

US does not support Azerbaijan. It supports Aliyevs.

And lobbying has a lot to do with it.

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From the US House Speaker posing on photos and Donald Trump entering into a business venture with the playboy son of a corrupt Azerbaijani minister-oligarch, to members of Congress violating ethics rules (albeit "unknowingly") by taking trips to a lavish convention in Baku, to the US Ambassador in Azerbaijan getting a lucrative job with a company linked to Azerbaijan's State Oil Company shortly after leaving his diplomatic post, to US universities becoming pulpits for Aliyev's lobbyists and DC think-tanks taking positions favorable to the ruling regime after financial engagements with the Azerbaijani government, to FARA records showing Azerbaijan's Ambassador in DC going on a multi-million dollar lobbyist shopping spree - the outreach of these efforts raised eyebrows in the media and within the concerned circles, including public integrity watchdogs.
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Some tend to downplay Azerbaijan's lobbying influence on the US foreign policy, dismissing its activities as a mere PR show directed at the domestic audience. But money matters in politics. And in foreign policy it matters every penny as much, particularly when it comes to American policy towards small countries. The corrupting effect of Azerbaijan's lobbying in the US is not a trivial matter to be easily dismissed.

The greatest achievement of Aliyev's lobbyists has been the invention and propagation of the myth of Azerbaijan's "strategic importance" for the US and, consequently, the importance of the ruling regime as the guarantor of a "strategic partnership". This, of course, is a pure nonsense. But it serves as the foundational pillar for rationalizing the support afforded by the West to the Aliyev dictatorship, not only by its most obvious supporters but even by many of his apparent critics.

A country with only about 0.5% of the world's oil reserves, and with gas reserves that can barely meet meager 2% of Europe's (not even global) demand is deemed by one too many "experts" as a "vital energy supplier for the West"; Angola, for example, produces and has more reserves of oil than Azerbaijan. And, to top it off, it is even blessed with access to open seas. That makes transportation of its oil to markets so much easier than Azerbaijan's complicated and expensive pipeline routes. Trinidad and Tobago has a larger current output and Uzbekistan has bigger reserves of natural gas than Azerbaijan. These and the host of other countries that actually surpass Azerbaijan in oil and gas production and reserves don't seem to get much clout. That's a shame. But with all the lobbyist hype about it, one might think that Azerbaijan is an oil and gas superpower at par with Russia, Saudi Arabia or Venezuela.

Even more laughable is the pedaling of Aliyev dictatorship as a conduit of Western influence and interests within the region. The utter incompatibility of its corrupt and repressive regime with the most basic values that underlie Western democracies is obvious. That makes Azerbaijan, under the current regime, a terrible role model and a type of friend that you would rather not be seen in public with.

But even putting the soft-power and moral considerations aside, it is incomprehensible how Aliyev's Azerbaijan can make a strong, critical ally for the West. When we talk about strategically important US allies, we usually mean mighty regional heavyweights like Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, or Japan. They all have some type of military, economic, technological, cultural or religious authority or advantage within their regions by which they can exert significant influence on others. Azerbaijan has none of it. Quite the opposite is true: Azerbaijan itself is very much a subject to influence from its much stronger neighbors. And the peculiar type of government running that country, often compared to mafia, makes it even more exposed to foreign pressure.

Azerbaijan's alleged importance for the US military and security operations in that part of the world is equally unconvincing. The US has two countries in the region - Iraq and Afghanistan that are located on each side of the anti-Western Iran - where American combat troops are stationed and whose governments are wholly dependent on Washington's support. The strong NATO ally, Turkey, is nearby, as well as other countries open for cooperation with the United States. So, any transportation routes, intelligence gathering posts or other activities going through or located in Azerbaijan can potentially bypass that country and be relocated somewhere else. Azerbaijan might be a valuable and convenient tactical partner, but certainly not irreplaceable or "strategically important" in any sense.

Most incredibly, Azerbaijan's complicated physical location - being "sandwiched between Russia and Iran" - is much touted by the regime apologists as some type of a geopolitical jewel that should compel the US and EU to bend over and backwards before Mr. Aliyev. In reality, such unfortunate geography makes Azerbaijan rather a strategic liability than an asset for any coalition building - the weakest link of the pro-Western chain, so to speak. That will remain true as long as it has a government lacking genuine electoral mandate from its people and whose power is based on robbing the country's riches, allocating the loot among the ruling elite, and silencing dissent with police bayonets.

