

The Role of Azerbaijan's selective bandwagoning with Russia in its relative neutrality during the 44-day war

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Abstract

Starting with the early 2000s, Russia emerged as the major regional power over almost all of the post-Soviet space. As such, for decades Russia was viewed as the preserver of the status quo when it came to the conflict in and around Karabakh. It is widely accepted as a fact that no tangible change can occur on the ground toward the resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict without Russia's approval, especially through military means. Yet, when the 44-day war broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, Russia chose not to directly intervene in the war, knowing that with its military superiority over Armenia, Azerbaijan would come out as the winning side in the war. The aim of this study is to discuss the foreign policy approach of Azerbaijan towards Russia during the last decade and how it contributed to Russia's relative neutrality in the 44-day war.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Russia, Armenia, South Caucasus, Karabakh conflict, strategic hedging, balancing, bandwagoning

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union did result in the end of the Cold War with the US, however, it did not end Russia's capacity to exercise its influence beyond its borders. The difference was in the fact that this new Post-Soviet Russia was now not a global superpower capable of exerting its influence all over the world, but a regional power capable of projecting its power over the post-Soviet space (with the exception of three Baltic states, which became part of EU and NATO). As such, Russia also played a key role in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Karabakh. In fact, it was through Russia's mediation that the 1994 ceasefire agreement was reached between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Subsequently, Russia was one of the three co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk groups, which was tasked to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Aside from its role in the multilateral negotiations, Russia also had (and continues to have) important bilateral relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. And it is important to note that these bilateral relations were not only limited to the diplomatic sphere but also economic and military spheres.

Russia's approach towards the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been aimed at one main goal – preserving its influence over the region.¹ From the maximalist perspective, it would mean having Russian troops and permanent military bases in both countries (which it currently has in Armenia) and if possible, making both countries become members of a new, post-Soviet Russian-led arrangement. There have been multiple initiatives to this new Russian-led arrangement, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) or Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Armenia being a

¹ Naumkin, V. V. (2002). Russian Policy in the South Caucasus. *Connections*, 1(3), 31–38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26322951>.

member of both of these organizations. From the minimalistic stance, Russia's aim has been preventing any of the two sides from joining any anti-Russian (or as Russia often calls, "non-friendly") coalitions/alliances, especially of a military nature, and not allowing any foreign military presence (such as, in the form of giving military bases) in their territory. The Azerbaijani side fulfilled both of the above-mentioned expectations. In order to ensure the continuity of this setting, the Russian side viewed the Karabakh conflict as leverage. By not fully committing to any side from reaching a conclusive victory over the other, Russia aimed to pose itself as the arbiter of this dispute. And if both sides wanted to reach a favorable end for themselves, each needed to fulfill the interests of Russia. The conclusive victory of one side over the other, would in turn release them from the main leverage Russia possessed over them.

As such, when serious fighting broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan in April of 2016 (that became known as the 4-day war), which was the most intensive clash between the two since 1994, Russia immediately intervened to stop the fighting by exerting diplomatic pressure on both sides. The main reason for the Russian intervention was to prevent any kind of on-the-ground changes from taking place that would leave Russia out. To this end, although the fighting ceased, the negotiation process (which was stalled up to that point) was revived and attempts were made to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Considering this role of Russia in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, when Azerbaijan undertook operation "Iron Fist" against the Armenian occupying forces in Karabakh, Russia's reserved and impartial response was viewed with surprise by most observers. While it is important to state that Russia did not stand still – it did send arms and ammunition to Armenia, as well as tried to negotiate several ceasefire agreements

(which did not hold for too long) this was in stark contrast to the reaction it showed during the 4-day war in 2016. In the latter clash, Russia used heavy diplomatic pressure to make both sides cease the fighting. Although, in the 44-day war Russia again used diplomatic means to end the fighting, such as by holding multiple meetings with the ministers of foreign affairs of Azerbaijan and Armenia, no significant pressure was applied to coerce the sides to end the fighting.

While the demands of international law were restored by Azerbaijan through military means, it became only possible in 2020, while Azerbaijan had the capacity to carry out this mission even earlier. While this paper does not claim that there were no other reasons for such a mission not taking place before 2020, it does accept that the possibility of a direct Russian intervention was one of the key factors in the equation. As such, while the UN's lack of action to enforce its supposedly binding Security Council resolutions when it came to Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territories was itself a problem, Azerbaijan's ability to implement the demands of the international law later than it had the capability of doing so, specifically due to the Russian factor is the problem that this research will be concentrating on.

Considering the fact that Azerbaijan's operation "Iron Fist" with its successful ending did not result in the deterioration of relations between Azerbaijan and Russia, nor did it result in Azerbaijan antagonizing Russia, it is clear that Azerbaijan's foreign policy towards Russia played a serious role in this regard. For this reason, the importance of this research is that it will help to understand how a certain foreign policy approach, especially in the dynamic of small states – big powers, influences the stance of great powers with respect to the wars happening between neighboring small states, in the context of the 44-day war. Therefore, the conclusions that will be reached as a result of this study will help

us to understand what foreign policy approach Azerbaijan took when it came to dealing with Russia, and how it affected Russia's relative neutrality during the 44-day war.

The primary goal of this research is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the relations between Azerbaijan and Russia. The study aims to elucidate the nuanced foreign policy pursued by Azerbaijan vis-à-vis Russia, charting its evolution over time. Furthermore, the research seeks to discern the pivotal role played by this foreign policy in shaping Russia's impartial response to the 44-day war. With this question in mind, the hypothesis offered in this paper is that Azerbaijan's increasing bandwagoning with Russia contributed to the Kremlin's decision of not directly intervening in the war.

Literature Review

For this research, having an understanding of the dynamic between small states and big powers is highly important. It should be noted that there are numerous valuable pieces of literature that try to explain the power dynamics among states, without necessarily making the distinction between small states and big powers. As a result, these works usually portray a universalistic approach to interstate relations. On the other hand, there are pieces of literature that recognize the peculiarity of power dynamics between small states and big powers and try to explain this relationship in a distinct way. Considering the importance of power dynamics for interstate relations, the analysis of existing pieces of literature ranging from a more generalist approach to a more specific one has been conducted.

The concept of balance of power is widely known and extensively discussed in the international relations literature. However, when it comes to the question of whether there are any possible alternatives to the policy of balancing, there are two main concepts that can be found in the literature. The first of these is the concept of *bandwagoning*. Stephen

Walt (1987) defines the policy of bandwagoning as aligning with the state that constitutes a threat (or, if there are many such threats, then aligning with a state that constitutes the greatest threat). It should be noted that, according to Walt, balancing is a more common policy choice for a state that faces an external threat. He claims that, only under certain conditions, such as in the absence of allies or allied support, a state might choose to pursue the policy of bandwagoning.

In addition to bandwagoning, another alternative to the policy of balancing, which has a particular utility for this research, is the concept of *strategic hedging*. This is a relatively new concept in the literature of international relations. The concept of strategic hedging started gaining traction in the early 2000s. It was initially employed to explain certain foreign policy trends by specific countries and regions. Although in the beginning, there was no unanimous definition for the concept (as each author gave his/her own specific definition), almost all of them loosely defined it as a combination of the policy of balancing and cooperation with a given great power. Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels (2002) were two such early applicers of the concept. Focusing specifically on Japan, the authors used the concept of “dual hedge” as Japan’s foreign policy approach towards the US in the post-Cold War era. According to the authors, Japan was benefiting from the military protection provided by the US, which “hedged” them from external military threats (2002, p. 111). On the other hand, the US was an economic rival to Japan in the world market. Considering the importance of its supplier and customer countries, Japan has refused to become a fully-fledged American ally. Therefore, when contrary to its economic interests, Japan has repeatedly chosen to distance itself from the American foreign policy decisions – thus putting a second hedge. As an example of this behavior, the authors provide the Japanese stance on the American decision to invade Afghanistan.

Although, the Japanese government initially offered a wide range of support to the US cause of defeating the Taliban (including employing its Self-Defense Forces), later it backtracked on her offers considering that such an involvement might harm its relations with the Middle Eastern states. As a result, Japan ended up providing much less support than it had initially offered, and no significant SDF involvement was realized.

Robert J. Art (2004), one of the pioneers of the concept of strategic hedging, has employed this concept to explain the European foreign policy approach in the post-Cold War era. Although he discusses multiple factors that have influenced European foreign policy, he considers the policy of hedging to be one of the key components in this regard. Art characterizes Europe's foreign policy approach towards three countries – Russia, Germany, and the US, as *hedging*. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia became much weakened in the 1990s. As a result, he argues, Europe chose to pursue a more nuanced approach towards Russia. On the one hand, it showed a willingness to cooperate with Russia both economically and politically, hoping that this would eventually lead Russia to democratization. On the other hand, Europe chose to keep NATO as a tool of hard balancing, in order to counter Russia, in case it becomes hostile to Europe. As the author stated, "Europe lives next to a Russia that is neither enemy nor ally" (p. 185).

Art also argued that the neighbors of Germany, in particular France and the UK, were not very happy with its unification. They worried that a unified Germany might again pose a threat, possibly outpacing them economically and militarily. However seeing the US support for the German unification, France and the UK instead of putting hard resistance, chose a dual approach to deal with this threat. On the one hand, they intensively pursued the aim of integrating united Germany into the institutional framework of the EU,

which in turn could advance the economy of the EU as a whole. On the other hand, they heavily supported the continuation of the presence of NATO in Europe, as well as united Germany's full incorporation into this system. By doing so, France and the UK would have the US as a hard balancer in the continent against a potential resurgence of a hostile Germany. Here as well, according to Art, Europe used a dual approach towards Germany – on the one hand, economic and political integration, on the other, continuation of NATO's presence.

