

## HIGHLIGHT OF JOURNAL

The Role of the European Union and the United States in Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Process:  
Shifting Gears with Optimism?  
**Esmira Jafarova**



CAUCASUS  
STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

# CAUCASUS

## STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

Volume 4 • Issue 1 • Summer 2023

## South Caucasus at the Crossroad of Peace and War

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From Passive to Active:  
Unpacking the EU's New Role  
in Promoting Peace between  
Azerbaijan and Armenia

**Agha Bayramov, Tom Wagenmakers,  
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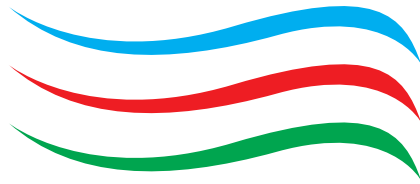
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# CAUCASUS STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

## Volume 4 • Issue 1 • Summer 2023

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### South Caucasus at the Crossroad of Peace and War



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# Editor's Note

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The current issue of the Caucasus Strategic Perspectives (CSP) journal entitled “*South Caucasus at the Crossroad of Peace and War*” is dedicated to the different mediation activities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenia’s internationally wrongful acts and foreign policy, Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, as well as the news initiatives in the South Caucasus region.

The CSP’s new issue includes 7 articles. The CSP’s current authors analysed the EU’s and the US’s mediator roles to reconcile Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenia’s international responsibility in relation to the formerly occupied territories of Azerbaijan, Russia-Armenia relations, the perspective of the Middle Corridor, and Iran-Armenia relations and its implications for Azerbaijan, etc.

The new issue’s *Articles Section* starts with **Esmira Jafarova’s** article of “*The Role of the European Union and the United States in Armenia–Azerbaijan Peace Process: Shifting Gears with Optimism?*” which explores the recently found activism by two external actors – the European Union and the United States – in the post-conflict peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan following the 44-day Karabakh War and poses the question of “*Can the EU and the US make a real difference with their newly found activism?*”.

Joint article of **Agha Bayramov, Tom Wagenmakers,** and **Douwe van der Meer** titled “*From Passive to Active: Unpacking the EU’s New Role in Promoting Peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia*” analyses the European Union’s increased involvement in promoting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan following the Second Karabakh War in 2020, explores the motivations behind the EU’s engagement, including its political and economic interests in the South Caucasus, and highlights the challenges that the EU faces in promoting lasting peace in this region.

**Najiba Mustafayeva's** article of "*Criminalization of Ecocide: Impetus towards Armenia's International Responsibility*" provides analysis of the existing legal framework and Armenia's obligations under international law for environmental damage in the liberated (formerly occupied) territories of Azerbaijan, with an overview of the current worldwide initiatives on criminalization of ecocide alongside other recognized international crimes, as well as the challenges and implications of this process.

**Ali Askerov's** article of "*Charting a Course between Independence and Semi-Colonialism: Armenia at a Crossroads*" focused primarily on Armenia's new policy aimed at reducing this country's dependence on Russia, which puts the former at a crossroads between remaining a client country of Russia or taking radical steps towards achieving genuine independence.

**Soso Dzamukashvili's** article of "*Stuck between War and Peace: What are the Prospects of a Peace Treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan?*" discusses major factors that impact the prospects of a peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia and concludes that the process to sign a peace deal is significantly derailed by Russia, which is interested in keeping its military presence in the region by maintaining the status quo in the conflict-affected region of Azerbaijan.

**Krzysztof Winkler's** article of "*The Middle Corridor: Perspectives and Opportunities after the War in Ukraine*" argues that the war in Ukraine has created new momentum for Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye in terms of reinforcing the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route and assess the current political and economic environment and challenges related to the effective use of the Middle Corridor transport route that have to be deal with.

**Maxime Gauin's** article of "*The Axis of the Iranian Islamist Regime and Armenian Nationalism*" presents the origins of and the recent developments in the alliance between Iran, on one side, and Armenian diaspora nationalists and the government of Armenia on the other, and also explains the reinforcement

of the ties between these two countries and the unprecedented rise of Iranian aggressiveness against Azerbaijan.

Finally, on behalf of the CSP team, we hope this issue provides food for thought and contributes to and enriches the discussion on subject-matter issue.

*Sincerely*  
**Farid Shafiyev**  
*Editor-in-Chief of CSP Journal*

# The Role of the European Union and the United States in Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Process: Shifting Gears with Optimism?

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Esmira Jafarova\*

This article explores the recently found activism by two external actors – the European Union and the United States – in the post-conflict peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan following the 44-day Karabakh War. In doing so, the article briefly touches upon the background of the pre-war engagement of the two actors with regional security affairs and argues that today's increased profile of the EU and the US represents a different situation from the habitual distant attitude displayed by both towards the security ailments of the South Caucasus. The recently found high profile of both the EU and the US also happens against the backdrop of geopolitical competition on the part of the Russian Federation, which has traditionally viewed the region as its 'own backyard'. However, certain achievements brought about by the EU-led peace process and a comparatively active US engagement with the peace process allow observers to remain hopeful that, for the first time in many decades, peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan may be within reach. Can the EU and the US make a real difference with their newly found activism?

**Key words:** EU, US, Azerbaijan, Armenia, peace, conflict, South Caucasus



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### *Introduction*

With the third anniversary of the 44-day Karabakh War fast approaching, challenges still remain in regard to the Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization process as well as the full implementation of the commitments undertaken in the Trilateral Statement (November 10, 2020). The post-conflict peace process focuses on issues in four main clusters: (1) the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace process; (2) border delimitation and demarcation; (3) humanitarian issues; and (4) the opening of all economic communications. Pressures also exist vis-à-vis Article 4 of the Trilateral Statement, which stipulates the complete withdrawal of all remaining armed forces belonging to Armenia from Azerbaijan’s territory where Russia’s peacekeeping contingent is temporarily deployed.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the complexity of all the issues, this article will mostly discuss the Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization and peace process as the vital pillar in the above quadrilateral. More specifically, the discussion will be centred on the roles of external actors: the European Union (EU) and the United States (US), and their ability to make a difference in the post-conflict normalization and peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

*Despite the formal existence of the OSCE Minsk Group, which mediated the [former] conflict unsuccessfully for about 28 years, it is now an effectively defunct entity that lost any relevance on Azerbaijan’s victory and liberation of its lands in the 44-day Karabakh War.*

Interestingly, the situation around the mediating parties in the Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization process has changed. Despite the formal existence of the OSCE Minsk Group, which mediated the [former] conflict unsuccessfully for about 28 years, it is now an effectively defunct entity that lost any relevance on Azerbaijan’s victory and liberation of its lands in the 44-day Karabakh War. Clearly, the Minsk Group needs to find a new *raison d’être* in the context of post-conflict developments in the region if it still wants to make a difference.

With Russia fully engulfed in a war with Ukraine, its priorities currently lie elsewhere. As a result, its diminished role in post-conflict normalization in the South Caucasus is observable. The EU, in

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<sup>1</sup> President.az, *Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation*, November 10, 2020, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/45923> (accessed: April 7, 2022)

contrast, has so far assumed an unusually high profile in the process, with the US timidly catching up, but still showing more activism than before. Against this backdrop, this article aims to assess the roles of the EU and the US in post-conflict normalization in the South Caucasus as two previously distant, but recently more active, actors in bringing peace to the region. In doing so, this article will also consider the perceptions of the Russian Federation of the increased profile of its competitors.

*Before the new realities established in the region in the aftermath of the 44-Day Karabakh War, the EU mostly remained on the back burner with respect to conflict resolution in the South Caucasus, while the OSCE and the Russian Federation fulfilled the role of traditional mediators in the conflict.*

### ***European Union: No longer a marginal player?***

Before the new realities established in the region in the aftermath of the 44-Day Karabakh War, the EU mostly remained on the back burner with respect to conflict resolution in the South Caucasus, while the OSCE and the Russian Federation fulfilled the role of traditional mediators in the conflict. The latter was always thought to possess the upper hand in regional affairs due to its geographical proximity and the existence of its vested interests in them. Therefore, Russia once again took the lead in facilitating the signing of the Trilateral Statement (November 10, 2020) between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which also marked the cessation of hostilities.

### ***The EU grabs the initiative***

The first meeting with EU mediation occurred in Brussels on December 14, 2021. The meeting brought about significant results, including those relating to the opening of economic communications, delimitation and demarcation of the state border, demining, and humanitarian issues.<sup>2</sup> The next meeting, also in Brussels, took place on April 6, 2022 and further discussed these issues, but this time it was also agreed to convene a Joint Border Commission by the end of April 2022, which would deal

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2 Council of the EU, “Statement of President Charles Michel following the trilateral meeting with President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan”, December 14, 2021, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/12/14/statement-of-president-charles-michel-following-the-trilateral-meeting-with-president-ilham-aliyev-and-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan/> (accessed: March 10, 2023)

with the delimitation of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>3</sup>

The next round of meetings happened on May 22, and August 31, 2022 in Brussels, and delivered equally important results in terms of the furtherance of the post-conflict agenda between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Right after the third round of the talks, the relevant commissions on the delimitation of the state border between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia were established<sup>4</sup> on both sides, with the first meeting of the commission finally happening on May 24, 2022.<sup>5</sup> Two consecutive meetings of the border delimitation and demarcation commission took place on August 30, and November 3, 2022, with the parties pledging to continue working in this direction.<sup>6</sup>

The increased EU profile in the post-conflict normalization process brought a new dynamism to lingering issues, although progress was still mostly built on existing arrangements, including those agreed on November 10, 2020 and on January 11, 2021 in Moscow, and on November 26, 2021 in Sochi. Nonetheless, the meeting on August 31, 2022 represented a leap forward towards the signing of a peace treaty between the parties, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both countries having been instructed to work on the preparation of a future document in this regard.<sup>7</sup>

3 Council of the EU, “Statement of European Council President Charles Michel following the Second Trilateral Meeting with President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan”, April 6, 2022, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/04/06/statement-of-european-council-president-charles-michel-following-the-second-trilateral-meeting-with-president-ilham-aliyev-and-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan/> (accessed: March 25, 2023)

4 AzerTac, *State Commission on delimitation of state border between Azerbaijan and Armenia established*, May 23, 2022, available at: [https://azertag.az/en/xeber/State\\_Commission\\_on\\_delimitation\\_of\\_state\\_border\\_between\\_Azerbaijan\\_and\\_Armenia\\_established\\_\\_ORDER-2147375](https://azertag.az/en/xeber/State_Commission_on_delimitation_of_state_border_between_Azerbaijan_and_Armenia_established__ORDER-2147375) (accessed: March 10, 2023)

5 APA News Agency, *First meeting of Commission on Azerbaijan-Armenia delimitation held at the border*, May 24, 2022, available at <https://apa.az/en/foreign-policy/first-meeting-of-commission-on-azerbaijan-armenia-delimitation-held-at-the-border-376868> (accessed: March 10, 2023)

6 Council of the EU, “Azerbaijan, Armenia Agree to Expedite Joint Work for Border Delimitation”, November 6, 2022, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/08/31/press-statement-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-trilateral-meeting-with-president-aliyev-of-azerbaijan-and-prime-minister-pashinyan-of-armenia-31-august-2022/> (accessed: March 13, 2023)

7 Council of the EU, “Press statement by President Charles Michel following the trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia”, August 31, 2022, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/>

Expectations were raised higher with the first quadrilateral meeting that took place between the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia with the participation of EU Council President Charles Michel and French President Emmanuel Macron on the margins of the meeting of the European Political Community held on October 6, 2022 in Prague. This meeting delivered results and commitments to further work on issues of principle importance. Mutual recognition of each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity based on the UN Charter, as well as the Almaty 1991 Declaration, became a landmark achievement of the meeting.<sup>8</sup>

Subsequently, however, Armenia refused to join the next meeting in the Brussels format on December 7, 2022 when France's President Emmanuel Macron was due to participate in what should have remained a trilateral format. When Azerbaijan rejected the French President's presence, citing his biased and unfriendly attitude towards Azerbaijan,<sup>9</sup> Armenia declined to partake in further meetings and thus missed both the 7 December meeting in Brussels and one scheduled for 23 December in Moscow.<sup>10</sup> This effectively stalled the pace of negotiations within the Brussels format, creating something of a limbo in the peace talks.

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press-releases/2022/08/31/press-statement-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-trilateral-meeting-with-president-aliyev-of-azerbaijan-and-prime-minister-pashinyan-of-armenia-31-august-2022/ (accessed: March 31, 2023)

8 Council of the EU, "Statement following quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel, 6 October 2022", October 7, 2022, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/10/07/statement-following-quadrilateral-meeting-between-president-aliyev-prime-minister-pashinyan-president-macron-and-president-michel-6-october-2022/> (accessed: March 13, 2023)

9 Azerbaijan perceives the French position as not very helpful to the EU-led process, first because of the influence of the Armenian diaspora, second because of controversial statements made by French President E. Macron in the aftermath of the first meeting of the European Political Community (EPC) in Prague in October 2022 (Caspian News, *President Macron's Comments on Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict Trigger Backlash from Baku*, October 17, 2020, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/president-macrons-comments-on-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-trigger-backlash-from-baku-2022-10-17-0/> (accessed: March 13, 2023), as well as after the second meeting of the EPC on June 1, 2023 in Chisinau (Turan News Agency, *Macron distorted results of Kishinev meeting – Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry*, June 2, 2023, available at: [https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2023/6/free/politics\\_news/en/5140.htm](https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2023/6/free/politics_news/en/5140.htm) (accessed: June 2, 2023))

10 Trend New Agency, *Armenia skipping trilateral meeting in Moscow - last-minute decision, Russian FM says*, December 23, 2022, available at: <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3686154.html> (accessed: March 29, 2023)



*The EU mission in Armenia*

Sending the EU mission to the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan created further pandemonium in the process. The mission was set to be deployed only on Armenia's territory and Azerbaijan opted to work with it when and if necessary. This mission was deployed almost immediately, in October 2022, and was supposed to stay for only two months to fulfil monitoring and observation-related tasks “for strengthening confidence and contributing to delimitation”.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, things took a convoluted turn when, upon the completion of the two-month term, the EU decided to extend the tenure of the mission, and modified its original purpose. The original EU mission morphed into a civilian mission called the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA) under its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which followed the example of the existing mission in Georgia. The objective of the mission, which was said to comprise “exclusively civilian staff of one hundred persons, including around fifty unarmed observers”,<sup>12</sup> is “... to contribute to stability in the border areas of Armenia, building confidence on the ground, and ensuring an environment conducive to normalization efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan supported by the EU”.<sup>13</sup> The mission was deployed on February 20, 2023.

The entire process of mission deployment was accompanied by an array of controversies, including but not limited to the apprehensions voiced by official Moscow over alleged EU forays into what Russia traditionally considers to be its ‘sphere of influence’.<sup>14</sup> The Ministry Foreign Affairs of Russia also made no bones about calling the situation a “geopolitical confrontation”. More specifically, the Ministry noted that:

11 APA News Agency, *EU agrees to send a mission to Armenian-Azerbaijani border*, October 11, 2022, available at: <https://apa.az/en/foreign-policy/eu-agrees-to-send-mission-to-armenian-azerbaijani-border-updated-386836> (accessed: March 13, 2023)

12 EU Neighbours East, *Armenia: EU launches civilian mission to contribute to stability in border areas*, February 20, 2023, available at: <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/armenia-eu-launches-civilian-mission-to-contribute-to-stability-in-border-areas/> (accessed: March 13, 2023)

13 Council of the EU, *Armenia: EU establishes a civilian mission to contribute to stability in border areas*, January 23, 2023, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/01/23/armenia-eu-sets-up-a-civilian-mission-to-ensure-security-in-conflict-affected-and-border-areas/> (accessed: March 13, 2023)

14 Reuters, *Russia slams new EU mission to Armenia, says it will stoke tensions*, January 26, 2023, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-slams-new-eu-mission-armenia-says-it-will-stoke-tensions-2023-01-26/> (accessed: March 13, 2023)

*The appearance of the EU representatives in the border regions of Armenia... can only bring geopolitical confrontation to the region and exacerbate existing contradictions.... The EU's attempts to gain a foothold in Armenia at any cost and to squeeze Russia's mediation efforts could damage the fundamental interests of Armenians and Azerbaijanis in their aspirations for a return to peaceful development in the region.<sup>15</sup>*

The mission is set to last for two years and is deployed near the border with Azerbaijan, which therefore also insists that its position and reservations in this respect be given due regard.<sup>16</sup> The EU's decision to extend the tenure of the mission in Armenia and insert modifications to its original *raison d'être* caused commotion and confusion in a rather tenuous geopolitical setting, including in Azerbaijan.

Controversial statements made by the head of the EU Mission, Markus Ritter,<sup>17</sup> to the effect that the EU Mission is containing a potential Azerbaijani 'offensive' against Armenia, caused uproar in Azerbaijan's political establishment, with Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stating that the EU Mission should not engage in "slandorous allegations and should act according to its mandate."<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the EU Mission in Armenia did not voice any criticism towards Armenia when the next violent clashes occurred on April 11, 2023, resulting in the deaths of military servicemen on both sides. Having deplored the incident, the EU in essence repeated a line that coincides with Armenia's position:

*This incident yet again emphasizes that in the absence of a delimited border, the 1991 line must be respected and the forces of either side withdrawn to safe distances from this line to prevent any similar incidents from occurring ....<sup>19</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Report News Agency, *Hikmat Hajiyev: Armenia doesn't want to sign peace treaty, trying to gain time*, March 13, 2023, available at: <https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/participants-of-10th-global-baku-forum-pay-tribute-to-great-leader-heydar-aliyev/> (accessed: March 14, 2023)

<sup>17</sup> Public Radio of Armenia, *If there is no spring offensive by Azerbaijan, then the EU mission in Armenia is a success, Markus Ritter says*, March 29, 2023, available at: <https://en.armradio.am/2023/03/29/if-there-is-no-azerbaijani-assault-this-spring-then-the-eu-mission-is-a-success-markus-ritter-says/> (accessed: March 30, 2023)

<sup>18</sup> Mfa.gov.az, "No:168/23, Response of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Aykhan Hajizada to the question on the statement of the head of the European Union Mission in Armenia Markus Ritter", March 28, 2023, available at: <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/no16823> (accessed: March 30, 2023)

<sup>19</sup> European External Action Service, "Armenia/Azerbaijan: Spokesperson statement on

With work regarding border delimitation still in progress and not much progress being made, Armenia was pushing for the creation of a demilitarized zone along its border with Azerbaijan and around the latter's Karabakh region,<sup>20</sup> which Azerbaijan refuses due to security considerations and persistent armed attacks by Armenia against Azerbaijan's positions. Moreover, the EU Mission divulged plans to open three additional points for monitoring the Armenia–Azerbaijani border,<sup>21</sup> which the Armenian side misrepresented as an attempt “to contain Baku's provocations”.<sup>22</sup> This kind of approach could make Azerbaijan question the neutrality of the EU Mission, which would make its contribution to the peace process less effective.

*What is next for the EU?*

Against the backdrop of these developments, the EU-led format remained inactive for almost nine months, giving rise to speculation about whether the EU will at all be able to assume a leading and constructive role again in the post-conflict normalization process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as the latter expressed disappointment that “the mission of the EU in Armenia does not serve peace and security, but the interests of Armenia”.<sup>23</sup>

This represented a departure from a very hopeful situation when the EU hit the ground running in its freshly baked constructive engagement with regional affairs.

All in all, this twist of events related to the EU's engagement in the facilitation of the peace process indicates a degree of ambivalence

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the latest incidents at the Armenia-Azerbaijan border”, April 12, 2023, available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/armeniaazerbaijan-spokesperson-statement-latest-incidents-armenia-azerbaijan-border\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/armeniaazerbaijan-spokesperson-statement-latest-incidents-armenia-azerbaijan-border_en) (accessed: April 17, 2023)

20 Al-Arabiya News, *Armenia proposes demilitarized zone for Karabakh, Azerbaijan border after new clashes*, November 10, 2022, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2022/11/10/Armenia-proposes-demilitarized-zone-for-Karabakh-Azerbaijan-border-after-new-clashes> (accessed: April 17, 2023)

21 MediaMax, *EU Mission to open three additional hubs in Armenia*, June 7, 2023, available at: <https://mediamax.am/en/news/foreignpolicy/51558/> (accessed: June 8, 2023)

22 JAMNews, *EU Mission expands to contain Baku's provocations - Armenian political scientist*, June 7, 2023, available at: <https://jam-news.net/new-operation-centers-for-the-eu-mission/> (accessed: August 8, 2023)

23 *Caliber.az*, *Azerbaijan dismisses cooperation with EU mission in Armenia*, March 29, 2023, available at: <https://caliber.az/en/post/155358/?s=03> (accessed: August 8, 2023)

between the EU wanting to play a more constructive role and then grabbing a chance to turn the whole gig into a geopolitical marathon. To repeat the above, the EU-mediated meetings in the Brussels format have so far proven to be effective in reaching tangible outcomes. However, Armenia sabotaged the format by demanding to turn it into a permanent quadrilateral one with France always participating, which was rejected by Azerbaijan.<sup>24</sup> Since then, the format was laid to rest, with no follow-up EU initiative to set up another meeting between the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia. This situation lasted until May 2023, which will be covered below.

On the margins of the Munich Security Conference in February 2023, bilateral meetings between the EU Council President Charles Michel, the President of Azerbaijan and the Prime Minister of Armenia happened separately and the trilateral format was not yet resuscitated.<sup>25</sup> There were hopes that the EU may kick start its active mediation once again as later, during a phone call between Charles Michel and the leaders of both countries on March 25, 2023, the EU Council President once again reaffirmed readiness to facilitate Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization.<sup>26</sup>

Expectations were high in the final quarter of 2022 that a peace treaty could finally be signed before the end of the year.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, that did not happen.

However, things finally moved on from the deadlock with the fifth meeting within the Brussels format finally taking place on May 14, 2023. The results of the meeting were rather heartening in the sense that both countries reaffirmed their support and respect for each other's

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24 Al Jazeera, *Azerbaijan cancels Armenia talks, rejects France's involvement*, November 25, 2022, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/25/azerbaijan-cancels-armenia-talks-rejects-frances-involvement> (accessed: March 14, 2023)

25 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev met with the President of the European Council in Munich*, February 17, 2023, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/58985> (accessed: March 14, 2023); ArmenPress, *PM Pashinyan, EU's Charles Michel meet in Germany, discuss regional security*, February 17, 2023, available at: <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1104346/> (accessed: March 14, 2023)

26 Caucasus Watch, *Charles Michel Discusses Karabakh Issue with Pashinyan and Aliyev*, March 27, 2023, available at: <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/charles-michel-discusses-karabakh-issue-with-pashinyan-and-aliyev.html> (accessed: March 30, 2023)

27 Anadolu Agency, *Armenia says it intends to sign a peace deal with Azerbaijan by end of 2022*, October 26, 2022, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/armenia-says-it-intends-to-sign-peace-deal-with-azerbaijan-by-end-of-2022/2721610> (accessed: March 16, 2023)

territorial integrity and sovereignty, having once again “confirmed their unequivocal commitment to the 1991 Almaty Declaration and the respective territorial integrity of Armenia (29,800 km<sup>2</sup>) and Azerbaijan (86,600 km<sup>2</sup>).”<sup>28</sup> Although the parties had previously expressed their commitment to the Almaty Declaration of 1991 during the Prague meeting on the margins of the European Political Community, back in October 2022,<sup>29</sup> this was the first time this support was framed quantitatively, having indicated actual numbers. If previously Armenia could tiptoe around the fact of recognition of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity, speculating that this did not include the Karabakh region, this time it referred to concrete numbers which cited both countries’ territorial extents inherited after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, so no room is left for such speculations.

On the opening of communications, the final document of the Brussels meeting specified that the parties “have been tasked to finalize an in-principle agreement on the modalities for the opening of the railway connections and the necessary construction works together with a concrete timetable”. It was also agreed to refer to the World Customs Organization for supporting this work.<sup>30</sup> Clearly, there has been visible progress during the first meeting in Brussels after a long break and it is hoped that this momentum can be kept up.

The next meeting between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan happened on June 1, 2023 on the margins of the second meeting of

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28 European Council, “Press remarks by President Charles Michel following the trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia”, May 14, 2023, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/14/press-remarks-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-trilateral-meeting-with-president-aliyev-of-azerbaijan-and-prime-minister-pashinyan-of-armenia/> (accessed: May 14, 2023)

29 European Council, “Statement following quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel, 6 October 2022”, October 7, 2022, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/10/07/statement-following-quadrilateral-meeting-between-president-aliyev-prime-minister-pashinyan-president-macron-and-president-michel-6-october-2022/> (accessed: May 14, 2023)

30 European Council, “Press remarks by President Charles Michel following the trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia”, May 14, 2023, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/14/press-remarks-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-trilateral-meeting-with-president-aliyev-of-azerbaijan-and-prime-minister-pashinyan-of-armenia/> (accessed: May 24, 2023)

the European Political Community that took place in Chisinau, Moldova. The meeting was facilitated by EU Council President Charles Michel and joined by France’s President Emmanuel Macron, as well as for the first time Germany’s Chancellor Olaf Sholtz. The outcome of the meeting was noted as positive by Charles Michel, who announced that this meeting will serve as a “good preparation” for the next meeting, scheduled to take place in Brussels on July 21, 2023.<sup>31</sup>

*The role of the United States in the [former] Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict was non-linear, with periods of inaction and increased profile interchangeably dominating in the US approach towards the conflict.*

Although it is clear that the resumed EU engagement in post-conflict normalization is a positive development, it remains to be seen how things will move forward henceforth, as achieving a final and lasting peace also demands full commitment from both parties.

### ***The United States: Reluctant or engaged?***

The role of the United States in the [former] Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict was non-linear, with periods of inaction and increased profile interchangeably dominating in the US approach towards the conflict. As a member of the once leading format – the OSCE Minsk Group – the US was an insider to the (ultimately unsuccessful) peace negotiations for 28 years since the immediate aftermath of the First Karabakh War. Before the 44-day Karabakh War, the US position on the solution of the former Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict was formulated mostly in the following terms:

*The United States supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and holds that the future status of ‘Nagorno-Karabakh’ (the name of the region was abolished and reorganized as Karabakh Economic Region in 2021 by Azerbaijan’s presidential decree) is a matter of negotiation between the parties with the aim of achieving a lasting and comprehensive political resolution of the conflict. The United States remains committed to finding a peaceful settlement of the conflict through the Minsk Group process.<sup>32</sup>*

31 European Council, “Remarks by President Charles Michel after his meeting with the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, France and Germany”, June 1, 2023, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/06/01/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-after-his-meeting-with-the-leaders-of-armenia-azerbaijan-france-and-germany/> (accessed: June 2, 2023)

32 “Europe and Eurasia: The United States and the Conflict Over Nagorno-Karabakh”, Lanham: Federal Information & News Dispatch, Inc, 2008, available at: <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/>

The US therefore mostly confined its role in conflict resolution to its co-chairmanship within the Minsk Group format; however, it also did not equivocate in the expression of support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, in some respects, its hands were also tied and it was unable to wholeheartedly side with Azerbaijan due to the actions of influential Armenian lobby groups, who constrained Congress and other institutions from delivering stronger US support to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. The adoption of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act in the early 1990s against Azerbaijan under pressure from Armenian lobby groups represented a quintessential example of how US foreign policy was influenced by lobby politics.

The 44-day Karabakh War brought new changes also to the US role. While, as described in the previous section, it was the EU that assumed the frontrunner's role in post-conflict normalization between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the role of the US has also undergone certain unexpected modifications.

*The US in the face of new regional realities*

Direct engagement in bilateral talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan is not a complete novelty in the US engagement with the two countries. Throughout the three decades, direct talks with the facilitation of the Minsk Group, and sometimes also the US individually, were important components of the negotiation process. These included a hallmark meeting between the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Key West, Florida, in 2001 with the sole facilitation of the US; the 'Prague Process', which was launched in 2004 by the Minsk Group and envisaged direct and regular contacts between the foreign ministers, and delivered the formulation of the so-called 'Madrid Principles' that

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[docview/189992438?accountid=10226](https://www.docview/189992438?accountid=10226) (accessed: January 10, 2014)

33 For example, the United States Department of State, in its human rights report on Armenia for the year 2006, states: "Armenia continues to occupy the Azerbaijani territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding Azerbaijani territories". The similar report on Azerbaijan also emphasizes this fact: "Armenian forces controlled most of Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as large portions of adjacent Azerbaijani territory" and "Armenia continues to occupy the Azerbaijani territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding Azerbaijani territories". (See: *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2006, Armenia, section 1(a)*. *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2006, Azerbaijan, introductory section*). Relevant statements and resolutions adopted on state and federal levels also contain recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

contained a roadmap to the peaceful resolution of the conflict.<sup>34</sup>

However, similar to the case with the EU, the US interest and involvement in conflict management in the South Caucasus was also inferior to that of the Russian Federation, even though they both held equal status within the Minsk Group. Some experts who evaluated the potential security challenges in the region in 2013 described the Armenia–Azerbaijan situation as a ‘third-tier’ conflict and therefore concluded that dealing with it was not a priority for the US.<sup>35</sup> This also meant that if the conflict combusted again in the region (Azerbaijan’s formerly occupied territories), this would have had little effect on US interests. This was also the widespread perception of the conflict throughout 2014 and 2015.<sup>36</sup>

This distanced approach to security issues in the South Caucasus remained unchanged during the Obama Administration, the priorities of which certainly lay elsewhere, i.e. the war in Afghanistan. There was an overall estrangement from Eurasian affairs brought about by a certain weariness with foreign interventions, financial concerns in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, and so on.<sup>37</sup> Even after the outbreak of the Four-day War in April 2016, the US position did not change.<sup>38</sup> Disengagement and a low profile apropos of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict also continued during the Trump administration, which mostly continued the policy of US retrenchment from around the world.

