

**Citation List:** Parlar Dal, E., & Hayat, M. (2026). Türkiye and Azerbaijan's quest for status in world politics. In Ş. Aktürk & A. Balcı (Eds.), *Azerbaijan and Türkiye in world politics* (pp. 379-396). Turkish Academy of Sciences Publications.

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## **CHAPTER 24**

# **TÜRKİYE AND AZERBAIJAN'S QUEST FOR STATUS IN WORLD POLITICS**

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## TÜRKİYE AND AZERBAIJAN'S QUEST FOR STATUS IN WORLD POLITICS

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### **Abstract**

This article examines how Türkiye and Azerbaijan have pursued international status since the early 2000s and how their once-separate trajectories have fused into a mutually reinforcing partnership. Drawing on Social Comparison and Social Identity approaches, it employs a tripartite typology-status mobility, social creativity and status competition-to trace foreign-policy change across two discrete timelines: Türkiye's EU-centred mobility phase (2000-2010) followed by a creativity-and-competition blend (2010-present); and Azerbaijan's four-stage path from energy-driven mobility (1994-2003) through creativity (2004-2013) to assertive competition (2014-2020) and the hybrid strategy that has prevailed since the 2020 Karabakh war. Process-tracing official statements, strategic agreements and secondary scholarship, the study shows that joint instruments-cross-border pipelines, defence cooperation, Turkic multilateral initiatives-now serve as shared levers of prestige. The 2021 Shusha Declaration crystallises this alignment, recasting bilateral ties as a formal alliance that links hard-power coordination with soft-power projection. The analysis demonstrates, first, that mobility, creativity and competition can be layered rather than sequential; and second, that bilateral synergy magnifies individual gains, enabling both capitals to project influence well beyond their immediate neighbourhoods. By integrating these cases, the article advances debates on status politics and offers a refined lens for assessing foreign-policy change in contemporary world politics.

### **Keywords**

*Turkish Foreign Policy, Status Politics, Azerbaijani Foreign Policy, Shusha Declaration, Foreign Policy Change*

## **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have emerged as emblematic cases of states whose foreign policies are increasingly animated by a quest for international status. In Ankara, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) came to power in 2002 convinced that the country's rising economic weight and civilisational self-image warranted greater recognition in global governance. In Baku, the consolidation of the Heydar Aliyev leadership after 1993-and especially the post-2004 energy windfall-produced a parallel ambition: to convert material leverage into diplomatic visibility and a higher ranking in the international hierarchy. Although the two trajectories unfolded in distinct domestic and regional contexts, they have converged since the mid-2010s into an increasingly mutually reinforcing search for status, formally codified by the 2021 Shusha Declaration.

International Relations scholarship treats status as a socially recognised rank based on valued attributes-military capability, economic weight, cultural prestige or normative entrepreneurship. Building on Social Comparison Theory and Social Identity Theory, recent work identifies three broad repertoires through which rising powers pursue status: status mobility (access to elite clubs), social creativity (niche excellence and soft-power projection) and status competition (hard-power accumulation). Individually, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have drawn on all three. Türkiye's first AKP decade centred on mobility-anchored in EU accession talks-while Azerbaijan's post-Soviet opening relied on energy-driven mobility and, later, creativity through cultural diplomacy. From the early 2010s onward, both capitals supplemented these tracks with measured competition: Ankara through forward military posture in its near abroad, Baku through force modernisation culminating in the 2020 Karabakh victory. Concomitantly, the two states began to pool their efforts, positioning joint energy corridors, defence cooperation and Turkic cultural diplomacy as shared instruments of prestige enhancement.

Existing studies tend to treat Türkiye's and Azerbaijan's status trajectories in isolation. Analyses of Türkiye often debate the nature and durability of its post-2000 foreign-policy shifts. For Azerbaijan, scholarship has charted the evolution from multi-vector balancing to assertive hard power but rarely connects that arc to broader debates on status politics. Comparative examinations of how two politically aligned powers can synchronise mobility, creativity and competition-and thereby magnify each other's status claims-remain scarce. By tracing Türkiye's and Azerbaijan's policy shifts across distinct but overlapping periods-2000-2010 and 2010-present for Türkiye; 1994-2003, 2004-2013, 2014-2020 and 2020-present for Azerbaijan-the study illuminates the layered nature of status strategies and the compound effects generated when two allied states act in concert. This article proceeds in four parts: the first section situates status seeking within the broader IR literature on status politics; the second analyses Türkiye's trajectory; the third examines Azerbaijan's; and the fourth synthesises the two narratives to show how cooperation in security, energy, and cultural diplomacy has created a complementary, mutually amplifying path to international prominence.

### **1. From Status Aspirations to Policy Shifts: Tracing the Dynamics of Foreign Affairs**

In the literature, the policies through which states pursue status are interpreted through several theoretical lenses, most prominently Social Comparison Theory (SCT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT)-frameworks rooted in individual-level psychology. SCT holds that comparisons with others are central to how people judge their own worth and build self-esteem (Paul et al., 2014, p. 17). When the same logic is applied to states, it suggests that governments, like individuals or small groups, enter into status seeking because they wish to occupy a more favourable social position than their peers (Paul et al., 2014, p. 35). The second framework on which this article relies, SIT, examines the efforts of social groups to secure a positive and distinctive collective identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the international arena, states therefore work persistently to gain recognition and a distinctive status by identifying with reference groups that rank just

above them in prevailing international standings while remaining broadly comparable (Brown & Haeger, 1999). Building on SIT, scholars point to three overarching pathways by which states try to climb the ladder: status competition, status mobility and social creativity.

