

The current situation, problems and future direction of energy cooperation between China and Azerbaijan

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Abstract

The increasing geopolitical risks of the Eurasian continent due to the Russia-Ukraine war have accelerated the urgent needs of major Eurasian economies for the energy industry chain and supply chain adjustment and restructuring. Azerbaijan connects China, the Middle East and Europe, which is of great strategic significance in the short-chain and decentralization of Eurasian energy security. In recent years, Azerbaijan has been committed to strengthening its position in the field of building global energy security, has participated in a number of large-scale construction projects of transportation infrastructure networks and the construction of energy transportation pipelines, and made large-scale investments to adapt to the needs of short-chain and decentralized energy security. The European Union has also strengthened energy cooperation with Azerbaijan for the diversification and reliability of energy supply. Compared with European and American countries, China's cooperation with Azerbaijan is relatively lagging behind and is easily disturbed by regional security and stability. Under the background of the "Belt and Road" initiative, cooperation between China and Azerbaijan should avoid the traditional field of energy mining, focus on strengthening cooperation in the fields of renewable energy and clean energy, and improve cooperation on the construction of East-West railway transportation trunk lines and energy infrastructure and regional security cooperation between China-Central Asia-Caspian Sea-Azerbaijan-Europe.



Full Text Article



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Keywords:China; Azerbaijan; Energy Cooperation; Energy Transportation; Renewable Energy

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, Russian gas imports to Europe have dropped significantly. Before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia covered nearly 40% of Europe's natural gas needs, with the Yamal-Europe pipeline

accounting for nearly 15% of the country's westbound supply. In March 2022, Gazprom stopped gas deliveries to Europe through the pipeline; In September 2022, the "Nord Stream 2" and "Nord Stream 1" pipelines exploded and were scrapped one after another, and Russia's natural gas imports to Europe fell further sharply. The Yamal pipeline, one of the three remaining lines of Russian gas supplies to Europe, has also announced that it will be closed in 2025. At the same time, the energy embargo of European and American countries, financial sanctions, and the withdrawal of multinational energy companies have seriously damaged Russia's oil and gas production and export capacity. By the end of 2023, Russia imported only 34% of its gas into Europe compared to 2021. Over the past decade, Russia's share of total global pipeline gas exports has averaged around 43%. Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia's share of total global pipeline gas exports has fallen to 29%. According to data from the International Energy Agency, in 2022, when the Russia-Ukraine war broke out, natural gas demand in Asia and the Pacific decreased by 14bcm, Eurasia by 27bcm, and Europe by 85bcm.^[1] Due to the lack of global oil and gas inventories and limited spare capacity, the global oil and gas gap is difficult to fill in the short term,^[2] since the outbreak of the war, oil prices have hit a record high, and the rise in oil and natural gas as raw materials has aggravated inflation in Europe and the United States, and the rise in natural gas and oil prices has had a chain reaction on other oil prices, further exacerbating inflation, thus dragging down the process of world economic recovery. The World Bank predicts that global energy prices will remain high until the end of 2024 and well above the average of the last five years.^[3]

The intensifying geopolitical risks in Eurasia have accelerated the urgent need for the adjustment and restructuring of the energy industry chain and supply chain in the major economies of Eurasia. In order to reduce supply chain risks, major economies have shifted to emphasizing the autonomy and controllability of their own industrial chains and improving the resilience of key supply chains.^[4] Risk and security have become important considerations affecting the layout and adjustment of industrial and supply chains. Diversification, decentralization, flexibility, and regionalization have become new needs for the adjustment of industrial and supply chains. The global industrial division of labor system is facing reorganization, and short-chain, decentralization, localization, regionalization, and camp to meet security requirements have become important trends in the adjustment of the global industrial chain and supply chain.

