

A New Security Architecture in Türkiye-Azerbaijan Relations Between 2018 and 2023

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Abstract. Between 2018 and 2023, Türkiye and Azerbaijan significantly redefined their bilateral security relationship, evolving from a historically close partnership into a formalised strategic alliance underpinned by shared geopolitical interests and mutual threat perceptions. This period witnessed the consolidation of a new security architecture characterised by integrated defence planning, joint military operations, and institutionalised security frameworks. The 2020 Second Karabakh War served as a critical juncture, showcasing the effectiveness of Türkiye's military support, including advanced drone warfare and strategic advisory assistance, in reshaping the conflict dynamics in the South Caucasus. The subsequent 2021 Shusha Declaration marked a milestone in bilateral ties, codifying mutual defence commitments, emphasising territorial integrity, and signalling a shift toward a more assertive and coordinated regional posture. This transformation was driven by several structural and contextual factors: shifting power dynamics in the Caucasus and Central Asia, the relative decline of Russian influence, the reassertion of Turkish regional leadership under its "strategic autonomy" policy, and Azerbaijan's rising defence capabilities and economic clout. Moreover, increased cooperation in defence industrial development, intelligence sharing, and energy security has contributed to a multidimensional security framework that transcends traditional military alliances. The emerging Türkiye-Azerbaijan security axis has broader implications for regional stability and geopolitical alignments, particularly for Iran, Armenia, and Russia. It also reflects Ankara's ambition to position itself as a central security actor across the Turkic world and beyond, aligning with the institutional expansion of platforms such as the Organization of Turkic States. This abstract explores the historical trajectory, institutional mechanisms, and strategic outcomes of the evolving security paradigm, arguing that the Türkiye-Azerbaijan partnership has set a precedent for new forms of regionalism and deterrence-based security cooperation in the post-Soviet geopolitical space.

Keywords: Azerbaijan; Turkey; strategic alliance; diplomacy; South Caucasus.

INTRODUCTION

The strategic partnership between Türkiye and Azerbaijan has historically been underpinned by deep-rooted cultural, linguistic, and historical ties, often encapsulated in the phrase "one nation, two states" [1, 2]. While this fraternal relationship has long influenced diplomatic and economic interactions, the period between 2018 and 2023 marked a significant evolution, transitioning from symbolic camaraderie to a structured and institutionalised security alliance. This transformation was

catalysed by shifting geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus, the culmination of the Second Karabakh War in 2020, and the subsequent signing of the Shusha Declaration in 2021. The success of this collaboration not only altered the military balance in the region but also underscored the potential of joint defence initiatives. In the aftermath, the Shusha Declaration formalised this burgeoning alliance, outlining commitments to mutual defence, joint military exercises, and cooperation in defence industry development. This

agreement signified a shift towards a more cohesive and proactive security posture, reflecting both nations' aspirations to assert greater influence in regional affairs.

Literature review

In recent years, scholarly interest in regional security dynamics in the South Caucasus has grown, particularly in the context of shifting alliances, post-Soviet state consolidation, and the evolving role of middle powers such as Türkiye. Much of the early literature on Türkiye-Azerbaijan relations focused on cultural diplomacy and energy cooperation, often framed through the lens of soft power and ethnic kinship [2; 3]. These works emphasised the symbolic nature of the "one nation, two states" slogan, underscoring the cultural foundations of the bilateral relationship but offering limited insight into its institutional and strategic evolution. Following the Second Karabakh War in 2020, several analysts began to reassess the Türkiye-Azerbaijan axis through a security studies framework. The author [4] examined the transformation of military ties from episodic cooperation to structured alliance behaviour, emphasising the growing role of joint exercises and arms transfers. Similarly, authors [5] analysed the Shusha Declaration as a political manifesto with NATO-like implications, suggesting that the bilateral relationship had acquired characteristics of collective defence. However, these studies often remain descriptive and lack a comprehensive institutional or geopolitical framing. From a broader perspective, regional security literature often discusses the South Caucasus within the influence spheres of Russia, Iran, and the West, leaving the Türkiye-Azerbaijan partnership under-theorised in terms of autonomous regionalism and indigenous security architecture [6]. While realist analyses frequently interpret Azerbaijan's military build-up as a counterbalance to Armenia, few studies integrate Türkiye's strategic ambitions under its "strategic autonomy" doctrine into a coherent regional security model. This study contributes to the existing literature by bridging historical, institutional, and strategic dimensions to demonstrate how Türkiye and Azerbaijan have crafted a multidimensional security architecture. Unlike earlier works, it frames this partnership not merely as a bilateral alliance but as the nucleus of a wider Turkic security axis with potential multilateral implications through the Organization of Turkic States. By doing so, it situates the

