

DOI <https://doi.org/10.30525/2592-8813-2024-4-26>

ENHANCING THE GEOPOLITICAL STANDING OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN: INSIGHTS FROM CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL THEORIES

Asgar Asgarov,

*Postgraduate Student, Academy of Public Administration under
the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Baku, Azerbaijan)*

ORCID ID: 0009-0004-3458-4769

asgar.asgar@inbox.ru

Abstract. The study examines the strategic initiatives and geopolitical positioning of Azerbaijan in the post-2020 era, focusing on its policies towards French colonies and broader international relations. The study first touches upon the most contemporary geopolitical theories in general, and then evaluates Azerbaijan's geopolitical steps in these directions. The research aims to analyze Azerbaijan's geopolitical strengthening using contemporary geopolitical theories through a qualitative methodological approach. Key findings demonstrate that Azerbaijan leverages its strategic location and energy resources to enhance its influence, aligning with Realist theories focused on state power and national interests. The country's commitment to multilateralism and regional stability is analyzed through a Liberalist lens, highlighting its engagement with international organizations like the EU, NATO, and the UN. Additionally, Neorealism explains Azerbaijan's balanced relations with global powers, maintaining strategic autonomy in a multipolar world. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of Azerbaijan's evolving geopolitical role, demonstrating how it navigates complex global dynamics to secure national interests and promote regional stability.

Key words: Azerbaijan Geopolitics, Decolonization, Energy Diplomacy, International Relations, Postcolonialism, Neorealism, Liberalism, Power Balance.

Introduction. In recent years, significant shifts in international relations, especially in the post-2020 period, have reshaped geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus. These changes have necessitated Azerbaijan to adapt its foreign policy to align with the new global and regional realities. **The relevance of this topic** is underscored by Azerbaijan's increasing geopolitical significance, driven by its strategic location, rich energy resources, and active diplomatic engagements. **The primary purpose of this research** is to explore how Azerbaijan's foreign policy and geopolitical strategies have evolved in response to contemporary global developments. Specifically, this study seeks to achieve several objectives: first, to provide a theoretical analysis of Azerbaijan's policy towards French colonies, and second, to examine Azerbaijan's foreign policy through the lens of modern geopolitical theories.

In this regard, **the scientific novelty of this research** lies in two main areas. Firstly, it is the first scholarly work to theoretically analyze Azerbaijan's policy towards French colonies, highlighting the country's stance on decolonization and support for independence movements. Secondly, this research is pioneering in discussing Azerbaijan's foreign policy and geopolitics using contemporary geopolitical theories, offering a fresh perspective on how these theories can be applied to understand Azerbaijan's international actions.

Methodologically, the study employs a **qualitative approach**, utilizing theoretical analysis to examine Azerbaijan's foreign policy within the frameworks of some theories. This method allows for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Azerbaijan's geopolitical strategies and their implications for the broader international system.

The research contributes to the academic discourse by providing new insights into the role of small but strategically important states like Azerbaijan in the global geopolitical arena. It enriches the

understanding of how emerging geopolitical players navigate complex international environments and challenge existing power structures. By situating Azerbaijan's foreign policy within modern geopolitical theories, this study offers theoretical perspectives on the evolving nature of international relations and the significance of non-Western actors in shaping global dynamics.

Geopolitical Theories as a Framework for Understanding the Modern International Relations System with a Focus on Contemporary Theories

Geopolitics examines the relationship between geography, power, and politics, exploring how geographical features like land, water, and resources shape political decisions and international relations. The field integrates insights from geography, political science, history, and economics to analyze topics such as borders, national security, and the impact of technology and globalization (Kaplan, 2012). Geopolitical analysis is applied to diverse areas, including regional conflicts, global economic trends, and environmental challenges. Traditional theories, like those of Halford Mackinder and Alfred Mahan, emphasized the strategic importance of land, sea power, and natural resources, offering structured frameworks for understanding state power and security (Vinay, 2014). While these theories were instrumental in shaping historical strategies, they often overemphasized geography and overlooked economic, technological, and cultural factors (Bacevich, 2010). In the modern interconnected world, where globalization and technology reduce the significance of physical borders, these frameworks struggle to explain complex international dynamics. Contemporary geopolitical studies now seek more nuanced approaches, integrating socio-political and economic dimensions to address the multifaceted nature of power.

