BAKU DIALOGUES

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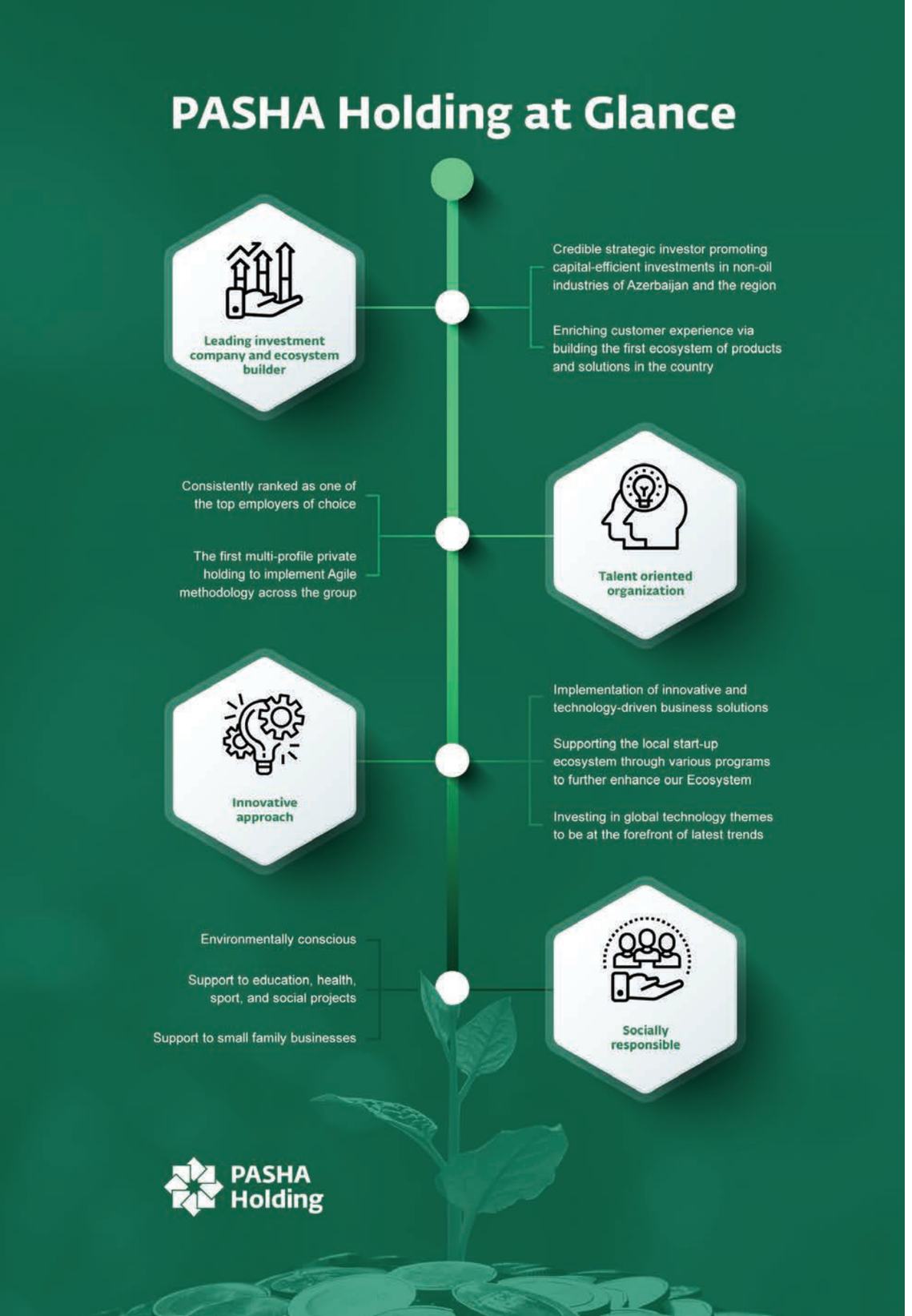

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Armenia Adapts to New Postwar Realities

Richard Giragosian

To many observers, Armenia's non-violent change of government in 2018 represented an unusual victory of "people power." In what became heralded as Armenia's "Velvet Revolution," Armenian opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan surprised many with the relative ease with which he displaced an entrenched elite and emerged as the new Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia. After an important free and fair election in December 2018 cemented Pashinyan as Armenia's new leader, the country ushered in a new period of democracy and reform. Endowed with a rare degree of legitimacy bolstered by popular support, the new democratically-elected government promised a critical reassessment of a number of critical issues, ranging from Armenian relations with Russia to its policy regarding the conflict over Karabakh.

Yet despite these important gains in democratic change and advances in reform, the Armenian leadership faced a looming challenge that was largely obscured by a legacy of arrogance and complacency. With a focus overwhelmingly devoted to domestic reform priorities, the Pashinyan government seemed increasingly ill-prepared for the inescapable geopolitical and foreign policy demands that loomed large over Armenia. And through much of the period between mid-2018 and early 2020, Armenia embarked on a foreign policy course characterized more by overconfidence than any realistic reassessment, marked by sporadic mistakes and missteps in its approach toward Russia but also Azerbaijan. Although somewhat explainable by a combination of inexperience and simplistic idealism, Armenia greatly overvalued the advantages of democracy and reform while also overstating its strategic significance. Against that backdrop, such diplomatic overconfidence only exacerbated a mounting crisis over Karabakh, as tensions increased and vulnerability intensified.

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By summer 2020, signs of an impending war were largely ignored or dismissed by Armenia. This strategic myopia only worsened the impact of Azerbaijan's unexpected military operation that began on the morning of 27 September 2020. And in what stretched into a 44-day war, Pashinyan emerged as the first leader of Armenia to have suffered an unprecedented military defeat. By the end of the Second Karabakh War, the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus witnessed a sweeping regional shift. Ending the war through a deployment of Russian peacekeepers to parts of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), the new postwar reality has left the region stranded in unchartered territory.

More specifically, on 10 November 2020 Armenia and Azerbaijan accepted the terms of a Russian-crafted and Russian-imposed agreement that effectively ended the Second Karabakh War and triggered the immediate deployment of some 2,000 Russian peacekeepers to parts of the former NKAO for an initial five-year mission. Although the agreement consolidated significant territorial gains by Azerbaijan and introduced a cessation of hostilities, it only affirmed Armenia's stunning defeat. And while the acceptance of the Russian ceasefire agreement saved lives and salvaged remaining territory in the warzone, to this day the conflict remains unresolved, with several outstanding questions remaining open—including the status of Karabakh and the terms of the withdrawal and possible demobilization of the Armenian forces stationed in the Russian peacekeeping zone—making further diplomatic negotiations essential to ensuring lasting security and stability.

Overcoming Armenia's Postwar Political Crisis

In the wake of unexpected and unprecedented Armenian losses in the Second Karabakh War, a lingering domestic political crisis in Armenia only further escalated well into 2021—a crisis that still lingers as of January 2022. This pronounced political crisis was only deepened by Armenian society's lack of preparation to accept the scale and scope of the war's unexpected

losses. Throughout the acute phase of this domestic crisis, the Pashinyan government faced an emotional series of protests, with calls for the prime minister to resign and demands for accountability. Against such a backdrop, the crisis was marked by pronounced political polarization defined by a stalemate between an unpopular and discredited opposition against an embattled government with no credible alternative or viable replacement. It was a reluctant recognition of this crisis that led Pashinyan to accept the necessity for early elections, based on a prudent recognition that this was the only feasible way to diffuse the domestic deadlock.

Pashinyan thus scheduled an early election for June 2021, the significance of which consisted of two additional factors. First, the need for a fresh mandate was the only legal and constitutional avenue for resolving the deepening domestic political stalemate that offered the incumbent Pashinyan government an attractive opportunity to seek a rare, renewed degree of legitimacy. Another related factor was the importance of holding a second "free and fair" election, standing out as an impressive "back-to-back" repeat of the free and fair election that took place in December 2018.

Nevertheless, with former President Robert Kocharian positioning himself as the flagbearer of the opposition's challenge to Pashinyan, the election was defined more by a contest of personalities rather than any real competition of policies—although the latter could hardly be said to have been the same. For the Armenian electorate, it was also a choice between an appeal to the authoritarian "strong man" leadership of the past, as embodied by Kocharian and the rest of the opposition, versus opting to show continued confidence in the democratic reforms of the Pashinyan government. Yet, despite expectations for an especially close and competitive contest, most observers were surprised by the depth and degree of victory for the incumbent government.

An additional surprise was seen in both the overconfidence of the opposition and the overstated vulnerability of the government. But such expressions of surprise were justified, as this was an early election not only conducted in a delicate and difficult period of postwar uncertainty and instability, but also as a contest in unchartered political territory. Thus, with the electoral victory, Pashinyan was able to restore his own legitimacy, regain a fresh mandate, and remain strengthened by a new parliament dominated

by a majority of seats held by his own party. In other words, despite Armenia's overwhelming wartime defeat and the consequent shock of unprecedented loss, Pashinyan survived the most critical test to his political leadership.

The New Postwar Reality

In the wake of the impressive reelection of the Pashinyan government in 2021, Armenia embarked on a policy of strategic adjustment, facing a new postwar reality. For Armenia, the set of postwar challenges remained critical, however, and consisted of three main drivers, each of which will be examined in turn.

The first driver is the prolonged "state of war." Armenian society has been unable to overcome the shock from its unexpected military defeat in the Second Karabakh War. While this was exacerbated by the Pashinyan government's failure to prepare public opinion for the scale and severity of the military defeat when it became clear to them that it was coming, it was also due to a prolonged "state of war." More specifically, despite the cessation of combat operations after the acceptance of the aforementioned Russia-brokered agreement, what amounts to a state of war with Azerbaijan remains, due to, for example, the continued captivity of Armenians detained by Azerbaijan and lingering disputes over key border areas.

The return of Armenian prisoners and other civilians is an urgent priority for Armenia. Although there has been some progress on this issue, Azerbaijan seems to be using it as leverage to further strengthen its bargaining power in preparation for the commencement of diplomatic negotiations on outstanding issues. This has also been matched by an increase in tension and insecurity over preparations for the onset of a process of border demarcation and delineation, especially for border areas in Karabakh and southern Armenia, often with roads now passing through the Azerbaijani side of the "new" border, and with Armenian villages and towns situated in exposed and vulnerable positions in close proximity to Azerbaijani military units.

A second factor contributing to the escalation of the postwar crisis in Armenia has been the uncertainty and insecurity deriving from the new postwar reality. With a delay in the resumption of diplomatic negotiations, this uncertainty stems from

the vague and incomplete terms of the Russia-imposed ceasefire agreement itself. Although that agreement resulted in an important cessation of hostilities that allowed for the deployment of a Russian peacekeeping force to parts of the former NKAO, it fell far short of either a comprehensive peace deal or a negotiated resolution to the conflict over Karabakh itself.

Indeed, the text of the 10 November 2020 agreement is entirely silent on the question of the status of Karabakh. Armenia interprets this silence as a deferment of the issue and not as an acknowledgment of its implicit resolution. Also deferred to a later stage of diplomatic negotiations, are other important issues, such as military demobilization and border demarcation. At the same time, this uncertainty has been compounded by insecurity, which stems in part from what Yerevan asserts are blatant border incursions by Azerbaijani military units along the southern and eastern border areas of Armenia.

The third driver of the political crisis in Armenia is rooted in the general perception of a lack of accountability for the country's military losses, the political decisions taken through the war, but also the various processes that led to the country's political and military unpreparedness to fight and win that war in the first place—that is, to preserve sufficiently the gains made during the First Karabakh War. From a broader perspective, this lack of accountability is related to the fact that the conflict over Karabakh predates Armenian independence (and, of course, the coming to power of the Pashinyan government), which placed that same Pashinyan government in politically uncharted territory, as the only Armenian leadership to have "lost" Karabakh.

More specifically, the response of the government to the unexpected loss of the war has been both inadequate and insufficient. More broadly, the Armenian government's demonstrable failure to adjust and adapt to the new postwar reality—as evidenced in the absence of a new diplomatic strategy and a failure to alter or adjust the country's military posture or undertake serious defense reforms—only contributes to a continuing "state of denial." And despite achieving hard-fought democratic gains since coming to power, the government's inadequate response to the demands of the postwar crisis has only fostered a perception of state paralysis.

A Shifting Geopolitical Landscape

Some observers see the Second Karabakh War as a victory for Turkey as much as for Azerbaijan. This view stems from Turkey's unprecedented support for Azerbaijan's warmaking capability, as derived from the "one nation, two states" strategic concept increasingly invoked by decision-makers of both countries. And although this concerted effort did succeed in making large territorial inroads and even capturing parts of the former NKAO, several factors both weaken the case and diminish the gains from the war for Turkey. In other words, Turkey's political victory is neither as complete nor as convincing as it seems. Rather, Turkey is now overextended, in both the military and diplomatic dimension.

This assessment is confirmed by the less than expected results for Turkey after Russia's belated engagement in arranging the 10 November 2020 deal. And this is also confirmed by the controversy over the future peacekeeping mission in the region for both Russia and Turkey. The latter issue was especially embarrassing for Turkey, as Moscow seemed to have openly reneged on promises for a great, more direct role for Turkish peacekeepers. The final outcome resulted in more of a symbolic role for Turkey, with a minimal and marginal position in the peacekeeping planning and supervision within Azerbaijan itself. And this effectively gave Russian peacekeepers the dominant role in the region.

Yet at the same time, Turkey did in fact consolidate its status as Azerbaijan's leading provider of military equipment and weapons (especially high-tech weapons), which had the effect of displacing Russia's role in that regard. This is also matched by a "power exchange" defined by a deeper trend of a shifting balance of power, with a resurgent Turkey further empowering an overconfident Azerbaijan after concluding the Second Karabakh War's successful military campaign.

On the other hand, Armenia's unexpected military defeat enabled Russia to significantly expand and consolidate its power and influence in the country. Faced with an Armenian government endowed with a rare degree of legitimacy, stemming from the reelection of its democratically-elected leader, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Moscow has been careful to avoid direct interference or intervention in domestic Armenian politics.

Instead, Russia has focused it power projection on Armenia's dependence on security and military ties with the Kremlin, with the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces into parts of the former NKAO representing the most visible display of this heightened dependence. At the same time, Russia also relies on consolidating its leverage over Armenia through Russian-owned and Russian-controlled sectors of the Armenian economy, as well as through the application of pressure on Armenia's limited room to maneuver and reduced options in conducting a more flexible foreign policy. Thus, for postwar Armenia, despite gains in democracy and reforms, the outlook remains challenging, as each step of increasing Russian power and influence results in a corresponding erosion of Armenian independence and sovereignty.

Armenia has long been seen as the most loyal, and perhaps most subservient, former-Soviet republic. Russia's leverage over Armenia has depended on a "3G" approach, consisting of a combination of guns and discounted weapons, below market gas supplies, and goods, as both a major trading partner and as the dominant force of the Eurasian Economic Union to which Armenia belongs, together with Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (and, of course, Russia). And for Armenia, the alliance with Russia is acutely defended as a "strategic partnership" although it is more accurately defined as a dangerous Armenian overdependence on Russia. Driven by an imperative of threat perception regarding the conflict over Karabakh and the promise of a security guarantee, Russia has long been seen as Armenia's priority partner. And over time, Armenian-Russian relations have steadily devolved as Yerevan has mortgaged its own independence to Moscow's interests.

The new postwar regional context has also allowed Russia to initiate a military buildup in southern Armenia and along strategic points on the Armenian side of the border with Azerbaijan. Although distinct from the Russian peacekeeping operation in parts of the former NKAO, this expansion of a Russian military presence in Armenia entrenches Russia's control and management of to-be-restored regional trade and transport links, including the planned establishment of road and railway links between mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave through southern Armenia. In addition, the recent Russian military buildup also suggests that, once delineated, the Armenian side of the border with Azerbaijan will be controlled by Russian border guards—a development of strategic implications that constitutes an inherent threat to Armenian sovereignty and independence, given Russia's existing control over two of Armenia's four external borders: complete control over the Armenian-Turkish border and supervisory control and oversight of Armenia's border with Iran.

What Next?

After the war for Karabakh came to an end, many questions over what comes next have risen to the surface, with no clear answers and even fewer certainties. For example, after 44 days of fighting, the Second Karabakh War halted abruptly on 10 November 2020 when Armenia announced that it had accepted the terms of a Russian-imposed agreement—an agreement that both ended the hostilities and effectively ceded territory to Azerbaijan.

While this agreement did salvage remnants of territory in the warzone and save the remaining Karabakh Armenian population from advancing Azerbaijani forces, the situation remains dangerously unclear and undefined, raising questions over status, sovereignty, and legal standing, amongst other issues. And although seemingly deferred, these outstanding issues are just that—outstanding. They are far from resolved.

Beyond the unclear perspective of the status issue, there is also justifiable concern over what the agreement does not stipulate or stress, as related to matters of security. For example, there is no clarity with respect to the security of those parts of the former NKAO that are beyond the Russian peacekeeping zone. In addition, earlier negotiation processes seem to be ad acta, and nothing has been said regarding demilitarization or withdrawal. And with a number of other complications and issues related to postwar security, there is an obvious need for direct negotiations and further agreements.

Armenia's Pressing Priorities

But beyond the immediate political challenge, the current Pashinyan government will also have to manage a set of looming policy priorities. In a broader sense, the outcome of the election and the fresh mandate for the government brought about only a temporary respite. Unprecedented domestic challenges, ranging from pronounced postwar insecurity to the lingering impact of COVID-19,

demand immediate political attention and urgent policy initiatives. And more narrowly, as important as was the June 2021 election, it was not enough to address the deeper deficiencies in governance in Armenia, such as a lack of institutional checks and balances and the perilous state of the reform program.

In terms of public policy, three main imperatives are clear. First, postwar insecurity demands a new Armenian diplomatic strategy, based on the inclusion of a more innovative and flexible adoption of diplomatic tactics in pursuit of defined national interests and in defense of "end state" objectives. The second imperative stems from postwar uncertainty and is rooted in the need for a new direction in defense reform, incorporating "after action" assessments and military "lessons learned" based on a critical review of the unexpected severity of the losses incurred in the Second Karabakh War. Each of these two imperatives require a coherent strategic vision that has been lacking to date.

While there has been dangerously little real progress in either area, the third imperative is equally significant. While this policy imperative predates the onset of the Second Karabakh War, it involves a different kind of war: the public health war against the COVID-19 pandemic. And in this regard, the government must confront the impact of the health crisis and the distressingly low level of vaccination in the country, but also plan for the essential economic recovery to come.

The Risk of "Self-Inflicted Wounds"

At the same time, Armenia faces a further danger, which stems neither from the political opposition nor from pressing policy challenges. This risk originates in the government itself, as demonstrated by the risk of "self-inflicted wounds." To be more direct, it is Pashinyan himself who poses the most serious risk to his standing, given his record of impulsive and often reckless leadership. This is a risk derived from the temptation to pursue vendetta politics—i.e., engaging in political retribution and personal revenge—that may undermine his own legitimate government and unravel the hard-fought democratic gains in governance since the Velvet Revolution.

And as important and legitimizing as were the 2018 and the 2021 free and fair elections, in and of themselves they are not enough

to resolve the deeper deficiencies and shortcomings impeding the system of governance in Armenia. For one, political polarization is likely to linger: parliament has become the new arena for confrontation between the small opposition parties and the government. Sometimes these sessions have even involved fisticuffs and other forms of physical altercation. Thus, despite the notable affirmation of Armenia's democratic resilience, further steps need to be taken on the much more daunting and difficult path to achieve sustainable postwar stability and entrench the institutional durability of democracy, along which no amount of wishful thinking or misplaced exceptionalism can effectively manage or mitigate.

The Potential for Regional Cooperation

With respect to the question of regional cooperation, the focus now seems to be on restoring regional trade and transport routes, as per the terms of the 10 November 2020 agreement that ended the Second Karabakh War. The tripartite working group on regional trade and transport has reportedly achieved a breakthrough. After the Armenian side suspended the process in response to Azerbaijani border incursions in May 2021, Armenian Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigoryan has of late reported significant progress in these talks.

More specifically, the working group's negotiations resulted in an important preliminary agreement that reiterated and reaffirmed Armenian sovereignty over any and all road and railway links between Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave through southern Armenia. It also confirmed Russian control and supervision of road and rail traffic, including legal provisions for customs control and access. The successful agreement over the restoration of regional trade and transport is limited to the links between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan as the first stage, however, with the planned reconstruction of the Soviet-era railway link and the construction of a highway.

The broader second stage of regional trade and transport encompasses a more expansive (and significantly more expensive) strategy that includes the reopening of the closed border between Turkey and Armenia, the restoration of the Soviet-era railway line between Kars and Gyumri, and the eventual extension of Azerbaijani railway

network to enable Armenian rolling stock from southern Armenia to make its way in a northeastern direction through to Baku and on to southern Russia.

Discussions in the tripartite working group have also involved a Russian pledge to provide a new gas pipeline "spur," running through Azerbaijan, which would deliver Russian natural gas to Armenia, as a partial alternative to Armenian dependence on the sole gas pipeline from Russia through Georgia.

Thus, the issue of the restoration of regional trade and transport is significant for two main reasons. First, it is, for now, the only clear example of a "win-win" scenario for postwar stability. These and similar economic and trade opportunities are important for Yerevan, Baku, and Moscow. For Armenia, they are important because they will help the country overcome its economic isolation; for Azerbaijan, because they will enable it to develop its regained districts beyond the confines of Karabakh; and for Russia, because their implementation will entrench the country's power to direct and manage the process of regional reintegration.

Second, this is the one area of positive diplomatic negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with the aforementioned working group offering some hopeful signs for confidence-building between Yerevan and Baku. Consequently, economic incentives and trade opportunities have been elevated to a new and unprecedented degree of importance—a component that until now has not been prioritized in negotiations not just about the conflict over Karabakh but, more broadly, in any talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan. BD

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Azerbaijan in the Struggle for Eurasia

Restoring America's Geostrategic Approach

Michael Doran

Azerbaijan is "geopolitically critical" to the United States, argues the 1997 book, *The Grand Chessboard*, by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security advisor to former President Jimmy Carter. Counterbalancing Russia is a primary duty of the United States, and the mere placement of Azerbaijan on the map makes it a crucial partner in that effort. The benefits of partnership extend well beyond Azerbaijan's immediate neighborhood, the South Caucasus. The country is the sole gateway to the West of the former Soviet states of Central Asia. The independence of those states, Brzezinski explains, "can be rendered nearly meaningless if Azerbaijan becomes fully subordinated to Moscow's control."

Brzezinski was not alone in championing this view. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, American foreign policy professionals on both sides of the political aisle espoused the same perspective, which we shall dub the "the geostrategic approach." Its influence generated significant American support for the creation of an East-West land bridge, across which rail tracks and energy pipelines now stretch—the Silk Road region's only terrestrial supply lines from Asia to Europe that Russia cannot control. This land bridge opened the way for an air corridor which, during the war in Afghanistan, allowed planes from America's military bases in the Middle East to reach the battlefield by a route much shorter than any alternative, and one that required no haggling with difficult partners, such as Russia.

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As it emerged defeated three decades ago from the First Karabakh War (1988-1994), Azerbaijan was virtually a failed state, inundated with hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons. Today it is the wealthiest, most prosperous, and most influential country in its neighborhood. Its victory in the 2020 Second Karabakh War also revealed the startling power of its military. The rise of Azerbaijan has vindicated Brzezinski and his cohort, but even as the country grows stronger and fulfills the role envisioned for it, the geostrategic approach grows weaker. Supporters of this perspective in Washington today are few and far between. Are we witnessing the temporary eclipse of an influential foreign policy doctrine, or its total demise?

The geostrategic approach calls for paying close attention not just to the character of states and the policies of governments but also to the tectonic plates atop which those rest—plates formed over the centuries by history, demography, and culture.

The Struggle for Eurasia

Before answering that question, let us stipulate that the decline of the geostrategic approach is part of a larger American retreat from the Middle East and Central Asia, which is the result of five major developments:

One, domestic legitimacy crisis. The geostrategic approach is a victim of the ongoing political polarization in the United States. In Washington today, foreign policy doctrines rise and fall according to whether they advance domestic political agendas. As a nonpartisan reading of the national interest, the geostrategic approach serves no clear domestic master—while even riling up several influential domestic lobbies—and therefore offers its champions few rewards.

Two, the rise of Sino-centrism. American foreign policy today focuses on East Asia, with Taiwan in the center of the frame. What is the place of the South Caucasus

in the struggle for Taiwan? To ask the question is to answer it.

Three, the dictates of "Restraintism." In both parties, significant constituencies call for a restrained foreign policy, one that avoids not just conflict but involvement in far flung regions. The geostrategic approach, however, urges the United States to get deeply involved in an unfamiliar corner of the world, some six or seven thousand kilometers from home.

Four, the Iran gambit. Following the example of the Obama Administration, the Biden Administration is searching for a modus vivendi with Iran, not just with respect to the nuclear question but with respect to regional order as well. The gambit, which plays well among progressives in America, seeks to end the contest with Iran so as to facilitate the pivot to Asia. Tilting toward Azerbaijan, in many ways Iran's natural rival, does not comport with a policy of accommodating Tehran.

Five, the disaffection with Turkey. A prolonged crisis, the worst in 50 years, has beset U.S.-Turkish relations. As Turkey's closest ally, Azerbaijan has been caught in the crossfire.

Taken together, these developments establish the grounds for arguing, with some force, that the geostrategic approach is in fact dead. Having said that, news of its demise may yet be premature. It is not hard to imagine scenarios in the future—highly plausible scenarios—that will lead to a resuscitation of the doctrine.

Consider, for example, the growing support among Americans for the following four assertions. *One*: Russian leader Vladimir Putin's "imperial" project has more vitality than many analysts originally assumed. By hook or by crook, he aims to bring the countries of the former Soviet Union into some sort of formalized Russian sphere of interest.

Two: Chinese leader Xi Jinping seeks not just to take control of Taiwan but to transform the global international system, replacing it with a Sinocentric order, downgrading America in the process.

Three: Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei will never accept a deal on Iran's nuclear program that will truly block all pathways to a bomb, nor will he reach lasting agreements on regional security with the United States. Like Putin and Xi, Khamenei seeks to overturn the American-led international order.

Four: China, Russia, and Iran are increasingly cooperating among themselves on projects of mutual interest; when not cooperating, they are often moving along roughly parallel lines. Although their interests do collide in some areas, they share the same grand strategic goal of weakening America and its allies.

As it develops a strategy for winning the struggle for Eurasia, Washington will soon rediscover the set of unique characteristics that make Azerbaijan a prime candidate for a special partnership.

As these four propositions become increasingly obvious to the American electorate, it is easy to imagine shocks to the American-led international system—such as an attack on Taiwan by China, on Ukraine by Russia, or on Israel by Iran—that will force the strategic community in Washington to conclude that the United States faces a loose global coalition of revisionist powers whose collective goal is to topple America from its position of primacy in Eurasia.

Indeed, as the United States retreats, China, Russia, and Iran are growing more, not less assertive. This dynamic means one of two things. Either America's decline will entail a series of ignominious collapses on the model of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, leading ultimately to the loss of its status as the preeminent world power; or Washington will manage its decline better, by discovering a method for checking its rivals with as little reliance as possible on its own military. Since the days of Thucydides, great powers have had recourse to only one such method: borrowing the power of allies and partners. As it develops a strategy for winning the struggle for Eurasia, Washington will soon rediscover the set of unique characteristics that make Azerbaijan a prime candidate for a special partnership.

