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Turkey and Azerbaijan's Strained Alliance

By

Gulf State Analytics

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For information about Rosa&Roubini Associates, please send an email to info@rosa-roubini-associates.com or call +44 (0)20 7101 0718.

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Gulf State Analytics

Turkey and Azerbaijan's Strained Alliance

4 November 2026

Executive Summary

- The historic Turkey-Azerbaijan alliance is experiencing growing tensions despite their longstanding cultural, linguistic and military ties.
- Azerbaijan's restrictions on students wearing hijabs in public schools have prompted criticism from Turkey, which Baku considers interference in its domestic affairs.
- Baku's continued defence and energy partnerships with Israel are increasingly at odds with Turkey's critical stance towards Tel Aviv over the war in Gaza.
- Azerbaijan is increasingly asserting its political independence and rejecting any suggestion that Turkey has the right to dictate its domestic or foreign policies.
- Turkey's ambition to lead the Turkic world is creating friction as Azerbaijan resists any perceived political subordination to Ankara.
- Ankara's growing rapprochement with Armenia concerns Azerbaijan, which fears it could weaken Baku's negotiating position and undermine its regional interests.
- Russia could benefit from the tensions by exploiting divisions between Ankara and Baku to restore its influence in the South Caucasus.
- The Middle Corridor and the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity could face complications if deteriorating relations disrupt Turkish-Azerbaijani cooperation.
- European countries have vested interests in preserving the alliance because both transport initiatives are important for reducing dependence on Russian trade and energy routes.
- Ankara and Baku's alliance is unlikely to collapse, but unresolved disagreements could make it increasingly pragmatic and transactional, with national interests taking precedence over shared identity.

Key Picture: The Middle Corridor Route



Source: RUSI

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Turkey and Azerbaijan Alliance

Turkey and Azerbaijan have a decades-old special alliance. Rooted in shared linguistic, cultural, and ethnic bonds, the "two states, one nation" slogan has long encapsulated this unique bilateral relationship. Since Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, Ankara and Baku's cooperation has extended across multiple domains such as defence, energy, and regional security. Turkey's role in the 2020 Karabakh War and the signing of the Shusha Declaration in 2021 have underscored Ankara's critical role in bolstering Baku's position in the South Caucasus.[1] However, today Turkey and Azerbaijan's relationship is experiencing some problems. Although there are no indicators of this alliance crumbling, officials in Ankara and Baku will be challenged to navigate tensions stemming from their deeper disagreements. How the two countries do so will raise important questions about the balance of power in the South Caucasus.

Introduced in October 2026, Azerbaijan's enforcement of a regulation that effectively banned female students from wearing hijabs in public schools was a trigger for this new tension in bilateral affairs.[2] After dozens of Azerbaijanis were detained for protesting the measures, a host of prominent figures in Turkey's government, media, and Islamist organisations harshly criticised the authorities in Baku.[3] Within the context of Turkey's pre-Justice and Development Party (AKP) history, this issue is a sensitive one that goes to the heart of Islamic identity and religious freedom. From the Azerbaijani government's perspective, however, this criticism constituted an infringement of the former Soviet republic's sovereignty as an independent state free to uphold its own secular political system.

Azerbaijan's strategic partnership with Israel is another source of disagreement between Ankara and Baku, which has become an increasingly sensitive matter since Israel began its war on Gaza in response to the Hamas-led attack of 7 October 2023.[4] The Turkish government led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become increasingly confrontational toward Tel Aviv in response to Israeli war crimes in Gaza, while Azerbaijan has maintained its closeness to Israel in the domains of defence and energy. Officials in Ankara, particularly those from Islamist circles, have found it unacceptable for the government of a Muslim-majority country such as Azerbaijan to hold such ties with Israel amid this period of immense suffering in Gaza. As Baku sees it, Azerbaijan has the right to decide what type of relationship it will foster with Israel and such criticism from Ankara is understood as a Turkish attempt to dictate Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

Azerbaijan Pushes Back Against Turkish Influence

The growing friction in this alliance speaks to some fundamental differences between Turkey and Azerbaijan's understanding of their bilateral relationship and their roles in the wider Turkic world. Turkey promotes itself as a leader among Turkic-speaking countries while Azerbaijan is increasingly adamant about asserting its independence and is now adamant about not allowing Baku to be subjected to any political subordination by a foreign government.