Nonetheless, during the 44-Day Karabakh War, the US stepped up once again to initiate a direct meeting between the warring parties in search of a ceasefire. The foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan met in Washington with the mediation of the US Secretary of State, Michael

*However, similar to the case with the EU, the US interest and involvement in conflict management in the South Caucasus was also inferior to that of the Russian Federation, even though they both held equal status within the Minsk Group.*

34 Jafarova, E. *Conflict Resolution in South Caucasus: Challenges to International Efforts* (Lexington Books, 2014), pp. 73–74.

35 Blank, S. “US Policy, Azerbaijan, and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict”, *Mediterranean Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (June 1, 2015): 100. available at: <https://doi.org/10.1215/10474552-2914539> (accessed: May 23, 2023)

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., p. 104.

38 Shaffer, B. “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Russia - US Flashpoint,” *Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO)*, July 9, 2017, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fighting-caucasus-implications-wider-region> (accessed: March 28, 2023)



Pompeo, on October 23, 2020.<sup>39</sup> The final and holding ceasefire was, nonetheless, brokered with the mediation of the Russian Federation on November 10, 2020 with the signing of the Trilateral Statement. Former Secretary of State Pompeo expressed the US position as: “ending the recent fighting is only the first step toward achieving a peaceful negotiated settlement”. He also noted that the US planned to extend \$5 million to the population affected as a result of the 44-Day Karabakh War.<sup>40</sup>

These developments notwithstanding, the US, overall, did not shy away from its traditional low profile in regional matters. The US role was best summarized by the then presidential candidate and now incumbent US President Joe Biden: “Inexplicably, the Trump Administration has been largely passive, and disengaged, throughout this recent period of escalation ...”.<sup>41</sup>

*Can the U.S. step up its role in post-conflict normalization?*

Although still mostly adhering to its policy of disengagement<sup>42</sup> during the 44-day Karabakh War, which also coincided with the presidential race in the United States, the post-war period ushered in renewed US activism in the post-conflict normalization between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Direct meetings between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan with the facilitation of the US took place on September 19, 2022 on the margins of the UN General Assembly in New York<sup>43</sup>

39 Jafarova, E. “Humanitarian Ceasefire and Civilian Lives in Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: What is at Stake?” *World Geostrategic Insights*, October 21, 2020, unpagged, available at: <https://wgi.world/humanitarian-ceasefire-and-civilian-lives-in-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-what-is-at-stake/> (accessed: March 2, 2021)

40 Ibid., p. 18

41 “Nagorno-Karabakh Statement by Vice-President Joe Biden,” 2020, unpagged, available at: <https://joebiden.com/2020/10/13/nagorno-karabakh-statement-by-vice-president-joe-biden/> (accessed: March 12, 2021)

42 The US made several statements during the active phase of the conflict, i.e. on 27 September 2020 the U.S. State Department “expressed alarm at reports of large-scale military action along the Line of Contact and condemned in the strongest terms this escalation of violence” (“Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict,” *Congressional Research Service* (2021):17, available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46651> (accessed: March 8, 2021))

43 Reuters, *Blinken hosts Armenian, Azeri foreign ministers, urges return to peace talks*, September 19, 2022, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/blinken-hosts-armenian-azeri-foreign-ministers-urges-end-hostilities-state-dept-2022-09-19/>

and on November 8, 2022 in Washington DC.<sup>44</sup>

Early in 2023, on the margins of the Munich Security Conference on February 18, 2023, with the facilitation of the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia met for the first time since meeting in Sochi back in October 2022.<sup>45</sup> These meetings happened behind closed doors and focused on post-conflict issues, Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization, and the signing of a peace treaty. On March 20–21, 2023, Secretary Blinken called the respective leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan and reiterated Washington’s readiness to “... offer continued US assistance in facilitating bilateral peace discussions ...”,<sup>46</sup> and this message was repeated in the talks with both leaders.

The next round of talks between the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia with the facilitation of the US was announced as happening in Washington DC in the second half of May 2023. However, the day the meeting announcement was made, April 11, 2023, coincided with another violent incident taking place on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Experts linked this escalation with the reluctance on Armenia’s part to engage in a meaningful peace process; it thus resorted to violence and shifted the focus to a more negative agenda.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, on April 23, 2023, Azerbaijan finally established a border checkpoint on the Armenia–Azerbaijan border<sup>48</sup> in the direction of the

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(accessed: March 28, 2023)

44 Al Jazeera, *US hosts talks between Armenia, Azerbaijan’s foreign ministers*, November 8, 2022, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/8/us-hosts-talks-between-armenia-azerbajians-foreign-ministers> (accessed: March 28, 2022)

45 Krikorian, O.J., “Armenian and Azerbaijani Leaders Meet Blinken, Participate in Panel Discussion at Munich Security Conference”, *The Caspian Post*, February 20, 2023, available at: <https://caspianpost.com/en/post/news/caspian-region/armenian-and-azerbaijani-leaders-meet-blinken-participate-in-panel-discussion-at-munich-security-conference> (accessed: March 28, 2022)

46 U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Azerbaijan President Aliyev”, March 21, 2023, available at: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-azerbaijani-president-aliyev-11/> (accessed: March 28, 2022); U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan”, March 20, 2023, available at: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-armenian-prime-minister-pashinyan-12/> (accessed: March 28, 2022)

47 AzerNews, *Expert links Armenia’s recent provocation to the planned meeting of Azerbaijan-Armenia in Washington*, April 12, 2023, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/208592.html> (accessed: March 17, 2023)

48 APA News Agency, *Azerbaijan established a border checkpoint due to the misuse of the Lachin-Khankandi road by Armenia*, April 23, 2023, available at: <https://apa.az/en/>

Lachin road after four months of peaceful protests by the Azerbaijani people, represented by eco-activists, NGOs, students, teachers, representatives of civil society and many others from all walks of life, against illegal exploitation of natural resources extracted from the Gizilbulag and Demirli gold and mineral deposits, and the misuse of the Lachin road for military purposes in contravention of Article 6 of the Trilateral Statement (November 10, 2020), which stipulates only civilian/humanitarian usage of the road.<sup>49</sup>

Although the US reaction to the establishment of the checkpoint was not positive, as it expressed “concern”<sup>50</sup> over the development, it did not take long for the US to initiate another meeting of the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan on May 1–4, 2023 in Arlington, Virginia, where intensive discussions over the elements for a peace treaty happened. In the aftermath of the four-day negotiations, the statement made by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken contained a positive message that a “peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan is ‘within reach’”.<sup>51</sup> In the meantime, a press statement released by the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry stated:

*The Ministers and their teams advanced mutual understanding on some articles of the draft bilateral Agreement on Peace and Establishment of Interstate Relations, meanwhile acknowledging that the positions on some key issues remain divergent.*<sup>52</sup>

The process of Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization is still ongoing, and the US role in this is stronger than ever.

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foreign-policy/azerbaijan-established-a-border-checkpoint-due-to-the-misuse-of-the-lachin-khankandi-road-by-armenia-mfa-401617 (accessed: May 3, 2023)

49 The Hill, *Azeri protesters say they'll end blockage of key road*, April 28, 2023, available at: <https://thehill.com/homenews/ap/ap-business/azeri-protesters-say-theyll-end-blockage-of-key-road/>; President.az, *Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation*, November 10, 2020, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/45923> (accessed: April 7, 2022)

50 Reuters, *US 'deeply concerned' by Azerbaijan's checkpoint on Lachin corridor bridge*, April 23, 2023, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-deeply-concerned-by-azerbajians-checkpoint-lachin-corridor-bridge-2023-04-23/> (accessed: May 3, 2023)

51 State.gov, *Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Negotiations, Press Statement*, Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, May 4, 2023, available at: <https://www.state.gov/armenia-azerbaijan-peace-negotiations/> (accessed May 4, 2023)

52 Mfa.gov.az, “No:239/23 Press Release on the meeting between the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia held Arlington, Virginia”, May 4, 2023, available at: <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/no23923> (accessed May 4, 2023)

Clearly, in the past, the US did not assume a prominent unilateral position in the final resolution of the [former] Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. The dominant US narrative was to support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of both Armenia and Azerbaijan while attempting to balance out the interests of Armenian lobby groups. Nevertheless, the new situation in the South Caucasus also creates more opportunities for more assertive US action in the post-conflict management arena in the region. For the first time, there is momentum and a level playing field in the region for participating in a fledgling security architecture through the management of post-conflict normalization between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

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### ***Russia's perception of the West's activism***

The role of the Russian Federation in the management of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has doubtlessly been influential at all times. However, Russia's role has largely been ambivalent; this includes both the Soviet-style 'divide and rule' policy that has helped Russia to stir up ethno-territorial confrontation in the region in order to keep a strong grip on the regional states, and a seemingly constructive role, having facilitated two ceasefires in 1994 and 2020 between warring Armenia and Azerbaijan. Its contributions to the achievement of peace in the region cannot be denied, especially in the wake of the post-conflict agenda and the Moscow-mediated meetings (in e.g. Moscow and Sochi) that further consolidated the results of the September–November 2020 war and the Trilateral Statement.

Granted, the newly found activism of the EU and the US in post-conflict normalization between Armenia and Azerbaijan may also be dictated by the reigning perception that Russia, being distracted from the region in the wake of the war in Ukraine, has unintentionally left the initiative to other interested external players, the EU and the US among them.

Russia still perceives the increased role of the EU and the US with openly expressed jealousy. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova has on numerous occasions blamed the EU for hijacking the peace process and trying to appropriate the previous

*The role of the Russian Federation in the management of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has doubtlessly been influential at all times. However, Russia's role has largely been ambivalent.*

achievements brokered by the Russian Federation.<sup>53</sup> She also lambasted the EU's decision to dispatch a civilian mission to Armenia, saying: "Geopolitical motives, not conflict settlement, are behind the EU's new mission in Armenia ... everything is being done to squeeze Russia out of the region and weaken its historical role as the main guarantor of security."<sup>54</sup>

The same attitude was also displayed towards Washington's good offices when Zakharova, during a press conference on March 23, 2023, said that "Large-scale problems began to arise with the involvement of the West in the normalization of Armenian–Azerbaijani relations".<sup>55</sup> It is becoming increasingly obvious that the post-conflict normalization process between Armenia and Azerbaijan is now sandwiched between the two competing geopolitical blocks – with one heavily distracted in its own war, but still possessive of regional affairs, and the other scrambling to break the old patterns of acquiescence and inaction when it came to the security ailments of the South Caucasus.

The bone of contention in Moscow's approach is its insistence on freezing indefinitely the issue of the so-called 'status' of Karabakh Armenians to be dealt with at a later stage, which Azerbaijan strongly rebuffs. The Azerbaijani side opposes any discussions on the so-called status of the Karabakh region, even more so delaying its consideration to a later stage.<sup>56</sup>

53 ARKA News Agency, *Zakharova criticizes EU's role in normalization of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations*, March 28, 2023, available at: [https://arka.am/en/news/politics/zakharova\\_criticizes\\_eu\\_s\\_role\\_in\\_normalization\\_of\\_armenian\\_azerbaijani\\_relations/](https://arka.am/en/news/politics/zakharova_criticizes_eu_s_role_in_normalization_of_armenian_azerbaijani_relations/) (accessed: March 28, 2023)

54 Teslova, E., "Exclusively Geopolitical Motives Behind new EU Mission in Armenia: Russia", *Anadolu Agency*, March 21, 2023, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/exclusively-geopolitical-motives-behind-new-eu-mission-in-armenia-russia/2826576> (accessed: March 28, 2023)

55 APA New Agency, *Zakharova commented on Blinken's statement on 'a peace agreement can be signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the near future'*, March 23, 2023, available at: <https://apa.az/en/foreign-policy/zakharova-commented-on-blinkens-statement-on-a-peace-agreement-can-be-signed-between-azerbaijan-and-armenia-in-the-near-future-399295> (accessed: March 28, 2023)

56 KarabakhSpace.eu, *Aliyev insists there can be no 'status' for Nagorno-Karabakh*, June 17, 2022, available at: <https://karabakhspace.commonspace.eu/news/aliyev-insists-there-can-be-no-status-nagorno-karabakh> (accessed: April 7, 2023)

Against this backdrop, there were also indications of the existence of two separate drafts of a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan – roughly dubbed the ‘Washington’ and ‘Moscow’ drafts – with the former allegedly recognizing the Karabakh region as an inalienable part of Azerbaijan and the latter attempting to ‘freeze’ the issue of status for the Karabakh region to be dealt with at a later stage, and by so doing garnering Yerevan’s support.<sup>57</sup>

*The hiatus in the EU-led peace talks that lasted for about nine months actually played into the hands of Russia, which was ostensibly worried about the West’s increased profile in post-conflict normalization.*

The hiatus in the EU-led peace talks that lasted for about nine months actually played into the hands of Russia, which was ostensibly worried about the West’s increased profile in post-conflict normalization. Nonetheless, with Russia’s priority being its war in Ukraine, it has detached from its erstwhile zeal and ability to dominate the peace process in the South Caucasus, thereby leaving an unprecedented loophole for some time in the management of security in the region. All that was left was a defunct Minsk Group; a more active, but sometimes controversial, EU role; a more-or-less rejuvenated US profile; and a distracted, but still possessive, Russia – none of which was helping to bring about progress in post-conflict normalization.

After the meetings in Washington and Brussels in early- and mid-May 2023 respectively, geopolitical competition was again at play, with the parties having met in Moscow on May 19, 2023 at the level of foreign ministers, and the heads of state meeting on May 25, 2023. The message from the Moscow meeting of the foreign ministers was positive and in line with previous positive outcomes from the Washington and Brussels meetings. Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted after the meeting: “We hope the outcome will be positive. The parties are already close to a final agreement”.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, it was specifically emphasized in the aftermath of the Moscow meeting that existing documents, especially the Trilateral Statement (November 10, 2020), should constitute the basis for a future peace deal alongside the opening of all communications in the region. This was an apparent attempt to

57 Radar Armenia, *There is no Washington or Western project; there is an Azerbaijani peace treaty project*, October 28, 2022, available at: <https://radar.am/en/news/politics-2533928048/> (accessed: March 29, 2023)

58 Reuters, *Azerbaijan, Armenia close to deal on ending transport blockade, Russia says*, May 20, 2023, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/azerbaijan-armenia-close-deal-ending-transport-blockade-russia-2023-05-19/> (accessed: May 24, 2023)

extend Russia's monopoly over the peace process and maintain the country's predominance over the state of affairs.

However, on May 25, 2023, during the meeting of the leaders in Moscow and contrary to the hopes for an equally positive outcome, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan engaged in a 'battle of arguments' initiated by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and the meeting ended with no substantial outcome for the peace process.<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, on June 2, 2023, a day after the meeting of Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders in Chisinau (Moldova) on the margins of the EPC, a meeting of the Trilateral Working Group on the opening of economic and transport communications in the South Caucasus took place in Moscow.<sup>60</sup> The meeting was hailed a success, with Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk noting that "Significant progress in agreeing methods to unblock transport communications between Azerbaijan and Armenia was noted with satisfaction."<sup>61</sup> It seems that, while the political process is handled mostly by the Washington–EU axis, Moscow may achieve some progress on the issue of the opening of all regional communications, in accordance with the Trilateral Statement.

### *Conclusion*

This article has explored the current situation in the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace process and the increased profile of the West – the EU and the US – in the facilitation of post-conflict normalization. The initiative assumed by the EU in particular to act as a go-between for Armenia and Azerbaijan, and establish a successful trilateral format that has been able to foster some approximation of the positions, is highly commendable and also unusual for the EU, whose role before the 44-day conflict was mostly inferior to those of the regional actors

59 VoANEWS, *Armenian and Azerbaijani Leaders Spar in Front of Putin*, May 25, 2023, available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/armenian-and-azerbaijani-leaders-spar-in-front-of-putin/7108967.html> (accessed: June 2, 2023)

60 APA News Agency, *Meeting of Russia-Azerbaijan-Armenia Trilateral Working Group kicked off in Moscow*, June 2, 2023, available at: <https://apa.az/en/foreign-policy/meeting-of-russia-azerbaijan-armenia-trilateral-working-group-kicked-off-in-moscow-404836> (accessed: June 2, 2023)

61 Reuters, *Azeri-Armenian talks to unblock transport links making progress, Russia says*, June 2, 2023, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/azeri-armenian-talks-unblock-transport-links-making-progress-russia-2023-06-02/> (accessed: June 8, 2023)

and the OSCE Minsk Group. However, with the Minsk Group being effectively obsolete and the Russian Federation distracted in Ukraine, the EU has found itself at the centre of post-conflict normalization efforts. The EU's increased profile is further buttressed by the US, who is also ratcheting up its efforts towards this end.

Anticipations of a peace treaty being signed before the end of 2022 did not materialize. Moreover, for almost nine months the EU did not initiate any further meetings in the Brussels format after the cancellation of the meeting on December 7, 2022, barring a side meeting on the margins of the Munich Security Conference. However, there seems to be a new momentum since early May 2023, with both Washington and the EU ratcheting up their efforts to bring the parties closer to peace. Although apprehensions over the West's activism are continually voiced on the part of the Russian Federation, the two competing geopolitical blocks seem to effectively complement each other, with the West leading the political process and Russia, at the moment, mostly facilitating the process regarding the opening of economic and transport communications.

All in all, the South Caucasus region is in a state of flux and its most important component is the Armenia–Azerbaijan normalization and peace process. The war in Ukraine is not yet in the home stretch and unpredictability lingers as to how things can and will end. Nevertheless, its impact is definitely already felt in Russia's decreased engagement in the peace process. There is a unique opportunity for the EU and the US to ramp up their roles in post-conflict normalization, which might bring about solid peace in the region. It will be necessary to wait and see if these two actors' glimmers of enhanced activism will indeed live up to the promise. There is a lot at stake, and this is the reason to move forward in good faith.





# From Passive to Active: Unpacking the EU's New Role in Promoting Peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia

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and Douwe van der Meer<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

This article analyses the European Union's (EU) increased involvement in promoting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan following the Second Karabakh War in 2020. While the EU's previous (indirect) engagement was shadowed by its member state France's co-chairing role within the Minsk Group, its recent diplomatic efforts and visibility signify a shift towards more active involvement in the South Caucasus region. This article explores the motivations behind the EU's engagement, including its political and economic interests in the region. Additionally, the article highlights the challenges that the EU faces in promoting lasting peace in this region. Furthermore, this article provides policy recommendations for the EU to promote peace and stability in the region. These include maintaining a consistent stance against separatism, drawing on its own experience with resolving conflicts within the Union, and increasing its financial investments in trade, infrastructure, and renewable energy production. By following these recommendations, the EU can strengthen its influence in the South Caucasus and promote lasting peace in the region.

**Key words:** EU, South Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Energy, Middle Corridor, Peacebuilding



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### ***Introduction***

After the signing of the Trilateral Statement of November 10, 2020 that ended the Second Karabakh War, both Russia and the EU have undertaken multiple efforts to mediate negotiations for the normalization of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Before the war, the EU's diplomatic representation in the peace negotiations was passive and it was de facto monopolized by France's participation within the Minsk Group. However, since the end of the Second Karabakh War, the EU has become more actively engaged. Specifically, it has organized seven meetings with the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia, although one was cancelled. In addition to the organized meetings, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, has held intensive phone calls with Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev. Given the EU's more active diplomatic involvement, one may question the reasons for this change in diplomatic strategy, as well as the motivations behind it. Furthermore, it is important to examine the main challenges and prospects for the EU's efforts in the region.

This article aims to explain the EU's role in promoting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In doing so, the main focus of this article will be to explain the motivation behind the EU's involvement in the peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and that process's challenges and prospects.

### ***Competing mediation processes***

Geopolitical competition in the South Caucasus increased in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War (2020) as Russia sidelined the Euro-Atlantic community from the trilateral statement. In July 2021, while answering the question, "*Where does the EU stand in all this, and why do we need to be involved in the region?*",<sup>1</sup> Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated that the South Caucasus is significant for the EU in terms of energy and transportation, but "a growing number of countries"<sup>2</sup> are politically and economically active in the region, namely Russia, Türkiye, China and

1 Borrell, J., "Why we need more EU engagement in the South Caucasus", *European Union External Action*, July 2, 2021, available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/why-we-need-more-eu-engagement-south-caucasus\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/why-we-need-more-eu-engagement-south-caucasus_en) (accessed: March 14, 2023)

2 Ibid.

Iran. Borrell's statement indicates that the EU views the region as a subject of competition and recognizes the need to intensify its activities in the area to safeguard its economic and political interests from other players. The EU's involvement in mediating the negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan should also be seen in this context. Although Russia has traditionally acted as the primary mediator, the EU's decision to increase its mediation efforts aims to bring a peace on its own terms, rather than on Russia's. From a competitive perspective, this move enables the EU to enhance its influence in the region, thereby providing a clear incentive for it to engage in peace efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

*Geopolitical competition in the South Caucasus increased in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War (2020) as Russia sidelined the Euro-Atlantic community from the trilateral statement.*

Geopolitical tensions between the EU and Russia escalated further following Russia's continued invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and Russia is increasingly interpreting the EU's mediation efforts as aimed at excluding Russia from a diplomatic settlement.<sup>3</sup> While the EU and Russian mediation processes overlap on issues such as border delineation and demarcation and the reopening of transport links, their positions differ on the 'status' of the Armenian population living in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Russia is reluctant to include a settlement of the issue of 'status' in any potential peace treaty and prefers to defer the issue to future negotiations.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, Russia seeks to keep its peacekeeping forces in the region for longer. The EU, on the other hand, prefers a comprehensive settlement that includes a decision on the issue of 'status'.<sup>5</sup> For Azerbaijan, the Armenia - Azerbaijan conflict is resolved, and the possibility of granting any 'status' to Karabakh Armenians does not exist.

It is difficult to say whether the EU has changed its position since the start of the negotiations because of the limited EU press statements.

<sup>3</sup> President of Russia, *Answers to media questions*, October 31, 2022, available at: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/69730> (accessed: April 26, 2023)

<sup>4</sup> Tass, *Status of Karabakh should be left to next generations to decide - Russian ambassador*, 1 November 2022, available at: <https://tass.com/world/1530691> (accessed: April 26, 2023)

<sup>5</sup> Council of the European Union, "Nagorno-Karabakh: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union", November 19, 2020, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/11/19/nagorno-karabakh-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union/> (accessed: April 26, 2023)

Nevertheless, when reviewing all the press statements following the meetings of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, it becomes evident that the terms “Karabakh” and the “ethnic Armenian population in Karabakh” were mentioned for the first time after the EU-led meeting on May 22, 2022. According to some experts, Charles Michel chose to use the term Karabakh, which is favoured by Azerbaijan, instead of ‘Nagorno-Karabakh.’<sup>6</sup> Karabakh is preferred by official Baku because Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree on July 7, 2021 resulting in the reorganization of economic regions in Azerbaijan and increasing their number from 11 to 14. Additionally, the decree established the new Karabakh and East Zangazur economic regions, which aim to facilitate the restoration, flexible regional management and rapid development of the historic Karabakh region. After the fifth trilateral meeting, Michel again addressed the rights and security of ethnic Armenians and referred to the “former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast” in his press statement.<sup>7</sup> The inclusion of “Nagorno” was an attempt by the EU to accommodate the preferences of the Armenian side too, as Armenians generally prefer the term ‘Nagorno-Karabakh.’ Additionally, the EU used the term “former” to address Azerbaijan’s perspective, as Baku no longer considers the oblast relevant or in existence. Thanks to the EU’s balanced play of policy, both Armenia and Azerbaijan initially welcomed the EU’s mediation efforts.

However, the EU and Russia have numerous shared priorities, specifically clearly defining and establishing the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan and restoring transportation connections between the two sides.

Another difference between Russia and the EU’s positions regarding the process is their presence on the ground. After Moscow’s involvement in the termination of military activities in 2020, Russia deployed 1,960 armed peacekeepers to the Karabakh region and along the so-called

6 Isayev, H., Kucera, J. and Mejlumyan, A., “EU emerges as major player in Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations”, *Eurasianet*, May 25, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/eu-emerges-as-major-player-in-armenia-azerbaijan-negotiations> (accessed: March 14, 2023)

7 European Council, “Press remarks by President Charles Michel following the trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia”, May 14, 2023, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/14/press-remarks-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-trilateral-meeting-with-president-aliyev-of-azerbaijan-and-prime-minister-pashinyan-of-armenia/> (accessed: May 14, 2023)

‘Lachin corridor’. The mandate for these peacekeepers was not clearly defined, other than that its presence would last for five years, as enshrined in the Trilateral Statement of 10 November 2020.<sup>8</sup> The EU, on the other hand, set up the EU Monitoring Capacity in Armenia (EUMCAP) in October 2022 and later the European Union [Civilian] Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in January 2023. EUMA has an initial mandate of two years, during which observers deployed from the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia patrol and report from the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to Russia’s military mission, the EUMA’s mandate is strictly civilian. It is framed as a civilian mission “tasked with observing and reporting on the situation on the ground; contributing to human security in conflict-affected areas and based on the above, contributing to build confidence between populations of both Armenia and Azerbaijan.”<sup>10</sup> In addition, the civilian aspect is stressed by the fact that the mission was established as a response to requests by the Armenian authorities to the EU to deploy a civilian mission. Although the EUMA is part of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP),<sup>11</sup> “the entire chain of command is civilian”.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The EU’s motivation for stability: Trade and energy***

Arguably, the EU has a greater interest in reconciling Azerbaijan and Armenia than Russia, as the existence of tension between these two is good for Russia’s military business in the region. For example, according to Calibier.az (Azerbaijani media), Russia’s peacekeepers, temporarily deployed in some parts of Azerbaijan’s Karabakh (Garabagh) region,

8 President of Russia, *Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation*, Events, November 10, 2020, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384> (accessed: April 26, 2023)

9 European Commission, “Armenia: EU establishes a civilian mission to contribute to stability in border areas”, January 23, 2023, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/01/23/armenia-eu-sets-up-a-civilian-mission-to-ensure-security-in-conflict-affected-and-border-areas/> (accessed: April 26, 2023)

10 Press and information team of EUMA, *About European Union Mission in Armenia*, EU Mission in Armenia, January 26, 2023, available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/about-european-union-mission-armenia\\_en?s=410283](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/about-european-union-mission-armenia_en?s=410283) (accessed: July 1, 2023)

11 Press and information team of EUMA, *EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA)*, EU Mission in Armenia, February 28, 2023, available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/eu-mission-armenia-euma\\_en?s=410283](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/eu-mission-armenia-euma_en?s=410283) (accessed: July 1, 2023)

12 Ibid.

*The EU has a greater interest in reconciling Azerbaijan and Armenia than Russia, as the existence of tension between these two is good for Russia's military business in the region.*

are supplying weapons to the Armenian separatists through the so-called Lachin corridor. Therefore, Russia has no interest in settling all the pending issues between two countries, notably the issue of 'status', as this would make its peacekeepers irrelevant and thereby decrease Russia's influence in the region.<sup>13</sup>

The EU, on the other hand, has much to gain from peace in the South Caucasus. After Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine, the region has increased its strategic importance for the EU as both a source of energy commodities and as a trade corridor. The stability of the South Caucasus region is of vital interest to the EU. A new war between Armenia and Azerbaijan instantly complicates the development of projects such as the Middle Corridor, which is an international transport initiative that seeks to connect Türkiye to China via Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. In other words, any new war could decrease the EU's opportunities for the diversification of its energy sources and routes.

### Energy: Diversification from Russia

In 2020, the EU presented its Green Deal, a plan to "transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy."<sup>14</sup> Thus, ensuring a secure and affordable EU energy supply, developing a fully integrated and digitalised EU energy market, and developing a power sector based largely on renewable sources are among the key principles of the Green Deal.<sup>15</sup> In order to achieve these principles, the Commission wants to, *inter alia*, build interconnected energy systems, which is possible through a well-diversified energy network and better-integrated grids to support renewable energy sources.<sup>16</sup> However, the conflict in Ukraine

13 Isayev, H., Kucera, J. and Mejlumyan, A., "EU emerges as major player in Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations", *Eurasianet*, May 25, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/eu-emerges-as-major-player-in-armenia-azerbaijan-negotiations> (accessed: April 26, 2023)

14 European Commission, "A European Green Deal – Striving to be the first climate-neutral continent", available at: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en) (accessed: March 15, 2023)

15 European Commission, "Energy and the Green Deal", available at: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/energy-and-green-deal\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/energy-and-green-deal_en) (accessed: March 15, 2023)

16 Ibid.

has once again highlighted the EU's dependence on Russia for energy, prompting the European Commission to accelerate its search for alternative sources. Russia's renewed war of aggression against Ukraine has only increased the importance of the South Caucasus region in terms of energy. In May 2022, the EU presented 'REPowerEU' in response to Russia's renewed invasion.<sup>17</sup> One of the aims of REPowerEU is to end the EU's dependence on Russian fossil fuels.

*After Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine, the region has increased its strategic importance for the EU as both a source of energy commodities and as a trade corridor.*

Azerbaijan is one of these reliable, non-Russian sources of energy in the Caspian Sea region. Azerbaijan has aided Europe in diversifying its oil and gas supplies and improving its oil and gas security via the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline. The Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), the SGC's third component, became operational in December 2020. This 878-km-long pipeline receives natural gas from the Shah Deniz field in the Azerbaijani section of the Caspian Sea through the South Caucasus Pipeline, passing it through Azerbaijan and Georgia, and then along the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) via Türkiye. It connects to TANAP at the Türkiye-Greece border in Kipoi, carries gas onward to Europe through Greece, Albania, and the Adriatic Sea, and then terminates in southern Italy. Given that Italy, Greece, and Bulgaria heavily rely on gas imported from Russia, making them vulnerable to supply cuts and price increases imposed by a monopolistic supplier, the TAP is critical for the energy security of these countries.

Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen signed a new Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy on July 18, 2022.<sup>18</sup> The memorandum includes a commitment to double the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor to provide at least 20 billion cubic meters of gas to the EU annually by 2027.<sup>19</sup> In line with this, on April 25, 2023, the national gas system operators of Bulgaria, Romania,

17 European Commission, "REPowerEU: A plan to rapidly reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels and fast forward the green transition\*", May 18, 2022, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_3131](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_3131) (accessed: March 15, 2023)

18 European Commission, "Statement by President von der Leyen with Azerbaijani President Aliyev", July 18, 2022, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_22\\_4583](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_4583) (accessed: June 24, 2023)

19 Bayramov, A. and Wagenmakers, T., "Europe's Energy Dilemma and Azerbaijan's Potential Contribution", *Russian Analytical Digest*, Vol. 284, June 8, 2022, p. 9



Hungary, and Slovakia reached an agreement to increase the transfer of natural gas from Azerbaijan by utilizing their respective countries' existing infrastructure.<sup>20</sup> In addition to natural gas, on December 2022, the leaders of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, and Hungary signed an agreement to construct an underwater electric cable beneath the Black Sea. The cable will carry green energy (electricity) from planned Caspian Sea wind farms to Europe.<sup>21</sup>

*Azerbaijan is one of these reliable, non-Russian sources of energy in the Caspian Sea region. Azerbaijan has aided Europe in diversifying its oil and gas supplies and improving its oil and gas security via the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline.*

In light of these energy initiatives, it is imperative for the EU to ensure stability and peace in the region to safeguard long-term ventures and mitigate potential risks and threats to its diversification goals. Moreover, these projects illustrate that Azerbaijan holds a crucial position as a transit country for transporting energy resources from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, with significant potential for future expansion of gas volumes. For example, in May 2023, KazTransOil, the national oil transporter of Kazakhstan, announced a substantial

increase in oil exports via its Aktau Port to Baku, Azerbaijan. In the same vein, during the period of January to February 2023, Turkmenistan demonstrated a noteworthy surge in crude oil exports to Azerbaijan, amounting to 119,200 tons. This figure represents a significant growth of 4.4 times when compared to the corresponding indicator observed in the previous year.<sup>22</sup>

### Trade: The Middle Corridor

According to Joseph Borrell, the South Caucasus plays a significant role in linking the EU with Asia through transport corridors. Therefore, the EU should foster the region's role as a connectivity hub.<sup>23</sup> Russia's

20 AP News, *European countries, Azerbaijan agree to boost gas transfers*, April 25, 2023, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/europe-azerbaijan-gas-bulgaria-romania-hungary-slovakia-a0ae5e90dbb7b87b7b81afb3acd3455a> (accessed: June 24, 2023)

21 Euronews, *Hungary, Romania, Georgia, Azerbaijan agree to Black Sea electricity project*, December 17, 2022, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/12/17/hungary-romania-georgia-azerbaijan-agree-to-black-sea-electricity-project> (accessed: June 24, 2023)

22 Orient, *Turkmenistan has significantly increased oil exports to Azerbaijan*, April 25, 2023, available at: <https://orient.tm/en/post/52055/turkmenistan-has-significantly-increased-oil-exports-azerbaijan> (accessed: June 24, 2023)

23 Borrell, *op. cit.*

war has sparked renewed interest in the Middle Corridor, an alternative trade route that circumvents Russia by starting in China and traversing through Central Asia and the South Caucasus to reach the EU. The burgeoning interest in the Middle Corridor highlights the growing importance of the South Caucasus region as a transport corridor, which clarifies the EU's interest in the region.<sup>24</sup> As Mardell explains, the war in Ukraine has negatively impacted the China-Europe rail express connection. China's One Belt One Road project initially aimed to promote freight trains running from China across Russia and Ukraine or Belarus to the EU. However, the sanctions imposed as a result of the war have made this trade route less feasible. Thus, the Middle Corridor, which crosses the South Caucasus region, is the obvious alternative choice.<sup>25</sup>

*Russia's war has sparked renewed interest in the Middle Corridor, an alternative trade route that circumvents Russia by starting in China and traversing through Central Asia and the South Caucasus to reach the EU.*

The EU has a significant interest in the Middle Corridor as it could be crucial for rebuilding Ukraine after the war.<sup>26</sup> To rebuild the country, Ukraine requires materials from China, and the Middle Corridor provides the easiest solution to access these materials while bypassing Russia. Since the EU has pledged to aid in Ukraine's reconstruction, it has a critical interest in securing the Middle Corridor's viability. Consequently, the EU needs to establish peace in the South Caucasus region to ensure the Middle Corridor's continued use as an alternative trade route.<sup>27</sup>

However, it remains uncertain how much the Middle Corridor can substitute for the trade route that passes through Russia. The Middle Corridor will be unable to match the volume of trade that the northern route through Russia can handle anytime soon. Additionally, the Middle

24 Avdaliani, E. and Devonshire-Ellis, C., "Will The Middle Corridor Evolve To Reshape Eurasian Connectivity Between China and the European Union?", *Silk Road Briefing*, March 2, 2023, available at: <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2023/03/02/will-the-middle-corridor-evolve-to-reshape-eurasian-connectivity-between-china-and-the-european-union/> (Accessed: March 15, 2023)

25 Cokelaere, H. and Aarup, S.A., "Ukraine war shakes up China-Europe railway express", *Politico*, July 25, 2022, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-china-silk-road-railway/> (accessed: 25 April 2023)

26 Ibid.

27 Prodaniuk, T. and Koldomasov, A., "The EU's mission to rebuild Ukraine: problems and priorities", *Institute of International Relations Prague*, Policy Paper, 6 August 2022, p. 1, available at: <https://www.iir.cz/the-eu-s-mission-to-rebuild-ukraine-problems-and-priorities> (accessed: March 15, 2023)

Corridor presents some complexities due to the need to cross the Caspian Sea and the inclusion of more transit countries. Nevertheless, given the need to avoid Russia, the EU has little choice but to prioritize the stability of the South Caucasus region, which is critical for the viability of the Middle Corridor as an alternative trade route.

The transport time for goods between China and Europe has significantly decreased due to the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, the further development of Kazakhstan's railroad system, and the modernization of ports such as Alat (Azerbaijan), Aktau, Kuryk (Kazakhstan), and Turkmenbashi (Turkmenistan) located in the Caspian Sea region. In March 2022, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Kazakhstan produced a quadrilateral statement on the need to develop the Trans-Caspian International Corridor.<sup>28</sup> Maersk has started a new train service along the Middle Corridor and Nurminen Logistics started running a container train from China to Central Europe through the trans-Caspian route on May 10, 2022. In June 2022, China's National Development and Reform Commission stated that work on the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project would start in the near future.<sup>29</sup> Although the Middle Corridor is a viable alternative trade route for the EU, it is still in development, and infrastructure is being built at a slow pace. Furthermore, it remains to be seen how invested the EU will be in the Middle Corridor when the war in Ukraine ends and the Northern Route becomes available again.

Despite these challenges, the Middle Corridor is currently an important trade route for the EU, and therefore the EU should invest in its development. To make this possible, stability in the Caucasus region is essential, which explains the EU's efforts to negotiate peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The risk of renewed hostilities poses a threat to the security of the transport infrastructure that is being developed for the Middle Corridor. Therefore, the EU's peace efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan are important for the Middle Corridor project because a stable South Caucasus region is necessary for the success of the project.

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<sup>28</sup> Avdaliani and Devonshire-Ellis, *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

### ***Challenges and prospects for a peace agreement***

Despite repeated diplomatic efforts, the EU has encountered several challenges in its negotiation track between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The first challenge pertains to the definition of a peace agreement, specifically with regard to what ‘peace’ means for Azerbaijan and Armenia. By examining both governments’ statements, it is evident that they are not yet on the same page. For Azerbaijan, peace entails recognition of its territorial integrity, withdrawal of remnants of Armenia’s military forces from areas (in the Karabakh region) that are under the temporary control of Russia’s peacekeeping forces, and further negotiations between local Armenian residents in the Karabakh region and the Azerbaijani government for their reintegration without the involvement of third parties.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, for Armenia, peace means securing international guarantees for the rights and security of the ethnic Armenians living in the Karabakh region, an international (i.e. not solely Russian) peacekeeping presence in the Karabakh region, and the creation of a demilitarized zone<sup>31</sup>, which is deemed by official Baku as interference in the internal affairs of Azerbaijan.

Considering the past two years, it can be said that official Baku is the one pushing for the signing of a peace agreement, while Yerevan has consistently attempted to delay any decision in the expectation of securing more favourable terms in the future. According to Huseyn Mahmudov, head of the International Military Cooperation Department at the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan, “*The main purpose of the Armenian side’s regular shelling of Azerbaijan Army positions is to delay the signing of a peace treaty.*”<sup>32</sup> The progress towards a peace agreement has

*Considering the past two years, it can be said that official Baku is the one pushing for the signing of a peace agreement, while Yerevan has consistently attempted to delay any decision in the expectation of securing more favourable terms in the future.*

30 Report.az, *Hikmat Hajiyev: Armenia doesn’t want to sign peace treaty, trying to gain time*, March 13, 2023, available at: <https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/hikmat-hajiyev-armenia-doesn-t-want-to-sign-peace-treaty-trying-to-gain-time/> (accessed June 24, 2023)

31 Bunatian, H., “Pashinian Points To Lingering Differences Between Armenia, Azerbaijan After U.S.-Sponsored Peace Talks”, *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, May 6, 2023, Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/pashinian-interview-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-talks/32398806.html> (accessed: June 24, 2023)

32 Rehimov, R. “Armenia aims to delay signing of peace treaty: Azerbaijani Defense Ministry”, *Anadolu Agency*, September 13, 2022, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/armenia-aims-to-delay-signing-of-peace-treaty-azerbaijani-defense-ministry/2683841> (accessed: June 24, 2023)

slowed down because Yerevan believes that the West and Russia may pressure Azerbaijan and offer Armenia a favourable peace deal once the conflict in Ukraine comes to an end. While waiting for the West, Armenia is looking for new external partners, namely Iran and India, against Azerbaijan. On April 20, Armenia hosted the first trilateral consultations with Iran and India in Yerevan. The meetings involved deputies and assistants in the foreign ministries of the three countries, specifically focusing on “economic issues and regional communication channels.”<sup>33</sup> The sides agreed to continue further consultations in the trilateral format.<sup>34</sup>

The second challenge is the lack of a united EU stance. Some EU member states’ divergent interests and priorities<sup>35</sup> have led to different opinions and approaches towards the peace process, making it difficult for the EU to influence the situation. For example, France, which has a significant Armenian diaspora population, has been a vocal advocate for Armenia and has taken a more pro-Armenian approach towards the peace process.<sup>36</sup> Disagreements over the participation of France’s President Emmanuel Macron led to a scheduled EU-led quadrilateral meeting in Brussels on December 7, 2022 being cancelled.<sup>37</sup> The chances of reaching a peace agreement decreased after Nikol Pashinyan insisted on France’s inclusion in the negotiations, while Azerbaijan was strongly opposed to this request due to France’s perceived biased stance (favouring Armenia’s position) on issues related to the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In line with this, a delegation from France’s Armed Forces Ministry was dispatched to Armenia with the objective

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33 Kucera, J., “Armenia hosts first trilateral meeting with Iranian and Indian officials”, *Eurasianet*, April 21, 2023, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-hosts-first-trilateral-meeting-with-iranian-and-indian-officials> (accessed: April 27, 2023)

34 Ibid.

35 France24, *Armenian diaspora pitches in as Nagorno-Karabakh truce crumbles*, October 27, 2020, available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20201027-armenian-diaspora-pitches-in-as-nagorno-karabakh-truce-crumbles> (accessed: June 24, 2023)

36 Huseynov, V., “Opinion: What does French support for Armenia mean for the future of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations?”, *KarabakhSpace.eu*, June 2, 2021, available at: <https://karabakhspace.comspace.eu/opinion/opinion-what-does-french-support-armenia-mean-future-armenian-azerbaijani-relations> (accessed: June 24, 2023)

37 Reuters, *Azerbaijan cancels Armenia talks, says Macron cannot take part*, November 25, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/planned-brussels-meeting-between-armenia-azerbaijan-leaders-scrapped-interfax-2022-11-25/> (accessed: June 24, 2023)

of investigating potential avenues for military collaboration. This move raises concerns as it potentially contradicts the European Union's stance on peaceful approaches. Additionally, France's Foreign Minister, Catherine Colonna, disclosed during her recent visit to Armenia that a military mission will be established at the Embassy of France in Armenia. This development has the potential to foster a greater level of bilateral cooperation in the field of defence.<sup>38</sup>

The third challenge is the role of external powers, specifically Iran and Russia. Moscow has sought to maintain its influence in the region and has used its peacekeeping involvement in the Karabakh region as a means of exerting leverage over the parties. In the same vein, Moscow has started its own mediation efforts for peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Although Iran has not explicitly stated that it does not want a peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan, such a deal could potentially impact Iran's economic dominance in Armenia and its transit links in the Caspian Sea region. As stated earlier, the peace negotiations between the parties involve the establishment of connectivity and the reopening

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of transport links between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan also prefers the opening of the Zangazur corridor, which is part of a strategic transportation route that extends from Azerbaijan's capital city of Baku to Türkiye's Kars province, passing through Armenia. Consequently, Iran's position as the primary transit route between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (a landlocked territory of Azerbaijan) will be diminished. Similarly, Iran will no longer maintain its pivotal role in connecting Türkiye and Central Asia, as a significant portion of Türkiye's trade with Central Asia depends on truck transit through Iran.<sup>39</sup>

Overall, the EU's mediation efforts to contribute to the peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan are an important part of its broader

38 The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, *French Military Officials Visit Armenia*, November 3, 2022, available at: <https://mirrorspectator.com/2022/11/03/french-military-officials-visit-armenia/> (accessed: June 24, 2023)

39 Veliyev, C., "Iran's frustrations with the Zangazur corridor", *Eurasia Daily Monitor, The Jamestown Foundation*, September 23, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/irans-frustrations-with-the-zangazur-corridor/> (accessed: May 14, 2023)

strategy to secure its political and economic interests and promote peace and stability in the South Caucasus region. One important factor is the region's growing energy, trade, and transportation importance, which has made it a key area of interest for major global powers such as China, Iran, Türkiye, and Russia. By successfully mediating the negotiations, the EU can increase its leverage in the region and secure positive outcomes that align with its interests. The conflict in Ukraine has made the South Caucasus region even more critical for all stakeholders, as it serves as a key transit route for trade, transportation, electricity, natural gas, and oil. If peace is achieved in the South Caucasus, the EU can help to ensure a stable and secure energy supply for its member states.

Based on the analyses above, this article makes three policy recommendations for the EU. First, the EU's stance against separatism is well established and has been successful in resolving similar issues within its own member states, including South Tyrol (Italy), Catalonia (Spain), Friesland (the Netherlands), and Corsica (France). Therefore, the EU's anti-separatist policy should also be applied to the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia, as it concerns Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. It would be counterproductive for EU politicians to promote policies abroad that contradict their own domestic policies. By maintaining a consistent stance against separatism, the EU can uphold its principles and promote stability and peace in the region.

Second, the EU needs to adopt a consistent policy in the Eastern Partnership region to avoid double standards. While the EU has shown support for Georgia's territorial integrity and reacted strongly to Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty by imposing sanctions, it has shown only minimal concern for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. This inconsistency undermines the credibility of the EU and needs to be addressed. The EU should ensure that its policies are applied consistently and impartially in the region. This will help to build trust and establish the EU as a reliable partner for all countries in the region, regardless of their political or economic importance.

To achieve peace in the Southern Caucasus, the EU could propose peacebuilding measures based on its own familiar and successful experience with resolving conflicts within the Union. By drawing lessons from the above-mentioned cases, where lasting peace was achieved, Armenia and Azerbaijan could learn a lot. The ways national

governments dealt with issues related to minorities, such as in Catalonia (Spain), the Basque region (Spain), and Friesland (the Netherlands), are good examples of successful dialogue-based approaches. Although each of these cases is unique, the manner in which governments addressed national tendencies has proven to be effective so far. Even though the (former) Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has many differences at its core, the dialogue-centred approach is a promising starting point. The EU has a lot to offer in this regard, and these experiences should be an essential part of the EU's peace efforts in the South Caucasus.

Another way for the EU to stabilize the South Caucasus is by increasing its commitment to the region through financial investments, for example, for post-war reconstruction, demining, rehabilitation, and repatriation activities. Additionally, this can be achieved by investing in trade, infrastructure, and renewable energy production, which would not only boost the region's economy but also provide the EU with greater leverage over Armenia and Azerbaijan.

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Thirdly, to increase its effectiveness in the peace process, the EU should adopt a unified strategy. Although the EU uses soft diplomacy to persuade the parties involved, certain EU politicians and member states, such as France, may be giving Armenia false hopes of retaliation. For example, France's Armed Forces Ministry sent a delegation to Armenia to explore military cooperation opportunities, which may contradict the EU's peaceful approach. Furthermore, France's Foreign Minister, Catherine Colonna, during her latest visit to Armenia on April 28, 2023, announced the creation of a military mission at the Embassy of France in Armenia to deepen bilateral cooperation in the defence area.<sup>40</sup> A more coherent and united approach by the EU would strengthen its ability to bring stability to the South Caucasus region.

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40 The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, *French Military Officials Visit Armenia*, op. cit.





# Criminalization of Ecocide: Impetus towards Armenia's International Responsibility

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Najiba Mustafayeva\*

The deliberate and extensive destruction of Azerbaijan's environment during nearly thirty years of Armenian occupation makes Armenia responsible under international law. Considering the fact that Armenia committed these illegal actions with the understanding that there is a high probability of severe and long-term damage to the environment being caused by them, this represents an ipso facto (by the fact itself) ecocide, the definition of which was recently provided by international legal experts in order to criminalize this conduct under international law. Against this background, this article provides analysis of the existing legal framework and Armenia's obligations under international law for environmental damage in the liberated (formerly occupied) territories of Azerbaijan, with an overview of the current worldwide initiatives on criminalization of ecocide alongside other recognized international crimes, as well as the challenges and implications of this process. The author also touches upon the issue of individual criminal responsibility of Armenians for the perpetration of war crimes, as well as inter-state arbitration under the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats.

**Key words:** Azerbaijan, Armenia, ecocide, international law, war crimes, international responsibility



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### *Introduction*

In the 1970s, a noted biology professor, Arthur W. Galston, proposed the concept of ecocide during the Vietnam War, when he *raised his voice against* the U.S. Army using the chemical herbicide “Agent Orange” to exterminate the foliage cover and crops of hostile forces.<sup>1</sup> Now, 50 years later, the term ecocide resonates with a new and dangerous relevance in the context of the extensive destruction of Azerbaijan’s environment and biodiversity during nearly thirty years of occupation of its internationally recognized territories by Armenia. Moreover, even after the end of the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Armenia continued to cause significant environmental damage through illegal business activities in Azerbaijan’s Karabakh region and the exploitation of the natural resources of Azerbaijan therein, resulting in a major environmental catastrophe.

The widespread deforestation, arson, destruction of biodiversity, unsustainable logging, river pollution, and contamination through significant construction and mining, exploitation of natural resources, and their illegal export from Azerbaijan (Karabakh region), were deliberately committed by Armenia in the knowledge that there was a high probability of severe and long-term damage to the environment being caused by those illicit acts.<sup>2</sup> This brings an element of urgency to the establishment of Armenian accountability under international law.

In fact, such illegal actions of Armenia represent the violation of its legal obligations under international law to refrain from the usage of means of warfare that “are intended, or may be expected, to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment”.<sup>3</sup>

The goal of this article is to provide an analysis of Armenia’s obligations under international law for severe environmental destruction in Azerbaijan’s formerly occupied territories during the past three decades, as well as current illicit activities in Karabakh region, where a Russian peacekeeping contingent is temporarily deployed. Thus, this

1 European Law Institute, “Ecocide”, available at: <https://www.europeanlawinstitute.eu/projects-publications/completed-projects/ecocide/> (accessed: February 28, 2023).

2 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, “No:015/23, Press Release on arbitration filed by Azerbaijan against Armenia for widespread environmental destruction”, January 19, 2023, available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.az/en/news/no01523> (accessed: March 12, 2023).

3 ICRC, “Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)”, June 8, 1977, available at: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977> (accessed: March 23, 2023).

article provides an overview of the issue of Armenia's international responsibility in the context of the inter-state arbitration under the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, as well as individual criminal responsibility of perpetrators of ecocide, that currently constitute war crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Furthermore, the article touches upon the current worldwide initiatives on criminalization of ecocide alongside recognized international crimes, i.e., war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and crimes of aggression. In general, it is argued that criminalization of ecocide would contribute to a wider recognition of this conduct as a criminal offence at both international and national levels, and, consequently, to realization of environmental remediation as a result of prosecution of ecocide cases by international criminal tribunals and domestic courts.

### ***Armenia's obligations under international law for environmental catastrophe***

Armed conflicts often result in significant environmental damage due to various factors such as military operations, displacement of populations, infrastructure destruction, or the use of hazardous materials. These activities can lead to deforestation, water and soil pollution, wildlife displacement, and other forms of ecological harm, as well as illegal exploitation of natural resources.

The ecosystem of the formerly occupied territories has been severely damaged by Armenians during the years of occupation. Armenian forces intentionally targeted and caused significant hazard to the region's natural environment, including forests, rivers, and wildlife. In addition, Armenia targeted civilian infrastructure, including energy facilities, water treatment plants, and agricultural structures, the destruction of which resulted in environmental catastrophes such as oil spills and the release of pollutants that impacted the surrounding environment.<sup>4</sup>

According to Azerbaijan, during the three decades of occupation of the country's territories by Armenia's armed forces, illegal settlements and illicit economic activities, military infrastructure, and mining operations

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4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, "Armenia's Aggression against Azerbaijan: Environmental Damage", available at: <https://mfa.gov.az/en/category/consequences-of-the-aggression-by-armenia-against-azerbaijan/environmental-damage> (accessed: March 12, 2023).

*The ecosystem of the formerly occupied territories has been severely damaged by Armenians during the years of occupation. Armenian forces intentionally targeted and caused significant hazard to the region's natural environment, including forests, rivers, and wildlife.*

were established in violation of international law. Moreover, Armenia deliberately targeted environmentally sensitive areas and infrastructure during the occupation period, thereby causing further environmental devastation. Armenia's armed forces intentionally set fire to forests and grasslands to prevent the possibility of Azerbaijan's counter-offensive, and thus caused ecological damage.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, even after the end of the war in 2020, Armenians, while withdrawing from the then-occupied districts of Azerbaijan, specifically Kalbajar and Lachin, cut down *trees* in conjunction with burning houses and nearby forests. In fact, the large-scale ecological terror committed by Armenians in those territories during their handover resulted in the felling of plane trees in the liberated territories of Azerbaijan that were more than 2,000 years old, the burning of the Topkhana forest around the city of Shusha with prohibited white phosphorus, and arson attacks on forests that *ipso facto* represent intentional damage to flora and fauna.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, the delicate balance of the Karabakh region's ecosystem was negatively affected by illicit business activities and the exploitation of its natural resources. According to the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, illicit exploitation of natural resources by Armenians has been revealed. In particular, the Kyzylbulag gold deposit and the Demirli copper–molybdenum deposit<sup>7</sup> were illicitly utilized by Base Metals, a subsidiary of the Australian company International Base Metals Limited, up to 2020. The resources extracted within this large-scale criminal business in the mining sector in the Karabakh region have been transferred to Armenia for reprocessing and exported to the global market.<sup>8</sup> This illegal activity “not only criminally enriches the

5 Karabakh Center, “Ecocide in Karabakh”, available at: <https://story.karabakh.center/en/ecocide-in-karabakh> (accessed: March 28, 2023).

6 Azernews.az, Armenia's ecological terror against Azerbaijan during three-decade occupation, January 21, 2021, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/aggression/175301.html> (accessed: March 18, 2023).

7 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, “No:573/22, Head of the Press Service Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Aykhan Hajizade, answers the questions of local media representatives” (translation from Azerbaijani), December 12, 2022, available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.az/az/news/no57322> (accessed: May 15, 2023).

8 The Center for Analysis of Economic Reforms and Communication, “Azerbaijani environmentalists

political leaders of Armenia and the suspicious Base Metals, but also causes serious damage to the ecology of the entire region.”<sup>9</sup>

In this regard, Azerbaijan has made several appellations to the command of Russia’s peacekeeping contingent that has been temporarily deployed in the Karabakh region to stop the illegal exploitation of natural resources therein and to eliminate the negative consequences of the environmental damage. However, the peacekeeping contingent of Russia failed to prevent these illegal activities, which led to a protest by Azerbaijani eco-activists on the Lachin–Khankendi road against Armenian eco-terror in the Karabakh region that lasted for more than 100 days.<sup>10</sup> The main demand of this peaceful protest was to provide access to Azerbaijani specialists to conduct monitoring of mineral deposits located in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan (specifically, the area that is under the temporary control of the peacekeeping contingent).<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance also poses a significant environmental hazard, hindering the safe return of Azerbaijan’s internally displaced persons and impeding efforts for environmental recovery. Such remnants of the war were deliberately planted by Armenia during the period of occupation in blatant violation of international humanitarian law and international human rights law.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, significant damage to the environment of Azerbaijan’s conflict-affected territories, with long-lasting effects on ecosystem and human health, raise the issue of Armenia’s responsibility under international law

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protest illegal extraction of Kyzylbulag gold and Demirli copper-molybdenum deposits in the territories of Azerbaijan where Russian peacekeepers temporarily operate”, December 16, 2022, available at: <https://ereforms.gov.az/en/media/xeberler/vusal-qasimli-ekoloji-terrorla-bagli-dunya-beyin-merkezlerine-muraciet-edib-536> (accessed: April 15, 2023).

9 Ibid.

10 *At the moment of writing* this article eco-activists had temporarily suspended the protest.

11 Azertag.az, *Peaceful protest of Azerbaijani eco-activists on Lachin–Khankendi road enters 117<sup>th</sup> day*, April 7, 2023, available at: [https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Peaceful\\_protest\\_of\\_Azerbaijani\\_eco\\_activists\\_on\\_Lachin\\_Khankendi\\_road\\_enters\\_117th\\_day-2561645](https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Peaceful_protest_of_Azerbaijani_eco_activists_on_Lachin_Khankendi_road_enters_117th_day-2561645) (accessed: May 29, 2023).

12 Mustafayeva, N. “Armenia’s obligations under international law in the area of mine action”, *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*, Vol.3, Issue 1, Summer 2022, pp. 133–149, Available at: <https://cspjournal.az/post/armenias-obligations-under-international-law-in-the-area-of-mine-action-482> (accessed: May 29, 2023)

*Armenia is responsible under international law, specifically IHL, for irreparable deliberate damage to the whole ecosystem of the liberated territories, as well as current activities for the illicit exploitation of the natural resources of Azerbaijan.*

for the acts they have perpetrated.

Under international humanitarian law (IHL), namely the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocol I, Armenia is obliged to implement its obligations in the area of protection of the natural environment. By joining these treaties, which were adopted in order to limit the atrocities of wars, Armenia undertook a legal obligation to comply with their provisions under any circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Article 35(3) of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions states: “*It is prohibited to employ methods or means of warfare which are intended, or may be expected, to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment*”.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, Article 55(1) of the same protocol stipulates that “*care shall be taken in warfare to protect the natural environment against widespread, long-term and severe damage. This protection includes a prohibition of the use of methods or means of warfare which are intended or may be expected to cause such damage to the natural environment and thereby to prejudice the health or survival of the population.*”<sup>15</sup>

Hence, Armenia is responsible under international law, specifically IHL, for irreparable deliberate damage to the whole ecosystem of the liberated territories, as well as current activities for the illicit exploitation of the natural resources of Azerbaijan.

### ***Judicial litigation and inter-state arbitration: Momentum to hold Armenia responsible***

The regime of responsibility under international criminal law is based on the principle of individual criminal responsibility for international crimes.

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13 Safarov, N. and Mustafayeva, N., “Violations of international humanitarian law by Armenia in the Second Karabakh War”, *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*, Vol.1, Issue 2, Winter 2020, pp. 131–142, Available at: <https://cspjournal.az/post/violations-of-international-humanitarian-law-by-armenia-in-the-second-karabakh-war-447> (accessed: May 29, 2023)

14 ICRC, “Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)”, June 8, 1977, available at: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977> (accessed: March 23, 2023).

15 Ibid.

It is a fact that, alongside the Geneva Conventions, intentional long-term and severe damage to an environment is also included in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC)<sup>16</sup> as a war crime. Therefore, the issue of the individual criminal responsibility of Armenians for intentional destruction of the ecosystem of the liberated territories of Azerbaijan has gained prominence.

Thus, Article 8(2)(b)(iv) of the Statute defines as a war crime an act that is committed that involves “*intentionally launching an attack in the knowledge that such attack will cause ... severe damage to the natural environment which would be clearly excessive in relation to the concrete and direct overall military advantage anticipated*”.<sup>17</sup>

As can be observed, the Rome Statute does not use the term “ecocide”, due to the fact that it has not yet been recognized as an independent international crime. However, as this is an integral element of war crimes defined under the Statute, it is envisaged that there will be individual criminal responsibility of perpetrators for committing such an act.

Notably, Armenia signed the Rome Statute in 1999, but has not yet ratified the document as “it contradicted the country’s constitution” in the Constitutional Court’s opinion.<sup>18</sup> By the end of last year, Armenia had expressed its intention to ratify the statute, but was faced with a negative reaction from Russia, which assessed this attempt as unacceptable and warned Yerevan about “extremely serious consequences”.<sup>19</sup>

Although the question remains opened, it remains of interest for the purposes of this article. The issue is whether the perpetrators of the above-discussed illegal activities in the Karabakh region, that *ipso facto* represent war crimes, will be prosecuted by the ICC in the case of ratification of the Rome Statute by Armenia.

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16 The Rome Statute is an international treaty that established the International Criminal Court, a permanent court intended to prosecute individuals for genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and the crime of aggression. The ICC has jurisdiction over crimes committed after 1 July 2002, the date when the Rome Statute came into force.

17 The International Criminal Court, “Rome Statute of ICC”, 1998, available at: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/RS-Eng.pdf> (accessed: March 10, 2023).