Azerbaijan's strategic position in Eurasian energy security is prominent

Azerbaijan's prominent position in Eurasian energy security

Located on the shores of the Caspian Sea, at the intersection of East and West, Azerbaijan has a unique geographical location, which is a regional hub and an important link connecting China, the Middle East and Europe, and one of the most important links in global energy security. Under the influence of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the impact of the original energy industry chain and supply chain in Eurasia by regional conflicts, the importance of Azerbaijan as a bridge between Eurasia and the replacement of the original blocked

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transportation chain has become increasingly prominent. Strengthening cooperation with Azerbaijan in the fields of politics, economy and trade, transportation and logistics, and energy will not only help expand China's influence in the Caucasus more efficiently, improve the level of connectivity in the Eurasian region, and increase the flexibility of Eurasian industrial and supply chains, but also provide broader economic, political and geopolitical support for China's cooperation with the EU. Deepening cooperation with Azerbaijan under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative is in line with the reality of the global supply chain adjustment needs, and will help promote good cooperation in the Eurasian region.

Azerbaijan is committed to strengthening its position in the field of global energy security

In recent years, Azerbaijan has been committed to strengthening its position in the field of building global energy security, participating in large-scale construction projects of several transport infrastructure networks, as well as in the construction of energy transport pipelines, as well as large-scale investments. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the "Middle Corridor", is the shortest geographical link between Western China and Europe. Azerbaijan is one of the important countries located in the Central Corridor. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor has two main transport routes, namely: 1. Aktau/Kulik Port- Baku Port - Azerbaijan Railway Line - Georgian Railway Line - Batumi/Poti Port and via the Black Sea Sea Sea Route, connecting the Bulgarian port of Varna/Burgas or the Romanian port of Constanta; 2. Aktau / Kulik Port-Baku Port-Azerbaijan Railway Line-Georgian Railway Line (Baku-Tbilisi-Kars direction)-Turkish ports on the Black Sea and Mediterranean coast.^[5] Azerbaijan is the owner of the existing transport infrastructure (Port of Alat, BTK) from the Caspian Sea to the west. Over the past two years, freight traffic in the Central Corridor has more than tripled, from about 840,000 tonnes in 2021 to 2.76 million tonnes in 2023.^[6] The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway is an important part of the Eurasian transport network and is the shortest existing railway line connecting Europe and Asia, connecting all countries along the east-west route, 59.2% of which are located in Azerbaijan.

In terms of energy pipeline construction, Azerbaijan has built four energy pipelines (three oil pipelines and one gas pipeline): to the north is the Baku-Novorossiysk oil pipeline to Russia, with a total length of 1,330 kilometers and an annual transport volume of 5 million tons; To the west, the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline is passed through the Georgian Black Sea port of Supsa, with a total length of 833 kilometers and an annual transportation capacity of 15 million tons; There is also the Baku (Azerbaijan)-Tbilisi (Georgia)-Ceyhan (Turkey) pipeline, which is 1,768 kilometers long and has an annual transport volume of 50 million tons; The gas pipeline is the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline with an annual transport capacity of 20 billion cubic meters.^[5] The Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline Project and the Trans-Adriatic Gas Pipeline Project are major projects in Azerbaijan's strategy to diversify natural gas supply, and are another important route to Europe. "In June 2012, the Azerbaijani government signed a trans-Anatolian gas pipeline project with the Turkish government. In June 2013, the Argentine government selected the Trans-Adriatic Gas Pipeline project as the main route for transporting natural gas to Europe in the second phase of the Shah Daniz gas field. That is,

