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One more to join the BRICS?

While favouring both China and Russia, Azerbaijan remains aloof from democracy and human rights - more so than ever before

The recent statement about Azerbaijan's intent to become a BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa) member-state should be read within the context of this drift. Such a statement should be understood primarily in the context of rapprochement with China. As was the joint declaration on strategic partnership between Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and China, which the leaders of the three countries announced at the recent summit of heads of state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Astana, Kazakhstan. According to the declaration, Azerbaijan opposes the independence of Taiwan and supports the 'One China' principle. China, in turn, supports Azerbaijan's 'peace agenda' with Armenia. Notably, Azerbaijan's peace agenda is the 'victor's agenda': from the beginning, it excluded the political rights of Karabakh Armenians, forcing Armenia to accept Azerbaijan's version of peace.

Azerbaijan, along with Russia, is also highly critical of Armenia's pro-western drift since the Second Karabakh War. Currently, ten Chinese companies are reportedly operating in Azerbaijan's Karabakh Economic Zone. In other words, the political support to the 'One China' principle is coupled with economic ties. Azerbaijan hopes to attract Chinese investors, including in the field of alternative energy. Azerbaijan's State Customs Committee claims that 'China-Azerbaijan bilateral trade reached $3.1 billion in 2023, a year-on-year increase of 43.5 per cent, with both imports and exports seeing double-digit growth', making China Azerbaijan's fourth largest trading partner.

Thus, apart from the economic cooperation, Azerbaijan politically aspires to integrate into the non-, and often the anti-Western alliance.

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BRICS, which was established in 2009, is not simply a coalition of repressive regimes. Ideologically, BRICS relies on the discourse of *multipolarity* – a theory proposed by Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin, who recently

and the UAE.

praised BRICS as an ‘anti-colonial’ union. The discourse of multipolarity opposes the Western approach to human rights and civil liberties in favour of sovereigntism of non-Western states based on pragmatic economic cooperation despite internal differences. For Azerbaijan, such an ideological component fits perfectly in its ongoing crackdown, justifying it as Baku’s sovereigntist approach.

BRICS, aiming at expansion, recently included such countries as Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia and the UAE. The common principle of BRICS is a degree of antagonism to Western-centred ideas; however, the proposed alternative is not promising in terms of civil liberties and human rights. Vice versa, challenging what they call the Western hegemony, the organisation, appealing to the Global South, presents the non-Western countries as ‘different’ and thus rejects the universal concepts of human rights and democracy and accepts various kinds of authoritarianism and illiberalism. Not surprisingly, Russia, China, and India under Modi play leading roles in the organisation.

For Azerbaijan, which enthusiastically supports the 'anti-colonial' struggle against France, so much so that Baku has announced the creation of an 'International Front for the Liberation of French Colonies', the desire to become part of the BRICS is a logical outcome of recent anti-Western shifts in the country. Such anti-colonialism is in the spirit of Duginist anti-Western ideology, but in no way in line with progressive decolonisation.

The country’s leadership, its strongman Ilham Aliyev, see the future of Azerbaijan within the illiberal block, maintaining only pragmatic oil and energy-based cooperation with some Western countries. While prior to the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan positioned itself as a country with a ‘balanced’ foreign policy and even opted for integration into Europe, the current foreign policy is quite different. For the leader of Azerbaijan’s opposition Popular Front Party, Ali Karimli, these drifts ‘betray the people of Azerbaijan’ and keep the country away from European development and democracy – a path taken by Azerbaijan’s neighbours, Armenia and until recently, Georgia.

Armenia's current leadership, which is increasingly warming ties with the collective West,

Western institutions have long criticised Azerbaijan's militaristic stance on human rights violations, especially the radical shift to an illiberal and authoritarian world that occurred after the September 2023 offensive, when

has already received generous economic support from the European Union.

Azerbaijan seized Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian population, facing a threat to their survival, fled from there.

Azerbaijan responded by arresting several members of civil society and independent journalists, who were accused of 'spying' and working for 'foreign interests'. The move towards an authoritarian alliance in foreign policy has been accompanied by repression at home.

Armenia's current leadership, which is increasingly warming ties with the collective West, has already received generous economic support from the European Union. According to Armenian expert Sossi Tatikyan, the most tangible defence cooperation in the military sphere has developed with France. Recently, the US and Armenia have launched joint military exercises, which are again criticised by the Kremlin as an attempt to push Russia and Iran out of the region.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan, moving away from Western institutions, has chosen the BRICS path. Closer relations with Russia, which could have been expected after the inaction of the Russian peacekeeping mission during Azerbaijan's offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, prompted Azerbaijan to move closer to BRICS. Thus, while favouring both China and Russia, Azerbaijan remains aloof from democracy and human rights - more so than ever before.



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