18 Oc-media.org, “Russia ‘criticises’ Armenia’s International Criminal Court ratification”, 28 March 2023, available at: <https://oc-media.org/russia-criticises-armenias-international-criminal-court-ratification/> (accessed: April 18, 2023).

19 Vincent, F., “Russia threatens retaliation against Armenia over move to ratify Rome Statute”, *Le Monde*, March 29, 2023, available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/03/29/russia-threatens-retaliation-against-armenia-over-move-to-ratify-rome-statute\\_6021123\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/03/29/russia-threatens-retaliation-against-armenia-over-move-to-ratify-rome-statute_6021123_4.html) (accessed: May 30, 2023).



Against this background, it is worth discussing the issue of retroactive force of the Rome Statute. Retroactive force, also known as *ex post facto* law, refers to the application of a law to acts committed before the law was enacted. *The jurisdiction of the ICC is non-retroactive*. This entails that the ICC has no jurisdiction to investigate crimes that took place before 1 July 2002, when the Rome Statute has entered into force. For states that ratify after this date, the ICC has jurisdiction “for crimes committed only after the Rome Statute has entered into force in that State Party unless that State declares otherwise”.<sup>20</sup>

Since the Statute has not been ratified by Armenia, the ICC is currently not a suitable avenue for judicial proceedings regarding Armenians criminal acts that *inter alia* include deliberate and widespread destruction of the environment and biodiversity of Azerbaijan. Despite this fact, Armenians can still be prosecuted for these crimes by an *ad hoc*<sup>21</sup> tribunal for war crimes that will determine their individual criminal responsibility. Moreover, as war crimes are not subject to any statute of limitation, judicial proceedings against perpetrators can still be launched regardless of how much time has passed since their commitment.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, the issue of responsibility of Armenia is also based on the *jus cogens* (peremptory norms of international law) character<sup>23</sup> of the norms that outlawed war crimes.<sup>24</sup> Thus, in accordance with Article 53 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, “*A peremptory norm of general international law is a norm accepted and recognized by the international community of States as a whole as a norm from which no derogation is permitted and which can be modified only by a subsequent norm of general international law having the same character*”.<sup>25</sup> In fact, *jus cogens* norms are recognized as hierarchically superior to the

20 ICC, *Joining the International Criminal Code: Why does it matter?*, available at: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/Publications/Joining-Rome-Statute-Matters.pdf> (accessed: 20 June, 2023).

21 Created for a particular purpose.

22 The Convention on the Non-Applicability of Statutory Limitations to War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity; European Convention on the Non-Applicability of Statutory Limitation to Crimes against Humanity and War Crimes.

23 Moreover, since the *jus cogens* norms constantly continue to develop, the prohibition of the destruction of the natural environment is among possible further candidates for peremptory norms of international law.

24 Mustafayeva, “Armenia’s obligations under international Law in the area of mine action”, *op.cit.*

25 United Nations Treaty Series, “Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties”, May 23, 1969, available at: [https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/1\\_1\\_1969.pdf](https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/1_1_1969.pdf) (accessed: March 8, 2023).

ordinary norms of international law.<sup>26</sup>

Regarding war crimes, it should also be noted that these crimes had been recognized by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in its verdict on *Jurisdictional Immunities of the State (Germany v Italy: Greece Intervening)*<sup>27</sup> alongside crimes against humanity as breaches of *jus cogens* norms that are binding upon states regardless of any treaty.

At the same time, international criminal responsibility that holds perpetrators individually accountable for international crimes, *inter alia* war crimes, does not exclude international responsibility of Armenia as a state under international law for a breach of its international obligations.

Thus, Article 31 of the Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (*ARSIWA*), adopted by the International Law Commission, provides the obligation of a wrongdoing state to make full reparation for the injury caused by the internationally wrongful act.<sup>28</sup> Notably, this long-standing principle of international law has been reestablished by the Permanent Court of International Justice in the case *Factory at Chorzów*, as follows: “Reparation must, as far as possible, wipe all consequences of the illegal act and re-establish the situation which would, in all probability, have existed if the act had not been committed”.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, among the recognized forms of reparation, claims for compensation are the most common in international practice.<sup>30</sup> Hence, as the ICJ mentioned in the *Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros case*, it is “a well-established rule of international law that an injured state is entitled to obtain compensation from the state which has committed an internationally wrongful act for the damage caused by it”.<sup>31</sup>

26 International Law Commission, “Second Report on *Jus Cogens*”, UN Doc A/CN.4/706, 2017, pp.12-14.

27 ICJ, *Jurisdictional Immunities of the State (Germany v Italy: Greece Intervening)*, 2012, available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/143> (accessed: March 10, 2023).

28 United Nations, “Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (*ARSIWA*)”, available at: [https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/draft\\_articles/9\\_6\\_2001.pdf](https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/draft_articles/9_6_2001.pdf) (accessed: March 25, 2023).

29 Permanent Court of International Justice, *Factory at Chorzów*, 1927, available at: <https://jursmundi.com/en/document/decision/en-factory-at-chorzow-merits-judgment-thursday-13th-september-1928> (accessed: March 27, 2023).

30 Hernandez, G., *International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 272.

31 ICJ, *Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Project (Hungary/Slovakia)*, 1997, available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/92/092-19970925-JUD-01-00-EN.pdf> (accessed: March 25, 2023).

*As a member of the Bern Convention, Armenia is responsible for violations of its provisions, in particular for environmental damage in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan.*

In addition to the responsibility of Armenia under IHL, it is also responsible for violations of its obligations as a state party under special legally binding international instruments, among which is the 1979 Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (the Bern Convention). The principal aims of the Convention are to conserve wild flora and fauna and their natural habitats, as well as to develop collaboration between state parties.<sup>32</sup>

Armenia has been a member state of the Bern Convention since 2003 and, by becoming a party to this international legally binding instrument, committed itself to the conservation and protection of wildlife and natural habitats. As a member of the Bern Convention, Armenia is responsible for violations of its provisions, in particular for environmental damage in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan.

Considering the fact that, in accordance with Article 18(2) of the Convention, any dispute between Contracting Parties concerning the interpretation or application of this treaty should be submitted to arbitration, on January 18, 2023 Azerbaijan commenced an inter-state arbitration against Armenia under the Convention, demanding the wrongdoing party “cease all ongoing violations of this treaty, and pay full reparation for its environmental destruction in the formerly occupied territories”.<sup>33</sup> In case of success, this case will be a turning point in a state’s international responsibility for severe environmental damage being decided by arbitral tribunal.<sup>34</sup>

Hence, intentional damage to the natural environment of Karabakh region could be prosecuted both as a grave breach of the “Geneva law”, i.e. war crimes, as well as through inter-state arbitration under a special international treaty like the Bern Convention as a violation of Armenia’s obligations under this instrument.

32 Council of Europe, “Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats”, September 19, 1979, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/1680078aff> (accessed: March 26, 2023).

33 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, “No:015/23, Press Release on arbitration filed by Azerbaijan against Armenia for widespread environmental destruction”, January 19, 2023, available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.az/en/news/no01523> (accessed: March 12, 2023).

34 Kaminski, A., “Azerbaijan sues Armenia for wartime environmental damage”, *The Guardian*, January 26, 2023, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/26/azerbaijan-sues-armenia-for-wartime-environmental-damage-bern-convention-biodiversity-aoe> (accessed: March 24, 2023).

Besides the above-mentioned mechanisms, it is worth specifically mentioning that new impetus towards Armenia's international responsibility could also be provided in case of criminalization of deliberate ecological destruction in the form of an independent international crime – ecocide.

### ***Criminalization of ecocide: Challenges and implication***

According to the European Law Institute, the concept of ecocide implies the “devastation and destruction of the environment to the detriment of life”, however, no single legal definition has yet been agreed at the international level within a legally binding treaty.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, in 2021 a panel of legal experts assembled by the Stop Ecocide International Foundation (Expert Panel) proposed the definition of the crime of ecocide as follows: “*unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts.*”<sup>36</sup> This definition was elaborated by the Expert Panel with the aim of making an amendment to the Rome Statute of the ICC in order to expand the jurisdiction of the Court to include the crime of ecocide.

Hence, in the context of the proposed definition, illegal action must pass two thresholds to qualify as ecocide. First, it must be committed “*with knowledge of a substantial likelihood of serious damage*”. Second, it should “*either be unlawful in domestic or international law or wanton, meaning that it must be committed with reckless disregard for damage which would be clearly excessive in relation to the social and economic benefits anticipated*”.<sup>37</sup>

In case of the adoption by the ICC member states of this proposal to amend the Rome Statute, ecocide would become the fifth international crime the tribunal prosecutes alongside war crimes, genocide, crimes

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35 European Law Institute, “Ecocide”, available at: <https://www.europeanlawinstitute.eu/projects-publications/completed-projects/ecocide/> (accessed: February 28, 2023).

36 Stop Ecocide Foundation, “Legal definition of ecocide”, available at: <https://www.stopecocide.earth/legal-definition> (accessed: March 9, 2023).

37 Hemptinne, J., “Ecocide: An Ambiguous Crime?”, *The European Journal of International Law*, August 29, 2022, available at: <https://www.ejiltalk.org/ecocide-an-ambiguous-crime/> (accessed: March 3, 2023).

against humanity, and the crime of aggression, and hence “*the first new international crime since the 1940s when Nazi leaders were prosecuted at the Nuremberg trials*”.<sup>38</sup>

Including ecocide as the fifth crime in the jurisdiction of the ICC under its constituent instrument – the Rome Statute – would mean that it will be prosecuted as an international crime by the international tribunal. Consequently, an individual who commits a crime shall be individually responsible and liable for punishment within the jurisdiction of the ICC in accordance with the Statute.

Moreover, the proposal of the Expert Panel to put ecocide before the ICC will make it possible to criminalize serious environmental damage induced intentionally or through negligence in periods of war, as well as in post-conflict situations and peacetime, and thereby take this environmentally destructive conduct beyond the narrow scope of war crimes.

Furthermore, criminalization of ecocide as an international crime within the Rome Statute would *ipso facto* mean that this crime would be enshrined in a legally binding source of international law, i.e. international treaty.<sup>39</sup> This could be an incentive for states to criminalize ecocide within their national legislation, i.e. criminal codes, and consequently prosecute the proposed crime in domestic courts.

### ***Conclusion***

It is argued in this article that, notwithstanding that ecocide has not yet been recognized as an international crime, it was criminalized as a war crime under the Rome Statute of the ICC. War crimes, in turn, were defined by the Statute as grave violations of the 1949 Geneva Conventions that, with their Additional Protocols, create international obligations for Armenia for, *inter alia*, widespread environmental destruction in Azerbaijan during the years of occupation, as well as for illicit exploitation of the natural resources of Azerbaijan even after the end of the war.

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38 The Guardian, *Legal experts worldwide draw up 'historic' definition of ecocide*, June 22, 2021, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jun/22/legal-experts-worldwide-draw-up-historic-definition-of-ecocide> (accessed: March 2, 2023).

39 Hemptinne, J., “Ecocide: An Ambiguous Crime?”, *The European Journal of International Law*, August 29, 2022, available at: <https://www.ejiltalk.org/ecocide-an-ambiguous-crime/> (accessed: March 3, 2023).

Moreover, these unlawful activities of Armenia aimed at intentional severe damage to the natural environment represent breaches of the hierarchically superior and non-derogable *jus cogens* norms of international law, as well as international customary rules in the area of the conduct of warfare that have been codified as war crimes in, *inter alia*, the Rome Statute of the ICC.

The violations of these norms entail individual criminal responsibility of the perpetrators for war crimes. At the same time, they do not exclude international responsibility of Armenia as a state under international law for a breach of its international obligations. In this regard, the inter-state arbitration initiated by Azerbaijan against Armenia for the violation of its obligations under the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats has been assessed as a turning point in the issue of international responsibility of the state for severe environmental damage that would be ruled on by an arbitral tribunal.

Furthermore, it is also suggested in this article that criminalization of ecocide alongside other international crimes will provide the impetus towards Armenia's responsibility under international law for significant damage to the environment of Karabakh region, with long-lasting effects on the ecosystem and human health occurring even after the end of the war. In fact, the adoption of a new crime of ecocide will take these illegal actions beyond the scope of war crimes and also cover the post-conflict period and peacetime.

Moreover, the author suggests that criminalization of environmental damage as the fifth international crime could serve as an incentive for states to criminalize ecocide within national legislation. Consequently, perpetrators of this crime would be prosecuted by both international criminal tribunals and domestic courts.



# Charting a Course between Independence and Semi-Colonialism: Armenia at a Crossroads

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Ali Askerov\*

The aggressive policies pursued by Armenia towards Azerbaijan amidst the fall of the Soviet Union resulted in the occupation of the latter's territories. However, despite the challenges faced by Armenia, a newly independent state transitioning from Soviet rule to an independent state, its use of force against Azerbaijan has proven to be a costly approach. Armenia's aggressive policies have brought about significant ramifications for the nation, particularly concerning the establishment of normal relations with Türkiye, a crucial neighbouring country, and the deepening of its dependence on Russia, primarily due to the military support received during the invasion of Azerbaijan's territories in the early 1990s. Although Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is seeking to develop a new policy aimed at reducing Armenia's dependence on Russia, this stance has not garnered unanimous support among Armenian political factions. Currently, Armenia stands at a crossroads between remaining a client country of Russia or taking radical steps towards achieving genuine independence.

**Key words:** Armenia, Russia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Karabakh region, independence, semi-colonialism, peace and security



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### *Introduction*

Since gaining its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia has become heavily reliant on Russia for national security, resulting in the deployment of Russian troops and consequent installation of Russian military bases on its territory. This reliance has allowed Russia to exert significant influence over Armenia's sovereignty, transforming the country into a semi-colonial state. Russian support emboldened Armenia in pursuing aggressive policies towards Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, resulting in the occupation of a significant amount of the latter's territory. However, Armenia's inability to meet its security needs independently has come at a cost, with its semi-independence under Pashinyan's government leading to the alienation of Russia's support and defeat by Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War in 2020. Armenia now faces a difficult decision, choosing between maintaining its semi-colonial status and pursuing true independence, each with its own set of challenges and consequences.

When Armenia gained independence in 1991, the country was already embroiled in the [first] Karabakh war. During the period of chaos and uncertainty during the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia seized the opportunity to invade additional territory of Azerbaijan. That made external military support necessary to sustain the occupation. Russia was eager to maintain a presence in the region and saw an alliance with Armenia as a valuable opportunity. The alliance between Russia and Armenia was born out of mutual need, but with Russia as the dominant party. Russia provided significant aid to Armenia to address its various needs, while also establishing a strong presence in the country, thereby increasing its dependence on Russia.<sup>1</sup>

With the support of the Russian military, Armenian illegal armed militias were restructured into a formalized armed force. Russia provided weapons and ammunition to the Armenian troops, aiding in their transformation into a fully-fledged army.<sup>2</sup> By providing support to Armenia's army, Russia, albeit indirectly, played a role in the invasion of Azerbaijan's territories. However, it is important to acknowledge that the involvement of the Russian 336th motorized regiment in the

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1 Tchantouridze, L. "The three colors of war: Russian, Turkish, and Iranian military threat to the South Caucasus", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*. Vol. 2 (1) Winter, 2008, pp. 2-10.

2 Ibid.

Khojaly genocide cannot be solely attributed to Armenia's military activities. The joint operations of Armenian and Russian troops were responsible for the tragic events that took place during the Khojaly genocide and resulted in the loss of lives of innocent Azerbaijanis<sup>3</sup> after Russia helped Armenia to occupy about 20% of Azerbaijan's territories. The Kremlin then played a significant role in bolstering Yerevan's capacity to enhance its position in the [now formerly] occupied territories through the construction of fortifications and the establishment of effective control over those territories.<sup>4</sup>

*The provision of political and military assistance by Russia to Armenia came at a significant cost, as Yerevan had to acquiesce to the deployment of Russian troops within its borders, thus eroding its sovereignty.*

In May 1994, Russia brokered a ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, paving the way for peace negotiations. Russia was a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, alongside France and the U.S., but remained positively biased towards Armenia (1991–2018, at least until Nikol Pashinyan came to power), its military and strategic ally in the South Caucasus region. This was one of the primary reasons why negotiations spanning over 26 years failed to produce any positive outcomes, despite the UN Security Council passing four resolutions supporting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and demanding the withdrawal of Armenia's troops from the occupied territories.<sup>5</sup>

The provision of political and military assistance by Russia to Armenia came at a significant cost, as Yerevan had to acquiesce to the deployment of Russian troops within its borders, thus eroding its sovereignty. In 1992, Armenia joined the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), further exacerbating its reliance on Russia for security. As a result, Armenia was deprived of the opportunity to independently formulate its foreign policy, as the Kremlin laid down the parameters for its external relations. Although Armenia could have pursued diplomatic

3 See, for example: I. Isayev and S. Abilov. "The Consequences of the Nagorno–Karabakh War for Azerbaijan and the Undeniable Reality of Khojaly Massacre: A View from Azerbaijan" in *Polish Political Science Yearbook* (December 2016), vol. 45, pp. 291–303. Available at: <http://czasopisma.marszalek.com.pl/images/pliki/ppsy/45/ppsy2016022.pdf> (Accessed: April 14, 2023).

4 A. Askerov. "The Nagorno Karabakh Conflict: The Beginning of the Soviet End", in A. Askerov, S. Brooks, & L. Tchantouridze (eds.) *Post Soviet Conflicts*, (Lexington, 2020), pp. 55-82.

5 Askerov, A. and Matyok, T. "The Upper Karabakh predicament from the UN resolutions to the mediated negotiations: Resolution or hibernation?", *European Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 1, no. 2, 2015: 154-163.

engagements with other nations, its foreign policy options were largely circumscribed by the strategic dictates of the Kremlin.

Presently, Russia seems to have an interest in prolonging the current status quo in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan to maintain its influence over both Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, Azerbaijan has taken independent and assertive measures vis-à-vis Russia's influence in that region, with the possibility of eliminating it altogether. Armenia, on the other hand, cannot adopt a similar approach due to its significant reliance on Russia. Nonetheless, given Russia's current vulnerabilities, Armenia may seize the opportunity provided by favourable conditions to break free from its dependence on Russia.

### ***Russia's partiality and military alliance with Armenia***

Russia has maintained military bases in Armenia for over three decades, and the two countries have a longstanding military alliance. According to an agreement signed in 1995, Russia maintains a military base in the city of Gyumri (Armenia), which is located near the border with Türkiye. The military base is staffed by several thousand Russian troops and houses a variety of military equipment, including tanks, armoured vehicles, and aircraft.<sup>6</sup> In 2010, Armenia and Russia signed another agreement that extended the lease on the Gyumri base until 2044.<sup>7</sup> The agreement also stipulated that the base would be upgraded with new weapons systems and other equipment. Yet the Russian military presence in Armenia has been a source of controversy in recent years.<sup>8</sup> Russia sought to leverage the situation to secure as many guarantees as possible for its military and political presence in the South Caucasus, seeking to derive benefits from the circumstances.<sup>9</sup> In 2020, there were

6 Rogozinska, A. and Olech, A. K., "The Russian Federation's military bases abroad", Report, *Institute of New Europe*, Available at: <https://ine.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/THE-RUSSIAN-FEDERATIONS-MILITARY-BASES-ABROAD-1.pdf> (Accessed: July 9, 2023).

7 Dyomkin, D., "Russia extends military presence in Armenia", *Reuters*, August 20, 2010, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/armenia-russia-idUSLDE67J0DX20100820> (Accessed: May 10, 2023).

8 Huseynov, V. "Yerevan and Karabakh Separatists Divided Over Russia's Regional Security Role", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 20 Issue: 23, February 8, 2023, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/yerevan-and-karabakh-separatists-divided-over-russias-regional-security-role/> (Accessed: February 8, 2023)

9 Grigoryan, M., "Russia Signs Base Lease Extension with Armenia", *Eurasianet*, August

protests in Gyumri following the arrest of a Russian soldier on charges of murder. The incident brought to the forefront the ongoing tensions between the local Armenians and the Russian military in the city. These tensions have been a recurring issue, periodically resurfacing over time.<sup>10</sup>

In a recent statement, Pashinyan expressed concern about the threat to Armenia's security posed by the presence of the Russian military, a situation that is exploited by Azerbaijan. Pashinyan also acknowledged that Azerbaijan has been alerting the West to potential military aggression by Armenia and Russia.<sup>11</sup> Pashinyan has become increasingly critical of the CSTO and has publicly voiced his criticisms of the Russian military presence in Armenia. He argues that the presence of Russian troops poses more of a threat than it provides protection to the country; thus Armenia's increased communication with European nations and the United States, while maintaining formal ties with Russia, is not a coincidence. In early 2023, Armenia declined to host a CSTO exercise, which is a notable move that sends a strong message to Russia.<sup>12</sup> This decision represents a significant shift towards greater autonomy in Armenia's foreign policy and is indicative of the country's willingness to assert its presence and agency on the international stage.

As a member of the CSTO, a military alliance of six former Soviet republics established in 1992, Armenia is committed to collective defence and mutual security cooperation with the other member states: Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The organization's main goal is to provide a regional security framework to counter external military threats and address transnational security challenges such as terrorism and organized crime. Armenia's membership in the CSTO has been seen as a key component of its national security strategy, given its

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20, 2010, Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/russia-signs-base-lease-extension-with-armenia> (Accessed July 9, 2023).

10 Report News Agency, *100 detained in anti-Russia rally in Gyumri, Armenia*, January 9, 2023. Available: <https://report.az/en/region/anti-russian-rally-held-near-military-base-in-gyumri-armenia/> (Accessed: July 9, 2023).

11 Avedian, L. "Pashinyan says Russian military presence "threatens Armenia's security", *The Armenian Weekly*, January 11, 2023, Available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/01/11/pashinyan-says-russian-military-presence-threatens-armenias-security/> (Accessed: April 20, 2023).

12 Kucera, J. "Armenia refuses to host CSTO exercises", *Eurasianet*, January 10, 2023, Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-refuses-to-host-csto-exercises> (Accessed: July 9, 2023).

tense relations with neighbouring Azerbaijan and Türkiye. The Second Karabakh War saw Prime Minister Pashinyan calling on the CSTO to intervene in the military operations against Azerbaijan. However, the CSTO declined to do so, citing the fact that the war was taking place on the soil of Azerbaijan, not Armenia.<sup>13</sup>

However, during the Second Karabakh War, Armenia received military and diplomatic assistance from Russia. This support included the provision of weapons and ammunition, which Russia has been supplying to Armenia for a long time. Throughout the conflict, Russia continued to provide such aid, including the shipment of consignments of Iskander short-range ballistic missiles.<sup>14</sup> There is no clear or confirmed information on how many of these missiles were fired by Armenia during the Second Karabakh War. Initially, Armenia denied their use, but Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan later admitted that Iskander missiles had been deployed but did not function as expected.<sup>15</sup> The Russian Defence Ministry denied detecting the use of Iskander missiles by Armenia during the war. Nevertheless, evidence from Azerbaijan contradicts this statement, revealing that Armenia did,

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13 Weitz, R. “The Collective Security Treaty Organization before and after the Ukraine War: Some Implications for the South Caucasus.” *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*. Vol. 3, Issue 1. Summer 2022, pp. 55-70, Available at: <https://cspjournal.az/post/the-collective-security-treaty-organization-before-and-after-the-ukraine-war-some-implications-for-the-south-caucasus-477> (Accessed: July 9, 2023).

14 Russia has emphasized that the Iskander missile systems sold to Armenia are different from the Iskander-M systems deployed to Russia’s 102nd Military Base in Gyumri since 2013, which are nuclear-capable. If Russia were to sell or transfer a nuclear-capable weapon system to Armenia, such as the Iskander-M, it would violate international arms agreements such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NNPT). Although videos appear to show two Iskander missiles being launched from Armenia, the flight paths depicted in the videos suggest a normal trajectory arc, which is typical of the -E model Iskander, rather than using evasive flight maneuvers that would indicate an -M model Iskander. Repass, M. S. and Wolkov, N. “Contrary to Previous Claims, Evidence Shows Iskander Missiles in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War”, *Caspian Policy Center*, April 15, 2021, Available at: <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/contrary-to-previous-claims-evidence-shows-iskander-missiles-in-the-second-nagorno-karabakh-war> (Accessed: July 9, 2023)

15 Kucera, J. “Visitors to Karabakh to Require Russian Permission,” *Eurasianet*, February 10, 2021, Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/visitors-to-karabakh-to-require-russian-permission> (Accessed July 9, 2023); Michael S. Repass and Nicole Wolkov, “Contrary to Previous Claims, Evidence Shows Iskander Missiles in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War”, *Caspian Policy Center*, April 15, 2021, Available at: <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/contrary-to-previous-claims-evidence-shows-iskander-missiles-in-the-second-nagorno-karabakh-war> (Accessed: July 9, 2023)

in fact, use these missiles.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most pivotal forms of support rendered by Russia to Armenia was its intervention to bring an end to the fighting on November 9, 2020, preventing Azerbaijan from completely destroying all the forces of Armenia in the war zone. Had Russia not intervened, Azerbaijan's successful military offensive would likely have resulted in the complete demilitarization of the Karabakh region. The primary motivation behind Russia's involvement was to establish dominance and to leave some issues unresolved, which would create leverage that both Azerbaijan and Armenia would depend on. Russia's intervention prevented Armenia from losing all of its armed forces stationed in the Karabakh region, which is currently under the temporary control of Russian peacekeeping forces. Since the signing of the Trilateral Statement, Russia has sought to consolidate its hegemonic position in the region, the initial phase of which was the deployment of the country's peacekeepers.

### *Attempts to break free from Russia's influence*

Armenia has experienced several attempts to break free from Russia's domination. The most notable one occurred on October 27, 1999, when a shooting took place in the parliament of Armenia, resulting in the deaths of then Prime Minister Vazgen Sargsyan and the speaker of the parliament, Karen Demirchyan, who were key figures in the country's political leadership. Their reform-minded coalition had won a majority in the parliamentary elections held in May 1999, effectively devaluing the role of the previous, pro-Russian President Robert Kocharyan in the political scene. The shooting claimed the lives of eight prominent political figures and led to significant changes in Armenia's political landscape.<sup>17</sup>

A survey conducted by the Center for Sociological Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia immediately after the shooting (30–31 October) revealed that 56.9% of respondents

16 Mammadli, N., "Armenia's Use of Iskander Missiles Against Azerbaijan Confirmed with New Evidences", *a*, April 7, 2021, Available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/armenias-use-of-iskander-missiles-against-azerbaijan-confirmed-with-new-evidences-2021-4-7-0/> (Accessed: May 23, 2023)

17 Demourian, A. "Gunmen Take Over Armenian Parliament; Premier Killed", *Washington Post*, October 7, 1999, Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/daily/oct99/armenia27.htm> (Accessed: April 12, 2023).

considered the events of October 27 a crime against the country’s statehood and authorities.<sup>18</sup> There were allegations of Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan’s involvement in the shooting.<sup>19</sup> These two figures went to great lengths to attain and maintain power, often at the expense of Armenia’s sovereignty. Their actions resulted in Armenia becoming highly dependent on the resolution of the [former] conflict with Azerbaijan, which caused significant harm to the country. Armenia required assistance from Russia to maintain its occupation of Azerbaijan’s territories, and Russia took advantage of the situation to strengthen its presence in and influence over Armenia.

Nikol Pashinyan’s rise to power in 2018 marked another significant moment in Armenia’s efforts to break free from Russian dominance.

*Seemingly, as a pro-Western prime minister, Pashinyan acknowledged the uncertain future of Armenia’s relationship with Russia, even though Armenia currently lacks the ability to completely disengage from Russia’s sphere of influence.*

Seemingly, as a pro-Western prime minister, Pashinyan acknowledged the uncertain future of Armenia’s relationship with Russia, even though Armenia currently lacks the ability to completely disengage from Russia’s sphere of influence.<sup>20</sup> However, emancipating Armenia from Russia’s influence is a challenging task, as the country is heavily reliant on Russia, particularly in security matters. Russia acts as a guard for Armenia, and its support was crucial

for Armenia to maintain control over the occupied territories of Azerbaijan; therefore, removing Russia’s troops from Armenia would pose a significant challenge for the country. It was clear that replacing Russia with the West would not be a seamless process, and Pashinyan faced pressure from three different directions: Russia, the pro-Russian opposition, and the Armenian diaspora. The obstacles were immense, and freeing Armenia from Russian influence would require careful manoeuvring and strategic planning.

Nikol Pashinyan aligned himself with different countries based on Armenia’s interests and adapted his stance as circumstances required. He rose to power through street protests, surrounded himself with

18 Asbarez, *Public Says Oct. 27 Events Is a Crime Against Statehood*, November 3, 1999, Available at: <https://asbarez.com/public-says-oct-27-events-is-a-crime-against-statehood/> (Accessed: April 12, 2023).

19 C. Zurcher. *The post-Soviet wars: rebellion, ethnic conflict, and nationhood in the Caucasus*. (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

20 Batashvili, D. “Nikol Pashinyan’s Russian problem”, *Rondeli Foundation*, Available at: <https://gfsis.org.ge/publications/view/2684> (Accessed: April 14, 2023).

individuals from the liberal NGO community, and adopted a flexible approach accommodating both Western and Russian interests.<sup>21</sup> However, his pro-Western stance faced opposition from the Kremlin, which supported his political rivals loyal to Russia. Pashinyan's anti-corruption efforts and weakening of influential clans further challenged Russian influence in Armenia, potentially leading to opposition from Moscow during his tenure.<sup>22</sup> However, when these efforts failed due to Pashinyan's popular support, the Kremlin resorted to using the 'Karabakh' card as leverage by supporting an individual of their own who could potentially become a significant rival to Pashinyan.<sup>23</sup>

Prior to that, fully cognizant of Armenia's long-established military dependence on Russia, the Kremlin was determined not to relinquish its influence over the country. The primary objective was either to alter the political leadership or dissuade Pashinyan from pursuing his pro-Western policies. To achieve this, Russia deliberately sought to instigate a minor conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which eventually unfolded in July 2020. Initially, Azerbaijan hesitated to engage in warfare with Armenia, as Prime Minister Pashinyan had requested time to consolidate his power and make conciliatory gestures towards Azerbaijan. However, Armenian forces deliberately provoked Azerbaijan, compelling it to retaliate. It is also plausible that elements within Armenia's military, sympathetic to Russia and opposed to Pashinyan, played a role in instigating Azerbaijan's actions. Russia's ultimate aim was to undermine Pashinyan's authority and coerce him into reversing his pro-Western policies.<sup>24</sup>

*Prior to that, fully cognizant of Armenia's long-established military dependence on Russia, the Kremlin was determined not to relinquish its influence over the country.*

The brief July 2020 clashes marked the resumption of armed conflict, which erupted again on September 27, 2020. Azerbaijan's counteroffensive to Armenia's usual military provocations escalated

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21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 International Foundation for Better Governance, "Is Moscow scheming for Ruben Vardanyan to be Armenia's president?", *Eureporter*, January 11, 2023, Available at: <https://www.eureporter.co/world/armenia/2023/01/11/is-moscow-scheming-for-ruben-wardanyan-to-be-president-of-armenia/> (Accessed: May 14, 2023).