Nationalism

The geostrategic approach calls for paying close attention not just to the character of states and the policies of governments but also to the tectonic plates atop which those rest—plates formed over the centuries by history, demography, and culture. Seen through this prism, one of the most important attributes recommending Azerbaijan for strategic partnership with the United States

is the simple and obvious fact that it is a real nation state and not what is often called by specialists an "imagined community." Its government represents a cohesive society held together by a strong communal identity. Unlike many post-Soviet and Middle Eastern states, Azerbaijan is not a collection of diverse ethnic groups that, thanks to accidents of history and the whims of imperial cartographers, woke one day to find themselves living under the same government.

This does not mean that there are no minorities in Azerbaijan—only that they are, in fact, actual *minorities,* whose size does not fragment the country politically or undermine its security. Their status as full and respected members of the state is beyond doubt. The Western press frequently depicts the conflict with Armenia as a sectarian struggle pitting Muslim-majority Azerbaijan against one of its Christian neighbors, but it is more accurately understood as a contest between rival nationalisms. The tolerance of Azerbaijani society is well documented in general but affirmed specifically by the self-assurance of the Jewish community, which has existed continuously for many centuries—possibly for over 2,000 years—harmoniously integrated into the country's social and cultural life. All Azerbaijanis are familiar with the battlefield sacrifice of Albert Agarunov, a Jewish hero of the First Karabakh War. In downtown Baku, a statue stands in his honor.

Azerbaijan's identity places it in a state of permanent enmity with Iran. Leaders on both sides have a strong interest in keeping the enmity contained. When Azerbaijani and Iranian officials meet, smiles break out and affirmations of brotherhood flow freely. Beneath the niceties, however, boundless suspicions lurk—because Baku and Tehran sit on opposite sides of not one, but two socio-historic fault lines.

The first of these is the line between the Persian and Azerbaijani nations. After a series of wars between the Russian Empire and Iran, the treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) forced Iran to cede the South Caucasus—that is, the lands north of the Aras River—to Russia. This border, drawn by two multiethnic empires, bisected the lands populated by ethnic-Azerbaijanis, the people whom Azerbaijani nationalists today call "the Azerbaijani nation." Ethnic-Azerbaijanis constitute between one-fifth and one-third of the entire population of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and they are predominantly concentrated in ethnically homogenous communities located in the regions immediately south of the Aras River. Historically, they have been well integrated into Iran, including at the highest levels of political and economic life. Many feel themselves to be Iranian first and Azerbaijani second.

But some significant portion, especially of the younger generation, feels less loyalty to its Iranian identity and longs to cultivate its Azerbaijani roots. Among Azerbaijanis living in the Persian heartland, intermarriage and assimilation rates are high, but among those living in predominantly ethnic-Azerbaijani provinces, a desire for greater cultural rights is increasingly evident. Those provinces are consumers of Turkish and Azerbaijani media—which promote a very different picture of the relationship between religion and state than prevails in the Islamic Republic. Though a Muslim majority country, Azerbaijan is a secular state and Western in its cultural orientation, with women fully integrated in public life and alcohol consumed at European levels.

The Azerbaijani question is therefore one of the most significant national security challenges—possibly even the most significant—that Tehran faces.

Azerbaijani Iranians have watched with ever growing pride as an independent Azerbaijani state rose from the ashes after the First Karabakh War. They find the quality of life in Azerbaijan, which is much higher than in Iran, inherently attractive, and Azerbaijan's historic victory in last year's Second Karabakh War filled their hearts with joy and swelled their chests with pride.

To be sure, the war boosted nationalist sentiment in "South Azerbaijan," as the nationalists call the Azerbaijani regions of Iran. But how deep does this sentiment run? Is it strong enough to fuel a movement for a federal state? Could it give rise to serious demands for an autonomous Azerbaijani region? Can the enemies of the Islamic Republic harness the sentiment for revolutionary ends? Or will it simply play out like the Iranian equivalent of Quebecois nationalism—strong enough to cause an occasional ruckus but not to drive events over the long haul? In a rapidly changing world, the answers to these questions are known to no one, but at the highest levels of the Iranian government they weigh

heavily on the mind. A well-organized movement for autonomy would shake the regime to its core.

The Azerbaijani question is therefore one of the most significant national security challenges—possibly even the most significant—that Tehran faces. Although the United States has been engaged in a contest with the Islamic Republic since 1979, Washington, historically, has shown scant awareness of the Azerbaijani question and, in turn, of the opportunity it offers for counterbalancing Iran and even for gaining leverage over it.

Not so Jerusalem. Israel's ties to Baku are long and deep, and they include strategic cooperation, with Israel receiving around 40 percent of its oil from Azerbaijan, to which it sells high end military equipment, including some of the weapons and defensive systems that played a major role in Azerbaijan's recent military victory. The Iranians, for their part, have long assumed that Azerbaijan is assisting Mossad, Israel's intelligence agency, in its covert war against their nuclear program. In 2012, Mossad (presumably) assassinated Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, an Iranian nuclear scientist. In response, Iranian officials lodged a formal protest with the Azerbaijani ambassador in Tehran. Was the protest based on solid information, or were the Iranians simply leaping to conclusions? We may never know for sure, but even the uncertainty surrounding the episode speaks volumes about just how unnerving Iran's leaders find Azerbaijan. On the one hand, if Baku had been assisting Israel in its covert war, then the success of Mossad's operation testified to the strength of Azerbaijan's capabilities. On the other hand, if Baku had not been offering intelligence assistance to Israel, then Iran's decision to lodge a protest with Azerbaijan's ambassador reveals more than just a little paranoia.

To counterbalance its northern neighbor, Tehran has consistently supported Armenia in the conflict over Karabakh. Armenia is a Christian nation and Azerbaijan, like Iran, is a predominantly Shiite Muslim society. The ideology of the Islamic Republic calls for supporting fellow Muslims, but state interest trumps religious solidarity. In the Second Karabakh War, Tehran's support for Armenia included one instance of direct intervention. Several diplomatic sources in Baku told me that, in mid-October 2020, Iranian forces crossed the Khudafarin Bridge into Azerbaijan, where they placed concrete barriers on the road running parallel to the river. This action temporarily prevented reinforcements and supplies from reaching Azerbaijani frontline troops that had already moved westward past the bridge. The Iranians refused to budge for several days. They returned home only after Baku threatened to go public with its displeasure—a step that would have inflamed the sentiments of Azerbaijanis in Iran and turned them against their government.

Tehran also helped deliver military equipment and supplies to Armenia, which shares no border with its military patron, Russia. When Georgia barred Moscow from using its airspace, Tehran offered the Russians access to Armenia through Iran. Iranian Azerbaijanis, however, learned of the resupply operation. Protestors took to the streets in anger, forcing Iranian officials to deny that they were aiding Armenia and to issue affirmations of Muslim solidarity with brotherly Azerbaijan.

The second fault line separating Baku from Tehran is the divide between Iran and Turan.

Iran and Turan

The second fault line separating Baku from Tehran is the divide between Iran and Turan. In Iranian literature, "Turan" refers to Central Asia. The word appears repeatedly in Iran's national epic, *The Shahname*, written in the eleventh century by Ferdowsi, Iran's poet laureate. *The Shahname* immortalized the fear that the Central Asian nomadic conquerors struck in the hearts of the settled Persians. "No earth is visible, no sea, no mountain, from the many blade-wielders of the Turan horde," writes Ferdowsi, who lived at the precise moment when the balance of power between Iran and Turan shifted in favor of the latter—shifted, more precisely, in favor of Turkic steppe warriors, the dominant group in Turan. Genghis Khan, the most famed steppe conqueror, was a Mongol, but his army was populated mainly by Turkic cavalrymen. Indeed, at that moment in history the most powerful militaries in the world were those fielding Turkic mounted archers. Tamerlane, the second greatest conqueror, was himself a Turkic horseman, and from his capital, Samarkand, he ruled all of Iran.

Azerbaijanis are a Turkic people, the cultural descendants of steppe warriors. The era of Turkic military supremacy over Iran lasted about

a thousand years. Political power brought demographic transformations. The region that now includes the Republic of Azerbaijan and the provinces of Iran populated by ethnic-Azerbaijanis was completely Turkified. Demographic strength, in turn, brought political power. From the death of Ferdowsi down to World War I, almost every ruling dynasty in Iran emerged from Turkic tribes.

The greatest among them was Shah Ismail, the founder of the Safavid Dynasty, which built the most powerful and consequential Iranian state of the last millennium. Shah Ismail converted Iran to Shiism, and his power rivaled that of the Ottoman Empire. The Islamic Republic remembers him as a great "Persian" monarch, and the label is justified. But the Azerbaijanis also embrace him as a native son—and they, too, have a valid claim over both him and his legacy. Born to an Azerbaijani family in one Azerbaijani city, Ardabil, he made his capital in another, Tabriz. His troops were Turkic warriors, whom he spurred to battle with Azerbaijani poetry, which survives to this day, and which is regarded in Azerbaijan as a national treasure. In 1993, newly-independent Azerbaijan erected a statue of him in downtown Baku.

Leaders in Tehran see Azerbaijan's appropriation of great "Persians" such as Shah Ismail as the ludicrous pretensions of upstart yokels. The regime's mouthpieces, official and unofficial alike, habitually paint Azerbaijan as a fake country, a trumped-up former province of Iran that the Russians hived off from the motherland. The sense of superiority that these attitudes express is sincere, but it also masks more than a little insecurity. Fear of Turan will forever haunt the Persian collective consciousness—and not only because Turks dominated Persians for a thousand years. Leaders in Tehran today are haunted not by the ghosts of Turan past, but of Turan future.

On 10 December 2020, ghosts of the blade-wielding horsemen of the Turan horde appeared in Baku. They were summoned by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who joined Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to celebrate the victory in the Second Karabakh War. From the podium, Erdoğan read a folk poem—a lament mourning the division of the Azerbaijani people by the Aras River. Iranian officials, for their part, interpreted this longing for unity as a grave threat to Iran's territorial integrity and they exploded with rage. Among the many reactions was a signed statement by three-quarters of the

members of Iran's parliament. Read out during a televised session, it "strongly condemned" Erdoğan's remarks. Iran's foreign ministry summoned the Turkish ambassador for a rebuke. "The Turkish ambassador was told that basing foreign policy on illusions is not wise," Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh tweeted.

Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister at the time, also took to Twitter—to issue an empty threat. "Erdoğan was not informed" about the true meaning of the poem, he wrote. The lament was not about the Azerbaijanis being divided from one another, but about "the forcible separation" of Azerbaijan from the "Iranian motherland." Didn't Erdoğan realize that he was "undermining the sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan?" Zarif asked. "NO ONE can talk about OUR beloved Azerbaijan," he warned. Zarif was signaling that two can play at the game of reclaiming territory: Turkey and Azerbaijan should beware lest Iran decide to repatriate Azerbaijan.

But by turning a poem into a diplomatic incident, Zarif and his Iranian colleagues inadvertently exposed their impotence. Tehran played no role in shaping the war on its borders, and it was entirely shut out of the postwar diplomacy. On none of Iran's other borders is Tehran so utterly devoid of influence. However, by directing their rage at Erdoğan, they also revealed that the thing they fear most is not irredentism in Baku per se, but a larger Turanic movement led by Ankara. In contrast to Azerbaijan, Turkey is slightly more populous than Iran and wields much greater military might. It is a rising power, and it cannot be intimidated.

While the word "Turan" originated in Persian, it passed into Ottoman Turkish in the nineteenth century, becoming less geographic in meaning and more ethnographic. "Pan-Turanism" now refers to the movement that sought to unite all Turkic peoples from the Ottoman Empire to Central Asia—from Istanbul to the Altai mountains.

For the most part, the Turkish Republic has shied away from pan-Turanism, seeing it as a romantic idea, a movement of dreamers, inviting costly Turkish participation in pointless foreign adventures. But in recent years, a pan-Turanist thread has appeared in Ankara's policy, partly due to domestic politics in Turkey, partly to the abundant energy resources of Central Asia that must cross Turkey to reach Europe, partly due to the vacuum left by a retreating U.S.—

and partly due to the success of the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance.

Among all the Turkic countries, Azerbaijan and Turkey are the closest, and their languages are mutually intelligible. When Turks and Azerbaijanis discuss their bilateral relations, they invariably mention the phrase, "One nation, two states." This is no empty political slogan: in the popular cultures of both countries, expressions of mutual affection abound.

In the West, especially during the Second Karabakh War, many observers depicted this mutual affection and the military alliance it supports as a "jihadi" coalition, led by Erdoğan, the supposed Muslim Brother. This depiction is, not to mince words, laughably ignorant. The Turks are Sunnis. Turkish Islamists, therefore, regard the post-Soviet Azerbaijanis as vodka-swilling Shiites, a very disreputable type of person. Erdoğan wins no applause from the devout in Turkey when he embraces Ilham Aliyev. He does, however, win approval from secular nationalists, who are members of his domestic coalition.

But there are also other strands in the pan-Turanist thread that Ankara has been lately weaving. Turkey has played the leading role in creating the Organization of Turkic States, whose members also include Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan (with Hungary and Turkmenistan enjoying observer status). Founded in 2009 as the Turkic Council and headquartered in Istanbul, the organization is Turkey's answer to China's Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Russia's Eurasian Union. It promotes cooperation among the governments of Turkic-speaking countries, creating a club of states that, despite their many differences, share one thing in common: a desire to escape domination by larger powers, Russia and China above all others.

With no binding mechanisms for coordinating the economic and security policies of its members, the Organization of Turkic States does not currently pose a significant hard-power threat to China and Russia. Like Iran, however, both those countries rule over Turkic Muslim minorities and therefore are extremely wary of Turkic solidarity, even if it comes in the form of a toothless organization. Events, moreover, are moving swiftly. The Second Karabakh War showcased the potential of Turkish unmanned combat aerial vehicles (that is, drones) to overwhelm Russian weapons system. Some influential voices in Turkey are now calling for

closer security cooperation among the Turkic states. When the government of Kazakhstan followed Ukraine's lead and signed a deal with Ankara, in November 2021, to acquire Turkish drones, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping cannot but have been displeased.

It is Ali Khamenei, however, who has the most to fear. In Tehran, the Second Karabakh War did more than just highlight Turkish military prowess. The ceasefire agreement requires Armenia to open a land bridge across its territory connecting Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave, which borders Turkey. This bridge, which the Turks and Azerbaijanis call the Zangezur Corridor, carries great symbolic meaning in pan-Turanist circles. When it becomes operational, it will allow travel from Europe to China without ever leaving Turkic soil (except for the corridor through Armenia, which will be less than 50 kilometers long). The state of war for the last 30 years between Armenia and Azerbaijan ensured that no such direct rail or highway links could develop, although they existed in the Soviet, Russian, and Persian periods. Article 9 of the ceasefire agreement restores the lost connectivity. "The Republic of Armenia," it states, "shall guarantee the security of transport connections between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to arrange unobstructed movement of persons, vehicles, and cargo in both directions."

If Azerbaijan acts as a natural counterbalance to Iran, then its rise has also significantly eroded Russian influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

This simple line is the stuff of nightmares in Tehran, where the Zangezur Corridor is seen as a pan-Turanist plot—a land grab. Tehran fears that the "transport corridor" of today will morph into a security buffer tomorrow. It will interpose a joint Turkish-Azerbaijani force between Iran and Armenia, cutting the two off from each other. Pan-Turanist soldiers would then be arrayed all along the northwest frontier of Iran, poised to invade or to incite the millions of Azerbaijani Iranians living across the border, just a stone's throw away. At the meeting of the Organization of Turkic States in November 2021, Ilham Aliyev did nothing to calm Iranian nerves. "The Zangezur

Corridor," he said, "will unite the entire Turkic world."

Moscow's "Special" Relationship with Baku

If Azerbaijan acts as a natural counterbalance to Iran, then its rise has also significantly eroded Russian influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. To untrained eyes in Washington, however, the veneer of warm and friendly relations between Moscow and Baku often makes the more lasting impression.

Entirely fluent in Russian and often schooled in Moscow, the Azerbaijani elite contains a sizeable contingent that promotes close ties with Putin. For his part, the Russian leader appears in no way anti-Azerbaijani. During the Second Karabakh War, some observers even discerned a pro-Azerbaijan inclination. For reasons that will become clear below, however, that description is a misreading of Putin's approach. Nevertheless, it is based on some very real and startling aspects of Russian policy—most notably the military restraint that Russia exhibited even as Azerbaijan published, in the midst of the fighting, videos documenting the rout of the Armenian army and the destruction of state-of-the-art Russian weaponry.

To justify his restraint, Putin hid behind international law, which clearly recognizes that the territories occupied by Armenia in the First Karabakh War belong to Azerbaijan. This fact allowed him to claim that Russia's treaty obligations only applied in the event of an attack on Armenia proper, not on Armenian forces in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, which was where the fighting of the Second Karabakh war took place. On 22 October 2020, in the middle of the war, Putin appeared in a discussion organized by a Moscow think tank. When asked if the Kremlin's special relationship with Yerevan would lead it to take Armenia's side, he answered by depicting Russian policy as equally balanced between the belligerents. "Let's start from the beginning, with […] whom to support," Putin answered. "You said that Russia has always had special ties with Armenia. But we have always had special ties with Azerbaijan."

When combined with Putin's notoriously strained relations with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, statements such as this strengthened the perception in Washington that Baku, not Yerevan, had won the contest for the Russian leader's favor. The 2018 Velvet Revolution, Pashinyan's populist reform movement, had already created a fertile soil for such perceptions to take root. It earned him high regard in the West and riled the Kremlin, especially when it led to the arrest of, among others, Robert Kocharyan, a former two-term president and a close associate of Putin. Jailing Putin's friends without permission is a cardinal sin of the new Russian order.

In Putin's mind, Armenia is classified neither as a friend nor an ally, but as a satellite. This simple fact is often obscured in Washington, but it is an old story and one that by now should be obvious to all national security professionals.

And sins will be punished. When the Second Karabakh War broke out, Putin used it to discipline Pashinyan—to remind him that, in Russian-Armenian relations, it is Moscow that holds the whip hand. But that's not all it holds. When the war ended, Putin had captured for Russia two prizes: the lead role in the diplomacy surrounding the conflict, and the job of keeping the peace on the ground with Russian troops—nearly 2,000 in total—which Baku has grudgingly accepted on Azerbaijani soil for the first time. Aliyev, for his part, raised no protests about Russia's acquisition of these prizes.

Although these facts are entirely true, they paint a very misleading strategic picture, directing the eye to details which seem important on the surface, but which, upon close inspection, turn out to be irrelevant to American national security. Take, for example, the bad relations between Putin and Pashinyan. They certainly grab the eye, as contests between powerful personalities always do. With respect to the American interest, however, they are no more important than a soap opera, for one simple reason: they do not threaten the Russian military's preeminent status in Armenia.

In Putin's mind, Armenia is classified neither as a friend nor an ally, but as a satellite. This simple fact is often obscured in Washington, but it is an old story and one that by now should be obvious to all national security professionals. Shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, leaders in Yerevan turned Armenia into the anchor of Russia in the South Caucasus. In the process, they placed the security apparatus of the country firmly and forever in Moscow's hands. Russia is Armenia's number one trading partner. Russians occupy the commanding heights of the Armenian

economy, not to mention its rail network, gas lines, and nuclear power plant. More importantly, the Russian military operates two major bases in the country from which it supports a host of forward operating positions. Russian units routinely augment Armenian forces, including in border patrol duties. Whereas Azerbaijan must purchase its weapons from Russia, Armenia receives them for free or at a discount. The Russian military exercises total and direct control over Armenian airspace.

It also controls Armenia's arsenal of strategic weapons. Although this fact is crucially important for understanding the outcome of the Second Karabakh War, it has gone virtually unnoticed in the United States. During the conflict, the Armenian military launched one or more SS-26 Iskander ballistic missiles at Baku. (There is some ambiguity in the source material over the number of missiles launched, with some credible sources suggesting that the number might be two or higher.) Moscow does not give the Armenian military independent launch authority over the SS-26 Iskander.

Someone very high up in the Russian chain of command, possibly even Putin himself, approved the attack. In all likelihood, that person even encouraged or ordered it. We know from highly credible evidence, that the launch or launches occurred on 8 or 9 November 2020. The ceasefire agreement was signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia late on 9 November 2020 and went into force on 10 November 2020. The launch or launches took place in the final hours of the war, while Putin was brokering the ceasefire. They were, that is to say, Putin's main input into the negotiations.

A quick sketch of the situation on the battlefield reveals his motives. The Azerbaijani military had just executed a daring and successful surprise attack that drove the Armenians from the city of Shusha, the strategic prize for Azerbaijan, which towers over Stepanakert/Khankendi, the main ethnic-Armenian-populated city in Karabakh. The operation positioned the Azerbaijani military to drive all Armenian forces out of Karabakh in very short order. The Azerbaijanis, in other words, were but one day's fighting away from total victory.

That was the context in which word was given to fire on Baku. Aliyev undoubtedly read the launch for what it was, namely, a missive from Putin, which delivered something like the following messages: a complete expulsion of Armenian forces from Karabakh is a red line for Moscow; a failure to accept an immediate ceasefire will trigger a major Russian escalation; this escalation will entail attacks on Azerbaijani civilian targets in the capital, Baku, and on the country's oil and gas infrastructure. It can even entail the sudden appearance on the battlefield in Karabakh of "little green men"—the kind that entered Ukraine in 2014.

This threat of escalation reveals the inadequacy of the "pro-Azerbaijan" label that some accounts have attached to Russian policy during the Second Karabakh War. Putin no doubt enjoyed punishing Pashinyan, but slapping down an upstart Armenian prime minister was not the strategic goal. Nor did Putin have any special love for Azerbaijan. His only goal, which he pursued with impressive focus, was to preserve Russia's status as the balancer between Baku and Yerevan. He refused to allow the Azerbaijanis to win, because their total victory would have ended not just the conflict, completely and forever, but also Russia's "imperial" role in the South Caucasus.

Seen in this light, the launch of the SS-26 Iskander conveyed one additional message: Azerbaijan must accept the Russian "peacekeepers" in the Lachin Corridor, the primary route from Armenia to the Russian peacekeeping zone in Karabakh (which lies in Azerbaijani national territory). Direct Russian control over the corridor gives Moscow leverage over both Yerevan and Baku simultaneously. By making the Russian military the guardian of the Armenians' access to land that they regard as a hallowed national patrimony, Putin preserved Moscow's iron grip on Yerevan. Likewise, by placing the Russian forces in a position from which they could, if they so desired, instantly snatch Shusha from Azerbaijan's hands—Shusha, the jewel in the crown of Azerbaijani Karabakh and the city that for decades has been the object of national longing—he insured that Baku would work hard to stay in Moscow's good graces.

The comparison with Ukraine and Georgia is instructive. With respect to Azerbaijan, Russia's peacekeepers perform the same dual function that Russian forces in Donbass and South Ossetia perform. They serve simultaneously as a permanent credible threat and as the advance guard of an invasion force, instilling in Azerbaijan a proper respect for Russian power. They encourage Baku, for example, to refrain from developing a more intimate relationship with NATO, and to continue to purchase Russian weaponry, which the Azerbaijanis

have never stopped buying even while developing defense relations with the Turks, Israelis, and others.

A Landscape Transformed

If Baku remains deferential to Moscow, it is by necessity. But when seen from Washington, this deference sometimes blinds Americans to the dramatic change in the balance of power that the Second Karabakh War represents. To avoid provoking Russia, the Azerbaijanis never advertise the growth of their capabilities, nor do they flaunt their successes. Consequently, many American observers have failed to recognize the most important aspect of the ceasefire: Russia had no choice but to monitor the peace together with Turkey.

That Putin would allow a competing power such a role in a region traditionally considered Russia's sphere of interest sent ripples of disbelief through Moscow. At a press conference in the Russian capital on 17 November 2020, a reporter asked Putin if the reports were really true: would Turkey share with Russia responsibilities for policing the ceasefire? "What can I tell you?" Putin answered. "These are the geopolitical consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union." In a previous context, Putin had (now famously) described the Soviet Union's demise as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century." In this instance, he embroidered his point as follows: "What do I mean? Azerbaijan is an independent sovereign state. Azerbaijan has the right to choose its allies as it sees fit. Who can deny this to it?"

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But denying Baku allies other than Russia has been Moscow's intention since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Its failure to achieve this goal is not the result of its punctilious regard for Azerbaijan's "right to choose," but of Baku's adroit diplomacy.

The Azerbaijanis have consistently made independence from Russia their national priority. The risks of pursuing such a goal have been high—as the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and of Ukraine in 2014 demonstrate. Even with these examples before their eyes, leaders in Baku have rejected all major initiatives to create a formal Russian-dominated system among the former Soviet Republics. For example, at the first opportunity, Azerbaijan left the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the post-Soviet military alliance whose members, in addition to Russia, include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. While Baku did join in 1993, a year after the CSTO's founding, it did so only because membership was the price it had to pay to gain Russian support for ending the First Karabakh War, which it lost badly in no small part due to Russian support for Yerevan. Armenia had occupied not just all of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, but also seven surrounding districts over which it had no historic claims, and from which it ethnically cleansed all the Azerbaijani residents, who constituted almost the entire population.

From this bitter experience, the Azerbaijanis learned that Moscow intended to follow a policy of divide and rule in the South Caucasus—supporting Armenia so that Baku would have no choice but to turn to Russia for protection.

Liberating its conquered territory required political freedom of action, which, in turn, rested on economic independence. Therefore, Baku has also staved off demands from Putin that it participate in another of his "imperial" initiatives, namely, the Eurasian Economic Union, which came into being in 2015 and includes all the members of the CSTO minus Tajikistan. To convince Baku to join the Union, Putin threatened to whip up domestic opposition to Aliyev, who deftly managed to hold out. If Aliyev had backed down and joined the Union, he would have handed Moscow a mechanism for compelling Baku to develop a common energy policy. Giving Russia a handle on the ultimate source of the country's independence was a nonstarter.

Energy wealth has transformed Azerbaijan dramatically. In 1993, it was defeated and destitute. Less than three decades later, it is now the most powerful, wealthy, and influential country in the region. With wealth has come economic partnerships—the most important of which is with Turkey. By 2006, gas and oil pipelines linked the two countries, and drew Georgia into an alignment with them. A rail line followed. By 2018 this budding relationship had flowered into

the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC), a natural gas supply route from Baku to Puglia in Italy that has advanced a chief American objective, namely the diversification of hydrocarbon supplies to the European Union, thus weakening the leverage of Russia over the Transatlantic Alliance.

Through this policy of low-key defense diversification, Azerbaijan managed to build a military that became entirely independent of Russia and trained to a NATO standard.

As Azerbaijan and Turkey became economically intertwined, they developed a special defense relationship. By engaging bilaterally with the Turkish military, Aliyev managed to avoid triggering the kind of violent Russian response that greeted the efforts of Georgia and Ukraine to move toward the West. Aliyev also cleverly diversified his defense relationships, working closely with Israel and even engaging in a limited institutional partnership with NATO—which entailed, among other things, the dispatch of a small Azerbaijani contingent to Afghanistan. Through this policy of low-key defense diversification, Azerbaijan managed to build a military that became entirely independent of Russia and trained to a NATO standard.

Putin either failed to recognize the threat that this development posed or was powerless to stop it. The full extent of the danger to Moscow became clear only in March 2020, when Turkey's Operation Spring Shield in northern Syria revealed that Turkish drones had the capacity to overwhelm the Russian weaponry deployed by the Syrian forces. By then it was too late for Moscow to adjust. Six months later, the Second Karabakh War proved not just that Azerbaijan's military was bigger and more powerful than Armenia's, but that it had at its disposal state-of-the-art weapons systems for which the Russians, as far as one can tell, currently have no effective answers.

