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CHAPTER 9

HEYDAR ALIYEV'S LEGACY ON AZERBAIJAN-TÜRKİYE RELATIONS: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Heydar Aliyev, Azerbaijan’s national leader, had a profound and lasting impact on the strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Türkiye. His presidency (1993–2003) was the foundational period that transformed the cultural slogan “one nation, two states” into a structured, institutionalized alliance. This essay evaluates Aliyev’s legacy through the lenses of realism, constructivism, and institutionalism, highlighting the policies that shaped this unique bilateral relationship. It traces his diplomatic, economic, and security initiatives, with particular focus on energy diplomacy—specifically the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline—that created material interdependence. Furthermore, the analysis explores the foundations of security cooperation that ultimately evolved into the comprehensive strategic alliance formalized by the Shusha Declaration. The central argument is that Aliyev’s pragmatic and visionary leadership established a resilient framework that skillfully balanced a shared identity with robust national interests, enabling the relationship to endure and strengthen long after his tenure.

Keywords

Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Heydar Aliyev, Legacy, Leadership

Introduction

The strong bond between Azerbaijan and Türkiye is perfectly reflected in the phrase “one nation, two states,” signifying one of Eurasia’s most enduring strategic partnerships. This phrase, often attributed to Azerbaijan’s national leader Heydar Aliyev, evolved from a simple slogan into the core principle guiding their cooperation during his leadership. In truth, Aliyev’s vision and policies while president from 1993 to 2003 are mainly responsible for the unique nature of their relationship, establishing a foundation that remains today. This analysis explores Aliyev’s significant influence, detailing the history, diplomatic achievements, and institutional frameworks he promoted to turn cultural closeness into a formidable strategic alliance.

The core idea of “one nation, two states” is special because it highlights a shared Turkish identity and history while simultaneously respecting each nation’s sovereignty. Aliyev promoted this concept throughout his career, utilizing it as both a philosophical framework and a practical guide for achieving results. His influence was not just bilateral. The Secretary General of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) referred to him as “one of the architects of the Turkic World,” praising his significant role in uniting the brotherly Turkic countries and peoples (Organization of Turkic States, 2023). This statement from the OTS Secretary General underscores the significance of Aliyev’s work, not just for Azerbaijan and Türkiye, but for fostering cooperation across the entire Turkic world.

Understanding Aliyev’s legacy is crucial to seeing how he transformed this shared identity into formal, institutionalized cooperation. It also demonstrates how he balanced the powerful appeal of solidarity—not just between the two nations but across the entire Turkic world—with astute, practical politics in a challenging and shifting global environment. One contemporary analysis even compared him to Charles de Gaulle, stating that he “rescued his nation from collapse, reconstituted the state’s institutions, and set the course for his country to realize its potential” (Yavuz, 2023). This massive nation-building effort in Azerbaijan is directly tied to its strategic alignment with Türkiye, which has created a partnership model that has proven both resilient and adaptable over the years.

Assessing Aliyev’s impact requires a multifaceted approach. This study employs theoretical frameworks from leadership, economics, and international relations to understand the logic behind his policies. It will also trace the history of the bilateral relationship and the creation of formal cooperation mechanisms. Finally, the analysis will cover his energy diplomacy, particularly pipeline politics, as well as the expansion of security and defense cooperation, tying these points together to evaluate Aliyev’s lasting influence.

The main point is that Heydar Aliyev’s leadership was transformative. He fostered a strong emotional connection, which he built into a structured, institutional partnership capable of withstanding international pressures and adjusting to regional politics. Aliyev’s legacy extends beyond individual agreements to the development of a comprehensive strategic mindset. This mindset allowed the relationship to deepen under new leadership, culminating in the significant security cooperation seen during the 2020 Karabakh War and the broad alliance formalized by the Shusha Declaration.

1. Theoretical Frameworks

Heydar Aliyev’s strategic thinking and policy choices toward Türkiye are too complex to be captured by a single theory. Therefore, this study employs several complementary theoretical perspectives. These frameworks provide the necessary tools to analyze the complex interplay of domestic and foreign policy, identity, power, and economics that defined his approach. By examining Aliyev’s work through these lenses, we can move beyond a simple description of events to grasp the core principles that guided the relationship with Türkiye.

