

IRAN'S SCIENCE DIPLOMACY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS CASE STUDY: THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

The first World War saw the birth of professional image cultivation across national borders, and it was inevitable after the war that the emerging academic study of international politics would wake up to the importance of what is now commonly dubbed as 'soft power'.

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Nowadays it is widely acknowledged that science, technology and international affairs affecting one another, bearing pervasive mutual influence. Science and technology play an increasingly important role in attracting global resources, talents and investment. Globalization has increased the importance of science and technology for international relations.¹ Cooperation in the fields of science and technology can be extremely essential for confidence-building especially among those countries which tension and misunderstanding is almost a chronically permanent feature of their relations. Science cooperation may lead to more efficient conflict resolution, it also improves mutual understanding and can empower poverty-stricken regions of the world. Science diplomacy can help the Islamic Republic of Iran and the countries of the South Caucasus to collectively and more efficiently cope with mutual threats and to create new opportunities for the prosperity of all of these neighbors.

We will briefly look at the important developments and turning points in the mutual relationship between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is assumed that considering the remarkable academic and scientific capabilities of the Islamic Republic of Iran, science diplomacy of this country regarding the Republic of Azerbaijan has not been active and successful. In this article the role of the

science diplomacy in the relations between the two countries will be discussed. At the end some suggestions will be made to deepen cooperation in the fields of science and technology.

Theoretical Framework:

The first World War saw the birth of professional image cultivation across national borders, and it was inevitable after the war that the emerging academic study of international politics would wake up to the importance of what is now commonly dubbed as 'soft power'. In the era of growing inter-state conflict between the two World Wars, E.H. Carr wrote that the 'power over opinion' was not less essential for political purposes than military and economic power and has always been closely associated with them.² Power means the ability to get the outcomes one wants and having the capabilities to affect the behavior of others. You can coerce them with threats, you can induce them with payments; or you can attract and co-opt them to want what you want. A country may obtain the outcomes it wants when other countries-admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness- want to follow it. In this sense it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics. This soft power – getting others



to want the outcomes that you want- co-opts people rather than coerce them.³ According to Nye, the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others); its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad); its foreign policy (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority). Popular culture is more likely to attract people and produce soft power in the sense of preferred outcomes in situations where cultures are somewhat similar rather than widely dissimilar. All power depends on context. Soft power depends more than hard power upon the existence of willing interpreters and receivers. Governments are not in full control of the attraction. Much of American soft power has been produced by Hollywood, Harvard, and Microsoft. Civil society is the origin of much soft power.⁴

Soft power is more difficult to wield, because many of its crucial resources are outside the control of governments, and their effects depend heavily on acceptance by the receiving audience. Soft power resources sometimes take years to produce the desired outcomes. Soft power resources are slower, more diffuse, and more cumbersome to wield than hard power resources.⁵ Science is a source of what Joseph Nye terms 'soft power'. The scientific community often works beyond national boundaries on problems of common interest, so is well placed to support emerging forms of diplomacy that require non-traditional alliances of

nations, sectors, and non-governmental organizations. If aligned with wider foreign policy goals, these channels of scientific exchange can contribute to coalition building and conflict resolution.⁶

Science diplomacy is an important instrument by which governments can realize their soft power. They must depend on the capabilities of private sector and civil society to aptly conduct science diplomacy. Science diplomacy provides nations with chances to cooperate in low politics; and as a result may mitigate political tensions in the long-run.

The Role of Science Diplomacy in Foreign Policy and International Affairs:

Science diplomacy is science cooperation among nations to tackle problems facing humanity in order to establish constructive partnership at the international level. Scientists can contribute to this process in several ways.⁷ Science cooperation can lead to the improvement of relations between countries. This role refers to the use of science as an instrument to repair strained relations. Science cooperation agreements and joint commissions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union or China during the Cold War are examples of the role which the science and scientists can play to help diplomacy. The Cold War period was characterized by a paradigm of 'isolation and control' of information and innovation for national

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security and commercialization purposes. Now this paradigm has been replaced by one of 'partnerships and engagement'.⁸ But as we mentioned, even during the Cold War irrespective of political tensions between the two blocs, were full of historical examples of the link between science and diplomacy.⁹ Since a primary meaning of diplomacy is an instrument of governments, some understand science diplomacy as a way to pursue a national agenda, or otherwise stated, a component of 'soft power'.¹⁰

When it comes to the neighbors of a given country, much attention must be paid to science diplomacy. Neighboring countries often face similar problems which originate from sharing the same geographical and ecological environment which necessitates science cooperation. Developing scientific ties with neighboring countries will culminate in the emergence of new generations of elite who are more familiar with the culture and mentality of other countries in that geographical region, therefore they can play a significant role in creating a peaceful and prosperous region. That is why we hold it is not rational to afford ignoring the science diplomacy in the caucasian policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan after the collapse of the Soviet Union:

Generally, Iran's relations with its caucasian neighbors has been limited and far from being consistent with geopolitical considerations; and geographical, historical and cultural realities. However, a great potential has remained unfulfilled regarding bilateral relations between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan.¹¹ In spite of the fact that the South Caucasus is significantly relevant to the security and national interests of Iran, the Islamic Republic of Iran as a regional power has not formulated an active foreign policy to deal with these three northern neighbors.¹²

Heyder Aliev and his successor have always cautiously got along with their powerful neighbors. Since late Aliev took power in 1993 the Republic of Azerbaijan has tried to keep the balance in its relations with the West, Russia, Turkey and Iran. With all this, Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan have experienced some difficulties in their relationship.¹³ Preventing Iranian companies from

participating in the consortium of the 'Contract of the Century' and de facto division of the northern part of the Caspian Sea by three of littoral states (Russia, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan) are just two examples.¹⁴

Political relations between the two neighbors have often been affected by third parties, specifically Russia, U.S., Turkey, and Israel; and disagreement on the legal status of the Caspian. Even the expansion of economic ties has been limited because of the nature of political relations; and cultural and linguistic affinities which are not negative by nature have to some extent played a negative role as a result of the influence exerted by the U.S. and Israel; and troublemaking by separatists.¹⁵ Although ethnicity is not an important factor by itself, it has affected the bilateral relationship. The Republic of Azerbaijan like many other post-soviet states is going through the process of nation-building; a process which requires mental and ideational emphasis on ethnical, linguistic and cultural traits that make a nation distinct from others. Hence, it is not weird when the people of the Republic of Azerbaijan feel attached to the nationality which originates from Azeri* ethnicity.¹⁶ However, after the fall of the Elcibey, ultranationalism has been replaced by pragmatic considerations and cautious policies.¹⁷

As Ramiz Mehdiyev claims, regional policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan has two main facets: 1) Developing favorable conditions to expand mutual cooperation with neighboring countries, specifically Georgia, Iran, Russia and Turkey; 2) Expanding ties with Western countries and Euro-Atlantic institutions. He adds that considering the religion of the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan, much attention must be paid to strengthen ties with Muslim countries.¹⁸

It seems that after Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and gradual removal of international sanctions against Iran; the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran can more easily find a chance to radically change the nature of their bilateral relations and overcome years of misunderstanding. The Republic of Azerbaijan is eager to become a platform to facilitate trade deals between Iran and the EU; and play the role of an energy corridor for the transition of Iranian oil and gas to Europe. Now both countries are desperate for foreign investment and increasing regional trade. They are expanding economic and commercial cooperation after a decade of cold relations.¹⁹

The Role of Science Diplomacy in Bilateral Relations:

There are many issues on which the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan can cooperate

* The Editorial Board of *Avrasya Dünyası* holds the view that "Azerbaijani" is the appropriate noun to designate the Azerbaijani Turks.

managers and bankers from the Republic of Azerbaijan.²⁸ Despite several ups and downs, Turkish policymakers believe in the effectiveness of this sort of cooperation in the long-run. In 2013, the Azeri students were the first in terms of quantity among all foreign students in Turkey.²⁹

Israel is another hardworking actor in the Caucasian arena. Science diplomacy is an instrument by which Israel is trying to improve its image on the international scene.³⁰ Officials of the Republic of Azerbaijan believe that expanding ties with Israel in the fields of agriculture, medicine, environment, education and communications will bring investment, technology, and prosperity to different sectors of the economy. One of the priorities of the 'State Program of Social-Economic development of the regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan' is developing agriculture, and Israel as one of the world leaders in this field can help Azeri farmers to run private farms.³¹ On the other hand, cooperation with Israel can provide the Republic of Azerbaijan with new weapons and military technologies which cannot be supplied by other countries due to the sanctions or their reluctance.³²

European Union is another significant actor which has a desire for promoting educational system of the Republic of Azerbaijan to catch up with European standards. According to European concepts, science cooperation and student exchange will contribute to economic development and political stability. EU

member states provide Azeri citizens with many opportunities such as Erasmus Mundus.³³

Conclusion:

As the world is increasingly encountering political tensions and cultural cleavages; traditional diplomacy, military power, and economic tools do not seem to be enough to surmount these challenges. Science diplomacy has not yet become a remarkable element of Iran's foreign policy agenda. However, considering the new environment surrounding Iran's policymakers after reaching a nuclear deal with world powers; the Islamic Republic of Iran can resort to science diplomacy as an instrument for deepening ties with neighbors and advancing regional peace and sustainable development; and as a result create a win-win situation which is beneficial to all parties. In addition to the student exchange programs, Iranian policymakers must initiate joint research and apprenticeship projects, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan can exchange their information and experiences to address environmental problems, contagious diseases, etc. Azeri officials must become aware of high level of expertise of the Iranians in different disciplines.

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Endnotes

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