Consider, for example, the ballistic missile or missiles fired on Baku in the final moments of the war. Insofar as the launch expressed an Armenian-Russian readiness to conduct mass terror attacks on Azerbaijan's capital, it was very persuasive. It convinced Aliyev to end the war. But in strict military terms, it was a failure. The missile or missiles never reached their targets, because the Azerbaijani military shot them down—with an Israeli missile defense system, the Barak-8. The inadequate performance of the SS-26 Iskander left a taste of bitterness in Yerevan. In February 2021, Pashinyan, while sparring with rivals over who was responsible for the defeat, complained that the missile or missiles "did not explode." When asked why, he said sarcastically, "I don't know. Maybe it's a weapon of the 1980s."

No post-Soviet state has proved as adept as Azerbaijan at slipping free from Moscow's bear hug. Although Putin sought to downplay Turkey's role in the monitoring of the ceasefire—by depicting it as an inevitable consequence of the fall of the Soviet Union—the truth is that Aliyev outmaneuvered him personally. When Putin came to power in 1999, Russia still exercised hegemony over the South Caucasus. At that time, Azerbaijan was still a member of the CSTO. The rise of a truly independent Azerbaijan took place, in other words, on Putin's watch—and it happened not by an act of God but by human planning.

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The Azerbaijani leadership conducted a painstaking diplomacy that kept the Russians at arm's length and yet avoided provoking them. It did so at great risk to itself and with only limited and intermittent assistance from the West.

Azerbaijan has presided over a tectonic shift in the South Caucasus, ending the hegemony that Russia had exercised for the past two centuries.

The Tovuz Option

But the contest with Moscow is hardly over. Azerbaijan's wealth, power, and independence will continue only if it remains open as an East-West conduit for trade, especially in oil and gas, all of which passes through a very narrow corridor, which is sometimes called the Ganja Gap, after the largest city in the corridor. The Gap is less than 100 kilometers wide. Near its narrowest point, in the northwest corner of the country, sits Tovuz,

a small town. Tovuz is Azerbaijan's windpipe. As such, Putin would love nothing more than to crush it with his thumb.

In July 2020, during border clashes in the Tovuz region, which killed Azerbaijani General Polad Hashimov, Armenia almost gave Putin an opportunity to do just that. These clashes were the prelude to the Second Karabakh War, and a brief analysis of them will clarify the American stake in the larger conflict.

Reports on the clashes in the Western press often presented them as part of the struggle over Karabakh. But Tovuz is nowhere near Karabakh. It is, however, near the SGC. The pipeline first became operational on 31 December 2020—that is, five months after the fighting in Tovuz and a little over one month after the end of the Second Karabakh War.

It would be simpleminded to say that the fighting in 2020 was all about that pipeline, but it would be equally wrong to say that the pipeline had no impact on the fighting. The SGC does more than just establish Azerbaijan as a gas exporter to Europe. It positions Baku to become the leader of a consortium of gas exporters—the colossal size of whose reserves will turn the group into a serious rival to Russia.

The challenge that the SGC represents to Moscow is playing out before our eyes today. Take, for example, the case of Turkmenistan, which contains some of the largest gas reserves in the world. It recently agreed to supply Europe through the SGC. Turkmenistan's primary customers, at the time the deal with Azerbaijan was agreed, were China and Russia. In the past, Russia has purchased Turkmenistan's gas at cut rate prices and then exported it to Europe for profit. A partnership with the SGC, if Russia and China don't succeed in scuttling it, will allow Turkmenistan to diversify its customer base and, thereby, to develop more room for maneuver internationally.

If this deal had been inked when Brzezinski was writing *The Grand Chessboard*, it would have been seen in Washington and European capitals as delivering significant benefits to the Atlantic Alliance, and as a harbinger of greater independence and prosperity for the peoples of Central Asia. Today, however, the deal received scant attention in the West, which increasingly behaves as if fossil fuels are antiquated sources of energy, as outdated as whale blubber oil. For example, the German government is rushing with a quasi-religious zeal to decarbonize its electricity grid. This development, when combined with a decision to shut down all nuclear power plants by the end of this year, is leading inexorably to a shortfall in energy production that Berlin can fix in only one way: by importing Russian gas.

Unlike Western politicians, Putin has not deluded himself into believing that fossil fuels will cease to power modern economies. This intellectual clarity allows him to use energy as a geostrategic weapon. "We believe there are strong elements of tightness in Europe's gas markets due to Russia's behavior," Fatih Birol, the head of the International Energy Agency, recently told reporters, noting that "today's low Russian gas flows to Europe coincide with heightened geopolitical tensions over Ukraine."

Russia is currently withholding at least one-third of the gas it could supply to Europe—and that blackmail has considerably improved Putin's hand in the negotiations surrounding the Ukraine crisis. The last thing Putin wants to see is an end to Europe's vulnerability on energy. He therefore looks at the SGC as a serious national security threat.

No one is more attuned to Moscow's sense of threat regarding Azerbaijan than Armenia. David Tonoyan, who was Armenia's defense minister at the time, addressed a gathering of Armenian diaspora representatives in New York in March 2019, just ten months after Ilham Aliyev presided over the opening ceremony of the SGC but before it was fully operational. Tonoyan's remarks did not address Russia's concerns about the pipeline directly, but indirectly they made Moscow an intriguing proposition: use Armenia to block the SGC.

The most important subject of Tonoyan's talk was the traditional diplomatic formula for solving the conflict over Karabakh: "territories for peace." The formula implied that Armenia would return some of the occupied territories in return for granting a special status for Armenian-occupied Karabakh. He expressed himself as follows: "I, as the Defense Minister, say that the option of return of 'territories for peace' will no longer exist, and I have re-formulated it into 'new territories in the event of a new war.'"

Tonoyan's slogan, which has since been popularized as "New wars for new territories," demonstrated a brazen disregard for international opinion. The old formula, "territories for peace," had been accepted by all interested parties for years, even decades; it formed the basis of all serious diplomatic efforts to solve the conflict. Flouting international opinion is a

strong state's prerogative. Armenia, however, is weak. The size of its population—roughly 3 million souls—has not grown since the 1990s; Azerbaijan's population, by contrast, has now surpassed 10 million. The defense budget of Azerbaijan is as large or larger than Armenia's entire state budget.

On the face of it, Tonoyan's slogan suggests that he had a poor grasp on basic power realities. But what if he wasn't thinking in terms of Armenia's capabilities? Suppose, instead, that he was weighing the power of Russia against the power of Azerbaijan. "New wars for new territories" is a very reasonable slogan if one assumes two things: that the Russian military is stronger than the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance; and that Moscow might look favorably on the acquisition of new territories by Armenia.

Azerbaijan manages to fend off Russia, Iran, and Armenia partly because of its own inherent skill in statecraft, but also because it stands on the shoulders of Turkey.

The new territories that Russia would find most alluring are located near Tovuz. The gas pipelines that run through that area carry 90 percent of Azerbaijan's exports and fund 60 percent of its state budget. If Armenian troops had captured Tovuz in July 2020, Russia would have dominated Azerbaijan once again, with immediate results.

Specifically, in that scenario, Putin would have achieved seven objectives. He would have (1) extended a controlling hand over Azerbaijani oil and gas sales to the West; (2) guaranteed that, in the future, all Central Asian oil and gas would flow to or through Russia or China; (3) broken or severely curtailed the military alliance between Azerbaijan and Turkey; (4) downgraded the military alliance between Azerbaijan and Israel; (5) ended the cooperation between the Azerbaijani military and NATO; (6) positioned Russia to reassert its total hegemony over Georgia; and (7) blocked the development of a land route between Turkey and the other members of what is now the Organization of Turkic States, which, thanks also to points (1) through (6) above, would be strangled in the crib.

In the event, none of this transpired—but not because Tonoyan's thinking was unhinged. He simply failed, like many others, to realize just how powerful the Azerbaijani-Turkish alliance had become.

Azerbaijan manages to fend off Russia, Iran, and Armenia partly because of its own inherent skill in statecraft, but also because it stands on the shoulders of Turkey. But Turkey is a regional power, not a great power. Imagine what might happen if, in the coming years, Ankara were to lose momentarily the capacity to come to Baku's aid. In that case, Russia would surely move to exploit the opportunity. Its peacekeepers in Karabakh today play a relatively benign role but only because they are paired up with their Turkish counterparts. If the Turkish counterweight were to disappear, the Russian peacekeepers could transform themselves into war makers. In that case, Tonoyan's "New wars for new territories" would again become a realistic proposition. Putin would be free to exercise the Tovuz Option.

That scenario can be rendered fanciful if the United States will wake up and rediscover its traditional job of counterbalancing Russia (and Iran too).

Where is America?

Back in 1997, long before the SGC was even in its planning stages, Zbigniew Brzezinski could already see the pipeline clearly in his mind's eye, and he understood what was at stake strategically—for the West as well as for Russia. From Moscow's point of view, he writes in *The Grand Chessboard*, Azerbaijan "is the cork in the bottle containing the riches of the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia."

Now, as then, the job of the United States is to keep Russia from forcing the cork back into the bottle. Much of official Washington, however, has forgotten this strategic imperative. America is either completely oblivious to the importance of the South Caucasus or it is focused on secondary and tertiary questions.

Two personal anecdotes are apposite. I first visited Azerbaijan in the final weeks of the Second Karabakh War. After posting statements on social media about the strategic importance of the country, I received a note from a friend, a former senior American official (who today has returned to government service), expressing some disagreement with my views. "[Y]ou should press your hosts on press freedom and human rights," he advised. "There will never be bipartisan support for deepening the relationship with Azerbaijan until they begin to tackle those issues."

I played out in my mind how a conversation with an Azerbaijani official might go if I were to heed my friend's advice. The official would say to me

something like: "The Iranians have crossed the Khudafarin Bridge, set up roadblocks, and are not allowing us to resupply our troops. People are dying as a result." To which I would respond: "That's truly unfortunate. I'm sorry to hear it. But I must tell you that you won't receive help from Washington until you reform your press laws." The advice seemed tone-deaf. I chose not to pass it on.

Thwarting the Iranians and protecting Azerbaijani sovereignty are American interests, not rewards that the United States bestows on the Azerbaijanis for following its advice on press regulations and human rights—regardless of how wise that advice may be. Indeed, where was the support from the United States when the Iranians crossed the Aras and violated Azerbaijani sovereignty? Or when the Russians encouraged the Armenians to commit a war crime (one of many) by launching one or more Iskander SS-26 missiles at civilian targets? Most important of all, where was the United States when the Russians insisted on introducing peacekeepers into Karabakh? The Americans vanished at the most important moment of the conflict, namely, during diplomacy that brought the fighting to a close.

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At earlier stages of the war, Washington was not entirely absent but took positions that left its friends scratching their heads. Which brings me to my second personal anecdote. A senior official in the Israeli government, who had direct knowledge of the events in question, told me that, during the fighting, a very senior White House official called to request that the Israelis put the brakes on the resupply of the Azerbaijani military. Eager to broker a ceasefire, that American official apparently calculated that, because the Azerbaijanis held the upper hand on the battlefield, they were reluctant to accept a ceasefire. If, however, Israel would slow or stop the flow of weapons shipments, then Baku's calculus might change.

The Israeli official politely refused the request, explaining to the American that allies don't abandon allies in the middle of a war. The White House official did not push the issue again.

As a result of America's vanishing act, Ilham Aliyev had no alternative than to work within structures created by Vladimir Putin to secure Azerbaijan's interests. If Baku today is closer to Moscow than some in Washington would prefer, it is because the United States failed to do its job: to craft realistic alternatives for post-Soviet and Middle Eastern powers who seek independence but also fear being crushed by America's enemies.

As the only country in the world that borders both Russia and Iran, Azerbaijan performs a special function in maintaining the balance of power in the Silk Road region by keeping both of those powers at bay simultaneously.

Just Showing Up

Brzezinski in his 1997 book classified Azerbaijan as a "geopolitical pivot," distinguishing it from a "geostrategic player." Pivots, he explained, are "states whose importance is derived not from their power and motivation but rather from their sensitive location." By contrast, "geostrategic players are the states that have the capacity and the national will to exercise power or influence beyond their borders in order to alter—to a degree that affects America's interests—the existing geopolitical state of affairs."

But in the intervening two decades the world has changed. Azerbaijan is still a crossroads, but it is also much more. It has become stronger, more self-confident, and more assertive. Azerbaijan is a "keystone state," one could say, borrowing the concept that Nikolas Gvosdev of the U.S. Naval War College explicated in a previous edition of *Baku Dialogues*. As the only country in the world that borders both Russia and Iran, Azerbaijan performs a special function in maintaining the balance of power in the Silk Road region by keeping both of those powers at bay simultaneously.

As if to emphasize the readiness of Azerbaijan to play this role, Aliyev traveled to Kiev on 14 January 2022 and signed bilateral agreements with the Ukrainian government on food safety, trade, and energy cooperation, among other issues. More important than the specific content of these agreements was the symbolism

of the meeting. Putin has deployed a 100,000-person force along the frontier with Ukraine and seems to be threatening to invade. Aliyev offered solidarity to the embattled Ukrainians at a moment when Western resolve is flagging.

Expressions of temerity towards Russia were subtle but unmistakable. For instance, both Aliyev and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky speak Russian, but only Azerbaijani and Ukrainian were spoken at their joint press conference. "We have signed the Joint Declaration of the Presidents of Ukraine and Azerbaijan," Zelensky said. "It enshrines readiness to provide mutual support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our states within internationally recognized borders." Aliyev, for his part, underscored that "during independence, Ukraine and Azerbaijan have always supported each other, always supported each other's independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty, and this support is reflected in the Joint Declaration we signed today."

Aliyev's support for Ukraine at this fateful moment demonstrated no little courage. Despite his resolve, however, and despite the special capabilities of his country—Azerbaijan as a "keystone state"—it's not a great power: Baku's full potential can only be realized when stronger powers buttress it. To partner effectively with Azerbaijan, the United States must integrate it into a comprehensive approach toward the struggle for Eurasia.

This is precisely the kind of strategy that the United States most needs today. On both the left and right, Americans have grown weary of military adventures. There does exist, however, a healthy and prudent middle ground between sending American invasion forces halfway around the globe and the game of vanishing superpower that the United States has been playing lately in the Middle East and Central Asia. The trick to capturing that middle ground is to augment the power of countries like Azerbaijan that are willing and able to do the hard work of containing the revisionist powers. To be sure, that task requires taking the time to learn the unique strengths and vulnerabilities of those countries. But the very first principle of good strategy is "Know thyself." If the United States is going to borrow the power of other countries effectively, then it must, *first*, relearn the role it should be playing and, *second*, show up on time. BD

Time to Get U.S.-Azerbaijani Relations on Track

Luke Coffey

Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War has created a new geopolitical reality in the South Caucasus and the Caspian region. This new geopolitical reality creates challenges and opportunities for the United States. Azerbaijan's victory in the war means that NATO member Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus, and by extension Central Asia, is on the rise. If Washington and Ankara can get their bilateral relationship back on track, Turkey's ascendancy in the region can benefit broader U.S. strategic interests. In the aftermath of the conflict there is also an opportunity for America to increase and deepen regional economic and energy cooperation. However, Moscow now has troops—either by invitation or by occupation—in all three countries of the South Caucasus and in Kazakhstan on the other side of the Caspian. From the American point of view, this does not help bring stability or security to the region.

Azerbaijan is in a strategic region where many U.S. geopolitical interests converge. Since 2001, Azerbaijan has proven to be a reliable partner for America against terrorism as well as in the war in Afghanistan. With the new geopolitical reality in the region, U.S. policymakers would be remiss to ignore this limited window of opportunity for improving Washington's relationship with Baku.

Bilateral Ties Over Time

U.S.-Azerbaijani relations date back to the post-World War I Paris Peace Conference—that is to say, during the early and short-lived days of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. Alimardan Topchubashov, the nascent republic's foreign minister, was stuck in Istanbul waiting for France to issue visas for him and his delegation to travel to Paris to make the case for an independent Azerbaijan in front of the victors of World War I.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months, but visas were not forthcoming. Finally, U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing wrote to his French counterpart, Stephen Pichon, asking for help in getting visas for the Azerbaijani delegation. After three months of waiting, Topchubashov and his delegation finally made it to Paris, met with U.S. President Woodrow Wilson in May 1919, and won de facto recognition of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. Sadly, the new republic was short-lived. Months later, the Red Army invaded and occupied Azerbaijan and absorbed it into the Soviet Union.

A few months after meeting with the Azerbaijani delegation, Wilson recounted the event during a speech delivered to San Francisco's Commonwealth Club in September 1919: "Well, one day there came in a very dignified and interesting group of gentlemen who were from Azerbaijan. […] I was talking to men who talked the same language that I did in respect of ideas, in respect of conceptions of liberty, in respect of conceptions of right and justice."

During the Cold War and the Soviet occupation of Azerbaijan, the United States and the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic did not, and of course could not, have formal diplomatic relations. However, on the break-up of the Soviet Union, the then-U.S. president, George H.W. Bush, recognized the reestablishment of Azerbaijan's independence on Christmas Day 1991.

Regrettably, by the late 1990s, the United States had lost much of its enthusiasm for engaging with most of the newly independent countries of the former Soviet Union, including Azerbaijan. This all changed, however, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Soon thereafter, the U.S. sought to reengage with the region by seeking cooperation against international terrorism and to secure transit and basing rights in the South Caucasus and Central Asia for combat operations in Afghanistan. Azerbaijan, in particular, was an important focus for the United States during this time.

There were also efforts made immediately after 9/11 to improve Baku's maritime capabilities on the Caspian. The U.S. helped Azerbaijan gain the ability to secure its maritime borders, protect vital energy infrastructure, stop the flow of terror-

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BAKU DIALOGUES

ists, prevent terror attacks, ensure the free flow of commerce in the region, and prevent the transfer of illegal weapons and drugs. Between 2000 and 2003, the U.S. Coast Guard donated a total five naval cutters to Azerbaijan. In addition, the U.S. supplied Azerbaijan's naval vessels with radar and communication equipment to help improve command and control. One of Azerbaijan's biggest capability gaps in the Caspian was maritime domain awareness, so the United States also provided a number of coastal radar stations, which, according to the U.S. State Department, are used "by the Navy, Coast Guard, and State Border Service to conduct maritime surveillance and detect smuggling threats." U.S.-Azerbaijan military cooperation is not limited to the maritime domain. Since 2003, the Oklahoma-Azerbaijan National Guard Partnership, conducted under the auspices of the U.S. National Guard State Partnership Program, has regularly brought American and Azerbaijani soldiers together for joint training.

Today, the U.S.-Azerbaijan relationship is dormant and in dire need of revitalization.

Today, the U.S.-Azerbaijan relationship is dormant and in dire need of revitalization. In the past 15 years, there have been no new initiatives of note to enhance relations. Much of the enthusiasm for energy cooperation in the 1990s is gone today. Many of the post-9/11 initiatives to cooperate on counterterrorism and security issues have ended. There has not been a cabinet-level visit to Baku since Hillary Clinton visited as Secretary of State in 2012 (although John Bolton came in October 2018 as National Security Adviser). Complicating matters even more is that Azerbaijan, due to its closeness and association with Turkey, has become "collateral damage" resulting from the currently frosty relations existing between Washington and Ankara. Making matters worse for bilateral relations, influential diaspora groups (particularly Armenian-American ones), coordinating with influential members of the U.S. Congress, have made improving the U.S.-Azerbaijani relationship difficult.

U.S. Interests in the Region

Azerbaijan is an important, if often overlooked, country concerning many of the challenges the U.S. faces around the world. There are five clusters of issues here and each will be addressed in turn.

First, Azerbaijan is important for energy security for the Transatlantic Community. The Transatlantic Community benefits whenever Europe reduces its dependence on Russian oil and gas. Azerbaijan offers an important alternative. The Southern Gas Corridor is a great example of this. If projects like the proposed Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline are ever realized, Azerbaijan would play an even bigger role in the European continent's energy diversification. This is particularly important at a time when pressure is mounting on Germany to stop the certification process of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline project with Russia.

Retaining access to the Ganja Gap is important to any U.S. strategy in the region.

Second, Azerbaijan is in a geostrategic location in the context of great power competition. At some point on the vast Eurasian landmass, all trade and transit has to pass through one of three countries: Russia, Azerbaijan, or Iran. The breakdown in relations between the West and both Moscow and Tehran means that Russia and Iran are not viable options for the east-west free flow of trade and energy. This leaves only Azerbaijan, specifically the trade chokepoint known as the "Ganja Gap," which is named after Azerbaijan's second largest city that sits in the middle of this narrow passage. Retaining access to the Ganja Gap is important to any U.S. strategy in the region.

Third, Azerbaijan has also proved to be a reliable U.S. partner regarding another sensitive geopolitical issue: Israel. Although Azerbaijan is a majority-Muslim country, it is both in law and in fact a secular society and has a very close relationship with Israel. The Azerbaijani city of Qirmizi Qasaba is thought to be the world's only all-Jewish city in the world outside Israel. Azerbaijan also provides Israel with 40 percent of its oil. As a sign of how close the bilateral relationship is between the two countries, former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu even visited Azerbaijan when in office. At a time when the U.S. has been working hard getting other Muslim majority countries to normalize relations with Israel, Azerbaijan should be highlighted as an example.

Fourth, Azerbaijan is also an important diplomatic interlocutor. Baku often hosts high level and sensitive diplomatic meet-

ings. A number of meetings between American and Russian military leaders have been held in the country in recent years. Such meetings are especially useful given the frosty state of U.S.-Russian relations. They present a non-political opportunity for the United States to discuss, on a military-to-military level, issues such as how to prevent accidents in Syria, where both the United States and Russia are militarily involved. Meetings like this led one veteran observer of the South Caucasus to ask: "Is Baku the new Caucasian Geneva?"

Perhaps most relevant to the current geopolitical circumstances resulting from the situation in Afghanistan is that Azerbaijan is the key to Central Asia—the *fifth* cluster of issues. For economic, cultural, trade, historical, and transit reasons, Azerbaijan is the gateway to the region for the Transatlantic Community. This is particularly true considering the importance of the Ganja Gap. Baku also maintains close relations with many of the Central Asian republics, especially Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—both of which could be very important to the European continent's energy needs.

Furthermore, with the Taliban now in control of Afghanistan, Central Asia is even more important to U.S. policymakers. The five Central Asian countries have a new reality on their doorstep and are nervously watching it unfold. In the coming months and years, Afghanistan will likely become a place of instability, as it was in the 1990s. While options are limited, the U.S. must mitigate the geopolitical fallout from the restoration of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Central Asian region will be an important part of any approach. The Biden Administration needs to develop a new Central Asia strategy and build confidence and trust with the Central Asian states—especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Azerbaijan (and Turkey) could play an important role in this important context.

Another point worth mentioning is the meaningful contribution Azerbaijan made to NATO's efforts in Afghanistan. In 2020, Azerbaijan had 120 soldiers serving in Afghanistan under NATO command. While this might not sound like much, it exceeded the troop contributions of 23 other countries, including NATO members like Greece, Norway, and Spain. During the chaotic evacuation at Kabul International Airport in the summer of 2021, Azerbaijani soldiers played an important role that received praised from NATO's Secretary General. Also, the campaign in Afghanistan served as a reminder of the importance of the Ganja Gap. At the peak of the war, more than one-third of U.S. non-lethal military supplies such as fuel, food, and clothing passed through the Ganja Gap either overland or in the air. During last year's evacuations, dozens of NATO aircraft used the Ganja Gap's airspace to safely remove thousands of civilians from Afghanistan.

The Azerbaijani victory demonstrated that the 'old way' of viewing the region no longer applies. The sooner American policymakers recognize and understand these new realities, the better for U.S. interests.

New Geopolitical Reality

Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War has created a new geopolitical reality in the South Caucasus and the Caspian region—both integral parts of what the editors of this journal have taken to calling the Silk Road region. The Azerbaijani victory also demonstrated that the 'old way' of viewing the region no longer applies. The sooner American policymakers recognize and understand these new realities, the better for U.S. interests. This new geopolitical reality creates opportunities and challenges for the United States.

There are now five new "realities" that U.S. policymakers must recognize in the region after the Second Karabakh War. Each will be addressed in turn. *Firstly*, Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus and, by extension, in Central Asia is on the rise. NATO member Turkey surprised many in Washington by actively taking on the role of the balancing power against Russia in the region. If Washington and Ankara can get the bilateral relation back on track Turkey's ascendancy in the region can benefit broader U.S. strategic interests.

Secondly, there is now regional uncertainty about Russia's commitment to the broader region. Even though it was Russia that brokered the ceasefire agreement, there is a perception that Moscow to a certain extent abandoned Yerevan during the conflict. There is also a perception in the region that Azerbaijan defied Russia, with no serious consequences, by using military force to liberate its territory. Countries in the region might be willing to test the waters more with Moscow as a result. One of the first examples

of this was the agreement between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan over a long-disputed hydrocarbon field in the Caspian they now both call Dostluk (it used to be called Kapaz by Baku and Serdar by Ashgabat). In the 1990s, Ashgabat was loathed to make a deal with Baku over Dostluk for fear of upsetting Moscow. The situation is now different.

Thirdly, Iran is weaker in the region. Tehran has a new geopolitical reality on its northern border, in the form of an emboldened Azerbaijan and a weakened Armenia. The latter has enjoyed surprisingly cozy relations with Tehran over the years. On the other hand, relations between Iran and Azerbaijan are cordial but there are tensions beneath the surface, in part due to the issues having to do with the sizable number of ethnic-Azerbaijanis living in northwestern Iran and other parts of the Islamic Republic. In recent years, Azerbaijan has strived to maintain cordial relations with Iran because it relied on access to Iranian airspace and territory to supply its autonomous region of Nakhchivan—an exclave of Azerbaijan nestling between Iran, Armenia, and Turkey. As part of the 10 November 2020 peace deal, Armenia must open a corridor through its territory to allow Azerbaijan to transport goods directly to Nakhchivan. In addition, last year Turkey announced a new natural gas pipeline to supply Nakhchivan with energy. Iran is thus now becoming less important for Azerbaijan, and it is likely that the dynamics in the bilateral relationship will change in Baku's favor.

Fourthly, while cordial on the surface, relations between Moscow and Baku are strained. Azerbaijan has pursued a pragmatic foreign policy when dealing with Russia. One that balances Baku's desire for independence from Russian-backed organizations while maintaining cordial relations with Moscow. However, several events in 2020 have strained Azerbaijan's relations with Russia. As one notable observer of the region recently stated, "Azerbaijan has launched a public campaign against Russia." The most notable point of friction between Azerbaijan and Russia is the credible allegation that Armenia fired Russian supplied Iskander-M missiles during the conflict. However, relations between Moscow and Baku had frayed even prior to the onset of the Second Karabakh War—in the summer of 2020—when the former vocally and very publicly protested and accused the latter of "intensively arming Armenia" using an air bridge to deliver weaponry and supplies. This charge was repeated during the war, as well.

Lastly, there are new regional energy and transit infrastructure projects that are now possible. Everyone likes a winner. The completion of the Southern Gas Corridor and Azerbaijan's stunning victory in the Second Karabakh War could inject new enthusiasm, if not a healthy dose of realpolitik, into the region's thinking. Another opportunity for the U.S. in the region should be focused on increasing foreign investment and improving in the economic situation in the South Caucasus.

Everyone likes a winner. The completion of the Southern Gas Corridor and Azerbaijan's stunning victory in the Second Karabakh War could inject new enthusiasm, if not a healthy dose of realpolitik, into the region's thinking.