Table 1
Theoretical Frameworks for Analyzing Aliyev’s Approach to Relations with Türkiye

Theoretical Framework	Core Mechanism	Manifestation in Aliyev’s Policies
Realist Perspectives (including omnibalancing)	Balancing against external and internal threats	Partnership with Türkiye as counterweight to Russia and internal rivalries
Constructivist Perspectives	Shared identity construction	“One nation, two states” discourse emphasizing Turkic kinship
Institutionalist Perspectives	Creating durable organizations	Strategic Partnership Council, intergovernmental commissions
Political Economic Perspectives	Material interdependence	Energy pipelines and direct investments creating mutual economic stakes
Leadership Studies Perspectives	Personal diplomacy and strategic vision	Cultivation of relationships with Turkish leaders

A realist perspective, prioritizing state survival above all, offers a clear lens for Aliyev’s foreign policy. His policies were a calculated response to regional power dynamics, designed to balance security threats from both inside and outside Azerbaijan (Karayel, 2024, pp. 380-381). The partnership with Türkiye served as a key strategic counterweight to Russian influence in the South Caucasus. Simultaneously, Aliyev was careful to pursue a balanced foreign policy that avoided provoking Russia, which remained the dominant regional power during the 1990s. This balancing act was evident in his handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where Türkiye’s support provided the necessary diplomatic leverage without escalating into a direct military confrontation.

Steven David’s (1991) omnibalancing theory is also particularly applicable in this context. It argues that leaders in states facing both internal and external threats must balance against both. For Aliyev, securing his power at home after a chaotic start to independence meant he needed external partners who could boost his regime’s security and economy. Türkiye, especially under Süleyman Demirel, was a perfect fit, initially backing Aliyev against domestic military groups and offering economic aid without the hegemonic threat from Russia or the revolutionary risks from Iran (Mammadli, 2023). This “multi-vector” foreign policy enabled Azerbaijan to maintain working relationships with multiple powers while steadily developing its strategic partnership with Türkiye.

While realism explains the *necessity* of the alliance, constructivism reveals its character and durability, examining the relationship between identity, interests, and security (Wendt, 1999; Kubalkova, 2001). This view illustrates how Aliyev masterfully leveraged the shared Turkish identity to foster deep cooperation. His famous “one nation, two states” line was not just rhetoric; it became a powerful, reinforcing narrative that shaped both economic and security cooperation and strengthened the relationship. By constantly highlighting shared history, language, and culture, Aliyev established a foundation of trust that made diplomacy easier and more cost-effective. This shared identity framework continues to exert significant influence on relations today.

This identity piece was a core part of Aliyev’s strategy. As the OTS Secretary General noted, Aliyev is regarded as the architect of the Turkic World for his efforts in uniting the Turkic nations, fostering a strong bond that extended beyond immediate political or economic concerns. However, in a crucial distinction from his predecessor, Ebulfez Elchibey, whose pan-Turkist ideas were often unrealistic, Aliyev linked this

identity discourse to practical, real-world cooperation. This created a lasting model of ethnic solidarity that was effectively channeled through state institutions in both countries.

Institutionalist theory, which posits that establishing formal structures is the most effective way to ensure long-term stability and mutual benefit (Peters, 2019; Tsebelis, 1990), provides a compelling explanation for Aliyev's push to move beyond temporary deals. He sought to build permanent frameworks that would outlast his presidency. The creation of bilateral bodies, such as the Strategic Cooperation Council, demonstrates this focus on long-term relationship building. A 2010 joint statement referred to these mechanisms as "fundamental work to strengthen this friendship and pass it on to future generations," a conscious effort to institutionalize the partnership so it would not depend solely on personal diplomacy (Declaration on the Establishment, 2010).

This basic architecture from Aliyev's time still guides relations. The strong network of institutional ties between Azerbaijan and Türkiye makes their relationship unique in the Turkic world. Aliyev managed the development of many cooperation channels, including trade commissions, energy groups, military training exchanges, and parliamentary friendship groups. This web of institutions created what theorists call "path dependency" (Pierson, 2000, pp. 251–266). Once established, these institutions tend to persist, as they develop standardized procedures and constituencies invested in maintaining them.

