijan purchased \$256 million worth of weapons from Türkiye, including six Bayraktar drones, which, according to experts, played an important role in the defeat of Armenian forces and were successfully used. Bayraktar drones played an important role in the defeat of the Armenian armed forces (Gadzhiyev, 2021, p. 127). In this context, the long-standing alliance between Baku and Ankara played a decisive role in the success of the Azerbaijani armed forces. It can be said that the concepts that Azerbaijan placed at the center of its post-independence foreign policy strategy paved the way for this determinism to gain a concrete framework.

One of the most important indicators of Azerbaijan's strategic hedging in its relations with Russia is the November 10 Agreement that ended the 44-day war. This agreement, signed in Moscow between the leaders of Azerbaijan, Russia and Armenia, demonstrated how and within what parameters I. Aliyev implemented a strategy that included Russia after achieving what he wanted from the war. Azerbaijan's policy during and after the war, which is located at the intersection of the interests of North and South, West and East, can be evaluated in this context. Thus, I. Aliyev effectively broke the military and diplomatic deadlock that emerged in the region in the early 1990s. In November 2020, with the active mediation of Russian President Putin, a ceasefire agreement was reached after a 44-day war that started in late September (Mamedov, 2024). In this context, both politically and geopolitically, Azerbaijan has eliminated the mechanism of Russian domination that has always existed over it. It is a well-known fact that frozen conflicts, one of Moscow's important geopolitical tools in the region, are used as a tool of domination. In removing this instrument of domination, Azerbaijan has somehow involved Russia in the process in order to hedge its bets for the sake of its own strategy. In this case, it prioritized Russia as an active mediator, but it also ensured Armenia's geopolitical detachment from Moscow.

Thus, the President of Azerbaijan I. Aliyev made full use of the corridor of opportunity opened by the alliance with Türkiye and Russia's non-intervention (Krivopalov, 2022, p. 159). The opening of this corridor of opportunity was determined by the general framework of Azerbaijan's foreign policy strategy from the beginning. In particular, the implementation of strategic hedging elements in relations with Russia, thereby reducing risk, was of particular importance.

Russian-Ukrainian War and Azerbaijan's Stance

In the immediate aftermath of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the I. Aliyev administration was careful not to weaken its strategic ties with Russia while establishing greater economic ties with the West. Azerbaijan continued to prioritize developing energy cooperation with the West, but at the same time preferred to maintain strategic cooperation with Russia. In particular, it sought to pursue more opportunities to channel its energy exports to the European Union.

On January 14, 2022, Ilham Aliyev paid an official visit to Kiev, where the presidents of Azerbaijan and Ukraine signed inter-state documents and reaffirmed their positions on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the two friendly countries. On February 22, 2022, on the

eve of Russia's recognition of the independence of the territory, which under international law is an integral part of Ukraine, I. Aliyev and Putin signed a declaration of alliance in the Kremlin. Despite the declaration of alliance signed before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijan has officially adopted a neutral position in the war between the two countries. Azerbaijani public opinion was generally favorable towards Ukraine's justified resistance against Russia. Numerous pro-Ukrainian rallies were organized in Baku. On February 27, a rally in support of Ukraine was held in front of the Ukrainian Embassy in Baku, which was quite crowded by local standards, where, in addition to the slogan "Slava Ukraine!", the slogan "Putin, get out!" was also heard. "Russia should leave the territory of Ukraine. And withdraw its troops from Karabakh," the protesters said, adding that they expected "more support from the Azerbaijani government. Ukraine has always supported Azerbaijan and now Azerbaijan's support is needed" (Musavi, 2022).

Azerbaijan started sending humanitarian aid to Ukraine from the first days of the war. The first aid was delivered on February 27, three days after the start of the war. Humanitarian aid consisting of medical supplies and medicines with a total weight of about 137 tons was delivered to Ukraine (Huseynli, 2023). In July 2023, Aliyev also allocated \$7.6 million to Ukraine for the purchase and delivery of electrical equipment. By the end of 2024, Azerbaijan provided Ukraine with about \$40 million. In February 2025, I. Aliyev signed a decree on humanitarian aid to Ukraine worth \$1 million (Abdullayeva, 2025).

While expressing sympathy for Kiev and providing humanitarian aid, official Baku still tried to remain neutral and not take sides. Azerbaijan's position on the Karabakh conflict was in line with Ukraine's position on Crimea and Donbass. On January 14, in a meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky, Aliyev reiterated his recognition of Ukraine's territorial integrity. On the other hand, Russia was one of Azerbaijan's most important strategic and economic partners. Russian troops were deployed in Karabakh after the 44-day Armenian-Azerbaijani war in the fall of 2020. This was apparently the reason why Azerbaijan did not participate in the UN General Assembly vote on a resolution demanding that Russia immediately stop using force against Ukraine (Musavi, 2022).