Within this framework, status competition denotes the recourse of lower-status states to hard-power instruments in an effort to attain-or surpass-the standing of the dominant group. Put differently, social competition entails a sustained bid by a low-status actor to match or exceed the material (military and/or economic) capabilities of a higher-status counterpart and, in the process, to engage it in overt geopolitical rivalry (Parlar Dal, 2019b). Some analysts further stress that emerging powers occupying comparable positions within international organisations likewise deploy status-competitive tactics to open new arenas of cooperation and broaden their diplomatic networks (Parlar Dal, 2019b). Such competition is observable not only between rising powers and established great powers but also among the rising powers themselves. Unlike social competition-which pursues status gains through the accumulation of material power (military or economic)- social mobility offers a different route: states not yet admitted to higher-status clubs seek entry by internalising those clubs' norms and policy practices (van Knippenberg & Ellemers, 1990). Admission depends largely on the extent to which the aspirant can assimilate the dominant group's values and institutions. By contrast, states that embrace a social-creativity strategy accept the legitimacy of the prevailing distribution of power and seek to be more effective than the ruling group in newly discovered areas (Lemaire, 1974) and on non-material criteria like cultural policies, public diplomacy, regional leadership, norm entrepreneurship, development, and humanitarian cooperation policies (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010). Evidence from nine G20 emerging powers shows that such tactics have been used to carve out a distinctive and favourable status in South-South Development Cooperation (Parlar Dal & Dipama, 2019). Put in practical terms, social creativity boosts international recognition without contest the prevailing order and requiring the adoption of the dominant group's rules: governments foreground niche strengths in these arenas, a strategy whose viability often hinges on charismatic leadership capable of mobilising domestic support and sustaining external visibility (Table 1).

**Table 1**

Strategy	Core Logic	Main Mechanism	Relation to International Order	Motivation	Common Tools/ Instruments
<b>Status Competition</b>	Compete with peers or dominant powers to gain higher relative standing	Increase material capabilities (military, economy), geopolitical rivalry	Challenges hierarchy and power distribution	Desire to match or surpass others	Military build-up, regional power projection, UN Security Council bids
<b>Social Mobility</b>	Join a higher-status group by adopting its rules, norms, and identity	Norm internalization, policy alignment, institutional adaptation	Accepts hierarchy but aims for inclusion	Recognition and legitimacy from dominant group	Policy reforms, EU/NATO accession criteria, alignment with liberal norms
<b>Social Creativity</b>	Highlight unique value in areas unrelated to traditional power hierarchies	Redefining standards of worth, symbolic competition	Accepts current structure, but shifts focus to alternative domains	Distinction without confrontation	Cultural diplomacy, South-South cooperation, public diplomacy, normative entrepreneurship

#### Comparison of Status-Seeking Strategies

The choice among the three strategies – status competition, status mobility, and social creativity-is contingent rather than rule-bound. Relative capabilities and the security environment shape the plausibility and persuasiveness of competitive bids: when power gaps are narrowing and threat perceptions are acute, investments in military or economic strength yield visible returns and are legible to third parties as credible claims to higher rank. The pay-off to mobility depends on the openness and credibility of membership-granting venues and peer gatekeepers-alliances, influential IO committees, and elite forums.

Where admission criteria are transparent and consistently applied, internalising dominant norms functions as a verifiable signal of membership-worthiness; where venues are closed or criteria opaque, conformity becomes largely performative and yields limited returns. A third factor concerns the structure of policy domains. In expanding or weakly institutionalised areas-humanitarian relief, digital governance, or cultural diplomacy-states can make contributions out of proportion to their material endowments and convert them into recognition that hard-power accumulation alone would not produce. Because these conditions vary over time, states rarely rely on a single strategy; instead, they layer and resequence the tools to carry gains from one arena into another-social creativity can frame and legitimise subsequent competitive moves; mobility can codify and institutionalise advances first achieved through prestige diplomacy; and competition can defend and expand openings created by mobility, consolidating recognition in the wider hierarchy. In short, selection and sequencing are two sides of the same adaptive process: as capabilities shift, venues open or close, and issue areas evolve, decision-makers recalibrate to align domestic role claims with changing external opportunities and constraints.

## **2. Ankara's Status Strategies: From Mobility to Competition and Creativity**

This article contends that Türkiye's foreign policy from 2000 to 2010 was shaped primarily by status mobility-aligning with higher-status clubs and internalising their rules-amid broader transnational dynamics. By contrast, the 2010–2022 period reflects a recalibration toward a blend of status competition and social creativity. The analysis traces how these strategies were operationalised in institutional bargaining, coalition-building, defence-industrial upgrading, and niche diplomacy, and how changing domestic and systemic conditions shifted their relative weight over time.

### **2.1. Status Mobility in Turkish Foreign Policy during the period 2000–2010**

Türkiye's foreign policy shifted markedly between 2000 and 2010, after the European Council's 1999 candidacy decision and the formal start of accession talks on 3 October 2005. The opening of these negotiations was made possible by a wave of political reforms-not least the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). During its first two terms (especially 2002–2007), the AKP pursued a proactive, norm-driven diplomacy at both regional and ideational levels, all the while keeping European integration at the centre of its external agenda. This recalibration rested largely on Turkish elites' desire to elevate the country's international standing by joining a higher-status grouping-namely, the European Union. The quest for EU membership therefore exemplified a status-mobility strategy: admission to the prestigious European club promised a visible upgrade in Türkiye's position within global politics. Consistent with the logic of status mobility, Ankara's quest for EU membership precipitated sweeping adjustments in its diplomatic priorities and instruments. Liberal norms and values moved to the foreground, and between 2005 and 2010 Türkiye enacted landmark reforms designed to meet the Copenhagen criteria, including the abolition of the death penalty and far-reaching judicial restructuring. Together, these measures both advanced the accession agenda and signalled a deep reconfiguration of Türkiye's foreign-policy identity.