The last example of Europe's policy of hedging, provided by the author, was towards the US. Art argues that Europe's main goal, with respect to the US, was, on the one hand, to maintain her presence in the continent, in order to benefit from America's security guarantees and, on the other, to develop plans for a scenario in which this security guarantee ceases to exist. For this reason, Europe launched multiple institutional initiatives within the framework of the EU, in order to enhance their security capabilities (though not completely, but at least a foundation). Through these policies, Europe wants to gain more autonomy from the US, in order to increase its leverage over the latter. According to Art, this dual approach towards the US is another example of the European policy of hedging strategic bets.

Focusing on Southeast Asia, Evelyn Goh (2005) analyzed the foreign policy behavior of Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam in the context of the post-9/11 world. According to Goh, these three "maritime" states traditionally pursued a close relationship with the US for decades. On the other hand, more inland – "continental" states, such as Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, were more under the Chinese sphere of influence. Goh argues that, with the rise of China, the aforementioned maritime states pursued a foreign policy that could not simply be described as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality. As

such, the author claims that the behavior of these three maritime states can best be understood with the concept of strategic hedging. She defines the concept as “a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality” (p. viii). This approach enables the states to follow a foreign policy by not choosing one side, while totally opposing the other.

In her work, Goh argues that there are three components of the policy of strategic hedging that can be observed in the dynamics of Southeast Asia, keeping the three maritime states in mind. The first component is indirect balancing against China by aligning with the US. This is done as a contingency for a scenario in which China becomes an outright hostile threat against them. The second component is, what the author calls as, pursuing a policy of "complex engagements" with China. According to Goh, with this policy, the three maritime states try to build a relationship with China, by which both sides cooperate with each other in various spheres, intending to make China a power that acts in accordance with international norms and principles. The third component of their strategic hedging behavior is the policy of “enmeshment”. With this policy, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam aim to bring the interests of multiple powers onto themselves, so that the security and safety of the three above-mentioned states would also be in the interest of the latter powers. As Goh describes, this enmeshment policy can take various forms, such as giving stakes to states like China, USA, Japan, India, Australia, and the EU by integrating them into the regional multilateral formats or deepening economic ties through signing free trade agreements. Goh claims that each of these three components of strategic hedging is pursued for responding to three possible future scenarios – preventing China from dominating the region, having a contingency arrangement following the US

withdrawal from the region, avoiding instability in the region due to great power rivalry, in the respective order.

While the concept of strategic hedging was often used as a policy approach of medium and smaller states in relation to big powers, there have been pieces of literature that utilized this concept for explaining certain policy approaches among the big powers themselves. Evan S. Medeiros (2005) focusing on the early post-Cold War period, analyzes the strategies that China and the US employ in relation to each other and argues that both of their strategy consists of *hedging their bets* on different steps that they can take towards each other. Medeiros's understanding of "hedging" is slightly different from other scholars' understanding. He utilizes this term not as a set of measures a state can take to have a certain level of protection from another state which the former state does and wishes to continue cooperating. Instead, in Medeiros's understanding, hedging is a strategy, which involves taking various measures in relation to another state in such a way that when one of these measures fails to bring the desired outcome, the remaining measures would play the role of contingency.

Medeiros groups the hedging policies of China and the US into two categories - cooperative and competitive. According to the author, this is the result of a situation, in which neither side wishes to engage in a military confrontation with the other, while at the same time, both sides take certain measures to undermine the potential future hostile intentions of the other. For instance, he argues that the US cooperates with China, especially in the economic and diplomatic sector, in order to fold the latter in the rules-based international order, where China would commit abiding to the international norms and principles, and would not pursue any aggressive and expansionist aims. However, the US, worrying that China might one day challenge its regional hegemony, builds stronger

relations, including in the military sphere, with the neighboring states, such as Japan, India, South Korea, Singapore, and Indonesia. By doing this the US achieves two things. Firstly, it reduces the need for the neighboring states to bandwagon with China, in the face of the latter's increasing power. Secondly, in case a military confrontation becomes inevitable, the US together with the joint capabilities of these neighboring states would have military superiority over China.

On the other hand, China continues to cooperate with the US, in order to continue getting economic, financial, and technological benefits from this relationship. While at the same time, seeing America's backing of Taiwan, as well as its deepening relations with the surrounding regional states (such as Japan and India), China believes that the US wants to constrain it. In order to mitigate this problem, China pursues two main goals, which together constitute the competitive dimension of its hedging. Firstly, China promotes strengthening cooperation among the regional states in a multilateral format (such as with ASEAN). By doing so, Medeiros argues, China wants to establish regional norms and principles, purposefully designed to limit the US's potential hostile actions. According to Medeiros, China by this way, aims to mold the US's behavior in the region by these regional rules of engagement (similar to how the US aims to fold China into the international rules-based order). The second policy that constitutes China's competitive dimension of hedging is increasing its military capabilities. This internal balancing of China is primarily aimed at regaining control over Taiwan, but also from a broader perspective, bridging the power disparity between it and the US.

There have been other scholars who treated the concept of strategic hedging not as a standalone strategy, but as a state behavior closely linked to the international system. Brock F. Tesson (2012) analyzing the behavior of four states (Russia, China, Brazil, and

France) argues that for each period in the international system second-tier states have a particular core strategy. He argues that both the existing international system (multipolar vs unipolar) as well as the expectations of states about the future influence the choice of strategy of the second-tier states. By defining second-tier states as “those countries (with the exception of the system leader) that enjoy major power or regional power status”, he identifies four periods in the international system - concentrating multipolar, deconcentrating multipolar, concentrating unipolar, and deconcentrating unipolar. Developing from this categorization, Tessman argues that balancing, buck-passing, and bandwagoning are core strategies for second-tier states in concentrating multipolar, deconcentrating multipolar, and concentrating unipolar periods respectively. He further argues that strategic hedging is the core strategy for second-tier states in the deconcentrating unipolar international system. Tessman suggests that during this period, when there is a hegemon that goes through a process of decline, second-tier states through strategic hedging get a chance to assert themselves while avoiding direct military confrontation with the hegemon (at least in the short-run).

Tessman also suggests looking at strategic hedging in terms of two variations. The first variation, which he calls Type A hedging, consists of actions that a second-tier state can take, which would enable it, in the long run, to successfully overcome the system leader in case of a military confrontation, while avoiding a premature military clash with the latter. Broadly speaking, this can be a set of measures that would reduce the leverages that the system leader has over the second-tier state or would increase the latter's self-sufficiency.

When it comes to the second variation – Type B hedging, Tessman states that there are certain benefits that second-tier states get from the hegemon during the period of the

unipolar international system, such as maintaining the safety of maritime routes, protection under the hegemon's nuclear umbrella, etc. Consequently, when the hegemon goes through a relative decline, it usually becomes incapable of maintaining these benefits. As a result, second-tier states would take measures, either individually (such as developing nuclear weapons) or collectively (joint maritime patrolling) to decrease their reliance on the hegemon for such benefits. Tessman defines such a set of measures as Type B hedging.

There are some scholars, such as Mohammad Salman and Gustaaf Geeraerts (2015), who view the concept of strategic hedging as a process. Salman and Geeraerts's understanding of strategic hedging shares certain similarities with Tessman's understanding. Particularly, they both agree that strategic hedging is a policy that second-tier states choose during the period of relative decline of the hegemon during the unipolar international system. However, unlike Tessman, Salman and Geeraerts argue that the policy of strategic hedging is a process that includes alternating variations of balancing behavior. They first make a distinction between positive balancing, which comprises a set of actions that a second-tier state would take in order to change the unipolar system, and negative balancing, which is a set of actions that the hegemon would take to preserve its status and the unipolar system. The authors further divide these two forms of balancing into military and nonmilitary forms of balancing.

Based on these four forms of balancing, Salman and Geeraerts suggest that strategic hedging is a policy that is comprised of four stages, which is used by second-tier states to bridge the power gap between them and the leading state, while not causing a direct confrontation. In other words, it involves a process in which there is a large power

gap between the secondary state and the leading state, which as a result of successful hedging ends up with the disappearance of this gap.

Authors define this four-staged process as follows – it starts with a period of large power gap between the leading state and the secondary state. At this stage, the secondary state begins to employ a positive nonmilitary balancing strategy (such as enhancing internal economic capabilities). In response to this, in the next stage, the leading state will counter this challenging state with negative nonmilitary balancing methods (such as strategic non-cooperation). Subsequently, if the gap between the two states has been reduced, then in the third stage the secondary state would resort to positive military balancing by policies like enhancing its own military capabilities. In the fourth stage, facing a growing threat from a rival state, the leading state would resort to negative military balancing (preferably in an indirect way, such as by giving support in terms of military equipment and technology to the enemy of the rival state).

While this approach to the concept of strategic hedging does bring a new way of looking at this strategy, it can be said that this approach is relatively unique and has certain flaws. The main issue with Salman and Geeraerts's conceptualization is that they do not consider strategic hedging as a separate state behavior alternative to balancing. In their definition of strategic hedging, it is a combination of consecutive different variations of balancing behavior itself. Such an approach inadvertently devalues the utility of the concept. While the element of cooperation between the second-tier state and the system leader (or in other words, policies of bandwagoning by the secondary state towards the system leader) has consistently been an important element of the concept of strategic hedging in the works of other scholars, Salman and Geeraerts fail to give deserved credit to this aspect. In the end, the image that is portrayed with their conceptualization of

strategic hedging is one that consists of purely a gradual escalation of hostilities between the hedging state and the leading state.

