

# Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: The Failure of Multilateral Diplomacy

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This article describes the failure of the long-term attempts to resolve the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan through the means of multilateral diplomacy. It shows that the OSCE Minsk Group has been unable to fulfil its mission and analyses the structural problems their attempts have had. Then, the article proceeds to question the validity of the liberal concept of global politics and its ability to resolve conflicts, arguing that, in the case of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, multilateral diplomatic efforts could actually have made matters worse instead of improving them. It reveals that attempts to stimulate the conflict parties to achieve a consensus were futile owing to the fundamentally skewed status quo and, in reality, only motivated Armenia to continue doing nothing and trying to normalize the fact of territorial occupation. The article also points up the failure to apply similar legal standards to the Nagorno-Karabakh and other separatist conflicts in the post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe. Finally, it evokes the realist concept of diplomacy and reviews its fundamental pillars, arguing for a case that their application in the foreign policy of the conflicting states might have helped them to achieve much better conflict-resolution dynamics.

**Keywords:** Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, democratic peace, conflict resolution, political realism, OSCE Minsk Group, multilateral diplomacy



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*Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict: Negotiations*

Outside observers often find it difficult to understand why the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict has been so intractable and resisted peaceful resolution. There is a complex combination of several complicating factors: the exclusive and radical version of nationalism preached by the Armenian side; the absence of local mechanisms of civil representation and dispute resolution that could help to establish a dialogue between the two communities; and the factor of Russia, which has capitalized on the hostile status quo to entrench the dependence of both Azerbaijan and Armenia on its security guarantees. All these factors have formed a rock-solid perception in the minds of both peoples and their national elites that the conflict has no viable or acceptable resolution. However, and perhaps most importantly, the ultimate culprit has been the blatant failure of diplomatic efforts, both at the level of the international community and among regional actors.

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Given the highly adverse dynamics on the ground, the only viable hope for a breakthrough had always rested with a proactive and principled position of the larger international community regarding the issue. However, this hope would never come to fruition. Back in 1992, when the conflict was still in the phase of expansion, the OSCE called for the convening of a special conference to mediate between Azerbaijan and Armenia and help them in finding a solution.<sup>1</sup> The body that came to be formed in 1994 was dubbed the Minsk Group, from the place of its first gathering. Now, 28 years later, it has still to show any tangible successes for inclusion

in its resumé. Even the 1994 ceasefire agreement, which unfortunately remained the single most successful episode in the Armenia–Azerbaijan negotiations, was largely mediated by Russia.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, the Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, the USA, and France, has become known for one particular skill: muddling through and avoiding any meaningful and innovative ideas. In fact, since the 2000s, the only mission of the group was to monitor the situation along the Line of Contact (LoC), while the absence of permanent international observers was a breeding ground for constant ceasefire violations that further

1 OSCE Minsk Group, “Who We are”, available at: <https://www.osce.org/minsk-group/108306> (accessed: December 12, 2020).

2 Povazan, M., “Russian Foreign Policy Towards and Influence on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict,” *Russian Council of Foreign Relations*, November 9, 2020, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/martinpovazan/russias-foreign-policy-towards-and-influence-on-the-nagornokarabakh-co/> (accessed: December 12, 2020).

plagued diplomatic efforts. The frequent, fruitless visits and grudgingly similar statements made for many years by Andrzej Kasprzyk, the OSCE Special Representative in the Minsk Group for 23 years, became an increasingly irritating factor in Baku in the environment of rising tensions and a growing sense of unfairness regarding the status quo. In an article written as far back as 1996, a US Special Representative for Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations, John Maresca, pointed out the perennial weaknesses of the Minsk Group, which was kept too low-key in its status, represented little political will of the countries that were supposed to stand behind it, and was constantly ridiculed and pushed back by high-level Russian authorities.<sup>3</sup> However, its format and mandate have remained unchanged ever since.