Energy diplomacy provides another crucial lens for understanding Aliyev's strategy. This refers to a state's strategic maneuvers concerning energy resources, which have become vital components of global politics and foreign policy (Çomak et al., 2015). Key elements include supply security, transit routes, and diversification. When countries sign major energy agreements, it implies a commitment to mutual diplomatic and security support.

Aliyev knew that large-scale energy projects would create a shared financial dependency, effectively locking in political ties even if regional dynamics shifted. He skillfully used energy diplomacy to improve Azerbaijan's position and its relations with Türkiye. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline is the prime example. Initiated under his presidency, this project physically linked Azerbaijan's energy to Turkish ports, creating powerful shared economic interests (Kürüm, 2024, pp. 120-127). Later projects, such as the SOCAR-invested STAR refinery in Izmir and the TANAP gas pipeline, were built upon this original vision.

This energy diplomacy demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of how economic ties can serve strategic political objectives. By making Türkiye the main corridor for its energy exports to Europe, Aliyev ensured that Turkish interests were aligned with Azerbaijan's sovereignty and growth. This, in turn, boosted Türkiye's own strategic importance as an energy hub, creating a symbiotic relationship that strengthened cooperation. This political-economic view helps explain why the Azerbaijan-Türkiye partnership is so much stronger than regional relationships lacking such a robust economic foundation.

Another perspective, leadership studies, which focus on how a leader's personality and experiences influence foreign policy (Gardner, 1990), helps explain Aliyev's unique approach. His leadership style was a rare blend of Soviet-era bureaucratic expertise and post-independence nationalism, enabling him to bridge Azerbaijan's past and present in its dealings with Türkiye. His extensive tenure within the Soviet security apparatus and the Politburo provided him with an intimate, firsthand understanding of Russian strategic thinking. (Ahundova, 2018a), while his Azerbaijani identity and roots in Nakhchivan connected him deeply to Turkish culture. This unique background enabled him to create a policy for Türkiye that acknowledged regional power realities while still promoting Azerbaijani interests.

The personal aspect of Aliyev's diplomacy was also vital. He established strong, personal relationships with Turkish leaders, especially Süleyman Demirel, which fostered a level of trust that enabled cooperation during difficult times (Aslan & Hesenov, 2005, pp. 149-150; Wilson, 2013, pp. 473-474). As one analysis noted, this close friendship directly «contributed to the development of bilateral relations». This personal bond was vital for navigating complex issues, helping to smooth over diplomatic crises, such as an alleged

coup attempt in 1995, and demonstrating how personal ties can reinforce formal ones. Aliyev was an intensely active diplomat; from 1993 to 1998 alone, he visited 33 countries 79 times, attended 232 events, and signed 431 documents (Mammadli, 2023). This intense interaction, especially with Turkish leaders, demonstrated his conviction that personal connections were essential for establishing enduring state-to-state relations.

2. Historical Context: Formative Experiences and Early Relations

Understanding Aliyev’s legacy in Türkiye requires examining the history that forged his political worldview. Aliyev’s unique life—from his early years in Nakhchivan, to his rise through the Soviet KGB and Politburo, and finally to leading an independent Azerbaijan—gave him a specific, pragmatic skill set for developing this relationship. This background explains the partnership he built: one that blended Soviet-era realism with a new Azerbaijani nationalism.

Table 2
Evolution of Azerbaijan-Türkiye Relations During Aliyev’s Presidency

Period	Primary Characteristic	Key Developments	Regional Context
1993-1994	Strategic Reorientation	Shift from Elchibey’s Turkism; initial Russian appeasement	Armenian military advances; Russian pressure
1994-1995	Foundation-building	Friendship and cooperation agreements; energy dialogue	Ceasefire in Karabakh; Contract of the Century signed
1995-1999	Institutionalization	Military cooperation; high-level visits; multilateral engagement	Regional pipeline projects advances; changing Turkish governments
1999-2003	Consolidation and transition	Strategic partnership concept; succession planning	Increasing Western engagement in the region; Aliyev’s health declines

Heydar Aliyev’s political personality was shaped within the Soviet institutional system, where he refined the bureaucratic skills and strategic mindset that would later define his foreign policy. Born in Nakhchivan in 1923, he joined the Soviet security services in 1944, rising to head the Azerbaijani KGB in 1967 and becoming First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan in 1969. His 1982 promotion to the Politburo was the highest rank any Azerbaijani ever reached in the Soviet Union. This deep experience provided him with an intimate understanding of Russian strategic culture, which was vital for managing the region after independence (Ahundova, 2018b).