24 A. Askerov and G. Ibadoghlu, "The Causes and Consequences of the Second Karabakh War: September 27, 2020–November 10, 2020." In H. Yavuz and M. Gunter (eds.) *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*. (Routledge, 2022). pp. 245-271.



into full-scale war, dubbed the Second Karabakh War, which resulted in Armenia's defeat after 44 days of fighting. Despite this defeat, Pashinyan retained power with popular support, which leads to some important conclusions. First, Pashinyan remains the most popular political leader in Armenia despite the war's grave outcome for the country. Second, Armenian society is weary of the conflict with Azerbaijan and seeks a resolution to it. Finally, Armenian society is increasingly aware of the country's dependence on Russia and desires to break free from it. Despite the defeat, Pashinyan was re-elected as prime minister, reflecting the public's continued support for him.

Pashinyan encountered substantial pressure from the opposition, particularly from the pro-Russian faction led by former presidents Serzh Sargsyan and Robert Kocharyan. This acrimonious conflict between the incumbent and opposition forces persisted and failed to de-escalate.<sup>25</sup> After defeat in the 44-Day War, Pashinyan faced a severe backlash from opponents and protesters who demanded his resignation, citing his alleged mishandling of the war with Azerbaijan. Despite the mounting pressure to step down, Pashinyan refused to do so, stating that he had a responsibility to stabilize Armenia and safeguard its national security.<sup>26</sup> Pashinyan's ability to withstand opposition pressure was largely due to the significant support he received from the electorate.

Nikol Pashinyan's demonstrated willingness to engage in compromise has faced significant opposition from the Armenian Diaspora, the Parliament of Armenia, and Armenian separatist leaders in the Karabakh region, thereby impeding the signing of any peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>27</sup> The parliamentary opposition of Armenia

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25 Turan, "Situation in Armenia worsens: Pashinyan threatens Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan with arrest", September 12, 2018, Available at: [https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2018/9/free/politics\\_news/en/74975.htm](https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2018/9/free/politics_news/en/74975.htm) (Accessed: May 1, 2023); Report News Agency, *Nikol Pashinyan: "Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan are political corpses"*, September 15, 2018, Available at: <https://report.az/en/region/nikol-pashinyan-robert-kocharyan-and-serzh-sargsyan-are-political-corpses/> (Accessed: May 1, 2023); Report News Agency, *Kocharyan's election tactic – illegal money and weapons in use – Commentary*, June 14, 2021, Available at: <https://report.az/en/analytics/kocharyan-s-election-tactic-illegal-money-and-weapons-in-use-commentary/> (Accessed: May 1, 2023).

26 Reuters, *Armenian PM, under pressure to quit after Karabakh defeat, unveils action plan*, November 18, 2020, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-politics-idCAKBN27Y0WF> (Accessed: May 1, 2023).

27 Avraham, R. "Is Armenian public opinion an impediment for peace?", *Foreign Policy Association*, June 20, 2023, Available at: <https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2023/06/20/is-armenian-public-opinion-an-impediment-for-peace/> (Accessed: July 11, 2023).

protested in the capital and regions, demanding Pashinyan's resignation. The Prime Minister's statement about lowering the bar on the issue of 'Karabakh' sparked the opposition's street struggle, as they interpreted it as accepting the Karabakh region's status within Azerbaijan and the subsequent expulsion of local Armenians.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Russia's new strategy***

Following its unsuccessful attempt to remove Pashinyan from power during the 44-Day War, Russia adopted a new strategy and stepped in to terminate the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan on November 9, 2020. This move allowed Russia to play a key role in the potential peace process, becoming a party to the tripartite statement with Azerbaijan and Armenia that prevented the total destruction of the Armenian forces in the war zone. Under the 10 November 2020 statement, Russian peacekeeping troops were deployed to Azerbaijan's Karabakh region, thereby providing Russia additional opportunity to strengthen its influence in the South Caucasus. As a result, Armenia has become more dependent on Russia, while Azerbaijan could be vulnerable to potential provocations from Russia.

With the termination of the active military operations, one of Russia's objectives was to gain control over all communication lines, including the Lachin and Zangezur roads,<sup>29</sup> effectively establishing itself as the

*With the termination of the active military operations, one of Russia's objectives was to gain control over all communication lines, including the Lachin and Zangezur roads, effectively establishing itself as the dominant power in the region.*

dominant power in the region. The Kremlin sought to regulate the flow of goods and services through these critical routes, further solidifying its role in the peace process and strengthening its position as a dominant power in the region. However, Russia's control of these crucial points goes against the interests of both countries in the region. Neither of

<sup>28</sup> JAMnews, *Protests in Armenia continue – what will happen next?*, May 5, 2022, Available at: <https://jam-news.net/protests-in-armenia-continue-what-will-happen-next/> (Accessed: July 11, 2023).

<sup>29</sup> The Zangezur Road or Corridor runs through Azerbaijan and Armenia territories reaching Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan's autonomous republic, which neighbors Türkiye. A major part of Zangezur was given to Armenia by the Bolsheviks following establishment of the Soviet rule in the region. See, for example: B.A. Budagov, G.A. Geybullayev, "Explanatory dictionary of toponyms of Azerbaijani in Armenia", (Baku: Oghuz eli, 1998). (translation from Azerbaijani)

the two states fully trusts Russia, as it manipulates the situation in the region to advance its own interests. In short, the deployment of troops to the region allowed Russia to double its leverage, further complicating the peace process in the region.

### *Yerevan's concerns over Russia's influence in Armenia*

Given the historical circumstances, Russia's intervention on November 9, 2020 played a crucial role in ending the war and prevented Armenia from facing even more unfavourable outcomes from the conflict. Through its involvement in stopping the war, Russia not only ensured the survival of illegal forces of Armenia still stationed in the Karabakh region, but also inadvertently contributed to the rationale for Pashinyan's continued hold on power, despite the Kremlin's primary goal of removing him from office. While Armenia experienced a significant defeat in the war, Russia's assistance prevented the country from facing a complete military failure. Over time, Pashinyan has strengthened his political position through electoral victories, but he has also expressed apprehension about Russia's influence on Armenia's security.<sup>30</sup> He aims to utilize Russia's support to benefit Armenia while simultaneously rejecting any Russian agenda that goes against Armenia's interests. The realm of politics enables such manoeuvring, and it is yet to be determined how Armenia's association with Russia will transform in the long run.

In the aftermath of the war, Azerbaijan asserted its victory and successfully regained control of its previously occupied territories. Nevertheless, it continued to face challenges in fully restoring its authority throughout the entire region. This outcome bestowed upon Russia a new (albeit temporary) peacekeeping status in the area and led to it overshadowing the OSCE Minsk Group as the primary mediator. Consequently, the region found itself grappling with a complex and demanding situation. Initially, Russia assumed a quasi-governmental role in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. However, over time, it

30 BBC News, *Armenia election: PM Nikol Pashinyan wins post-war poll*, June 21, 2021, Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57549208> (Accessed: April 29, 2023); Avedian, L. "Pashinyan says Russian military presence "threatens Armenia's security"." *The Armenian Weekly*. January 11, 2023. Available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/01/11/pashinyan-says-russian-military-presence-threatens-armenias-security/> (Accessed: April 29, 2023).

gradually came to recognize Azerbaijan as the legitimate owner of the region, particularly in light of recent developments on the Ukrainian front line.<sup>31</sup>

After the signing of the nine-point Trilateral Statement on November 10, 2020, Azerbaijan pursued assertive policies to enforce its provisions. These measures effectively persuaded Pashinyan to relinquish control of the Karabakh region to Azerbaijan and redirect his efforts toward achieving genuine independence for Armenia, free from Russian influence. However, Pashinyan's new policies clashed with Russia's interests, sparking a political tension between the two nations. In an attempt to regain control, the Kremlin installed its own candidate, Ruben Vardanyan, in the city of Khankendi in the Karabakh region, aiming to challenge Pashinyan's authority in Armenia. However, Azerbaijan's resolute policies shattered Russia's calculations and effectively thwarted its covert intentions, unequivocally demonstrating that Baku held sole authority to exercise complete jurisdiction over Karabakh region. The failure of Ruben Vardanyan, a Russian billionaire appointed by the Kremlin to undermine Pashinyan's power in Armenia, not only represented his personal defeat but also signified the failure of Kremlin policies in the region. In addition, Pashinyan is striving to dissociate Armenia's internal political affairs from the matter of 'Karabakh', despite the Armenian opposition maintaining a strong interconnection with it.

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### ***Concerns over Russia's policies in the Karabakh region***

Russia's attempt to install Ruben Vardanyan, an Armenian-Russian businessman, as the de facto 'leader' of the separatist regime in the Karabakh region, with the aim of challenging Pashinyan's authority in Armenia, ultimately proved unsuccessful. Vardanyan failed to garner the anticipated support in either Armenia or the Karabakh region and, under pressure from Baku, he was subsequently removed from his 'position' as the so-called 'state-minister' of the separatist regime. Just three months into his appointment as a banking magnate, Vardanyan clashed with Armenia's prime minister regarding the role of Russian

31 K. Krivosheev. "Russian Peacekeepers find themselves sidelined in Nagorno Karabakh", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 15, 2022, Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88651> (Accessed: April 29, 2023).

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peacekeepers in the region. However, the primary source of disagreement between Pashinyan and Vardanyan arose from Russia's apparent intention to orchestrate Vardanyan's ascent to power in Armenia.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, Vardanyan faced criticism from Azerbaijan. Official Baku's criticism of Vardanyan implied a broader criticism of Russia's policies. Azerbaijan strongly opposed Russia's green light for the misuse of the Lachin corridor for military

purposes by Armenia and Armenians of the Karabakh region. This led to the demonstrations of the eco-activists against illegal activities taking place via this road in the Karabakh region.<sup>33</sup> When, in December 2022, a group of Azerbaijani environmental activists began blocking the Shusha–Khankendi part of the Lachin road, the main transportation route connecting Armenia to the local Armenian population living in the Karabakh region, Pashinyan criticized Russia for not doing enough to resolve the situation. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has denied any accusations of impeding the transportation of humanitarian supplies in the area. Yerevan has accused the protesters of being government-backed agitators, while Baku has refuted claims of blockading the road, stating that certain convoys and humanitarian vehicles are permitted to pass through.<sup>34</sup>

Ostensibly, the conflict in Ukraine has weakened Russia's position in the region, leading to Azerbaijan's adoption of more independent strategies instead of passive acquiescence to Russia's policies. The environmental activists have actively challenged Russia's influence in the Karabakh region. The Kremlin seeks to maintain control over the region at all costs and tries to perpetuate its presence by controlling the Lachin corridor. This clashes with Azerbaijan's interests as it strives to

32 International Foundation for Better Governance, "Is Moscow scheming for Ruben Vardanyan to be Armenia's president?", *Eureporter*, January 11, 2023, Available at: <https://www.eureporter.co/world/armenia/2023/01/11/is-moscow-scheming-for-ruben-wardanyan-to-be-president-of-armenia/> (Accessed: April 29, 2023).

33 Trend, *Peaceful protest of Azerbaijani eco-activists continues on Lachin-Khankendi road*, April 19, 2023, Available at: <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3737391.html> (Accessed: May 19, 2023)

34 Marrow, A. "Armenia, Azerbaijan Highlight Nagorno-Karabakh Schism in Munich Standoff.", *Reuters*, February 18, 2023, Available: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/leaders-armenia-azerbaijan-set-first-meeting-since-october-2023-02-18/> (Accessed: July 9, 2023).

reestablish its jurisdiction over the territories internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, including the Lachin road. Through assertive policies, Azerbaijan was able to establish a checkpoint on the Armenia–Azerbaijan border in the direction of the entrance to the Lachin road.<sup>35</sup> The establishment of a border checkpoint by Azerbaijan has effectively prevented illegal trafficking of weapons, landmines, and ammunition into the Karabakh region via the Lachin road.

Under the Trilateral Statement, Russia seeks to establish control over the communication lines passing through Zangezur that would connect Azerbaijan’s main territory to its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. However, Yerevan opposes this move, as it seeks to avoid further dependence on Russia. Despite being in a position of strength, Russia has encountered resistance from both Armenia and Azerbaijan in recent months. The war in Ukraine has weakened Russia’s influence in the region, which is evident in the policies of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The recent shift in Armenia’s foreign policy, characterized by its marked rejection of the Kremlin, constitutes a significant departure from its longstanding dependence on Russia during the post-Soviet era.<sup>36</sup>

Azerbaijan’s constructive policies on the Karabakh region have the potential to bolster Pashinyan’s anti-Russian stance. A significant shift in the peace process occurred when, during the Munich Security Conference in February 2023, Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev expressed his willingness to engage in dialogue with Armenian residents living in the Karabakh region. This would facilitate Pashinyan’s policies to strip Armenia of both the ‘Karabakh’ issue and the threats coming therefrom, including that of Ruben Vardanyan. President Aliyev made it clear that engaging in dialogue with ethnic Armenians of the Karabakh region would only be feasible under the condition that Vardanyan departs from the enclave.<sup>37</sup> The fact that both Baku and Yerevan regarded Vardanyan

35 EUI, *Azerbaijan sets up checkpoints on the Lachin corridor*, April 27, 2023, Available at: <https://www.eiu.com/n/azerbaijan-sets-up-checkpoints-on-the-lachin-corridor/> (Accessed: May 10, 2023).

36 Khalidbayli, E. “Pashinyan made a terrible mistake: The Kremlin will take the West’s revenge from Yerevan” (translation from Azerbaijani), *Yeni Musavat*, June 3, 2023, Available at: [https://musavat.com/news/pasinyan-qorxunc-sehve-yol-verdi-kreml-qerbin-intiqamini-da-irevandan-alacaq\\_982155.html](https://musavat.com/news/pasinyan-qorxunc-sehve-yol-verdi-kreml-qerbin-intiqamini-da-irevandan-alacaq_982155.html) (Accessed: June 5, 2023).

37 Light, F. “Top Nagorno-Karabakh official sacked as blockade approaches fourth month”, *Reuters*, February, 23, 2023, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/top-nagorno-karabakh-official-sacked-blockade-approaches-fourth-month-2023-02-23/> (Accessed May 23, 2023)

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as Russia's representative who was unwelcome in the region suggests that the leaders of both countries are opposed to Russia's attempt to solidify its position in the region through political means.

Over time, Russia has emerged as the primary source of problems in the region. Azerbaijani media has repeatedly reported that Russian peacekeepers deployed in the Azerbaijan's Karabakh region have been supplying weapons to Armenian forces stationed therein via the Lachin road.<sup>38</sup> Reportedly, Russian peacekeepers have covertly provided support to Armenians living in the Karabakh region by facilitating the transport of weapons and ammunition and turning a blind eye to their actions.<sup>39</sup> However, the main issue remains that some military detachments of Armenia's Army are still illegally present in the Karabakh region, despite the Trilateral Statement of November 10, 2020 stipulating the concurrent deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces and the withdrawal of Armenian troops from the conflict area (Article 4).<sup>40</sup> This situation exposes the flaws in the peace process and Russia's peacekeeping mission, exacerbating the situation in the region by masking the problems and creating the potential for a renewed armed conflict if Armenian troops continue to receive military support.

### ***Balancing Russia's influence: Pashinyan's latest efforts***

Yerevan has been active in seeking new ways to decrease its dependence on Russia. One is to strengthen its ties with Iran. Iran is also interested in strengthening its economic ties with Armenia. In 2022, the two

38 Karimli, I. "Media: Russian Peacekeepers Supply Weapons to Armenian Separatists in Azerbaijan's Karabakh Region", *Caspian News*, November 6, 2022, Available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/media-russian-peacekeepers-supply-weapons-to-armenian-separatists-in-azerbaijans-karabakh-region-2022-11-6-0/> (Accessed: April 29, 2023).

39 Demokrat, *Russians are arming Armenians in Karabakh* (translation from Azerbaijani), June 10, 2022, Available at: <https://demokrat.az/az/news/113498/qarabagda-ermenilerruslar-silahlandirir> (Accessed: May 23, 2023); Sia.az, *Russian peacekeepers secretly support Armenians* (translation from Azerbaijani), December 5, 2022, Available at: <https://sia.az/az/news/politics/1005855.html> (Accessed: April 29, 2023).

40 President.az, *Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation*, November 10, 2020, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/45923> (Accessed: April 29, 2023).

countries continued to maintain friendly relations and to collaborate in various fields such as energy, transportation, and culture. Iran and Armenia have reached an agreement to significantly increase their gas trade. While Armenia currently relies heavily on Russia for its natural gas supply, the strained relations with Moscow have prompted Yerevan to explore alternative options, and leveraging its ties with Iran has become a strategic consideration. By expanding its gas trade with Iran, Armenia aims to diversify its energy sources and reduce its dependency on Russia, thus ensuring greater energy security.<sup>41</sup>

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In November 2022, Pashinyan's visit to Iran was another significant development. During the visit, he met with Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi and other officials to discuss ways to enhance bilateral ties. They deliberated on issues such as increasing trade and deepening cooperation in the fields of infrastructure, energy, agriculture, and construction, among others.<sup>42</sup> The two countries signed multiple agreements and memorandums of understanding (MoU) throughout the year, including an agreement on expanding and developing the International North–South Transit Corridor in Iranian territory, from the Nordoz border to Varzeqan and Tabriz, and a MoU on cooperation in the medical tourism sector.<sup>43</sup>

Iran's actions indicate its apprehension about a more powerful Azerbaijan on its northern border. Tehran's strategy was to bolster Armenia and to benefit from the protracted issues regarding Azerbaijan's formerly occupied territories keeping Azerbaijan preoccupied with its own issues. In recent years, Iran's policies towards Azerbaijan have become increasingly aggressive. For instance, in 2020, Iran accused Azerbaijan of ostensibly permitting Israeli intelligence agents to operate on its territory and threatened to retaliate. In response to Iran's military exercises on the Azerbaijani border, Azerbaijan and Türkiye conducted

41 Mejlumyan, A. "Iran and Armenia agree to double gas trade", *Eurasianet*, November 2, 2022. Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/iran-and-armenia-agree-to-double-gas-trade> (Accessed: May 2, 2023).

42 Primeminister.am, "PM Pashinyan pays short visit to Iran", Available at: <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2022/11/01/Nikol-Pashinyan-visit-to-the-Iran/> (Accessed: May 15, 2023).

43 Tehran Times, *Tehran, Yerevan ink MOU on energy cooperation*, November 2, 2022, Available at: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/478257/Tehran-Yerevan-ink-MOU-on-energy-cooperation> (Accessed: May 15, 2023).



joint military exercises near the Iranian border.<sup>44</sup> Due to the heightened tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan in recent months, experts have begun assessing the possibility of a potential new conflict in the South Caucasus, with concerns raised about Iran’s possible military intervention on Armenia’s behalf.<sup>45</sup>

*Normalization of relations with Türkiye*

Following the 44-day war, the government of Armenia has adopted a stance aimed at normalizing relations with Türkiye, despite the historical grievances between the two nations.

While Türkiye made serious attempts to improve relations with Armenia in the late 2000s, the preconditions set by the Armenian government at the time prevented positive results.<sup>46</sup> However, given that Armenia shares most of its borders with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, two strategic allies, improving relations with these countries is crucial for Armenia’s economic prosperity and border security. This would reduce Armenia’s dependence on Russian troops and weaken Russia’s leverage over Armenia. Therefore, Yerevan must prioritize ending hostilities with Baku and Ankara and gradually developing relationships with its immediate neighbours.

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Türkiye could play a significant role in Armenia’s efforts to reduce its dependence on Russia by engaging in diplomatic initiatives, supporting economic cooperation, facilitating people-to-people exchanges, and promoting regional integration. If Türkiye and Armenia can establish diplomatic relations, this will help Armenia foster improved relations with other countries such as Pakistan. By promoting dialogue and peaceful solutions to problems, Türkiye can help Armenia diversify its international partnerships and

44 Kucera, J. “Azerbaijan and Turkey in joint military exercises on Iranian border”, *Eurasianet*, December 7, 2022, Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-and-turkey-in-joint-military-exercises-on-iranian-border> (Accessed: July 9, 2023).

45 Iddon, P. “Iran, Azerbaijan tensions heighten risks of military conflict”, *Middle East Eye*, April 22, 2023, Available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/prospect-military-conflict-between-iran-and-azerbaijan> (Accessed: July 9, 2023).

46 Askerov, A. “Turkey’s “Zero Problems with the Neighbors” Policy: Was It Realistic?”, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 4(2), 2917, pp. 149-167.

reduce its reliance on Russia. Türkiye can also support economic cooperation and trade between the two countries. By promoting bilateral economic ties, such as investments, joint ventures, and trade agreements, Türkiye can contribute to Armenia's economic growth and development. This would provide Armenia with alternative economic opportunities, reducing its dependency on Russian economic support. Furthermore, Türkiye can facilitate people-to-people exchanges and cultural diplomacy initiatives. By promoting educational and cultural exchanges, tourism, and cross-border collaborations, Türkiye can foster mutual understanding and bridge the gap between the two nations.

More importantly, Türkiye holds a pivotal position in supporting Armenia's endeavours to diversify its international relations and attain a heightened sense of independence in its foreign policy. Of particular significance is Türkiye's potential to facilitate regional integration and cooperation initiatives involving Armenia. By actively advocating for regional projects, fostering infrastructure development, and encouraging joint initiatives, Türkiye can play a crucial role in propelling Armenia's integration into broader regional frameworks. In essence, Türkiye stands as the linchpin in Armenia's pursuit of diversifying its international relations and attaining greater autonomy in its foreign policy. Through its proactive role in promoting regional integration, advocating for Armenia's inclusion, and fostering cooperative initiatives, Türkiye can unlock a world of possibilities for Armenia, enabling it to chart its own course and break free from the confines of sole regional dependence.

The geopolitical landscape of the region has undergone significant changes since 2020, underscoring the importance of regional cooperation among states rather than focusing solely on threats. The First Karabakh War in the early 1990s heavily burdened Armenia, as it was excluded from major regional projects. However, the current conditions offer new opportunities for Armenia to collaborate with Azerbaijan to solve the pending issues and participate in significant regional projects. By engaging in economic cooperation with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, Armenia can help bridge differences, promote economic growth, and contribute to regional integration.

To foster collaboration and effectively address potential threats to regional security, it is imperative for states within the region to embrace and commit to binding bilateral and multilateral agreements. While it is

true that certain factions within Armenia and the Armenian diaspora may still harbour reservations towards improving relations with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, it is crucial to recognize that pursuing such reconciliatory efforts is the key to expediting Armenia's desired outcomes.

### *Conclusion*

Armenia's degree of independence has been called into question due to its reliance on Russia for security. Prior administrations, especially under the leadership of Kocharyan and Sargsyan, adopted policies that rendered Armenia highly dependent on Russia. Consequently, Armenia traded its autonomy for both the occupation of Azerbaijan's territory and Russia's assistance in that regard. Most of Armenia's resources were channelled towards the invasion and occupation of Azerbaijan's territories, which lasted for three decades. Presently, Armenia has a unique opportunity to break free from its semi-colonial status and decrease its dependence on Russia. Nevertheless, achieving this goal will be a daunting task, given the competing factions within the nation and continual foreign interference. Armenia currently stands at a crossroads, where resolute policies must be implemented to determine its trajectory towards either independence or semi-colonialism.

Armenia's strategic location highlights the importance of fostering positive relations with Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Achieving economic development and prosperity in the region is contingent on a peaceful environment and regional cooperation among sovereign states. Nikol Pashinyan has acknowledged that the presence of Russian forces in Armenia has created more insecurity than security for the country, and this has informed the direction of his policies. If Armenia can successfully shed the burden of the issues related to Armenians of the Karabakh region, reject Russian military assistance, normalize relations with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and build strong relationships with neighbouring states, it can achieve true independence.

The path to achieving Armenia's aspiration for full independence lies in the realm of regional cooperation, whereby nations come together in a shared pursuit of progress, unity, and common goals. By transcending historical grievances and embracing the principles of trust, dialogue, and understanding, Armenia can pave the way towards a more harmonious

and prosperous future. The significance of regional cooperation cannot be understated, as it acts as a catalyst for transformative change. While it may take time for certain elements within Armenia and the Armenian diasporas to fully embrace the idea of improving relations with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, it is essential to recognize the immense potential and benefits that lie within such endeavours. Embracing dialogue, reconciliation, and cooperation not only helps to overcome historical grievances, but also creates an environment conducive to mutual understanding, empathy, and collective progress. Ultimately, the pursuit of regional cooperation serves as a transformative force, ushering in an era of positive change, resilience, and shared prosperity. By embracing this vision and committing to the principles of collaboration and understanding, Armenia can position itself at the forefront of regional progress, thereby shaping a future marked by lasting peace, stability, and enduring cooperation. The policies implemented by the Pashinyan government reflect a clear commitment to emancipating Armenia from the grip of Russia's influence. A key component of this strategy involves cultivating stronger and more constructive relationships with both Azerbaijan and Türkiye. By fostering stronger ties with its neighbouring countries, Armenia can potentially reduce its reliance on Russia and create opportunities for true national independence.



# Stuck between War and Peace: What are the Prospects of a Peace Treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan?

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Soso Dzamukashvili\*

For two and a half years, Armenia and Azerbaijan, with the involvement of other international actors, have been engaged in negotiations on signing a peace treaty. However, a deal that would be the basis for reconciliation between the two countries has not yet been reached yet. This article discusses major factors that impact the prospects of a peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The article looks into not only the unresolved issues between the two countries, but the role of international actors as well. The article concludes that the process to sign a peace deal is significantly derailed by Russia, which is interested in keeping its military presence in the region by maintaining the status quo in the conflict-affected region of Azerbaijan. The complexity of inter-state border demarcation and delimitation, as well as different stances on unblocking transport and economic connections, have further undermined negotiations.

**Key words:** Azerbaijan, Armenia, Karabakh region, Russia, South Caucasus



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### ***Introduction***

In November 2020, Armenia and Azerbaijan, under the mediation of Russia, signed a Trilateral Statement that ended the 44-day-long Second Karabakh War. As a result, Azerbaijan liberated seven Armenia-occupied districts (Fuzuli, Jabrail, Zangilan, Gubadli, Lachin, Kalbajar, Aghdam), as well as the strategic city of Shusha. Russia, as the main broker of the ceasefire, deployed around 1,960 peacekeeping troops to the part of the Karabakh region where the ethnic Armenian population are residing, as well as along the road corridor passing through the Lachin district, which would remain a linking route between the ethnic Armenian-inhabited towns of the Karabakh region and Armenia.

Despite subsequent diplomatic efforts, both between official Yerevan and Baku and involving other international actors, the possibility of

*Despite subsequent diplomatic efforts, both between official Yerevan and Baku and involving other international actors, the possibility of achieving a peace deal between the two countries has been elusive ever since the end of the war in 2020.*

achieving a peace deal between the two countries has been elusive ever since the end of the war in 2020. Unresolved issues, such as border demarcation and delimitation, unblocking transport and economic connections, as well as Armenia's insistence on defining a status for Karabakh Armenians, largely impede the consequent peace agreement. Frequent post-war border tensions between Baku and Yerevan have further marred the peace prospects. At the same time, Russia, the major mediator of peace talks, has only tried to maintain the status quo between Armenia

and Azerbaijan to guarantee the relevance of its military presence in the region. Hence, negotiations that have lasted for more than two years have not yet resulted in the signing of a peace deal.

### ***A peace deal entangled in geopolitics***

Talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan regarding the establishment of a sustainable peace environment began in a trilateral format a few months after the Trilateral Statement (November 10, 2020). In January 2021, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, hosted a round table for the two countries' leaders in Moscow to discuss steps to stabilize the situation and achieve a sustainable peace.<sup>1</sup> At the meeting,

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<sup>1</sup> Deutsche Welle, *Armenia-Azerbaijan: Putin urges 'next steps' after peace*, January 11,

Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev urged his counterpart to begin working to reopen “transport arteries and strengthen regional stability and security”, mentioning that the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict was already part of history.<sup>2</sup> The leaders made a decision to create a working group at the level of the deputy prime ministers of all three countries that would focus on establishing transport and economic links in the South Caucasus region connecting Azerbaijan and Armenia with each other, as well as the two countries with Russia.<sup>3</sup> As Baku had shown its readiness to conclude a peace agreement with Yerevan, Russia organized two subsequent summits in the same year, in Moscow and Sochi.<sup>4</sup> While trilateral meetings for the most part encompassed the opening of transportation routes and the establishment of a bilateral commission on the delimitation of the state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the question of signing a comprehensive peace treaty was somewhat set aside.