The relative calm that reigned in the conflict zone between 1994 and 2014 was often presented as a success of diplomacy, which completely ignored the fact that this calm mainly had to do with the unwillingness of the both parties to risk a renewal of hostilities as well as the specificities of the unipolar global order that posed very difficult obstacles to the use of power. As soon as this order started to show cracks after the Russian occupation of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia in 2008, the whole balance of power shifted and it suddenly turned out that large-scale violence in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone is possible and the Minsk Group is poorly equipped to prevent it. Given the growing polarization in the world between major centres of power, the fact that the three Co-Chairs of the Group have retained miraculous unanimity on the peace process<sup>4</sup> attests not to its success, but rather the careless and superficial attitude of the international community, as big countries simply did not bother to clash over a relatively “unimportant” matter. The reactions of the co-chair countries during the 44-day war exemplified the reasons why the Group could not be an efficient tool. For instance, France’s President Emanuel Macron rather boldly endorsed Yerevan by promising “not to accept Azerbaijan’s attempts to re-conquer Nagorno-Karabakh” (without offering means to do it

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3 Maresca, J., “Lost Opportunities in Negotiating the Conflict over Nagorno Karabakh,” *International Negotiation*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Jan. 1996), pp. 471-499.

4 Markedonov, S., “Russia and Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: a Careful Balancing,” *ISPI*, March 12, 2018, available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/russia-and-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-careful-balancing-19832> (accessed: December 12, 2020).

peacefully),<sup>5</sup> and the USA seemed not to be particularly bothered.<sup>6</sup>

The United Nations has been no better at finding a way out of this impasse. The Security Council was seemingly very active during the most intensive phase of the war in 1993 and issued four resolutions (numbers 822, 853, 874, and 884) that emphasized commitment to the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and called for the withdrawal of the Armenian occupying forces from the Kalbajar, Aghdam, Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Gubadly, and Zangilan regions.<sup>7</sup> However, these benign declarations would not materialize. The Western mediators, in the case of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, instead of pressuring Armenia to demonstrate constructiveness in the negotiations, simply decided to freeze the conflict until better times, which, as is now clear, would never come.

The international community's lukewarm efforts to resolve the conflicts in the South Caucasus, perceived as a deep backwater, represented an obvious contrast to its active position on the Yugoslavian wars, which were unfolding in the immediate vicinity of the West. In the above-mentioned article, Ambassador Maresca openly claims that the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process was left by the West to Russia as a consolation prize, as it took the biggest one: Yugoslavia.<sup>8</sup> These double standards left a lasting scar on the societies and political elites of Azerbaijan and Armenia and imposed significant obstacles to their normal development. In Azerbaijan, this attitude instilled a conviction of the profound injustice of the world order, as well as its inability to be inclusive and serve the most pressing needs of small nations. It has been widely perceived that calls for peace and reconciliation without putting any pressure on Armenia to make the necessary compromises—liberating at least the seven adjacent districts around Nagorno-Karabakh region and starting the process of the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homeland—merely disguised a cynical worldview in which conflicts and suffering that do not immediately harm big powers do not really matter.

In Armenia, getting away unpunished after having gained three times more territory than initially planned and having committed a number of war

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5 Daily Sabah, *We Won't Accept Azerbaijani Control in Nagorno Karabakh, Macron says*, September 30, 2020, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/we-wont-accept-azerbaijani-control-in-nagorno-karabakh-macron-says> (accessed: December 12, 2020).

6 Safi, M. & Borger, J., "US silence on Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict reflects international disengagement", *The Guardian*, October 4, 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/04/us-armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh> (accessed: December 12, 2020).

7 U.S. Department of State Archive, "1993 UN Security Council Resolutions on Nagorno-Karabakh", available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/13508.htm> (accessed: December 12, 2020).

8 Maresca, J., "Lost Opportunities in Negotiating the Conflict over Nagorno Karabakh," *International Negotiation*, Vol.1, No.3 (Jan. 1996), pp. 471-499.

crimes created a growing sense of “justice by force”: the normalisation of the conflict outcomes by the mere fact that the world makes no tangible efforts to resolve it. These feelings among Armenians gradually led to the triumph of the maximalist position that they have no need to compromise at all. This “double movement” in the conflicting countries narrowed down the negotiation space until, in the 2010s, it was no longer possible for Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders to find a common language. After several years of intensive diplomatic work that culminated in the Key West talks, where the conflicting sides were very close to an ultimate solution (though the proposed solutions were rejected by Azerbaijan owing to its final outcomes for the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity), the level of engagement of the international community started to recede. In the almost 20 years since then, the peace process became less and less substantive, and after the 2012 Sochi meetings between the leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, it was not paid even lip service. That is why, in his first statements after the escalation of violence, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the ultimate failure of the old formats, which have utterly discredited themselves.