Aliyev, shaped by Kremlin power struggles, embraced a pragmatic, realist approach to international relations. This practical outlook distinguished his policy towards Türkiye from the more ideological stance of his predecessor, Ebulfez Elchibey. An analyst remarked that Aliyev developed “his own brand of Machiavellianism,” which enabled him to be a “reliable Soviet soldier” while also “fighting for his people’s rights” and safeguarding Azerbaijan’s cultural heritage (Yavuz, 2023). This pragmatic duality enabled him to work effectively within the Soviet system while staying true to Azerbaijan’s interests, and it is what later allowed him to balance relations with Russia and Türkiye. His 1987 resignation from the Politburo, in protest of Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies, demonstrated both his principles and his keen sense of the shifting political winds.

When Aliyev returned to power in 1993, he inherited an independent Azerbaijan in a dire condition: facing military defeats in Karabakh, political turmoil, economic collapse, and diplomatic isolation (Ahundova, 2018c). The previous government, the Azerbaijani Popular Front, had pursued an ideologically-driven, pan-Turkist alignment with Türkiye that often antagonized other regional powers, especially Russia. Aliyev, coming to power in this mess, knew he had to factor Russia into his strategic plans. He pragmatically recognized that Russia still saw the region as its sphere of influence.

Aliyev's first move was a masterful strategic pivot from Elchibey's idealism to a more balanced foreign policy. In his first months, he actively worked to appease Russia. This included emphasizing the importance of ties with Moscow, temporarily halting work with Western energy firms, and agreeing to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (LeVine, 2007, pp. 188-190). This was a cautious, realist move that reflected his assessment of regional power and his need for regime stability. But this Russia-friendly policy failed to deliver: it did not stop Armenian advances or ease the pressure on Azerbaijan. Once Aliyev had solidified his power at home, he gradually shifted to a more balanced policy: one that maintained good working relations with Russia, while also reviving ties with Türkiye and the West. This recalibration demonstrated Aliyev's pragmatic approach, where strategy always took precedence over ideology.

The key turning point in Azerbaijan-Türkiye relations occurred with Aliyev's official visit to Ankara in February 1994. This trip marked a clear move away from the initial appeasement of Russia and a strategic re-engagement with Türkiye and the West. During this landmark visit, Aliyev signed a 10-year friendship and cooperation agreement with Turkish President Süleyman Demirel, as well as 15 other agreements on trade, investment, and culture. The main "Agreement on the Development of Friendship and Multilateral Cooperation" explicitly confirmed plans to transport Azerbaijani oil to global markets via Türkiye, laying the tracks for future energy partnerships (Veliyev, 2020, pp. 123-124).

The political impact of this visit was far greater than just the papers signed. Aliyev declared that "friendship with Türkiye is eternal" and "no force will be able to divert us from our path" (Şükürov, 2023). Concrete policy actions supported this rhetoric: he guided energy investments via Türkiye, resumed energy negotiations with Western firms, and enhanced diplomatic coordination with Ankara on regional matters. The 1994 visit established the template for Aliyev's entire approach to Türkiye-combining high-level declarations of brotherhood with practical, multi-sectoral agreements, all while acknowledging strategic realities (Şükürov, 2023; Veliyev, 2020, pp. 123-124).