In March 2022, Azerbaijan reinitiated specific discussions regarding the peace treaty and announced five principles aimed at normalising relations with Armenia. The proposal could have been used as a basis for a bilateral peace agreement and should have paved the way for intensive, substantive and results-oriented negotiations. The document included the following points: *1. mutual recognition of respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability of internationally recognized borders and political independence of each other; 2. mutual confirmation of the absence of territorial claims against each other and acceptance of legally binding obligations not to raise such a claim in future; 3. obligation to refrain in their inter-State relations from undermining the security of each other, from threat or use of force*

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2021, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/armenia-azerbaijan-putin-urges-next-steps-after-peace/a-56194856> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

2 Huseynof, V., “Trilateral Summit of Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian Leaders”, The Jamestown Foundation, January 12, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/trilateral-summit-of-armenian-azerbaijani-and-russian-leaders/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

3 Radio Free Europe, *Putin Hosts Trilateral Meeting With Armenia, Azerbaijan Leaders*, January 11, 2021, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-putin-armenia-azerbaijan-karabakh-talks/31041118.html> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

4 Dzamukashvili, S., “The Sochi Summit: A Small but Successful Step Toward Reconciliation Between Armenia and Azerbaijan”, *International Conflict Resolution Center*, December 1, 2021, available at: <https://icrcenter.org/the-sochi-summit-a-small-but-successful-step-toward-reconciliation-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)



*both against political independence and territorial integrity, and in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the UN Charter; 4. delimitation and demarcation of the state border, and establishment of the diplomatic relations; 5. unblocking transportation and other communications, building other communications as appropriate, and establishing cooperation in other fields of mutual interest.*<sup>5</sup>

As the submission of the proposal of Azerbaijan to Armenia took place shortly before the two leaders' meeting in Brussels on April 6, 2022, the initiative on the peace treaty was taken by European Council President Charles Michel, who hosted two subsequent meetings in May and August 2022.<sup>6</sup>

The US stepped into the process in September 2022, bringing the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan to New York, and the Secretary of the Security Council of Armenia and the Foreign Policy Aide to Azerbaijan's president to the White House.<sup>7</sup> As a result of the EU- and the US-mediation efforts, the sides agreed on the mutual recognition of territorial integrity as per the Alma-Ata declaration of 1991, and Armenia agreed the deployment of an EU civilian observer mission to its borders, while Azerbaijan agreed to cooperate with this mission "as far as it is concerned".<sup>8</sup>

The US proposed signing an Armenia–Azerbaijan peace treaty by the end of 2022. According to the Secretary of Armenia's Security Council, Armen Grigoryan, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to sign a peace agreement and finish the border delimitation process by the

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5 Azertag, *Foreign Ministry: Azerbaijan has announced basic principles proposed for establishment of relations with Armenia*, March 14, 2022, available at: [https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Foreign\\_Ministry\\_Azerbaijan\\_has\\_announced\\_basic\\_principles\\_proposed\\_for\\_establishment\\_of\\_relations\\_with\\_Armenia-2052467](https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Foreign_Ministry_Azerbaijan_has_announced_basic_principles_proposed_for_establishment_of_relations_with_Armenia-2052467) (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

6 Radio Free Europe, *Armenia, Azerbaijan Make Progress Toward Peace Deal*, April 7, 2022, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/pashinian-aliyev-eu-peace-talks/31789826.html> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

7 Deutsche Welle, *US hosts talks with Armenia, Azerbaijan*, September 20, 2022, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/armenia-azerbaijan-diplomats-meet-after-deadly-border-clashes/a-63176839> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

8 Council of the European Union, "Statement following quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel, 6 October 2022", October 7, 2022, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/10/07/statement-following-quadrilateral-meeting-between-president-aliyev-prime-minister-pashinyan-president-macron-and-president-michel-6-october-2022/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

end of 2022 during the meeting in September 2022 in the White House.<sup>9</sup> Even though Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan expressed the readiness of Armenia to sign a peace treaty with Azerbaijan and to launch peace talks,<sup>10</sup> shortly after a meeting on the sidelines of the European Political Community held on October 6 in Prague, he soon demanded France's involvement in peace talks. Azerbaijan ruled this out as France's President Emanuel Macron had backed Armenia in his statements during and after the Second Karabakh War, as well as during the former conflict with Azerbaijan in general.<sup>11</sup>

*In the meantime, in response to the increasing involvement of the EU and US in the reconciliation processes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia, the principal mediator of the original conflict, signalled its annoyance in regard to the West's interference in this process*

In the meantime, in response to the increasing involvement of the EU and US in the reconciliation processes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia, the principal mediator of the original conflict, signalled its annoyance in regard to the West's interference in this process and also strongly criticised the announcement of the EU's new monitoring mission in Armenia for a two-year term to monitor border areas.<sup>12</sup> On October 31, 2022, the Kremlin hosted the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Sochi for the first such gathering since the last Moscow-mediated summit in November 2021.<sup>13</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed his version of a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan which was set to postpone the issue of the "status

9 The Armenian Weekly, *The Sochi Trilateral Summit: Implications for the Nagorno Karabakh conflict settlement process*, November 2, 2022, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/11/02/the-sochi-trilateral-summit-implications-for-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-settlement-process/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

10 Reuters, *Armenia says it agrees Karabakh peace talks with Azerbaijan, will discuss border*, April 6, 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/armenia-says-it-has-agreed-peace-talks-with-azerbaijan-over-karabakh-2022-04-06/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

11 Aljazeera, *Azerbaijan cancels Armenia talks, rejects France's involvement*, November 25, 2022, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/25/azerbaijan-cancels-armenia-talks-rejects-frances-involvement> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

12 Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii, "O sozdaniy grazhdanskoj monitoringovoy missii Yevrosoyuza v prigranichnykh rayonakh Armenii", , January 26, 2023, available at: [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1849816/](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1849816/) (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

13 Huseynov, V., "The Sochi Summit Raised More Questions Than Answers", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, *The Jamestown Foundation*, November 7, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-sochi-summit-raised-more-questions-than-answers/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

*As the US sought to become actively involved, Russia was concerned that the primary goal of the US was to utilize the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace agreement to prepare the ground for ending the Russian peacekeeping mission in the Karabakh region as a part of the US strategy.*

for Karabakh Armenians” to the future. However, Azerbaijani sovereignty over the Karabakh region is a key issue and this element was part of the draft peace treaty mediated by the US. Armenia’s Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, had made it clear that Yerevan was ready to recognize the Karabakh region as part of neighbouring Azerbaijan under certain conditions of guaranteeing the rights and security of ethnic Armenians living in that region.<sup>14</sup> For Russia, a peace treaty achieved via Western mediation would reconfirm Azerbaijan’s sovereignty over the Karabakh

region and thus make the need for Russia’s peacekeeping mission, which is seen in Moscow as a guarantee of Russian leverage in the region, irrelevant.

As the US sought to become actively involved, Russia was concerned that the primary goal of the US was to utilize the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace agreement to prepare the ground for ending the Russian peacekeeping mission in the Karabakh region as a part of the US strategy. The Kremlin is concerned that, after the conclusion of a peace treaty, Azerbaijan may be unwilling to extend the mandate of the Russian peacekeepers beyond the initial five-year term ending in November 2025. Russia fears that the peace treaty might lead to the withdrawal of its troops from the Karabakh region and even its military base and border troops from Armenia itself, especially in the case of the normalization of relations between Armenia and Türkiye. Türkiye’s President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has signalled Türkiye’s readiness to normalise relations with Armenia immediately after the conclusion of a peace treaty between Baku and Yerevan.<sup>15</sup> Some political forces and civil activists in Armenia have started demanding the withdrawal of the Russian military base from Armenia. They argue that Armenia should leave the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), especially

14 The Armenian Weekly, *The Sochi Trilateral Summit: Implications for the Nagorno Karabakh conflict settlement process*, November 2, 2022, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/11/02/the-sochi-trilateral-summit-implications-for-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-settlement-process/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

15 Dzamukashvili, S., “Three decades on, Armenia and Turkey edge slowly towards rapprochement”, *Emerging Europe*, September 16, 2021, available at: <https://emerging-europe.com/news/three-decades-on-armenia-and-turkey-edge-slowly-towards-rapprochement/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

after clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in May 2022, when the CSTO refused to defend Armenia in what Yerevan claims were a series of incursions by Azerbaijan.<sup>16</sup>

Russia is satisfied with the current status quo as the Karabakh region is a *de jure* part of Azerbaijan but with the Russian peacekeeping contingent remaining therein. The best-case scenario for Russia is to extend this situation until 2025, ensuring the extension of the deployment of Russian peacekeepers for at least another five years. It is worthwhile to mention that this approach is in line with Armenian interests as well. The continuation of the current status quo is not ideal for Armenia, but after the loss in the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Armenia's options are limited; namely, it can either stop its 'Karabakh' agenda or keep the current status quo. For Baku, on the other hand, postponing the question of 'status' for Karabakh Armenians is not an option. A potential peace deal is crucial as it will guarantee Azerbaijan's territorial integrity as well as the security environment in the districts of the Karabakh region and adjacent districts, especially after Baku announced its reconstruction plan for the region and the resettlement of its internally displaced citizens back to their homes.<sup>17</sup>

*Russia is satisfied with the current status quo as the Karabakh region is a de jure part of Azerbaijan but with the Russian peacekeeping contingent remaining therein.*

The year 2022 ended with another standoff between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Karabakh region with the involvement of Russian peacekeeping forces. In early December, Azerbaijani officials from the Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, and the state-owned mining company AzerGold CJSC were denied access by the Russian peacekeeping contingent to mining areas in the Karabakh region for carrying out on-site inspections of the Gizilbulag gold deposits and the Demirli copper–molybdenum deposits to evaluate potential risks to the environment.<sup>18</sup>

16 Radio Free Europe, *Opposition Groups Call For Armenia's Withdrawal From CSTO On Eve Of Yerevan Summit*, November 23, 2022, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/armenia-csto-protest-russia-azerbaijan/32144702.html> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

17 Dzamukashvili, S, "Azerbaijan's Ambitious Reconstruction Plan for Nagorno Karabakh: Smart Yet Vague", *Forbes Georgia*, December 5, 2022, available at: <https://forbes.ge/en/azerbaijanis-mtiani-qharabaghis-aghdenis-ambitsiuri-gegma-tchkvianurithumtsa-bundovani/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

18 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, "Commentary of the Press Service Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the statement of the Ministry of Foreign

As a result, Azerbaijani environmental activists arranged a protest on the Shusha–Lachin road (the only link connecting Armenia with local Armenians living in the Karabakh region), where the Russian peacekeeping forces are deployed, accusing them of harbouring sympathies with the separatist regime in Khankendi. They demanded full access for Azerbaijani governmental institutions at every site in the Karabakh region to inspect the pollution Armenian companies have inflicted on the environment by illegally mining gold in this region.<sup>19</sup>

While the peacekeepers appeared uncertain of how to manage the protesters, they were under a harsh spotlight from both sides. Azerbaijanis at the protests said they were willing to let Armenians through, but the Russians were preventing it. Armenians, meanwhile, accused the peacekeepers of neglecting their mission, which is to ensure the security of the ethnic Armenian population in Karabakh region. Disappointed by the Russian peacekeepers' work, on the sidelines of a meeting of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Saint Petersburg on 26 December, Nikol Pashinyan told Vladimir Putin that “it turns out the Lachin Corridor is not under the control of the Russian peacekeepers”, and called on Moscow either to seek a United Nations mandate for its mission in Karabakh or to open the door for a multinational peacekeeping contingent.<sup>20</sup> However, Armenia neglected the fact that any mission to be deployed to the territory of Azerbaijan would need the authorization of official Baku.

While both the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides were more critical of Russia's involvement in the reconciliation process, talks on a peace deal continued on May 14, 2023 in Brussels with the moderation of EU Council President Charles Michel who, after the meeting, commented that the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan “share a common willingness for the South Caucasus at peace”, describing their exchanges as “frank,

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Affairs of Armenia dated December 13, 2022”, December 13, 2022, available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.az/en/news/no58222> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

19 Kucera, J., “Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh under harsh spotlight”, *Eurasianet*, December 15, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/russian-peacekeepers-in-karabakh-under-harsh-spotlight> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

20 Gavin, G., “Armenians turn fire toward Russia as Nagorno-Karabakh blockade enters third week”, *Eurasianet*, December 29, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/armenians-turn-fire-toward-russia-as-nagorno-karabakh-blockade-enters-third-week> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

open and result oriented”. The leaders have also agreed to continue to meet trilaterally in Brussels as frequently as necessary to address ongoing developments on the ground and standing agenda items of the Brussels meetings.<sup>21</sup> In the meantime, on 22 May, Armenia’s Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, stated that Armenia is ready to recognize the Karabakh region as part of neighbouring Azerbaijan under certain conditions, a compromise that could help end a decades-old animosity and revive an impoverished region.<sup>22</sup>

Subsequently, on June 1, 2023, at the second summit of the European Political Community, Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan were joined by EU Council President Charles Michel, France’s President Emmanuel Macron, and Germany’s Chancellor Olaf Scholz. While the meeting focused on a peace deal, as well as the restoration of transport links between the two South Caucasus nations and the delimitation of their long border, it is unclear whether the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders narrowed their differences on any of these issues. Nevertheless, the next meeting was planned to take place in Brussels on July 21, 2023.<sup>23</sup> President Michel also expressed his intention to invite the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, France, and Germany to meet for a second time on the margins of the next summit of the European Political Community in Granada in October 2023.<sup>24</sup> The EU’s active involvement and the statement of Pashinyan on the readiness to recognise Karabakh region as part of Azerbaijan might indicate that talks on the signing of a peace deal are developing successfully.

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21 Reuters, *Leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan to meet May 14 in Brussels -EU*, May 8, 2023, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/leaders-armenia-azerbaijan-meet-may-14-brussels-eu-2023-05-08/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

22 Radio Free Europe, *Pashinian Says Armenia Is Ready To Recognize Nagorno-Karabakh As Part Of Azerbaijan Under Certain Conditions*, May 22, 2022, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-pashinian-recognize-karabakh-azerbaijani-territory/32422965.html> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

23 The Armenian Mirror Spectator, *Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev met on Thursday, June 1, for the third time in less than three weeks for fresh peace talks mediated by the European Union*, June 8, 2022, available at: <https://mirrorspectator.com/2023/06/08/eu-hosts-another-aliyev-pashinyan-meeting/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

24 Council of the European Union, “Press Statement on Armenia and Azerbaijan”, Council of the European Union, May 8, 2023, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/08/press-statement-on-armenia-and-azerbaijan/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

***Border demarcation***

After the Second Karabakh War and the subsequent Trilateral Statement concluded on November 10, 2020, Azerbaijan restored control over its inter-state border with Armenia which had been uncontrolled for the almost 30 years of occupation by Armenia. According to the statement, Armenia was required to return control over seven districts – Fuzuli, Jabrail, Zangilan, Gubadli, Lachin, Kalbajar, and Aghdam – to Azerbaijan. The further Trilateral Statement signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia on 26 November 2021 related to

*After the Second Karabakh War and the subsequent Trilateral Statement concluded on November 10, 2020, Azerbaijan restored control over its inter-state border with Armenia which had been uncontrolled for the almost 30 years of occupation by Armenia.*

the issue of border demarcation. Russia proposed setting up an Armenia–Azerbaijan joint commission on the delimitation and demarcation of borders with Russian facilitation to undertake a delicate process of border demarcation, using Soviet-era maps and GPS technology.<sup>25</sup>

The Soviet-era borders, which had not been designed as international borders, had never been properly demarcated. Hence, Armenia and Azerbaijan, for their entire history as independent states, have never had

fully agreed upon the borders between them, and the November 10, 2020 statement gave no indication as to how the border should be drawn or to what standard.<sup>26</sup> In the absence of any official border agreement, the best reference data the border working group has come from Soviet topographical maps from the 1970s. The topographic nature of these maps means that they are more oriented towards precisely representing landscape rather than administrative boundaries, which sometimes appear as broken lines for the sake of illustration of topographical features.<sup>27</sup>

**At the same time, the borderline was never physically demarcated, and**

<sup>25</sup> Dzamukashvili, S. and Clayton, A., “A New Frontier: Understanding the Context of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Border Demarcation Process”, *Conflict Resolution Center*, January 19, 2022, available at: <https://icrcenter.org/a-new-frontier-understanding-the-context-of-the-armenia-azerbaijan-border-demarcation-process/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

<sup>26</sup> Broers, L., “New Armenian-Azerbaijani border crisis unfolds”, *Chatham House*, May 27, 2021, available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/new-armenian-azerbaijani-border-crisis-unfolds> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

<sup>27</sup> McGlynn, E., “Perspectives | On the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, the map is not the territory”, *Eurasianet*, March 2021, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-on-the-armenia-azerbaijan-border-the-map-is-not-the-territory> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

in many areas lines of actual control do not correspond to the *de jure* border. Over the past 30 years, optimal geographic positions taken by both sides have essentially been ‘borderized’ through the construction of defensive infrastructure and fortifications.<sup>28</sup>

While both Baku and Yerevan agree that the demarcation of borders is a dire necessity, they are not on the same page with regard to the technicalities. To address this issue, Baku and Yerevan agreed at the April 6, 2022 summit in Brussels to create a Joint Border Commission to delimit the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan and ensure a stable security situation along and in the vicinity of the borderline.<sup>29</sup> The first meeting between the newly established Border Commissions of Azerbaijan and Armenia took place on May 24, 2022, after the meeting of the two countries’ leaders on May 22, 2022 in Brussels. Deputy Prime Minister of Azerbaijan Shahin Mustafayev, who chairs the commission, and his counterpart from Armenia, Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigoryan, met on the interstate border and reaffirmed their readiness to work on delimitation and other issues in line with the ultimate goals of the commissions.<sup>30</sup>

Navigating through dated maps would constitute a challenge even for states friendly with each other. Despite some tangible results, tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the border have remained, including military clashes such as those in September 2022.

Moreover, Azerbaijan has three enclaves within Armenia (which Armenia refuses to hand over), which include five villages in the Kazakh District, namely Baghanis-Ayrum, Ashagi Askipara (Nerkin Voskepar), Yukhari Askipara (Verin Voskepar), Barkhudarly, and Sofulu; and one village of Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (of Azerbaijan), Kyarki (Tigranashen). The only Armenian enclave within the territory of Azerbaijan is ‘Artsvashen’ (in Azerbaijan the village is

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28 Broers, L., *op.cit.*

29 Mehdiyev, M., “Azerbaijan, Armenia Agree to Start Delimitation and Demarcation of State Borders”, *Caspian News*, April 8, 2022, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-armenia-agree-to-start-delimitation-and-demarcation-of-state-borders-2022-4-8-0/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

30 Mammadli, N., “Azerbaijani, Armenian Border Delimitation Commissions Hold First Meeting”, *Caspian News*, May 24, 2022, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijani-armenian-border-delimitation-commissions-hold-first-meeting-2022-5-24-2/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)



called Bashkend).<sup>31</sup> These settlements were ceded to Armenia as a result of hostilities in the 1990s, during the First Karabakh War. Following that war, each side absorbed the exclaves that were surrounded by their territory, with serious implications for their respective populations.<sup>32</sup> There is no agreement on how to proceed with enclaves, which further complicates the issue of border demarcation.

### ***Unblocking economic and transport links***

Unblocking and restoring transport connections, specifically, a route from Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (AR) via Armenia, was outlined in the 10 November 2020 Trilateral Statement. Restoring connections in the region would provide both Azerbaijan

*According to Azerbaijan, Armenia used the road to illegally transfer “manpower, ammunition, mines, and other military equipment from Armenia to the Armenian armed formations on the territory of Azerbaijan”, violating the tripartite statement of November 10, 2020.*

and Armenia with economic and trade opportunities, ending the latter’s three-decade-long isolation. Therefore, on January 11, 2021, during a summit in Moscow hosted by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev and Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan agreed on a statement<sup>33</sup> on establishing a tripartite working group jointly chaired by the deputy prime ministers of the three countries to oversee the “unblocking of all economic and transport links” in the region.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, the work of the group so far has been intangible. While the statement outlines the necessity to create new transportation and communications links connecting Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan AR via Armenia, the Armenian side has insisted that no term such as ‘corridor’ is mentioned in the Trilateral Statement and

31 De Waal, T., “Unfinished Business in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict”, *Carnegie Europe*, February 11, 2021, available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/02/11/unfinished-business-in-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-pub-83844> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

32 Jam News, *Enclaves - islands of the Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation*, Jam News, 2022, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27wpgGFhgqU> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

33 President.az, *Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation*, January 11, 2021, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/50070> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

34 Radio Free Europe, *Putin Hosts Trilateral Meeting With Armenia, Azerbaijan Leaders*, January 11, 2021, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-putin-armenia-azerbaijan-karabakh-talks/31041118.html> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

has insisted it has to install customs and other checkpoints, demanding uncontrolled passage along the Lachin road between Armenia and the Karabakh region.<sup>35</sup>

According to Azerbaijan, Armenia used the road to illegally transfer “manpower, ammunition, mines, and other military equipment from Armenia to the Armenian armed formations on the territory of Azerbaijan”, violating the tripartite statement of November 10, 2020.<sup>36</sup> Baku decided to establish a border checkpoint at the entrance to the Lachin–Khankendi road on the border with Armenia on 23 April, claiming that this assured that there would not be any obstacles to movement along the corridor for Armenians living in the Karabakh region.<sup>37</sup> In May 2023, President Ilham Aliyev called on the Armenian separatists in the Karabakh region to “obey the laws of Azerbaijan instead of seeking a so-called independence“. However, the separatist regime comprising Karabakh Armenians rejected his offer,<sup>38</sup> which makes the situation more complex. The Armenian troops and the separatist regime present in Khankendi undermine the prospects for a peace process in the region.

Furthermore, there have been fears in Yerevan that by opening a ‘corridor’ the country would lose its jurisdiction over its southern border, its only outlet to Iran.<sup>39</sup> The idea of the Zangezur Corridor has alarmed Iran as well, which appears to fear the cutoff of its border with

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35 Armenpress, *Wording of so-called corridor unacceptable for us – Armenian PM*, June 14, 2022, available at: <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1085904/tur> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

36 Mfa.gov.az, “No:221/23, Commentary on the statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia dated April 23 on the establishment of the border checkpoint by Azerbaijan at the starting point of the Lachin-Khankandi road”, April 24, 2023, Available at: <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/no22123> (accessed: May 23, 2023).

37 International Crisis Group, *New Troubles in Nagorno-Karabakh: Understanding the Lachin Corridor Crisis*, May 22, 2023, available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/new-troubles-nagorno-karabakh-understanding-lachin-corridor-crisis> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

38 Caspian News, *President Aliyev Tells Separatists in Karabakh Region to Obey Azerbaijani Laws*, May 31, 2023, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/president-aliyev-tells-separatists-in-karabakh-region-to-obey-azerbaijani-laws-2023-5-31-0/> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

39 Mgdesyan, A., “Attacks on Armenia highlight ongoing disputes over “corridor” for Azerbaijan”, *Eurasianet*, September 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/attacks-on-armenia-highlight-ongoing-disputes-over-corridor-for-azerbaijan> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

Armenia, which plays an essential role in Tehran's economy, providing it with a transport corridor to the Black Sea and on to Europe.<sup>40</sup> Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has criticized the plan, which might have given Armenia more confidence to push back against the 'Zangezur Corridor'.<sup>41</sup>

In 2022, Armenia's Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, announced that Armenia is ready to provide a road to Azerbaijan. The mention of 'proposals' referred to a draft decision that Armenia's National Security Service published on 18 August proposing the establishment of three new, much longer border crossings at the village of Sotk on the border of Azerbaijan's Kelbajar district, at Karahunj on the border of Azerbaijan's Gubadli district, and at Yeraskh on the border of Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan AR.<sup>42</sup> All the proposed passages are longer than that Azerbaijan proposed (the 45-km long passage in the south along the Armenia–Iran border), and the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, did not welcome Armenia's proposal, calling it an unrealistic option to avoid obligations.<sup>43</sup> While that proposal could, in theory, meet one of the key conditions of the 2020 trilateral statement, Armenia has not yet discussed how it is going to guarantee security across these transport links.

### ***Conclusion***

For more than two years, Armenia and Azerbaijan, along with other international actors, have been engaged in talks concerning building sustainable peace. While concluding a peace deal is crucial

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40 Dzumakashvili, S., "The 3+3 Regional Cooperation and Georgia: What is at Stake?", Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2022, available at: <https://gfsis.org.ge/files/library/opinion-papers/175-expert-opinion-eng.pdf> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

41 Kucera, J., "Iran-Azerbaijan infowar heats up again", *Eurasianet*, September 2, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/iran-azerbaijan-infowar-heats-up-again> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

42 Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Armenia, "Additional Supplements to the Resolution N 2011 of May 12, 703 of the Government of Armenia", Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Armenia, May 12, 2022, available at: <https://www.e-draft.am/en/projects/4661/about> (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

43 Azertag, *Armenia should stop making false excuses to evade its obligations regarding the Zangezur Corridor* (translation from Azerbaijani), , October 17, 2022, available at: [https://azertag.az/xeber/XIN\\_Ermenistan\\_Zengezur\\_dehlizi\\_ile\\_bagli\\_ohdeliklerinden\\_yayinmaq\\_uchun\\_saxta\\_behanelere\\_son\\_qoymalidir-2336810](https://azertag.az/xeber/XIN_Ermenistan_Zengezur_dehlizi_ile_bagli_ohdeliklerinden_yayinmaq_uchun_saxta_behanelere_son_qoymalidir-2336810) (Accessed: June 26, 2023)

for reconciliation, Russia's geopolitical interest in maintaining the status quo in the region has significantly derailed the reconciliation process. Moscow has acted as a spoiler rather than a peace broker as its influence in the region largely depends on maintaining the status quo in the Karabakh region, which rules out the possibility of signing a peace deal between Baku and Yerevan. To move forward, the two sides have already reached the mutual recognition of territorial integrity that should be the basis for signing a peace deal.

*While concluding a peace deal is crucial for reconciliation, Russia's geopolitical interest in maintaining the status quo in the region has significantly derailed the reconciliation process.*

The complexity of inter-state border demarcation and delimitation creates major difficulties and has even led to a series of armed clashes that have further prolonged negotiations. The Soviet-era borders, which had not been designed as an international border, had never been properly demarcated. Hence, Armenia and Azerbaijan, for their entire history as independent states, have never had fully agreed upon borders between them, and the Trilateral Statement (November 10, 2020) gave no indication as to how the border should be drawn or to what standard. At the same time, varied stances regarding how to create and restore transport and economic links have undermined prospects of sustainable peace.

The emergence of the EU and US in the reconciliation process has not led to any significant changes, and clashes between Yerevan and Baku may be expected in the near future. However, it is worth highlighting that the EU is still actively engaged in providing round tables to both sides. There are some ongoing efforts that signal that the differences between Armenia and Azerbaijan in their talks may be becoming narrower, and the two sides might be one step closer to concluding a deal.



# The Middle Corridor: Perspectives and opportunities after the war in Ukraine

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Krzysztof Winkler\*

In the past, Central Asia was the site of one of the main trade routes in the world, known as the Silk Road. This linked China with the Middle East and the Roman Empire. Today, China is seeking to revive that road with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Middle Corridor is the shortest way from China to Europe, but the Russian and maritime routes are easier to use due to the ready-made intermodal infrastructure. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) countries have invested in infrastructure such as roads, railroads, ports and airports, but much more must be done, for example, the creation of effective intermodal transfer services and establishing cooperation in minimizing tariff obstacles. There are many political issues, including conflicts and a lack of developed multimodal infrastructure, that inhibit making the TITR an effective transport route that can bring participants in the project revenues from cargo fees and foreign investments. Increased China West antagonism, and competition among Türkiye, Iran and Russia for regional supremacy in the South Caucasus, could interfere with efforts to make the Middle Corridor an efficient transport route. Tariff barriers must be cut or adjusted for smooth movement of goods across state borders. The US and the EU show some interest in investing in the Middle Corridor, but the extent of that involvement remains unclear. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has created new momentum for Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye in terms of reinforcing the TITR. The aim of this article is to assess the current political and economic environment and challenges related to the effective use of the Middle Corridor transport route that have to be deal with.

**Key words:** Middle Corridor, Central Asia, Trade, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Transport



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### ***Background to the Middle Corridor***

The Middle Corridor derives its name from the fact that it is situated between the Northern Corridor, a trade route through Russia, and the maritime trade route across the Indian Ocean. It designates a trade route that connects China, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Türkiye and Europe. Countries along the Middle Corridor – China, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye – have a great opportunity to advance their economic position in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine. The Northern Corridor route passing through Russia and Belarus was heavily used as a land connection between China and Europe before the war in Ukraine. However, as both Russia and Belarus have now been hit by a strong sanctions regime, the route’s capabilities have decreased, with a fall of 40% in the second half of 2022. The level of goods transported through the Middle Corridor was rather small; before the war in Ukraine, it was only 8% of the Siberian Railway level, and the amount of goods moved along the corridor increased from 350,000 tons in 2020 to 530 000 tons in 2021. But in 2022, that quantity grew to 3.2 million tons.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, early initiatives aimed at opening this route started in 2009. Türkiye proposed the Middle Corridor as an alternative multimodal route from China to Europe<sup>2</sup> and plans to develop cooperation with countries of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). These states share language and historical links with Türkiye. One of the main arguments for the route is that it is the shortest land route from China to Europe, and OTS member states can profit from the transit of goods between China and the EU. To achieve that goal, they have to advance their own transport infrastructure, including through investing themselves and attracting further investments.

There is also a need to improve coordination of transit rules among countries on the TITR for the smooth movement of goods. Tariff barriers still vary

1 Chang, F.K., “The Middle Corridor through: Trade and influence ambitions”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, February 23, 2023, available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/02/the-middle-corridor-through-central-asia-trade-and-influence-ambitions/> (Accessed: June 16, 2023)

2 Tuba, E., “Russia’s War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity. Connecting Europe and Asia via Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey”, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, October 28, 2022, p. 2, available at: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/russias-war-on-ukraine-and-the-rise-of-the-middle-corridor-as-a-third-vector-of-eurasian-connectivity> (Accessed: June 14, 2023)

significantly due to different customs regimes in the countries along the corridor's route and prolong the duration of cargo movement along the Middle Corridor. For many years, representatives from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Türkiye have met to discuss how to solve this issue. In November 2022, they finally accepted a road map to make customs and tariff controls less burdensome.<sup>3</sup> According to the road map, full implementation of a common customs regime will take five years.