The wholesale overhaul of Turkish foreign policy in the 2000s-intended to align the country with new objectives and secure fresh gains-was underpinned by an explicitly civilisational and geopolitical outlook. The identity that AKP elites projected onto Türkiye meshed with a status-mobility strategy designed to elevate the country's standing, either through full accession to the high-status European Union or by turning Türkiye into a magnet for its own region and more distant theatres alike. Consistent with this doctrine, Ankara sought to normalise relations with its neighbours under a "zero problems" policy (Davutoğlu, 2010; Akpınar, 2013, p. 740), encouraging high-level political and strategic cooperation while deepening economic and security ties (Davutoğlu, 2013, p. 90). The EU viewed this neighbourhood initiative favourably because it dovetailed with its own normative agenda. For much of the 2000–2010 decade, the effort to enhance Türkiye's stature through European integration was regarded-both domestically and

abroad-as the backbone of the country's conventional diplomacy. Crucially, this Europe-centred track never crowded out Ankara's multidimensional and ambitious outreach; political elites treated the two lines of action as mutually reinforcing. Thus, even as Türkiye affirmed its European identity and drew closer to EU norms and values, it simultaneously pursued an active diplomacy aimed at normalising relations with immediate neighbours and cultivating new ties with more distant regions, including Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The rapid Europeanisation launched after 1999 sowed the seeds of a far-reaching shift that unfolded across the first decade of the 2000s. Türkiye's bid for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for 2009–2010 laid bare Ankara's ambition to assume a more assertive role in key multilateral arenas and to help sharpen the UN's moral and normative standards. In effect, the quest to join such high-status clubs gradually redirected the country's foreign-policy priorities. That same period nonetheless witnessed a number of tactical moves. Türkiye's participation in NATO's 2001 operation in Afghanistan, for example, was not interpreted as a turning point in Ankara's overall foreign-policy orientation; it reflected continuity in the country's alliance commitments. Likewise, Ankara's outreach to other regions-most notably the Middle East-between 2000 and 2010 did not generate a fully fledged strategic reorientation. Because this outreach was pursued through status-competition tactics, it often spawned new rivalries and tensions among Türkiye's peers. Amid these dynamics, the eruption of the Arab Spring accelerated a de-Europeanisation that had first become visible after 2007, with adverse repercussions for Türkiye's foreign and security policy, democracy, and economy. As a result, the recalibrations that had once seemed to enliven Turkish diplomacy during the 2000–2010 decade gradually lost their positive traction over the country's external agenda.

## **2.2. Post-2010 Turkish Foreign Policy: Status Competition and Social Creativity**

From 2010 onward-particularly after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis-Türkiye combined status-competition and social-creativity tactics in its quest for greater standing in world politics. In practice, this mix translated into efforts to reshape rules and representation in multilateral venues, the cultivation of selective coalitions and regional security activism, and high-visibility niche diplomacy and humanitarian initiatives. By contrast, the status-mobility track receded into the background: with the EU accession process effectively stalled, the European pathway-and the status gains it once promised-remained largely dormant.

### **2.2.1. Status Competition**

Türkiye's global ambitions have grown markedly since 2010. This expansion has led political elites to lean more heavily on status-competition strategies aimed at boosting the country's standing vis-à-vis both established great powers-most visibly the EU-and other rising powers. Within that competitive frame, Ankara activated an increasingly pro-active mix of military and economic instruments, and the geopolitical shock of the Syrian crisis accelerated these shifts in foreign policy. First, the military campaigns Türkiye launched in northern Syria broke decisively with its long-standing principle of non-interference and signalled a departure from the country's earlier free-rider posture. Security concerns moved to the centre of foreign-policy thinking, and outward power projection became an explicit goal. The trend crystallised in three emblematic steps. It included the opening of Türkiye's first African military base in Somalia in 2017-designed to balance both Western and Gulf influence in the Horn of Africa (Donelli & Cannon, 2021), direct intervention in the Libyan civil war, and the deployment of domestically produced armed drones in multiple regional conflicts. Second, a distinct locus of status competition emerged in the Eastern Mediterranean, where rivalry with Greece intersected with both sides' quests for recognition. The discovery of sizeable natural-gas deposits reignited disputes over exploration and extraction rights. Türkiye stepped up seismic surveys and drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, culminating in a major gas find (Dalay, 2021). Naval operations inspired by the Mavi Vatan ("Blue Homeland") doctrine signalled

an autonomous, status-competitive posture, even at the cost of friction with European partners. Third, Türkiye's decision to veto the NATO accession bids of Finland and Sweden underscored a willingness to defend core national interests even against the Western bloc. The veto functioned as leverage to seek concessions on the stalled F-35 programme, an end to support for the PKK-linked YPG, and the lifting of arms embargoes imposed since October 2019 (MacDougall & Samar, 2022). Taken together, these moves operationalise status-competition tactics intended to consolidate Türkiye's role as a pivotal actor in regional and global politics.

