

Opinion – Washington-Baku Cooperation Towards COP29 in a Fragmented World

Written by Wilder Alejandro Sánchez

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WILDER ALEJANDRO SÁNCHEZ, JUN 23 2024

Azerbaijan will host the COP29 climate conference in November. As preparations are underway, Azerbaijani officials are meeting with partners and carrying out “listening tours” to understand the issues global leaders, agencies and communities want to address. Besides a focus on climate change financing, water issues will likely be at the top of the agenda – and Washington will be an important partner in the planning stages. An Azerbaijani delegation led by Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources and President of COP29 Mukhtar Babayev traveled to Washington, DC, in April. The delegation’s meetings included a visit by John Kerry, the former US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, to the Azerbaijani embassy in the US capital. The Azerbaijani delegation also participated in the International Monetary Fund’s and World Bank’s Spring Meetings. At a March event organized by Axios, John Podesta, senior adviser to the president for international climate policy (who replaced Kerry), explained that “we need to build on the momentum... particularly to deliver at the global level the finance that will be necessary to help developing economies transition.”

While the full agenda of COP29 has not been released, Baku has delineated its vision for the summit. At the Bonn Climate Change Conference in mid-June, COP29 President-Designate Babayev explained the five initial priority areas for the summit: spanning human capital, agriculture, the urban environment, energy storage and finance, and investment and trade. Climate change financing will be high on the agenda, as Azerbaijan aims to secure a “fair and ambitious new climate finance goal, finalise Article 6, strengthen global financial institutions, and ensure the private sector commits to climate action,” Babayev said. As for specific challenges, water security is expected to be one of the event’s focus areas. Access to water will be one of the defining factors for cooperation or conflict in the 21st century, as climate change, environmental destruction, greater reliance on water-intensive industries, population growth, and inter-state tensions make access to this vital resource even more important than gold.

A COP conference in the Caucasus means that environmental issues, including water-related issues affecting the Caucasus and Central Asia, can be at the forefront of discussions. Central Asia experienced a drought during the summer of 2021, and regional water bodies, namely the Aral Sea and Caspian Sea, are at risk of disappearing. “We feel the impact of climate change very much because [the Caspian’s] level is going down, and ... we witness [this] every day. For me, it’s a sign of how the environment around us is fragile,” said Nigar Arpadarai, UN climate change high-level champion for COP29. Neighboring Iran, globally known for its authoritarian regime, similarly has water insufficiency – due to a rising population, pollution, water mismanagement, and treating ethnic groups as second-class citizens – which will worsen in the coming years.

Other areas of the world are equally suffering from lack of water. On 8 May, the United Nations Environment Programme issued an interview with Harald Egerer, head of UNEP’s office in Vienna. Egerer explained how the Carpathian region, a chain of mountains across several Central and Eastern European states, has “been getting hotter over the last 50 years,” causing “more frequent and intense heat waves, droughts, erratic rainfall, and floods. Drought increases the risk of wildfires and pest outbreaks in the Carpathians.” Elsewhere in Europe, countries like Italy and Spain continue to face droughts. The European Union has taken the controversial opinion to “shelve a plan to boost the European Union’s resilience against droughts and floods,” explains Politico Europe.

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As for the Western Hemisphere, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Mexico are currently also experiencing droughts. Lack of rain affects the energy production of many countries, so not only is there a lack of water, but electricity rationing programs are also in effect. Hence, focusing on water issues at COP 29 is mandatory. Anecdotally, Azerbaijan's Caspian neighbor Kazakhstan will co-organize the One Water Summit with France during the annual United Nations General Assembly this September. The fact that the summit occurs two months before COP29 in Baku means that water will be broadly discussed at high-level events this year. Hopefully, the conference will conclude with a "blue agreement" addressing water.

On the other hand, some countries have too much water due to rising seas. This past May, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev met with the Governor General of Tuvalu, the Prime Minister of Tonga, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Bahamas. Islands across the Pacific, Caribbean (and the Maldives) are at risk of disappearing due to rising sea levels.

It is unclear if nuclear power will be a significant focus of COP29, but it will probably be discussed. While nuclear power is a valid alternative to more polluting energy industries, nuclear power can also be problematic if the facilities are not well-managed. Moreover, the geopolitics of nuclear energy must also be considered, given the tense relationship between the Global Powers nowadays. In December 2023, Armenia and Russia signed a contract to modernize Armenia's Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), which will operate until 2036. This is problematic as the contract will ensure Armenia remains in Russia's sphere of influence. Moreover, for several years, there have been reports about concerns over the plant's radioactive waste, which could affect neighboring settlements and agricultural land.

Unfortunately, the increasingly fragmented and violent global (dis)order means that the Azerbaijani COP29 presidency will have the monumental task of convincing global leaders from states and industries to put their differences aside and focus on environmental cooperation and protection, including addressing climate change financing and water issues. Washington's support will be vital for Baku to have a chance at achieving this almost impossible objective, given the current global geopolitical climate.

About the author:

Wilder Alejandro Sánchez is president of Second Floor Strategies, a consulting firm in Washington, D.C. He is an analyst who monitors defense, geopolitical, and trade issues across the Western Hemisphere, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. He has monitored Moldovan affairs for over a decade.