It is impossible to calculate how many billions of dollars in foreign direct investments the almost 30-year-old frozen conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia has cost the region. Now that there is some degree of peace and stability, the U.S. should consult with regional countries on possibilities for new regional energy and infrastructure projects. This could help boost the economic prospects of the region and help build an enduring peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Thinking boldly and creatively, if there is genuine peace someday and if the idea of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline is realized, why could there not be a Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Armenia-Nakhchivan-Turkey gas pipeline (TAANaT)? The idea would not be to compete with TAP, TANAP, and the Southern Gas Corridor. Instead, such an ambitious project could help the region integrate better, build trust among old adversaries, and support Armenia with its own energy issues. While the region is probably years away from diplomatic conditions allowing for such a project, the United States should start a discussion now on what is possible.

Challenges with Relationship

Like all relationships, the one between the United States and Azerbaijan faces challenges. In a number of cases around the world, including this one, bilateral ties frequently suffer from a lopsided policy pursued by Washington heavily focused on lofty human rights goals—

often at the expense of strategic American interests in the region. Rightly or wrongly, there is a feeling in Baku that Azerbaijan is singled out for sustained criticism by the West—mainly by the EU and some of its member states, but also by the U.S.—in contrast to the almost complete silence that greets the activities of some other countries in that part of the world and elsewhere.

It is no secret that human rights issues have been a persistent problem in the relationship. In recent years, there have been legitimate concerns about freedom of the press and the slow process of democratization. From America's perspective, these worrying developments for U.S.-Azerbaijani relations cannot be ignored.

At the same time, it is important remember what former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said about democracy development in the former Soviet Union. He believed it is important to ask, "Which way are they moving, and are they coming towards freer political systems and freer economic systems or are they regressing?"

Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan's overall democratic trajectory has been headed in the right direction. Recent changes in top government positions have also signaled a desire to align more with Western views and thinking. For example, it has not gone unnoticed by observers of the South Caucasus in Washington, DC that older officials who spent time in Moscow for education have been replaced with younger ones with U.S. education. While Washington should continue to press for improvements on human rights, U.S. policymakers cannot allow that issue to create a lopsided foreign policy that undercuts the United States' broader interests in the region.

Another major obstacle to better U.S. and Azerbaijani relations occurred in 1992 when the U.S. Congress passed Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act as a result of actions undertaken by the influential Armenian-American lobby. Amongst other things, Section 907 prevents the U.S. from providing military aid to Azerbaijan and identifies Azerbaijan as the aggressor in its war with Armenia. This latter point is curious considering that Armenia is the aggressor and Azerbaijan is the victim in the conflict over Karabakh.

The U.S. needs an anchor of engagement and influence on each side of the Caspian Sea. On the western side, Azerbaijan is the natural partner for the United States.

After 9/11, the Bush Administration recognized the important role that Azerbaijan would play in the campaign in Afghanistan (and later Iraq) and annually waived Article 907. The Obama, Trump and incumbent Biden administrations have all continued to waive Section 907. Azerbaijan is the only former Soviet republic that has restrictions, such as Section 907, placed on it. Even the most casual observer can see that the origins of Section 907 were motivated by lobbyist-driven parochial political concerns in the U.S. and not connected—then or now—to larger U.S. strategy or goals in the region

The easiest thing that America could do is plan a presidential visit to the South Caucasus. No sitting U.S. president has ever visited Azerbaijan or Armenia and only one, George W. Bush, has visited Georgia.

The Way Ahead

There is now great opportunity for the United States to strengthen its relationship with Azerbaijan. The signals coming from the region could not be clearer. The U.S. needs an anchor of engagement and influence on each side of the Caspian Sea. On the western side, Azerbaijan is the natural partner for the United States. The U.S. should pursue a pragmatic relationship with Azerbaijan based on strategic and regional mutual interests. There are some legitimate human rights concerns, but in the long-run, only U.S. engagement, not constant criticism, can lead to an improvement of the situation.

The easiest thing that America could do is plan a presidential visit to the South Caucasus. No sitting U.S. president has ever visited Azerbaijan or Armenia and only one, George W. Bush, has visited Georgia. It is time for this to change. A visit by the American president would send a strong message of the importance of the region to the United States. This should then be followed up by a more visible U.S. presence in Azerbaijan. As noted above, the most recent cabinet-level visit in Azerbaijan was by Hillary Clinton in 2012. A good way to start re-engagement easily and symbolically would be with a few high-level

visits by U.S. officials. Alternatively, official visits to Washington by the three South Caucasus heads of state or government could be arranged.

The U.S. should do a better job at understanding how the broader region is interconnected. This could be done by turning the C5+1 into the C5+2 by including Azerbaijan. For the United States to implement any successful Central Asia strategy it must include Azerbaijan. The C5+1 initiative is a U.S.-led effort created in 2007. The primary goal is to create a multilateral format for the five Central Asian republics and America to build relations. For economic, cultural, trade, historical, and transit reasons Azerbaijan, while not a Central Asian country, is the gateway to the region for the Transatlantic Community. This is particularly true considering the importance of the Ganja Gap. Azerbaijan must have a seat at the table.

For the United States to implement any successful Central Asia strategy it must include Azerbaijan, which is the gateway to the region for the Transatlantic Community.

In addition, the United States should appoint a Special Envoy for Eurasian Energy with a specific focus on the Caspian region. American policymaking in the Caspian region is often a victim of administrative and bureaucratic divisions in the U.S. government. For example, responsibility for the Caspian region is divided amongst three different bureaus in the State Department, two different Combatant Commands in the Department of Defense, and three different directorates in the National Security Council. Not only would the appointment of a Special Envoy send a strong political message to the region, but it would also help lead to a coherent cross-government policy for the region.

On a national level, the United States should request to establish a diplomatic presence in Ganja. A U.S. diplomatic presence, whether in the form of a consulate or consular agency, would be welcome. Not only is Ganja strategically located on the Eurasian landmass, but it is also Azerbaijan's second largest city. An American consulate in Ganja would demonstrate that the U.S. takes the region at a level of seriousness proportionate to its role in America's global interest. In addition, a diplomatic presence would give the U.S. government a depth of situational awareness in the region not possible without a consulate.

Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act is an unfair impediment to acting in the interest of American security.

When appropriate, America should help Azerbaijan improve its security and defense capabilities. In the South Caucasus in particular, sovereignty equals security. This means respecting other countries' sovereignty and being able to defend one's own sovereignty. The U.S. should work bilaterally and, when appropriate, through NATO to improve the security and military capabilities of partners in the region. This also includes providing military and security assistance to all deserving allies in the region. The U.S. government's decision to provide military assistance to another country should be based on American security interests and not the particular priorities of pressure groups lobbying the U.S. Congress. Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act is an unfair impediment to acting in the interest of American security.

Finally, the United States must do a better job at striking a balance between promoting human rights and safeguarding other American strategic interests. The U.S. should have frank, open, and constructive discussions with its allies in the region when and where there are human rights issues—with the goal of long-term democratization. However, human rights should be just one part of a multifaceted relationship that considers broader U.S. strategic interests and stability in the region.

Focus and Engagement

Azerbaijan will continue to be a regional economic leader in the South Caucasus and an important economic actor in the Caspian region. If correct policies are pursued, Azerbaijan will serve as an important alternative source of energy for Europe well into the future.

Azerbaijan will continue to look to the West. But it also realizes that while the U.S. might come and go in the region, Iran and Russia are there to stay. This is why European states, the EU, America need to stay engaged with Azerbaijan and encourage Azerbaijan to maintain good relations with its neighbors, but also to stay focused on deeper cooperation with the West.

Today the U.S. sees an Azerbaijan that is more cautious and mindful of its place in the region. Globally, Azerbaijan is trying to keep a balance between its relations with the West and Russia. Regionally, Azerbaijan has sought to keep a balance between Russia and Iran while striving to preserve its autonomy or independence as much as possible.

With great power competition heating up around the globe, the U.S. needs to increase its engagement with Azerbaijan. BD

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The Strategic Implications of the Tashkent Conference

Urs Unkauf

This essay is devoted to a consideration of a matter of fundamental geopolitical importance that has gone largely unnoticed in the West, to its detriment. The trigger event, so to speak, was a remarkable conference that took place not in Washington, Brussels, or Moscow—but in Tashkent. On 15-16 July 2021, Uzbekistan's capital hosted delegations from nearly 50 countries, among them China, Russia, India, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and all the Central Asia countries, at the level of foreign ministers or above.

To understand the issues at play and the consequences thereof, we will need to spend some time discussing what actually took place during the conference itself, which was entitled "Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity: Challenges and Opportunities." In addition to relating the explicit agenda of the conference, we will also examine its broader agenda (whether intended or not) and conclude with an examination of its potentially far-reaching geostrategic implications.

The Tashkent conference was geared not only to government officials, but also towards leading scholars, experts, and media representatives from all over the world who follow developments in at least one of these two regions. In his opening address, Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev affirmed his country's readiness to take up new leadership responsibilities in the region, which aligns with the domestic economic and social reform agenda he launched upon coming to power following the death of his predecessor, Islam Karimov, in September 2016. The host's speech was followed by opening statements from Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani and Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan, whose delegations also exchanged informal views during the conference.

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Here a somewhat digressive remark is in order. When the conference was in its planning stage, the fall of the Ghani government in Afghanistan had not been anticipated. Still, one of the conference's working group sessions was devoted to the devolving situation in Afghanistan. By that stage, the conference's more astute participants were seeing the writing on the wall. Those who could not, of course, came to their senses less than a month later. Either way, the Taliban's takeover of the country has put both Central and South Asia more firmly on the international geopolitical agenda—the recent events in Kazakhstan, which began as this issue of *Baku Dialogues* was being finalized, have also played a role in drawing attention back to the Silk Road region.

The Tashkent conference established a political and technical platform for serious multilateral discussions on a mutually beneficial strategic model of interregional cooperation.

But to come back to Mirziyoyev's opening address. In the context of announcing a new, open foreign policy strategy for the country, Uzbekistan's President made it clear that his country is centrally focused on strengthening regional connectivity. His announcement stressed that the focus would be on further deepening economic and cultural cooperation between Central Asia and South Asia—two regions that are linked historically as well as economically yet have not so far been able to transform this inherited potential towards proper policymaking in recent years.

The Tashkent conference was advertised as being about enhancing regional interconnectivity, trade, and cooperation between Central Asia and South Asia—as well as presenting the host country's new cross-regional foreign policy strategy. But as Edward Lemon wrote in the Fall 2021 edition of *Baku Dialogues*, the conference also served to demonstrate that the emerging regionalism—a topic raised by the concerning countries themselves and not from outside—will be a *leit-*

motif for future geostrategic developments in the Silk Road region.

This is significant because these two regions—namely, Central Asia and South Asia—are presently integrated into different groupings that open up completely new spheres of geopolitical interaction. Although there are overlaps in membership—as in, for instance, between the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)—interaction between the five Central Asian states with the countries of South Asia is taking place in a completely new dimension that goes beyond simply forging a new connection between the two regions named in the title of the conference.

Emerging Regionalism

In the three decades since (re) gaining independence, the Central Asian states have gone through particular development paths. What they all have in common—in terms of foreign and regional policy—is that their respective relationships with Russia continue to play a central role in the way in which they manage their external relations. This is due to the perpetuation of longstanding sociological, historical, and logistical ties—hardly unusual or unexpected.

That being said, the Central Asian states should not be viewed through a narrowly calibrated lens or a one-size-fits-all approach. Under the decades-long leadership of Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan succeeded in establishing itself as the leading economic power in the region, which was neither seriously threatened by substantial internal or external conflicts (this proposition still stands notwithstanding the tumultuous events that took place in early January 2022). During Uzbekistan's Karimov period, on the other hand, the country pursued a policy that was consistently oriented towards the maintenance of internal stability, due in part to wanting to prevent the experiences of the civil war in neighboring Tajikistan as well as those related to dealing with radical Islamist groups in the eastern part of the country. From a Western perspective, Kyrgyzstan is often praised as a "beacon of democracy in the region," but this is a problematic assessment since the country is characterized by weak state power and frequent changes of government compared to its neighborhood. Finally, there is Turkmenistan—a country whose external relations are based on the principle of "perpetual neutrality." This posture that has made the country traditionally reluctant to engage deeply in regional integration and obtain full membership in most multilateral organizations.

To this brief survey can be added the fact that there have been various conflicts of interest and border disputes between the Central Asian states themselves, which has made it difficult for them to present themselves in the past as a region that is more than a mere object of great power politics and rivalries. But this is now fundamentally changing.

Another sign of the development of regional cooperation is the establishment of the International Institute for Central Asia. This may seem trivial, but this is hardly the case. Its opening ceremony took place on the afternoon of 15 July 2021, that is to say, right before the main session of the Tashkent conference. It was opened by the Chairperson of the Uzbek Senate, Tanzila Narbaeva, who read Mirziyoyev's message of greeting. The main thrust of the message was that the institute's establishment is necessitated by the realities of regional development—that is to say, by the present historical moment projected into the likely future—or, at least, into the future towards which the region aims to attain. This is another confirmation, the presidential message said, that Uzbekistan firmly intends to continue its course of deepening regional cooperation in foreign policy.

This was followed by a speech from Uzbekistan's foreign minister, Abdulaziz Kamilov. He emphasized that the institute's establishment reflects an important trend in international relations: the growing importance and interconnectedness of regional political and economic processes. This trend, he said, is particularly evident in Central Asia. Historically, he underscored, this region had been a crucial link in the Great Silk Road and represented a common cultural and civilizational space of formative importance for global economic, scientific, and cultural exchanges. He announced that the research center's activities of focus will be the study of regional processes and international relations in the context of Central Asia, which, he stressed, is Uzbekistan's main foreign policy priority. And he concluded by expressing confidence that the institute will serve as a flagship platform for what he called "substantive expert discussion about the prospects for regional cooperation and the development of specific and sci-

entifically substantiated proposals for multilateral projects in various fields."

Let us now turn to South Asia, where the situation with regards to the advancement of regionalism is different. There, the unstable situation in Afghanistan and the ongoing confrontation between nuclear powered India and Pakistan are two reasons why increased regional cooperation has so far been held back. South Asia's smaller countries—i.e., Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives—are mostly overshadowed by their larger neighbors. China and India also compete economically for hegemony in this region, which further complicates joint action on the world stage. Since (re)gaining independence as part of the global process of decolonization in the middle of the twentieth century, the region's states have each striven to advance their economic development and usually directed their respective foreign policies on this aspect. Countries with a growing middle class, such as India and Bangladesh, still find themselves focusing their foreign policy postures primarily on domestic poverty reduction and prosperity promotion. South Asian states are interested in increased cooperation with those of Central Asia not only due to economic motives but also because they seek both to solve regional security challenges jointly and establish new options for action by pooling resources.

It is thus within such a context that the Tashkent conference was convened. Its bottom-line intention was to lay the foundation for the establishment of a political and technical platform for serious multilateral discussions on a mutually beneficial strategic model of interregional cooperation in the fields of transport and logistics, energy, trade, industry, investment, technology, culture, humanitarian affairs, and beyond. To get into the subject-matter in more detail, we will now examine what took place during the conference itself.

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Impetus to Revitalize and Strengthen

The plenary session of the Tashkent conference on 16 July 2021 was dedicated to the status and perspectives of interregional cooperation in Central and South Asia, the provision of successful examples of the same, and a discussion of promising interconnected regional infrastructure projects. In the context of the conference, numerous bilateral meetings also took place between delegations and participants. Of particular note was the exchange between the President of Afghanistan and the Prime Minister of Pakistan, who, thanks to Uzbekistan's mediation, were able to engage in a serious discussion on issues having to do with regional security architecture.

The conference's first working group, entitled "Trade and Transport: Connectivity for Sustainable Growth," was devoted to prospects for modernizing the economies of Central and South Asia in the context of strengthening interregional connectivity. In addition, new opportunities for developing transport and communication connectivity in Central and South Asia were discussed, including projects to expand existing transport corridors and build new ones. An important part of the proceedings focused on the topic of cooperation with foreign and international financial and investment institutions to realize such projects.

In the conference's second working group, entitled "Reviving Cultural and Humanitarian Relations as a Way to Strengthen Friendship and Mutual Trust," a no less broad range of topics was discussed. For example, speakers placed emphasis on cooperation in the research, preservation, and promotion of Central and South Asia's historical and cultural heritage. Likewise, joint projects in the fields of education, social support and protection of the interests of young people, healthcare, science and technology, ecology, and tourism were discussed.

The conference's third working group, entitled "Regional Security: Challenges and Threats," dealt with how greater regional coordination could help combat new threats and challenges to regional stability as well as ensure the security of cross-border infrastructure. A central point of discussion concerned the new responsibility of regional actors in the stabilization of Afghanistan in the wake of the Western withdrawal from the country. Over the course of the debate, it became clear that the prospects for imple-

menting a foreign system of governance and society in Afghanistan were quite low. Instead, speakers emphasized that coordinated steps would need to be taken in the time ahead to bring about peace within Afghan society, which would need to involve negotiations between the country's various factions in order to figure out how to ensure at least a basic level of humanitarian and social stability throughout the country. Several participants referred to Uzbekistan's ambitious policy, which, in addition to its domestic reforms component, is also oriented towards executing a new foreign policy with regional aspirations. This, in turn suggests that Tashkent will need to keep engaging in Afghanistan in a constructive manner and, in so doing, make an important contribution to regional and even global security.

Geopolitical Turn Towards Asia

In the closing plenary of the conference, Uzbekistan's foreign minister Kamilov usefully summed up the central results of the meeting. In addition to having forged numerous concrete agreements and provided for space to conduct various informal meetings and exchanges on the sidelines of official events, he said that the Tashkent conference can rightly be called a milestone in the revival of international relations after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. He underscored that "this high-level, world-class conference, and the establishment of the International Institute of Central Asia, illustrate Uzbekistan's willingness to promote close regional and inter-regional relations in all respects, to strengthen multilateral dialogue, and to address the key issues of the day in a constructive and forward-looking manner." He further noted that the conference represented a key achievement for Mirziyoyev in 2021, for he had been able to bring together senior policymakers not only from Central and South Asia but also those belonging to other global and regional powers to seriously address many strategic and pressing foreign policy issues beyond controlling the pandemic.

The fact that this conference was not held in Washington, Brussels, or Moscow, but rather in the heart of the Silk Road region also offered a clear view of the reality of a polycentric world order and, more importantly, the preferences of the actors shaping it. China, Russia, India, the states of Central Asia, and the Arab world together represent a solid majority of the world's population, in both demographic and economic terms. Clearly, the EU and its member states, including Germany, will need to adjust their respective foreign policy strategies and, in turn, start playing stronger and more active roles in such initiatives at senior, political decision-making levels. Otherwise, they will lose their cultural and economic capital in the region, which will invariably affect their standing on the global stage.

The Tashkent conference can also be seen as tangible evidence that various transformation processes are currently taking place at the global level—too little noticed in the shadow of the pandemic, at least by most Western observers. Thus, it could be said that the central issue of world politics no longer revolves around direct confrontation between major powers (e.g., China, Russia, the U.S.), but rather concerns their establishing and further developing zones of influence in various regions. This remains an accurate statement notwithstanding the ratcheting up of tensions in the Ukrainian and Taiwanese geopolitical theaters. One consequence of this change is that the major world powers now find themselves interacting and competing on a more equal level with various regional powers (e.g., Turkey, Iran, Israel, India, Pakistan) for political, economic, and cultural spheres of influence.

A main takeaway from the Tashkent conference is that the EU and its member states, including Germany, will need to adjust their respective foreign policy strategies and, in turn, start playing stronger and more active roles in such initiatives at senior, political decision-making levels.

This became particularly clear from the almost fluid transition from regional to geopolitical issues during the three working group sessions at the conference, on the margins of which numerous informal discussions were held—discussions that had been more or less frozen for almost a year and a half due to the pandemic. European countries such as Italy, Latvia, and Belarus also sent senior government representatives to the high-level forum, which was attended by a total of over 250 participants. While the EU itself was represented by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, the absence of a state secretary, Central Asia coordinator, or min-

ister from, say, the German side did not go unnoticed by many conference participants. If Germany and other serious EU member states do not wish to abandon their perceived strategic role(s) in this part of the world—something that still may be possible to retain—then they will need to make their respective presences felt much more strongly.

The United States, for its own part, also did not appear to put its most influential foot forward at the conference. The American delegation was led by Joe Biden's homeland security adviser. This was interpreted as an additional sign that the U.S. was taking steps away from the region—by the time the conference took place, its withdrawal from Afghanistan was well underway. Certainly, America continues to be engaged in South Asia with, for example, India—both bilaterally and in the context of, say, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, although it seems that Delhi is less willing to go all-in than Washington may wish.

On the other hand, the strategic approach of the United States in the west-of-the-Caspian part of the Silk Road region, for example, seems to be rhetorically focused on providing political support to Ukraine and Georgia in the context of NATO membership prospects, EU association initiatives, and fostering economic and energy cooperation in accordance with its own interests. But how these are precisely defined is not easily understood. In terms of America's energy policy, for example, the rise of Russia and Iran as crucial regional powers should be sufficient reason for America to rethink its strategic orientation. It seems rather obvious that, from Washington's perspective, Azerbaijan and other states in the region (e.g., Turkmenistan), could form a valid counterweight both to Russian dominance of the European energy market and a potential strengthening of the Iranian political position in the Caspian Region. And yet, American foreign decisionmakers do not seem to be doing enough to advance such a foreign policy.

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Prospects for the Future

The Tashkent conference was not simply about connecting two major emerging regions; rather, it should be seen as representing a turning point in twenty-first-century international relations—especially when coupled with the West's exodus from Afghanistan and the consequent restoration of Taliban rule. This is not to say that all the actors present in Tashkent last summer grasped this dimension in the fullness of the consequences in play. But it should now be clear that what was launched during the conference will have fundamental geopolitical implications for the years and perhaps decades to come.

The Tashkent conference was not simply about connecting two major emerging regions; rather, it should be seen as representing a turning point in twenty-first-century international relations.

Nazarbayev coined the phrase "multivectoral foreign policy" in the 1990s, and his historical achievement is to have provided the impetus for the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union as an organizing structure in the post-Soviet space. However, multilateralism as understood and received in most mainstream Western circles is not congruent with this term. In this understanding, the concept of multilateralism is primarily about the establishment of rules-based mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution. But this falls of the mark.Multivectoral foreign policy, which is practiced not only by Kazakhstan, refers less to structures for organizing political processes than to the geopolitical realities that exist throughout the Silk Road region—especially as seen in Central Asia but also Azerbaijan. A pragmatic policy of balance vis-à-vis global and regional powers, which at the same time self-confidently articulates and represents a country's own national interests, is a model that seems desirable to many states under current conditions and likely future trajectories—and not only in that part of the world.

China, Russia, and India each have a decisive advantage over the West in this regard, as Beijing, Moscow, and New Delhi are not in any serious way interested in the internal affairs of other states, the degree with which these other states transform themselves in accordance with Western governance models, and individual

lifestyle questions like gender, culture, and religion as aspects of the political. This pragmatic approach, which takes appropriate account of the multicultural and multivectoral realities of the countries of the Silk Road region in general and Central and South Asia in particular, gives these actors a decisive advantage. If the West does not want to see itself limited to being merely a trade and economic partner in the future, it will need to redevelop its art of diplomacy under these conditions and distance itself from some cherished maxims of postmodern thinking that are becoming increasingly unapplicable beyond the confines of the West itself.

Beijing, Moscow, and New Delhi are not in any serious way interested in the internal affairs of other states, the degree with which these other states transform themselves in accordance with Western governance models, and individual lifestyle questions like gender, culture, and religion as aspects of the political.

The Tashkent conference is a prime example of what such majority-driven agenda-setting is going to look like for future global formats. Perhaps not in the immediate future, but almost certainly in a decade or two, if not sooner.

Purposefully or not, by hosting the Tashkent conference, Uzbekistan has contributed to the emergence of a new global order—or at least a significant part of one—through the configuration of participants, topics, and timing of the event held under its auspices in July 2021. Thus far, it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that this sort of event had taken place only under the auspices of the G7 or the G20. At the same time, there is the question of the so far insufficient reception—much less its geopolitical consequences—of this conference in Western policymaking circles.

After Tashkent

Those who might think that the medium- to long-term results of the Tashkent conference are overestimated at this point would have to provide practical proof to the contrary and name a format that practically reaches a comparable spectrum of topics and target groups when it is first held. Currently, such a format does not exist in the Americas, Africa, or elsewhere in Asia.

The twentieth century was described as the "Atlantic century" by German historian Heinrich-August Winkler or the "American century" by American magazine magnate Henry Luce. The twenty-first century will definitely be an Asian century, as accurately analyzed inter alia by German lawyer and political scientist Karl Pilny in a trilogy of books beginning with The Asian Century (2005). Uzbekistan has already announced several other formats in the coming years at a similar level, and it remains to be expected that this newly created dimension of multivectoral interactions will not be limited exclusively to Central Asia's most populous country. The Arab world countries represented in Tashkent (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar) are also showing clear ambitions to take more active foreign policy roles beyond one-off opportunities such as Dubai's Expo 2021 or the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. So is Turkey, of which nothing more needs to be said given the sophisticated understanding of Ankara's role in the Silk Road region we can assume most readers of this journal possess.

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A central merit of the Tashkent conference is that it made a fundamental contribution to the reactivation of international diplomacy based on personal encounters. Another is that it brought not only regional but global political actors to the table—thus transcending existing lines of confrontation. With the establishment of the International Institute for Central Asia, regional identity is being structurally institutionalized for the first time under Uzbek leadership. This, in turn, offers Uzbekistan further prospects to act as a model for other regions and, if necessary, to assume the role of an incubator for regional actors. The immediate aspiration is, admittedly, more modest: it focuses on increased integration and deepening interaction among the five countries of Central Asia, plus, perhaps, Afghanistan (Uzbekistan has repeatedly stressed that Afghanistan is an integral part of Central Asia). This, too, could constitute a new kind of policymaking: contrary to the approach favored by those that profess holistic and universal

claims, regional dynamics develop sui generis—that is to say, without being confronted with either direct intention or external accountability.

In this regard, a close eye will need to be kept on how global powers will react, in practical terms, to the impulses emanating from the Tashkent conference. *First*, both leading western European powers—i.e., Germany and France—are currently facing a reconfiguration of foreign policy decisionmakers, resulting from a change in strategy as well as generation. *Second*, despite surface appearances to the contrary, Russia is currently focusing primarily on the internal consolidation of its society. *Third*, China is pursuing the expansion of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative while remaining relatively isolated from the outside world, in the sense that it has not provided even a hint of wanting to play the sort of leadership role internationally that, say, the United States has played since 1945.

Dealing with Geopolitical Realities

The Western response to these current processes of change as illustrated by the Tashkent conference found expression in the Summit for Democracy, an online conference held at the initiative of the White House on 9-10 December 2021. The conference website proclaims that "renewing democracy in the United States and around the world is essential to meeting the unprecedented challenges of our time." The Biden Administration persists with the premise that the Western way of organizing and governing a society—market economy and liberal values—is the template for solving developmental challenges in all parts of the world.

The Western response to these current processes of change as illustrated by the Tashkent conference found expression in the Summit for Democracy, an online conference held at the initiative of the White House

But as Stephen M. Walt argued in an early December 2021 essay for *Foreign Policy*, the open and hidden agenda of the Summit for Democracy offers more potential for exacerbating conflicts rather than charting new lines of cooperation. In addition to arguing for the weakening of American domestic democratic institutions as a consequence of the Trump Administration's policies, Walt accurately calls the selection of guests "arbitrary and inconsistent." If the intentions of the U.S. government are measured against its own standards, which any consistent argumentation should presuppose, then this reveals a lack of self-reflection regarding the actual constellations of power in world politics. Walt also raises the pertinent question of the agenda of current U.S. foreign policy, which, in addition to the purely virtual format of this summit, points to a key difference from the Tashkent conference. In his own words, "the summit's guest list would be a lot smaller, but at least it would be ideologically consistent."