Although President Ilham Aliyev has refrained from portraying Turkish criticism of Baku's domestic and foreign policies as unwanted foreign interference, other Azerbaijani officials have, which, along with the recent decision to declare 31 Turkish citizens persona non grata in Azerbaijan, speaks to the seriousness of these tensions.[5] The message from Azerbaijan is that Baku continues to value its alliance with Ankara but demands that Turkey respect certain boundaries. Put simply, Baku is firm in its stance that shared history, language, and cultural ties do not provide Turkey with the right to dictate Azerbaijani policy.

Turkey's eagerness to embrace a rapprochement with Armenia is another issue that Azerbaijan finds problematic.[6] Ankara's interest in normalisation with Yerevan stands to challenge an important principle underpinning Turkey's strategic partnership with Baku, which has been that Turkish-Armenian normalisation will be linked to Armenia and Azerbaijan reaching a comprehensive peace agreement. Therefore, Turkey's bilateral engagement with Armenia in domains such as agriculture, education, trade, and regional connectivity leaves policymakers in Baku concerned about Ankara prioritising its economic and strategic interests above

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Azerbaijan's ability to negotiate with Yerevan from a position of strength following the 2020 war. This disagreement can't be dismissed as insignificant because it ultimately goes to the heart of the South Caucasus' future security landscape and geopolitical balance.

Russia, Trade Corridors and Regional Security

There is a compelling argument to make about Russia benefitting from these tensions between Ankara and Baku. As a power that has traditionally maintained significant political, economic, and military influence in the South Caucasus, Russia may find itself in a position to bolster its position in the region as a result of strains on Turkey and Azerbaijan's alliance. Growing military cooperation between Moscow and Baku comes at a time when Russia and Azerbaijan are moving past the crisis in their bilateral relationship that followed the Azerbaijan Airlines crash in December 2024, which Aliyev attributed to Russia's military.[7] Ultimately, with Russia having lost some degree of influence in the South Caucasus following its full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the friction in Turkey and Azerbaijan's alliance could help Moscow restore some of that clout.

Ankara and Baku's rift plays out at a sensitive time for international transportation and energy initiatives which link Europe to the Caspian region. The war in Ukraine and the U.S.-Iran crisis have undermined the Northern Corridor through Russian territory and reinforced the necessity of alternative trade and energy routes connecting Europe to the Far East. Within this context, the European Union has placed greater value on the Middle Corridor—a multimodal trade and transport network linking China and Central Asia to Europe via Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey.[8] The Washington-backed Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) is another initiative, and it is designed to connect Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhichevan, via Armenian territory, onward toward Turkey and, by extension, the European Union.[9]

Both the Middle Corridor and TRIPP depend on close coordination between Turkey and Azerbaijan, meaning that any serious deterioration in bilateral ties could create complications for investment initiatives, expansion of infrastructure, and financing. Therefore, European countries, which remain determined to reduce their dependence on Russia, have vested interests in Ankara and Baku's tensions being effectively managed.

As much as the tensions between Turkey and Azerbaijan are real, there are no indicators that a total breakdown in bilateral relations is looming. At the end of the day, Ankara and Baku have much to lose from the breakdown of this alliance. Even if their differences over religious freedom, Israel, Armenia, and Turkish leadership in the Turkic world are probably not going to disappear in the foreseeable future, both countries view the other as an indispensable ally. Yet it is reasonable to assume that in the foreseeable future this alliance may grow more pragmatic and transactional in nature with divergent geopolitical priorities doing more to shape this once seemingly unbreakable relationship than in the past.

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