The Caucasus and Black Sea region is located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Azerbaijan is seen as a key partner for Europe in this axis because of its oil and gas fields which, combined with those of Kazakhstan, provide a counterweight to Russia's energy supply to Europe.<sup>4</sup> Azerbaijan also plays an important role as a hub for the transit of freight and fossil fuels from Asia to Europe. The Heritage Foundation's New Cold War Strategy depicted Baku as an important location to check Chinese ambitions in Central Asia and to control the Middle Corridor as an alternative means of moving goods from East Asia to Three Seas Initiative countries in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup>

In recent months, China has become much more active in Central Asia, in addition to the Belt and Road investments made in the past few years. Although the Middle Corridor is one of the six official routes of the BRI, Chinese involvement in Middle Corridor investments is minor.<sup>6</sup> China has been trying to secure its position as a main power

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3 Chang F.K., "The Middle Corridor through: Trade and influence ambitions", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, February 23, 2023, available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/02/the-middle-corridor-through-central-asia-trade-and-influence-ambitions/> (accessed: April 12, 2023)

4 Sadler B., Di Pane J., Robinson N. and Diaz, J., "Promoting U.S. Security Cooperation from Eastern Mediterranean to the Caucasus", *The Heritage Foundation*, March 7, 2023, available at: <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/promoting-us-security-cooperation-the-eastern-mediterranean-the-caucasus> (accessed: April 19, 2023)

5 Carafano, J.J., Pillsbury, M., Smith, J. and Harding, A., "Winning the New Cold War: A Plan for Countering China", executive summary, *The Heritage Foundation*, March 28, 2023, available at: <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/winning-the-new-cold-war-plan-countering-china> (accessed: April 20, 2023)

6 Colakoglu, S., "The Middle Corridor and the Russia-Ukraine War: the Rise of New Regional Collaboration in Eurasia?", *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, January 31, 2023, available at: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13744-the-middle-corridor-and-the-russia-ukraine-war-the-rise-of-new-regional-collaboration-in-eurasia?.html> (accessed: June 14, 2023)



in Central Asia, in light of the weakening position of Russia not only in Ukraine, but also in the world. Russia's declining global political position and the shrinking trade balance between Russia and China strongly back China's interests. This situation presents an opportunity for the former Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus to develop cooperation with partners from Western countries, as well as with Türkiye and China.

The Middle Corridor could be used more extensively by China as a part of its BRI project, as China seeks alternative ways to transfer its goods to Europe, because the Western sanctions imposed on Russia have effectively hampered the operability of the Northern Corridor. The main route from China to Europe is the maritime way through the South China Sea, Malakka Strait, Indian Ocean, Red Sea and Suez Canal to Mediterranean ports in South Europe. The second route is the Northern Corridor including the Trans-Siberian Railway which, due to many years of development, has much better multimodal infrastructure (such as railroads, and storage and cargo handling facilities) than that currently available in the countries of the Middle Corridor.

Improvements in infrastructure will facilitate increasing capacity from 3.2 million tons in 2022 to a projected 10 million tons, given Türkiye's completion of the Marmara Railway under the Bosphorus Strait. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan has spent US\$35 billion on new roads, railroads and airports in the past 15 years.<sup>7</sup> Russia's route has the advantage of decades of infrastructure development, therefore the Middle Corridor needs much more investment to make mass cargo transport feasible and to preserve its competitiveness in relation to the Russian and maritime routes. The BRI was seen by the countries of the Middle Corridor as an opportunity to build this necessary infrastructure. However, because of low Chinese investment in the Middle Corridor trade route and trouble with BRI undertakings in other countries such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan, that means of financing these investments looks much less attractive. As a result of the cautious approach by countries along Middle Corridor to BRI investments, Chinese investors have become sceptical about their investments in TITR transport infrastructure,<sup>8</sup> even

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7 Carrafano, J.J., "Central Asia's Middle Corridor gains traction at Russia's expense", *Geopolitical Intelligence Services AG*, August 29, 2022, available at: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/tr/middle-corridor/> (accessed: June 14, 2023)

8 Ibid.

though making the Middle Corridor economically feasible for China's exports, due to the volume and set of products, is an indispensable part of the BRI.

### ***Political environment along the Middle Corridor***

The political situation in Central Asia and the South Caucasus is complicated by the intersecting interests of the countries along the Middle Corridor and powers such as Russia, Türkiye and China. This multipolar world presents opportunities for regional powers to increase their sphere of influence. Russia, China, Türkiye and Iran are competing for influence in Central Asia. Russia was the dominant power in the past, but its position diminished during the war in Ukraine. Türkiye, with its strong cultural and language ties to the region, can be a strong player.

China, with the world's second-largest economy and growing military power, may be the future dominant power in Central Asia, but as of now it is not ready to fulfil that role because it has not achieved a sufficient level of military power and skills. Iran, which has close relationships with Russia and China, could also be a part of a new regional equilibrium. Like Russia, Iran has its own problems in the form of heavy sanctions imposed by the international community on its economy and an internal political crisis with huge social unrest<sup>9</sup> directed against its authority. That diminishes Iran's capacity to compete with other powers.

*The political situation in Central Asia and the South Caucasus is complicated by the intersecting interests of the countries along the Middle Corridor and powers such as Russia, Türkiye and China.*

The South Caucasus has its own complicated political situation. Even after the Second Karabakh War in 2020, tension still exists between Armenia and Azerbaijan and needs to be reduced to allow stability along the Middle Corridor's geography. Meanwhile, Georgia also has its own problems with a Russian occupation and military presence in its Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Tskhinvali) regions. Moscow could leverage that advantage to disrupt the transport of goods to Türkiye, however the possibility of such a scenario depends on the condition and capability of Russian military forces after the war in Ukraine. A

9 Loft, P., "2022 Iran Protests: Human rights and international response", *House of Common Library*, May 26, 2023, available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9679/> (accessed: June 14, 2023)

significantly weakened Russian Army could limit Moscow's ability to disrupt activity in the South Caucasus.

The US and the EU have in recent years developed a superficial interest in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. After the disastrous US abandonment of Afghanistan in 2021, that region was left to China, and regional powers such as Russia and Türkiye were allowed to fill the void left by the Western powers. The war in Ukraine has changed that situation through the EU's emerging zeal to find alternative sources of oil and gas. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are among the countries best placed to decrease Europe's dependence on Russia's fossil fuel reserves.

In 2022, the volume of cargo moved along the Middle Corridor grew six-fold in comparison with the situation in 2021. Many logistic firms started to use this transport route, for example, Denmark's Maersk, Finland's Nurminen Logistic, Germany's CEVA Logistic, Azerbaijan's ADY Container and a group of Chinese rail operators.<sup>10</sup> That demonstrates the increased interest in using the Middle Corridor as a supplement to the Northern Corridor and the maritime route from Asia to Europe.

In this context, the Southern Gas Corridor is one of the best examples of such diversification. Pipeline connectivity is the most cost-effective means of cooperation between the Central Asian and South Caucasus states and the EU. The Southern Gas Corridor has kept functioning even amid political tensions and bureaucratic problems. Diversification of the sources and routes of energy, and cooperation with like-minded partners are critical in the current unstable and multipolar world situation, and in a complex geopolitical environment.

There is also a possibility of enhanced cooperation between the states that are party to the Three Seas Initiative for economic and security cooperation based on common interests (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary) and some of the countries located along the Middle Corridor, especially Georgia and Azerbaijan. Both of these could provide a bridge between Eastern and Central Europe and Central

10 Tuba, E., "Russia's War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity. Connecting Europe and Asia via Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey", *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, October 28, 2022, available at: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/russias-war-on-ukraine-and-the-rise-of-the-middle-corridor-as-a-third-vector-of-eurasian-connectivity> (accessed: June 16, 2023)

and Eastern Asia. The field of energy cooperation fits this bridge best, due to the existing pipelines and the EU's increasing demand for oil and gas after severing connections with Russia.

However, the East-West trade route is not the only focus of regional players. There is also a northsouth trade route that is important for Russia and, to some degree, India. Competing with the Middle Corridor project is Russia's International NorthSouth Transport Corridor (NSTC). Russia is trying to diversify its trade links, decouple from the West and drive trade flows towards the Indian Ocean and East Asia. The NSTC could make that idea feasible. This link is vital in preventing RussiaIndia trade being prone to any interruptions by Western countries. The route is shorter and quicker than traditional sea route via the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean and the Baltic Sea. It reduces the time needed to move goods to 18 days, twice as fast as the Suez Canal route, as well as lowering transport costs.<sup>11</sup> Currently, 70% of scheduled NSTC work is complete.<sup>12</sup> Only a section of some 35 km is required to finish the construction work completely. That is, however, in question because of the current AzerbaijanIran political tensions.

The NorthSouth connection could be profitable for India, as a swing state between global powers and a rival to China. New Delhi sees partnership with Russia as a useful tool to counterbalance China's expansion, and the NSTC is one of many projects India is interested in to balance Chinese influence in Central Asia. India's policy towards the NSTC includes cooperation with Azerbaijan and Armenia as parts of the broad coalition of countries that have invested in the project.<sup>13</sup> India has, like China, ambitions to become a great power. The NSTC is seen as one of the ways to fulfil that intention. India may desire an additional link with Russia to keep open the option of balancing

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11 Avdaliani, E., "The Expansion of the International North-South Transport Corridor: Geopolitical Updates", *Silk Road Briefing*, April 4, 2023, available at: <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2023/04/04/the-expansion-of-the-international-north-south-transport-corridor-geopolitical-updates/> (accessed: June 15, 2023)

12 Dezan Shira and Associates, "Azerbaijan, Russia to Move Ahead with Completing Vital Rasht-Astara INSTC Rail Link Through Iran", *Silk Road Briefing*, March 1, 2023, available at: <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2023/03/01/azerbaijan-russia-to-move-ahead-with-completing-vital-rasht-astara-instc-rail-link-through-iran/> (accessed: April 14, 2023)

13 Blank, S., "INSTC: India makes its move in Central Asia and Beyond", *Trends Research and Advisory*, January 13, 2023, available at: <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/instc-india-makes-its-move-in-central-asia-and-beyond/> (accessed: April 14, 2023)

China's influence through Russia–India cooperation, similar to the situation in the Cold War.

Azerbaijan could use the NSTC as a source of additional revenues and in bargaining with Western partners on Middle Corridor projects. It is an indispensable part of the Middle Corridor, so it gives Azerbaijan leverage during negotiations with partners in both the Middle Corridor and NSTC projects. The NSTC is in some ways in competition with the Middle Corridor, especially while Russia and Iran are on the opposite side to the West. The problem with the NSTC is a lack of the capital needed to complete the project due to the economic problems of the main parties. Russia and Iran have been under heavy sanctions, and their readiness to invest huge sums of money is doubtful. India has its own internal economic and financial problems, and the ongoing conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir prevents India from financing major undertakings such as the NSTC. Central Asian countries are unable to fill the financial gap left by bigger participants like India and Russia. The lack of a common tariff regime and many barriers on the borders of Azerbaijan and Iran also do not facilitate the proper environment for achieving the full capacity of the NSTC, which with proper investment could reach roughly 30 million tons of freight by 2030.<sup>14</sup>

### *Poland, EU and US perspective*

Poland's interest in the South Caucasus and Central Asia region is twofold. The first consideration is energy cooperation. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan could increase their share in Poland's imports of oil and gas, as part of EU cooperation with these countries. The second is the Middle Corridor, seen by Poland's government and the EU as a means to bypass Russia for freight transportation from Asia. Current cooperation, however, is limited mainly to the energy domain.

There is growing interest in the EU in buying more oil and gas from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. That approach increases the chance of

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14 Dezan Shira and Associates, "Joint Azerbaijan, Iran Logistics Operator Proposed For Western INTSC Routes to Russia and Europe", *Russia Briefing*, October 31, 2022, available at: <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/joint-azerbaijan-iranian-logistics-operator-proposed-for-western-instc-routes-to-russia-and-europe.html/> (accessed: April 18, 2023)

combining EU funds to further increase the volume of oil and gas exported from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to Europe. The fact that the pipelines are functional even when political tensions in the South Caucasus remain high provides at least some assurance that delivery of these commodities is not going to be disrupted. Poland and Lithuania currently cooperate with Azerbaijan in a safe roads project that could make the transit of goods along Azerbaijan's roads safer and smoother. This project is directed towards safety improvements on Azerbaijani roads. Lithuanian and Polish experts will support Azerbaijan in introducing new regulations to improve the safety of travel along Azerbaijan's roads.<sup>15</sup>

*There is growing interest in the EU in buying more oil and gas from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. That approach increases the chance of combining EU funds to further increase the volume of oil and gas exported from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to Europe.*

US and EU engagement in Middle Corridor projects could increase financing opportunities, thereby making it easier for TITR countries to create the required intermodal infrastructure. The difficult part of that situation for TITR states is manoeuvring between the contradictory interests of the US, EU, China, Russia and Türkiye. Each of these players would want to dominate the TITR. Participants in that route should carefully assess how to keep doors open to the other side in case a former partner loses its position or capabilities, in the way that Russia has after its poor performance in the war in Ukraine.

## **Conclusion**

When we take into consideration wide-ranging points of view, the current changes in the international political and economic order are simultaneously an opportunity and a danger for Central Asian and South Caucasus countries. China, through its Belt and Road Initiative, started the process of rebuilding links between countries positioned along the ancient Silk Road. The BRI is simultaneously a political and an economic project. China, through its economic projects, also wants to increase its influence in the states situated along the BRI, just as other investors do. At the same time, the EU's interest in oil and gas from

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<sup>15</sup> Ministry of Infrastructure, "Polish-Azerbaijani talks on transport, logistics and road safety" (translation from Polish), News, March 5, 2023, available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/infrastruktura/polsko-azerskie-rozmowy-o-transportcie-logistyce-i-bezpieczenstwie-ruchu-drogowego> (accessed: June 15, 2023)

Central Asia, mainly from Kazakhstan and the South Caucasus, with Azerbaijan as the leading deliverer of those goods, offers an additional way to bring investment to these regions.

Geopolitical rivalry among the great powers has become one of the most important factors in today's international policy. The US is focusing its attention in these regions as places of geopolitical rivalry with both China and Russia. American investment in the Central Asia and South Caucasus transport infrastructure will depend on the profit to the US of that rivalry. India sees the opportunity to shape its geopolitical surroundings. US and India cooperation, taking into account their good political relations, could be manifested in Middle Corridor projects. Meanwhile, rivalry among the great powers could be used by countries along the Middle Corridor to skilfully attract investment from them, as these powers will be interested in realizing their interests in the Middle Corridor. This became much more attractive for China after war broke out in Ukraine last year, as it provides an additional route to move cargo to the Middle East and Europe. That route needs significant investment in intermodal infrastructure, otherwise it will be unable to immediately supplement the Siberian route.

As a result of the war in Ukraine, the EU found itself in a vulnerable position in terms of transit of oil and gas sources from Russia. European countries started to seek new sources of and routes for these fuels. Poland is a special case in Eastern Europe, due to its historic experience with Russia, including wars and Russian occupation. Any new source of oil and gas independent of Russia has important value for the Polish government. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are therefore going to benefit more from the current level of trade in fossil fuels to Europe, as European trade links with Russia are virtually cut off. Fossil fuel trade is now one of the main aspects of the EU's activities in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Pipelines like the Southern Gas Corridor,<sup>16</sup> including the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline,<sup>17</sup> are deemed the most reliable way of doing business in the region currently.

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16 Ministry of Energy of Republic of Azerbaijan, main page projects, "The Southern Gas Corridor", May 31, 2023, available at: [https://minenergy.gov.az/en/layiheler/cenub-qaz-dehlizi\\_2196](https://minenergy.gov.az/en/layiheler/cenub-qaz-dehlizi_2196) (accessed: June 16, 2023)

17 TANAP Home, available at: <https://www.tanap.com/en/tanap-project> (accessed: June 16, 2023)

Transport of goods requires huge investment in ports, roads and railroads. Therefore, the realisation of Middle Corridor projects would take some time. The war in Ukraine creates motivation to attract investors such as the EU or China to finance that trade route. The Middle Corridor has the potential to supplement the Northern Corridor as an AsiaEurope multimodal cargo route. It is for countries situated along the Middle Corridor to skilfully take advantage of that circumstance.





# The Axis of the Iranian Islamist Regime and Armenian Nationalism

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Maxime Gauin\*

This article presents the origins of and the recent developments in the alliance between Iran, on one side, and Armenian diaspora nationalists and the government of Armenia on the other. The use of Armenian nationalism by Iran started with the first Shah of the Pahlavi dynasty, but the Islamic Republic of Iran developed and intensified those ties. Building on the success of Azerbaijan in the April conflict of 2016, the liberation of its previously occupied territories in 2020, the full reconstitution of the Türkiye–Azerbaijan–Israel triangle, and the weakening of Russia since 2022, this article explains the reinforcement of the ties between the partners and the unprecedented rise of Iranian aggressiveness against Azerbaijan.

**Key words:** Armenia, Iran, nationalism, South Caucasus, Armenian Diaspora



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### *Historical background*

The paradox has never been so acute: Armenian nationalists, who have persistently presented themselves as the purest incarnation of Christianity, and even inspired anti-Muslim terrorist Anders Breivik,<sup>1</sup> are also the staunchest allies of the Islamist regime ruling Iran since 1979. This true for the current Armenian government and even more for the nationalist organization of the Armenian diaspora. Nevertheless, this is a paradox in appearance only. The alliance makes sense when considering what Armenian nationalism is primarily about.

The Armenian presence in Iran is as old as the Armenian (Gregorian) church,<sup>2</sup> and this community is one of the sources of 19<sup>th</sup> century immigration to today's Armenia.<sup>3</sup> The implantation of Armenian nationalism in Iran precedes the First World War, when this country was used by Armenian nationalists as a bulwark against the Ottoman Empire.<sup>4</sup> However, the situation became much more problematic in 1917–1918, when British and French military attachés tried to create a “Christian Front” (of Armenians and Assyrians, from north-eastern Anatolia to north-western Iran) in order to prevent the Ottoman and German armies from reaching Baku and its oil fields. In February–March 1918, the Armenian and Assyrian volunteers of fighting units in Urmia (north-western Iran) escaped the control of the French officers sent to command them, and even threatened those officers when they protected 2,000 local Muslims (Azerbaijanis, Kurds, and Persians) who fled the violence of the Christian nationalists.<sup>5</sup> Those who could not take refuge on time often suffered this:

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1 Breivik, A., “2083: A Declaration of European Independence”, Oslo, 2011; Lragir, *The Criminal on Armenian Television*, July 27, 2011, available at: <https://www.lragir.am/2011/07/27/22755/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

2 Nahapetian, N., “République islamique et communautarisme: Les Arméniens d'Iran”, *CEMOTI*, No. 24, 1997, p. 294.

3 Karabakh.org, *Massive resettlement of the Armenians to Karabakh and other regions of North Azerbaijan*, available at <https://karabakh.org/karabakh-history/karabakh-during-the-xix-cc/massive-resettlement-of-the-armenians-to-karabakh-and-other-regions-of-north-azerbaijan/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

4 Berberian, H., “The Dashnaksutiun and the Iranian constitutional revolution, 1905–1911,” *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1/2, Winter/Spring 1996, pp. 7–33; McCarthy, J., Arslan, E., Taşkıran, C. et al., *The Armenian Rebellion at Van* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006), pp. 41, 43, 49, 55, 188 and 216.

5 Caujole, P. *Les Tribulations d'une ambulance française en Perse* (Paris: Les Gêmeaux, 1922), pp. 73–94 (quotation p. 83).

*Girls disembowelled, the intestines unwound on the snow, still alive and holding their entrails in their hands. A child, his eye drawn from the orbit, screaming his pain and handing me his bloody stump for me to pull it out of the smoky rubble where his executioners had thrown it. Shattered skulls, brains whose spit has sprayed on the walls!*

The total losses of the bloody events between Muslims on one side, and Armenians and Assyrians on the other, were about 4,000 persons, including some 100 Armenian and Assyrian fighters killed with weapons in hand, the others being Muslims, often unarmed civilians.<sup>6</sup> These war criminals were totally unable to block the Ottoman advance to Baku through Urmia and abandoned this city in mid-1918. In July of the same year, indiscriminate and bloody reprisals took place in Urmia against the Christian population, perpetrated by Muslims in general, and especially by ethnic Persians. Yet the Armenian nationalists never developed, as a result of this violence, any anti-Persian racism, unlike that which has been developed against the Turks as a result of the mutual massacres of 1915–16. A similar double standard was implemented to the benefit of the Kurds (overrepresented among the perpetrators of bloody reprisals in Anatolia at that time) by the same Armenian nationalists.

The main explanation for this double standard can be found in the foundation of the project of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (the ruling party in Armenia from 1918 to 1920, established in Tbilisi, Georgia, as a transnational network in 1890) at the end of 1920s: this was an “Aryan confederation” (Armenia, “Kurdistan”, and Iran), led by Tehran, against the Republic of Türkiye and the USSR, preferably with the support of fascist Italy.<sup>7</sup> The cooperation of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) with Iran’s Pahlavi regime continued and was not diminished by the rapprochement of official Tehran with the Nazi regime of Germany after 1935. The ARF was seriously weakened by the arrests of its members by the British and the Soviets from 1941 to 1944 during the joint invasion of Iran.<sup>8</sup> In Iran, as in other countries (Greece, for example), the ARF was saved by the Cold War.

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6 Zavie, E., *D’Archangel au Golfe persique. Aventures de cinquante français en Perse*, (Paris: La Cité des livres, 1927), p. 270, n. 1 (also see pp. 173, 248-250, 258–260 and 266).

7 Gorgas, J. T., *Le Mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil: continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925–1946)*, (Berne: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 121 and 225–228.

8 Abrahamian, E., *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 388.

The racist (Aryanist<sup>9</sup>) ideology of the ARF has remained intact until today, as proved by the recurrent tributes paid by this party to its leaders who collaborated with the Nazis (recruitment of volunteers, spying, and sabotage), on an ideological (racist) basis, from 1933 to 1945.<sup>10</sup>

During the first years of the Islamist regime, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini initially favoured the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), a terrorist organization created in Lebanon in 1971 by dissident Armenian nationalists in opposition to the traditional nationalist parties, over the ARF, because the ARF was closely associated with the Shahs, having been accepted as the main representative of the Armenian community and having seats in the parliament. However, by 1983, the mullahs' repression of the ARF, which had started in 1979, changed its aims. It was no more about taking revenge against former supporters of the Shah, but about forcing this Armenian party to work – at least politically – for the Islamist regime.<sup>11</sup> The reconciliation became official in 1989, when the commemorations of 24 April took place in Tehran beneath pictures of Khomeiny. The tensions between Tehran and Ankara (concerning the issue of secularism and of the veil at the university) surely had something to do with this reconciliation,<sup>12</sup> but the

9 Because the Armenian nationalists believe they belong to the “Aryan race” and consider the Persians as “Aryans”, they forgive what they never forgave when Turks behaved in the same way.

10 Berberian, H., “From Nationalist-Socialist to National Socialist? The Shifting Politics of Abraham Giulkhandanian,” in Der Matossian, B. (ed.), *The First Republic of Armenia (1918–1920) on Its Centenary: Politics, Gender, and Diplomacy* (Fresno: California State University, 2020), pp. 53–88; Derounian, A., “John T. Flynn and the Dashnags”, *The Propaganda Battlefield*, 31 May 1944, available at: <http://jfk.hood.edu/Collection/Weisberg%20Subject%20Index%20Files/F%20Disk/Friends%20Of%20Democracy/Item%2006.pdf>; Jaffe-Hoffman, M., “At Auschwitz liberation tribute, Israel should study tale of two monuments”, *The Jerusalem Post*, January 21, 2020, available at: <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/at-auschwitz-liberation-tribute-israel-should-study-tale-of-two-monuments-614769>; Sonentz-Papazian, T. “Sonentz: In Memory of General Dro,” *The Armenian Weekly*, November 16, 2017, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2017/11/16/sonentz-general-dro/>; The Armenian Weekly, *Garegin Nzhdeh's Statue to Be Erected in Bulgaria*, January 26, 2018, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2018/01/26/garegin-nzhdeh-statue-erected-bulgaria/> (all the links accessed: June 23, 2023)

11 Toranian, J-M “Ara”, “L’ayatollah Khomeiny reçoit Hay Baykar”, *Hay Baykar*, February–March 1979, p. 7; Minassian, G., *Guerre et terrorisme arméniens* (Paris: PUF, 2002), p. 80.

12 Le Monde, *Le massacre des Arméniens en 1915 a été commémoré à Erevan et... à Téhéran*, April 26, 1989, available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1989/04/26/le-massacre-des-armeniens-en-1915-a-ete-commemore-a-erevan-et-a-teheran\\_4104977\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1989/04/26/le-massacre-des-armeniens-en-1915-a-ete-commemore-a-erevan-et-a-teheran_4104977_1819218.html) (accessed: June 23, 2023)

Caucasian context, too, is one of the elements necessary to understand it. The ethnic cleansing of the Azerbaijanis from Soviet Armenia, begun in 1987, was almost completed (more than 200,000 persons expelled to Azerbaijan, and probably 217 killed in order to scare the others), making Armenia an almost mono-ethnic country.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the repression in Georgia, in January 1989, showed how contested Soviet domination was in the region and, as a result, indicated the possibility of independence for the Caucasus' three countries. Until today, the ARF is the only Armenian party allowed and registered in Iran.<sup>14</sup>

During the First Karabakh War (1988–1994), Iran officially acted as a mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but was in practice on the side of Armenia, including providing military assistance.<sup>15</sup> The secular model of Azerbaijan is indeed in absolute contradiction to the Islamist regime of Iran imposed by the mullahs. Correspondingly, Baku developed its alliance with Ankara (another secular power with a Sunni majority) as early as 1992, and started developing its relations with Israel in the same year, the Israeli embassy in Baku having been opened in 1993.<sup>16</sup> All the attempts of Iran to use the disorganization of Azerbaijan in the early 1990s to promote Islamism in this country failed.<sup>17</sup> Until today, the Islamist regime has allowed Armenian schools in Iran, but never allowed any school in the Azerbaijani language.

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13 Gauin, M., “The Home they Lost: Refugees from Armenia to Azerbaijan”, Analytical Policy Brief, *Institute for Development and Diplomacy of ADA University*, March 10, 2023, available at: [https://idd.az/media/2023/03/13/idd\\_policy\\_brief\\_-\\_gauin\\_-\\_10\\_march.pdf](https://idd.az/media/2023/03/13/idd_policy_brief_-_gauin_-_10_march.pdf) (accessed: June 23, 2023)

14 *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, “Dašnjak”, available at: <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/dasnak> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

15 Priego, A., “Armenia-Iran relations and their implications for Nagorno-Karabakh” *Comentarios UNISCI*, No. 1, June 19, 2007, available at: <https://www.ucm.es/data/cont/media/www/pag-72542/1comentario.pdf> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

16 Murinson, A., *Turkey's Entente with Israel and Azerbaijan. State Identity and Security in the Middle East and Caucasus* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010)

17 *Le Monde*, *L'Azerbaïdjan dans la tourmente — Les revers essuyés au Karabakh exposent Bakou à toutes les aventures*, March 18, 1992, available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1992/03/18/l-azerbaïdjan-dans-la-tourmente-les-revers-essuyés-au-karabakh-exposent-bakou-a-toutes-les-aventures\\_3878482\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1992/03/18/l-azerbaïdjan-dans-la-tourmente-les-revers-essuyés-au-karabakh-exposent-bakou-a-toutes-les-aventures_3878482_1819218.html); *Le Monde*, *L'Iran est écarté de l'exploitation pétrolière en Azerbaïdjan au profit de la société turque TPAO et de la firme américaine Exxon*, April 14, 1995, available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1995/04/14/l-iran-est-ecarte-de-l-exploitation-petroliere-en-azerbaïdjan-au-profit-de-la-societe-turque-tpao-et-de-la-firme-americaine-exxon\\_3867493\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1995/04/14/l-iran-est-ecarte-de-l-exploitation-petroliere-en-azerbaïdjan-au-profit-de-la-societe-turque-tpao-et-de-la-firme-americaine-exxon_3867493_1819218.html) (all the links accessed: June 23, 2023); Murinson, A., “Le poids de l'histoire — Comment l'Iran pénètre en Azerbaïdjan”, *Outre-terre*, No. 28, 2011, pp. 474–478.

The alliance of Iran and Armenia solidified during the following years. One of the most striking examples was the delivery of weapons by Armenia to Iran in 2007, a part of these weapons being transferred by the Islamist regime to a Shia militia in Iraq for a deadly attack against the U.S. Army. The State Department only expressed “deep concern” and applied no sanction on Yerevan,<sup>18</sup> due to the actions of the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA, controlled by the ARF) and of the Armenian Assembly of America (AAA, controlled by Ramkavar, another Armenian nationalist party).

Barely less relevant for the Armenia–Iran alliance is the joint statement of the Armenian and Iranian governments, in December 2011, on the “right of the nations to a peaceful use of nuclear power”, followed by an agreement for building a gas pipeline connecting the two countries.<sup>19</sup> The alliance was also consolidated in the diaspora, particularly in Lebanon. Indeed, by 1996, the ARF of Lebanon started bringing itself closer to the Tehran-controlled Hezbollah. The ARF as whole (not merely the Lebanese branch) officially stated in 1996: “*Pan-Turkism and racist Zionism are two sides of the same coin, namely of imperialism.*”<sup>20</sup> Since 2005, the ARF and Hezbollah have been part of the same electoral bloc for the Lebanese legislative elections.<sup>21</sup>

Correspondingly, since 2011, the ARF and the Iranian regime have been on the same side during the Syrian civil war, that is, on the side of Bashar el-Assad.<sup>22</sup> As a result, there is no exaggeration in the official statement made by the ARF in 2021 that the party “has always worked to strengthen Armenia–Iran relations” and “welcome[s] the military–political will of Iran’s leadership” against Azerbaijan and Türkiye.<sup>23</sup>

18 Lake, E., “WikiLeaks: Armenia sent Iran arms used to kill U.S. troops”, *The Washington Times*, November 29, 2010, available at: <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/nov/29/wikileaks-armenia-sent-iran-arms-used-to-kill-us-t/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

19 Slate.fr, *L’Arménie joue la carte iranienne*, January 27, 2012, available at: <https://www.slate.fr/lien/49215/armenie-iran-gazoduc> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

20 Minassian, G., *Guerre et terrorisme...*, *op.cit.*, p. 251.

21 Hourany, D. “Ethnic versus secular”, *Now Lebanon*, May 13, 2022, available at: <https://nowlebanon.com/ethnic-versus-secular/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

22 TV5 Monde, *Qui soutient encore Bachar al-Assad?*, June 1, 2014, available at: <https://information.tv5monde.com/international/qui-soutient-encore-bachar-al-assad-1453> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

23 The Armenian Weekly, *ARF Bureau addresses regional developments with Iran*, October 6, 2021, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/10/06/arf-bureau-addresses-regional-developments-with-iran/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

This reference to the current “military–political” actions of Iran lead to the changes made by the Azerbaijani victories of 2016 and 2020.