3. Diplomatic Institutionalization: Building the Partnership's Architecture

Perhaps Heydar Aliyev's most significant legacy for Azerbaijan-Türkiye relations was his systematic work on institutionalizing diplomacy, which transformed a temporary friendship into a structured, durable partnership. The numerous agreements and mechanisms established during high-level visits evolved into joint commissions and, following his tenure, into multilateral bodies like the Turkic Speaking Countries Council, later Organization of Turkic States, (founded in Nakhchivan in 2009). The institutional structure created lasting frameworks that would outlive Aliyev and guide the relationship for decades. Building these mechanisms demonstrates Aliyev's strategic vision: he aimed for self-sustaining partnerships that were not solely reliant on personal ties or temporary mutual interests.

The institutionalization was built on a foundation of frequent high-level visits. Unlike Elchibey, who focused on ideology, Aliyev focused on establishing institutional links with the Turkish state and its private sector, while also promoting practical cooperation. His first official visit in February 1994, for example, emphasized symbolic brotherhood but also resulted in concrete deals on trade, energy, and culture. He created a model that combined shared identity with shared interests. This balanced style-mixing emotional appeals to shared identity with the pragmatic pursuit of national interests-became a hallmark of his Türkiye policy (Şükürov, 2023; Veliyev, 2020).

Aliyev's close personal ties with Turkish leaders also had a significant impact. His relationship with President Süleyman Demirel is especially noteworthy. As one analysis stated, their "close friendship... contributed to the development of bilateral relations." This personal trust facilitated communication during crisis times, helping them navigate complex issues such as energy routes and security. This top-level trust built a reserve of goodwill that stabilized the relationship, especially during the 1995 alleged coup attempt against Aliyev. The Demirel connection helped resolve that diplomatic spat quickly, demonstrating how personal ties can supplement institutional ones (Andriyanov & Mirelenov, 2008, pp. 465-468).

A dense network of formal agreements established the legal basis for the institutionalized relationship. The first key document was the "Agreement on the Development of Friendship and Multilateral Cooperation," signed during Aliyev's visit to Azerbaijan in February 1994, which outlined the core principles of the

relationship. This was followed by numerous other agreements covering a wide range of areas, including maritime and air transport, energy, labor, and cultural exchange. All these agreements together created a thick web of legal ties and cooperation mechanisms that streamlined interactions (Şükürov, 2023; Veliyev, 2020).

The foundation of institutionalizing partnership is the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council, established in 2010 and built upon the groundwork laid by Aliyev (Veliyev, 2020, pp. 158-159; Azərbaycan Respublikası..., 2010). Although established after his death, it was the logical culmination of the processes he initiated. This strategic partnership agreement was comprehensive, covering «military-political and security issues, military and military-technical cooperation, humanitarian issues, economic cooperation, and common and final provisions» (Veliyev, 2020, pp. 158-159; Azərbaycan Respublikası..., 2010). This comprehensive framework embodied Aliyev’s vision of a partnership that unified both countries across various levels.

Aliyev extended his efforts beyond bilateral agreements by effectively leveraging multilateral platforms to enhance the Azerbaijan-Türkiye relationship in a broader framework. Both states played a vital role in founding the Organization of Turkic States, with Aliyev regarded as “one of the architects of the Turkic World” (Andriyanov & Mirelenov, 2008, pp. 467-468). Furthermore, working together in multilateral organizations allowed them to coordinate their regional strategies and strengthen cooperation across the broader Turkic world. They also collaborated in forums such as the Economic Cooperation Organization and the OSCE to address issues of mutual interest, including energy and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Aliyev understood that Azerbaijan-Türkiye relations existed in a complex regional environment, with Russia, Iran, and other powers all having interests in the Caucasus. His foreign policy, as noted, «placed particular emphasis on relations with major regional countries with influence and interests in the South Caucasus» (Mammadli, 2023). This multi-vector approach enabled Azerbaijan to deepen its special relationship with Türkiye while maintaining working ties with other regional powers, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of exclusive, vulnerable alliances.

4. Energy Diplomacy: Economic Integration as a Strategic Bond

Heydar Aliyev’s energy diplomacy stands as one of his most tangible and lasting legacies, creating a material interdependence that has firmly anchored the political relationship. Aliyev recognized that shared economic stakes in the energy sector would foster a long-term strategic partnership, one that could withstand political shifts. Despite tough negotiations and threats, he stood firm. By physically linking Azerbaijan’s energy resources to and through Turkish terminals, he created an infrastructural dependency that has proven incredibly durable. This energy partnership evolved into a comprehensive economic integration that continues to shape the region today.