Compared to the elaborately prepared Tashkent conference, Biden's online summit can be understood as a last expression of marking the meaning of a still perceived "unilateral moment," which everyone sensible knows fell by the wayside some time ago. However, the lack of substantive results deriving from the Biden summit show that significant geopolitical trends are not understood—neither by its organizers nor its champions. Three of the most important are: *one*, strengthening regional cooperation without external influences; *two*, pragmatic cooperation on concrete issues of politics and economics beyond intervention in each other's domestic affairs; and *three*, regional resolution of conflicts without unilateral U.S. intervention by means of 'R2P' or its functional equivalent. Each by itself and all together show how outdated and out of touch the Summit for Democracy turned out to be.

In short, the Biden Administration's event was an attempt to let all actual and perceived friends-by-values speak without actually having to make a statement of any real substance. If strategists in Washington seriously believe they can make use of such a format to seriously impact the course of international politics, then at least some of them suffer either from a lack of awareness of current realities in many parts of the world or from an overestimation of their own ability to shape the globe after the disaster in Afghanistan.

That being said, it can certainly make sense for states with a shared understanding of values and politics to exchange views with each other. But it truly bears asking: does an event whose primary outcome seemed to consist in the repetition of a single mantra happen out of the self-image of an end in

itself, from which in turn it follows that this end ultimately justifies the means of politics? A remarkable text by Anne Applebaum published on 15 November 2021 in *The Atlantic* certainly supports this view. Entitled "The Bad Guys Are Winning," it draws a dark image of a "liberal world order" threatened from all sides while conveniently ignoring the fact that it never existed in the form described.

From Multilateralism to Multipolarity

The current situation particularly demands of any substantive foreign policy the ability to look at the world through the eyes of others, without framing and labeling this view from an a priori point of view. A primarily 'value-oriented' foreign policy, as it is currently being pursued in some parts of the Western world, for its own sake always hides that part of reality that does not fit into its own image. It thus fails to align itself with the requirements needed to shape changes in real life instead of only on paper.

Furthermore, it will be of importance to use existing formats and geopolitical stakeholders—e.g., SCO, OIC, CICA, CSTO, and others—as pillars for prospective synergies towards the most urgent topics on the global agenda. It is therefore crucial to agree on shared priorities, which also allow for the inclusion of EU and NATO member states as well as the U.S. in a joint agenda that could finally reach out to what has been promised by various formats but not yet been practically performed. Bearing in mind the imperative of overcoming the pandemic, it will also be of utmost importance to face the challenges of global inequalities—not only between North and South and East and West, but also within societies themselves and, as a precondition, to provide an international framework for peaceful development based on the principle of non-interference in the internal issues of other states.

Hence, it will be of geostrategic importance to follow the further developments of interaction between Central and South Asia introduced at the Tashkent conference as a possible model with which to shape regional potentials that can face all such challenges. A constructive role of the U.S. and the EU within this open process is to be recommended also to better pursue their own interests and to arrive at a new stage of global understanding of interest-based policymaking, which of course always aligns with national traditions, values, and cultures.

The fact that, even now—after the Western defeat in Afghanistan—the political shift towards Asia in terms of security and stability matters is non-negotiable, makes it somehow clear that there should have been a much more modest approach to well-established but in various cases less productive formats in world politics. The benchmark that was set up by the Tashkent conference very well may end up being regarded by future historians as one of the founding pillars of a new global order that is, indeed, both multipolar and based on a process of interaction between states that have in common a growing self-confidence as sovereign actors in specific regional frameworks.

Woe to us in the West if we continue to fail to pay attention to all of this. BD

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Understanding the Baku-Tehran Relationship

Nina Miholjčić

Even though Azerbaijan and Iran have maintained cordial ties over the years, this has been punctured by evidently turbulent periods of constrained diplomatic and political rhetoric, which has produced occasional volatility in the bilateral relationship. Ever since Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1991, Baku and Tehran have remained cautious and circumspect in their interactions whilst managing to avoid open conflict. Such vigilance is due for the most part to the effects of contrasting foreign policies, divergent choices of allies and foes, different constitutional arrangements, and contrary ethnic- and identity-based perceptions and postures. Such and similar points of friction explain why Azerbaijan and Iran continue to be wary of one another in their bilateral communication and diplomatic relations.

That being said, the two countries share some common religious and cultural values. The majority of Iranians as well as Azerbaijanis are Shia Muslims. The two countries are members of some of the same regional organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Conference and the Economic Cooperation Organization, which indicates that both nations pursue some common religious and economic interests. They are also both members of the Non-Aligned Movement. However, the history of relations between Azerbaijan and Iran has shown that even shared geographical, religious, and economic elements are insufficient to prevent occasional diplomatic and political discord, which has made the relationship somewhat disruptive. The conduct and outcome of the Second Karabakh War added additional layers of complexity to already complex bilateral ties: the new geopolitical status quo has had an impact on border, security, and transportation policies between the two neighboring states, with Iran in particular having manifested a great deal of anxiety with respect to the new reality. Such implications have also caused periodic tensions in Iran-Azerbaijan political discourse and heightened rhetoric between high officials from both countries.

Ever since Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1991, Baku and Tehran have remained cautious and circumspect in their interactions whilst managing to avoid open conflict.

However, recent developments also reveal that the relationship between Azerbaijan and Iran has witnessed a thawing of sorts due to strong diplomatic efforts made by both capitals to overcome or at least reduce tensions. High officials from both countries have reiterated their dedication to continue with the development of healthier bilateral relations.

Contrasting Foreign Policies

Since regaining its independence, Azerbaijan has successfully developed a multifaceted and multivectoral foreign policy. During the 1990s, the need for building strong regional and global relationships was even more prominent, especially due to the fact that Azerbaijan wanted to abandon the omnipresent Soviet legacy and strengthen its own national and cultural identity—but also to establish itself as a resilient, independent country in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan's current foreign policy remains multivectoral and is put in the service of completely restoring its territorial integrity whilst continuing to expand its international influence.

Azerbaijan possesses considerable oil and gas reserves, which contribute to faster economic growth and the development of modern defensive capabilities. However, this relatively small state in the South Caucasus is surrounded by influential regional powers and remains entangled in an underlying conflict with Armenia that has been for the most part but not completed resolved. The constant security threat this poses to Azerbaijan, coupled with regional games conducted by

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surrounding powerful states, force Azerbaijan to seek strong alliances, develop regional collaboration networks, and promote its interests internationally.

To that end, Azerbaijan has established strategic bilateral relations with, inter alia, Israel and Turkey over the years. However, such relationships are a source of consternation in Iran, since both Israel and Turkey have very delicate relationships with Tehran—to speak euphemistically. Iran and Israel have had a deeply troublesome relationship since the 1979 Iranian Revolution overthrew a regime that had been quite friendly to the Jewish State. Both countries continue with proxy warfare campaigns and are in constant alert regarding each other's political and military moves. Tehran strongly disapproves of Azerbaijan's rapprochement with Israel, especially since it perceives this relationship to constitute a direct security threat whereby, so the narrative goes, Israel has open access to Iran's northern border from where it is free to spread its influence in Iran itself and its immediate neighborhood.

The end of the Second Karabakh War saw Azerbaijan recover control over the entirety of its southern border (i.e., the border with Iran). The length of the liberated border with Iran is some 138 kilometers—that's how much borderland had been occupied by Armenian forces during the First Karabakh War. In other words, Azerbaijan is once again the sole guardian of its border with Iran, which—to repeat—has made Teheran very wary due to its perception of potential Israeli interference. The Iranian authorities are concerned that Israeli intelligence might surface on Azerbaijan's border with Iran, which would constitute a serious security threat from their point of view.

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While Iran continues to harshly criticize Azerbaijan-Israeli cooperation, Baku has made it clear that it will entertain no plan to stop investing in its relationship with Tel Aviv. The two countries have already developed energy, technology, and arms agreements that have proven to be mutually beneficial. For instance, Azerbaijani oil accounts for about 40 percent of Israel's total consumption, while Israel continues to be one of Azerbaijan's major arms suppliers. However, Azerbaijan has not been especially vocal about its good relationship with Israel because, in general, this is not Baku's style, but also, in this particular case, because Israel is not exactly everyone's favorite UN member state, as it were. This includes Iran, obviously, but also other states in some parts of the neighborhood they share. This explains, for instance, why Azerbaijan still has not opened a fully-fledged embassy there (although Israel has had one in Baku since 1993).

Iran's recent military maneuvers close to its border with Azerbaijan have been interpreted as, inter alia, a preemptive response to a possible threat from some sort of Israeli presence in the liberated areas. Iran is gravely concerned that Israel might take advantage of the newly developed geopolitical reality on its northwestern border. Tehran believes that such changes endanger Iran's regional posture and influence whilst concurrently providing to its mortal geopolitical enemy more access and advantage in a possible future conflict between the two, via Azerbaijan.

Iranian officials have been warning the Azerbaijani leadership about possible repercussions caused by Israel-Azerbaijan cooperation. For instance, a high Iranian military official stated in September 2021 that Iran would not "tolerate its neighbors coming under the influence of third-party countries"—a reference to the perception of Israel's rising influence in Azerbaijan. Moreover, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, stated in October 2021 that "those who dig a hole for their brothers will be the first to fall into it"—also a reference to enhanced cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel, but also between Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Indeed, the Iranian authorities are anxious about the strategic partnership Azerbaijan has forged with Turkey as well as with Ankara's growing influence in the region. Turkey provided active and unconditional support to Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War, which heightened Tehran's suspicions of Turkey's role in the development of postwar relations amongst the South Caucasus states. Iran cannot overlook the fact that Turkish officials (and their Azerbaijani counterparts) have been promoting a "one nation, two states" narrative. Tehran perceives this as a celebration of pan-Turkism, which Iran perceives as being disruptive to its sovereignty—particularly in terms of provoking separatist movements in the northern part

of the country inhabited by ethnic-Azerbaijanis—a topic that will be discussed in some detail below.

Iran perceives Turkey as a serious rival in the region and is discontented by the fact that Ankara already has gained significant influence in the South Caucasus, especially regarding the linguistic and cultural ties Turkey enjoys with Azerbaijan. And Tehran is not wrong: Turkish soft power is very prominent in Azerbaijan. Moreover, Turkey has been expanding its influence internationally at a significant pace recently. Turkish involvement in the Syrian conflict and in Libya's affairs are two examples of Turkey's foreign policy strategy aimed at building a strong global presence and becoming an important player in the international arena. On the other hand, Iran's reach is limited due to the extensive sanctions imposed by the United States that have brought the Iranian economy to the brink of collapse. In addition, numerous internal social and cultural crises prevent Iran from making a bigger regional and international impact. Its influence is most strongly felt in the Levant.

Iran has maintained friendly relations with Armenia ever since this South Caucasus country regained its independence in 1991. The two states have been involved in a swap energy agreement that helps both overcome the hardship of sanctions and closed borders. This key agreement involves the exchange of Iranian gas for Armenian electricity, which is based on a 1-kilowatt hour of electricity per 3 cubic meters of gas scheme.

Before the Second Karabakh War, Iran and Armenia maintained a direct and unimpeded land route that was beneficial for both countries, with Armenia gaining access to another country besides Georgia with which to trade directly—a much-needed boost for the Armenian economy given the fact that Armenia's borders with neighboring Azerbaijan and Turkey are closed. On the other hand, Iran could exercise geopolitical advantage and maintain its leverage in the region by establishing closer trading relations with Armenia and making its territory a necessary land transit route between Azerbaijan and its landlocked exclave, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, on the one hand, and Azerbaijan and Turkey, on the other. However, the outcome of the Second Karabakh War has resulted in a possible reduction in Iran's regional influence. With the newly-established framework of border politics in the South Caucasus, Iran has lost a significant part of its direct transportation line

to Armenia—especially to the part of Karabakh that is presently part of the Russian peacekeeping zone.

Tehran managed to maintain a more or less balanced approach during the Second Karabakh War and generally refrained from making incendiary statements during the war in order not to irredeemably spoil its relationships with either Azerbaijan or Armenia. It is also important to note that during the war, Iran tried to play the role of neutral mediator between the warring sides by offering to host peace talks on more than one occasion. Moreover, Iran repeatedly issued statements in support of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and did not publicly call into question the legitimacy of Baku's attempt to reclaim its internationally recognized borders and territory.

In the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War, diplomatic tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran were raised over detained Iranian truck drivers who were said to be transporting goods and material to Armenia and/or the ethnic-Armenian-populated Russian peacekeeping zone in Karabakh. Azerbaijan accused the drivers of illegally entering Azerbaijan from Armenia. Also, Azerbaijan has started to charge fees to Iranian trucks on a road through southern Armenia that passes through some parts of Azerbaijani territory. These diplomatic incidents have now been overcome: Azerbaijan released the detained drivers and both sides agreed to settle issues through dialogue and restrain from harmful rhetoric on the basis of the principle of mutual respect. Eventually, Iran adjusted its transportation policy to accord with new realities. Still, not everything has gone back to normal.

Secular vs. Theocratic Government

Iran and Azerbaijan are the only majority Shia Muslim nations in the world. However, their official political establishments differ significantly. Azerbaijan is a secular state in which religious practices are largely relegated to private areas of social life and sovereignty is vested in the people according to its constitution; Iran is an "Islamic republic" in which sovereignty is constitutionally vested in God and whose political system blurs the line between politics and religion, elected authorities and religious leaders.

During the period in which Azerbaijan was a part of the Soviet Union, a doctrine of state atheism

was enforced more or less harshly by the authorities. However, even after regaining its independence in 1991, when the question of identity and religion became a major concern for Azerbaijan's policymakers, the country's political forces preserved a sturdy dedication to the idea of secularism—an idea that served as the backbone of the first period of Azerbaijan's independence, during the short-lived era of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic. According to the country's constitutional framework, Azerbaijan is a secular state that respects the freedom of religion. Article 18 of the Constitution states that "religion in the Republic of Azerbaijan is separate from the state. All religions are equal before the law." Although it is difficult to measure the extent to which Azerbaijanis actively practice their religion, representative studies show that the percentage of people regularly attending religious ceremonies is far lower than the percentage of those that officially declaring themselves to be believers.

The most up-to-date official data regarding religious demography is from 2011. According to the State Committee on Religious Associations in Azerbaijan (SCWRA), an estimated 96 percent of Azerbaijan's population is Muslim, of which approximately 65 percent is Shia and 35 percent Sunni. The remaining 4 percent include Russian Orthodox Christians, Georgian Orthodox Christians, Armenian Orthodox Christians, Jews, and others.

A minority of Muslim Azerbaijanis, however, attend religious ceremonies on a regular basis; the same applies to keeping the various other tenets of Islam, including fasting during the month of Ramadan. Despite the fact that religious observance has somewhat increased in Azerbaijan since the early 1990s, the country preserves a steady secularist approach in public life—for instance, fewer Azerbaijani women wear any form of veil than their counterparts in, say, Turkey or, for that matter, many Western European cities. Even though there is no law that bans wearing a veil, schools, many companies, and governmental institutions unofficially discourage the practice.

Azerbaijan's constitution allows individuals to express their religious beliefs and to practice religious rituals freely so long as these do not disturb public order or public morality. According to the law, the state is prohibited from interfering in the religious activities of its citizens unless there is a justified fear of "religious extremism" and "radicalism" that requires special measures to

be implemented by the government in order to prevent or combat dangerous acts and tendencies that misuse religion. The government has the right to ban religious organizations whose activities "humiliate human dignity and contradict the principles of humanism." That being said, Azerbaijan's secularism is tolerant of moderate Islam whilst concurrently remaining vigilant against Islamist extremism and the threat of terrorist.

Unlike its secular neighbor, Iran is a theocratic republic that promotes a legal and political system largely based on Islamic law. The Iranian constitution proclaims that "all civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria." The Supreme Leader, who is elected by a religious body of Islamic scholars and clerics (and, therefore, not by the people), is the most powerful figure in Iran, tasked with executing an extended scope of activities, which makes the position highly respected and important. Even though the political framework of Iran includes an elected president, the office is constitutionally subordinate to the Supreme Leader. There is also an elected parliament, but two largely unelected councils—the Guardian Council and the Expediency Discernment Council—can together overturn any piece of legislation passed in that assembly on the grounds of incompatibility with "the criteria of Islam and the Constitution." In a political system where religion plays an enormously important role, citizens are not only encouraged but oftentimes pressured to practice their religious beliefs.

Iran's 2016 census estimated that 99.5 percent of the country's population is Muslim. However, a 2020 online survey conducted by the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN), working in cooperation with Dr. Ladan Boroumand, cofounder of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran, showed that only 40 percent of Iranians identified as devout or practicing Muslims, although a majority stated that they believed in God (about 78 percent). Moreover, even though the state propaganda apparatus quite explicitly depicts Iran as a Shia nation, only 32 percent explicitly identified as such, while only 5 percent said they were Sunni Muslim and 3 percent Sufi Muslim according to the same survey. Regardless of the veracity of the 2020 survey, it seems that both belief and observance may be trending downwards—that is to say, it may show an increase

in secular sentiments among citizens. Still, the Iranian authorities are without question faith-based, and religious dogma greatly affects the country's domestic and foreign policy.

Both Azerbaijan and Iran maintain a cautious stance toward the topics related to religion in their bilateral relations. On the one hand, Baku is concerned about the possible influence of extreme Islamism coming from its southern neighbor. Tensions between the two countries were especially visible during the 2018 Iranian nuclear crisis. After Washington withdrew from the nuclear deal with Iran and reimposed sanctions, many Iranians started looking for refuge abroad, including in neighboring Azerbaijan. However, concerned that a massive influx of refugees from Iran would inevitably involve the arrival of untold numbers of Islamic extremists, Baku decided to close its border with Iran temporarily. On the other hand, Tehran disapproves of Azerbaijan's strategic partnership with Turkey for a number of reasons including the possible growth of the influence of Sunni Islam in the country. Moreover, as discussed above, Iran criticizes Azerbaijan because of its alleged pro-Western approach that favors cooperation with the U.S. and Israel. Differences along the secular/theocratic axis do cause some bilateral pressure; when these are combined with other points of tension, they make the Baku-Tehran relationship complex and never quite peaceful.

Still, it would be incorrect to say that religious affairs have ever been a predominant area of tension between the two countries. In other words, the religious issue has never been a sufficient factor in and of itself to produce a downturn in the bilateral relationship; if other misunderstandings come up, then differences having to do with the role of religion in public life can serve as an aggravating factor. After all, as Brenda Shaffer wrote in a previous edition of *Baku Dialogues*, "Tehran almost always puts pragmatic interests above ideology in instances where Islamic solidarity conflicts with primary geopolitical interests." It therefore seems quite unlikely that any future political dispute between Azerbaijan and Iran will be based solely on differences having to do with religion and ideology.

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Ethnic Ties and Identity Politics

Ethnic-Azerbaijanis comprise Iran's largest minority, making up somewhere between one-fifth and one-third of the total population of the country. Their presence is concentrated mostly in the northern and northwestern regions of the country. Links to the majority of the inhabitants of the Republic of Azerbaijan through ethnic ties abound. This considerable ethnic group of Turkic origin was divided in the nineteenth century by the 1813 Treaty of Gulistan and the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay, which made the Araz River the state border between two empires, and thus left a portion of ethnic-Azerbaijanis under Persian rule and the rest under Russian rule.

Being predominantly Shia in the country with a Shia majority has helped Iranian Azerbaijanis to better integrate into the country's broader social fabric. Even though ethnic-Azerbaijanis have historically proven to be Iran's most loyal ethno-linguistic minority, any rise in tensions involving neighboring Azerbaijan or any rapprochement between Azerbaijan and Turkey might be interpreted as possibly dangerous or separatist-inducing in the eyes of Tehran.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the newly independent countries experienced an increase of nationalist sentiments and some were involved in bloody conflicts over territorial issues—most relevantly for present purposes, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Both Karabakh Wars were seen by Tehran as potentially compromising to the security of the Islamic Republic due to the possibility of hostilities spilling over into Iran's majority-ethnic-Azerbaijani provinces. The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which involves the question of ethnicity and identity, is a serious concern for the Islamic Republic, given that Iran's large ethnic-Azerbaijani minority might be susceptible to the Republic of Azerbaijan's increased nationalism, which, in turn, could invoke separatist ideas among Iran's ethnic Azerbaijani community.

Although it is highly unlikely for separatism to take a serious course in Iran's ethnic-Azerbaijani-majority provinces in the near future, Tehran remains very vigilant re-

garding any developments in the South Caucasus that are close to its northern borders, especially if those are related to a resurgence of identity politics.

In terms of linguistics and education, the second-most widely-used language in Iran is Azerbaijani. However, formal education in Iran does not recognize any other language except Farsi. Moreover, both spoken and written Azerbaijani in Iran is overly influenced by Farsi vocabulary and, in addition, can only be used completely freely in domestic contexts and, to a limited extent, in some public settings at local levels: public services, for example, are not provided in the Azerbaijani language. Even though this means that ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran cannot exercise their right to education in their native language, many do not find it especially concerning. Some may support the idea of introducing the Azerbaijani language in schools with majority ethnic-Azerbaijani pupils, but few would want to provoke any social tension over such an idea.

What would be the ideal form of self-governance, one that serves both the interests of the central government in Baku and the future residents of Nagorno-Karabakh?

From the Republic of Azerbaijan's point of view, a huge ethnic-Azerbaijani group concentrated just across the border with Iran might become an issue of grave concern only in the event that this ethno-linguistic group decides to pursue a more aggressive political approach permeated by the idea of separatism or unification. The reason is simple: there are more ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran than there are in the Republic of Azerbaijan; thus, in the unlikely event a serious separatist movement is born in Iran's ethnic-Azerbaijani heartland, the Republic of Azerbaijan would become overshadowed and potentially overwhelmed: no definitive answer is presently forthcoming to the question of how Baku would deal with the hypothetical decision by Iranian Azerbaijanis to truly pursue national-oriented politics based on the notion of separatism and pan-Turkic enthusiasm. What seems clear is that neither Iran nor Azerbaijan favor a separatist-oriented movement by Iranian Azerbaijanis; rather, both Baku and Tehran are entirely on the same page with respect to the desirability of the preservation of the present border between Azerbaijan and Iran. This is highly unlikely to change in the future.

Modus Vivendi

Although the present Azerbaijan-Iran relationship is partially characterized by what can be called occasional saber-rattling behavior and heightened rhetoric, the likelihood of open conflict is quite low—certainly, there is nothing in the history of this relationship that would suggest either Baku or Tehran would see it as being in their respective interests to cross the line into fully-fledged armed confrontation.

Certainly, the two states pursue diverging foreign and domestic policies. And these have in turn both created greater geopolitical gaps between them and amplified existing points of friction. However, Azerbaijan and Iran have been capable of managing serious disagreements in a diplomatic manner, even though they still experience serious political rows periodically. The modus vivendi reached between the two states at the end of 2021 has provided new space for boosting bilateral cooperation and developing effective mechanisms for resolving and diluting diplomatic and political disputes between Baku and Tehran.

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This is not to say that all will be smooth sailing from here on out. The continued strengthening partnership between Baku and Ankara coupled with the maintenance of friendly relations between Azerbaijan and Israel remain sources of antagonism between Azerbaijan and Iran—at least from the perspective of Tehran, which remains fixated on these as each representing threats to its security. Iran views both Israel and Turkey through zero-sum lenses: the greater leverage and influence each is perceived to have secured in Azerbaijan (and the rest of the South Caucasus), the greater Iran's concern. This is unlikely to change.

Differences in governance systems remain possible areas of tension between Azerbaijan and Iran, which adds a layer of complexity to an already complicated relationship. There is always a possibility

that Iran might encourage pro-Iranian irredentist sentiment in Azerbaijan, mainly through outreach to Shia religious organizations operating in the country. After all, such a policy had been pursued in the past. However, that course of action failed then and would certainly remain unsuccessful now—especially because of the danger that such a political move by Tehran would quite likely produce a strong response by Baku (in the form of some sort of encouragement of irredentist ideas in the Iranian Azerbaijani community), which could rock an Iranian system already beset with serious internal difficulties.

Thus, the most likely scenario in the complex game being played by Baku and Tehran is for both to continue with a cautious stance in bilateral cooperation while refraining from causing serious provocations and yet accepting the possibility that tensions and diplomatic rows will arise but not slip out of control. Still, there now seems to be a greater political determination to invest additional efforts into resolving problems that may come up through diplomatic channels. This is hardly cause for imprudent optimism; on the other hand, it would not accord with the truth to deny that the situation has gotten a bit better. Indeed, the understandings reached at the end of 2021 may signal the onset of a more stable and predictable period in bilateral relations—to the enduring benefit of both states. BD

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Drones and Special Forces

Armenian-Azerbaijani Relations in the Wake of the Second Karabakh War

Agil Rustamzade & Anar Valiyev

"War is a mere continuation of policy with other means."
-Carl von Clausewitz

The Second Karabakh War was more than a war between two belligerents; essentially, it represented a war between two strategic paradigms: one belonging to the twenty-first century and the other a relic of twentieth-century military thinking. Azerbaijan's achievement of air supremacy with the help of drones was not only one of the crucial factors that decided the outcome of that particular war; it will almost certainly contribute to the further development of the military art in armed conflicts of various scopes across various theaters in the time ahead.

At the same time, referring to this war as a "drone war" does not reflect reality. In this, as in much else, impressionable journalists got it wrong: this could be a proper designation only if the drones had fought also on the ground instead of soldiers. Certainly, the use of drones was decisive; but the laurels of victory in this war do not belong solely to this contingent of the Azerbaijani military: the mobile groups of special forces were also decisive. Each played a critical part in the country's military achievement.

We begin with an examination of the area of hostilities and the respective dispositions of the parties to the conflict before getting into a discussion about some relevant aspects of Operation Iron Fist—the official designation used by Azerbaijan for the Second Karabakh War. We conclude with remarks of a more geopolitical nature.

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Applied Geography

We define the war zone on the day of the commencement of the hostilities on 27 September 2020 as consisting of Azerbaijani sovereign territory occupied by Armenian forces—that is to say, the bulk of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and the seven surrounding districts. Throughout this essay, the term "Karabakh" will be used interchangeably with the term "war zone" to refer to this area, which is characterized by a complex relief with a predominance of mountainous and high-altitude terrain. Indeed, the average elevation is 1,100 meters above sea level, with insignificant flat-hilly terrain in the southern part along the Aras River valley.

The Second Karabakh War represented a war between two strategic paradigms: one belonging to the twenty-first century and the other a relic of twentieth-century military thinking.

The conduct of war in mountainous terrain is considered as a fighting activity under special circumstances in which the capacity of the attacking side to use military equipment and artillery, as well as transfer reserves, is sharply reduced. Standard military textbook tactics for a classical frontal attach operation in such terrain indicate that the proportion of attacking troops to defending troops should be six to one. The arrangement of Armenian positions on the dominant peaks above the Azerbaijani positions created additional advantageous conditions for the defense of Karabakh by Armenian armed forces.

These geographical advantages were over time supplemented in various ways. Thus, after the First Karabakh War, Armenian authorities ordered the construction and then the strengthening of three successive lines of defense commonly designated the "Ohanyan Line" (named after Seyran Ohanyan, who served from 2000 to 2007 as a "minister of defense" of the breakaway ethnic-Armenian statelet in Karabakh and

from 2008 to 2016 as minister of defense of Armenia). This defense line consisted of a series of fortifications involving barrier fences, minefields and barbed wire, and cemented firing points. After the barrier strips, an around 7-meter-high earthen rampart was built.