through the Trans-Anatolian Gas Transmission Pipeline, the second phase of the gas from the Shah Deniz gas field in Azerbaijan will be transported to the eastern part of Turkey through Georgia, and then extended to the western part of the country, and finally reach the borders of Turkey with Greece and Bulgaria. After that, the Trans-Adriatic Gas Pipeline will be used to cross the Adriatic Sea to southern Italy via Greece, Albania and the Adriatic Sea, thus opening up a channel for the transmission of Azerbaijani gas to Europe.^[7] Azerbaijan is located in the Transcaucasia and is an important part of the Eurasian land bridge. As a crossroads of human migration, Transcaucasia is not only historically a major route of imperial rivalry, but also one of the most ethnically and culturally heterogeneous regions, and the geographical reality of this region has created a constant conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the violent struggle between the two sides over the Nagorno-Karabakh region has escalated directly into a war at the national level, and a formal political settlement has not been achieved for a long time. The territorial conflict, which has lasted for more than three decades, as well as the two Nagorno-Karabakh wars, have affected peace and stability in the region, which has adversely affected its role as a regional hub and energy corridor. But in 2023 Azerbaijan won the second Nagorno-Karabakh, strengthening its control over the territory and boosting its position in the South Caucasus. Subsequently, both Azerbaijan and Armenia expressed the signing of a peace agreement to end the territorial conflict since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the two sides announced the signing of an agreement on the establishment of a joint border commission for the delimitation and demarcation of a common border. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced that he had formally proposed to Azerbaijan to sign a peace treaty. "We have put forward 17 articles in the latest draft peace treaty. Thirteen articles, including the preamble, have been fully agreed". "We put forward the following proposal—to incorporate all the agreed terms and wording into it and sign it as a peace treaty," Pashinyan said. In July 2024, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said the two countries had agreed on about 90% of the wording of the draft peace agreement. As the region's geopolitical stability increases, this will further favor Azerbaijan to play a more important role in its participation as a hub for energy supply chains linking China, Central Asia, the European Union, and even the world.

Europe is paying more and more attention to Azerbaijan

The EU's energy supply security has always been affected by the geopolitics of Eurasia, and political tensions may affect the security of energy transportation and supply. Due to the urgent need to adjust supply chains and promote the development of alternative transport corridors, the EU has begun to look for energy supply chains in the South Caucasus, and Azerbaijan has become the focus of the EU's new energy diplomacy policy.

The EU's energy security strategy emphasizes strengthening global relations with reliable energy producers and transporters, establishing long-term measures that contribute to the EU's energy security, such as increasing the EU's energy production and diversifying external suppliers and related infrastructure. The strategy also reaffirms its commitment to diversifying energy sources and energy routes: "In line with the objectives of the Energy Union, the EU

will seek to diversify its energy sources, routes and suppliers". (European Council 2016,22)^[8] The EU's Action Plan on Energy Diplomacy places particular emphasis on establishing and developing energy cooperation with "important producers or regions, transit countries or regions, neighbouring countries, and key global and regional strategic partners and interlocutors".

Azerbaijan's growing position in the field of global energy security has led the EU to significantly increase the importance it attaches to energy diplomacy. The SGC is a remarkable achievement of the strengthening of the construction of the two sides in the energy field. The European Investment Bank approved a loan of 1.5 billion euros for the energy project. The SGC consists of 3 pipelines: the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) across Azerbaijan and Georgia, the TANAP across Turkey, and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) across Greece and Albania and connecting it to Italy.^[8] The project meets the EU's need to diversify its energy chain and supply chain routes.

To sum up, as an important "gateway" to communicate with the Eurasian continent, Azerbaijan can improve the security and stability of the energy corridor in the entire region by virtue of its geographical location and infrastructure construction, and is a key part of the diversification strategy of the energy industry chain and supply chain of major economies in Eurasia. Therefore, strengthening cooperation between China and Azerbaijan through the Belt and Road Initiative will not only help reduce dependence on specific energy suppliers, realize China's diversified, decentralized, flexible and regional needs in the field of energy supply, enable China to better cope with the uncertainty of global supply chains, but also provide China with opportunities for cross-regional cooperation and strengthen China's influence in Eurasia.