Table 3
Major Energy Projects in Azerbaijan-Türkiye Relations

Project	Initial Operation	Significance	Current Status
Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline (BTC)	2006	First major Caspian energy export route	Transported approximately 224 million barrels of oil in 2024
Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Pipeline (BTE)	2007	First natural gas export route to Türkiye	Transported approximately 23 billion cubic meters of natural gas in 2024
Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP)	2018	Direct Azerbaijani natural gas transport through Türkiye to Europe	Transported 73 billion cubic meters totally
Iğdır-Nakhchivan Pipeline	2025	Ending Nakhchivan’s energy isolation	Recently opened

The heart of Aliyev's energy strategy was the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which made Türkiye the primary route for Azerbaijan's energy to reach global markets. Although the pipeline was opened in 2006, all critical negotiations, battles over alternative routes, decision-making, and initial construction took place under Aliyev's leadership and were guided by his strategic vision (Buzbay, 2024). The BTC project represented the first segment of the East-West Energy Corridor initiative, designed to transport Azerbaijani oil to Türkiye via Georgia, with support from the US and the EU. Russia opposed this initiative, as it would bypass its energy routes. Nevertheless, the BTC was completed in 2006, transporting Azerbaijani oil to Türkiye's Ceyhan Port for export to global markets (Kürüm, 2024, pp. 127-132).

Türkiye's emergence as an export port disrupted Russia's monopoly on energy routes, which previously transported Kazakh and Azerbaijani oil. Furthermore, as a collaborative effort involving Western energy companies, such as BP, the BTC played a crucial role in diminishing Russia's dominance over Caspian energy resources. The BTC project was the perfect expression of Aliyev's foreign policy: it broke Azerbaijan's dependence on Russian export routes, forged a lasting economic bond with Türkiye, plugged Azerbaijan into European energy security, and even strengthened Azerbaijan's diplomatic hand in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by pointedly bypassing Armenia.

The importance of the BTC went far beyond its economic impact; for Azerbaijan, it meant diversified oil exports and strengthened its sovereignty and regional security. In the first half of 2025 alone, about 106 million barrels of crude oil from the BTC were loaded onto 145 tankers at Ceyhan (BP Azerbaijan, n.d.). But its political impact was what truly changed the game in the South Caucasus. It created a set of common interests between Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Georgia, and the West, while weakening the influence of Russia and Iran. The pipeline established the operational model for all future energy projects between the two nations.

As energy cooperation developed, Türkiye remained committed to projects that would reduce its dependence on Russian natural gas, diversify its supplies, and strengthen its role as a key transit country. This collaboration, which originated in the oil sector, expanded into the natural gas sector. A significant milestone occurred in 2011 with the memorandum of understanding for the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), designed to transport Azerbaijani natural gas to Türkiye and EU countries. TANAP was completed and entered service on 12 June 2018. With the completion of the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) at the Turkish-Greek border, Azerbaijani natural gas now reaches European countries (Kürüm, 2024, pp. 127-132). Transporting Caspian gas to Western markets via TANAP, independent of Russian lines, enhances Türkiye's status as a transit country and reduces Russia's influence in the region.

The success of the BTC set the stage for the Southern Gas Corridor, with TANAP facilitating even deeper energy integration. This massive infrastructure project, which has been online since 2018, spans 1,850 km and has an initial capacity of 16 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year, with plans to expand to 31 bcm. Approximately 6 bcm are supplied to Türkiye, with the remainder provided to Europe (Zeynalova, 2024). These pipelines (TANAP and BTC) are not just economic boons; they are now vital to Europe's energy supply. In 2023, Azerbaijan exported 11.8 bcm of natural gas to Europe, a figure that rose to 12.9 bcm in 2024; in 2024, it also sent 9.9 bcm to Türkiye and 2.4 bcm to Georgia (Anadolu Ajansı Enerji Terminali, 2025). This partnership has helped Türkiye reduce its own energy dependence on Russia and has made Azerbaijan a key supporter in Türkiye's quest to become a major energy hub. These numbers demonstrate how Aliyev's initial energy partnership has evolved into a significant component of Europe's energy security strategy.

