

# **The Role of Indonesian Students in Azerbaijan in Strengthening Indonesia-Azerbaijan Bilateral Relations**

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## **Abstract**

*Indonesia and Azerbaijan have built a close relationship since Azerbaijan declared its independence from the Soviet Union as Indonesia is one of the first countries which recognise Azerbaijan's independence. Until now, the bilateral relationship between Indonesia and Azerbaijan is mostly in trade and political aspects. However, this research aims to analyse the relations of Indonesia and Azerbaijan in the field of culture as well as the role of Indonesian students in Azerbaijan in strengthening both relations. This study is descriptive qualitative research with primary and secondary data that obtained from interviews, and qualitative questionnaires from the study of Indonesian students' perspectives in terms of their activities which have a potential role in many fields to increase the ties between the two countries, and literature review. Furthermore, the concept of public diplomacy in international relations by Nicholas J. Cull is applied in this study to conclude the result. The authors discovered that individuals, particularly students, can contribute to improving bilateral ties. Moreover, the study discovered that several of the activities carried out by Indonesian students in Azerbaijan have the potential to improve bilateral relationships that are based on the principles and practise of public diplomacy by promoting, introducing, and teaching Indonesian cultures to the Azerbaijani people.*

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Public Diplomacy, Students, Bilateral Relations.

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## **I. Introduction**

Following the demise of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan declared its independence. On September 28, 1991, Indonesia was one of the first nations to acknowledge the Republic of Azerbaijan's independence. The relationship was then increased when the diplomatic relations between both countries were officially established a year later, on 24 September 1992. Azerbaijan opened its embassy in Jakarta in 2006 followed by Indonesia opening its embassy in Baku in 2010. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations between them, several visits were held in both countries, resulting in various agreements, joint declarations, as well a Memorandum of understanding in different fields such as education, humanitarian, trade, and economics. In international politics, as Muslim majority and developing countries, both are members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as well as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). There is various cooperation in many fields between them, however, trade relations is the most prominent one compared to other fields (KBRI Baku, n.d.).

Despite the reality that Indonesia has a strong trade relationship with Azerbaijan, other efforts have been made by the Indonesian government to build stronger relations in other fields, including cultural promotion. For instance, the embassy of the Republic of Indonesia held the Indonesian Cultural Festival six times from 2016 to 2022 and still going on until current moment as an annual cultural event. In fact, this effort has been analysed successfully to introduce Indonesia to Azerbaijani people and attract more tourists from Azerbaijan. It resulted from the increase of Azerbaijan tourists coming to Indonesia from 374 tourists in 2020 to 717 tourists in 2022 due to COVID-19. On the other hand, before the pandemic, the Azerbaijani tourists coming to Indonesia reached thousands of people (BPS, 2022).

From the facts above, the bilateral relation is mainly played by the state or government as the actor. However, another noteworthy point is that another party indirectly participates in this bilateral relationship in the education sector. The existence of students of both countries can be essential actors in improving the relations. Some scholarship programs are offered to attract students from Indonesia and Azerbaijan to study in both countries. In Indonesia for instance, there are two popular scholarships among Azerbaijani students which are the Indonesian Art and Culture Scholarship (IACS) and the Darmasiswa Scholarship (KEMLU, 2020). These scholarships are intended to introduce Indonesian culture by experiencing it in Indonesia directly. Similarly, some scholarship programs are also applicable for Indonesian students to study in Azerbaijan such as the Nailakhanim Scholarship, Khazar University International Scholarship Program (KUISP) and the Scholarship Programme by the Azerbaijani government for students from OIC and NAM member countries, including Indonesia.

In actuality, international students serve as ambassadors for their home nations in the nations where they are studying. These students play crucial parts in several activities that support their homeland. In the case of Indonesian students, for instance, they have an organisation named the Indonesian Student and Youth Association in Azerbaijan (P3I Azerbaijan, n.d.). This organisation gathers all Indonesian students in Azerbaijan to cooperate in some activities in several fields related to education, economy, tourism and culture, particularly, in promoting Indonesian culture. Besides, they also endeavour to promote Azerbaijan education to attract more Indonesian people to study in Azerbaijan through their social media. The survey illustrates that the total number of Indonesian students in Azerbaijan increases annually, and more Indonesians are interested in studying in Azerbaijan. It illustrates that students indirectly contribute however to strengthening the relation between both countries.

On the other hand, this study aims to find the role of Indonesian students in Azerbaijan in strengthening the bilateral relations between Indonesia and Azerbaijan. In this case, the process of finding secondary data through literature review as well as previous studies has been conducted onerous due to the fact that the research related to relations between both countries is restricted. These facts become the evidence that the study conducted by the authors has high novelty and there is no previous research conducted in similar discussions.