There has also been a multiple intersection of different, often contradictory, narratives and strategies that distorted the proper resolution process for the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. Probably due to the fact that Armenia is a small, economically feeble state, the fact that its behaviour towards the Nagorno-Karabakh region mirrors that of Russia in Abkhazia, South Ossetia (at least before their “recognition” in 2008), and Donbass has largely passed under the radar of global opinion, although, in the latter cases, the West was happy to side with Georgia and Ukraine against the obvious aggression of a much larger and more powerful state. Yerevan managed to capitalize on this cognitive dissonance, building an image of a country that, being three times smaller than its rival in terms of both territory and population, had been constantly threatened and cornered, thus arguing that the Karabakh movement was a “struggle for liberation” of a brave, small people. This narrative worked well, with the audience largely unaware of the complex regional realities and thus preferring to contextualize the regional conflicts within the abstract frameworks of postcolonialism and Orientalism. Later, the Armenian side also started to employ the rhetoric of the “clash of civilization” that grew popular in the 2000s with the global war against terror declared by the USA and the general destabilization of the Middle

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East. For the right-wing public, Yerevan was happy to play out the narrative of a “heroic Christian nation” guarding European values in this exotic corner of the world.<sup>9, 10</sup>

Hence, the Western public never came to properly assess the human toll of the conflict, the fact that the human rights of Azerbaijanis were being viciously violated, or to appreciate the cynical power play of Russia here. And so it never developed a strong lobby for a proactive position on Karabakh, as happened with the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. This stance pushed Yerevan to a more uncompromising position in the negotiations and, at the

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same time, made it oblivious to the growing geopolitical and diplomatic isolation of Armenia, in contrast to Baku. So, at the time when Yerevan had the most pragmatic reasons for rejecting its maximalist ambitions, it had the least willingness to do so. This trend can explain why the last 10 years of the negotiations have been so disappointing.

Hence, the second Karabakh war (September 27–November 9, 2020) has been primarily an outcome of the chronic mismanagement of the peace process.

Abstract and toothless calls for peace in a situation in which the status quo is deeply skewed in favour of one party at the expense of the other in reality encouraged the aggressor, which was able to pose as peace-loving for the simple reason that it had already gained everything that it wanted, by force; and, at the same time, alienated the losing side, whose calls for restorative justice could be easily presented as “aggressive”. The promotion of pacifism in such a situation legitimizes post factum the use of force and “the right of force”. Although some politicians and experts warned, for many years, that this approach was unsustainable, only now is the international community starting to recognize the risks it bears. So, in order to prevent the conflict from further escalating and prevent other “boiling” conflicts from such unfortunate developments, international mediators must deploy qualitatively better efforts than they have done for the 26 years that have passed and stop engaging in self-deception by confusing the lack of war with peace and equating Armenia and Azerbaijan, which had been in an inherently unbalanced position.

9 Tchilingirian, H., “Religious Discourse on the Conflict in Nagorno Karabakh,” *George Fox University*, August 1998, available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1721&context=ree> (accessed: December 12, 2020).

10 Mnatzakanyan, A., “Why Nagorno Karabakh Matters,” *New Eastern Europe*, April 14, 2020, available at: <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/04/14/why-nagorno-karabakh-matters/> (accessed: December 12, 2020).

### ***Liberal approach to conflict resolution and its failure***

Assessing the failed peace process now, when we have already left a short but intensive second war behind us, we can further review the fundamental concepts of international relations that have been thoroughly tested by this conflict. Most interestingly, it enables us to compare the presumptions of both liberal and realist approaches to diplomacy and conflict resolution.

The liberal paradigm, which was at the peak of its dominance in the 1990s, at the time of the First Karabakh War (1988–1994) and active international efforts to reach a sustainable peace, rests on the notion of democratic peace—the idea that democratic countries have very few incentives to fight each other and in fact almost never do so. When applied to the wider world (which, to a large extent, remained and remains outside the “democratic community”), this concept stipulated that the global domination of predominantly Western democracy would play a positive role in strengthening peace. It was assumed that democratic countries, having an innate interest in sustainable peace across the world, would be efficient in resolving violent conflicts and mitigating global security threats through their joint efforts.<sup>11</sup> The idea of the “liberal world order” relies on the notion that, since win-win, mutually beneficial cooperation between sovereign states is perfectly possible,<sup>12</sup> rationally governed states, through having the example of such cooperation before them, would sooner or later accept these rules.

