

## *A small country at the table of "Great Game" in Central Asia*

### ***Azerbaijan, the oil illusion***

*Smashed between Russia and Iran, already at war with Armenia, rich in hydrocarbons, predominantly Muslim, Azerbaijan should be a powder keg, instead it is a very quiet place, when Bin Laden is not a news. Yet, the wealth, promised by oil tycoons' capitalism is reserved for the regime of an old ex- soviet party hierarch.*

The war wind blowing hard in Central Asia does not reach Baku, the sleepy Capital of Azerbaijan. Settled on the top of Abseron peninsula, Baku is the sentinel of a flat and gloomy sea, the Caspian sea, which does not bring news from other country, but only the image of the oil rigs on the horizon, far like a promise.

Oil. The mad rush for black gold, which accompanied the Second Industrial Revolution (1870-1900) and which still dictate the unwritten rules of the geopolitical "Great Game", did not started in Saudi Arabia or Texas deserts, but here, all around Baku. The first oil well in history (1848). the first refinery, the first pipeline (1878), and even the first off-shore platform (1949). At the beginning of the XX century, Azerbaijan produced by itself half of the entire world's oil quantity and it was the energetic treasure of Tsarist Russia. Baku was a modern and cosmopolitan city, where the oil companies of Nobel brothers (inventor of dynamite's family) and of Rothschilds showed up. Italian architects designed the luxurious residences of the oil aristocracy, the banks headquarters, the government buildings, providing the city with a "Belle Epoque" charm, which, despite the decadence, is still there.

Few kilometers are enough to see a spooky scene evoking the ghosts of recent past: hundreds semi-abandoned wells, rocker drills continuing to move as if by magic, some worker who suddenly appears in the mud and in black or fluorescent psychedelic colored puddles, large rusty pipes leading to dirty beaches. Further north, in Sungait, oil archeology turns into the nightmare of industrial cemetery. Smokestacks, warehouses, railroads, electric cables, light poles, paved roads full of holes: tons of rusty iron and gray concrete, square miles of squalor without any human presence. It is the legacy of Soviet industrialization, paralyzed by its obtuse gigantism: a production piece in every USSR republic, many watertight compartments working in military way, controlled by an increasingly sclerotic brains of centralized economy: when that was turned off, everything stopped. One hundred years of oil extraction have been useless.

But today the "Great Game" (as the challenge for the control of the Central Asia between British and Russian Empires was called) restarts. Unknown or forgotten countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and others) can become the second energetic hub of the world, or even the first, being side by side or overtaking the Arab countries, friends-enemies of the superpowers, according the conveniences (of the superpowers). Three factors are decisive in the future of these nations: oil (and gas) deposits; the geographical position (for the distribution of black gold); the political-military alliances. Religion, "civilization", ideologies do not matter anything, despite of the propaganda by U.S. State Department, many lies by Western media, and apocalyptic theories (a little insane) by the often-quoted Samuel Huntington ("The clash of civilization").

The "Great Game" began precisely during the presidency of George Bush senior (1988-1992). A triumphant presidency: it started with the Red Army retreat (1989) from Afghanistan of the mujahideen financed for years by CIA. Score one to zero for the U.S.A. It continues, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of Cold War in Europe, with the victorious war against the bad guy on duty, Saddam Hussein, who, with the short-lived (idiot) invasion of Kuwait, allows the U.S. Army bases establishment in Saudi Arabia, strong ally of the U.S.A. The sheiks oil is now under the protection of Uncle Sam Army, a few steps from Sacred Islam places. Two score to zero for U.S.A., in the face of Muslims, who feel oppressed.

It ended with the demise of USSR, the historical rival, the resulting independence of former Soviet republics and the discovery (or rediscovery, in the case of Azerbaijan) of huge oil reserves in Caspian Sea and Central Asia. It was the beginning of a new age promising peace and prosperity (to

America), it was the famous New International Order that, ten years later, George W. Bush wanted to reshape in his image and likeness: a stars and stripes world, dominated by a “made in U.S.A.” capitalism (U.S. need a enormous quantity of energy to live: they are the largest consumers of oil of the world and the biggest polluters on earth). As everyone knows, Washington government is an expression of oil business, started from Bush clan (Texas oil): from Condoleeza Rice (Chevron) to the Vice President Dick Cheney (Halliburton), from Gale Norton (Delta Petroleum) to Donald Evans (Tom Brown), most of the Republican administration in office was formed in the oil companies. To make matters worse, Enron, the energy sector's finance society, overwhelmed by the crash (and false statement in account), yielded the largest contributions to the campaign of Bush junior.