## **II. Research Method**

This research is descriptive qualitative research in which the data is received from both primary and secondary data. The interview and the explanation of the participants who are provided the questionnaire are the reference of the primary data while secondary data is obtained from the literature review. Furthermore, the research utilises public diplomacy theory and correlates it with the participants' answers to find the conclusion of the research question. In addition, the Forum Group Discussion was conducted to ensure the result of the study with the authorities and experts.

## **III. Discussion**

### **Indonesia and Azerbaijan's Relationship**

Historically, Indonesia has had diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan since 1992 which was marked by Indonesia's recognition of the independence of Azerbaijan from the Soviets. In the end, currently, Indonesia has become the third-ranked country as the main supplier of export activities in the oil sector from Azerbaijan. The establishment of the Indonesia Research Centre at Azerbaijan University of Languages, where information about Indonesia is introduced through educational channels such as in terms of culture, language, and geography, has strengthened ties between Indonesia and Azerbaijan. In regards to this, cooperation between the two nations spans a variety of areas, including the social, cultural, and educational, as well as the political and economic (Azerbaijan Embassy, n.d.).

In the field of education, the two countries have collaborated through the provision of educational scholarships from the Indonesian government for Azerbaijani students which are available in several types of scholarships including scholarships to study Indonesian traditional culture and arts in informal schools as well as in formal school such as in the master's level. The scholarship period spans from three months of study to two years of study fully funded during the study period by the Indonesian government. In this case, Indonesian people who wish to study in Azerbaijan are also assisted by the existence of government scholarships and several foundations that provide full scholarships during the study period. Thus, both the people of Indonesia and Azerbaijan who received the scholarships besides being able to pursue education can also experience directly living in the local country by studying language, culture, society and politics as a form of diplomacy between the two countries. In addition, the relationship between Indonesia and Azerbaijan in education is evidenced by the appearance of a research article from Azerbaijani professor, Habib Zarbaliyev which discussed about Indonesia (Zarbaliyev & Zaman Askerli, 2014).

Culture is analysed as the best tool of diplomacy due to its simplicity and creativity which can influence other people to learn and know easily (Mark, 2017). The introduction of the two countries' cultures through education can become a strong foundation so that more and more people from Indonesia and Azerbaijan obtain to know each other's local countries, which can lead to an interest in visiting the country and even inviting other relatives from both Indonesia and Azerbaijan to participate and experience and obtain to know the country. In this case, the diplomacy of tourist places can also be carried out to be able to increase the number of foreign visitors which can also increase the income of the local country in the economic sector (Putra & Risman, 2022). This can be proven by the involvement of Azerbaijani youth and women who had the opportunity to perform Indonesian culture in almost every activity of Indonesian cultural diplomacy in Azerbaijan as traditional dancers.

In the political and economic fields, relations between Indonesia and Azerbaijan are strengthened by cooperation in the field of oil imported from Azerbaijan (Tamami, 2021). Meanwhile, from Indonesia to Azerbaijan, exports of palm oil, soap, and tea, to electronic equipment such as refrigerators have been carried out and are continuing to this day. Meanwhile, from a political perspective, Indonesia and Azerbaijan support

each other in the field of humanity and peace, such as the conflict that occurred in Nagorno-Karabakh. Additionally, bilateral agreements between the two nations were made to improve relations between them, such as the sister city agreement between Bogor and Lankaran that was signed in 2020 (KBRI Baku, 2021). Making joint policy plans to explore future collaboration is also done as a form of reciprocal assistance to build connections between the two nations in regard to parliamentary cooperation, one of which is in the form of frequent visits between the two countries.

In addition to the economic, political and educational fields, there is also cooperation in the social and cultural fields carried out between Indonesia and Azerbaijan in the form of cultural performances and introductions both in the form of regular art performances and in the form of cultural education facilities in the local country. In this regard, Indonesia continues to carry out cultural diplomacy in various cities in Azerbaijan which are filled with artistic and cultural performances including traditional dances, and traditional music such as Angklung, Sape and Talempong. On the other hand, these cultural diplomacy activities are often accompanied by an introduction to tourist attractions in Indonesia through the provision of literature, video documentation, the introduction of traditional food, and traditional clothing, and business consultations for Azerbaijani businessmen who wish to expand their business in Indonesia. So far, the cultural diplomacy activities carried out by Indonesia are divided into two activities, both from collaborations with universities or other agencies in Azerbaijan that carry out similar activities, as well as social and cultural diplomacy activities carried out by the Indonesian embassy in Azerbaijan itself such as the Indonesian Culture Festival (ICF), Indonesian Day, Experience Indonesia and other similar activities with different names however, still with the same purpose that is carried out several times every year.