And the case of current Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who initially came to power on a liberal agenda and promised to boost the peace process, only switching to aggressive speeches and intransigent actions a year later, failing even to comply with the traditional niceties maintained by the leadership of Azerbaijan and Armenia and ultimately provoking a new, large war with Azerbaijan,<sup>13</sup> is telling in that democracy and liberalism may, in the end, not be necessary (or even helpful) in resolving ethnic conflicts.

During the war and in its immediate aftermath, Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly emphasized that the point often made by foreign diplomats and politicians that the “conflict does not have a

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11 Daalder, I. & Lindsay, J., “Democracies of the World, Unite,” in R. Art and R. Jervis (eds), *International politics and contemporary issues* (9th edition, Pearson, 2009), pp.567-577.

12 Dayer, T., “The Alleged Failure of Multilateralism in Syria: a Realist Trap,” *E-International Relations*, May 11, 2017, available at: <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/05/11/the-alleged-failure-of-multilateralism-in-syria-beyond-a-realist-trap/> (accessed: December 12, 2020).

13 Socor, V., “How Yerevan Walked Away from the Basic Principles of Karabakh Conflict Settlement,” *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 17 Issue: 168, November 25, 2020, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/how-yerevan-walked-away-from-the-basic-principles-of-karabakh-conflict-settlement/> (accessed: December 12, 2020).



*During the war and in its immediate aftermath, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly emphasized that the point often made by foreign diplomats and politicians that the "conflict does not have a military solution" was clearly wrong.*

military solution" was clearly wrong.<sup>14</sup> In saying this, Aliyev actually hinted at the perennial problem of the peace process, particularly in cultivating this misguided belief. This thinking, supposed to save the populations from the horrors of a new war and ensuing losses and destruction, in fact made a resumption of hostilities inevitable. This tragic twist of history occurred primarily because the assurances about a non-military solution convinced Yerevan, and Armenian society at large, that it could maximize its utility by simply pretending to pursue substantive negotiations. This approach mistakenly assumed that both parties prioritized

achieving peace with each other but failed to take into consideration the fundamental asymmetry between the post-war outcomes for Armenia and Azerbaijan. Whereas Armenia received much more than it had initially intended (the territory of the seven occupied districts surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh region was twice as large as the former autonomous region itself), Azerbaijan had lost too much ever to be able to accept these results. Thus, every negotiated consensus would have involved a certain degree of de facto loss for Yerevan that it did not want to accept (although it continues to pay lip service to the "inevitability" of a peaceful settlement). This situation skewed the hierarchy of interests of Armenia, and later Azerbaijan as well, thereby pushing down prospects for a peaceful solution. This was further exacerbated by a trend of reversal in the two countries' relative economic, political, and military power: thanks to its energy revenues, Baku came to thoroughly outdo Yerevan in terms of its capacities, thus making the unfavourable status quo all the less tolerable.

As John Ruggie observed, multilateralism, in its pure form, is highly demanding: it coordinates relations among states based on "generalized principles of conduct" requiring that all states abide by the same rules.<sup>15</sup> The efficiency of normative multilateral diplomacy is contingent upon the legitimacy of these very norms, which can be achieved only if all members of the community are committed to observing them. However, the West has failed to act in a fully consistent pattern when it comes to post-Soviet conflicts. A certain unevenness in the EU's approach towards the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, on one side, and the conflicts

14 The Ministry of Transport, Communication and High Technologies of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "President Ilham Aliyev addressed the nation", November 10, 2020, available at: <https://mincom.gov.az/en/view/news/1046/president-ilham-aliyev-addressed-the-nation-> (accessed: December 12, 2020).

15 Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, M., "The global crisis of multilateralism", *In the Long Run*, July 4, 2018, available at: <http://www.inthelongrun.org/articles/article/the-global-crisis-of-multilateralism/> (accessed: December 12, 2020).