Türkiye's bid to enhance its international standing through status-competition tactics has also generated a string of issue-specific, bilateral adjustments in foreign policy. Bilateral deals have moved to the foreground: Ankara has sought to expand its diplomatic footprint from Asia to Africa and Latin America, counting on these ties both to marshal broader support in multilateral forums and to expedite economic, security, and political agreements on a one-to-one basis. A tangible illustration of this deal-focused approach is the composition of presidential delegations: prominent business figures routinely accompany the Turkish head of state, and the trips typically conclude with swift, commercially significant agreements that favour Turkish conglomerates (Sahin, 2021). At the same time, a status-competition mindset has made Türkiye's post-2011 diplomacy increasingly event-driven, short-term, and strategically uneven. Nowhere is this inconsistency clearer than in Ankara's relations with the Gulf monarchies. From the outset of the Arab Spring, Türkiye and Qatar emerged as the principal regional backers of the Muslim Brotherhood, whereas Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates regarded the movement as a threat to the established order and to their own regimes' legitimacy (Kardaş, 2021). The rift deepened in 2017, when the so-called "Quartet" (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt) imposed a blockade on Doha and demanded that Qatar sever its ties with Iran and Türkiye and renounce its support for the Brotherhood—demands Qatar flatly rejected. Türkiye's mistrust of the Gulf bloc was amplified by the failed coup of 2016. These dynamics pushed Ankara ever closer to Qatar while widening the gap with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, fuelling a contest for regional leadership across the Middle East and the wider Islamic world (Kardaş, 2021).

The abrupt lifting of the Qatar blockade in late 2020 normalised relations between Doha and the Gulf monarchies and, in turn, raised the diplomatic and economic cost for Ankara of maintaining an adversarial posture toward Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Cinkara, 2022). Faced with acute liquidity needs to shore up a slowing economy—and mindful of the resources required to sustain an expansive status-competition agenda—Türkiye launched a rapprochement with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi from late 2021 onward.<sup>1</sup> The détente took concrete form during President Erdoğan's visits to Abu Dhabi (February 2022) and Riyadh (April 2022), which produced a raft of cooperation agreements covering the environment, trade, technology, energy, direct investment and stock-market links (Daily Sabah, 2022a). Just days before the Riyadh trip, Ankara transferred the murder case of journalist Jamal Khashoggi—killed in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018—to Saudi jurisdiction (Daily Sabah, 2022b). In parallel, Türkiye has simultaneously widened its competitive field to Africa, where it contests influence with European partners—most vocally France, whose Sahel interventions Ankara denounces as a neo-colonial "France-Afrique" strategy (Ramani, 2021). As many African states diversify their strategic ties, Türkiye has emerged as an attractive partner: exports of Turkish-made military equipment are rising (Armstrong, 2021), bilateral relations with major economies such as Algeria, Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa are deepening, and Turkish construction firms are winning an increasing share of large-scale infrastructure contracts.<sup>2</sup> Yet Ankara's sharp criticism of European policies abroad sits uneasily beside its persistent rhetorical commitment to EU membership—a tension that surfaces regularly in official statements and underscores the mixed signals embedded in its status-seeking diplomacy.

In the current Ukraine crisis, Türkiye has charted a course distinct from its NATO partners, preserving

<sup>1</sup> During the visit, the Abu Dhabi leadership announced plans to establish a US \$10 billion fund dedicated to investments in Türkiye.

<sup>2</sup> The Kigali Arena in Rwanda—currently East Africa's largest stadium—together with an Olympic-standard swimming pool and a world-class stadium in Senegal, were all built by Turkish construction firms.

cordial relations with both Russia and Ukraine (Türkdoğan, 2023). Ankara has unequivocally condemned Russia's invasion-casting affirmative votes on three Ukraine-related resolutions in the UN General Assembly-yet it has declined to join the Western sanctions regime. The chief reason is Türkiye's need to safeguard its substantial energy and tourism links with Russia. Presidential Spokesperson İbrahim Kalın articulated the policy on 1 March 2022: "We are not in the opinion of imposing sanctions against Russia. We have commercial ties such as natural gas, tourism, and agriculture. We do not want to make a harmful move for our country" (Hürriyet Daily News, 2022).

### 2.2.2. Social Creativity

Türkiye has sought to set itself apart-both from established great powers and from its fellow rising states-by deploying social-creativity tactics above all in the realm of development cooperation. Officials contend that Ankara's aid policies diverge from those of Western incumbents and from the practices of other emerging donors, offering instead a distinctive template dubbed the "Ankara Consensus," which is presented as an alternative to China's Beijing model and the U.S.-led Washington model (Donelli, 2018). To buttress this claim to distinctiveness, Turkish discourse draws on motifs anchored in national history and culture, and-particularly in Africa and across the wider developing world-portrays engagement as resting on mutual respect, fraternity, and a win-win logic, signalling a deliberate departure from both Western and other non-Western paradigms. In the same vein, Türkiye characterises its development cooperation as demand-driven, stressing that projects are typically initiated at the request of partner countries, which officials argue strengthens local ownership and attests to the needs-based orientation of Türkiye's aid portfolio.