You should not think that the policy of Clinton government (1992-2000) was different. U.S. need was already clear: reducing the dependence on Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern states (considered at risk), exploiting new sources of Central Asia and being able to provide oil bypassing the new enemy (Iran) and the past one (Russia). Looking at the map, it is clear that you have to pass through Turkey to reach Mediterranean Sea (here is the project of Baku-Tblisi -Ceyhan pipeline), whereas to bring oil to Indian Ocean, to Pakistan ports you need to cross Afghanistan. This is the project by Unocal, American company, which needed a stable and friendly regime in Kabul. The Pakistani government and CIA helped Taliban to win the civil war in Afghanistan (1996), but the new government was not very reliable.

Russia, for its part, wanted to maintain the existing network and expand it at the expense of other projects. Central Asia oil had to pass through Novorossiysk, over the Black Sea or arrive in Europe across the faithful Ukraine (as it happened till now).

Iran, oil exporting country and member of OPEC, did not obviously want to be cut off, also because it is the nation in the best strategic position (and Italians are focusing on the regime of ayatollahs).

Turkey, finally, worked to spread its economic influence in the former Soviet republics related by language, culture, geographical position (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan).

As long as the “Great Game” has seen like an “all against all” war, the area from Caucasus to Pakistan has been crossed by many conflicts all attributed to ethic and religious factors. Chechen, Abkhazian, Armenians, Azeris, Kurds, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Pashtuns: guerrillas supported by one or the other power, political factions or pseudo-religious groups created "ad hoc" to weaken, destabilize, threaten, blackmail various local governments, which were very dictatorial and corrupt.

“The events of 9/11 probably accelerated processes which were already underway for years”, says Marco Bassotti, Italian UN ambassador in Baku. “Before the Afghanistan war, the oil pipelines were seen as alternative each other – the ambassador continues- but now they want to realize as many pipelines as possible, to maximize the network and to avoid any situation of unilateral control or monopoly”. The energetic cake seems to be enormous, everyone could reach a suitable slice. Twenty prosperous years, this is the wonder by “Pax Americana” in the New International Order version. Political stability and oil for everyone, with only one enemy: Islamic fundamentalism designed to succumb but not so much. The reason is: without the terrorism threat, without the “permanent war” climate with its new holy alliance, many people would wonder if “another kind of world is possible”.

Scenarios change, according different points of view and Azerbaijan can be a perfect observatory. While in Europe journalists wrote huge articles about holy wars, world fights, nuclear and biological threat, life here flowed as if nothing had happened. Too busy making ends meet, Azerbaijanis were far away from the strong controversy on “the Western civilization primacy” or “the aggressive nature of Islam”. Osama Bin Laden and the Mullah Omar were virtually absent in TV news and in people's conversation. A 90 percent Muslim society did not observe strictly Ramadan, often allowing itself generous drinks of vodka, legacy of Russian domination. Azerbaijanis are good people: deeply tied to their country, with a strong sense of family, hospitable like their neighbors Georgians, food and company lovers, certainly not too much zealous for work. A little like Italians of the past times. Originally Christian (when the inhabitants of these lands were called Albanians), they converted to Islam in the seventh century, never showing fanaticism.

Seventy years of Soviet domination weakened religious zeal: Islam is, for the most part of them, a good family tradition, just like Catholicism in Italy.

The lack of Azerbaijanis preoccupation for “jihad” proclaimed by the elusive Saudi Sheik, propagandized mostly by Western media, is certainly much closer to reality than hysterical paranoia passed off as journalism. Few people realized that, in the months after the terrible attack to Twin Towers, nothing related terrorism happened. Eventually, the advent of the Euro and other “sensational” news took over the journalistic nothing, while the real facts were concealed (and so we don't have any balance of civilian victims in Afghanistan, nor of the North Alliance war crimes, nor the thousands ethnic arrests in U.S.A.)

So, life goes on as usually, in Baku and its surroundings. It means that 60 percent of population (about 8 million people) lives under the poverty line, with a per capita annual income lower than 500 dollars, with an unemployment exceeding 30 percent, with average salaries not reaching 50 euros. Not bad, for a country officially experiencing its “second oil boom”.

The government insists on great development possibilities of the country, counting on more consistent State revue. The agreement among the major oil company (British Petroleum, Amoco, Unocal, Elf, Total, Russia's Lukoil, the Italian Agip and others) and SOCAR, the Azerbaijani State company are production sharing: each group has its oil portion, according huge initial investments which are amortized in four to five years. In 2001-2002 the positive effects of profits should begin (but there is no longer the blind optimism about the consistence of the oil reserves). In Baku they are trustful, as the managers of the Oil State Academy, Azerbaijani Technical University, true source of engineers, scientists and managers since 1920.

In term of macroeconomics, this game can work: Azerbaijan has accounts in good standing (low inflation, low debt, good cash reserves). But for people who can see year after year more luxurious and richer shop windows, and nightclubs increase, the situation has not changed one jot, and it's not going to change, given that the political situation is more stagnant than ever.