***The reinforcement of the Azerbaijan–Türkiye–Israel triangle after the 2016 and 2020 wars***

The reinforcement of the alliance between Tehran and the Armenian nationalists does not date back to 2020, but to 2016, when a four-day war erupted between the armed forces of Armenia and Azerbaijan along the former line of contact, precisely in Azerbaijan’s formerly occupied territories. Indeed, the victory of Azerbaijan during the “Four Days War” of April 2016 broke the myth of the invincibility of the Armenian Army and increased the self-confidence of Azerbaijan’s army. It was also proof of the efficiency of Israeli-manufactured drones and confirmed the importance of the turn in Azerbaijan’s weapons’ imports made in 2015. Since this time, the largest part of the military material imported by Azerbaijan (roughly the two thirds) has come from Israel, and no longer from Russia.<sup>24</sup>

*Invincibility of the Armenian Army and increased the self-confidence of Azerbaijan’s army. It was also proof of the efficiency of Israeli-manufactured drones and confirmed the importance of the turn in Azerbaijan’s weapons’ imports made in 2015.*

A few months later, in December 2016, then President of Iran Hassan Rouhani went to Armenia to sign at least two agreements, one to increase the delivery of gas and one on the “joint use” of the border between the two countries.<sup>25</sup> Before this visit, in September, the Islamist regime invited to Iran no fewer than 16 “Armenian journalists” from Armenia, the separatist entity established by Armenia in Azerbaijan’s Karabakh region, the Czech Republic, France, Lebanon, Syria, and the United States. Among the American Armenian “journalists” was Harout Sassounian, columnist for the ARF organ *The Armenian Weekly*, editor of *The California Courier* and President of the All-Armenian Fund. Mr Sassounian dared to write: “As this was my first visit to Iran, I quickly discovered that the country was a lot different than

24 Smith, J., Wezeman, P. D. and Kuimova, A., “Arms transfers to conflict zones: The case of Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Sirpi.org*, April 30, 2021, available at: <https://www.sirpi.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2021/arms-transfers-conflict-zones-case-nagorno-karabakh> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

25 The Armenian Weekly, *Iranian, Armenian Leaders Look to Strengthen Ties*, December 21, 2016, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2016/12/21/iranian-armenian-leaders-look-to-strengthen-ties/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)



*what I had heard and read about in the United States. It is an important country with an ancient civilization that is often misunderstood by outsiders.*"<sup>26</sup> The fact that this "ancient civilization" cuts off the hands of thieves<sup>27</sup> and stones women for adultery does not seem to trouble him in any degree. But such open support by an American citizen residing in the US for an Islamist regime he did not support (at least not publicly) before 2016 needs some words of explanation.

While changes in Iran–Armenia Relations were significant, even bigger changes came during the and after Azerbaijan's victory of 2020. During the months preceding the war and during the war itself, all the weapons and ammunitions from Russia passed through Iran (via flights over the Caspian Sea) to Armenia, as Georgia refused any transit through its territory for warring countries. From Iran's point of view, the victory of Azerbaijani was a disaster, as the previously occupied territories of the latter had been used to bypass Western sanctions against the Islamic regime, acting as a gateway for exports and imports.<sup>28</sup> For the Armenian nationalists, it was also a financial loss (the clearest example being the Swiss-Armenian company Franck Müller, involved in the illegal exploitation of gold mines in Karabakh region until 2020),<sup>29</sup> but was also the materialization of a political nightmare.<sup>30</sup> It was the cancelation of Armenia's only territorial conquest since the attribution of the Zangezur region (now known as the "Syunik" region of Armenia) to Soviet Armenia by the USSR government in 1921 (after the ethnic cleansing of the Azerbaijanis living in the region by ARF official Garegin Nzhdeh

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26 Sassounian, H., "Sassounian: A Unique, Eye-Opening Visit to Iran," *The Armenian Weekly*, September 20, 2016, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2016/09/20/sassounian-a-unique-eye-opening-visit-to-iran/> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

27 France24, *L'Iran dévoile une machine pour amputer les voleurs*, January 25, 2013, available at: <https://observers.france24.com/fr/20130125-iran-devoile-machine-amputer-voleurs-chiraz-charia-doigt> (accessed: June 23, 2023)

28 Gafarli, T., "Unscrupulous profiteers of Armenia's Nagorno Karabakh occupation", *Anadolu Ajansi*, November 12, 2020, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-unscrupulous-profiteers-of-armenia-s-nagorno-karabakh-occupation-/2041427> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

29 Azernews, "Franck Muller founder engaged in illegal gold exploration in occupied territories of Azerbaijan – top official", October 31, 2020, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/karabakh/171828.html>; Karimli, I., "Azerbaijan Reveals Names of Foreign Mining Companies Illegally Operating in Karabakh Region", *Caspian News*, January 18, 2023, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-reveals-names-of-foreign-mining-companies-illegally-operating-in-karabakh-region-2023-1-18-0/> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

30 *France-Arménie*, January 2021, pp. 8–23.

and his men during the short-lived Armenian “Mountain Republic” of Zangezur, which escaped Soviet control from January to July 1921).

The hostility of the ANCA to the US sanctions against Iran existed before 2020, in accordance with the alliance of its holding group (the ARF) with Tehran, but the tone clearly became harsher after the victory of Azerbaijan in Second Karabakh War (2020). Indeed, in 2018, one of the ANCA’s programme directors, Alex Galitsky, tweeted:

*Sanctions provided a scapegoat for failing economy, pushed #Iran towards #Russia and #China & reduced reputational costs of regional intervention. The international sanctions regime did not just fail to curb Iran’s hegemonic ambitions – it accelerated them.”*<sup>31</sup>

In 2021, he wrote, also on Twitter: “‘Maximum pressure’ on Iran has seen the US empower warmongering dictatorships from Saudi Arabia & its war on Yemen to Turkey & Azerbaijan amidst their assault on Armenia, one of the region’s only democracies. This failed strategy has done nothing but deepen regional instability.”<sup>32</sup>

The ANCA itself went so far in 2022 as to tweet: “*The @ANCA\_DC thanks our sisters and brothers at the National Iranian American Council [NIAC] - for their solidarity. Persians & Armenians: Ancient civilizations w/ shared history, common values.*”<sup>33</sup> The NIAC is the lobby group established in 2002 in the United States to support the Iranian Islamist regime.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, the Turkish and Israeli governments have found the way for a full reconciliation, largely through Azerbaijani mediation.<sup>35</sup> This has

31 Galitsky, A., “Sanctions provided a scapegoat for failing economy, pushed #Iran towards #Russia and #China& reduced reputational costs of regional intervention...”, Twitter, March 19, 2018, 7:38 pm, available at: <https://twitter.com/algalsky/status/975879233187733504> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

32 Galitsky, A., “‘Maximum pressure’ on Iran has seen the US empower warmongering dictatorships from Saudi Arabia & its war on Yemen to Turkey...”, Twitter, November 29, 2021, 8:50 pm, available at: <https://twitter.com/algalsky/status/1465498423189143560> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

33 ANCA, “The @ANCA\_DC thanks our sisters and brothers at the National Iranian American Council - for their solidarity...” Twitter, September 13, 2022, 3:11 pm, [https://twitter.com/ANCA\\_DC/status/1569765672170790922](https://twitter.com/ANCA_DC/status/1569765672170790922) (accessed: May 31, 2023)

34 Lake, E., “Exclusive: Iran advocacy group said to skirt lobby rules”, *The Washington Times*, November 13, 2009, available at: <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/nov/13/exclusive-did-iranian-advocacy-group-violate-laws/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

35 The speech of President Ilham Aliyev at the “International conference “South Caucasus: Development and Cooperation”, CBC TV Azerbaijan, YouTube video, April 29, 2022, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNTCQw2qadE> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

resulted into the complete reconstitution of the Türkiye–Azerbaijan–Israel triangle, but with a much stronger Azerbaijani component than was the case around 2005, that is, during the previous high point of this trilateral alliance. Such a scenario is perceived as catastrophic by both the Iranian Islamist regime and the Armenian nationalists. This triangle reinforces Azerbaijan, which is the ideological antithesis of the Islamic Republic of Iran. For instance, in 2013, a survey by the Pew Research showed that only 8% of interviewed Azerbaijanis want sharia to be the state law, the lowest share of share of all the studied countries. The second lowest share is that of Türkiye, at 12%.<sup>36</sup> In both cases, the share is probably even lower today.

### *The current situation*

The Armenian nationalists are now mostly concerned with the failure of Armenian forces to concentrate heavy weapons near the internationally recognized border (as seen in the clashes of September 2022, when the Azerbaijani side again won)<sup>37</sup> and with Azerbaijani actions concerning the Lachin road. Indeed, these actions prevent the supply of weapons and ammunition to the separatist forces in the area where Russian “peacekeepers” are temporarily deployed. Yet, all the demands by the Armenian nationalists and their Western friends for “sanctions” against Azerbaijan, as a result of its control of the Lachin road, have failed. On the contrary, the West consolidated its partnership with Azerbaijan in 2022 by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on doubling gas supply from Azerbaijan for both EU and non-EU states, and this MoU was followed by an agreement on electricity supply to Europe.<sup>38</sup> The unhidden desire of the Armenian nationalists, that is, the “overthrow” of Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan,<sup>39</sup> has

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36 Pew Research Center, *The world’s muslims: Religion, politics and society: Chapter 1: Beliefs about Sharia*, April 30, 2013, available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-beliefs-about-sharia/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

37 Oryx, *War Once More: Documenting Equipment Losses During The September 2022 Armenia-Azerbaijan Border War*, September 14, 2022, available at: <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/09/war-once-more-documenting-equipment.html> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

38 Von der Leyen, U., “The two shores of the Black Sea have never been closer...”, Twitter, December 17, 2022, 3:17 am, available at: <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1604028008183889920> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

39 Mardikian, V., “Négociations arméno-azéries: ça coince”, *France-Arménie*, June 2022, p. 13.

also not been fulfilled, but nor has a peace treaty has been signed with Azerbaijan for the moment.

For the Islamic Republic of Iran, the main domestic problem is caused by the unprecedented public demonstrations against this regime that started in 2022. This is even more concerning for the mullahs as Iran has a strong minority ethnic component, not only ethnic Azerbaijanis but also the Baluchis (Pakistan-oriented). These have been overrepresented among demonstrators and the victims of repression.<sup>40</sup> Such events only increase the fear of the mullahs for the very existence of their government. Faced with these demonstrations, the regime is increasingly militarist and, according to some observers, close to becoming a racist one.<sup>41</sup>

The war in Ukraine is a source of both hopes and concerns for the two partners. The Islamist regime of Iran is one of the few countries providing weapons (drones, short-range missiles and tanks) to Russia, expects fighter jets in exchange, and seems to have already received cyber weapons.<sup>42</sup> Although the arrival of the Biden administration in 2021 had been seen with relief in Tehran, official Washington has now again increased the level of sanctions as a response to the deepening Iranian–Russian alliance amid the war in Ukraine.<sup>43</sup> The EU is taking similar measures, sanctioning Iranian companies for their contributions to the Russian war effort.<sup>44</sup>

Armenia is largely integrated into the Russia–Iran military alliance, as proved by Armenia’s participation in the drone competition in

40 Shaffer, B., “How Iran’s Ethnic Divisions Are Fueling the Revolt”, *Foreign Policy*, October 19, 2022, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/19/iran-protests-persians-minorities-ethnic-language-discrimination-regime-separatism/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

41 Le Monde, *En Iran, le pouvoir des gardiens de la révolution transforme progressivement le pays en une dictature militaire*, October 27, 2022, available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/10/27/en-iran-le-pouvoir-des-gardiens-de-la-revolution-transforme-progressivement-le-pays-en-une-dictature-militaire\\_6147558\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/10/27/en-iran-le-pouvoir-des-gardiens-de-la-revolution-transforme-progressivement-le-pays-en-une-dictature-militaire_6147558_3210.html) (accessed: May 31, 2023)

42 Lieber, D. and Faucon, B., “Moscow Supplies Iran With Advanced Cyber Weapons,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2023, p. A6

43 Macias, A., “U.S. slaps Iran with another round of sanctions over drones used in Russia’s war on Ukraine,” *CNBC.com*, January 6, 2023, available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/01/06/us-sanctions-iran-over-drones-used-in-russias-war-on-ukraine.html> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

44 Kijewski, L., “EU set to sanction Iranian companies over Russia’s war in Ukraine,” *Politico EU*, February 15, 2023, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-set-to-sanction-iranian-companies-over-russias-war-in-ukraine/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

*In the context of the reinforcement of Azerbaijan, as well as the weakening of Armenia and Russia, the authorities in Iran have chosen an aggressive posture.*

August 2022 in Iran.<sup>45</sup> Certainly, hopes for Russian intervention against Azerbaijan and Türkiye<sup>46</sup> have never materialized, and the atmosphere was particularly cold in September 2022, when Russia was unable to provide the military support requested by Yerevan, but this has in no way changed the fact that Armenia remains one of the main ways for Russia to bypass international sanctions, by importing and re-exporting to Russia targeted products such as microprocessors.<sup>47</sup> In fact, Armenian companies have been sanctioned by the US government for their support for the Russian war effort. For example, Tac LLC has been sanctioned for its participation in Russian imports of electronic materials.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, the Armenian nationalists who claim to be disappointed by the Kremlin are now advocating the reinforcement of the “partnership” with Iran as an alternative, from an explicitly anti-Western and anti-Israeli perspective.<sup>49</sup>

In the context of the reinforcement of Azerbaijan, as well as the weakening of Armenia and Russia, the authorities in Iran have chosen an aggressive posture. Military exercises have been conducted along the state borders with Azerbaijan in 2021 and then in 2022, and others are scheduled to take place in 2023; yet nothing of this kind happened between 1991 and 2020, when Azerbaijan’s territories bordering Iran were under Armenian

45 Joffre, T., “Iran, Russia, Belarus and Armenia hold joint drone competition,” *The Jerusalem Post*, August 16, 2022, available at: <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-714873> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

46 ANHA Hawar News Agency, “Harut Sassounian: an anti-Turkey coalition should be formed”, June 5, 2022, available at: <https://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/harut-sassounian-an-anti-turkey-coalition-should-be-formed-h31138.html>; Amirzayan, K., “Pourquoi mourir pour l’Artsakh”, *Nouvelles d’Arménie Magazine*, August 6, 2022, available at: [https://www.armenews.com/spip.php?page=article&id\\_article=94881](https://www.armenews.com/spip.php?page=article&id_article=94881); Abrahamian, M., “Arménie: le salut viendra de la Russie”, *Europe Orient*, May 25, 2022, available at: <https://europeorient.blogspot.com/2022/05/armenic-le-salut-viendra-de-la-russie.html> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

47 Marchenko, N., “Profiting from the war: Kremlin bypasses EU and US embargo via Armenia”, *The Sofia Globe*, March 27, 2023, available at: <https://sofiaglobe.com/2023/03/27/profitting-from-the-war-kremlin-bypasses-eu-and-us-embargo-via-armenia/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

48 U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Imposes Swift and Severe Costs on Russia for Putin’s Purported Annexation of Regions of Ukraine”, September 30, 2022, available at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0981> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

49 Tilbian, S., “Quel avenir pour l’Arménie?”, *Nouvelles d’Arménie Magazine*, October 28, 2022, available at: [https://armenews.com/spip.php?page=article&id\\_article=97543](https://armenews.com/spip.php?page=article&id_article=97543) (accessed: May 31, 2023)

occupation. More concrete was the arrest, in November 2022, of a spy network affiliated to Iran by the State Security Service of Azerbaijan.<sup>50</sup> Another subject of concern for Azerbaijan has been the illegal traffic of Iran's trucks to the former's Karabakh region. This started well before the war of 2020, but continued even afterwards.<sup>51</sup>

The crisis reached a new peak as a result of the murderous attack perpetrated on 27 January 2023 (Holocaust Remembrance Day) by an Iranian citizen at the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Tehran. The passivity of the police at the entrance of the embassy when the terrorist entered the building can only nurture the scepticism of Baku about the denial of responsibility by the government of Iran.<sup>52</sup> After this attack, the diplomatic personnel of the Embassy were repatriated to Baku. In this context, Armenia, as a sign of solidarity with Iran, blocked the adoption of a declaration by the Organization for the Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE) condemning this terrorist attack.<sup>53</sup>

Even more concerning is a recent assassination attempt against Fazil Mustafa, a deputy of Azerbaijan's Parliament known for his vocal criticism of Iran, on 28 March 2023. The crime took place the day before the official opening ceremony of the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Tel Aviv, Israel,<sup>54</sup> and only some minutes after the shots, Reza Abbasi,

50 Karimli, I., "Azerbaijan Exposes Secret Spy Network Set Up by Iran's Special Services", *Caspian News*, November 15, 2022, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-exposes-secret-spy-network-set-up-by-irans-special-services-2022-11-14-0/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

51 Anadolu Ajansi, *Iranian trucks have illegally entered Karabakh during Armenian occupation: President Aliyev*, September 27, 2021, available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/iranian-trucks-have-illegally-entered-karabakh-during-armenian-occupation-president-aliyev/2375984>; Bayramli, N., "Azerbaijan-Iran Relations at Its Lowest Level, Says President Aliyev", *Caspian News*, May 5, 2023, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-iran-relations-at-its-lowest-level-says-president-aliyev-2023-5-5-0/> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

52 Faucon, B., "Gunman Kills One at Azerbaijani Embassy in Iran", *The Wall Street Journal*, January 27, 2023, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/gunman-kills-one-at-azerbaijani-embassy-in-iran-11674833029>; Goble, P., "Attack on Azerbaijani Embassy in Iran Further Divides the World", *Eurasia Daily Monitor, The Jamestown Foundation*, January 31, 2023, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/attack-on-azerbaijani-embassy-in-iran-further-divides-the-world/> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

53 AzerNews, *Armenia obstructs OSCE declaration condemning terrorist attack on Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran*, March 18, 2023, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/207671.html> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

54 Gov.il, "Azerbaijan to open embassy in Israel today", March 29, 2023, available at: <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/azerbaijan-to-open-embassy-in-israel-today-29-mar-2023> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

an Iranian journalist closely linked to his government, tweeted, “Good night, Baku.”<sup>55</sup> The State Security Service of Azerbaijan arrested suspects less than one week later; all are linked to Iran and all confessed both their participation and the fact that the order came from Tehran.<sup>56</sup>

As a result, it appears that Iranian leaders are firmly committed to using terrorist groups against Azerbaijan. An obvious question is whether Armenian networks are likely to be used. If this happens, a reactivation of the ARF terrorist network is not impossible, considering the previous terrorist tradition of this party alongside the assault on Azerbaijanis by ARF members in 2020.<sup>57</sup> However, the VOMA and POGA paramilitary groups, supposedly banned by Armenia as a result of a decision of the International Court of Justice (7 December 2021), provide a more obvious tool for terrorist violence from an Iranian perspective.<sup>58</sup> In the diaspora, the organization most ready for an attack on Azerbaijan at the request of Iran is the Nubar-Ozanyan brigade, a paramilitary group operating in Syria. The group has publicly expressed its support for the Iranian-dominated Palestinian Islamic Jihad.<sup>59</sup> Nubar Ozanyan (killed in 2017) was a member of the far-left terrorist organization TIKKO who fought in the Armenian army during the first Karabakh war (1992–

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55 Azeri Times, “Minutes after #Iran critic Azerbaijani MP Fazil Mustafa was shot in front of his house in Baku, Iranian journalist with close ties to IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) tweeted: “Good Night #Baku””, Twitter, March 29, 2023, 10:13 am, available at: <https://twitter.com/AzeriTimes/status/1641081034493108227> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

56 Turan, *Iran’s involvement in attempted murder of MP Fazil Mustafa has been confirmed*, April 3, 2023, available at: [https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2023/4/free/politics\\_news/en/3104.htm](https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2023/4/free/politics_news/en/3104.htm); The speech of President Ilham Aliyev at the International conference on “on “Shaping the Geopolitics of the Greater Eurasia: from Past to Present to Future” dedicated to the 100th anniversary of National Leader Heydar Aliyevin Shusha, May 4, 2023, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXmN6G11hbE> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

57 Mynews1a.com, *Police Investigate Hate Crimes at Armenian Demonstration in Brentwood*, July 23, 2020, available at: <https://mynews1a.com/crime/2020/07/23/police-investigate-hate-crimes-at-armenian-demonstration-in-brentwood/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

58 International Court of Justice, “Reports of Judgments, Advisory Opinions and Orders Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Azerbaijan v. Armenia), Request for the Indication of Provisional Measures”, Order of December 7, 2021, available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/181/181-20211207-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

59 Armenia-Rojava, “Solidarity message with the Palestinian people and revolutionary forces resisting against Israel attacks on Gaza, from fighters of the Ş. Nubar Ozanyan Brigade.”, Twitter, August 6, 2022, 7:48 am, available at: <https://twitter.com/ArmeniaRojava/status/1555883403496628228> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

1994). Eventually, he moved to Syria to fight on the side of the Kurdish nationalist terrorists (PKK), also linked to Tehran.<sup>60</sup>

No matter what the Islamist regime will decide in this regard, its general views on the South Caucasus are clear. In February 2022, a conference was organized by the Iranian Studies Department of the Oriental Studies faculty of the Armenian National Academy of Sciences, together with the Iranian Cultural Center of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran at Yerevan, and Yerevan State University. The account by the ARF organ *Armenian Weekly* is devoid of any ambiguity:

*Iranian scholars pointed out that the 2020 war [...] was not just a war against Armenia, but also Iran. They hinted that by establishing a 'Zangezur Corridor,' Turkey–Azerbaijan–Israel are trying to cut Iran's alternative routes to Europe and Russia. They stressed the importance of the North-South Corridor for both countries, the increase of trade turnover to more than \$1 billion and negotiations regarding the free economic zone in Meghri.*<sup>61</sup>

On a more official level, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran stated, at the opening ceremony of the Iranian consulate in Zangezur (city of Kapan) in October 2022, that “*Iran considers the security of Armenia and the region as its own security.*” Then, in February 2023, he stated, “as a fundamental policy we are against any geopolitical changes in the region.”<sup>62</sup>

These concerns have rational and irrational aspects. It is perfectly rational, from the perspective of Tehran, to fear potential Turkish and Azerbaijani investments in Armenia in case of a peace treaty, because such investments would surely take place to secure a sustainable peace and would mitigate the Russian and Iranian domination of the

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60 Gutman, R., “Have the Syrian Kurds Committed War Crimes?”, *The Nation*, February 7, 2017, available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/have-the-syrian-kurds-committed-war-crimes/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

61 Tashjian, Y., “Reflection on the ‘Armenia-Iran: Historical Past and Present’ International Conference,” *The Armenian Weekly*, February 28, 2022, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/02/28/reflection-on-the-armenia-iran-historical-past-and-present-international-conference/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

62 Armenpress, *Iran considers security of Armenia and region to be its own security – Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian*, October 21, 2022, available at: <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1095416.html>; Asbarez, *Iran Again Voices Opposition to Regional ‘Geopolitical’ Changes*, February 27, 2023, available at: <https://asbarez.com/iran-again-voices-opposition-to-regional-geopolitical-changes/> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)



economy of Armenia. What is, however, totally irrational is to present Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Israel as one, as if they had merged against Iran, and to affirm that the opening of the Zangezur corridor would “cut Iran’s alternative roads to Europe and Russia.” An alliance does not represent the merging of the partners, and the very fact of opening a corridor is far from being sufficient to sever another road.

As far as evidence goes, the Iranian government, unlike Russia, does not use threaten to replace Nikol Pashinyan. Rather, the whole Iranian policy is now about providing encouragement, weapons, and gas to Armenia in order to give to its government the feeling that Iran is supportive and present in the region.<sup>63</sup> Clear evidence on the negative effects of this Iranian policy for the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan can be found in a statement made in January 2023 by Vahan Kostanyan, Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister: “*We had intelligence that larger attacks were being prepared by Azerbaijan when it attacked Armenia [sic] last September. Iranian actions and statements helped to stop a further deterioration of that situation.*”<sup>64</sup> As long as Armenia thinks that external support against Azerbaijan can be provided to restore its military capacity, devastated by the 2020 war, for new clashes (by Iranian military drones, for instance), the possibility of signing a peace treaty will be a distant prospect.<sup>65</sup>

Remarkably, despite the conflict between Nikol Pashinyan and the nationalists of the Armenian diaspora (who oppose the very idea of signing a peace treaty and call him a “traitor”<sup>66</sup>), these nationalists see

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63 Mejlumyan, A., “Iran and Armenia agree to double gas trade,” *Eurasianet*, November 2, 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/iran-and-armenia-agree-to-double-gas-trade>; Shahbazov, F., “Iran’s Drone Exports to Armenia Could Undermine Peace Process in Karabakh”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor, The Jamestown Foundation*, December 16, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/irans-drone-exports-to-armenia-could-undermine-peace-process-in-karabakh/>; Boussois, S., “L’Arménie prise au piège de la toile iranienne: un jeu dangereux”, *L-Post*, January 11, 2023, available at: <https://lpost.be/2023/01/11/opinion-larmenie-prise-au-piege-strategique-de-la-toile-iranienne-un-jeu-dangereux/> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

64 Zaman, A., “Turkey rises, Russia fades as Iran and Azerbaijan clash over Armenia”, *Al-Monitor*, January 31, 2023, available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/01/turkey-rises-russia-fades-iran-and-azerbaijan-clash-over-armenia> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

65 Shahbazov, F., “Iran’s Drone Exports to Armenia Could Undermine Peace Process in Karabakh”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor, The Jamestown Foundation*, December 16, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/irans-drone-exports-to-armenia-could-undermine-peace-process-in-karabakh/> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

66 Nouvelles d’Arménie Magazine, *Déclaration du comité central de la FRA*, November

no problem in supporting this Iranian policy. Harut Sassounian wrote a column titled: “Israeli TV spews repulsive Azeri propaganda against Armenia and Iran”. The original text was reproduced and translated into French by the blog of the fiercely pro-Putin (and mullah-friendly) review *Europe et Orient*, edited by former Ramkavar leader Jean Varoujan Sirapian.<sup>67</sup>

Using a barely implicit style, the Ramkavar organ *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator* in the US blamed Azerbaijani authorities, arguing as if they claim Armenia’s and Iran’s territory.<sup>68</sup> This convergence of the Ramkavar party’s (US branch) approach with Iran is particularly noteworthy, as the Lebanese branch of the Ramkavar party is an ally of the parliamentary block opposed to Hezbollah. It is true that the world leadership of Ramkavar has practically ceased to exist, however, contradictions are more likely to emerge in such a situation.

### ***What next?***

It is not clear what the outcome of the tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, or between Iran and Israel, will be. It is safe to observe that the disappointment of Armenian nationalists concerning Russia has no counterpart concerning Iran: This political dimension is the strongest, the biggest asset of the Iranian government. However, the economic importance of Iran does not match yet the importance of Russia. On the opposite side, the Azerbaijani army has proved to be robust and modern.<sup>69</sup> Azerbaijan has an exceptionally strong alliance with Türkiye.

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14, 2020, available at: [http://armenews.com/spip.php?page=article&id\\_article=71968](http://armenews.com/spip.php?page=article&id_article=71968); Lavrina, A. “In New York, #Armenian radicals from among the #Dashnaks detained Nikol #Pashinyan’s motorcade, calling him a “traitor””, September 24, 2022, 9:57 am, available at: <https://twitter.com/ALavrina/status/1573673057327144961> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

67 Sassounian, H., “Israeli TV spews repulsive Azeri propaganda against Armenia and Iran,” *The Armenian Weekly*, January 30, 2023, available at: <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/01/30/israeli-tv-spews-repulsive-azeri-propaganda-against-armenia-and-iran/>; Sassounian, H., “La télévision israélienne propage une propagande azérie répugnante contre l’Arménie et l’Iran”, *Europe Orient*, February 3, 2023, available at: <https://europeetorient.blogspot.com/2023/02/la-television-israelienne-propage-une.html> (all the links accessed: May 31, 2023)

68 Azadian, E., “New Threat to Armenia’s Sovereignty, In Addition to Azerbaijan,” *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, February 23, 2023, available at: <https://mirrorspectator.com/2023/02/23/new-threat-to-armenias-sovereignty-in-addition-to-azerbaijan/> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

69 Erickson, E. J., “The 44-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh Turkish Drone Success or

Its Israeli and Pakistani alliances are currently reinforced. All that is dissuasive, at least to a certain extent, for Tehran. And, last but not least, the Iranian Islamist regime is aware of the numerical importance of the Azerbaijanis and Baluchis in Iran. What can be said, in any case, is that knowledge on the alliance of the Armenian nationalists has to be spread, and especially made known to Western public opinion. For Azerbaijan, in addition to the information field, its Israeli and Turkish alliances provide it with a first-class opportunity to manage the terrorist risk, considering the experience of these two countries.

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Operational Art?”, *Military Review Online*, August 2021, available at: <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/img/Online-Exclusive/2021/erickson/Erickson-the-44-day-war.pdf> (accessed: May 31, 2023)

# CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

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