The current situation of energy cooperation between China and Azerbaijan in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative

Cooperation

Azerbaijani President Aliyev said: "The role of our country in the restoration of the 'Great Silk Road' is very important. This project cannot be achieved without the participation of Azerbaijan, which is one of the most important strategic points on this path. We have full confidence in this transport corridor. Azerbaijan is one of the initiators of this transport corridor plan. This corridor is not only important for the reconstruction of the 'Great Silk Road', but also for the expansion of transport volume and links between China and Europe.^[7] According to statistics from the Ministry of Commerce, "Azerbaijan is extremely rich in oil and gas resources, mainly distributed in the Absheron Peninsula and the Caspian Sea continental shelf in Azerbaijan. The proven oil reserves belonging to the Caspian Sea region of Azerbaijan are about 2 billion tons, and the geological reserves are about 4 billion tons. The proven reserves of natural gas are 2.55 trillion cubic meters, and the prospective reserves are 6 trillion cubic meters.^[7] In the field of energy diplomacy between China and Azerbaijan,

this is mainly achieved through cooperation in infrastructure construction for energy transportation and energy investment.

In the area of infrastructure for energy transportation, in 2013 China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to promote economic connectivity in Europe and Asia. Projects under the initiative have increased trade between China and Europe by facilitating access to foreign markets through the creation of a network of transport corridors. The Trans-Caspian transport route is an important outcome of the Belt and Road Initiative, with a total length of 6,500 kilometers, which is the shortest road from China to the west, and the corridor reduces the transit time from about 60 days to about 14 days. Low costs and greater efficiency increase the attractiveness of this route and the future expectations of the relevant interest groups.^[9] Not only that, but the route also provided access to regional markets for China to promote the development of the western provinces.

In the field of energy investment cooperation, from 1995 to 2023, China's investment in Azerbaijan in the oil and gas sector amounted to \$754.1 million. "China's investment in azerbaijan is mainly concentrated in the oil sector, and PetroChina, through its overseas company, has cooperated with the Azerbaijan State Oil Company to invest in the azerbaijani onshore oil field "SALIYAN", with a total investment of more than 600 million US dollars. Investment in oil exploration projects has led to the export of Chinese oil extraction equipment and services, as well as the investment of related enterprises in Azerbaijan.^[7] In recent years, some large domestic enterprises have begun to turn their investment attention to the Azerbaijani market, actively participating in infrastructure construction Azerbaijani bidding projects, and have achieved certain results. However, there are still some problems in the field of energy cooperation between China and Arab States that need to be resolved urgently.

Challenges faced by China's energy cooperation with Azerbaijan

Compared with Western countries, China is still relatively lagging behind in the field of energy construction and cooperation with Azerbaijan

Western countries have a long history of cooperation and development with Azerbaijan in the field of energy and energy, and have taken the lead and dominated by virtue of their advantages in capital and technology. In the field of oil and gas development, companies such as BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil and Total have been investing in energy and construction in Azerbaijan since the 90s of the 20th century. The "Contract of the Century" in 1994 was a landmark agreement between the Azerbaijani government and international energy companies, and BP was one of the first Western oil companies to participate in the signing and entry into the Azerbaijani market. Chevron and ExxonMobil were also important players in the Contract of the Century and have played key roles in several projects since then. Total was involved in the development agreement for Shah Deniz, one of Azerbaijan's largest natural gas fields, in 2000.