Critical and Postcolonial Approaches

Critical and postcolonial approaches have gained prominence in contemporary geopolitical studies, offering alternative frameworks to traditional theories. Critical geopolitics, advanced by scholars like Gerard Toal and Simon Dalby, deconstructs dominant geopolitical discourses, analyzing how language, imagery, and symbols legitimize power and global hierarchies. It examines concepts like "territory" as socially constructed and critiques the role of academic and political institutions in shaping geopolitical knowledge, emphasizing that knowledge production is not neutral but often serves specific interests (Yukaruç, 2017; Dijink, 2016).

Postcolonial geopolitics extends this critique by focusing on the enduring effects of colonial histories. Scholars like Edward Said and Dipesh Chakrabarty highlight how Eurocentric ideologies marginalize non-Western perspectives and perpetuate "the Other" narrative, portraying non-Western states as inferior or threatening. This perspective critiques orientalist tropes, colonial legacies, and the impact of colonial borders on contemporary conflicts, arguing that decolonization remains an ongoing process essential for global justice (Yukaruç, 2017; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2008).

Postcolonial theory also challenges dominant Western narratives in international relations, emphasizing the perspectives of formerly colonized states and their struggles with economic, cultural, and political inequalities stemming from colonialism (Said, 1979). Critics argue that postcolonialism overemphasizes identity politics and overlooks broader power relations and the experiences of other marginalized groups, but it remains influential in promoting a more inclusive analysis of global power dynamics (Spivak & Sarah, 1999).

Neorealism and Neoliberalism

The evolving nature of international relations necessitates periodic revisions of traditional theories, leading to the development of "neo-theories." Neorealism, introduced by Kenneth Waltz in the 1970s, focuses on the structure of the international system rather than individual states' characteristics (Waltz, 1979). It argues that the anarchic system, lacking central authority, compels states to prioritize power for survival, resulting in a self-help system. Neorealism highlights the importance of power distribution and "power transitions," identifying these as periods of heightened competition

and instability. Despite criticisms for neglecting domestic politics, ideology, and non-state actors, neorealism remains influential, shaping discussions on global power dynamics, including the rise of China and shifts in the international order (Bhagwati, 1997).

Neoliberalism, a late 20th-century counterpart to neorealism, emphasizes economic factors in shaping international relations. It advocates free trade, globalization, and economic interdependence as pathways to peace and stability (Jahangirli, 2021; Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism underscores the role of international institutions like the WTO and IMF and non-state actors, such as corporations and NGOs, in fostering cooperation. Critics argue it underestimates state power and strategic interests, overemphasizing economic factors (Stiglitz, 2002). Nonetheless, neoliberalism has significantly impacted geopolitical research, influencing foreign policies, economic globalization, and free trade initiatives worldwide.

Hybrid Warfare Theory

Hybrid warfare blurs the lines between conventional and unconventional warfare, using coordinated tools and tactics across multiple domains to achieve strategic objectives beyond military goals, such as political, economic, and informational aims. Developed through collective analysis by scholars, military strategists, and policymakers, it reflects modern security challenges rather than a single theorist's work (Williamson & Mansoor, 2012).

Key characteristics of hybrid warfare include a multi-faceted approach involving land, sea, air, cyberspace, and the information environment, the use of proxy forces for covert activities, and information warfare tactics like disinformation and cyberattacks. Economic pressure, such as sanctions, and political manipulation to exploit divisions within target states are also central strategies (Najžer, 2020). Hybrid warfare employs blended tactics, ambiguity for deniability, and asymmetric advantages to exploit vulnerabilities (Najžer, 2020).