There have been many works in the international relations literature on the concept of strategic hedging in the context of second-tier states versus system hegemon. However, one often overlooked aspect of strategic hedging is how this strategy can be understood from the perspective of small states. Cheng-Chwee Kuik (2010) examines the relationship of two Southeast Asian states – Malaysia and Singapore, with China throughout the Cold War and post-Cold War period. Kuik, in line with the realist school of thought, also recognizes the international political system as anarchy. However, he argues that the majority of the literature on the alignment behavior was focused on big powers and as such, the explanations provided by these pieces of literature fall short of explaining the alignment behavior of small states. According to Kuik, big states are power maximizers and as a result, their primary aim is to dominate over other states. On the contrary, the primary aim of small states, due to their smaller size and strength, is survival.

Kuik argues that there are three risks that small states face because of their vulnerabilities – economic, security, and political risks. The author defines this situation as a “strategic trilemma”. Due to this reason, small states pursue external assistance to mitigate these risks. However, as Kuik argues, a small state cannot tackle all of its risks by choosing one course of action. Additionally, that choice itself can satisfy some of the small state's risks, but it can also make the latter vulnerable to other risks.

According to the author, when facing a rising power, small states would always follow the strategy of hedging, as long as it is possible. In Kuik’s explanation, small states would choose a pure-balancing or pure-bandwagoning approach only if the threat to them

by a big power is direct and imminent. As long as this is not the case, small states would prefer the policy of hedging.

One key insight introduced by Kuik is that there are degrees to the hedging behavior. In a spectrum ranging from power acceptance (bandwagoning) to power rejection (balancing), there are degrees like *binding*, *economic pragmatism (neutrality)*, *dominance denial*, and *soft-balancing*. These degrees characterize how “hard” or “mild” of a hedging behavior a state is pursuing. Kuik explains this variety in the strategy of hedging with the *Domestic Legitimation* model. The author argues that the political elites of small states shape their hedging strategy by considering their internal dynamics as well. As a result, a strategy that justifies, enhances, and consolidates the internal authority of the ruling elite will become the preferred choice. As an example, according to Kuik, the reason why Singapore followed a more reserved approach towards China, by not hedging the latter through limited bandwagoning was due to the fact that it was thought that this approach might have destabilized the domestic multicultural arrangement of Singapore. This choice might have been interpreted as a result of the ethnic kinship between the ruling elite of Singapore with China.

Conceptual Framework

The relationship between Russia and Azerbaijan is another example of a relationship between a big power and a small state. Throughout its independence, Azerbaijan's relationship with Russia showed considerable variety. Considering the fact that Azerbaijan as a small state gained its independence from a Russian-led Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the fact that Russia was the strongest power in close proximity to Azerbaijan, the former was always viewed as a great source of threat to Azerbaijan.

When looking at the traditional realist school of thought, it could have been thought that the only two options available for Azerbaijan were either balancing against or bandwagoning with Russia. In fact, in the early years of its independence, Azerbaijan tried both of these strategies to mitigate the risk incurred by Russia. However, both of these strategies proved to be ineffective for Azerbaijan in dealing with the Russian threat. As a result, with Heydar Aliyev becoming the president of Azerbaijan, the country took a middle approach to its relationship with Russia. As Valiyev and Mamishova (2019) argue, the foreign policy choice that Azerbaijan pursued in relation to Russia, since Heydar Aliyev's coming to power, can best be characterized as strategic hedging.

As can be seen from the literature review, there are different definitions offered by various authors for the concept of strategic hedging. While many of these definitions are close to each other and reflect in essence similar patterns of behavior, for the sake of this research, the definition that best suits the case of Azerbaijan's policy towards Russia is the one provided by Evelyn Goh. Goh (2005) defines the concept of hedging as "a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality".

Kuik's definition of the same concept is also not too radically different from the one offered by Goh. Kuik (2010) defines the concept of hedging as "a strategic behavior under the conditions of high stakes and high-uncertainties, in which a country seeks to offset risks by pursuing multiple opposite and mutually-counteracting options, as an effort to insure its long-term interests in a fluid international environment".

The reason why Goh's definition of the concept of strategic hedging is chosen for this research is due to the fact that Kuik's definition of this concept is narrower in scope.

It is characterized as a behavior, which is shaped as a result of a "fluid international environment" – an environment in which there is a newly rising or declining power. While this definition does suit a case provided in his own research – Malaysia and Singapore's strategy in relation to a rising China, it neglects an environment that can be defined as static or established in terms of the strength of big power. As was the case with Azerbaijan, although on a global scale the collapse of the Soviet Union may be characterized as a decline of great power, on a regional level (i.e. South Caucasus) Russia remained the primary power. This does not mean that Russia's power projection capability remained unchanged. Quite the contrary. Russia's power projection capability did increase, particularly after Vladimir Putin's rise to power. However, speaking in comparison to other regional and international powers, Russia still remained the country that had significant leverage over the region. Nonetheless, Azerbaijan still pursued the strategy of hedging towards Russia.

However, this research does agree with Kuik's theory that there are degrees to a hedging behavior, which can be more inclined towards either balancing or bandwagoning. While this research agrees that Azerbaijan's overall policy towards Russia since Heydar Aliyev is best characterized as strategic hedging, it argues that during the period leading up to the 44-day war, Azerbaijan's relationship with Russia became increasingly more inclined towards bandwagoning approach. Although in Kuik's spectrum of degrees of hedging, the degree that is the closest to the policy of bandwagoning is termed "limited bandwagoning", due to the insufficient clarity provided for this term, coupled with its abstract nature, in this research the term "selective bandwagoning" will be used as a component of Azerbaijan's overall hedging strategy towards Russia.

Methodology

In order to gain more insight into Azerbaijan's approach towards Russia in the years leading up to the 44-day war, a ten-year-long period was examined – from 2009 to 2019. The aim of this model was to reveal Azerbaijan's behavior in relation to Russia, in order to see whether any form of trend can be identified. For this reason, multiple spheres of interaction between Azerbaijan and Russia were selected. To this end, both primary and secondary forms of data are used.

To understand Azerbaijan's behavior towards Russia in the period leading up to the war, Azerbaijan's own policy choices were taken as the source of data for this research. To this end, four policy choices were examined – *weapons purchase, voting behavior in the UN on matters concerning Russia, the level of trade turnover, and the number of Russian-language schools and the number of students studying in these schools*. The respective data was collected from official government statistics, reports carried out by research institutes (including think tanks and field-specific NGOs), and the official UN online archive.

Each of these components (except the number of Russian-language schools and the number of students studying in these schools) is analyzed individually for the given time period. The data for the last component (Russian-language schools and students studying there) is more dispersed. Therefore, it will not be subject to the ten-year framework.

The aim of this method of analysis was to observe possible trends. A trend that shows an increasing level of policy choices in favor of Russia was taken as a reflection of a strategy more inclined towards bandwagoning. On the other hand, a trend that reveals a

declining level of policy choices in favor of Russia was taken as a reflection of a strategy that is more inclined towards balancing.

The reason for choosing this methodological approach was due to the fact that it is very compatible with the objectives of this research. Namely, this approach is helpful for understanding Azerbaijan's relationship towards Russia by examining specific policy choices made by Azerbaijan in this regard, while at the same time, it enables us to discern possible trends reflecting the period leading up to the 44-day war.

We recognize the fact there are other research methods that could have been considered – particularly, content analysis and one-on-one interviews. For the former, speeches of high-ranking state officials, press statements and formal texts from the Azerbaijani side could have been examined to detect a language pattern that was used in relation to Russia during the given time period. Another option could have been taking one-on-one interviews with state officials, specifically engaged in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. The reason why the case-based analysis method was adopted for this research was due to its specific strengths over the other aforementioned alternatives. Firstly, while content analysis would have provided us with a rhetorical aspect, the method that was adopted for this research offers us Azerbaijan's actual policy choices towards Russia in practice. As a result, with its more solid data, the latter approach was preferred.

When it comes to the one-on-one interview method, it was initially viewed as an attractive approach. However, in this case, Azerbaijan's strategy towards Russia leading up to the 44-day war was extensively known only by a very small group of high-ranking government officials. Due to this, coupled with the fact that many such policy decisions chosen by Azerbaijan might have been still classified (which the aforementioned officials

would not be willing to share yet) we considered this method to be not very feasible for this research.

Findings

In this section, the empirical results and analysis of this research will be provided in four parts. The first three parts will concentrate on the pre-defined spheres of interaction between Azerbaijan and Russia in the ten-year period leading up to the 44-day war. These parts will be ordered as follows – Azerbaijan’s weapons purchase from Russia, Azerbaijan’s voting behavior in the UN on matters concerning Russia, and the level of trade turnover between the two countries. These parts will then be followed by Azerbaijan’s policy in the socio-cultural sphere, namely the increasing importance given to the protection and preservation of the Russian language by Azerbaijan.