After the Four-Day War that took place in April 2016, the Armenian command further reinforced its defensive positions. Thus, several rows of anti-tank ditches were dug along the lines of defense, with widths of between to 4 and 6 meters and depths of between 3 to 7 meters. This was understood to be an additional deterrent against a conventional armored assault: in the event of an attack, tanks were expected to get stuck in these ditches and become sitting ducks to be fired upon with impunity.

Also, in the wake of the Four-Day War, the Armenian military dug an entire network of secret passages and shelters behind each defense line. Throughout the defense line, round-the-clock surveillance systems were installed on the stocks, as a result of which the Armenian forces gained the capability to detect enemy movement at a distance of up to 350 meters.

In addition to reinforced defense lines, three fortified defense areas for infantry and artillery, featuring multi-storey bunkers constructed with reinforced concrete, were constructed in the areas of Fizuli, Aghdam, and Aghdere.

Planning for a large, combined arms military operation on the scale of the Second Karabakh War required Azerbaijan's military-political administration to precisely survey the Armenian forces' protective capabilities, properly assess various dangers of a financial nature, carefully take into account the domestic political circumstances in both states, and accurately gauge the likelihood of constricting reactions by outside powers both in the neighborhood and more distantly. The course and outcome of the war shows that all of Azerbaijan's calculations were correct: for instance, Russia did not effectively support Armenia whilst Azerbaijan received Turkey's full military and political support.

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There is some dispute in expert circles about the precise number of military equipment and weapons used by the parties in the war. We do not have the ambition to fill in all the blanks, but we can assert with confidence that although Azerbaijan lagged in the number of operational tactical missile systems, it had an advantage in the quantity and quality of military hardware.

Moreover, the quantitative proportion in manpower looked as follows: all power structures were involved in fighting on both sides, and partial mobilization was announced. During the war, Azerbaijan had around between 130,000 and 140,000 military personnel in active service, whereas Armenia's strength was estimated to be between 60,000 and 65,000 military personnel. Apart from Azerbaijan's quantitative superiority in the field, there was also a qualitative disbalance: the number of professional contract servicemen in the Azerbaijani armed forces was higher.

Moreover, Armenia could not develop all the necessary countermeasures for the defense of the territories they held in Karabakh on the basis of lessons (they should have) learned in the wake of the Four-Day War. This is when Azerbaijan first put into practice a strategy of deploying mobile groups of special forces from the rear to the front and also practiced the use of kamikaze drones. One reason for the Armenian failure to learn from this experience may be that its military leadership had been trained in Soviet and Russian military institutions that teach outdated maneuvers. Whatever the reason, in the Second Karabakh War they were unprepared to respond to innovative tactics involving the use of drones and mobile groups—although the Armenian forces did establish reconnaissance and assault battalions, which were staffed mainly by contract soldiers. But this was not enough. Moreover, presumably due to its modest economic circumstances, Armenia also failed to upgrade existing military hardware and purchase modern high-precision weapons systems. In addition, available financial resources were allocated irrationally. For example, Armenia purchased several Su-30SM fighters—this sort of air power is not much-needed for countries with a small territory to defend; on the other hand, Yerevan did not purchase either night vision systems or up-to-date means of secure military communication equipment.

The 2016 Four-Day War proved the correctness of the concept of using tactical mobile groups of Azerbaijani special forces against fortified platoon strongholds in mountainous areas. Relatedly, we can say that Israeli multifunctional missiles of the Spike family and kamikaze drones also proved to be effective weapons of war for Azerbaijan. Moreover, certain conclusions were made after the successful operation of the Turkish army in Syria (Operation Olive Branch), during which Bayraktar attack drones were massively used. Azerbaijan purchased attack drones and electronic warfare systems. Various communication systems were also purchased to create a single information field. Ground and air hardware was modernized for the use of high-precision weapons. In short, by the beginning of the Second Karabakh War, the concept of using drones and mobile groups and all its components in an integrated fashion was ready for execution.

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As a parenthetical remark, we can state that the military disposition of the parties prior to the Second Karabakh War can also be understood in light of ratings produced by globally authoritative indices. Here we can refer to two such ratings. First, the Global Firepower (GFP) military index, which ranks each country's potential war-making capability across land, sea, and air fought by conventional means. It incorporates values related to manpower, hardware, natural resources, finances, and geography, broken down into over 50 individual factors, which are then used in formulating the finalized GFP ranks. GFP's 2020 edition ranked Azerbaijan sixty-fourth and Armenia one hundred and eleventh.

Second, the Global Militarization Index (GMI), which is published by the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies. It depicts the relative weight and importance of the military apparatus of one state in relation to its society as a whole and uses a number of indicators to represent the degree of militarization of a country. Three overarching categories are employed to determine the results: military spending in relation to GDP and health spending, the relation of military personnel to the total population and physicians, and the number of an armed forces' heavy weapons in relation to the total population. In 2020, Azerbaijan's GMI was ranked third in the world whilst Armenia's GMI was ranked fifth in the world.

Azerbaijan's first strike in the Second Karabakh War destroyed up to 30 percent of Armenian artillery and up to 60 percent of Armenian air-defense systems.

Operation Iron Fist

Aside from combat operations, the Second Karabakh War also had a simultaneous cyberspace component. Back in July 2020, a group of hackers begins to publish photos and passport data on Azerbaijani hacker forums of several hundred Armenians, including employees of the Karabakh National Security Service. However, beginning in September 2020, the number and quality of attacks rose to unprecedented heights. Azerbaijani hackers also published leaflets on Facebook about the inventory of the military units of what its proponents call the Karabakh Defense Army.

The biggest cyberattack carried out by the Azerbaijani special services took place on 27 September 2020—the day the war began. The mobile operator operating in the occupied lands suffered massive interruptions, which significantly complicated mobile communications and impeded internet access. Viruses also blocked the work of most computers with IP addresses originating in the territories under Armenian occupation. Azerbaijani hackers also hacked into many official 'Artsakh' websites.

Operation Iron Fist, which consisted of a coordinated air-ground assault campaign, covered the entire front line, with several directions identified for offensive action: the main was the southern one whilst two auxiliary ones were in the north (Murovdag Ridge) and in the northeast (the village of Sugovushan).

In the morning of 27 September 2020, Azerbaijan's missile and artillery units launched a massive strike on more than 500 reconnoitered targets along the entire line of contact and into the depths of the territory occupied by Armenia. The greatest concentration of fire was in the main southern direction. Strikes were carried out on Armenian mil-

itary positions, equipment storage facilities, and ammunition depots. This first coordinated strike destroyed up to 30 percent of the Armenian forces' artillery.

Integral to Iron Fist was a critical operation conducted by the Azerbaijani Air Forces to suppress Armenian air-defense systems and establish Azerbaijani air supremacy. Thus, a complex plan was executed with the express intention of forcing Armenian forces to put into operation all their anti-aircraft missile systems.

This plan consisted in launching an air offensive that had the *appearance* of a massive air strike in which various types of aircraft, helicopters, and drones were used. For instance, Azerbaijan launched inexpensive light An-2 aircraft into the zone of destruction of the Armenian air-defense system. Each had been equipped with bombs so that an Armenian failure to shoot them down would have allowed these aircraft to be used as kamikaze drones, for each had been assigned a specific target. But shooting them down also resulted in an Azerbaijani military advantage, for the idea was to force the Armenian forces to waste expensive missiles attached to their Tor-M2KM anti-aircraft missile systems, which they had in limited quantities, on what were effectively false air targets. (This tactic was so cumulatively successful that in some stages of the war, the Armenian forces could not make any use of their anti-aircraft systems due to a lack of missile availability.)

The wave of An-2s was quickly followed by the deployment of Harop, Skystriker, and Orbiter-1k kamikaze drones, together with Bayraktar attack drones, which all moved in to target pre-selected Armenian air-defense equipment.

To support the drone offensive, various forms of electronic warfare (EW) were also put to active use to jam and otherwise interfere with the functioning of Armenian anti-aircraft missile systems. Moreover, false electronic targets were created to further confuse Armenian air-defense systems. In parallel, strikes were carried out on these same air-defense systems by Spike NLOS missiles mounted on helicopters, which had a range of up to 30 kilometers.

Azerbaijan acquired and maintained air supremacy over virtually the entire war zone from day one.

Thus, by the end of the first day of the Second Karabakh War, up to 60 percent of Armenian air-defense systems had been destroyed. At virtually no point during combat operations was Armenia able to control the sky above its defensive positions: Azerbaijan acquired and maintained air supremacy over virtually the entire war zone from day one.

Here we must break off the narrative to make the following observation: some experts and analysts have claimed that the dominance of drones in the air was due to the weakness of Armenian air-defense systems. This is quite simply incorrect. Rather, it was the effective application of a tactically sophisticated and innovative plan by the Azerbaijani Air Forces that quickly and decisively incapacitated a potentially capable air-defense system, including, inter alia, four technologically up-to-date vehicle installations brought in from Armenia for the mobile launch of Tor-M2KM missiles. That being said, even had the Armenian forces been equipped with only the latest air-defense systems, the agony of their defeat would only have been prolonged—ultimately, the result would still have been the same.

This is also a good place to note that the Azerbaijani Armed Forces also received out of area intelligence support by the Turkish Air Force. Thanks to the constant duty of AWACS aircraft and Bayraktar drones flying near the Turkish-Armenian border, Azerbaijani command posts received realtime information on all troop movements from Armenia to Karabakh.

After the massive artillery barrage, Azerbaijan's ground units began breaking into the first line of Armenian defense in the northeastern auxiliary and southern main directions. In the northern direction, special forces groups began to liberate strongholds on the high-altitude Murov Ridge. There were also simultaneous attacks in the central Aghdam direction—the shortest distance to Khankendi (the town is still called Stepanakert by Armenians—a name imposed in 1923 by the Soviet authorities in homage to Bolshevik revolutionary Stepan Shaumian, nicknamed the "Caucasian Lenin"). Only later, after the war—i.e., once the mine maps of the liberated Aghdam region were transmitted to the Azerbaijani side—was the decision not to advance directly in that direction vindicated, notwithstanding the expressed intentions and plans of some Azerbaijani generals.

In some areas, artillery duels quickly ensued. Thanks to its use of

drones in the war zone, Azerbaijan had better situational awareness and destroyed Armenian artillery with accurate strikes. Still, the advance of regular Azerbaijani ground troops was very slow at times for a combination of reasons: the mountainous terrain, reinforced defensive positions (e.g., earthen ramparts, anti-tank and anti-personnel minefields, engineering barriers), and the order by headquarters to protect the lives of soldiers as much as possible.

Nevertheless, there were gaps in the Armenian defensive positions in all directions, and Azerbaijan's mobile special forces groups began to penetrate them. They infiltrated deep into Armenian defenses, secretly entered their rear, and effectively destroyed their strongholds, all of which created the conditions for the advance of regular ground units. The first line of defense in the southern direction began to collapse, which allowed Azerbaijani assault battalions to liberate several frontline villages. On 3 October 2020, for example, it became possible to liberate several villages in Boyuk Marjanli, a village that had been itself liberated a bit earlier, after which the Armenian forces put up virtually no more resistance in that part of Karabakh. Thus, Azerbaijan launched an offensive in two directions: along the Araz River valley and in the direction of the city of Fizuli.

Although mobilization was announced in Armenia, it was not successful. Some of the men of draft age were abroad, while others chose to evade the draft. With the advance of the Azerbaijani army deep into the war zone, members of the Armenian forces began deserting—and from units that were located not just in Karabakh, but in Armenia (i.e., not in the war zone per se). By the end of the Second Karabakh War, the number of desertions had grown to 10,000—a huge figure for a small army.

As the situation on the ground began to deteriorate for the Armenian forces, the Union of Armenians of Russia (a diaspora organization headed by Ara Abramyan, who is simultaneously both the head of the World Armenian Congress and small political party in Armenia) together with VOMA (a paramilitary training organization whose acronym stands for "The Art of Survival") reportedly worked through social media networks in Russia and elsewhere to recruit mercenaries and volunteers to participate in hostilities. When recruiting, preference was given to snipers and operators of anti-tank missile systems. And not only persons of Armenian citizenship were

recruited—the case of a Russian citizen, Eduard S. Dubakov, is a case in point. The exact number of people who were recruited in such a manner and fought in the war on the Armenian side is unknown, but there is video footage of several VOMA battalions on the internet that shows them participating in the Second Karabakh War.

The most difficult breakthrough of the front line was in the northeastern auxiliary direction of the war zone, taking several days. Between 2-3 October 2020, Azerbaijani troops managed to liberate the villages of Talysh and Sugovushan. Soon after the approach of Azerbaijani subdivisions to the town of Aghdere, the battle took on a positional character. To demoralize the Azerbaijani population, the Armenian side began to strike Terter and Barda with artillery (i.e., Azerbaijani cities not in the war zone); in this sector of the front, Armenian artillery positions were sheltered in enclosed concrete bunkers, which prevented them from being effectively counterattacked and destroyed. Artillery shelling from both sides lasted with varying intensity almost until the end of the war.

However, attack drones operating in this direction destroyed most of the Grad and Smerch rocket artillery systems, and in late October 2020 kamikaze drones tracked down and destroyed two Scud missile launchers at the border with Armenia. On 4 October 2020, Armenian forces began heavy ball and rocket attacks on Ganja, Mingachevir, Gebele, and Kurdamir—Azerbaijani cities all outside the war zone—which resulted in civilian casualties. In response, the Azerbaijani military in the following days staged a punitive counterattack along the entire front line against Armenian military targets.

After ensuring the breakthrough of the front, Azerbaijani artillery units transferred fire to the depth of the war zone. Defense nodes, command and control posts, and support roads were hit. A missile strike by the LORA operational tactical missile system damaged the main bridge bisecting the Lachin corridor.

In ground battles, meanwhile, the Azerbaijani special forces had infiltrated to the rear of the Armenian lines, flanking them whilst also relying on reconnaissance units. Constant aerial reconnaissance and a developed unified network of data exchange turned all attempts of counterattacks by the Armenian army into a "fire bag." The largest of these, which

was announced by Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan on 7 October 2020, was to take place in the direction of Horadiz. Its stated purpose was to encircle the Azerbaijani troops that had broken through the southern front line—a repeat, it was hoped, of what Armenian forces had accomplished in the First Karabakh War. But this time, the Azerbaijani forces had laid a trap, with the result that about 1,000 Armenian soldiers found themselves surrounded before suffering defeat. According to various sources, the losses amounted to between 600 and 700 Armenian servicemen. In fact, all three major attempts by the Armenian military during the Second Karabakh War to counterattack, close the gap, or encircle Azerbaijani units that had broken through the defensive lines failed.

Moreover, in fierce fighting, the Azerbaijani military began to move north of the Araz, in the direction of the former NKAO itself. Azerbaijani units approaching the Fizuli fortified defense area surrounded the city from three sides. Combat reconnaissance indicated that a frontal attack would lead to largescale losses in both material and manpower. Thus, two developments took place in parallel: part of the ground attack forces continued their advance towards the town of Jabrayil.

At the same time, Azerbaijani Su-25 specially modified attack aircraft were deployed over Fizuli—at the time of production, these aircraft had been optimized for combat use at low and medium altitudes; later technical work made it possible for the Azerbaijani Air Forces' Su-25 to fly at high altitudes and carry laser-guided bombs jointly produced by Turkey and Azerbaijan. During the war, Su-25s performed more than 600 combat sorties. Mi-17 helicopters equipped with Spike-NLOS and LAHAT missiles also worked on ground targets. An analysis of amateur video footage of the fighting showed that Azerbaijan's Mi-24G attack helicopters (i.e., South Africa's modernized version of the Mi-24) were rarely used.

Azerbaijani troops managed to enter the rear of the main Armenian military groups in the war zone. The opposing side swiftly began to lose its ability to fight once the liberation of cities in the south and the advance in the northeast began to bear fruit. Many settlements, including the town of Jabrayil, were liberated on 4 October 2020. After fierce fighting, Agoglan was liberated on 9 October 2020. This was a key turning point: after the fall of Agoglan—demoralized and having problems with both command and support—the Armenian side was able to organize only focal nodes of

resistance on dominant peaks near large settlements. Here we can underscore that the conduct of the "Yarasa" special operations forces unit belonging to the Foreign Intelligence Service of Azerbaijan contributed to the growing disorganization, creation of panic, and general chaos in the ranks of the Armenian forces. Around this time, the failure of the Armenian information campaign to explain the video reports of the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan showing the liberation of various towns in Karabakh, as well as the secret forays of Azerbaijani special forces units to take "selfies" in the cities under the control of Armenians, became apparent.

We underline that the Second Karabakh War was the first war in which drones were successfully used so massively.

In the sky above Karabakh, Azerbaijan's drones continued to dominate and collect their tribute from the battlefield. Outstanding results were achieved by Bayraktar reconnaissance and strike drones. Thanks to their high-precision ammunition, they destroyed hardware and manpower, enhanced the precision of artillery attacks, carried out target designation for bombs dropped from Su-25 attack aircraft, and served to guide missiles of the TRLG-230 multiple-launch rocket system. Directly with its ammunition, Bayraktar drones destroyed some 50 to 60 percent of their targets—quite an impressive figure.

We underline that the Second Karabakh War was the first war in which drones were successfully used so massively. Aside from its military effectiveness, the use of drones also inflicted psychological pressure on the Armenian forces. There is more than one instance of a drone dropping a single bomb on a single tank in a large convoy that resulted in the crews of all the other tanks in the convoy quickly getting out of their fully functional vehicles and running away on foot.

We would also like to note the advantages provided by a unified information field system—an encrypted tactical communication system with the ability to broadcast video online, such as the NATO Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR). As a re-

sult of this technological edge, Azerbaijan's entire military was able to maintain close coordination in real time, which made it possible to immediately respond to a change of scenery and halt emerging dangers.

Here is a good place to say something more about the decisive role played by the mobile groups of special forces in securing Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War. In the context of Azerbaijan, the "special forces" are composed of the following: the special forces of the Azerbaijan Land Forces (the army), a separate special purpose brigade located in Nakhchivan, and small special units belonging to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Border Service.

Now then, apart from the first days of the war (and on other rare occasions) when it was necessary to tear through the defensive line solely with regular troops, in front of Azerbaijani ground forces were special forces mobile groups that attacked Armenian forces, liberated territory and settlements (villages, towns, cities), and secured captured defense lines.

We can provide a few examples. After the capture of the city of Agoglan, several mobile special forces groups launched an offensive from there in the direction of the city of Fizuli. They took back strategic heights and villages and were then reinforced by two motorized rifle brigades that took full control of those liberated territories.

Special forces groups coming from the rear of the Fizuli fortified defense line liberated the city on 17 October 2020.

A group of special forces trekking along the Araz River valley advanced towards the city of Zangelan. During this period, Armenian assault aviation flights reached their maximum number. Yet in this period five Armenian Su-25 attack aircraft went down in that part of the war zone: one collided into a mountain on 28 September 2020 and four others were in shot down by Azerbaijani air-defense systems. Here we underline the accurateness of the information and contrast it to what was propagated by various bloggers, including Van Hambardzumyan, and biased military experts from Russia.

We can skip ahead to something that happened a little later, when troops in the southern direction, having freed the city of Zangelan on 20 October 2020, reached the state border

with Armenia, where they were met with a hastily erected tent of Russian border guards. In this context, it may be useful to provide an excerpt from the statement of the former Chief of the General Staff of the Armenian Defense Forces, Colonel-General Movses Hakobyan, on 19 November 2020 at a press conference in Yerevan, "Russia provided the maximum it could have. We should be grateful. It gave us that which we could only dream about, from the very first days of the war."

These "dreams" included the transport of weapons from Russia territory by aircraft via several air bridges. Later, the facts of Russia's transfer of weapons—in total worth more than $1 billion—became known to the public. Transferred weapons included the Kornet-D portable anti-tank guided missile systems. Azerbaijani intelligence detected the transfer of a large batch of these weapons from Armenia to the warehouses of the military unit stationed in the vicinity of Khankendi, which were destroyed with a precision missile attack. This is the context in which Armenia's official spokesperson during the war, Artsrun Hovhannisyan, had spoken about the roar of explosions that lasted all night long.

According to Turkish investigative journalist Fulya Öztürk, weapons were flown into Armenia from the Russia-operated Khmeimim Air Base in Syria as well as from the Syrian capital by five civilian aircraft, a proxy militant, and similar sources. Syrian servicemen and ethnic-Armenians from Syria also played a part. Somewhere in mid-October 2020, when the Armenian air-defenses had been almost completely destroyed, several Tor-M2 anti-aircraft missile systems arrived in Karabakh after having been transferred from Russia. The air-defense unit operating this equipment was staffed by Russian servicemen. All this is based on Öztürk's reporting.

Around the same time—specifically, on 15 October 2020—the Caspian Flotilla of the Russian Federation conducted unscheduled exercises. In a press release, its defense ministry reported that these exercises took place in the central part of the sea, north of the Absheron Peninsula (the location of Baku) and included four ships equipped with the Kalibr-NK cruise missile complex. Each missile has a range of up to 2,000 kilometers and is designed to strike at ground targets. From the start of these exercise until the beginning of November 2020, Russian

combat aircraft carried out numerous violations of Azerbaijani airspace in the northeastern part of the sea border.

Not everything was so unambiguous in the case of the Russian Mi-24 helicopter, which was shot down on 9 November 2020 just a few hours before the signing of the tripartite statement that ended the Second Karabakh War. This helicopter was flying at low altitude at night between 1 and 1.5 kilometers from the Nakhchivan section of Azerbaijan's state border with Armenia.

But to come back to the main thrust of our narrative. Azerbaijani troops in the southern direction turned north towards the city of Gubatli, which was liberated on 25 October 2020. After this, the offensive continued along the Khakari River valley towards the city of Lachin. The Armenian units were hit hard with anti-tank systems and mortars, which made it impossible for their defensive operations to continue. More and more units of the Azerbaijani army were introduced into the battle, one of which began to advance in the direction of the village of Krasny Bazaar and another in the direction of the city of Khojavend.

Heavy fighting was taking place across the width of war zone, and the location of the Armenian side's positions on the dominant heights in the mountainous and wooded terrain greatly complicated the advance of even regular mobile infantry groups. Azerbaijani drones switched to destroying military vehicles delivering reinforcements and supplies along mountain roads, which became a growing problem for the Armenian command. By 22 October 2020, advancing Azerbaijani troops were already six kilometers from Lachin, the gateway town to the eponymous land corridor between Armenia and the former NKAO. In an attempt to somehow weaken the attack on the Lachin corridor, Armenian forces counter-attacked using infantry units in mountainous forest areas whilst setting up ambushes along the main supply routes in the area used by the advancing Azerbaijani forces. One success of these ambushes was the defeat of an Azerbaijani advance party consisting of one T-72 tank,

The decisive Battle for Shusha featured an audacious operation by Azerbaijani special forces.

four BMP-2 armored infantry vehicles, and five Sandcat armored vehicles.

The Battle for Shusha

It is within this context that began the decisive battle for the city of Shusha: through an audacious operation by Azerbaijani special forces. Operating in small groups, these mobile units began to seep through the mountains and forests on foot through territory occupied by Armenian forces and concentrated around Shusha. In a coordinated way, they took control of the settlements and roads located near the city. The Armenian army, shackled by battles elsewhere, was unable to transfer reserves to reinforce the more than 2,000 troops that had been present in the city. Late in the evening of 5 November 2020, Azerbaijan special forces mobile groups had reached the Lachin corridor road and, in combination with the destruction of a key bridge over the Khakari River (as mentioned above), were able to block the arrival of Armenian reinforcements trying to help defend Shusha. At the same time, advanced Azerbaijani ground units were breaking through to the village of Dashalti, which provided access to the road leading to Shusha.

During this period, unfavorable weather had come to Shusha (e.g., fog, low clouds) and for three or four days Azerbaijan could not use drones in that part of Karabakh. Drone flights were also curtailed because of Armenian electronic warfare systems: Yerevan had purchased several types of electronic warfare equipment from Russia in the wake of the Four-Day War and was able to make effective use of these at that point. Here we can note that throughout most of the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijani radio engineering reconnaissance was able to detect and guide its electronic warfare systems to destroy such equipment.

However, during the Battle for Shusha, the situation had become more complex. Azerbaijani troops had encountered problems with communication interruptions, leading to the losses of two Bayraktar drones (depending on the operational situation, such missions were carried out with those drones or with Spike-NLOS missiles or Harop loitering ammunition) for reasons having to do with a temporary inability to suppress Bayraktar control channels. This was due in part to the Armenian use of the Pole-21 system of numerous small-sized sensors installed on antennas and cell towers that jammed the frequencies of GPS positioning

systems. Although is not critical for drone operation, it did become more challenging to pilot them with precision and to determine the accuracy of coordinates for target designation.

As it turned out, this was not an effective deterrent for the liberation of Shusha. Onto the scene stepped forward Azerbaijani commandos, armed only with light weapons. Arriving from three directions under the cover of night on 6 November 2020, they began to climb the steep cliffside that serves as a natural fortress-like defense for Shusha, which was commonly understood to be an unassailable city. Undetected, they entered the city and began to engage in close combat street fighting with the large Armenian force. The Azerbaijani commandos managed to destroy several Armenian tanks and infantry fighting vehicles using grenade launchers and portable anti-tank guided missiles. The Battle for Shusha eventually fell in a hand-to-hand combat operation.

Right after Shusha's liberation, Armenian forces attempted to retake the city on three occasions before the end of the war. Assault units armed with heavy weapons were preceded by rocket artillery strikes in which the Armenians used all the artillery missile systems in the arsenal, including the TOS-1 heavy flamethrower systems and the Iskander-M missile systems.

By 8 November 2020, Armenian forces had lost their strike potential and been definitively pushed back to Khankendi. In addition to the liberation of the city of Shusha, the Azerbaijani Armed Forces had taken control of a junction of roads in its vicinity. The Armenian forces had no strength left for an effective defense of Khankendi, in the area of which armed clashes were already taking place. In short, the Armenian military defeat at Shusha led to the collapse of their entire defenses.

End of the War and its Continuation by Other Means?

Unquestionably, the Battle for Shusha decided the outcome of the Second Karabakh War. During this period, Russian diplomacy strenuously tried to stop the fighting in order to prevent the full liberation of Karabakh by Azerbaijan and thus the complete defeat of Armenia. The result was the signing of a trilateral statement on 10 November 2020 that is, in terms of scope, more than a narrow ceasefire agreement but less than a general peace treaty: strictly speaking, only its first article deals with the cessation of hostilities in Karabakh; others lay out various concrete measures, including the deployment of a "peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation […] in the amount of 1,960 military personnel with small arms, 90 armored personnel carriers, and 380 units of the automobile and special equipment."

The Russian peacekeeping zone today consists of that part of the former NKAO that that had not been liberated by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces, plus the Lachin Corridor. According to another article of this document, Russian peacekeepers will remain in that part of Karabakh until at least November 2025. Their deployment "shall be automatically extended by a further five-year period if none of the Parties [i.e., Armenia, Azerbaijan, or Russia] declares six months prior to the expiration of the period of its intention to terminate the application of this provision." The document makes no mention of a further extension.

But further considerations in this direction would enter the domain of speculation. What we can say with certainty is that the Azerbaijani victory in the Second Karabakh War brought the military conflict to an end. Nonetheless, an epilogue to this "hot phase" remains unwritten. For instance, Armenia has not yet officially announced the final figures of losses in manpower and military hardware. But the bottom line is that although we will hear a lot of interesting things about this war, no one can deny that Operation Iron Fist was skillfully designed and well-executed. This remains beyond doubt. In the entire history of warfare, there have been very few instances in which a victorious attacking side suffered fewer casualties than a defending side in such difficult geographical conditions.

In the entire history of warfare, there have been very few instances in which a victorious attacking side suffered fewer casualties than a defending side in such difficult geographical conditions.

