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Great-Power Game in Baku

By Elkhan Nuriyev

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Azerbaijan caught the world's attention when it hosted Eurovision last month. Unfortunately, Eurovision did little to bring attention to a far more important matter: Azerbaijan's geopolitical situation in which the country is caught between the interests of Iran, the West and Russia.

Azerbaijan's attempts to preserve its own freedom are similar to a tricky tightrope dance. The country is young and striving to maintain its independence, while at the same time trying to satisfy the interests of powerful actors, both near and far.

The geopolitical impact of the Arab Spring uprisings has prompted Iran, the United States and its allies and Russia to keep a close watch on current developments in Azerbaijan. Despite the country's continued efforts to maintain a balanced diplomatic stance, Iran, the United States and Russia have all tried to dissuade Baku's ruling elite from acting in a manner consistent with great-power interests.

The existence of Azerbaijan as an independent state is perceived as a threat to the national

security of Iran. In particular, the more than 20 million Azeris who live in northern Iran are largely viewed as being more loyal to Baku than Tehran. They could be the spark that ignites the fragile powder keg in the multinational structure of the Iranian state.

With President Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency, the Kremlin is expected to use new political and economic levers to try to limit Azerbaijan's independent foreign policy. Russia's closer strategic ties with Iran also serve this purpose, given that both powerful players have found common ground in many regional security issues. Great-power ambitions are increasingly manifested in the desire of Russia's leadership to run the geopolitical show in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. This might even become a reality if the military option against Iran is put into operation.

Although U.S. strategy has so far been focused on grappling with the results of Russian-Iranian geopolitical maneuverings that hinder any serious U.S. activity in the Caucasus, the United States values Azerbaijan as a strategic ally in the region. But Washington and Baku still continue to try to thrash out their differences on a number of sensitive issues.

At a June 6 meeting in Baku, Azeri President Ilham Aliyev and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had detailed talks on security cooperation, energy matters and democratic reforms in the country. At the same time, however, Clinton's meetings with representatives of civil society groups demonstrate the seriousness of U.S. concerns about domestic problems and also send a very clear signal to the Azeri government that they should do all they can to initiate far-reaching democratic reforms. If this does not happen, neither the United States nor other Western democracies will be able to offer Azerbaijan a real alternative to Russian policies.

After many years of pursuing a balanced interest-based foreign policy, Azerbaijan is now faced with an intractable geopolitical deadlock. Aliyev and his administration appear to realize that whatever their decision, it has to address the issues that plague their relations with Iran, the United States and Russia. This is a very tough call, one that will compel Azerbaijan to look either to the West or East.

The way forward for the trilateral relationship between Iran, the United States and Russia is currently the most important strategic factor influencing Azerbaijan's future geopolitics and regional security in the Caucasus.

Aliyev appears to be unsure of how best to proceed. The energy trade will continue to be a significant factor and the quest for diplomatic solutions could be stepped up, but the road ahead will continue to be fraught with pitfalls and new challenges.

Most important, Aliyev will manage to resolve his country's geopolitical dilemma only if he can credibly persuade the United States and other Western democracies that no one else can guarantee stability, liberalize the political system and bolster the market economy in the country. The sooner the leadership makes the necessary adjustments to its domestic and foreign policies, the faster it will discover how to eliminate many of the problems gripping the country.

The key unanswered question is whether the Azeri leadership is capable of a new strategic vision to introduce drastic changes, extensive freedoms and radical reform of the

government.

Elkhan Nuriyev is a counselor at the Caucasus Institute for Democratic Integration in Tbilisi.

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