Türkiye-Azerbaijan alliance within broader debates on post-Soviet regionalism, middle power strategies, and deterrence-based cooperation frameworks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Foundations of Türkiye-Azerbaijan Relations. The relationship between Türkiye and Azerbaijan is deeply rooted in shared ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and historical ties that span centuries. Both nations belong to the Oghuz Turkic lineage, and this kinship has long served as the cultural and emotional foundation of their bilateral interactions [2, 71]. Historically, periods of turmoil in the South Caucasus and Anatolia have repeatedly highlighted the depth of this bond. During the final years of the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman military supported Azerbaijani forces during the brief independence of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918–1920), particularly in the Battle of Baku, where the Caucasian Islamic Army, led by Nuri Pasha, played a decisive role [7, 9]. Though short-lived due to Soviet occupation, this early cooperation left a lasting impression on the national consciousness of both peoples. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Türkiye became the first country to recognise Azerbaijan's independence, signalling the start of a new era in bilateral relations [8]. In the post-independence period, Türkiye has supported Azerbaijan politically, economically, and diplomatically, particularly in the Karabakh conflict, where it has consistently endorsed Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. In 1994, a de facto ceasefire was established between Armenia and Azerbaijan, marking the beginning of a period of relative calm along the conflict lines [9, 66]. However, this ceasefire did not bring lasting peace, and political and military tensions in the region continued. During this period, Türkiye continued to support Azerbaijan's territorial integrity both diplomatically and economically. Türkiye actively worked to break various embargoes imposed on Azerbaijan and defended Azerbaijan's legitimate position on the international stage. Moreover, 1994 also marked a starting point for economic cooperation between Türkiye and Azerbaijan. In that year, the foundations were laid for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline project [3, 241]. This project established a critical logistical corridor for transporting Azerbaijani oil to global markets via Türkiye, laying the groundwork for a strategic energy partnership between the two countries. Beyond being an

economic project, the BTC pipeline has significant importance for regional energy security and for strengthening Türkiye's role as an energy transit country. However, due to regional constraints and internal challenges, military and strategic cooperation remained limited until the late 2000s.

Azerbaijan and Türkiye military alliance. One of the most critical developments in formalising the military alliance was the signing of the Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations on June 15, 2021 [10]. The declaration, signed by President Ilham Aliyev and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the historic city of Shusha, established a framework for mutual defence, joint military exercises, and cooperation in defence industries. The document emphasised territorial integrity, border security, and the importance of defending shared national interests against external threats. Before the Shusha Declaration, the two countries had already signed several defence cooperation agreements; however, these were more symbolic and limited in scope. Post-2018, these agreements became more operational, including shared military drills, arms deals, and defence technology development partnerships. The 2020 conflict over Karabakh served as a pivotal moment, highlighting the efficacy of Azerbaijan's military strategy, which was notably enhanced by Turkish support, including the deployment of advanced drone technology such as the Bayraktar TB2 [4, 588].

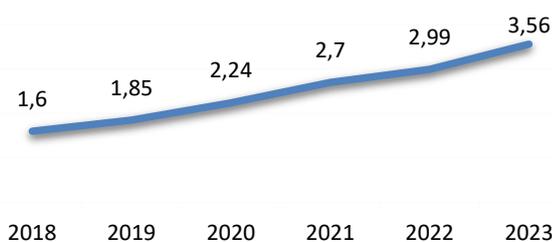


Figure 1 – Military expenditure (current USD) - Azerbaijan (2018-2023) (Billion Dollars)

According to SIPRI estimates, Azerbaijan's arms import volume is approximately 8.2 times greater than Armenia's. Between 2011 and 2020, Russia was identified as the primary exporter of arms to both countries. Specifically, Russia accounted for 94% of Armenia's arms imports and 60% of Azerbaijan's. For Azerbaijan, Russia was followed by Israel, Belarus, and Türkiye as the next most

significant arms suppliers [6]. From 2018 onwards, Azerbaijan and Türkiye significantly increased the frequency and scale of joint military exercises. Notable among these were the "TurAz Eagle" and "Mustafa Kemal Atatürk 2021" exercises, which included air and land forces simulating joint combat scenarios. These drills enhanced interoperability between the two armies and demonstrated military readiness to both allies and adversaries [11, 3588]. The deepening Azerbaijan-Türkiye military alliance has altered the security landscape of the South Caucasus. It has served as a deterrent against Armenia and signalled to regional powers, such as Russia and Iran, that a new security axis is emerging. This alignment also reflects Türkiye's broader strategic ambitions to project power in its near abroad through soft and hard power mechanisms. Moreover, the alliance is increasingly tied to the Organization of Turkic States, suggesting that the bilateral security partnership may evolve into a broader regional security bloc. This potential multilateralization could institutionalise the Türkiye-Azerbaijan model and integrate it into a wider Turkic defence framework.

