

**Nazrin Mehdiyeva, *Power Games in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan's Foreign and Energy Policy towards the West, Russia and the Middle East* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2011)**

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Nazrin Mehdiyeva's work is elegantly argued and timely volume on small states and energy politics; however, in looking to contribute to both of these literatures, she opens up questionable points in her book. Her main aim was to understand the conditions that allowed Azerbaijan to pursue an autonomous foreign policy after the Cold War while focusing on energy's role in the context of global energy insecurity. Mehdiyeva's structure relies on a simple and clear deductive narrative. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on small state literature and its application in Azerbaijan's institutional context; 4 focuses on Russia, the main 'antagonist' in the narrative, and 5 on the Caspian sea issue; while 6 and 7 deal with alternative allies in the form of Turkey and the United States. The last chapter concludes with the author's projection of future foreign policy.

Theoretically, the book contributes to, and focuses on, small states in international relations literature. The book begins with interrogating the popular notion of bandwagoning, also known as small states pooling their resources together with, or succumbing to the bigger power, in the presence of a clear and impeding threat. To follow the strategy, Mehdiyeva argues that Azerbaijan's success underlies two assumptions. First, in contrast to the commonly held notions of small state proclivities, Azerbaijan's foreign policy was one of strategic maneuvering. Conventionally, small states could either join bigger states for protection or band together themselves to balance the 'power deficit.' Strategic maneuvering however rejects this. In the book this means not aligning with Russia, or the West but instead choosing allies depending on the specificities of the issue—a framework of strategic resistance and pragmatism—allowing policy-level flexibility and practicality in the face of 'power deficits'. Second, she argues that, in contrast to the structural conceptions of power in neorealist, this 'strategic maneuvering' with the West underlies the non-determinism of four ideational factors: (1) Russia's historical image in Azerbaijan; (2) Turkey's Westernising tendencies; (3) the benevolent image of Western nations; and (4) Azerbaijan's misreading of its strength relative to the willingness of the West to help.

While these points were well argued, two points of criticism can be found. First, in as much as her explanation of ideational factors conjures a sophisticated narrative of Azerbaijan's politics, contrasting the pro-Turkish position of Abulfaz Elchibey and the pragmatism of Heydar Aliyev, the narrative appears to focus on the personalities and strategies of these leaders, which undermines the ideational factors she

identified. The ideational factors point to a general framework pursued by Azerbaijani actors. With a narrative that focuses on the leaders at the top rather than other actors in other policy and decision institutions, her narrative somewhat undermined the understanding that this was a state-level conception of a strategy. At this point, more focus on the rules of the game, commonly understood in Azerbaijan, rather than Elchibey or Aliyev, would have been better to balance her story. Even if posited that she was not going to discuss these issues, an institutional focus could have more concretely placed her story within the debates of state autonomy in foreign policy. In a way, she was already alluding to such ideas, seen in her telling of Aliyev's pragmatic approach, playing Turkey and Russia against each other in the pipelines of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipelines, Tengiz-Novorossiysk, and others policy areas.

Second, her focus on situating energy in Azerbaijan's successful maneuvering also has problems. There seems to be a focus on state leaders and state actors in explaining the outcome, but little has been done to explain the role of non-state actors such as British Petroleum, Dutch Shell, and Chevron, not just in negotiating the pipelines and in forming the Oil Consortiums, but also in maneuvering to acquire their interest in many other situations. These non-state actors may have had influence over the domestic policy structures of the United States, Turkey, and the EU, which could say that the success of Azerbaijan could have been because of a confluence of interest from all of these actors as a way to limit Russia's petronational expansion. A focus, then, on the relative power and actions of these companies could have strengthened her arguments. In the end, I wondered about energy's role in her narrative. Although she was keen on energy role a 'resource' that states go after, it has been rendered as a resource for consumption rather than its object-specific complexity. This points to the role of energy in the capital accumulation process and further consumption of the West within the evolving global political economy. The insecurity associated with peak oil, the contentious climate change negotiations, and the recent climate related changes, and the 'great power' 'competition' between the US and China, have highlighted that energy is not just a resource for the economy, but it is the potential prime mover in global economic machine. Put simply, energy is a much more complex object than a resource that states need to go after. The book could have benefited much if she was able to draw the relations of all the other energy-related political and economic activities taking in the United States, the EU, Turkey, or Russia, during those times, which prompted these states to act in certain ways. This could have situated Azerbaijan's autonomy within, say, the drive of the US economy for oil, or the EU's transition. This would have been a much stronger narrative situated within a global-local nexus.

Overall, this is a compellingly argued book that I recommend to anyone interested at moderate reading of international relations literature within the complexity of her personal understanding of Azerbaijan.