Weapons Purchase

In order to find out the volume of weapons purchases by Azerbaijan between 2009 and 2019, the data was generated from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). For the purpose of this research, SIPRI's total trend-indicator value (TIV) interface was used. TIV shows the total volume of imports and exports of conventional weapons (which was possible to obtain information about) between a supplier and a recipient state in a given time frame. However, it is worth mentioning that TIV is not the same as the exact financial value of a transaction. Since there can be variations in the price of a weapon from one deal to another, SIPRI employs a static, known price for each weapon. This price multiplied by the quantity of the weapon purchased gives the total trend-indicator value (TIV) of that purchase.

Shown below is the table of the total trend-indicator value (TIV) of Azerbaijan's arms imports broken down by supplier for the period 2009-2019 (expressed in millions of USD). It should be noted that “0” represents that the value of deliveries for that transaction was less than 0.5 million USD. Additionally, figures may not add up due to the conventions of rounding.

Table 1. TIV of Azerbaijan's arms imports broken down by supplier for the period 2009-2019 (expressed in millions of USD)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Belarus	27	9	51	69	33	33			10	37		269
Czechia									4	5		9
Israel	8	9	5	9	25	17	108	250	151	247	26	854
Pakistan										2		2
Russia	2	97	477	256	305	550	210	7	109	53		2066
Slovakia									12	12		24
South Africa	5	9	5	16	3	4	2					43
Spain											13	13
Turkiye		4	7	20	5	17	9	16	4	6	6	93
Ukraine	103	28	14	6	15							165
United States	0	1	1	2	0	1						4
Unknown supplier(s)										4		4
Total	145	157	560	378	385	621	328	274	290	365	44	3547

Source: SIPRI

As can be seen from the TIV table, Azerbaijan's arms imports from Russia for the year 2009 were equal to 2 million USD. For the year 2010, this value increased to 97 million USD. In 2014, there was a remarkable spike in the purchase of weapons by Azerbaijan from Russia, equivalent to 477 million USD – almost half a billion dollars for one single year. Although for the subsequent year, the value of weapons imports from Russia was relatively lower, overall this number was still high at 256 million USD. However, it should be noted that while for the previous year, Azerbaijan's total value of

arms imports was 560 million USD, for 2012 there was a sudden decline to 378 million USD. Therefore, it can be assumed that the decline in the level of arms imports from Russia from 477 million to 256 million USD was due to an impact of another third variable. Following year, in 2013 the value of arms imports from Russia grew further to 305 million USD. With this increasing trend, in the year 2014, the value of arms imports from Russia peaked at 550 million USD – more than half a billion dollars worth of military weapons and equipment within one year. Interestingly, we see a decline to 210 million USD. Again, when we compare the total purchase of weapons by Azerbaijan for two years – 2014 and 2015, we see that there was an overall drop in the volume of imports, from 621 million USD to 328 million USD. It can be argued that this decline was due to the 2014-2015 economic crisis that Azerbaijan faced. Although this decline in the total value of arms imports by Azerbaijan continued for the year 2016 – to 274 million USD, the value of weapons purchased from Russia saw a dramatic decline in this year, which stood at 7 million USD. It can be speculated that this decline in the purchase of Russian-made weapons at the expense of Israeli ones, which stood at 250 million USD, might have been due to a short-term souring of relations between Baku and Moscow, particularly following the 4-day war. Following this dwindling, as Azerbaijan's total value of arms imports gradually increased (albeit slowly), the purchase of weapons from Russia rose again to 109 and 53 million USD for the years 2017 and 2018 respectively. For the year 2019, there is no data shown in regard to the purchase of weapons from Russia by Azerbaijan. However, considering the fact that the total value of arms imports by Azerbaijan for this year is shown as 44 million USD (compared to 365 million USD a year prior) it can be stated that there are not enough resources available in terms of this year's arms imports of Azerbaijan, rather than an actual almost 90 percent decline.

Some might argue that the reason behind this high volume of weapons purchases is due to the availability. As it is widely known, Western arms suppliers have refused to sell weapons and ammunition to Azerbaijan, since very early on.

As such, it can be claimed that the reason why Azerbaijan imported so many weapons from Russia was because Azerbaijan lacked any other viable alternative. However, this is not entirely true. Considering the fact that the primary weapons that Azerbaijan was importing from Russia were small arms and light weapons, tanks, armored personnel carriers, and infantry fighting vehicles, it is safe to say that Azerbaijan indeed had other alternatives that it could have bought in case if it wanted. For example, Israel produced weapons from almost all of the above-mentioned categories – be it IWI Tavor assault rifles, Merkava tanks, or Achzarit armored personnel carriers. Other alternatives could have been China, Singapore, and South Korea.

Another claim could be that while Azerbaijan had alternatives, the reason why it preferred to buy from Russia was due to its relatively low cost. Firstly, the exact price of a purchased weapon is determined by bilateral negotiations. Therefore, we neither have information about the cost of purchase of Russian weapons for Azerbaijan, nor whether a lower price could not be negotiated for the same category of weapons from other suppliers. The second point regarding this argument is that the arms purchase is a much more political transaction, than a purely economic one. There are many countries who opt for importing a costlier alternative of the same type of weapon, due to political considerations. An example of this could be Georgia's decision to start purchasing US-made weapons (particularly small arms and light weapons) instead of their cheaper Russian alternatives. Therefore, if Azerbaijan had the intention to gradually distance itself

from Russia (as part of its balancing-leaning approach), the economic factor would not have been a primary consideration.

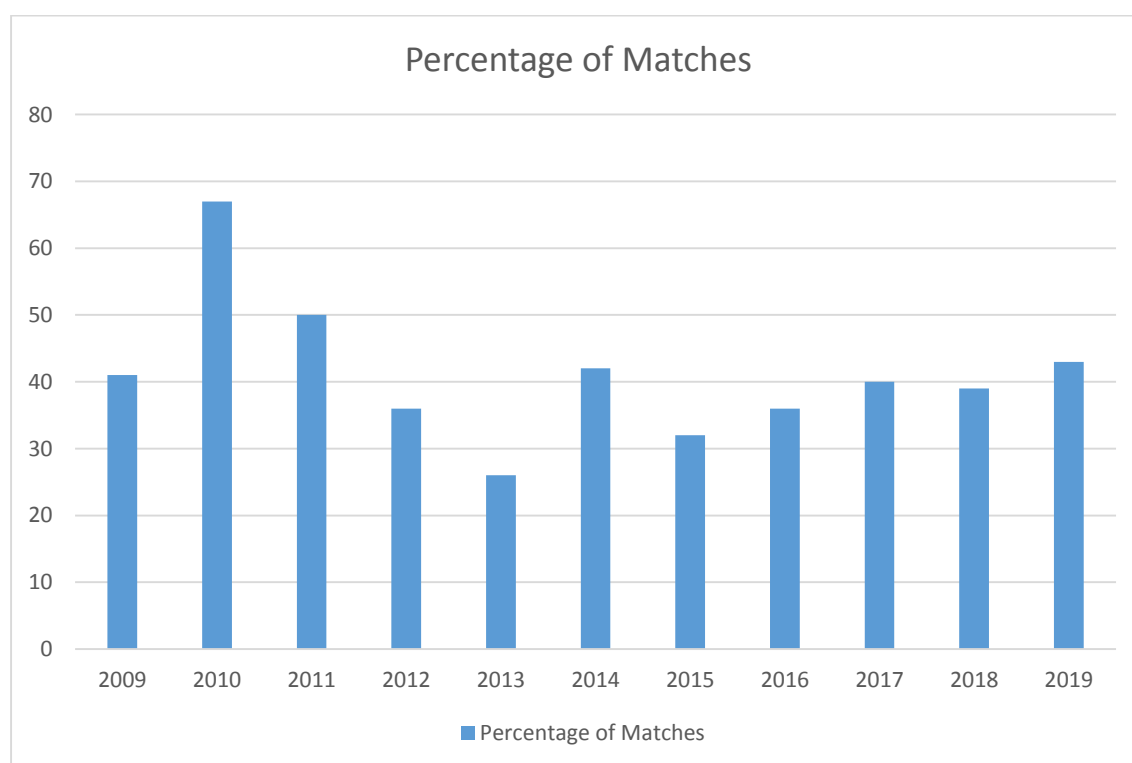
Voting behavior in the UN on matters concerning Russia

In addition to the cooperation in terms of weapons purchases, another reflection of Azerbaijan's relationship towards Russia can be seen through their voting pattern in the UN. It can be said that the countries that are relatively closely aligned with one another (especially in the small state – big power dynamic) demonstrate more unison voting behavior. This comes from the fact that more often than not countries that are aligned to one another hold identical positions when it comes to various foreign policy matters. In order to see whether a similar kind of dynamic is also at play between Azerbaijan and Russia, their voting behavior in the UN between the years 2009 and 2019 was analyzed for this research.

For this purpose, as both countries are members of the UN General Assembly, their stances on various resolutions that were put forward for the voting procedure between the years 2009 and 2019 were examined. It is worth mentioning that the majority of resolutions passed by the UN General Assembly are done so without voting – on the basis of consensus. The resolutions for which no consensus is formed, simple majority voting by the Member States is conducted. As such, in this research, the resolutions, which were passed through the voting procedure of the Member States, were taken into account. As a rule, throughout the analyzed time period, resolutions whose topic is of a humanitarian and economic nature, such as the ones on trade, human rights, and agriculture, together with the topics related to distant regions, where there is no direct Russian involvement, were excluded. The remaining resolutions that were analyzed were primarily on military (weaponry, use of force, nuclear power) and political (conflicts with

direct Russian involvement, such as in Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Syria) topics. The resolutions and the results of their respective voting procedure were collected from the UN Digital Library. In accordance with the results provided by the UN Digital Library, voting outcomes are divided into 4 categories – Yes (in favor of the resolution), No (against the resolution), Abstain, and Non-voting. In total, 318 resolutions were analyzed for the given ten-year period. The graph below demonstrates the percentage of matches of votes of Azerbaijan and Russia for each year. A match is a case in which both Azerbaijan and Russia both voted the same way. It is worth mentioning that for this research the resolutions for which one of the two states abstained, while the other did not vote at all, were also counted as a match.