The fact that the fighting stopped before a seemingly small step to complete victory produced different emotions in Azerbaijani society, which had tasted the sweetness of victory. That being said, the price Azerbaijan would have paid for the liberation of Khankendi and the continuation of hostilities in what is now the Russian peace-

keeping zone likely would have been high—perhaps prohibitively so. According to various sources, at least 7,000 civilians had not evacuated from Khankendi by the end of the Second Karabakh War (and the number of civilians in other parts of the Armenian-occupied lands at that time was probably at least that much more). There is no doubt that some of these people would have died in the liberation of the city. The deaths of even a few hundred people would have been presented to the whole world as "genocide" or "ethnic cleansing" or something similar. We can recall the international outcry to the massacre of Bosnian Muslims in the Srebrenica enclave in July 1995 or the ethnic cleansing of the Krajina Serbs in August 1995. Moreover, it seems likely that the Azerbaijani Armed Forces would have had to get involved in some sort of hybrid or even explicit military confrontation with a Russian-Iranian tandem in the event Khankendi had not been liberated but the fighting would have continued in Lachin or Kelbajar. It would be difficult to imagine how such a confrontation would have been in the national interest of Azerbaijan.

Politics is the art of the possible and Azerbaijan achieved the maximum it could, given the geopolitical realities of late 2020. But Baku's victory in the Second Karabakh War did not resolve the underlying conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. We can refer again to the tripartite statement as a whole, which lay out various concrete measures aiming towards a future predicated implicitly on the establishment of peaceful relations between two sovereign states: Armenia and Azerbaijan. On the other hand, we can again underscore that the results of the Second Karabakh War did not completely satisfy segments of Azerbaijani society while at the same time shocked and dealt a deep wound to Armenian society. The specter of Armenian revanchism hangs in the air, as do questions revolving around the restoration of Azerbaijani administrative control over the area encompassed currently by the Russian peacekeeping zone. And, of course, the state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains undelineated.

Much unfinished business needs to be conducted; the weight of some important geopolitical variables is not yet fully known. In some circles, hopes for a final and complete resolution of outstanding issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan are rather low: one of the major external parties to the conflict, namely Russia, is perceived to conduct its policy toward the Silk Road region more in accordance with the principles of conflict management than conflict resolution. Still, the Second Karabakh War changed the military-political balance of power in the South Caucasus: Turkey's role as a regional power was strengthened while Russia's influence was weakened.

All things considered, the document that ended the Second Karabakh War is qualitatively better than the situation that existed previously. The prospect for a genuine, sustainable peace has never been greater—at least not in the period since both Armenia and Azerbaijan each regained their independence. This, in turn, would suggest that the prospect for reconciliation between not only the two states but also the two titular nations has also never been greater. War may very well be a mere continuation of policy with other means; but the outcome of the Second Karabakh War clearly indicates that the time for belligerence is past. Sure, obfuscation remains a distinct possibility. But ultimately, no good purpose can be served from now on by anyone embracing a doctrine predicated on the falsehood that policy is a mere continuation of war with other means. BD

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Turkey's Changing Posture on Russia and America

Implications for the Silk Road Region

Hasan Ünal

As of this writing, tensions between Russia and Ukraine appeared to continue unabated, despite the Putin-Biden online meeting and the exchange of several messages between Washington and Moscow aimed at reducing them. The crisis has kept almost everyone guessing as to where all this is heading: will they subside or spiral out control? Will Russia invade Ukraine? If it does, how will America and its allies respond?

As things stand at present, it sure seems as though Russia and the U.S. and its allies have gridlocked themselves into a crisis without any sensible way out. The former was emboldened by the feckless handling of the crisis by the Biden Administration such that Moscow now wants to dictate terms to America and NATO that amount to something like this: "give us proper, preferably written assurances that Ukraine and Georgia will not be admitted to NATO." Team Biden, which has inadvisably goaded Ukraine against Russia for a second time in less than a year with its much-hyped 'America is back' slogan cannot simply comply with the request. At the same time, America cannot stand up to Russia militarily in that part of the world. Moreover, neither the United States nor its NATO allies that have considerable military clout are prepared to make a promise to Ukraine regarding admission to NATO. Indeed, just as this edition of Baku Dialogues was going to press, the hectic diplomacy between NATO and Russia on the one hand and the U.S. and Russia on the other, climaxing in the latest meetings of 11-12 January 2022, broke up with no agreement. This has given rise to further concern that the ongoing conflict is going to perpetuate.

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From Turkey's perspective, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has turned insoluble—akin in not unimportant ways to the Turkish-Greek dispute, with its clusters of psychologically combustible elements freely circulating across the board. Should Russia invade Ukraine, it would presumably trigger a harsh package of sanctions by both the EU and the U.S.; this would likely hurt Moscow considerably, albeit hardly enough to budge it from staying the course. Should the U.S. and NATO simply give in to Russia's ultimatum, then this would amount to a complete surrender of the Western powers—particularly after the disastrous U.S. debacle in Afghanistan. At the same time, the likelihood that Russia will step back entirely from its position—that, in other words, it will calmly accept the prospect of the admission of Ukraine and Georgia to NATO—is close to zero. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine on the one hand, and the U.S.-led West and Russia on the other, will perpetuate.

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Discernable Nuance on Russia

What posture, then, should Turkey take up? A cursory look at what Ankara seems to be doing and saying with regard to the rising tension between its two northern neighbors indicates a noticeable Turkish reticence.

We can recall that back in 2014, Ankara was quick to condemn the Russian takeover of Crimea—a position Turkey persisted in maintaining until quite recently. For instance, it did not allow any direct civilian flights from Turkey to Crimea, nor did it permit Turkish educational institutions to cultivate ties with their counterparts there and engage in exchanges, joint programs, training, and the like. In addition, the Turkish Foreign Ministry had been quite consistent

in seizing upon any opportunity to reiterate that Ankara regarded Crimea as part of Ukraine. Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu even attended a meeting of something called the Crimea Platform, organized by Ukraine to raise awareness about the Russian takeover of that precious peninsula. At this meeting, he found himself quite unusually sitting together with the representative of the Southern Cyprus Greek Administration, together with other Western officials—something Turkish diplomats would normally avoid. More importantly, the Turkish Foreign Ministry even went so far as to declare the Duma elections in Crimea as being null and void as late as September 2021. Also, during the first round of the latest Russia-Ukraine standoff, which took place in April 2021, Turkey's attitude was certainly more pro-Ukraine than in the latest phase of the conflict.

International news agencies have reported that Ankara has been lately quite careful with its wording in terms of its handling of the crisis. This does not mean, however, that Turkey's official position has changed formally: it still opposes Russia's takeover of Crimea—that is to say, it does not recognize Moscow's takeover. But a discernable nuance seems to be arising of late: Ankara now offers mediation to the two capitals instead of opposing Russia head-on diplomatically. And after some initial hesitation, the Kremlin welcomed Ankara's role of mediation, saying that Moscow would appreciate the use of Ankara's clout with Kyiv—although, of course, Russia knows that there is very little Turkey can do in terms of real mediation. But Ankara's new posture is more about making its position clear to Moscow rather than demonstrating a concrete ability to actually get anything done.

This discernable nuance in Ankara's stance does not seem to have gone unnoticed by Moscow. For instance, in an early December 2021 interview with ANT1, a Greek television channel, the Kremlin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov lashed out at Athens' policy of turning itself into an American garrison to take on Russia in the Black Sea, stating that the Greek posture could not be justified on the grounds that it must act thusly on account of its NATO membership. Having dismissed altogether such Greek arguments, Peskov then went a step or two further. He explicitly contrasted the Greek posture with that of Turkey. He underlined that the latter is also a NATO member and, in fact, is a NATO member with greater and more sophisticated military capabilities, and yet it pursues a national policy more in line with its interests. He even made a direct ratings comparison concerning the two countries' respective policies towards Moscow. According to him, Greece gets a six out of ten while Turkey gets a seven out of ten. It is certainly important to mention that this interview was broadcast on the very day that Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis visited Putin in Sochi, where, it seems, he did not receive the warmest reception possible.

Thus, one can plausibly conclude that all this amounts to an indication of some changes in Turkish-Russian relations. Close scrutiny suggests that the turning point is traceable back to a one-on-one meeting between presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in late September 2021 in Sochi, at which not even their closest aides were present. Since then, some noticeable improvement in Ankara-Moscow relations has been seen. For instance, tensions have subsided in Syria's Idlib province, where Turkey and Russia are pitted against each other, although the divergent approaches by the two countries to the Syrian crisis are still afloat. And Turkey's rhetoric regarding Russia has undergone some changes, as Ankara seems to have softened the sonority of its stance, if not exactly its substance.

The latest improvement in Turkish-Russian relations can be traced back to a one-on-one meeting between Putin and Erdoğan in late September 2021 in Sochi, at which not even their closest aides were present.

American Turkophobia

While Ankara's relations with Russia have been trending upwards, its relations with the West, and the United States in particular, seem to be going through some tough times. It is safe to say that Turkey and Washington do not seem to see eye to eye on any matter of importance to Ankara since the end of the Cold War. In fact, the smoldering tension between the two capitals has come into the open sharply under the Biden Administration, who is regarded, rightly, as an incorrigible Turkophobe.

The American policy of carving out a Kurdistan in the Middle East has been a constant irritant to Turkey since the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. Washington's open military support for the PYD—a

Syrian offshoot of the PKK—under the pretext of fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has taken anti-American feelings to new heights across the country, where anti-Americanism still regularly polls between 85 to 95 percent. It has also brought relations between the two capitals almost to the brink of collapse on more than one occasion. Ankara perceives Washington's moves as nothing other than marks of hostility towards Turkey, for in a multipolar world order, an otherwise valuable ally like Turkey—with its large and effective armed forces, second only to the U.S. in NATO that are equipped with sophisticated capabilities of its own production—could be cast aside by Washington in favor of a terrorist organization.

Turkey and Washington do not seem to see eye to eye on any matter of importance to Ankara since the end of the Cold War.

The Kurdish issue is not the only serious bone of contention between Ankara and Washington. Senior members of Team Biden began to express its opposition to a two-state solution in Cyprus way before it took over the White House from the Trump Administration; since taking office, the incumbent president has made it clear that the U.S. would not condone any such solution. But this flies in the face of facts and realities: it is now conveniently forgotten that Erdoğan came to power in 2002 with a vow to resolve the Cyprus conflict and that he even backed the 2004 pro-EU one-state solution known colloquially as the Annan Plan—a plan that was rejected by the island's Greek community. This rejection caused Turkey to adopt a position that the only sensible proposal for the solution of the Cyprus question must involve the recognition of two Cypriot states—two states that have for all practical purposes existed on the divided Mediterranean island since the mid-1960s, and officially existed there since 1974.

In addition to the fact that the Greeks in Cyprus have consistently rejected all the peace plans proposed by the international community throughout the duration of the conflict, there is also the charge of double standards: in all other similar postcolonial disputes, the West has generally agreed, in principle, to a two-state solution. The primary example is, of course, Palestine. In other words, the U.S. policy of championing the unification of the island without exerting much pressure on Greece and the Greek Cypriots is both futile and unrealistic. Given the reality of a multipolar world order, such a one-sided American position is totally unacceptable for Turkey. This is the context in which the Biden Administration's efforts to prop up Greece—ostensibly against Russia in the Black Sea—is viewed. The bottom line is that this has given further cause for concern in Ankara that the United States is, in actual fact, bolstering Greece to the detriment of Turkey.

Biden's irresponsible use of the term "genocide" to describe the events that took place in a crumbling wartime Ottoman Empire in 1915 has also contributed to anti-Americanism across Turkey. Indeed, he employed the taboo term in his 24 April 2021 statement that every American president had studiously and prudently avoided using up to that point. Why Biden rushed to include this incendiary word in the annual presidential statement about the Armenian question remains an enigma: it did not go unnoticed that this statement came in the wake of both Azerbaijan's historic victory in the Second Karabakh War and the subsequent proposals to Yerevan by Erdoğan and his Azerbaijani colleague, President Ilham Aliyev, to establish a regional cooperation platform that would put an end to Armenia's self-imposed isolation. The use of this term simply served no constructive geopolitical purpose.

Indeed, as the latest flurry of diplomatic meetings in the region demonstrated, Biden's attitude does not promote American interests in that part of the world; on the contrary, it has turned Washington into a second fiddle power in the South Caucasus, left with little leverage to influence events. A few examples will suffice. First, Azerbaijan and Armenia have taken sensible steps to normalize their relations. Second, Turkey and Armenia have appointed special envoys entrusted with the task of looking into ways to establish formal diplomatic ties. Third, Turkey has indicated on multiple occasions a willingness to open its border with Armenia for trade and transportation, with Armenia responding positively. All of this happened without any active American involvement or even serious encouragement.

In broader terms, there is now a much greater prospect for peace and reconciliation in the South Caucasus in general and between Ankara and Yerevan in particular. And where is Team Biden? Standing far behind Turkey and Russia, which seem to be coordinating all these efforts on their own.

The Montreux Dispute

Turkey and the United States are also sharply divided over the interpretation of the Montreux Convention (1936), which regulates civilian and military use of the Bosporus and the Dardanelles straits. Montreux was a revision (in Ankara's favor) of the terms of those parts of the Lausanne Treaty (1923) dealing with these waterways, which had limited Turkey's sovereignty by imposing a regime of demilitarization over what was called the Straits Region (i.e., the Bosporus and the Dardanelles and a narrow strip of land on both shores of the Marmara Sea). Montreux, in other words, fully integrated the Straits Region into Turkey's sovereign constitutional order and gave Ankara indisputable rights over the region in terms of militarization and beyond. This convention offers freighters unhindered passage through the area whilst restricting the movements of warships belonging to non-Back Sea riparian states—concretely, it provided for an upper limit of three weeks to more than three ships belonging to states with no outlets to the Black Sea to wander in its waters.

Turkey considers the Montreux Convention to be vital for ensuring both the stability of the Straits and the security of the Black Sea, which is why it has always strictly upheld the document's provisions despite constant rumblings from Washington. Over the past few decades, the United States has frequently remonstrated Turkey on this matter. Ankara has consistently refrained from giving its consent to American demands on the grounds that these would violate the terms of the Montreux Convention, which has caused Washington commentators to vent in anger against their NATO ally.

By way of illustration, we can refer to reports from the period of tense negotiations between Ankara and Washington on the eve of the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003. As is known, Washington had expected to use Turkish territory to open a northern front against Saddam Hussein's government and had apparently asked Ankara for the use of the port of Trabzon, located on the Black Sea coast, in order to be able to provide logistical support for its invasion. This, of course, would have violated the Montreux Convention in a major way, and so Ankara turned down the request.

A few years later, Washington asked Ankara to permit U.S. naval vessels to pass through the Bosporus into the Black Sea to engage in a show of force against Russia during the August 2008 Russo-Georgian war; but again, Ankara strictly abided by the Montreux regulations and declined the American request.

It seems unlikely that all the outstanding issues keeping Ankara and Washington apart will be resolved once Team Biden gives way to the next U.S. administration

Since the Russian the takeover of Crimea in 2014, this issue has become a renewed focus of debate. High-ranking American civilian and military officials sometimes openly refer to the Black Sea as a 'Black Hole' whilst their Turkish counterparts dismiss the American remonstrations on the sensible grounds that violating the Montreux Convention would not advance peace and security in the region.

In policy terms, what all this boils down to is that the United States wants Turkey either to dump the Montreux Convention altogether or to turn a blind eye to blatant American violations of the same treaty. Either way, this would effectually amount to a nullification of the historic agreement.

Turkey, on the other hand, having a diametrically opposite position, expects its ally to recognize that Turkey views the Montreux Convention dearly and will not allow it to be simply dismissed or discarded. Indeed, from Ankara's perspective, the strict application of the provisions of the Montreux Convention has been a main pillar of ensuring peace and security from the Cold War onwards. Moreover, the Turkish position has been that the acceptance of two additional Black Sea riparian states into NATO (Bulgaria and Romania) ought to make it easier, not harder, to handle security questions in that part of the world.

All in all, what divides Turkey and the United States on this issue is that while America wishes to use the Black Sea without almost any hindrance to confront Russia head-on militarily as and when it wishes, Turkey seems to regard the additional militarization of the Black Sea, which would amount to an escalation of the American conflict with Russia, as provocative—something Ankara always studiously has avoided enabling.

Prospects

It seems unlikely that all the outstanding issues keeping Ankara and Washington apart will be resolved once Team Biden gives

way to the next U.S. administration—whether in January 2025 or January 2029. We have the experience of the Trump period as a reference point, when tensions between the two countries eased somewhat because Trump in many ways defied the U.S. security establishment's policies concerning the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. Still, the U.S. establishment managed to get around Trump often enough, so bilateral tension did not disappear; this in turn made it easier for Team Biden to ratchet everything back up when it took over the reins of power in January 2021.

Historically speaking, Turkish-Russian friendship has as long a track record as Turkish-Russian enmity.

It would, therefore, be an uphill task to try predicting whether a post-Biden America would be capable of resetting relations with Turkey, notwithstanding the realities of a multipolar world order. But the odds don't appear to be good.

On the other hand, we have witnessed an unprecedented improvement in bilateral relations between Russia and Turkey. Despite certain disagreements over Syria and occasionally over Libya, Erdoğan and Putin have managed to figure out a way to work together well enough (and Turkey has managed to do so while remaining a reliable NATO member). Almost forgotten are the days when the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian fighter jet because it violated Turkish airspace for some 10 to 20 seconds. Of much greater importance in understanding the course of the Ankara-Moscow relationship is the fact that—as the Turkish leadership has pointed out several times—the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey was key to Azerbaijan's successful war against Armenia for the liberation of its occupied territories in the 2020 Second Karabakh War.

Historically speaking, Turkish-Russian friendship has as long a track record as Turkish-Russian enmity. It is true that Tsarist Russia was a constant threat to the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire: the former helped to push the latter out of the north of the Black Sea, the Crimean Peninsula, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. Paradoxically, however, it was Bolshevik Russia that offered enormous military, political, and diplomatic support to the Turkish War of Independence from 1919 to 1922 and beyond. Ankara and Moscow

placed their bilateral relations on solid ground with the signing of the Friendship and Cooperation Agreement (1925). This remained the status quo until Stalin made notorious demands on Turkey at the end of World War II—an untoward action that pushed Turkey to search for security in a U.S.-led Western alliance.

The first ten years of Turkey's NATO membership marked increased tension in Ankara-Moscow relations although Stalin, who had wrecked the historic rapprochement, died only a year after Turkey's admission to the Western alliance. But the infamous letter U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson wrote to Turkish Prime Minister Ismet Inönü in June 1964, which gave a stark warning to Turkey against military action in Cyprus to protect the Cypriot Turks from slaughter at the hands of the Greek Cypriot forces, caused an upheaval in Ankara. The American epistle turned almost everything upside down between the two NATO allies, and Turkey immediately began to revise its policy towards the Soviet Union. Moscow too judged that warmer relations were in its interest. Thus, the two countries forged a qualitatively stronger relationship by which Turkey, albeit remaining in NATO, managed to receive quite a considerable amount of commercial, economic, and financial assistance and support from the Soviet Union for its industrialization drive—something the U.S. always somehow chose not to provide.

The end of the Cold War saw an intensification of these trade and economic relations. This soon expanded into cooperation on political and even military matters. For instance, Moscow was helpful during the 2016 attempted military coup organized by members of Fethullah Gülen's terrorist group, which is suspected of having close ties with U.S. security and intelligence services. Russia apparently notified the Turkish government of what might be going on just prior to its onset; Moscow also condemned the coup attempt and the plotters immediately after they got into action, whereas it took the Obama Administration quite a few hours to make a statement expressing its support for the elected government of Turkey. It was not, therefore, for nothing that Ankara-Moscow relations flourished in an unprecedented manner after this attempted coup, assuming a military-strategic dimension.

The two countries, together with Iran, set up what they called the Astana Platform to bring peace to Syria, while Ankara purchased the

sophisticated S-400 air defense systems from Moscow. Though there remained disagreements between Ankara and Moscow over Syria and Libya, Erdoğan and Putin learned to smoothly iron them out, in one way or the other. As things now stand, it appears that Turkey feels closer to a Putin-led Russia than to a Biden-led United States.

It is possible that Ankara now seeks a new deal with Moscow over all the issues that keep them apart. It is more likely than not that the Russian side will be interested. For instance, there is no good reason why Erdoğan and Putin should not strike a deal, after some haggling, over the Cyprus question and the war in Syria. Russia's Cyprus policy, which ostensibly advocates for the unification of the island, hardly serves Moscow's real interest, for in such an eventuality the whole island would become EU territory and, by implication, a full-on NATO beachhead. And it is difficult to see what advantage, if any, Russia would gain out of the territorial aggrandizement of the EU and NATO, given its stance on Ukraine and Georgia and so on. After all, Cyprus is only about one hundred kilometers away from Russia's precious naval and air bases in Syria.

As things now stand, it appears that Turkey feels closer to a Putin-led Russia than to a Biden-led United States.

Whereas a change in Russia's Cyprus policy in favor of a two-state solution would incur no serious risk for Moscow, it would cement Turkey-Russia friendship, and perhaps even lead to a deal on Syria between the two countries. Indeed, just as Russia's Cyprus policy need revising, so does Turkey's adventurous Syrian policy: truth be told, the latter does not serve any genuinely attainable Turkish purpose. Three examples can be provided. First, Turkish forces have gotten totally bogged down on the ground in the neighboring country in the past few years. Second, the PYD has consolidated its position in northeast Syria in the same period, thanks to American wherewithal. Lastly, Turkey's persistent and failed effort to unseat Bashar Al-Assad has also indirectly helped the PYD as well as its main sponsor.

Should Turkey normalize its relations with Damascus through Russian mediation, it would likely make important gains: it could sign a memorandum with Syria over the return of Syrian refugees—which apparently number around four million—whose continued presence in Turkey at a time when the country is grappling with a deteriorating financial crisis has become totally untenable in the eyes of the Turkish people.

There is no reason why Turkey could not renew the 1998 Adana Memorandum with Syria, which at the time brought tensions between Ankara and Damascus to an abrupt end, normalized relations, and even stipulated joint action against the PKK. As part of a new deal with Syria, Turkey could also get Damascus to recognize the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC); in exchange, Turkey could transfer all the Syrian territory currently under its control back to the Assad government. Russia, in turn, could allow direct flights to TRNC and open a trade office there, which would function as many foreign legations do in, say, Taiwan (this is not to imply that Taiwan and TRNC are similar in other respects). In return, Turkey would allow direct flights to Crimea and permit various Turkish institutions, including universities, to reestablish ties with their counterparts there directly—of course without any mention of recognition of the Russian takeover.

But this last would hardly be a dealbreaker, for indications are that Moscow does not seek any official recognition by a third party over the status of Crimea since Russia considers the territory an integral part of its sovereign territory and has made it very clear that the issue an entirely internal matter.

From the Turkish perspective, Moscow would play a valuable part in all such arrangements: the deal the two countries could strike would be a clear win-win. There is also more to such a deal than meets the eye. Ankara's close ties with Moscow do seem to also contribute positively to the foreign policy postures of Central Asia's Turkic states as well as to Azerbaijan's relations with Russia. In broader terms, closer ties between Turkey and Russia always impact positively on members of the Organization of Turkish States (OTS), particularly on those that came out of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It is remarkable that when Turkey shot down the Russian fighter in 2016, it was Kazakhstan and its founding leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who took the lead in bringing the two countries together. With Russia seeking observer status in the OTS, Ankara may have to think twice in confronting Russia politically, diplomatically, and otherwise.

All this does not mean, however, that Turkey is putting all its eggs into one basket and that it does not attach much importance to Ukraine—to come back to the issue with which we began this essay. If anything, it has cultivated good ties with Ukraine since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and bilateral trade and economic relations have developed accordingly. There is also some additional potential for military cooperation between Ankara and Kyiv, by which Turkey seeks to purchase certain engines for its defense productions, including its tanks, because Ukraine has one of the largest engine production facilities in the former Soviet Union. And Ukraine has recently purchased from Turkey some of its latest high-tech drones, which have performed rather well in in Syria, Libya, and, particularly, in the Second Karabakh War.

Both politically and diplomatically, Ankara has made its position quite clear on the issue of the Russian takeover of Crimea. Turkey's official position remains unchanged: Crimea is a part of Ukraine. It is likely that Ankara will maintain this position, particularly within the context of NATO, although it might further tone down its expression of opposition to the Russian annexation.

No More Tightrope Acrobatics?

It would be useful to recapitulate the main threads of this essay. What we have maintained throughout is that Turkey's attitude towards the conflict between Moscow and Kyiv over Crimea and other parts of Ukraine has developed over the years. Whereas Ankara had been more vociferous in its opposition to Russia's 2014 political and military moves in Ukraine, there is a discernable change in its posture lately, manifested by various forms of reticence. When Russia took over Crimea, Turkey strongly denounced Moscow's actions and persisted in its attitude until recently: at the time, Ankara was sparing no efforts in its bid to unseat the Assad government while Moscow backed it in all respects. Turkey was then still trying to coordinate its Syria policy with Washington, though there soon emerged some differences between the two NATO allies in their respective approaches to the crisis, and Moscow's strong backing of Damascus was a constant source of concern and frustration to Ankara.

Leaving aside the debate over whether its involvement in the war in Syria on such a large scale actually served Turkish national interests—after all, Ankara tried to overthrow a government in Damascus that had been on the best possible terms with Turkey for more than a decade—Turkey had every reason to oppose Russia in both Syria and Ukraine. Indeed, the two countries were on a rapid collision course: the shooting down of a Russian fighter jet by the Turkish Air Force really did almost bring the two countries to the brink of war. Fortunately, such a war was avoided, perhaps thanks more to the extreme caution and prudence exercised by the Kremlin. The ensuing crisis persisted for about seven months and gradually both sides became convinced they should bury the proverbial hatchet and come to their senses. And so they did.

No sooner had the two capitals initiated serious efforts to mend their bilateral relations, an attempted coup occurred in Turkey, which gave further impetus to the genuine rapprochement already taking place between Ankara and Moscow. Still, this did not result in immediate and sweeping changes to Turkey's policy in areas of importance to Russia—neither on Syria nor particularly over Crimea, because the Ankara-Washington axis was still being managed properly enough under Trump, despite outstanding disagreements. Hence, Turkey's tightrope acrobatics went on for some years: keeping Russia on board on a range of issues from Syria and Karabakh through to the purchase of S-400 air defense systems while at the same time cultivating good economic and even defense industry cooperation with Ukraine.

But all this gradually reached a point whereby Turkey had to make some changes in its foreign policy. Some dormant wedge issues between Ankara and Washington came into the open with the arrival of Team Biden (e.g., the Armenian question), but the glass simply could not take any more drops of water on other critical issues like the U.S. project for the establishment of some sort of Kurdistan that threatens the territorial integrity of Middle Eastern countries, including Turkey, and serious disagreement over the Cyprus question.

Meanwhile, Ankara and Moscow came closer to each other. The Erdoğan-Putin tête-à-tête in late September 2021 has reduced tensions between the two countries over Syria. Speculation is growing that two leaders may have even struck a deal covering all outstanding issues: Cyprus, Syria, cooperation in the South Caucasus and even Central Asia, and closer military cooperation. The less am-

bitious version of this chatter is that they sounded each other out in a frank and forthright manner over all these issues, each presenting his respective redlines, without necessarily having reached mutually acceptable accommodations or an overall agreement—but with the expectation that some sort of understanding will soon be forthcoming.