In terms of introducing Indonesian culture to Azerbaijan through these performance activities, the Indonesian embassy in Azerbaijan certainly cannot work alone however, also involves other Indonesian youths and young women in Azerbaijan, the majority of which consist of students. In this case, student involvement can be analysed as one of the main keys as a non-state actor in Indonesian cultural diplomacy activities, especially in the university sphere. As for the performers of musical instruments, dances, and traditional Pencak Silat that were displayed in the Indonesian art and cultural performances in Azerbaijan, they also involved students who had skills in these fields. Thus, the existence of the Association of Indonesian Students and Youth in Azerbaijan has a paramount role as a non-state actor in carrying out Indonesian cultural diplomacy in Azerbaijan, especially because of the direct involvement carried out in the local Azerbaijani community, both in the university sphere and in other social spheres.

#### **IV. Result**

##### **The Students' Potential Contribution**

Based on the questionnaire that has been conducted, the authors found that different students from different backgrounds have a variety of perspectives regarding their knowledge of Azerbaijan in general. Their duration of residency in Azerbaijan also determines their answer. Those who are studying economic and international relations mentioned the economic aspect of Azerbaijan and its social condition. They mentioned that Azerbaijan depends on its oil and moreover, the society of it is quite multicultural and has a high level of tolerance. The one who is studying psychology gave an interesting fact that Azerbaijan is a country that the world desperately desires to be recognised by its own self. Another student mentioned a more comprehensive answer that Azerbaijan is an exotic and unique country, the fact that it is a land of fire, the country is also one of the safest and most stable in the region, it has a low crime rate and many gorgeous destinations that are more popular for tourists that includes several aspects. The majority of students answered the mainstream answer which indicates that Azerbaijan is a nice country, windy, and cold while Azerbaijan is a unique country which is located in Europe and Asia. However, the one with the longest duration of living in Azerbaijan mentioned another side about Azerbaijan people compared to Asians which specifies due to his more experiences than other responders that Azerbaijanis are different people from people in Asia, Caucasus people as always, wild and aggressive.

In the question about Indonesia and Azerbaijan relations, the answers also vary among responders. The majority said that the relationship is normal or positive however, not close and still can be improved. Another one believes that both countries always support each other in politics, economy, society, as well as education. Some also mentioned the oil trade between the two countries, of which Indonesia is the third major country that Azerbaijan exports its oil. Another responder mentioned the fact that both countries are identical and both of them are members of OIC and NAM organisations. Additionally, one assumes that Azerbaijan is a potential partner of Indonesia in tourism as Indonesia has huge natural and human resources and can collaborate with the positive management skills of Azerbaijan.

Regarding the potential that Indonesian students must increase bilateral relations, it analysed that promoting culture is the best potential that the Indonesian students in Azerbaijan can such as providing the local people with Indonesian food, teaching them about traditional music, and inviting them every time the Indonesian embassy held cultural events in Azerbaijan. On the other hand, promotion through social media has

great potential for cultural diplomacy that the students can do such as making content about Indonesia, sharing the language, and so on. Indonesian students in Azerbaijan can continue in promoting Indonesian culture such as traditional singing, dances, and foods. Moreover, the students can take advantage of the existence of the Indonesian Regional Study Centre at Azerbaijan University of Languages (ADU, n.d.). There, they can continue teaching the Indonesian language to Azerbaijan students who have an interest in Indonesia, through conversation clubs that have been carried out by the student's organisation for a few years and collaborate with the university staff. Moreover, both Indonesian students and Azerbaijani students, specifically those who are interested in Indonesian culture, can collaborate in creating such cultural events where there is cultural exchange between both students. So Indonesian people will know more about Azerbaijani culture and vice versa.

There are a number of acts that the students have mentioned as part of their commitment to fortify the bonds. The responses range from the most basic contributions, such as informing their friends about Bali and taking part in cultural activities, to more complex ones, like representing Indonesia at the university. In addition to that, the education sector also makes a contribution. One stated that they had written journals and published in Azerbaijan as students to advance Azerbaijani understanding of Indonesian subjects, particularly in the sphere of education. Another thing that some students do is utilise social media to promote culture and education.

At last, some students have already planned to do several activities that can contribute to strengthening the relationship between Indonesia and Azerbaijan. Mostly, they desire to promote more in social media regarding the study in Azerbaijan, especially sharing the scholarship information to attract Indonesian students and also promoting Indonesian tourism to attract Azerbaijani people to visit Indonesia through some social media channels that have a large benefit of linking the information to all people in the world, especially for Azerbaijani itself. Due to the fact that in this globalisation era, social media has become a crucial tool for completing the diplomatic mission, especially in cultural diplomacy (Khairunnisa, 2021).