Aliyev's energy diplomacy, initially underestimated by Europeans during his lifetime, has since positioned the Azerbaijan-Türkiye alliance at the forefront of Europe's energy security discussions, particularly amid the Ukraine conflict. Faced with energy challenges, the European Union has intensified its collaboration with Azerbaijan to ensure energy security. This initiative aligns with Türkiye's regional energy diplomacy and Azerbaijan's strategy of diversifying its natural gas export markets (Kazancı & Arslan, 2024, p. 1279).

The strategic importance of both countries has soared. Forecasts suggest that by 2027, Azerbaijan's gas exports could reach 30 bcm, enabling it to supply more to European countries, such as Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic (DHA, 2025). This growing demand has turned Türkiye into «a key energy hub, facilitating the transit of not only Azerbaijani gas to Europe but also gas from other countries, such as Turkmenistan» (DHA, 2025). Current talks about expanding TANAP and «transporting Turkmen gas across the Caspian Sea to Türkiye and Europe via Azerbaijan» (Gurbanov, 2018) are the logical conclusion of Aliyev's original vision. This European dimension gives both countries more leverage with Brussels and gives Europe a vested interest in supporting regional stability. This evolving role demonstrates how the energy partnership initiated by Aliyev has taken on a life of its own, creating new strategic opportunities far beyond the original bilateral scope.

5. Security Cooperation: From Defense Partnerships to a Strategic Alliance

Heydar Aliyev's legacy in security cooperation is another vital pillar of the bilateral relationship. During his presidency, he established the foundational security ties and set interaction patterns that later evolved into the strategic alliance, which played a decisive role in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. This journey—from simple military training deals to jointly producing advanced weapons—shows Aliyev's forward-thinking approach, which prioritized sustainable, institutional, and long-term alignment.

While security cooperation began immediately after independence, it was truly solidified under Aliyev's presidency, particularly with the signing of defense agreements in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These core documents established the legal frameworks for military training, defense planning, and intelligence sharing that would evolve (Cafersoy & Aslanlı, 2012, pp. 149-172). Full military integration came later, but the cooperation models Aliyev established laid the groundwork for the trust and institutional frameworks needed for it. This relationship has now deepened into a unique strategic alliance, especially with the Susha Declaration after the Second Karabakh War (Shusha Declaration, 2021).

The training component of this cooperation is critical. From the earliest years of independence, Azerbaijani officers began training at Turkish military academies (Bayraktar, 2021, pp. 351-352). This fostered personal ties and common professional standards, making future cooperation much easier. This exchange program, which Aliyev expanded, created a generation of Azerbaijani officers who were deeply familiar with Turkish military doctrine. Turkish advisors also helped reform Azerbaijan's military, although this assistance was initially given cautiously to avoid provoking regional powers, such as Russia. This slow, steady, and institutional approach to defense was classic Aliyev, prioritizing a sustainable, long-term bond with Türkiye.

The Karabakh conflict was a significant, early test for the Azerbaijan-Türkiye security relationship under Aliyev. In the 1990s, Türkiye's role was significantly limited by regional and international pressure, a sharp contrast to the 2020 war, where its support was decisive. Aliyev had to navigate this complex situation carefully, seeking diplomatic support from Türkiye but avoiding any actions that might drag it into a direct military conflict.

Within the UN and OSCE's Minsk Group, Türkiye acted as the primary spokesperson for Azerbaijan's position and consistently backed it (Hasanov, 2024, pp. 465-466, 495-496). But the involvement of Russia and the US internationalized the problem, limiting what Türkiye could do on its own. Despite these limitations, Aliyev always emphasized the symbolic significance of Türkiye's support. In joint statements, he hammered home the importance of territorial integrity and the need for Armenian forces to leave the occupied territories. This diplomatic alignment, while not a full military partnership at the time, set the principles for all future cooperation. Furthermore, Türkiye's decision to close its border with Armenia in solidarity with Azerbaijan showed the practical, real-world impact of this security relationship, even in its early stages. The border crossing at Alican has never reopened; Türkiye has maintained its stance that it will remain closed until Armenian forces withdraw and a peace treaty is signed (Bayraktar, 2021, pp. 333-357).