Hybrid warfare impacts international relations by challenging state sovereignty, often operating below the threshold of armed conflict, complicating effective responses. It poses global threats by integrating tactics beyond traditional warfare, utilizing economic and political institutions, NGOs, and other networks. This aligns with network theory, which offers insights into the interconnected dynamics of international politics through perspectives from mathematics, social sciences, and computer sciences.

Theoretical Foundations of Azerbaijan's Geopolitical Strengthening in the Post-2020 Contemporary Era

Azerbaijan's geographical position, connecting Europe and Asia, enhances its role in international relations. Its energy resources and location along major transportation corridors amplify its strategic importance, influencing its foreign policy and strengthening ties with neighboring countries and international organizations. The year 2020 marked significant shifts in Azerbaijan's geopolitical landscape due to events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Second Karabakh War, prompting new strategies to adapt to evolving global and regional dynamics. This study examines Azerbaijan's geopolitical strengthening through Realist and Liberal theoretical lenses.

Realist theory emphasizes state power and interests. Azerbaijan's energy resources, including oil and gas, are pivotal to its economic and political influence. Infrastructure projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) pipelines, as well as TANAP and TAP, facilitate the export of energy to global markets, bolstering Azerbaijan's economic independence and geopolitical clout (İsmayilov, 2022).

Liberal theory highlights the role of international cooperation and institutions. Azerbaijan's partnerships with organizations such as the EU, NATO, and the UN demonstrate its commitment to global stability and development. Cooperation with the EU focuses on energy security and economic collaboration, while NATO partnerships enhance defense capabilities through programs like "Partnership for Peace" (Abdullayev, 2023). Participation in organizations like the OIC, Non-Aligned

Movement, and international financial institutions promotes Azerbaijan's economic diversification and global influence.

Strategic ties with neighboring countries, particularly Turkey, are crucial for energy exports and regional stability. Azerbaijan also collaborates with Russia and Iran to strengthen its regional security and political influence. Azerbaijan's foreign policy, rooted in both power-based and cooperative approaches, underscores its emergence as a key regional and global actor.

Therefore, within the framework of Liberal theory, Azerbaijan's cooperation with international organizations and neighboring countries strengthens its position in the international arena and enhances its geopolitical power. This cooperation not only secures Azerbaijan's political and economic interests but also contributes to global and regional stability and prosperity. Consequently, Azerbaijan's strategies for international cooperation and integration are key foundations for the strengthening of its geopolitical position.

At the same time, Azerbaijan's recent steps towards strengthening the independence of island states can be deeply analyzed within the framework of postcolonialism theory. Postcolonialism theory examines the legacy of colonialism and its impact on the social, political, and economic issues faced by states and peoples in the modern era. This theory studies how national identities and independent states have formed and developed after the colonial period. During its independence, Azerbaijan aimed to strengthen its national identity and sovereignty, seeking to play an active role in the postcolonial world order. In recent years, Azerbaijan's efforts to support the sovereignty and decolonization of French colonies, particularly French Polynesia and New Caledonia, demonstrate its commitment to justice and independence on the international stage. The France Colonies Conference held in Baku on July 17–18, 2024, is a clear example of Azerbaijan's efforts in this area (Sarıyeva, 2024).

The growing dissatisfaction with Paris's colonial policies in New Caledonia and the demands of the local population for rights and autonomy reflect one of the fundamental principles of postcolonial theory – the desire to break free from cultural and political colonialism. Azerbaijan's support for this process and its encouragement of anti-colonial struggles in places like New Caledonia show that it acts as a defender of the rights of oppressed peoples on the international stage (REPORT, 2024). Azerbaijan's policy within the framework of postcolonialism is rooted in its own historical experiences. As a state that has suffered under colonial rule for many years and fought for independence, Azerbaijan supports other nations in their pursuit of a similar path. By organizing such initiatives, Azerbaijan draws international attention to the ongoing impacts of colonialism and promotes new independence movements.

