

Putin Forges New Ties with Baku

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The Russian president's first visit to Baku could pave the way for a new era in Russo-Azeri relations

Military co-operation and political rapprochement were high on the agenda during last week's talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Azeri leader, Heidar Aliiev.

The talks reflected recent strides forward in the relationship between the two countries which have been bitterly divided over the conflicts in Nagorny Karabakh and Chechnya.

Sergei Prikhodko, deputy head of the Kremlin administration, stated, "Russia and Azerbaijan are ready to put an end to the hiatus in their mutual relations.

"Both nations understand that this hiatus was wrong, both in terms of security issues as well as political and economic ties."

Relations between Baku and Moscow became particularly strained during the darkest years of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict when Azerbaijan suspected Russia of supporting the Armenian war effort.

When the Russian army invaded Chechnya in 1994, Baku openly expressed sympathy for the Chechen cause. During both campaigns, Moscow accused the Azeri government of turning a blind eye while wounded rebels were treated in local hospitals and Islamic mercenaries were flown into Baku airport.

Last year, the Kremlin threatened to impose a visa regime on Azerbaijan in bid to tighten controls on the border. It was a move which could have had serious economic implications for the former Soviet republic.

In September, however, Aliiev provoked a public outcry in Azerbaijan by handing over to the Russian authorities seven Chechen nationals suspected of staging the 1999 bomb attacks in the Dagestani town of Buinaksk.

During Wednesday's meeting in Baku, Putin made a point of thanking Aliiev for taking this "courageous" step. He went on to say that he was satisfied with the level of mutual co-operation in the fight against terrorism and could see no reason for Russia to introduce "one-sided measures" against Azerbaijan.

Conversely, last month Moscow slapped a visa regime on neighbouring Georgia which had refused to take action over Russian claims that Chechen rebels were taking refuge in the notorious Pankisi Gorge.

The issue provided a springboard for Putin and Aliiev to discuss military co-operation, aimed at "furthering the security interests of both states".

Only the future of the Gabalin radar installation remained a sticking point with Baku insisting that the facility should be turned over to Azerbaijan within the next five years. Moscow has signed an agreement with all former Soviet republics to lease radar installations for 20 years and is unwilling to make an

exception for Gabalin.

However, Putin has offered to share information received at Gabalin with the Azeri defence ministry if Aliev accepts a compromise. And the Russian government will also undertake to train Azeri military personnel and to maintain Soviet military equipment currently located in the region.

On the subject of Nagorny Karabakh where the six-year conflict was suspended in 1994, Putin agreed to guarantee any agreement reached between Armenia and Azerbaijan. "We are prepared to accept any decision which suits both nations," he said.

Russia is currently involved as a mediator in ongoing peace talks organised under the aegis of the OSCE's Minsk Group.

The two presidents also discussed co-operation in the Caspian oil industry which, since the fall of the Soviet Union, has been developed by a range of foreign companies.

On Tuesday, Russia's LUKOIL signed a \$250-million exploration deal with SOCAR, Azerbaijan's state oil company. Baku is also considering plans to transport crude oil from the Caspian Sea to Novorossiisk as well as an offer of natural gas exports from Russia.

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