Not only that, in Azerbaijan's largest oil field project, ACG (Azeri–Chirag–Guneshli), Western companies hold a whopping 88.4% of the shares, of which American and British companies account for about 60%. British, Norwegian and French companies have more than 60% stakes in the Shah-Jeniz gas project. The Azerbaijan State Oil Company (SOCAR) has a low level of control over domestic oil and gas reserves, holding only 23% of the equity reserves, with most of the remaining reserves held by foreign companies, including BP (36%), Statoil (11.4%) and Turkish National Oil Company (TPAO) (5.6%). Western companies control the exploration and development of several large oil and gas fields in Azerbaijan and are also involved in the construction of the midstream sector in Azerbaijan. Among them, the BTC and SCP pipelines are the largest oil and gas export pipelines in Azerbaijan, mainly invested and operated by BP, and are the largest shareholders of these two pipelines, accounting for 30.1% and 29% of the shares, respectively. Western companies have driven the development of the engineering and technical services market in Afghanistan through oil and gas exploration and development, and BP is the largest engineering and technical service provider in Azerbaijan.^[10] China-Azerbaijan's energy cooperation began in 2002, when it was already difficult to obtain production resources for a high-quality industrial chain. The main projects obtained by the Chinese side have poor assets, low reserves and complex geological conditions.

To sum up, the West has invested in Azerbaijan's energy sector for a long time, with a wide range and a large scale of cooperation, compared with the West, China not only entered the construction here late, but also has a small scale, and there is a large gap with the West. Not only that, the construction of energy diplomacy with Azerbaijan is one of the strategic pillars to ensure Europe's energy security, and China's in-depth development in Azerbaijan is bound to intensify competition with the West in the industrial chain and supply chain of traditional energy.

The enhancement of regional security and stability is still in an unstable state

Although Azerbaijan signed a peace agreement with Armenia to end the territorial conflict and demarcate a common border, which increased the stability of the South Caucasus. But in the face of intensifying geopolitical conflicts and power plays in Eurasia, it is debatable whether the increased security and stability in the South Caucasus can be sustained in the long term.

Azerbaijan pursues a balanced foreign policy, but because of its desire to maintain economic and political independence, its foreign policy has always been aimed at strengthening ties with the West rather than turning to Russia. "In order to avoid Russia's control of its own oil resources, Azerbaijan has cooperated with Turkey, Georgia, Kazakhstan and other countries to build the Baku-Tbilisi-Djehanyi (BTC) oil pipeline, which has been exported more than 50 million tons of oil annually to Europe since the pipeline was opened in 2006, making the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline through Russia useless."^[11] Coupled with the implementation of the Southern Gas Corridor plan, this series of moves has fundamentally

broken Russia's monopoly on Central Asia's oil resources, which is bound to lead to strong dissatisfaction in Russia.

At this stage, Russia is mired in the quagmire of the Russian-Ukrainian war, and its strategic focus is still on resolving this dispute, and the accumulated energy influence in the Transcaucasus is gradually dissipating. Once the Russia-Ukraine war ends, Russia may readjust its energy diplomacy strategy, turn more attention to the South Caucasus, curb Azerbaijan's tendency to turn to the West in the energy field by strengthening energy diplomacy, imposing economic sanctions, exerting political pressure, etc., and reshape its energy hegemony in Azerbaijan.

The future development direction of China-Arab energy construction cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative

Expand new areas of energy construction

Through the "Belt and Road" construction of new energy, expand the cooperation and construction of China and Azerbaijan in the field of new energy, not only can help Azerbaijan's economic structural transformation, but also can effectively avoid the fierce competition with the West in the field of traditional energy construction, through the expansion of renewable energy, clean energy and other fields, China can give full play to its own advantages, help Azerbaijan achieve energy diversification and sustainable development.