Only one leader: Heidar Aliyev, born in 1923, Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan since 1969, former member of the Politburo, rejected by of Gorbachev and perestroika, recycled thanks to the heavy military defeats in the war against Armenia and the inability of his opponents (or, if you want, thanks to his ability as politician – autocrat). Azerbaijan, beyond the rhetoric of Socialism, was treated by Moscow almost like a colony: tough it boasted about credits on the federation, which sucked all its oil, it had one of the lowest per capita income of USSR.

The nationalistic blaze led by Abulfaz Elchibey and his Popular Front for Azerbaijan since independence in 1991, was suppressed by a very serious economic crisis caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, but, first of all, by the unfortunate war against Armenia.

The Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict was essentially linked to Nagorno-Karabakh region. It is the most fertile and beautiful zone of Azerbaijan, and Armenians arrived there in the nineteenth century, pushed by the Tsar who did not approve a Muslim presence in his empire (Armenian are Christian Orthodox).

Despite many years of peaceful coexistence, to every clash of regional powers (Russia, Turkey and Iran), the poor Caucasian populations fought the one against the other, instruments of a policy that they could never drive. Thus, during the First World War, the Armenians were alongside the czarist army, Azerbaijanis were allies of “cousins” Turks of the Ottoman Empire sided with Germany and Austria against France, Italy, England and Russia. The violence, as in all wars, did not spare anyone, but Armenians were deported in crowds and made die of starvation and violence at the hands of Turks in that is considered the first genocide in modern history (1915-1918). The ephemeral ransom for Armenians (and for other persecuted people, Kurd) was ratified in the Treaty of Sevres (1920), which was to divide the spoils of the dead and defeated Ottoman Empire: independent Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Kurdistan were created at the expense of Turkey (Azerbaijan had become independent in 1918, like its neighbor Georgia). But Azerbaijanis, Kurd, Armenians and Georgians were overwhelmed by the terrifying force of the new Kemal Ataturk Turkey and the emerging Lenin and Stalin's Soviet nation. Transcaucasia was divided for love and harmony between the two regimes, which had many ideological affinities (sweep away the

old feudal and religious system in the two former empires, the Ottoman and Czarist) and a common enemy, England putting his hands on the Middle East and Iran (as British were to come up with the Shah of Persia Reza Pahlavi's father).

So the question of Nagorno-Karabakh was solved by Stalin, who at first facilitated Azerbaijan, but then balanced the matter through the complicated system of autonomous republics and autonomous regions, according to the ancient practice of divide et impera. Nobody knows exactly how and why the first ethnic conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh blew up in 1988. The only certainties are that Gorbachev tried unsuccessfully to fix it with an iron hand and that, after three years of open war, the Armenians won hands down. Nearly one million Azerbaijanis left the province, about 200 thousand Armenians left Azerbaijan afraid of reprisals (but a good number of Armenians still live here). In 1994 a cease-fire was signed, and since then the situation has been static, while the "displaced persons" continue to live in piteous conditions.

The military defeat overthrew President Elchibey, democratically elected in 1992, and saw the comeback of the old political fox Aliyev (1993). Just as Shevardnadze in Georgia, Aliyev quickly got rid of all dangerous rivals, gradually charged to plot coups and arrested, exiled, killed or sentenced to death (often after they were called to the government). He organized fraudulent elections in '93 and '98, he was elected triumphantly, and his party, called New Azerbaijan, won hands down in the same way and dominate the parliament. New Constitution (1995) draw a presidential system for Aliyev personal interest, he has power of appointment of almost all the Judges (the subjection of the judiciary is the most shameful aspect of the scheme), as well as six of the twelve members of the Commission election. He placed quite naturally his son at the head of SOCAR, which manages country's oil.

Not by chance, to describe the "new" regimes of Central Asia (Aliyev in Azerbaijan, Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, Karimov in Uzbekistan, Nyazov, the most grotesque, in Turkmenistan, all presidents formally elected by universal suffrage), the analysts Linz and Chelab restored the definition of "sultanism" due to Max Weber, "an extreme form of patrimonialism" in which "the government and the army are simply tools of the sultan (master)". It is not fair to describe them as "transitional" states, name used constantly to describe the nations at the end of communism, as if you were to just wait for the natural conclusion of a process inevitably leading to democracy and development in a context of free market.

Western products quickly arrived in the former communist countries, while human and political rights, as usual, was considered "optional". The economy killed politics, in free countries, and results were clear.

According to these criteria, there can be no authentic development for people, even if people are sitting on a oil sea. Indeed ... As Ryszard Kapuscinski wrote in his book on Iran "Shah-in-Shah", "oil creates the illusion of a completely different life, it offers the illusion of an easy life without hard work. It is a poison infecting mind, blurring vision, corrupting the heart. (.....) Oil makes big profits, but it employs few people. Oil create neither a large working class, nor a large middle class, for which the government, not being forced to share the profits, can use it for its full pleasure. (...) Oil is a fairy tale and like every fairy tale, a lie. "

**Cesare Sangalli**