Figure 1. Percentage of matches of votes of Azerbaijan and Russia in the UN General Assembly on matters concerning Russia for the period 2009-2019



Source: United Nations Digital Library

For the first year of the given period, the percentage of matches between the Azerbaijani and Russian votes was 41 percent. Out of 17 examined resolutions in 2009, demonstrated the same stances in seven of them. The subsequent year saw a rapid increase in the percentage of matches for the two states – 16 out of 24 resolutions, which constituted a 67 percent match rate. In fact, 2010 was the peak of the whole given time frame for the percentage of matches of the Azerbaijani and Russian votes. In 2011, although being high, there was a relative decline in the percentage of matches compared to the year prior. The percentage of matches for this year was 50 percent – in other words, 11 out of 22 resolutions. The downward trend continued for the subsequent two years. In 2012, the votes of 10 out of 28 resolutions were matches, which made up 36 percent. For 2013, the percentage of matches decreased further, down to 26 percent – six matches out of 23 resolutions. However, this downward trend was reversed for the following time period. There was an exceptionally sudden increase in the percentage of matches in 2014, reaching 42 percent or 13 matches out of 31 resolutions. While for the following year, the percentage of matches was 32 percent – 10 out of 31 resolutions, it can be said that the level of matches increased steadily for the next 5-year long period. In 2016, the percentage of matches rose to 36 percent, which was made up of 13 out of 36 resolutions. In 2017, the level of matching votes of Azerbaijan and Russia increased further to 40 percent – 12 out of 30 resolutions. In 2018, the level of matches stayed approximately the same at 39 percent, as a result of 15 matches out of 39 resolutions. Finally, in 2019, the percentage of matching votes of Azerbaijan and Russia hit 43 percent, constituting 16 matches out of 37 resolutions.

As a result of this analysis, a trend can indeed be identified in the voting behavior of Azerbaijan and Russia in the UN. Within the examined time range, roughly the first

half of this period has seen a declining pattern of matches. The percentage of matches of votes of Azerbaijan and Russia fell from 67 percent in 2010, to 26 percent in 2013. However, the second half of this period showed a steadily increasing pattern of matches. As a result, the percentage of matches gradually rose from 32 percent in 2015 to 43 percent for the year 2019. Consequently, it can be said that during the latter half of the last decade, Azerbaijan's stance on multiple foreign policy matters has become gradually more aligned with Russia.

It is possible that some might argue 11 percent increase is not too significant. While it can be true if the unit discussed was something different, when it comes to the voting behavior in the UN the situation is different. In the UN setting, large variations in these numbers can hardly be seen. The primary reason for this is that the majority of the issues discussed and brought to voting every year remain the same. Topics such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, Georgia's territorial integrity, and Ukraine's territorial integrity are a few examples that are voted on in the UN General Assembly on a yearly basis. As such, both Azerbaijan and Russia have solid unchanging positions on these and similar topics. For the most part, the increase in the percentage of matches is a result of increasing alignment in the newly coming topics. Therefore, large fluctuations in the percentage of matches in the voting behavior between the two countries in the UN General Assembly are almost impossible to observe. Considering this structural-institutional reality, the 11 percent increase, as a matter of fact, is a noteworthy rise in the percentage of matches of voting behavior in the UN General Assembly.

The level of trade turnover

The third element of analysis of Azerbaijan's approach towards Russia was the level of trade turnover between the two countries. It is known that according to the

traditional realist school of thought, all states are concerned primarily about their own security and consequently, in relative gains. Because, the states that cooperate (for example, in terms of trade) with each other always think about the fact that which of the two cooperating states gains more from this interaction. As such, the side that gains less from this cooperation in comparison to the other side puts itself in a relatively disadvantageous position, which in the long term may find its security in a compromised situation (by making the other state more powerful over itself). As a result, a smaller state that wants to balance against a more powerful state would choose to gradually disengage or at minimum, reduce its cooperation with the latter. As stated earlier, this research considers Azerbaijan's policy towards Russia not in terms of the concepts of balancing and bandwagoning of the traditional realist school of thought, but instead a hybrid approach of strategic hedging. By examining Azerbaijan's trade turnover with Russia in this section, we try to find out whether Azerbaijan's relations with Russia in the last decade resembled an approach more inclined to balancing or bandwagoning in the spectrum of the overall policy of strategic hedging.

The graph below demonstrates the level of trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Russia in the years between 2009 and 2019 in one thousand US dollars. The data shown in the graph was obtained from the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2023).

Figure 2. The level of trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Russia for the period 2009-2019 (in one thousand USD)



Sources: *State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan*

In the year 2009, Azerbaijan's trade turnover with Russia stood approximately at 1.819 billion dollars. This number increased further to 1.919 billion dollars in 2010. The level of trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Russia for the year 2011, saw a sharp increase to 2.828 billion dollars. The subsequent year witnessed a relative decline in the level of trade turnover to 2.338 billion dollars in 2012. However, immediately after that, this number rose to 2.583 billion dollars in 2013. The level of trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Russia for the subsequent 2 years that followed 2013, dropped seriously. In 2014, the level of trade turnover between the two was 1.955 billion dollars. Following this, in 2015 this number decreased further to 1.856 billion dollars. This was the lowest point in terms of the level of trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Russia since 2010. However, following this sudden decline, the level of trade turnover between these two countries showed a steady increase in the latter half of the last decade. In 2016, the level

of trade turnover between the two rose to 2.051 billion dollars. The next year – in 2017, this number increased further to 2.141 billion dollars. The year 2018, saw another noteworthy increase reaching 2.550 billion dollars. Finally, in 2019, the level of trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Russia peaked at 3.022 billion dollars – an all-time high in the last decade.

The data analysis of the level of trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Russia demonstrates that throughout the examined period between 2009 and 2019, Azerbaijan's policy towards Russia does in fact indicate that the former quite contrary to balancing and gradual disengagement, has instead followed a closer cooperation and increasing trade with Russia. Although there was a brief decline in the level of trade turnover for the years 2014 and 2015, it can be assumed that the most likely explanation for this sudden decrease was the economic crisis that both countries faced during this period of time. As was seen in the level of trade turnover between the two states for the latter half of the decade (in the years leading up to the 44-day war) the increasing trend resumed, which at the end of the given period reached its highest point in 2019. This analysis demonstrates that Azerbaijan's approach towards Russia, in addition to military and foreign policy matters, has also been characterized by the increasing strategy of selective bandwagoning in terms of mutual trade relations.

Importance given to the protection and preservation of the Russian language

In addition to the above-mentioned "hard" dimensions of the Azerbaijani-Russian relationship, the socio-cultural dimension has also been an important component. It is widely known that Russia gives very high importance to the protection and promotion of the Russian language and culture in the post-Soviet space. Numerous high-ranking state officials of Russia have expressed the importance they give to the preservation of this

status of the Russian language. In 2007, when answering a question from residents of Kazakhstan about the Russian language in the post-Soviet space, Vladimir Putin stated that "Support for the Russian language as a means of international communication is one of the most important areas of our work".² He also emphasized, "We have even established a special organisation, Russian World, to support the study of Russian abroad, above all in the former Soviet republics, of course". Indeed, the organization that Vladimir Putin mentioned in this statement – "Russian World" (Ruskiy Mir) Foundation, was established in the same year by the decree of the President of the Russian Federation of June 21, 2007 No. 796,³ with the aim to protect and popularize the Russian language abroad.

On April 26, 2007, in his annual address to the Federal Assembly, Putin extensively discussed the importance of promoting the Russian language. He stated, "Russian is the language of a *historical fraternity of peoples*, a true language of international communication. The Russian language not only preserves an entire layer of truly global achievements but is also the living space for the many millions of people in the Russian-speaking world, *a community that goes far beyond Russia itself*."⁴

Perhaps realizing the importance that Russia gives to the preservation of the Russian language and culture in the post-Soviet space, Azerbaijan never seriously attempted to uproot the presence of the Russian language and culture within the country. One notable exception to this was in the early 1990s, during the leadership of the Popular Front (PF) in Azerbaijan. It was during this period when the relations between Russia and

² President of Russia. (2007, October 18). *Live with President Vladimir Putin — Hot line (excerpts)*. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24604>.

³ Decree of the President of the Russian Federation On The Foundation of the Ruskiy Mir Foundation. No. 796. (2007). <https://www.prilib.ru/en/node/432871>.

⁴ President of Russia. (2007, April 26). *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly*. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24203>.

Azerbaijan were at their lowest, the government of PF embarked on combating the Russian "soft" influence in the country. Decisions such as switching from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin one, and downsizing the number of schools offering education in Russian were made. Importantly, as another reflection of his policy of strategic hedging, when Heydar Aliyev came to power, though he did soften some of the decisions taken in regards to the Russian language and culture, there were certain policies, which were not reversed and quite contrary, were pursued further on. For instance, Azerbaijan continued its transition to the Latin alphabet in the following years. Similarly, in its first constitution adopted in 1995, Azerbaijani became the sole official language of the country. This was contrary to some of the other post-Soviet states, primarily in Central Asia, which kept Russian as one of the two official languages of the state. The primacy of the Azerbaijani language was further solidified by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On improving the implementation of the state language" dated June 18, 2001, and the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On the State Language of the Republic of Azerbaijan" adopted in 2002, which made Azerbaijani the sole language of state operation.