France's colonial policy in territories like New Caledonia is central to postcolonial criticism. The protests and demands for independence in New Caledonia reflect the struggle of indigenous peoples to defend their cultural and political rights (Reeves, 2024). This is a significant issue for Azerbaijan, as it has faced similar struggles for independence and sovereignty in its own history. Azerbaijan's active participation in such processes demonstrates its application of postcolonialism theory principles and their integration into its international policy. Azerbaijan's policy within the postcolonialism framework strengthens its role as an actor supporting justice and the struggle for independence on the international stage. This approach solidifies Azerbaijan's position in the international community and allows it to act as a leader in defending the rights of oppressed peoples. Lastly, within the framework of neorealism theory, Azerbaijan's foreign policy is shaped by the anarchic nature of the international system and the balance of power. The Russia-Ukraine war, economic crises, and the establishment of a multipolar world order necessitate Azerbaijan's strategic actions, taking into account regional and global power balances. The disruption of military-political stability in various parts of the world, including the Middle East, Far East, Europe, and Africa, makes it essential for Azerbaijan to cooperate with international organizations to ensure its security and protect its national interests. In this anarchic environment, Azerbaijan strengthens its position by forming strategic partnerships with neighboring countries and playing an active role

on the international stage. Thus, Azerbaijan's foreign policy is shaped by the anarchic structure of the international system and the changing dynamics of regional power balance.

Research Findings

Summarizing the main findings of the research, it can be stated that the strengthening of Azerbaijan's geopolitical position can be analyzed within the framework of various theories. From the perspective of Realism, the strategic use of energy resources to increase state power and protect national interests enhances Azerbaijan's influence on the international stage. Liberalism, on the other hand, highlights Azerbaijan's cooperation with international organizations and neighboring countries, emphasizing its role in interdependence and global stability. Constructivism underscores the importance of national identity and values in international politics, explaining how Azerbaijan's national identity and historical experience influence its foreign policy strategies (Jabarov, 2023). Postcolonialism theory strengthens Azerbaijan's role in the struggle for justice and independence by supporting decolonization movements. In the framework of Neorealism, Azerbaijan's strategic actions must consider the anarchic nature of the international system and the balance of power. All these theoretical approaches help better understand Azerbaijan's position in international relations and its geopolitical strategies.

When analyzing Azerbaijan's relations with global powers from a theoretical perspective, it becomes evident that the United States' interests in the South Caucasus region are related to energy security, democratic development, and regional stability. Due to its rich energy resources and contribution to Europe's energy security, Azerbaijan holds strategic importance for the United States. Energy projects carried out with U.S. support have made Azerbaijan a vital energy supplier for Western energy markets. The U.S. interest in Azerbaijan aims not only to ensure energy security but also to reduce Russia's influence in the region. Issues of democratic development and human rights also play a significant role in U.S.-Azerbaijan relations. However, pressures related to these topics occasionally lead to tensions between the two countries. This approach of the U.S. aligns with the main principles of Liberalism, which emphasize the importance of international cooperation, the spread of democracy, and the protection of human rights.

Russia, on the other hand, traditionally holds strong influence in the South Caucasus region. Azerbaijan's energy policy and cooperation with the West undermine Russia's hegemony in the region. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan's acceptance of Russia's mediating role in resolving the former Nagorno-Karabakh conflict ensures the continuity of bilateral relations (Pekçetin, 2023). Russia's influence in security and military matters should be considered in Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy strategy. Russia's motivation in its relations with Azerbaijan can be explained within the framework of Neorealism. Neorealism focuses on the anarchic nature of the international system and the struggle of states to maintain the balance of power. Russia's close relations with Azerbaijan serve its aim to maintain its power in the region and limit Western influence.