Yet Türkiye's demand-driven aid philosophy does not invariably generate benign outcomes. Requests for assistance are often voiced not by the recipient country's citizens but by its political authorities during high-level visits, so Ankara's programmes risk mirroring elite preferences rather than the genuine needs of local populations. In this sense, a government-centred aid architecture may end up underwriting the self-serving, and at times undemocratic, agendas of incumbent rulers. Scholars who make this point highlight the personalised nature of Turkish decision-making: "personal relations between President Erdoğan and high-level officials of the recipient countries can determine which projects are chosen to be supported since on many occasions new development projects were spontaneously approved by the president during his trips abroad without consultation with the advisory body." (Maza, 2014). Türkiye's involvement in the Somali crisis in 2011 exemplifies the approach. Then-Prime-Minister Erdoğan visited Mogadishu at a moment when virtually all other international actors had withdrawn for security reasons, reinforcing Türkiye's claim to a distinctive humanitarian profile. To cement that image, Ankara has pushed its official development assistance above the OECD's 0.7 per cent GNI benchmark; in 2020 it recorded the world's second-highest ODA/GNI ratio, behind Sweden. Although Türkiye does not rank among the top economies on a per-capita basis, this performance is presented as proof that it delivers substantial aid to countries in need.

Türkiye's use of social-creativity tactics has given its diplomacy a sharper bilateral orientation. These tactics aim to enhance Ankara's image in partner countries and to showcase the "human-centred" virtues that, officials claim, set Turkish statecraft apart. Through the upbeat rhetoric that surrounds development cooperation, Türkiye reinforces a favourable reputation abroad, which in turn facilitates the conclusion of bilateral economic, political, and security agreements. In practical terms, the same tactics give Ankara a relative advantage over rival external actors active in the same settings-most visibly when large infrastructure projects are awarded to Turkish firms. Scholars underscore that non-economic tools such

as development and humanitarian assistance are deployed intensively to advance Türkiye's commercial objectives in sub-Saharan Africa (Parlar Dal & Dipama, 2020, pp. 252–253). A frequently cited example is Somalia. Observers note that Türkiye's widely praised involvement in the 2011 Somali crisis was followed, in 2013, by the Somali government's decision to grant Turkish companies priority contracts to modernise and operate Mogadishu's airport and seaport (Achilles et al., 2015).

### **3. Azerbaijan's Status Strategies: Crafting Recognition and Influence in the Wake of Independence**

Following its re-emergence as a sovereign state in 1991, Azerbaijan has treated foreign policy less as a static doctrine than as a sequence of status-seeking policy repertoires calibrated to shifting regional constraints and opportunities. This section therefore periodises Baku's ascent into four analytically distinct moments-1994-2003, 2004-2013, 2014-2020 and the phase that opened after the 2020 Karabakh war-and, within each, pairs a headline strategy with the operational instruments that gave it concrete effect. as head of state

#### **3.1. Status Mobility Strategy and Multi-Vector Balancing in Azerbaijan (1994–2003)**

Heydar Aliyev, who returned as head of state in 1993, became the pivotal architect of Azerbaijan's foreign policy during this period. With the Karabakh ceasefire freshly signed, three imperatives shaped the agenda: re-establishing territorial integrity, building the institutional foundations of sovereignty, and reviving an economy crippled by war. During these years, Official Baku advanced a status-mobility strategy aimed at elevating Azerbaijan in the international hierarchy by balancing relations with different power centres. Energy provided the first tangible breakthrough. The 1994 "Contract of the Century" drew leading Western oil-and-gas companies into joint ventures, integrating Azerbaijan directly into global markets and sharply raising its geopolitical stock (EU Reporter, 2025). Flagship pipelines-Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE)-created export corridors that bypassed Russia, simultaneously fueling domestic growth and furnishing Baku with a powerful lever in external negotiations. Alongside its energy initiatives, Azerbaijan made participation in multilateral institutions and active engagement within them a cornerstone of its external strategy. Within the United Nations, Azerbaijan sought not only to consolidate its international legitimacy but also to keep the Karabakh question visible on the global agenda by participating actively in General Assembly debates and specialised forums (Fuller, 2013).

On the security track, accession to NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1994 opened a door onto the collective defence architecture. In the aftermath of 9 / 11, the government deployed peacekeepers to Afghanistan and Iraq operations, signalling strategic alignment with the West (DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2021). Full membership in the Council of Europe (2001) and sustained engagement with OSCE mechanisms, meanwhile, underscored an explicit commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. At the same time, strategic equilibrium with Moscow was preserved. Strategic equilibrium with Moscow was preserved in parallel. Azerbaijan retained membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States from 1993 but opted not to renew the Collective Security Treaty in 1999, thereby safeguarding defence autonomy. The same balancing logic animated the 1997 establishment of GUAM-a grouping with Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova-through which Baku deepened political and economic linkages across the post-Soviet space, developed alternative energy corridors, and coordinated regional security positions, all while maintaining independence from Moscow (Shiriyev, 2019). In short, by coupling energy corridors that connect the republic to world markets with a multilayered diplomatic network-from the UN and NATO to the Council of Europe and the CIS-Azerbaijan not only expanded its geostrategic latitude but also institutionalized a status mobility trajectory that went on to shape its post-Soviet foreign policy.