While multiple measures were taken to strengthen the position of the Azerbaijani language in the country during the presidencies of Heydar Aliyev and Ilham Aliyev, it would be wrong to assume that the Russian language was completely neglected. As stated earlier, starting with Heydar Aliyev's presidency, a much more accommodating approach was taken towards Russia. No large-scale closure of Russian-language schools was carried out. Quite the contrary, the government took all the necessary measures to preserve and maintain the functioning of Russian-language schools. Ilham Aliyev continued this approach toward the Russian language and culture during his presidency

as well. In general, Azerbaijan's more nuanced approach towards the Russian language and culture starting with Heydar Aliyev's presidency can be viewed in itself as a microcosm of Azerbaijan's overall policy of strategic hedging towards Russia.

When it comes to the years following, particularly after 2010 – in its third decade of independence, there has been a gradual increase in the attention given to the protection and promotion of the Russian language and culture in Azerbaijan. While no legislative reversals were made in respect to the formal status of the Russian language, in practice the importance given to it has increased. This can be seen in two aspects. Firstly, with Decree No. 156 dated September 5, 2009 of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On the implementation of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'On Education'" and the Decision No. 103 dated June 3, 2010 of the Cabinet Of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On the approval of 'State standards of general education in the Republic of Azerbaijan'", Azerbaijan switched to a new educational model (called "National Curriculum"). With this educational reform, the study of the subject of Russian language in the Azerbaijani-language schools, which since 2002 was optional, was made mandatory. Previously, in Azerbaijani-language schools the only mandatory foreign language subject was English. With this reform, students of Azerbaijani-language schools now had to attend two obligatory foreign language subjects. This was a serious pivot from the previous condition. Before this reform, it was primarily the students studying in the Russian-language schools who were studying (and were expected to know) Russian, which constituted a small minority in the country. However, with the introduction of the new National Curriculum (2009), it became apparent that the government was interested in expanding the number of students who knew the Russian language.

The second aspect reflecting the increased importance given to the Russian language by Azerbaijan can be seen in the number of Azerbaijani students who were enrolled in Russian-language schools. It should be noted that information regarding the number of Russian-language schools in Azerbaijan for each year is not publicly available. Due to this reason, tracking the increase in the number of Russian-language schools in Azerbaijan on a yearly basis was not possible. However, with the available data, it is safe to say that overall the number of Russian-language schools in Azerbaijan has been increasing. In 2013, it was reported that the number of Russian-language schools in Azerbaijan was 314.⁵ Just five years later, in 2018, the President of Azerbaijan – Ilham Aliyev, when giving an interview to the "Rossiya-24" TV channel, stated that there were more than 340 Russian-language schools in Azerbaijan.⁶ In addition to that, he also emphasized that the Russian language is also taught in the majority of schools (Azerbaijani sectors) of the country, stating that Russian is being taught in more than 3000 schools in Azerbaijan, out of around 4500 schools in the country.⁷

Other than the number of Russian-language schools in Azerbaijan, the number of students enrolled in these schools has also increased. When analyzing the data on the number of students enrolled in the Russian-language schools in Azerbaijan it can be seen that there has been a consistent increase in their numbers. It was reported that in the year 2013, the number of students studying in Russian-language schools was 82.535.⁸ In 2015,

⁵ Oxu.az. (2013, August 23). *Azərbaycanda fəaliyyət göstərən rus məktəblərinin sayı açıqlandı* [The number of Russian schools operating in Azerbaijan was announced]. <https://oxu.az/society/3398>.

⁶ President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2018, December 25). *İlham Əliyev "Rossiya-24" telekanalına müsahibə verib* [Ilham Aliyev gave an interview to "Russia-24" TV channel]. <https://president.az/az/articles/view/31336>.

⁷ President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2018, December 25). *İlham Əliyev "Rossiya-24" telekanalına müsahibə verib* [Ilham Aliyev gave an interview to "Russia-24" TV channel]. <https://president.az/az/articles/view/31336>.

⁸ Oxu.az. (2013, August 23). *Azərbaycanda fəaliyyət göstərən rus məktəblərinin sayı açıqlandı* [The number of Russian schools operating in Azerbaijan was announced]. <https://oxu.az/society/3398>.

this number increased to 98.035.⁹ Three years later, in 2018, the number of students studying in these schools rose to 131.412.¹⁰ In the subsequent year, the number of students studying in the Russian-language schools further increased to 140.535.¹¹ Finally, in 2020 this number reached 150.757 students.¹²

As the data clearly demonstrates, the protection and promotion of the Russian language by Azerbaijan within its borders, particularly through its education system, has been increasing for the last decade. It can be argued that the growth in the number of students studying in Russian-language schools was due to the overall increase in the number of school students in Azerbaijan. However, even when analyzing the percentage of students studying in Russian-language schools in relation to the total number of school students for those years, we still see an increasing trend. Taking the total number of school students in Azerbaijan for the above-mentioned years from the State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the percentage of students studying in the Russian-language schools can be determined:

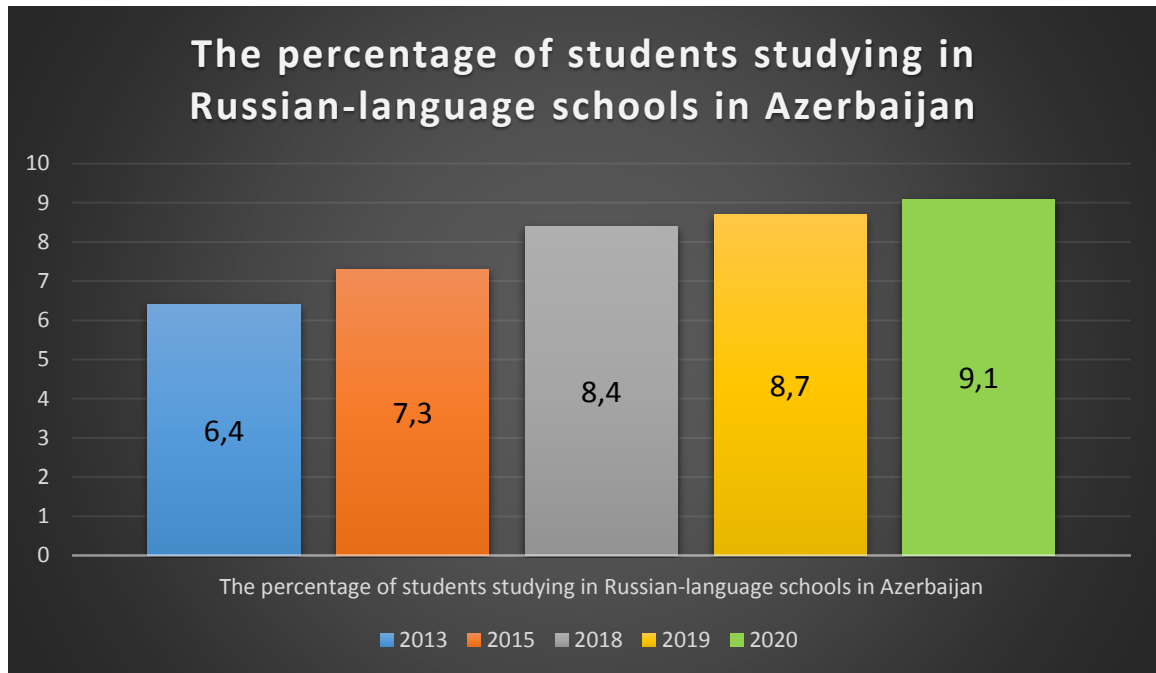
⁹ Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2015). *İllik Hesabat 2015* [Annual Report 2015]. <https://edu.gov.az/uploads/Hesabat/TN-hesabat-2015.pdf>.

¹⁰ Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2018). *İllik Hesabat 2018* [Annual Report 2018]. <https://edu.gov.az/uploads/Hesabat/TN-hesabat-2018.pdf>.

¹¹ Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2019). *İllik Hesabat 2019* [Annual Report 2019]. <https://edu.gov.az/uploads/Hesabat/TN-hesabat-2019.pdf>.

¹² Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2020). *İllik Hesabat 2020* [Annual Report 2020]. <https://edu.gov.az/uploads/Hesabat/TN-hesabat-2020.pdf>.

Figure 3. The percentage of students studying in Russian-language schools in Azerbaijan for the period 2013-2020



Source: Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan

As can be seen from the diagram above, not only the number of students studying in Russian-language schools increased in the last decade, but also the proportion of these students in relation to the total number of school students in Azerbaijan. Therefore, it can be concluded that indeed, the importance given to the protection and promotion of the Russian language by Azerbaijan has increased throughout the last decade, constituting one of the important components of Azerbaijan's increasing policy of bandwagoning with Russia. On 27 September 2018, during the official opening ceremony of the 9th Azerbaijan-Russia Interregional Forum in Baku, Vladimir Putin drew attention to the importance given to the Russian language in Azerbaijan, stating, “We see and highly appreciate this - interest given to the Russian language [in Azerbaijan]. And not only the interest of Azerbaijani citizens to the Russian language, but also the assistance provided

by the state, municipalities, [and] cities”.¹³ Similarly, in the meeting between the respective ministers of foreign affairs of Russia and Azerbaijan on 26th August 2020, Sergei Lavrov stated that the Russian Federation greatly appreciates the “caring attitude of the people and the country’s leadership in Azerbaijan towards the Russian language and culture”.¹⁴

As was seen from the analyzed data, Azerbaijan's policy of strategic hedging towards Russia has indeed shifted from an approach that leaned more towards balancing to an approach that is closer to bandwagoning. Knowing this, one might wonder what was the reason behind this shift in Azerbaijan’s approach towards Russia. While answering this question is beyond the scope of this research, it can be said that there were certain events that could have played a role in Azerbaijan’s decision.