Simultaneously, China is seeking to increase its influence in the South Caucasus region through the "Belt and Road" initiative. Azerbaijan's strategic geopolitical position is crucial for China as a transportation and logistics corridor connecting Central Asia and Europe. Azerbaijan's interest in China is related to economic cooperation and investment opportunities. Chinese companies are investing in Azerbaijan's energy and infrastructure projects, strengthening relations between the two countries. Additionally, China places great importance on ensuring stability and security in the region. Relations with China can be explained within the principles of Liberalism, focusing on economic interdependence and mutual benefit. China values economic development and the expansion of trade relations, which contributes to Azerbaijan's economic growth. Simultaneously, China's focus on regional stability and security aims to increase its influence in the South Caucasus region.

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is directed towards maintaining balanced relations among global powers. This policy aims to ensure the state's national interests and security, based on the principles of Realism and Neorealism theories. According to Realism, international relations constitute an anarchic

system where states primarily strive to increase their power and ensure their security. Realists argue that the main objective of states is to maintain the balance of power and secure their national interests. Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy is also based on these principles. Neorealism emphasizes the structure of the international system and the balance of power. Azerbaijan's efforts to maintain balance in its relations with global powers are aimed at securing its national interests and security in line with the anarchic nature of the international system.

Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy is aimed at ensuring stability and security both regionally and globally. Maintaining balance among global powers strengthens Azerbaijan's independence and sovereignty, consolidating its position in the international arena. This policy allows Azerbaijan to emerge as a stronger and more reliable actor at both the regional and global levels. Azerbaijan's balanced relations with global powers ensure access to international markets for its energy resources and support its economic development.

Within the framework of Realism and Neorealism theories, Azerbaijan's foreign policy is directed towards establishing balanced relations with global powers to increase state power and secure national interests. Liberalism emphasizes Azerbaijan's contribution to global stability through international cooperation and economic interdependence. These approaches help to understand Azerbaijan's foreign policy strategies in a broader and more comprehensive manner, strengthening its position in the international arena.

Conclusion. The research reveals a complex interplay of strategies that go beyond mere power dynamics, highlighting how the country has effectively adapted to the changing international landscape. By systematizing the findings, several overarching themes emerge that explain Azerbaijan's rising influence in the post-2020 era:

1. *Strategic Utilization of Energy Resources:* Azerbaijan's energy wealth serves as a cornerstone of its geopolitical strategy, not just as a source of economic power but as a tool for international influence. This aligns with Realist theories that emphasize state power and interest. However, Azerbaijan's approach is not merely about leveraging resources for immediate gains; it's about integrating these resources into a broader network of diplomatic and economic ties, enhancing its role in global energy security, particularly for Europe. This dual focus on energy and diplomacy signifies a nuanced understanding of power beyond military might.

2. *Commitment to Multilateralism and Regional Stability:* Azerbaijan's foreign policy emphasizes collaboration with international organizations such as the EU, NATO, and the United Nations. This strategy highlights a Liberalist perspective, focusing on interdependence, cooperation, and shared security goals. By engaging in multilateral frameworks, Azerbaijan strengthens its international legitimacy and secures alliances that provide a buffer against regional uncertainties. This approach demonstrates a pragmatic use of soft power, where diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation are tools for securing national interests.

3. *Promotion of National Identity and Historical Narrative:* Azerbaijan has effectively utilized Constructivist principles by framing its foreign policy around national identity and historical narratives. The country's support for decolonization movements and advocacy for the rights of marginalized communities align with its own experiences of overcoming colonial legacies. This stance not only bolsters Azerbaijan's moral standing on the international stage but also deepens its ties with other nations that have faced similar struggles, thus expanding its influence in non-Western political spheres.