### 3.2. Social Creativity and Rising Prestige in Azerbaijan (2004–2013)

With Ilham Aliyev's accession to the presidency in 2003, Azerbaijan retained the multi-vector balancing of the previous decade yet channelled expanding hydrocarbon revenues into an ambitious prestige-building agenda. The underlying logic was social-creativity: Baku sought to differentiate itself through cultural brokerage, humanitarian outreach and high-visibility mega-events-tactics that would recast the country's international profile while reinforcing its narrative of tolerance and modernity. A first theatre for this strategy was intercultural dialogue. Launched in 2008, the Baku Process convened ministers of culture from Council of Europe and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation members, positioning Azerbaijan as a diplomatic hinge between West and East. Biennial World Forums on Intercultural Dialogue (from 2011 onward) embedded the initiative in a regular calendar, amplifying Baku's claim that the South Caucasus-historically a crossroads of faiths and ethnicities-could serve as a global platform for multicultural governance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2014). A second avenue of social creativity involved international mega-events. Victory at the 2011 Eurovision Song Contest and the lavish hosting of the 2012 final offered an instantly recognisable platform on which to project a cosmopolitan, hospitable image. Scholars have since regarded Eurovision as a deliberate exercise in "identity advertising": by staging a seamless, European-style show on the Caspian shore, Azerbaijan demonstrated that its post-Soviet modernity rested on more than pipelines and proven reserves. Diaspora mobilisation complemented these visibility gains (Ismayilov, 2012). The World Congress of Azerbaijanis (2008) and subsequent diaspora forums networked entrepreneurs and advocacy groups across North America and Europe. Campaigns such as Justice for Khojaly reframed the Karabakh narrative for foreign legislatures, counterbalancing Armenian lobbying without departing from international legal discourse. In doing so, Baku transformed community solidarity into reputational capital (Hasanov, 2014).

During this period prestige diplomacy also acquired a humanitarian dimension. The 2011 establishment of the Azerbaijan International Development Agency (AIDA) signalled a shift from aid-recipient to niche donor: development and relief projects in more than ninety countries recast the republic as a contributor to global goods, even though its per-capita income still trailed that of established Western donors. Parallel education programmes extended scholarships to students from the Muslim world, Africa and Central Asia, generating personal networks disposed to view Azerbaijan through a favourable lens (Asgarov, 2024). At the cultural end of the spectrum, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation under First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva orchestrated restorations ranging from statuary in Versailles to catacombs under the Vatican. Such endeavours anchored the government's tolerance narrative in concrete heritage projects and deepened ties with European cultural elites (Ibragimov, 2022). The elevation of Aliyeva to goodwill-ambassador status at UNESCO and ISESCO, alongside the inscription of traditions such as Novruz and Azerbaijani carpet-weaving on UNESCO lists, further institutionalised these gains. Taken together, these strands of social creativity accumulated reputational capital that Baku could leverage in pursuit of higher-status roles. As these initiatives accumulated, the cumulative pay-off was tangible. In 2012–2013 Azerbaijan held a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, an achievement made possible by a blend of bilateral aid, energetic lobbying and the positive brand equity generated by its cultural diplomacy. Sitting at the same table as the great powers allowed Baku to present itself not merely as a hydrocarbon corridor or a post-conflict state, but as an actor entitled to shape debates on international peace and security. Taken together, the initiatives of 2004 – 2013 reveal a deliberate effort to convert energy windfalls into symbolic capital. By foregrounding tolerance, patronage of world heritage and targeted humanitarianism, Azerbaijan engineered a set of prestige assets that strengthened its diplomatic hand.

Notwithstanding the prominence of social creativity in 2004-2013, elements of the earlier status-mobility repertoire never disappeared. Azerbaijan sustained a pragmatic closeness to Western institutions. Cooperation with the European Union deepened under the European Neighbourhood Policy and, from 2009, the Eastern Partnership (Brie & Goreainov, 2021), but Baku pointedly refrained from framing EU

accession as a national objective. Relations with NATO likewise remained within the Partnership for Peace, preserving operational interoperability while upholding a deliberate policy of non-alignment (Gurbanov, 2020). Thus, even at the height of its prestige-building campaign, Azerbaijan blended social creativity with a restrained mobility calculus, extracting investment and political capital from Western ties without binding itself to comprehensive integration.

### **3.3. Competitive Status Projection and Strategic Diversification in Azerbaijan (2014–2020)**

Azerbaijan's foreign-policy trajectory entered a new register after 2014, when turbulence in the wider Eurasian security landscape converged with the maturation of Baku's long-term preparations on the Karabakh front. The crisis triggered by Russia–West antagonism over Ukraine, coupled with the visible stalemate in Karabakh negotiations, prompted Azerbaijani decision-makers to privilege status competition—that is, the projection of national capability through hard power and geoeconomic leverage—without relinquishing the prestige-oriented innovations of the previous decade. Against this backdrop, the military dimension came first: defence allocations rose steadily to 5.4 per cent of GDP by 2020, enabling the acquisition of modern air-defence systems, precision artillery and unmanned platforms (Wezeman et al., 2021). The brief but consequential Four-Day War of April 2016 offered the first empirical proof that this build-up was more than deterrent theatre; it served as a rehearsal for the forty-four-day campaign of 2020, during which Azerbaijan reconfigured facts on the ground in Karabakh and rewrote regional power equations. In official discourse the outcome authenticated the credibility of the state's defence transformation and demonstrated that Baku's long-incubated planning could deliver territorially and symbolically decisive results.

Yet military modernisation was only one axis of the new strategy; economic and connectivity initiatives supplied a complementary source of status. By embracing China's Belt and Road Initiative and investing in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, Azerbaijan positioned itself as the indispensable node of the Middle Corridor (Rentschler et al., 2025). The opening of the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway in 2017, together with the expansion of the Alat–New Baku International Sea Trade Port, signalled an ambition to translate geography into geoeconomic centrality (Kenderdine & Bucksy, 2021). In the energy domain, the Southern Gas Corridor advanced in three sequential strokes: TANAP reached the western Turkish border in 2018; TAP brought Azerbaijani gas to European consumers in 2020 (Stein, 2021). The corridor not only diversified the Continent's supply basket but also reinforced Baku's profile as a reliable, market-oriented provider—an image that carried political dividends in Brussels and beyond. At the same time, although status competition dominated the period, acts of social creativity remained integral to prestige-building. Sports diplomacy proved particularly efficacious. Hosting the inaugural European Games in 2015 and the Islamic Solidarity Games in 2017 enabled Azerbaijan to welcome athletes from both the Euro-Atlantic and Muslim worlds within a short time span, dramatizing its self-description as a cultural bridge (Rojo-Labaien, 2018; Sofyan, 2021). Annual Formula 1 Grand Prix races from 2016 projected an urban modernity that complemented, rather than displaced, traditional heritage narratives.