Arguably, the first such event that influenced Azerbaijan to reevaluate its strategy towards Russia was the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. It was the first Russian military intervention following the collapse of the Soviet Union. As such, up until this war, there was perhaps an overall skepticism on the probability that Russia could actually undertake a military intervention outside of its boundaries. The reason for such an approach could have been based on two reasons. Firstly, it is possible that Russia's own military-technical capabilities were seriously underestimated. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the world (including the post-Soviet states) had overestimated the strength of the unipolar international system. Georgia, famously, following the 2003 Rose Revolution, under the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili chose to pursue an openly pro-Western foreign policy.

¹³ Druzhinin, A. (2018, September 27). *Putin otsenil podderzhku russkogo yazyka v Azerbaydzhane* [Putin appreciated the support of the Russian language in Azerbaijan]. Ria Novosti. <https://ria.ru/20180927/1529468795.html>.

¹⁴ Tass. (2020, August 26). *Nastroy na uregulirovanie v Karabakhe. Glavy MID RF i Azerbaydzhana proveli vstrechu v Moskve* [Mood towards a settlement in Karabakh. The foreign ministers of the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan held a meeting in Moscow]. <https://tass.ru/politika/9298193>.

This foreign policy course inevitably antagonized Russia. However, it is possible that the reason why Georgia continued to pursue this pro-Western policy anyway was because of the [faulty] perception that in case Russia resorts to the use of force, then the West and in particular, the US would come to Georgia's help. However, the actual Russian military intervention in 2008 and the inaction of the West to come to Georgia's help probably influenced Azerbaijan's attitude towards Russia. It probably solidified the idea that neither Russia should be underestimated, nor the West should overestimated.

The second key event that possibly influenced Azerbaijan's foreign policy approach toward Russia was the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian War. The Ukrainian case was slightly different from the Georgia one, while still in essence they were similar. The difference between the two was that in the case of Georgia there was already a pro-Western government, which was following this foreign policy course for multiple years before it faced a military intervention from Russia. On the other hand, Ukraine faced Russian intervention immediately after the Maidan revolution. It was already known that the reason Maidan protests erupted was due to Ukraine's former president Viktor Yanukovich's decision to halt further Euro-integration and instead pursue a closer relationship with Russia. As such, it was already clear that the new government replacing Yanukovich would follow a pro-Western foreign policy. In response to this, Russia conducted an even more daring intervention, as a result of which it not only took control of Crimea and Donbas, it formally annexed Crimea into the Russian Federation. Yet, the response from the West was relatively mild, being limited to a number of sanctions against Russia. The increasing assertiveness and open military interventions from the Russian side, as well as the passive response shown by the West, was probably another key event

that contributed to Azerbaijan's decision to tilt its policy of strategic hedging towards bandwagoning with Russia.

In order to better visualize the gradual transition of Azerbaijan's foreign policy towards Russia from a balancing-leaning approach to a more bandwagoning-leaning strategic hedging it is worth examining a sequence of a few key events over the past decade.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly emerged Russian Federation came to be seen as a second-tier state by the Western world and the US in particular. In the 1990s, with its economic turmoil and internal instability Russia was viewed as a significantly weakened power, in no way a competitor to the US. This period became characterized as a period of a unipolar international system under the US hegemony. It was during this period when the boundaries of the Western-led institutions, such as the EU and NATO, started to expand eastwards, incorporating former Eastern-bloc states. Russia viewed this expansion as an encroachment of the West (again, in particular, the US) on the Russian sphere of influence. While during the Cold War, the Eastern European states comprised a kind of buffer zone for the Russian mainland against a potential invasion from the West, NATO's expansion as far east as the Baltic states – up to the border with the Russian mainland became viewed as a source of discomfort, if not an outright threat, by the Russian authorities. However, the reason why the West was able to successfully expand its sphere of influence to the East was because of their correct assessment of Russia's weakness. Indeed, Russia's subsequent inaction (other than issuing statements) to this expansion proved it right that it lacked sufficient capabilities to prevent the Eastern European states, such as Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, from becoming members of Western-led institutions.

The image of Russia as a weakened power gradually started to change in the early 2000s. There have been multiple explanations regarding the reasons behind this change, discussing which is beyond the purpose of this research. However, it is worth noting that some of the most commonly given explanations for this shift were growing revenue coming from oil and gas exports, and the new president's (Vladimir Putin's) policies aimed at centralizing the state authority and strengthening the country's military and security forces.

One of the very early key events that signaled the coming change in Russia's foreign policy, which is also important for this research, was Putin's speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy in February 2007. This was the first significant expression of criticism against the US foreign policy at the highest level of the Russian government since the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹⁵ In this speech, Putin famously stated his objection to the unipolar world order – “However one might embellish this term, at the end of the day it refers to one type of situation, namely one centre of authority, one centre of force, one centre of decision-making... I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world”.¹⁶ He further condemned implicitly the US's behavior as a perceived hegemon of a unipolar international system, by characterizing its actions as “unilateral and frequently illegitimate”. Particularly important to this research, in this speech Putin explicitly emphasized his discontent with the US's policy of expanding its sphere of influence, as well as NATO's eastward enlargement. “One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political,

¹⁵ Smith, M. & Aldis, A. (2007). *Putin on International Security*. Conflict Studies Research Centre UK Defence Academy. Retrieved from https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/94464/07_Feb.pdf.

¹⁶ President of Russia. (2007, February 10). *Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy*. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

cultural, and educational policies it imposes on other nations – “... the so-called flexible frontline American bases with up to five thousand men in each. It turns out that NATO has put its frontline forces on our borders... I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact?”. Putin's speech at this conference was a turning point in the relationship between Russia and the West. Immediately after the conference, there were already thoughts that if the West's approach towards Russia would continue the same way, Russia would not sit idly and this speech was an indication that "the Kremlin is gearing up for confrontation with the Americans".¹⁷ Consequently, the changing dynamic in the relationship between Russia and the West could not pass by without affecting the post-Soviet states neighboring Russia, including Azerbaijan.

In 2007, Azerbaijan adopted the document on the “National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan”. While large in scope and covering many different aspects of the national security of the country, the document also reflected Azerbaijan’s foreign policy course for the future. The value of this document for this research is that it stands as an important point of reference for comparison with the subsequent shift in the direction of the foreign policy of Azerbaijan.

From the very beginning of the document, integration into the Euro-Atlantic area is characterized as one of the core elements of the National Security strategy of the

¹⁷ Traynor, I. (2007, February 11). *Putin hits at US for triggering arms race*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/feb/11/usa.russia>.

country. Here, the Nation Security Concept is defined as “a set of goals, principles and approaches to the policies and measures, which underline the independence, territorial integrity and democratic development of the country, **integration into the Euro-Atlantic area as the strategic choice**”.¹⁸ In addition to this, the document also contains a dedicated subsection on the “Integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures” within the “Main directions of national security policy of the Republic of Azerbaijan”. Here again, the integration into the Euro-Atlantic area is described as the “strategic goal” of the country – “Integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic political, security, economic and other institutions constitutes the strategic goal of the Republic of Azerbaijan”.¹⁹ The document further provides examples of various fields of cooperation with NATO and the EU and presents them as policies aimed at deepening the integration process of Azerbaijan into the Euro-Atlantic sphere.

As can be seen from the National Security Concept of Azerbaijan, up until the year 2007, the country's foreign policy direction was clearly defined as Western-oriented, albeit in a careful manner. Perhaps a reflection of the country's overall policy of strategic hedging since 1994, Azerbaijan's pursuit of "balanced" and “multidimensional” foreign policy was mentioned more than once in its National Security Concept. Therefore, as was the case in practice, Azerbaijan was being careful not to demonstrate an outright opposition against Russia in the document.

¹⁸ Azərbaycan Respublikasının milli təhlükəsizlik konsepsiyasının təsdiq edilməsi haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikası Prezidentinin Sərəncamı [Order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan On the approval of the National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan]. № 2198. (2007). <https://e-qanun.az/framework/13373>

¹⁹ Azərbaycan Respublikasının milli təhlükəsizlik konsepsiyasının təsdiq edilməsi haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikası Prezidentinin Sərəncamı [Order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan On the approval of the National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan]. № 2198. (2007). <https://e-qanun.az/framework/13373>

The next key event reflecting Azerbaijan's gradual shift in its foreign policy towards Russia to a more bandwagoning-leaning approach was the signing of the Declaration of Friendship and Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan in Baku in July 2008. Although prior to the signing of this Declaration, both countries were cooperating in numerous fields, this document officially raised the legal status of the relationship between Russia and Azerbaijan to the level of strategic partnership. The Declaration covered almost all possible fields of cooperation. As expressed in the Declaration, both sides emphasized that the strengthening of trust and strategic partnership between the two will "contribute to peace and stability in the region".²⁰ This comprehensive document demonstrated the commitment of both sides to cooperate in the fields ranging from energy and economy to the resolution of regional disputes and military and military-technical matters. The signing of this Declaration was one of the landmark events that reflected Azerbaijan's evolving foreign policy with respect to Russia.