Additionally, there is some additional information regarding the role of Indonesian students in Azerbaijan that was analysed through an interview with Mrs Ingan Malam, the Head of Counsellor of the Indonesian Embassy to the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2018-2022, stated that youth are part of non-state actors that have a potential role as they have great capability in using technology and easily adapting in mastering the technology for the purpose of promoting Indonesia to the world. They also can be agents of peacebuilding in response to the current conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh by sharing positive narrations to prevent fake news and provocative news. Ultimately, the interviewee came to the conclusion that young people in Indonesia might actively contribute to bringing about altering and fostering peace as well as assist the government in publicising Indonesia so that Azerbaijanis would be more familiar with it.

Based on the interview conducted by the authors, Khoirul Anam, the coordinator of OISAA (Overseas Indonesian Students Association Alliances), emphasised the part played by Indonesian students in Azerbaijan in providing accurate information about the state of the conflict, which also assisted in advancing peace. It illustrates that Indonesian students in Azerbaijan are also concerned about world peace as was mentioned in the preamble of the Indonesian constitution. Another paramount statement quoted from the founder and the first president of OIC Youth Indonesia, Mr. Tantan Taufiq Lubis. The interviewee mentioned several roles that Indonesian youths can play in enhancing bilateral relations as agents of world peace, agents of the development of the economy, and agents of cultural promotion. In public diplomacy, the Indonesian youths can represent the positive image of Indonesia to the world.

### **The Role of Indonesian Students in Azerbaijan**

Based on the theory of the new public diplomacy and soft power, the authors found a correlation between the reality in students' perspectives regarding the bilateral relation and the components of the new public diplomacy itself which are cultural diplomacy and exchange diplomacy (Nye, 2008). It analysed that the students' actions to strengthen the bilateral ties can be a positive instance of both cultural diplomacy and exchange diplomacy. As part of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy is practised not only by state actors but also by non-state actors such as citizens or specifically by students who act in many ways to promote the culture (Melissen, 2005). Especially in this contemporary world, as technology develops, Indonesian students can promote both Indonesia to Azerbaijani people and Azerbaijan to Indonesians, as well as share some information regarding both countries easily through social media. Especially in promoting peace in the world by providing true news about both countries and preventing the spread of fake news (Azzimonti & Fernandes, 2023). Additionally, the Indonesian students in Azerbaijan can represent the image of Indonesia by illustrating positive behaviour toward the Azerbaijani people.

The public diplomacy role-playing students will be required to utilise their abilities and skills more regularly to bring people together to address common concerns and interests in a global society. Additionally, it is examined due to the fact that in accordance with an examination of cultural diplomacy and the transnational connections that they created, the agency of migrant women can contribute and become a non-state actor by obtaining involved in the women's sector while also empowering women and upholding gendered notions of feminine cultural domains of action (Biltekin, 2020).

The existence of Indonesian students in Azerbaijan has already been a positive instance of exchange diplomacy where the citizens from one country depart to another country to study and participate in a program for some period of time. It demonstrates how paramount a role students can have in diplomacy. Non-state actors' acts are less suspicious because of their increased impartiality and reputation in the region. They are more unbiased and inclined towards universal values since they are not generally observed as being self-interested. Additionally, they are reliable since they have the required local expertise and awareness of the situation (Lee & Ayhan, 2015). In this case, the Indonesian students in Azerbaijan have a responsibility to be non-state actors, especially in cultural diplomacy by introducing and performing Indonesian cultures among other students and people around the educational institutions in Azerbaijan.

## V. Conclusion

Referring to the concept of public diplomacy and soft power, where not only the state or government is the main actor, however, the students can also be the non-state actor who plays an essential and active role as the agent of culture and the agent of world peace by promotion through social media. They can also represent the positive image of Indonesia in Azerbaijan. These factors will influence and make the Indonesia-Azerbaijan bilateral relations stronger. In light of this evidence, it is crystal clear that Indonesian students in Azerbaijan have a significant role in practising cultural diplomacy and strengthening the bilateral relations between Indonesia and Azerbaijan by promoting, introducing, and teaching Indonesian cultures to the Azerbaijani people. Furthermore, it has a high correlation with Public Diplomacy in international relations. However, further research related to the public diplomacy of Indonesia in Azerbaijan is required especially with the upgraded data analysis of cultural diplomacy between both countries as well as its relationships.

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