4. *Balancing Global Power Relations:* Neorealism's emphasis on the anarchic nature of the international system and the necessity for balancing power relations is evident in Azerbaijan's strategic partnerships. By maintaining a balanced relationship with major global powers such as the United States, Russia, and China, Azerbaijan ensures its security and sovereignty. This balanced diplomacy is crucial for navigating the multipolar world order, reducing dependency on any single power bloc, and maintaining strategic autonomy.

5. *Adoption of Hybrid Strategies*: Azerbaijan's geopolitical actions demonstrate an understanding of hybrid warfare dynamics, blending conventional diplomacy with strategic use of information, economic pressure, and cultural diplomacy. This hybrid approach allows Azerbaijan to adapt to the complexities of modern geopolitical conflicts, where the lines between peace and conflict are increasingly blurred. It also reflects an innovative application of both traditional and contemporary geopolitical theories, showing an adaptable and forward-looking foreign policy.

References:

1. Abdullayev, E. (2023). The effects of uncertainty in energy prices on the economy of the Caspian Sea countries: Evidences from Russia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. Ankara: Hacettepe Üniversitesi.
2. Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2008). *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concept*. London: Routledge.
3. Bacevich, A. (2010). *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
4. Bhagwati, J. (1997). *The Promise and Peril of International Trade*. New York: Basic Books.
5. Dijink, G. (2016). *National Identity and Geopolitical Visions: Maps of Pride and Pain*. Second Edition. London: Routledge.
6. Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
7. İsmayilov, A. (2022). Azərbaycan enerji kaynaklarının dünya pazarına çıkarılmasında Türkiye'nin rolü-Azərbaycan ve Türkiye üzerine etkileri. İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi.
8. Jabarov, J. (2023). Cultural Relativism Theory and Azerbaijan Democracy. *International Journal of Multiculturalism*. Volume 4, Number 1, 25–38. DOI: 10.30546/2523-4331.2023.4.1.25.
9. Jahangirli, J. (2021). Contradictions of Realism and Liberalism on Interstate Relations: in the Case of Russo-Georgian War. *Scientific and Theoretical Almanac Grani*, 24(11), 55-66.
10. Kaplan, R. (2012). *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*. New York: Random House.
11. Najzer, B. (2020). *The Hybrid Age: International Security in the Era of Hybrid Warfare*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
12. Pekçetin, A. (2023). arabağ Sorunu'yla Şekillenen Azerbaycan-Rusya İlişkileri. Bu ANKASAM: <https://www.ankasam.org/anka-analizler/karabag-sorunuyla-sekillenen-azerbaycan-rusya-iliskileri/mənbədən tapılıb>
13. Reeves, J. (2024). France's Faux Pacific Power: The Colonial Reality in New Caledonia. Bu <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/frances-faux-pacific-power-the-colonial-reality-in-new-caledonia/mənbədən tapılıb>
14. REPORT. (2024). Yeni Kaledoniyada iğtişələr zamanı 150 milyon avroluq ziyan dəyib. Bu <https://report.az/diger-olkeler/yeni-kaledoniyada-igtisaslar-zamani-150-milyon-avroluq-ziyan-deyib/mənbədən tapılıb>
15. Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
16. Sarıyeva, İ. (2024). Fransanın mübariz müstəmləkələri Bakıda 1-ci "Müstəqillik qurultayına" toplaşdı. Bu <https://baki-xeber.com/14161-fransanın-mubariz-mustemlekeleri-bakida-1-ci-musteqillik-qurultayina-toplasib.html> mənbədən tapılıb
17. Spivak, G., & Sarah, H. (1999). *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
18. Stiglitz, J. (2002). *Globalization and Its Discontents*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
19. Vinay, K. (2014). *The G20: A New Geopolitical Order*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
20. Waltz, K. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.
21. Williamson, M., & Mansoor, P. (2012). *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
22. Yukarıç, U. (2017). A Critical Approach to Soft Power. *Journal of Bitlis Eren University Institute of Social Sciences*, 6(2), 491–502.