The Organization of Turkic States and Security Solidarity. Between 2018 and 2023, the strategic cooperation between Türkiye and Azerbaijan deepened not only on a bilateral level but also through multilateral platforms representing the Turkic world. The most concrete reflection of this process emerged in 2021 when the institutional structure of the Turkic Council was strengthened and transformed into the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) [12]. Within this organisation, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have made their leadership roles more visible, laying the foundation for a collective vision that extends not only to economic and cultural fields but also to the area of security. The "one nation, two states" principle enshrined in the Shusha Declaration guides the OTS's security outlook; in this context, defence industry cooperation, joint military exercises, and cross-border security coordination efforts have accelerated significantly. Azerbaijan's military experience gained from the Karabakh victory, combined with Türkiye's NATO-level defence capacity, has created a model security partnership for the Turkic world. Especially with the opening of the Zangezur Corridor, the geostrategic importance of Turkic geography has increased, prompting discussions on the development of OTS security mechanisms, including consultative groups, joint exercise planning, and information-sharing systems

[13, 3]. In this regard, the Türkiye-Azerbaijan axis plays a leading role in transforming the OTS from a purely cultural entity into a strategic platform for solidarity. Despite these positive developments, building a fully integrated Turkic security architecture faces several challenges. Political diversity, military capability gaps, and differing threat perceptions among OTS members limit the pace and scope of integration. Additionally, external actors such as Russia, Iran, and China closely monitor and, at times, oppose the deepening of Turkic security coordination, viewing it as a potential challenge to their regional influence.

Nevertheless, the growing institutionalisation of Türkiye-Azerbaijan military ties serves as a strong model, especially for younger member states that seek to modernise their armed forces and develop independent foreign policies. In the long term, if political will continues to align and a collective strategic culture develops, the OTS may gradually transform into a functional multilateral security entity, guided by the example of Türkiye and Azerbaijan. This would not only enhance deterrence capabilities but also increase the Turkic world's ability to manage regional crises autonomously.

The Shusha Declaration: Alliance Law and Political Manifesto. Signed on June 15, 2021, in the symbolic city of Shusha, recognised as the cultural capital of Azerbaijan, the Shusha Declaration marked a historical milestone by elevating Türkiye-Azerbaijan relations from a strategic partnership to an explicitly defined alliance framework. The importance of this declaration lies not only in its provisions but also in the timing and location of its signing. Shusha, liberated after the Second Karabakh War, represents both a symbolic victory and a strategic gain for Azerbaijan [5, 735]. By choosing this setting, the two nations reaffirmed their shared triumph and deep-rooted brotherhood on both political and geostrategic levels. The declaration's contents encompass cooperation across various fields; however, the most notable aspects pertain to defence and security. The declaration includes a mutual commitment clause stating that in the event of aggression or threats by a third party, the countries will support one another militarily. In this sense, it closely resembles NATO's Article 5 collective defence clause and lays the groundwork for a de facto military alliance [14]. It also outlines cooperation in defence industry projects, intelligence sharing, and joint counter-terrorism efforts, clearly pushing toward institutionalisation. The increase in

joint military drills, diversification of defence industry cooperation, and integration of military training programs all prove that the declaration goes beyond rhetorical expression and translates into practice. Choosing Shusha as the site for the signing further enhances the document's symbolic power. Known as the heart of Karabakh, Shusha is not only a spiritual and cultural heritage site but also of strategic value. Türkiye's act of signing the declaration there reflects its explicit support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and its intent to be an architect of the emerging security order in the South Caucasus. In this regard, the Shusha Declaration marks not only a turning point in bilateral relations but also opens the door to a collective security vision for the Turkic world.

CONCLUSIONS

Between 2018 and 2023, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have successfully transformed their historically close relationship into a comprehensive and institutionalised security partnership underpinned by shared strategic interests, mutual threat perceptions, and a deep sense of cultural brotherhood. The post-Second Karabakh War period marked a turning point, especially with the signing of the Shusha Declaration, which formalised their alliance and set the stage for coordinated defence initiatives. This period witnessed not only an intensification of bilateral military cooperation, including joint exercises, arms development, and personnel training, but also a growing emphasis on multilateral frameworks, particularly within the Organisation of Turkic States. Türkiye and Azerbaijan emerged as the principal architects of a nascent Turkic security identity, seeking to enhance collective deterrence and regional stability. While geopolitical challenges persist, such as differing levels of commitment among other Turkic states and external pressures from regional powers, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have laid the foundation for a durable, forward-looking security architecture in the South Caucasus and the greater Turkic world. Their evolving alliance signals not merely a reaction to past conflicts but a proactive vision for shaping the regional order through strategic alignment, shared capabilities, and institutional trust. In this context, the Türkiye-Azerbaijan axis serves as a model for leveraging ethnic, cultural, and historical ties to achieve strategic depth, offering important lessons for regional cooperation, defence diplomacy, and the pursuit of autonomous security frameworks in a multipolar world.

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