in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Donbass, on the other, has been much talked about and has produced some resentment in Azerbaijani society and its leadership. For example, the EU–Armenia Action Plan contained a reference to the need to pursue “conflict settlement efforts on the basis of international norms and principles, including the principle of self-determination of peoples”, whereas the EU–Azerbaijan Action Plan pointed to the “support for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of internationally recognized border” of Azerbaijan.<sup>16</sup> This seemed to imply that Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity was not inviolable after all, contrasting with the EU’s action plans with both Moldova and Georgia, whereby the bloc’s support for their territorial integrity was unambiguous.<sup>17</sup> After the EU’s adoption of comprehensive sanctions against Russia for its violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, Baku has many times raised the question why there had been no sanction measures against Yerevan, even symbolic ones.<sup>18</sup> The frequent use of the term “disputed territories” concerning Karabakh has also served to somehow indicate that its legal status is undetermined. The failure to assess Armenia’s position based on these norms produced a backlash against this process in Azerbaijan and triggered Baku to consider alternative options. Hence, we can conclude that Western attempts at Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict resolution have fallen victim to inconsistency and an unwillingness to apply similar rules and principles in various cases. In their recent piece, Grgic and Knoll-Tudor recognize that Europe has ultimately been unable to project any influence in the South Caucasus region and its prestige has suffered immensely because of the resumption of hostilities, thereby making the EU’s collective weakness apparent.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Realist approach***

What remains to us is to conduct a brief thought experiment considering the application of the principles of classic “realist” diplomacy to the resolution of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict instead of an inconsistent,

16 EEAS, “EU–Azerbaijan Action Plan,” available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/pdf/pdf/action\\_plans/azerbaijan\\_enp\\_ap\\_final\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/enp/pdf/pdf/action_plans/azerbaijan_enp_ap_final_en.pdf) (accessed: December 12, 2020)

17 Popescu, N., “How Europe Became Marginalized in Nagorno Karabakh,” *European Council of Foreign Relations*, October 13, 2015, available at: [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_how\\_europe\\_became\\_marginalised\\_in\\_nagorno\\_karabakh/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_europe_became_marginalised_in_nagorno_karabakh/) (accessed: December 12, 2020).

18 Metbuat.az, *Samad Seyidov: Armenia’s being away sanctions absolutely nonsense*, March 18, 2015, available at: <https://metbuat.az/news/65892/samad-seyidov-armenia-s-being-away-sanctions-absolutely-nons.html> (accessed: December 12, 2020).

19 Grgic, B. and Knoll-Tudor, B., “What Role for the EU in Post-War Karabakh,” *Euractiv*, December 18, 2020, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/azerbaijan/opinion/what-role-for-the-eu-in-post-war-karabakh/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

multilateral approach. The seminal work of political realism, *The Future of Diplomacy* by Hans Morgenthau, stipulates the fundamental principles of foreign policy and negotiations viewed through this paradigm's prism.

One of these principles states that, if a country's vital interests can be safeguarded without the attainment of its objectives, the latter must be abandoned.<sup>20</sup> This principle, if applied to Armenian foreign policy, directly exposes its fundamental faults. Official Yerevan, and subsequently Armenian public opinion, have been insisting that the continuing occupation of Azerbaijani territory is a prerequisite for protecting Armenian security and restoring "historical justice", thus failing to distinguish between the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Armenia as it is de jure recognized; what Laurence Broers, in his recent book, called "the augmented Armenia", a vision based on the vague and speculative notion of "historic territories" that views Nagorno-Karabakh region as the inalienable "living space" of the Armenian nation.<sup>21</sup> For this reason exactly, Yerevan had been, by all means, escaping from complying with demands to de-occupy at least the seven Azerbaijani districts and pretending that these demands did not exist or were subject to negotiation.

This echoes another maxim of political realism: "The Objectives of foreign policy must be defined in terms of national interest and must be supported with adequate power. The national interest of a peace-loving nation can only be defined in terms of national security."<sup>22</sup> The big trap of an overambitious diplomacy is that it makes the state its captive: to ensure national support, successive governments have to gradually raise the register of their rhetoric and lose flexibility even when it is necessary to maintain core security interests. At the same time, the unrealistic assessment of their own country's position prevented Armenians from realizing that, for Azerbaijan, the interwar status quo had been a compromise among fundamental interests and the immediate return of at least seven districts did not constitute an aggressive intention, but a *sine qua non*, given Azerbaijan's regional standing and capacity.

Thus, Armenia faced a new war that inflicted colossal human, military, and economic losses. Moreover, years of domination of the distorted security narrative have now put domestic stability in Armenia in question as society perceives the proper demarcation of the border as an Azerbaijani offensive

20 G. Morgenthau, "The Future of Diplomacy," in R. Art and R. Jervis (eds), *International politics and contemporary issues* (9th edition, Pearson, 2009), pp. 104-114.