### **3.4. Azerbaijan's Post-2020 Foreign Policy: Status Competition and Social Creativity**

The decisive victory in the Second Karabakh War opened an unmistakable new chapter in Azerbaijan's diplomacy. From Baku's perspective, the post-war agenda rests on two pillars: first, to consolidate a just and enduring regional order that reflects the new realities on the ground in the South Caucasus; and second, to broaden its web of partnerships in a multipolar world. In this context, status competition in the South Caucasus now centres on converting military gains into a legally anchored settlement with Armenia. Implementation of the November 2020 tripartite statement has advanced through border demarcation talks, the unblocking of transport corridors—including the prospective Zangezur corridor—and a growing agenda of economic interdependence (4Nuttall, 2025). The Shusha Declaration with Türkiye upgraded bilateral ties to an explicit alliance, synchronising defence procurement, logistics and energy policy (Shahbazov, 2021).

A parallel technology partnership with Israel has accelerated the modernisation of air- and missile-defence layers (Traub et al., 2024). Crucially, Baku presents these converging partnerships not as instruments of coercion but as building blocks for an inclusive and lasting security architecture.

Post-conflict confidence has also freed Azerbaijan to re-imagine its external narrative beyond the language of “occupied territories.” Within the Organisation of Turkic States the country now champions economic and cultural integration across Central Eurasia, reinforcing its role as a “natural bridge” between East and West (Shafiyev, 2023). Its 2019-2023 chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement stands out as one of the era’s most vivid demonstrations of social creativity: Baku steered NAM debates toward equitable development, pandemic solidarity and resistance to great-power coercion, thereby positioning itself as a principled voice for the Global South (Akbarov, 2024). The UN General Assembly’s 2020 special session on COVID-19-convened at Azerbaijan’s initiative-and medical aid sent to more than thirty states reinforced this image of responsible stewardship (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2020). This reputation was amplified when Azerbaijan hosted the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 29) in November 2024 and shepherded the Baku Climate Unity Pact, a landmark deal that set a US \$300 billion annual finance goal for developing countries and advanced new rules on carbon markets (Reuters, 2024).

Following the 2020 war, Azerbaijan translated battlefield success into a bolder-yet still calibrated-partnership agenda. The most conspicuous signal came in August 2024, when Baku declared its readiness to join non-Western BRICS grouping – an overture that fits neatly within its long-standing multi-vector outlook (Huseynov, 2024). On the opposite vector, an EU–Azerbaijan energy memorandum (July 2022) committed Brussels and Baku to doubling gas deliveries to at least 20 bcm by 2027, turning Europe’s post-Ukraine supply gap into Azerbaijani leverage (Reuters, 2022). In short, the country courts mutually offsetting partners–BRICS for geopolitical hedging, the EU for commercial scale-while avoiding exclusive alignment with either. In parallel, diplomatic engineering proceeds: Baku champions a “3 + 3” consultative platform that would seat Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia with Türkiye, Russia and Iran, thereby locking every primary stakeholder into regular dialogue under regional, not external, ownership. Beyond the Caucasus, officials have floated Baku as a quiet venue for exploratory contacts-including, at various points, Türkiye–Israel and Syria–Israel-framing mediation itself as a status asset (Reuters, 2025; The Times of Israel, 2025). The strategy is reinforced at the multilateral level: Azerbaijan’s term at the helm of the Non-Aligned Movement popularised anti-colonial and equitable-development themes that resonate in Africa and the Pacific, widening the country’s circle of political goodwill (Samadov, 2024).

In light of these developments, the result is a recombined posture that marries competitive status with social creativity. Hard-power gains let Baku dictate regional red lines; innovative coalition-building and humanitarian diplomacy extend its voice into the Global South. Meanwhile, pragmatic, issue-specific deals with the EU, Israel and the United States secure investment and technology without tethering Azerbaijan to a single pole. Taken together, these moves confirm a deliberate effort to lock in military achievements, diversify prestige channels and keep strategic options wide open-a formula that has already elevated Baku from South-Caucasian actor to recognised pivot in the wider Eurasian geometry.

#### **4. Mutually Reinforcing Trajectories: Türkiye and Azerbaijan’s Complementary Quest for International Status**

Türkiye and Azerbaijan have converged in their recent bids to enhance international standing, and each now amplifies the other’s reach. The 2021 Shusha Declaration recast their long-standing partnership as a formal alliance, committing both capitals to coordinated action across defence, energy, transit and cultural diplomacy. The familiar slogan “one nation, two states” thus moved from rhetoric to treaty, signalling that any threat to either side’s sovereignty or territorial integrity would elicit a joint response. Common ethnicity and language certainly grease the wheels, yet the pact is driven no less by hard strategic interests: for Ankara, secure access to the South Caucasus and onward routes into Central Asia; for Baku, firmer

guarantees of independence, territorial consolidation and global integration through its close strategic alignment with Türkiye. In effect, identity-laden fraternity has fused with strategic considerations, giving each partner a privileged place in the other's foreign-policy playbook and a shared platform from which to pursue status elevation.