Azerbaijan's resource-dependent monolithic industrial structure is greatly affected by international oil prices, which can easily lead to unstable domestic economic growth. In order to meet this challenge, Azerbaijan is committed to diversifying the national economy. To this end, the core point of the medium and long-term economic development strategy proposed by the Azerbaijan government is to vigorously develop non-oil and gas industries and reduce excessive dependence on the oil and gas industry.^[12] In recent years, China's new energy industry has developed rapidly, and the new energy industry represented by photovoltaic power generation has great competitiveness and potential. The scale of new installed capacity has increased significantly, the technical level ranks among the top in the world, and the international competitiveness has been significantly improved. The scale of the industry has doubled, and the competitive advantage of foreign trade is obvious. In 2023, the export of the "new three" (new energy vehicles, lithium batteries, and photovoltaic products) will exceed the trillion yuan mark for the first time, of which the export of photovoltaic products will exceed 50 billion US dollars, a year-on-year increase of more than 80%. At the same time, China's wind power industry has an overwhelming advantage in the production capacity of towers and castings, of which tower factories account for 90% of Asia's production capacity, and casting factories occupy 70% of the world's production capacity, becoming the world's largest wind power equipment manufacturing base.^[13] By leveraging its own advantages in energy construction and deepening China-Arab cooperation in the field of new energy, it will not only enhance China's economic and technological influence in Azerbaijan, but also lay the foundation for further expansion of cooperation in the field of traditional energy in the future. This multi-level cooperation model will help form a broader strategic partnership in

Azerbaijan, so that China can occupy an important position in both the new and traditional energy fields, and optimize its energy distribution and interest structure. With successful cooperation in the field of new energy, China can enhance its trust and position in the Azerbaijani market, so as to obtain more cooperation opportunities and benefits in the construction of traditional energy sources, and further consolidate its voice and influence in the country's energy policy. This strategy will achieve coordinated development in the energy sector and promote deep and mutually beneficial cooperation between China and Azerbaijan in the energy economy.

Optimize infrastructure to connect energy markets in Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan with China and Europe

Under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, China and the Arab States should continue to cooperate in building and improving the east-west railway transport trunk line between China and Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan and Europe, and strengthen transport connectivity. To build Azerbaijan into a transportation hub and transit point connecting Europe and Asia in the "Silk Road Economic Belt".^[5]

China and Azerbaijan should further deepen cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, promote the investment and construction of the China-Central Asia-Caspian Sea-Azerbaijan-Europe east-west railway transport trunk line, improve inter-regional transport connectivity, and optimize the efficiency of the energy industry chain and supply chain. By continuing to encourage Chinese enterprises to actively participate in the continuous construction and development of energy transport routes such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline, the Southern Gas Corridor, the Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan-China energy transport route, the Trans-Caspian Railway and transport routes, Efforts will be made to connect the energy supply chain between China and Central Asia and Europe to form a complete transportation network. Strengthening Sino-Arab cooperation in the field of transport infrastructure, on the one hand, can promote the process of economic diversification of Azerbaijan, further consolidate its position as a Eurasian transport hub, and promote economic integration and stable development in the region. On the other hand, China will not only have access to the oil and gas resources of Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea region, but will also be able to ensure the diversification of energy supplies and the stability of transport routes through cooperation with Azerbaijan.

Actively play a coordinating role in ensuring regional stability in the South Caucasus

The Belt and Road Initiative has a balanced global value chain division structure to promote interdependence and cooperation among countries along the Belt and Road, not only by emphasizing the interconnection of policies, facilities, trade, capital and people's hearts to promote and coordinate the integration of developing countries along the Belt and Road into the global economy, but also through third-party market cooperation to coordinate the interests of developed and developing countries.^[14] In the South Caucasus, China can use the

framework of the "Belt and Road" to establish a regional multi-platform cooperation and coordination organization, with the participation of China, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, the European Union, Russia, Turkey, etc, aiming to formulate a common energy security framework through dialogue, negotiation and cooperation, promote cooperation between all parties in infrastructure construction, energy supply chain security, technology sharing, etc, and avoid unilateralism and energy hegemony.

Conclusion

In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, China has strengthened cooperation with Azerbaijan in the fields of new energy, traditional energy infrastructure and transportation corridor construction, and regional security, which is not only conducive to reducing the vulnerability and risk of the original energy supply chain, improving the controllability of energy supply channels and the elasticity of the supply chain, but also adapting to the adjustment trend of the global industrial energy chain of short chain and decentralization, which is an inevitable choice in the context of increasingly geopolitical risks in Eurasia.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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