In his speech at the Cernobbio International Forum in September 2024, I. Aliyev declared that "Azerbaijan is ready to contribute to the settlement of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine" if necessary. According to I. Aliyev, "if we are talking about a hypothetical possibility, it was quite possible." I. Aliyev noted that Azerbaijan has good relations with both countries and supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine, but does not agree with the anti-Russian sanctions. The Azerbaijani president emphasized that "they strongly support the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and all countries, but at the same time they have not been and will not be part of the anti-Russian sanctions campaign" (Prezident. az, 2024).

It is safe to say that Azerbaijan has avoided any confrontation with both Russia and other major neighboring countries. As a result, while helping Ukraine as much as it could within the framework of international humanitarian law, "Azerbaijan refrained from making sharp moves against Russia in order not to expose itself to aggression" (Musavi, 2022).

Kuchera (2024) argues that Azerbaijan is the only winner of Russia's war against Ukraine. This is because the war in Ukraine has made Azerbaijan more important both for Europe,

which needs the country's energy resources and its position on east-west transit routes to overcome its previous dependence on Russia, and for Russia, which needs Azerbaijan's position on north-south transit routes to bypass Western sanctions even more. Azerbaijan has long sought to play in all directions and balance its relations with various partners, and its growing influence in the wake of the Ukrainian war has strengthened its ability to do so (Kuchera, 2024).

For Azerbaijan, the Russian-Ukrainian war was another test for the country's balanced foreign policy approach that it has pursued since the mid-1990s. Unlike Georgia, which is in conflict with Russia and thus threatened by the situation in Ukraine, and Armenia, which is economically and militarily dependent on Russia, Azerbaijan has had much more room for maneuver in these troubled times (Huseynov, 2022, p. 91). Huseynov (2022) notes that Azerbaijan has more room to maneuver thanks to its economic independence, its traditionally balanced approach to foreign policy, and its recently strengthened strategic alliance with NATO member Türkiye. Baku has nevertheless been careful enough not to provoke Russia and has maintained economic ties with Moscow. On February 22, 2022, these ties were further strengthened with the signing of a joint declaration on allied interaction. This declaration was seen by Azerbaijani political experts as a reassurance that Russia would not pursue policies similar to Ukraine in its relations with Azerbaijan (Huseynov, 2022, p. 99).

Conclusion

Strategic hedging is the adoption of multiple strategies to limit risk-taking against a state's behavior and to remain flexible in the face of contingencies. Hedging refers to a strategy in which the relatively weaker state against the hegemonic state on a hierarchical basis can cooperate economically, regionally, globally, and diplomatically by not directly confronting the hegemonic state due to an environment full of risks and uncertainties. Hedging also involves avoiding too much subordination to the hegemonic state and acting with alternative powerful states or regional organizations on various issues. Unlike balancing and bandwagoning, strategic hedging emphasizes the concept of mutual engagement. In other words, the relatively small state tries to convince the powerful state through diplomatic channels to be active on the legal and institutional level on which the status quo is based and not to display revisionist attitudes.

Looking at the dynamics of Azerbaijan's relations with Russia and the factors shaping the overall framework of relations, it is possible to observe that there are many elements of strategic hedging. In the difficult conditions of the South Caucasus geography, Azerbaijan has built its foreign policy on versatility and balance. Located on a geopolitical fault line such as the Black Sea- Caucasus - Caspian, Azerbaijan has prioritized observing international and regional balances as its foreign policy strategy.

Due to the circumstances that emerged during the Mutallibov period, Azerbaijan sided with Russia and followed it in this context. Under Elchibey, it entered into an open conflict with Russia. The main reason for this conflict was Azerbaijan's rejection of Russia's regional hegemony. In 1993, with the coming to power of H. Aliyev, Azerbaijan started to establish a cooperative relationship with Russia within the framework of a balanced foreign policy strategy. This policy was largely continued under I. Aliyev.

It is possible to explain Azerbaijan's hedging strategy and policy stance in this direction through three case studies. In this context, Azerbaijan's strategy in the Russian-Georgian, Second Karabakh and Russian-Ukrainian wars contains many elements of hedging. Azerbaijan took measures to insure its risk in these three wars and tried to minimize any negative situation that might occur.

Azerbaijan's position in the Russian-Georgian war was very important. Russia's behavior in Georgia created a risk situation for Azerbaijan. Having balanced relations with both Western states and Russia, Azerbaijan prioritized minimizing the risk. The 2020 Second Karabakh War is an important example of Azerbaijan's strategic hedging. Russia had historical and military ties with Armenia, whereas Azerbaijan managed to balance against Russia with the support of Türkiye. Azerbaijan's balanced relations with both Western countries and Russia provided a strategic advantage. I. Aliyev's government made maximum use of this advantage, turned the course of the war in its favor and ultimately won a victory over Armenia. Azerbaijan's strategic hedging was also used in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. During this period, Azerbaijan tried to establish important cooperation mechanisms with the European Union, especially in the field of energy cooperation, while on the other hand, it could not participate in the sanctions against Russia and continued its strategic cooperation with this state. As a result, Azerbaijan has successfully implemented its strategy of acting independently from Russia and acting cautiously in its relations with Russia.

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