In 2010, the document of the Military Doctrine of the Republic of Azerbaijan was adopted. The Doctrine itself makes references to the document of National Security Concept multiple times throughout the document, stating that the National Security Concept constitutes one of the few documents constituting the legal basis of the Doctrine.²¹ It also states that the Doctrine reflects the goals, fundamentals, and principles of the country's defense policy as embodied in the National Security Concept. However,

²⁰ Azərbaycan Respublikası və Rusiya Federasiyası arasında dostluq və strateji tərəfdaşlıq haqqında" Bəyannamənin təsdiq edilməsi barədə Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanunu [Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the approval of the Declaration "On Friendship and Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation]. № 674-IIIQ. (2008). <https://e-ganun.az/framework/15611>.

²¹ Azərbaycan Respublikasının Hərbi doktrinasının təsdiq edilməsi haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikası Milli Məclisinin Qərarı [Decision of the National Assembly of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the approval of the Military Doctrine of the Republic of Azerbaijan]. № 1029-IIIQR. (2010). <https://e-ganun.az/framework/19722>

there is a noticeable difference in the language of the Doctrine when it comes to matters related to foreign policy. While the document does discuss the issues and sectors on which cooperation is called for, unlike the National Security Concept an intent related to Euro-Atlantic integration is absent. An interesting point from the Doctrine that is worth mentioning is that the document only once refers to the Euro-Atlantic area. The document does refer to the need and importance of cooperation with Western-led institutions (such as NATO) in the field of defense, however, integration into these institutions is not discussed nonetheless. The Military Doctrine merely notes the importance of strengthening cooperation and contributing to the international security, "... in the Euro-Atlantic area, which also includes the region where the Republic of Azerbaijan is located". Overall, looking at the tone and the choice of words (or lack thereof) this document reflects a middle-of-the-road of Azerbaijan's overall foreign policy shift. Deriving from the document, though Azerbaijan considers itself to be part of the Euro-Atlantic area and states multiple fields of further cooperation in defense, no mention of integration with the Euro-Atlantic world was made.

The last key event to be discussed in this research, that reflects the transition of Azerbaijan's foreign policy approach was President Ilham Aliyev's speech in November 2015, after both Russo-Georgian and Russo-Ukrainian wars. During his trip for the opening of the Heydar Aliyev Center in Zagatala, I. Aliyev gave a speech in front of the members of the staff of the center. He started his speech by talking about the newly-opened Heydar Aliyev Center and about other projects that were being carried out in the region of Zagatala. Particularly noteworthy in that speech for this research was his criticism of the West. He stated that "Europe is experiencing a moral crisis today. Europe can't remain committed to its stated values. Suffering is inflicted on migrants and Muslim

refugees”.²² Referring to the treatment shown by the West against the migrants fleeing from the conflict zones of the Middle East, he further noted that “... it is a religious confrontation, not a migrant crisis. It is a religious confrontation, a sign of Islamophobia. This is the result of the anti-Muslim propaganda of recent years, and it can lead to even more problems and a clash between civilizations in the world”. Crucially, by emphasizing the multicultural and multiconfessional nature of Azerbaijan, he stated that “Sometimes they say that we should integrate into Europe... **we do not have to integrate anywhere.** We have built a strong state on our national values and established equal relations with all countries. Especially today, at the time of discrimination and Islamophobia, **there is no need for integration**”.

This speech was the clearest demonstration of Azerbaijan's shifting foreign policy approach. While in the second half of the 2000s integration into the Euro-Atlantic area constituted one of the "core elements" of the national security strategy of the country, by the mid-2010s Azerbaijan had completely abandoned this policy. However as can be seen in the analysis above, this shift was not sudden and surprising. Instead, it was a gradual shift, which progressed with the increasing strength and assertiveness of Russia. It is worth noting however that while Azerbaijan openly expressed its abonnement of the policy of Euro-Atlantic integration, cooperation between the two did not cease. Both sides continued their cooperation in the economy, energy, transportation, and in many other sectors. This demonstrates that Azerbaijan remained committed to its overall policy of strategic hedging (as it did not break or sever its relations with any one block). What

²² President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2015, November 4). *Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the opening of the Heydar Aliyev Center in Zagatala.* <https://president.az/en/articles/view/17367>.

changed was that Azerbaijan's more balancing-leaning strategic hedging towards Russia (in favor of integrating with the West), shifted to a more bandwagoning-leaning approach.

An example of the effect of this policy showed itself around this time – mid-2010s in Russia's position in the mediation format on the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. Ever since the 1994 ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Russia played an important role in the mediation process as one of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group (together with the US and France). It was widely believed that in the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia's interest in the conflict was centered on de-facto preserving the status quo, which was highly favorable for Armenia, emboldening the latter in negotiations (Abushov, 2019). Starting in the mid-2000s, a new push in negotiations resumed within the framework of the Minsk group. The set of proposals that emerged from the negotiations collectively became to be known as Madrid principles.²³ The overall premise of this proposal was the return of the territories surrounding the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) back to Azerbaijan and the determination of the final legal status of the territories of the former NKAO through referendum. Due to several disagreements on this proposal, particularly when it comes to the sequence and interval of the implementation of individual proposals, as well as on the final status of the territories of the former NKAO, Madrid principles were not materialized.

While there have been multiple meetings and negotiations in the subsequent years, the phase that is particularly important for this research came around a decade later. In the mid-2010s, Russia, particularly with the mediation of its Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, introduced a new set of principles for the resolution of the conflict. Russia,

²³ OSCE. (2009, July 10). *Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries* [Press release]. <https://www.osce.org/mg/51152>.

independent of the other co-chairs of the Minsk group, conducted negotiations around these principles (which became known as the "Lavrov plan"), despite reiterating that these principles were rooted in the Minsk group's Madrid principles.²⁴ While, indeed this new proposal was overall very similar to the Madrid principles, it had one crucial difference, which made it more favorable to Azerbaijan. Unlike the Madrid principles, the Lavrov plan did not include the clause on conducting a referendum in the territories of former NKAO. Instead, this plan offered that the final status of the territories of the former NKAO be decided at a later stage by the parties. Russia's removal of the referendum component from the proposal, which was the most contentious element for Azerbaijan, was a vivid example of Russia's shifting approach towards the parties and to the conflict. Taking Azerbaijan's biggest interest and concern (territorial integrity and its infringement) into account in its new proposal, reflected that Russia no longer viewed the two sides from the lens of "loyal ally" Armenia against "resisting balancer" Azerbaijan.

The event that stands as one the clearest examples of the success of Azerbaijan's shifting policy towards Russia took place in October 2020. On this date, Vladimir Putin gave a speech at the 17th Annual Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club. This event took place at a time when the 44-day war was still going on. In the meeting, Putin was asked by one of the participants if the attempts to achieve a peaceful solution to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan fails, considering historic ties and military alliance with Armenia, will Russia be taking sides against Azerbaijan. In response to this question, Putin stated that "Armenia and Azerbaijan are both equal partners for us".²⁵ This statement of Putin's is very symbolic. It shows that by this time,

²⁴ Broers, L. (2016). *The Nagorny Karabakh Conflict: Defaulting to War*. Chatham House. Retrieved from <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1423342/the-nagorny-karabakh-conflict/2037609/>.

²⁵ President of Russia. (2020, October 22). *Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club*. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64261>

Azerbaijan achieved building a relationship with Russia that had made Azerbaijan, in the eyes of the Russian leadership, on par with Russia's formal, treaty-bound ally – Armenia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates that Azerbaijan's increasing selective bandwagoning with Russia contributed to the Kremlin's decision of not directly intervening in the 44-day war.

With the resurgence of Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan has gradually shifted its approach towards Russia. While in the early years of its independence Azerbaijan tried to pursue a policy of balancing towards Russia with suboptimal results, following Heydar Aliyev's coming to the presidency of the Republic, Azerbaijan adopted a policy of strategic hedging towards Russia. Until the early 2000s, Azerbaijan's hedging strategy towards Russia for the most part remained more balancing-leaning. However, starting from the mid-2000s with the resurgence of Russian power and assertiveness Azerbaijan's policy of hedging gradually shifted towards a more bandwagoning-inclined approach. As was analyzed in this research, this shift in policy demonstrated itself in the economic, diplomatic, military, and humanitarian spheres.

The shift in Azerbaijan's foreign policy approach was also seen in the official documents and statements of its high-ranking government officials starting with the second half of the 2000s. While previously integration into the Euro-Atlantic area was considered as one of the main strategic goals of the country, gradually Azerbaijan moved away from this foreign policy agenda and eventually abandoned it altogether.

As a result of the shift in Azerbaijan's foreign policy strategy towards Russia, the Russian approach to and perception of Azerbaijan also gradually changed. This showed

itself both in statements and in practice. The effects of this policy were initially observed in Russia's approach towards the negotiation process, which increasingly showed a more accommodating stance in regard to Azerbaijan's interests. And when the 44-day war broke out, Russia demonstrated relative neutrality and showed multiple efforts to bring both sides of the conflict together and make a decision on mutually acceptable conditions for ending the fighting. This relative neutrality was also reflected by the statements of the Russian President, calling both Armenia and Azerbaijan as “equal partners” of Russia.

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