Nevertheless, the tall tale about this "strategic US ally" and its indispensability as an "energy and security partner" has stuck around. And the US approach towards Azerbaijan's seems to be in perfect conformity with this narrative. In spite of ever deteriorating situation with democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan, the US government still maintains friendly relations with the Aliyev regime. The damage done to the prospects of democracy in Azerbaijan, to the US reputation as a champion of freedom around the world, and the shameful betrayal of America's friends within the Azerbaijani civil society - all are the sacrifices laid at the altar of these phantom "vital US interests".

By now, Azerbaijan has more political prisoners than Russia and Belarus combined. But even the attacks against the employees and affiliates of the US sponsored institutions, such as RFE/RL, and other prominent activists targeted for participating in Western-backed initiatives are largely ignored. That is not counting some purely verbal condemnations issued by some US officials. And even those are "balanced" off and rendered ineffective by the statements stressing the "positives" and praising Azerbaijan's cooperation with the West.

Harsh words might be coming from some offices within the US State Department and Congress, being duly met with anti-American diatribes spewed by the Azerbaijani officials and their state-controlled media. But all that takes place while the US Assistant Secretaries of State, American Ambassadors in Baku, members of Congress, delegations from Pentagon and other US agencies pledge "cooperation" and "friendship" to the ruling dictatorship. Thus, the empty rhetoric and verbal brawls between the official Baku and Washington do not seem to affect their cozy relationship in any significant way. Business mostly continues as usual. No sanctions or other tangible measures are taken or seriously considered against any Aliyev regime officials implicated in gross rights violations and corruption. And that is all that matters.

US applied sanctions over human rights violations against many other countries. Belarus, Venezuela, and Myanmar are good examples. Calls to apply the same principles to Azerbaijan had been made, to no avail so far.

Strangely, Azerbaijan itself had been under US sanctions for over twenty years, but for a very different reason. Adopted by Congress in 1992, the Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act prohibits US government aid to Azerbaijan, with few exceptions and waivers. The reason for this act was Azerbaijan's blockade against Armenia at the time when the two countries were at war, with Armenian forces invading Azerbaijan's Karabakh region. Thus, while the US stops short of sanctioning the Aliyev regime over its failure to respect the basic rights of ordinary Azerbaijanis, it punishes their country for defending itself against the foreign aggression in Karabakh war.

Ironically, when questioned about millions of dollars spent on lobbying, Aliyev's minions claim that it is done to counter the Armenian propaganda and to promote the country's position in the long-standing Karabakh conflict. However, the regime's lobbyists in the US have nothing to show for, other than useless "pro-Azerbaijani" proclamations by state legislatures and municipalities and other similarly symbolic gestures. And those appear to mean exactly as much to the Armenian militants in Karabakh as the US officials' toothless criticism of his rights record matters to Mr. Aliyev.

One can't stop but wonder that if even one tenth of the efforts directed at propping up Aliyev's rule was actually spent on Azerbaijan's real national interests, it could have yielded some tangible results. For example, the above mentioned infamous Section 907 could have been repealed a long time ago. That is, of course, if the United States wanted to support the Azerbaijani people, not the corrupt tyrant that tramples their freedoms and plunders their country. When there is a will - there is a way, as they say.

But, so far, the Section 907 remains firmly in place. And, more importantly, so does Washington's "strategic friendship" with the Aliyev dynasty and the regime's repressions against the Azerbaijani civil society. The situation clearly speaks for itself.

Washington's similar love affairs with unsavory dictators in other countries have been unfolding in front of our eyes for quite a while now. Judging by those precedents, the current US approach to Azerbaijan does not bode well for that country's future. Nor does it offer any bright prospects for anyone else involved, be it the ruling Aliyev dynasty, the rest of Azerbaijani people, or the American interests in that part of the world. The only exception, perhaps, are the lobbyists and pundits that promote these policies and benefit from doing so. When the mud hits the fan, they will be long gone from the public scene. (Azeri Report Editorial)