

Opinion: What Aliyev's reaction to the airplane crash tells us about Azerbaijan's relations with the West

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On December 30, Germany's *Der Spiegel*, a publication often perceived as critical and biased against Azerbaijan – similar to many other German media outlets – reported on Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's reaction to Russia's handling of a recent aeroplane crash crisis between the two countries. The publication noted, "Aliyev's reaction is a testament to the increased weight of his country." It continued, "Aliyev called the previous statements from the Russian side 'nonsensical,' 'absurd,' and 'stupid.' He spoke of attempts to cover up the situation and made it clear that with his apology, Putin had fulfilled only one of several conditions that Baku had demanded of Moscow."

For *Der Spiegel*, it appeared surprising that a relatively small country in Russia's neighbourhood – often dismissed in the West as part of Moscow's "backyard" – could stand up assertively against perceived injustices and demand its rights.

Today, Azerbaijan is markedly different from the country it was five years ago. For the first time in over 200 years, the nation enters the new year with no foreign troops on its soil, making it the only Eastern Partnership country to achieve this milestone. Having restored sovereignty over all its internationally recognized territories, Azerbaijan plans to celebrate 2025 as the *Year of Constitution and Sovereignty*.

Leveraging its vast energy resources, critical geostrategic position at the crossroads of East-West and South-North transportation corridors, and the steady development of its non-oil economy, Azerbaijan is increasingly solidifying its self-sufficiency. The nation now envisions itself as an emerging middle power, capable of safeguarding its interests and security.

However, an analysis of attitudes from the United States, the European Union (EU), and certain EU member states suggests that misperceptions about Azerbaijan persist not only among experts and journalists but also among political leaders and governments. These actors often view Azerbaijan as a small, pliable country that can be easily coerced into actions against its will.

A stark example of this attitude was the infamous statement made by James O'Brien, Deputy Secretary of State of the United States, in November 2023 during a congressional hearing. O'Brien criticized Azerbaijan's legitimate and lawful operation against the separatist regime in Karabakh, a move widely regarded in Baku as a defence of its sovereignty. His remarks, which included threats that there would be no more "business as usual" with Azerbaijan, signalled a troubling condescension.

The Biden administration compounded this misstep by reimposing the notorious Section 907 amendment, opposing the 3+3 regional cooperation initiative in the South Caucasus, and alienating Azerbaijan with its unbalanced rhetoric. Collectively, these actions represent one of the most significant foreign policy failures of the administration's tenure. In July 2024, President

Aliyev openly criticized such Western attitudes, particularly from the United States, accusing them of making “unrealistic demands” of Azerbaijan.

A persistent misperception about Azerbaijan’s foreign policy concerns its relationship with Russia. Some in the West speculate that Azerbaijan has aligned itself with Russia against the West, particularly after President Ilham Aliyev signed a declaration on allied interactions with President Vladimir Putin in February 2022, just days before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

However, developments in Azerbaijan’s foreign policy over the past three years strongly contradict this narrative. Baku has demonstrated a commitment to maintaining balanced and amicable relations with all major powers. The signing of a strategic partnership agreement with China in July 2024, alongside the expansion of such agreements with EU member states to a total of ten – most recently with Slovakia in May 2024 – underscores Azerbaijan’s independent and pragmatic foreign policy approach. Azerbaijan has also emerged as a critical alternative energy supplier for the Eastern European countries assisting their efforts to minimize their dependency on Russia.

Azerbaijan has no intention of becoming a subordinate partner to any major power. Instead, Baku insists on partnerships grounded in equality and mutual respect, reinforcing its status as a sovereign and self-reliant actor on the global stage. However, this independent stance often clashes with the expectations of Western powers. Both the United States and the European Union have behaved as though they have the authority to dictate adjustments to Azerbaijan’s relationships with other countries.

This overreach extends to attempts at interfering in Azerbaijan’s domestic affairs. The sheer number of resolutions adopted by the European Parliament criticizing Azerbaijan’s internal governance has become almost impossible to track. The European Parliament has even gone as far as urging the European Commission to terminate energy imports from Azerbaijan. Similar criticism has been voiced by the United States, reflecting a tone of condescension, as if the EU and the U.S. possess the moral high ground to lecture others about democratic governance.

The disproportionate and condescending approach has driven Azerbaijan’s relations with Western states to their lowest point in the post-Soviet era. While

some recognize Azerbaijan's strategic importance and its critical role in ensuring energy security for Europe, others cling to outdated perceptions of the country as a minor actor in global affairs, susceptible to external influence. Such views fail to grasp the fundamental shift in Azerbaijan's foreign policy trajectory.

Far from aligning itself as a junior partner to Russia, Azerbaijan has pursued a balanced and pragmatic approach to foreign relations. By forging allied relations with the NATO member Türkiye, strategic partnerships with China and deepening ties with European Union member states, Baku has demonstrated a clear commitment to maintaining its independence and cultivating diversified alliances. This independent stance not only strengthens Azerbaijan's global standing but also underscores its resolve to reject any undue pressure or interference in its domestic or foreign policies.

For the West, particularly the United States and the European Union, this should serve as a moment for introspection. Instead of treating Azerbaijan as a malleable partner, Western powers must acknowledge and respect its sovereignty, strategic importance, and legitimate interests. Building a constructive and mutually respectful relationship with Azerbaijan would not only advance shared goals, such as regional stability and energy security, but also foster greater trust and cooperation.