Security coordination sits at the core of this compact. Decades of Turkish training, technology transfers and joint exercises modernised Azerbaijan's forces and underwrote Baku's victory in the 2020 Second Karabakh War. The Shusha Declaration then codified a "single force, single fist" doctrine, while the battlefield outcome itself magnified Ankara's leverage opposite Russia and Iran. Subsequent progress in Armenia–Azerbaijan talks, in turn, has broadened Türkiye's own room for diplomatic manoeuvre by reviving prospects for a long-stalled normalisation with Yerevan. Cumulatively, the alliance now shapes the regional balance of power and anchors both states' status-seeking agendas in a mutually reinforcing security and prestige framework. Complementing this, economic and energy cooperation forms the second pillar of the Turkish-Azerbaijani status agenda. SOCAR, Azerbaijan's state oil-and-gas giant, has become one of the largest foreign investors in Türkiye, while landmark projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil line and the TANAP gas pipeline channel Caspian hydrocarbons to global markets via Anatolia. The arrangement elevates Baku to the rank of indispensable supplier for Europe's energy security and simultaneously recasts Türkiye as a critical transit hub and rising commercial entrepôt. Under the Middle Corridor vision the partners extend this synergy beyond hydrocarbons. Joint ventures in rail and road—most visibly the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway and the proposed Zangezur corridor linking mainland Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan—stitch the South Caucasus into a wider Eurasian logistics grid, deepening regional integration and widening both capitals' diplomatic leverage. In short, these initiatives have functioned as strategic levers, amplifying each state's bid for elevated international status.

Türkiye and Azerbaijan also move in concert on the soft-power front, using culture and diplomacy to carve out a distinctive niche. The flagship vehicle is the Turkic multilateral architecture: founded in 2009 as the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States and upgraded in 2021 to the Organisation of Turkic States, the body has—with Ankara and Baku as co-sponsors—made the Turkic republics a far more visible bloc in world affairs. The Shusha Declaration aligns squarely with that vision, placing the global promotion of Turkic heritage and joint development initiatives at the top of the bilateral agenda. Outside the Turkic framework the two capitals coordinate, albeit asymmetrically, in wider forums. Azerbaijan's 2019–23 chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement supplied a podium from which Baku championed equitable development and pandemic solidarity; Türkiye, though not a NAM member, echoed those themes in its own outreach and used its observer status to back Azerbaijani initiatives. In the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation they vote in tandem on most dossiers, reinforcing a shared image as advocates for Muslim and Global-South concerns. Such calibrated acts of social creativity allow Ankara and Baku to reach beyond their respective regional power bases and present themselves as indispensable actors in the broader Eurasian and Global-South arenas.

## **Conclusion**

This study has shown that Türkiye and Azerbaijan have each re-engineered their foreign policies through distinct mixes of status-seeking strategies—yet have done so in ways that now reinforce one another. Türkiye's first AKP decade (2002–2010) rested largely on status mobility: the EU accession process induced sweeping reorientation—normative reforms at home, "zero-problem" neighbourhood diplomacy abroad, and a bid to act as a model Muslim democracy. From 2010 onward, however, Ankara's agenda tilted toward status competition and social creativity. Forward military deployments, the "Blue Homeland" maritime doctrine and the rapid expansion of an indigenous defence industry introduced selective strategic shifts, but the overall pattern became increasingly deal-focused—visible in ad-hoc bilateral deals, episodic alignments and recalibrated ties with Gulf monarchies. For its part, Azerbaijan's trajectory is staggered

yet analogous. During 1994–2003, energy-driven mobility-exemplified by the “Contract of the Century” and west-bound pipelines-anchored a major leap from post-conflict fragility to recognised petro-state. The 2004–2013 period then pivoted to social creativity: mega-events, cultural diplomacy and targeted aid projects upgraded the country’s image without altering core strategic alignments. From 2014 to 2020 Baku adopted calibrated competition, modernising its forces and, in the 2020 Karabakh war, translating hard power into territorial and reputational gains; the post-2020 phase blends that competitive confidence with renewed creativity in multilateral leadership and connectivity schemes. The 2021 Shusha Declaration crystallises this convergence. By institutionalising security coordination, energy interdependence and Turkic cultural outreach, it enables the partners to layer mobility, creativity and competition in tandem rather than in isolation. Türkiye’s logistical depth amplifies Azerbaijan’s energy leverage; Azerbaijan’s battlefield success and NAM activism bolster Türkiye’s claim to a wider strategic theatre. Joint pipelines, rail corridors and cultural platforms thus become shared badges of prestige, elevating both states beyond what either could achieve alone.

Summing up, three conclusions can be drawn. First, mobility, creativity and competition are complementary toolkits; when skilfully combined they can yield durable foreign-policy change without requiring a linear sequence. Second, bilateral synergy can magnify individual status gains, converting national projects into collective capital that resonates across multiple arenas-from European energy security to Turkic multilateralism. Third, while each capital retains its own constraints and priorities, their coordinated ambition underscores a broader point: in a system where recognition is diffuse and club membership is increasingly plural, horizontal coalitions offer a viable-and potent-pathway to higher international standing. Taken together, the Türkiye–Azerbaijan partnership demonstrates how the blend of shared identity, converging strategic interests, and carefully layered status strategies can reshape regional power dynamics and project both states onto a higher rung of the international hierarchy.

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