21 Broers, L., *Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 98-99.

22 G. Morgenthau, "The Future of Diplomacy," in R. Art and R. Jervis (eds), *International politics and contemporary issues* (9th edition, Pearson, 2009), pp.104-114.

into Armenian territory and the government seems to be unable to soothe the panic. Hence, unwillingness to limit its demands in line with its realistic capacity has cost Armenia serious damage to her fundamental national security. The fate of Armenia evokes still another of Morghentau's maxims: "A nation that sets itself goals it has not the power to attain may have to face the risk of war on two counts: dissipating its strength and still not be able to deter the rival."<sup>23</sup>

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We can clearly see now that the failure to find a mutually acceptable resolution to the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict and the second war in the region have been, to a great extent, due to the fact that Armenia's foreign policy had never taken into account the structural realities of regional politics or the basic interests of Azerbaijan and has grossly overestimated its own capacity to entrench the de facto occupation of a large chunk of Azerbaijani territories. In sum, Yerevan's foreign policy did not fit the axioms and demands of the realist paradigm. Otherwise, Armenia may have been much more prone to agree on a compromise solution. Against this backdrop, the attempts of the international community to resolve the conflict within the framework of multilateral diplomacy and the principle of abstaining from violence were utterly unsuccessful. In fact, this approach might even have done more harm than good as it created a false impression of "normalizing" the occupation in Armenia and reducing the incentives to switch to a realistic foreign policy. In fact, the first attempts to make the parties talk to each other and resolve their hostilities in a horizontal dialogue were taken by the Baltic democratic movements 30 years ago, even before a full-fledged war in Karabakh started and mutual perceptions as enemies had not yet become entrenched. Later on, there was quite an intensive dialogue at the civil society level in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Still, all these attempts failed to affect the course of events.<sup>24</sup>

When there is a bitter, unresolved interstate conflict, an appeal to values risks making the parties to the conflict even more stuck in their own truth, ignoring the challenges and opportunities that lie outside of this carefully constructed bubble. Moreover, the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, as well as some other unresolved conflicts, exposed another dangerous weakness of multilateral diplomacy: although it creates its own legitimacy with an

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Balciunas, A., "How Baltics tried and failed to end war in Nagorno Karabakh," *Euractiv*, October 27, 2020, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/azerbaijan/news/how-baltics-tried-and-failed-to-end-war-in-nagorno-karabakh/> (accessed: December 12, 2020).

appeal to universal values and norms, the principle of impartial mediation it implements is actually borrowed from classic diplomacy; which is why, in fact, a values-based approach cannot be impartial when there are clear violations of international law and cannot equalize the aggressor with its victim. Otherwise, it becomes just a toothless version of classic diplomacy. This reality has now been acknowledged by many authors in reaction to multiple cracks emerging in the liberal paradigm of global politics.<sup>25</sup>

### *Conclusion*

We have seen that the multilateral approach to the resolution of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict has failed and it can now be argued that this very approach has structural weaknesses that dramatically compromise its efficiency. On the one hand, commitment to non-violent resolution and appeal to common values instead of establishing trust encouraged the aggressor, Armenia, and convinced it of the secure character of the status quo; on the other hand, the big Western powers have been unable or unwilling to apply the same values and principles to different conflicts around the region. This practice runs directly against the basic tenets of liberal international relations theory: establishing an international community sharing common values and sticking to common rules, and thus contributes to diminishing trust in the peace process and making peace elusive.

At the same time, we have seen that Armenia’s position regarding the status quo, when analysed through the prism of the realist paradigm, was unsustainable and bound to engender a major escalation. In reality, this paradigm looks like a playbook for any government of Armenia that would be genuinely interested in ensuring its fundamental security and achieving a conflict resolution based on reasonable compromises. So, it can be concluded that, if Yerevan somehow had to deal with Azerbaijan on its own, outside the multiple diplomacy frameworks, it may have been much more prone to such a policy. This finding casts significant doubt on whether the liberal global order is more favourable to peace and less conflictual. Rather, multilateral frameworks should be an extension of nations’ foreign policies, based on the principles of power and security concerns.

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25 Narlikar, A., “Rebooting multilateralism? Lessons still to be learned,” *Global Policy*, September 29, 2020, available at: <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/29/09/2020/rebooting-multilateralism-lessons-still-be-learned> (accessed: December 12, 2020).