The security cooperation that Aliyev initiated has since evolved into a full-blown strategic alliance, a shift most clearly evident after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. Turkish defense technology, particularly

drones, played a decisive role in Azerbaijan's victory. President Ilham Aliyev himself stated that Türkiye's armed UAVs strengthened the Azerbaijani army, «played a vital role» in the war, and reduced the number of casualties (Kınık & Çelik, 2021). This military success was the direct result of the foundations laid decades earlier by Heydar Aliyev.

The relationship was formalized in the Shusha Declaration, signed on June 15, 2021 (Shusha Declaration, 2021). This declaration solidified a mutual defense commitment, formalizing the security partnership that Heydar Aliyev had initiated decades earlier. Today's security relationship is the result of processes he initiated. Under his presidency, the Azerbaijani Armed Forces began to shed their Soviet military models. They began training according to NATO standards under Turkish guidance, and Türkiye started backing Azerbaijan's defense industry. This dramatic shift, from a Soviet-era army to a modern force influenced by Türkiye, underscores the profound and lasting impact of the security partnership that Aliyev established (Shahbaz, 2022).

6. Conclusion: Aliyev's Enduring Legacy and Modern Relevance

Heydar Aliyev's strategic leadership effectively reshaped Azerbaijan-Türkiye relations. He shifted the connection from being emotionally driven to one grounded in formal mutual interests and shared security-robust enough to withstand regional turmoil and adapt to evolving geopolitical contexts. His legacy extends beyond policies or agreements; it encompasses the development of a strategic outlook that enabled the relationship to expand and strengthen under subsequent leaders, culminating in the alliance observed today.

Aliyev's most notable achievement was his ability to combine Turkish solidarity with a pragmatic focus on Azerbaijan's national interests. Unlike his predecessor, Ebulfez Elchibey, whose pan-Turkist enthusiasm sometimes overlooked regional realities, Aliyev grounded the concept of «one nation, two states» in practical frameworks that provided tangible benefits to both nations. This balanced strategy enabled him to strengthen relations with Türkiye steadily while avoiding tension with Russia, demonstrating skillful navigation of the complex post-Soviet Caucasus. As one analysis noted, «Heydar Aliyev's foreign policy has become even more realistic thanks to strategic diplomacy» (Mammadli, 2023). The importance of this balance is evident today, as Azerbaijan maintains practical relations with various power centers while upholding its special, unique partnership with Türkiye. Current Azerbaijani diplomacy, led by Ilham Aliyev, continues this multi-directional approach, showing the lasting influence of Heydar Aliyev's strategic model.

Aliyev's efforts to establish formal agreements, joint commissions, and multilateral structures form a significant part of his legacy. By developing a network of legal and cooperative mechanisms, he made sure the relationship would not hinge solely on the preferences of individual leaders or transient alliances. The Strategic Partnership Council, established in 2010, was directly rooted in the institutional groundwork he set. This layered cooperation, driven by Aliyev's frameworks, has enabled the relationship to strengthen despite changes in leadership and regional dynamics.

Perhaps Aliyev's long-term strategic vision is best captured in his own words from the dark days after the First Karabakh War: «Yes, we lost the war, but I am confident that this defeat will lead to the rebirth of a strong Azerbaijan because time and justice are on our side, and we will prevail» (Yavuz, 2023). This combination of patience and determination also shaped his approach toward Türkiye. Despite numerous challenges, Heydar Aliyev prioritized relations with Türkiye as the core of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. This demonstrates the lasting strength of his vision.

Ultimately, Heydar Aliyev's legacy stands as a powerful example of how a leader can transform shared identity and emotional bonds into a structured, enduring partnership. His strategy, which integrated identity, culture, and history with tangible institutional actions, established a relationship resilient enough to withstand regional upheavals and grow stronger over time. The extensive alliance between Azerbaijan and Türkiye today is a testament to his strategic vision and diplomatic expertise. He deserves recognition as the chief architect of one of the most unique bilateral relationships in the world.

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