When coupled with the hesitation of the West in general and the United States in particular to leap to the defense of Ukraine against Russia, Turkey seems to have implicitly adopted a new policy that can be summarized with the following formulation, made famous not so long ago by the legendary James Baker: "we have no dog in the fight." BD

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Terms, Conditions, Intersecting Interests

Turkey and Regional Cooperation After the Second Karabakh War

Ayça Ergun

This essay should be understood as a series of reflections on the geopolitics of the South Caucasus in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War and how this has provided Turkey with a great opportunity to revisit, redefine, and even consolidate its newfound role and mission in the region. It is predicated on the assessment that, starting in July 2020, Turkey became more proactive and involved in the region, which in turn laid the foundation for a game-changing development; Turkey's stature then grew even further in the wake of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia that ended the Second Karabakh War. Now Ankara is taking on a balancing role—if not quite a mediating one—in the region.

The situation is not straightforward: the well-consolidated empowerment of the Russian Federation in the wake of the war has ensured its continuing status as the main mediator in conflict resolution as well as open the possibility for it to become a genuine peacemaker. Turkey is considered the main balancing power to potentially check or restrain Russia's dominant position, at least down the road. But for now, Russia can be considered as "being fully back" on the ground: its armed forces are present in each of the three South Caucasus states—by invitation or otherwise. This lends a certain pallor of instability to the newly achieved status quo, although this is not widely recognized, much less pronounced in Turkey and in Azerbaijan.

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It is thus too early to speak about full-on regional *integration*, which will take time to bring about. Yet already today there is potential for the realization of regional *cooperation*. The ideas related to the latter are being discussed in various fora, yet the feasibility of the implementation of these ideas remains open to interpretation.

'Othering'

Cooperation in trade and transport is often said to constitute an initial step for building up mechanisms and taking actions. But any efforts in this regard should be considered in light of the willingness of Azerbaijanis to enjoy their victory and that of the Armenians to digest their defeat. Still, we repeat, one can observe the onset of a new status quo, which has a strong potential to endure and become desirable. This is predicated on several factors. Azerbaijan is taking stock of the liberation of its occupied territories, the restoration of its territorial integrity, and the consolidation of its nation- and state-building processes. The launch of rapid and wide-ranging reconstruction efforts in Karabakh subsequent to the Second Karabakh War further contributed to the restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereign rights and demonstrated Baku's full control over Karabakh. This brings us to the other main factor. It seems that Armenia—or, at the very least, the Armenian government headed by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan—is in the process of earnestly digesting at least some of the consequences of its defeat.

It is thus too early to speak about full-on regional integration, which will take time to bring about. Yet already today there is potential for the realization of regional cooperation.

That being said, the role of memory should not be underestimated. The legacy of enmity, conflict, and war obviously still exists. Built up over three decades of frozen conflict, elites and societal actors in both Armenia and Azerbaijan fostered feelings of 'othering'—by which is meant "a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities" (the definition is provided by the two originators of

this conceptual framework, John A. Powell and Stephen Menendian of the Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley).

Recourse to this contemporary sociological concept helps explain why the restoration of some sort of state of cohabitation, such as existed in the Tsarist or Soviet periods, will be difficult to achieve in the short and even medium term. Even the normalization of relations between two states will not alter this situation fully: for Baku the conflict is over, the Karabakh Armenians are citizens of Azerbaijan, and no special status will be forthcoming; for Yerevan, the status of Karabakh Armenians is yet to be determined, and this determination-to-come should involve international actors.

For Baku the conflict is over, the Karabakh Armenians are citizens of Azerbaijan, and no special status will be forthcoming; for Yerevan, the status of Karabakh Armenians is yet to be determined, and this determination-to-come should involve international actors.

A number of practical framing questions concerning regional cooperation remain unanswered. Two of the most important are, one, what will be the regional cooperation mechanisms? And two, who will be the actor(s) that will lead the process of internationalization?

The only option currently on the table is what we can call the pacting of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia with Turkey, Russia, and Iran. This is what is conventionally termed the 3+3 format. However, 3+3 is questionable not only in its potential to be a sustainable mechanism but also to be an effective one. In thinking through the feasibility of this would-be pact, as it were, the issue of the durability of the present coalition between Turkey and Russia needs to be considered: after all, Ankara and Moscow have competing foreign policies in the Middle East and perhaps elsewhere. Thus, their competitive cooperation lies in a delicate balance.

Moreover, also in the context of this potential pacting, the reticence of Georgia is evident: the country whose territorial integrity has been violated by Russia continues to remain strongly committed to a path of integration into Western political and security structures—i.e., NATO and the EU. As a consequence, Tbilisi remains reluctant to join 3+3 and has formally distanced itself from its realization. Thus, it declined to participate in the inaugural foreign ministerial meeting of what was touted as being 3+3 (but instead ended up being 2+3) that took place in Moscow on 10 December 2021.

Turkey has become more proactive in the South Caucasus, further increasing its clout in shaping matters related to the geopolitical situation: a game-changer. Russia has openly restored its position as the region's main game-setter—becoming again the decisive actor of the region.

It seems that both Azerbaijan and Turkey will invest considerable efforts in attempting to convince Georgia to engage within this regional format. Success is far from certain but may be more easily attainable in the event that Western actors become involved, which would make Georgia more comfortable. But this, of course, would present its own set of challenges. In the meantime, 3+3 remains contested.

Another issue is the absence of a formal bilateral relationship between Turkey and Armenia. The need to normalize ties between the two states has been voiced regularly since the end of the Second Karabakh War. In December 2021, a first concrete step was taken when both countries appointed special envoys to lead talks on this issue. As of this writing, however, the terms and conditions for normalization have yet to be determined.

This task is neither easy nor straightforward. Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, has underlined that Ankara is proceeding in full and open consultation with Baku on this issue—a political choice that seems to signal a Turkish disinclination to act independently of Azerbaijan. That being said, even if Baku were to announce its unconditional consent to Turkish-Armenian rapprochement, historical legacies and memories would not be overcome easily—further evidence of the potency of the 'othering' concept.

In the post-Second Karabakh War environment, Turkey has become more proactive in the South Caucasus, further increasing

its clout in shaping matters related to the geopolitical situation: a game-changer. Meanwhile, Russia has openly restored its position as the region's main game-setter—becoming again the decisive actor of the region.

In contrast, the OSCE Minsk Group has become even more ineffective. It is anyone's guess when and even if this format will be revived from what is effectually a state of hibernation, although a case may be made that its return to the regional scene could help build some trust between Armenia and Azerbaijan. As of this writing, however, no concrete proposal has been forthcoming from its Co-chairs. This issue will again be addressed below, briefly.

Contextualization

The Turkish position and Ankara's role in the postwar context should be analyzed within this context of and with reference to patterns of continuity and change in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Political, intellectual, and civil society elites mainly associate regional cooperation with the following themes: security, respect for protection of territorial integrity, difference, and similarities. This implies that possibilities for regional cooperation should address both historical and existing threats to security—whether real or perceived—amongst regional actors; to what extent differences (e.g., ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious) can be accommodated, acknowledged, and overcome where possible; and to what extent similarities can be emphasized and common interests found. In addition, scenarios envisaging the patterns of regional cooperation and possibilities for regional integration should acknowledge not only territorial borders but also the relevance and prevalence of cultural and psychological borders. These are largely informed by the legacies of the past, by facts and events shaping historical memory, and by conflicts from the post-Soviet period. Again, this points to the potency of the 'othering' concept.

When the Cold War came to an end, the Turkish state model—a democratic, secular, Muslim nation-state—was held up as a successful governance model that could be emulated in whole or in part by former Soviet republics. It was certainly promoted as such by Western actors in order to decrease the potential influence of Iran and the existing one emanating from Russia. Turkey, in other words, was considered a useful and reliable country for the promotion of Western interests.

The collapse of the Soviet Union drew not only new political borders but also cultural ones. Cultural borders were reinterpreted and redefined within the framework of new discourses on nation- and state-building in which friends and foes were redefined. Cultural borders did not overlap with political borders. These last became more value-loaded by virtue of the fact that they underlined similarities, affinities, shared and interacted experiences, common history, common destiny, and shared culture and language between national or ethnic groups. This was particularly valid for Azerbaijan and Turkey, whereas for the Armenians it represented a threat, enmity, and conflict. This in turn becomes a major obstacle to overcame for all parties in the establishment of platforms and mechanisms for regional cooperation and/or integration.

> *Ankara can be confident that it has consolidated its status as one of the two regional actors in the South Caucasus with which any Western counterparts will need to parlay.*

From today's perspective, any potential framework for regional cooperation in the South Caucasus should particularly refer to the Russian factor. Moscow's political and cultural influence is still dominant in the region—a fact that is very likely to endure into the future. However, the Russian factor also symbolizes the past and the previous regime-type. In the present situation, the proactive involvement of Turkey seems to counterbalance the Russian factor and gives Azerbaijanis, in particular, a feeling of security. Yet, as has already been mentioned, the currently harmonious relationship between Russia and Turkey also lies in a delicate balance. This does not imply that the Turkish political elite would ever consider decreasing Ankara's support to Baku; quite the contrary: it prefers to perpetuate the existing status quo for as long as possible. Still, the Russian factor is yet to be taken into fully account.

The potential involvement of Western actors in the South Caucasus is seen as useful in order to decrease the decisive power of the Russian Federation. Yet three questions remain unanswered: which Western actors would wish to get involved? By which mechanisms would they do so? Using which tools? To this one could add both the relative silence and lack of presence of Western countries and institutions. Furthermore, the

issue of Western effectiveness is at issue, which in turn decreases reliance on them, particularly from the perspective of Azerbaijan. Turkey, in this context, is free to enjoy its proactive position as the major supporter of the Azerbaijani victory. In addition, Ankara can be confident that it has consolidated its status as one of the two regional actors in the South Caucasus with which any Western counterparts will need to parlay.

Turkey is thus seen by Baku as a reliable ally—a friendly and brotherly nation and state. Yet Ankara has not managed to foster anything truly resembling a regional identity; instead, it has intensified bilateral relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia. The pacting of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey is a good example of partial regional cooperation. However, regional problems overshadow the potential for regional integration. Violations of the territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine engender feelings of insecurity.

For the Turkish political and intellectual elite, the triangular relationship between Ankara, Baku, and Yerevan is not very complex. Turkey's closing of its border with Armenia is considered as an "exceptional yet natural act" designed to strengthen the position of brotherly Azerbaijan in its quest to get back its occupied territories, which has now taken place. Thus, in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan seems to have given its consent to Turkey for the normalization of its relations with Armenia. Yet the terms and conditions for both parties remain rather vague. From the Turkish perspective, the political, cultural, and psychological borders with Armenia are solid, which implicitly fosters mental and emotional barriers whilst consolidating enduring prejudices.

This perception is reciprocated by the Armenian side. The previous process of normalization between Armenia and Turkey had ended in failure (it began in September 2008 with "football diplomacy" and culminated in the October 2009 signing of the Zurich Protocols before being canceled). This not only resulted in a serious crisis in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, but it also proved to be an ineffective way forward. And now, having won the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan seems to have given not only its consent but even its approval to Turkey to go ahead once more.

The Second Karabakh War was also a test for Turkey: to see whether it could strengthen its role in its immediate neighborhood and become

a more prominent security actor. It seems that Turkey restored its position as one of the two leading countries, along with Russia. This may very well be the result of some sort of understanding Ankara has reached with Moscow. Yet it is not easy to predict how long this entente cordiale can last.

Azerbaijan is now more confident and more powerful in the region in the wake of having restored its territorial integrity. Ankara sees the strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Turkey as having been deepened, which in turn signifies that interdependence has been intensified significantly. Both countries openly declare that they will "act as one" in defining priorities and interests in the South Caucasus.

This needs to be put alongside the trilateral relationship between Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia, which has been called "exemplary," "promising," and "groundbreaking." It too is often said to be a strategic partnership, yet the connotations of that relationship go beyond the notion of shared strategic goals. From the Turkish perspective, it is rather an act of solidarity to respect the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Georgia, which has the added benefit of further intensifying Ankara's energy politics.

Still, the future of the region remains unpredictable and fragile. The question is how this fragile condition can be accommodated by regional countries, particularly in the context where the presence of the West remains limited and obscure. Hence the fact that 3+3 remains the sole proposed format to advance regional cooperation. Its feasibility is questionable because a genuine and practical commitment for normalization and reconciliation efforts is yet to be seen.

Both scholars and policymakers have spoken positively about confidence-building measures and dialogue for cooperation—and that the parties involved underline the importance of regional connectivity, economic development, and initiatives in transportation and trade. Yet remaining unaddressed is the issue of how its predicate—the building up of sufficient trust to get any of this off the ground—would be achieved.

Regionalization and Normalization

The new geopolitical context established after the Second Karabakh War is rather regionalized: Turkey and Russia (and with a lesser extent Iran) have consolidated their respective spheres of

influence whereby each aligns with one or two South Caucasian countries but none with all of them. Added to this geopolitical reality is the fact that Western actors are currently less visible, less viable, and less effective than they have been in decades.

As of January 2022, Russia and Turkey are in cooperation rather than in competition in the South Caucasus. Yet this is a delicate balance to sustain.

As noted above, the most consolidated relationship is between Azerbaijan and Turkey, with both countries benefiting from their strategic partnership: indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that the 2020 victory is commonly enjoyed. The motto "one nation, two states" constitutes the basis of the bilateral relationship, which is also backed up with very strong societal support in both countries. Popular feelings of both empathy and sympathy reached their peak during the Second Karabakh War, of course. Both societies not only share cultural commonalities but are now also emotionally tied to each other. Interestingly, however, even this partnership could be further consolidated through strengthened institutionalization.

Furthermore, the triangular relationship between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey can become one of the pillars of regional integration by broadening enhanced cooperation and helping to reduce the effects of 'othering' on the region's cultural and psychological borders. Yet, as noted above, Georgia seems to be hesitant to engage in any type of cooperation mechanism in which Russia is involved.

Turkey's involvement as a proactive and game-changer actor during and after the Second Karabakh War was and remains unanimously supported by the country's political and intellectual elite, as well as by a wide range of societal actors. Turkish policymakers seem to enjoy their leading and decisive position in the region.

As of January 2022, Russia and Turkey are in cooperation rather than in competition in the South Caucasus. Yet, as argued above, this is a delicate balance to sustain.

To achieve comprehensive cooperation schemes, the dual principle of the inviolability of borders and the territorial integrity of states will need to be respected by all parties involved. The violation

of the territorial integrity of both Georgia and Ukraine constitute the biggest challenge for regional cohesion, regional stability, and regional unity. Trade and transport appear to be the most relevant areas to initiate regional cooperation. Yet the discourse of nation- and state-building, as well as the re-definition of friends and foes, will have a decisive role in determining the feasibility of the implementation of any type of projects. Overcoming the hatred born of 'othering' may take much longer than expected.

The normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia is now on the table, as has been discussed above. The appointment of special envoys is of considerable importance as a symbol of the commitment both countries to invest time and effort to build up to the achievement of a "normal" relationship. However, this will not be an easy task, bearing in mind the historically deeply-rooted enmity that exists between the two nations. The lack of trust is almost total. It seems that good will and good intentions at the political top in both countries can provide the only solid ground to initiate that bilateral relationship, taking into account the potential for public resentment and backlash present in both countries. It should be noted that talks on normalization were expected to begin after the Second Karabakh War, yet the terms and conditions for their commencement have yet to be set. A gradual and cautious process is the likely trajectory: we can therefore expect a slow process of normalization rather than a rush to launch an unsubstantiated dialogue.

Overcoming the hatred born of 'othering' may take much longer than expected.

This process will not simply involve Armenia and Turkey. Any discussion on normalization and how it may evolve will almost certainly take into account Azerbaijani perspectives and the position of Russia. As has been mentioned, Azerbaijan seems to have given its provisional consent—and this time, Ankara will very carefully consult with Baku. That being said, the Russian position is less well-known. Thus, the process of peacebuilding in the region will also inform the fate of normalization. Given Armenia's reliance on Russia and the presence of Russian troops in the South Caucasus—including in the Karabakh peacekeeping zone—Moscow's stance on normalization will be crucial. So far, there is not much evidence from the Russian

side whether it will be for or against the normalization process.

One should also acknowledge and address to the role of memory and the identity dimension in the process of normalization. 'Othering', hostility, and feelings of enmity dominate reciprocal perceptions. Although the political elites in both countries are committed to normalizing the bilateral relationship, overcoming stereotypes and prejudices has long way to go. A getting-to-know-each-other process can be realized through the help of soft power actors such as civil society organizations and academia. Therefore, policymakers will need to consider ways to overcome potential societal resentment and to integrate the societal dimension of normalization into their agenda-setting framework. Additionally, both Azerbaijan and Turkey need to keep benefiting from their alliance with Georgia, which should not be excluded from nascent cooperation mechanisms. Tbilisi's caution and reluctance to involve itself in any kind of cooperation with Moscow, and its desire to become more integrated into Western structures, should be somehow accommodated.

This process will not simply involve Armenia and Turkey. Any discussion on normalization and how it may evolve will almost certainly take into account Azerbaijani perspectives and the position of Russia.

Coming Out on Top

The South Caucasus still remains fragile and the likelihood of achieving serious regional cooperation is not easy to forecast. There is a need to build up trust, overcome hostilities, and demonstrate goodwill and genuine commitment for peaceful coexistence in a stable and secure region. Issues related to the perceptions of stability and security—being, as they are, overwhelmingly domestic matters—have also become regionalized, given the active involvement of Turkey and Russia as regional powers.

During and after the Second Karabakh War, the South Caucasus experienced what may very well be its least internationalized period since the collapse of the Soviet Union: the only outside powers that truly matter are Turkey and Russia. In any type of regional integration projects, Turkey is unlikely to face significant challenges due not only to its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan and Georgia but also because of the geopolitical context whereby it is in a state of collaboration with Russia. The Russian position, on the other hand, is a little more challenging, given Georgia's stance towards its northern neighbor.

One of the biggest challenges for regional cooperation in the South Caucasus is that no bilateral relationship is purely bilateral; rather, each is susceptible to being influenced by a series of factors informed by the choices made by regional and insider countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), regional but outsider countries (Iran, Russia, Turkey), and the West (the EU and its member states, the United States). The nature of all these interrelationships is both ambivalent and complex, given the series of factors that can influence bilateral and multilateral relations—as noted above, the normalization process between Armenia and Turkey is a case in point.

During and after the Second Karabakh War, the South Caucasus experienced what may very well be its least internationalized period since the collapse of the Soviet Union: the only outside powers that truly matter are Turkey and Russia.

Even under the Biden Administration, America remains reluctant to deal directly with regional matters. This is to be contrasted with the EU, which has over the past few months begun to signal that it wishes to play a more hands-on role in regional affairs. EUSR for the South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia Toivo Klaar, paid visits to the region after the war. And, of course, there was the fruitful meeting between President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in Brussels on 15 December 2021—which involved the President of the EU Council, Charles Michel—during the during the Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels. This may come to be seen as a crucial moment in the EU's ambition to become involved in the peacebuilding process.

Given the EU's poor record in dealing with the conflict over Karabakh, its rather slow and cumbersome decisionmaking processes, and its plentiful but rigidly structured toolkit of confidence- and peace-building instruments, it remains to be seen how effective Brussels can be. A good start would

involve doing more than issuing statements or expressing concerns: putting forward new policies that gain the region's consent—that is, policies that actually contribute to ensuring stability and security on the ground—surely would be welcome. The Minsk Group brand enjoys such a poor reputation, and this is unlikely to change. The EU, on the other hand, may be able to play a constructive role—again, if it can muster the wherewithal to be effective.

Greater EU engagement could provide the region's countries with an opportunity to sit at a different kind of table—one that would balance the strong position of Russia, made even more so in the wake of the Second Karabakh War. As things stand, the sole balancer is Turkey, particularly within the context of Azerbaijan. But this may not be enough. Turkey's great commitment to build up regional connectivity through trade and transport should be backed by a strong one from the EU, as a way to help overcome existing fragilities in the region.

Like its regional counterparts, Turkey does not stand in a neutral position in the South Caucasus. Its special, exceptional, and privileged partnership with Azerbaijan provides strong opportunities for both countries to further deepen their bilateral ties not only in areas like the economy, trade, transport, culture, education, and intersocietal dialogue, but also in the defense and military sectors. As for its relations with Armenia, it seems that the road to normalization is open, although the ride promises to be bumpy. By virtue of its strategic partnership with Georgia, Turkey should continue to support the restoration of the country's territorial integrity whilst deepening its bilateral ties through further institutionalization. Given Georgia's devoted aspirations to move closer to Western institutions, Brussels' heightened engagement in the South Caucasus could boost Tbilisi's enthusiasm, commitment, and support for regional connectivity projects.

Turkey's entry into the region as a proactive and game-changer actor shows that it will be part of major projects for regional interaction and cooperation. Ankara's new posture in the South Caucasus is strongly supported by Baku—which prioritizes Turkey in all regional matters—provides it with a unique opportunity to consolidate its position as the sole major actor that can effectively counterbalance the Russian factor. BD

Atticism and the Summit for Democracy

A Little Thought Experiment

Damjan Krnjević Mišković

> *"Classical political philosophy opposes to the universal and homogenous state a substantive principle. […] It asserts that every political society that ever has been or ever will be rests on a particular fundamental opinion which cannot be replaced by knowledge and hence is of necessity a particular or particularist society."*
>
> *– Leo Strauss*

When in the course of reading the two most authoritative accounts that together chronicle the war of the Spartans and the Athenians and how they waged it against each other—i.e., the *Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides and the *Hellenica* by Xenophon—we come across the word *attikizo* and its cognates on at least seven different occasions: five in the former work and twice in the latter, by our count (see Thuc. III.62.2, III.64.5, IV.133.1, VIII.38.3, and VIII.87.1; Xen. *Hell.* I.6.13 and VI.3.14). A straightforward definition of this Thucydidean neologism is "to become like or join or side with the Athenians; to work for the interests of Athens." However, as Victor Davis Hanson points out in *A War Like No Other* (2005), *attikizo* also has a normative connotation: it a "special word of sorts for Athenian expansionism." We can thus allow ourselves to take the noun 'Atticism' to mean, figuratively, "alignment to a stronger power by a subordinate one acting under constraint at a time of crisis." We may note, besides, that the classical Greek understanding of crisis connotes not just a meaning of momentous decision and thus uncertain outcome, resulting in the need to exercise prudential judgment; it is also a key Hippocratic term used to refer to a sudden change in the health of a body towards either recovery or a turn for the worst. Crisis thus understood does not perforce imply predetermined reason or directionality.

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'Atticism' means "alignment to a stronger power by a subordinate one acting under constraint in a time of crisis."

It is with this in mind that we can begin with preparations to conduct a little thought experiment on the strategic implications of the Summit for Democracy, which the Biden Administration staged online in December 2021 with much fanfare. In so doing, we can do worse than to call to mind a slight modification of something Barack Obama once said to Mitt Romney: "the 2000s called, and they want their foreign policy back" because, in many ways, the Summit for Democracy is reminiscent of various proposals put forward by Washington insiders in the first years of the third millennium for the establishment of some sort of U.S.-led global coalition of democratic states.

As we shall see, the speeches and deeds of the Biden Administration have provided enough evidence to suggest it may embrace some of the more dangerous elements of said proposals in the time ahead. This, in turn, may leave it open to the charge of advocating or suborning Atticism in the pursuit of its "America is Back" foreign policy posture. To get a sense of the possible effects thereof on U.S. national interests hereafter, we shall proceed with an inquiry into the scale, scope, and prudence of what we understand to be the Biden Administration's essential ambition. We shall at times proceed in a contemporaneously unconventional approach on the grounds that operating in this manner can shed light on such matters in ways that conventional ones cannot, or at least cannot do as well.

Genealogy of Morals

Before coming to the various proposals made in the 2000s for the establishment of some sort of U.S.-led global coalition of democratic states—an examination of which should prepare us to conduct our little thought experiment *per se*—we observe that "America is Back" represents most obviously

a political aspiration to repudiate the foreign policy posture of the antecedent administration, which had conducted its external affairs according to the "America First" slogan that may be said to have been encapsulated by words spoken by Donald Trump in September 2019 during an address to the UN General Assembly: "The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots. The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations who protect their citizens, respect their neighbors, and honor the differences that make each country special and unique." But we suggest that "America is Back" may also be understood to be a reference to the spirit of an earlier moment in world politics in which it could be said that America had in fact recuperated or perpetuated its standing and come back (or out) on top.

In the speeches and deeds that revolve around the holding of the Summit for Democracy, the Biden Administration has provided enough evidence to suggest it may have left itself open to the charge of advocating or suborning Atticism.

Testing the soundness of this suggestion requires a look back to the text that intellectually triggered the onset of that earlier time: namely, Francis Fukuyama's "End of History?" article, published in the Summer 1989 edition of *The National Interest*. Fukuyama rightfully acknowledged that much of the core of the argument contained in his paper was based on an influential set of lectures delivered in Paris between 1933 and 1939 by Alexandre Kojève. Of some relevance may be that, after World War II, Kojève became unquestionably one of the central behind-the-scenes figures in the first stages of what its proponents call the "construction of Europe" (on the authority of a remark once made to me by Stanley Rosen, who regularly met with him in the early 1960s, Kojève was fond of saying that his senior position in the French Directorate of External Economic Relations enabled him to preside over the end of history); he was also almost certainly a spy for the Soviet Union from 1940 until his death in 1968. Be that as it may, let us return to the subject of his lectures, published as a book in 1947 based on the notes of one of its attendees. A key passage, for present purposes, is the one in which Kojève, quasi-building on Hegel, makes the case for a "universal and homogeneous State: it unites all of humanity (at least that part which counts historically) and 'subsumes' (*aufhebt*) within its bosom all the 'specific differences' (*Besonderheit*): nations, social classes, families. [...] Therefore: wars and revolutions are henceforth impossible." Understood thusly, the universal and homogeneous states is a uniform and consolidated global economic and social order operating within a common, politically institutionalized space. In Kojève's words: "which is to say that this state will no longer modify itself, will remain eternally identical to itself. Yet Man is formed by the state in which he lives and acts. Therefore Man also will not change anymore." Quasi-building on Kojève yet stopping short of accepting the full consequences of his argument, Fukuyama in his article heralded the imminent coming of the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution," with only liberal democracy left standing. In the world at the end of history, Fukuyama hypothesized there will be "no need for generals or statesmen; what remains is primarily economic activity, [...] the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, [...] the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands [and] the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history."

Left unaddressed by Fukuyama is the question, amongst others, of who would curate the exhibit, as it were. This task was swiftly taken up by others. Influential Washington insiders like Charles Krauthammer, for example, wanted the United States to press home its advantage in order to solidify America's primacy. Hence the concept of "unipolarity," which he first laid out in late 1990 in a special edition of *Foreign Affairs*. "The true geopolitical structure of the post-Cold War world," Krauthammer said, is a "single pole of world power that consists of the United States at the apex of the industrial West." A series of writings by Robert Cooper, a prominent Tony Blair-era British diplomat and later EU bureaucrat, articulated most clearly what may be characterized as the European codicil both to Fukuyama's end of history hypothesis and Krauthammer's championing of a unipolar moment or era (in late 2002, the latter decided that the term 'moment' "seems rather modest;" in the pages of *The National Interest* he thus declared that the "unipolar moment has become the unipolar era"). Thus, for example, in his *The Postmodern State and World Order* (2000), Cooper opined that "what happened in 1989 went beyond the events of 1789, 1815, or 1919." In his contribution to an edited volume that appeared two

years later, he stated that "in [our] postmodern world, *raison d'état* and the amorality of Machiavelli's theories of statecraft, which defined international relations in the modern era, have been replaced." In the latter article, he referred to his new age as one in which "postmodern imperialism" or "cooperative empire" would be practiced without impunity or pushback by some sort of transatlantic coalition of liberal democracies. Writing in *The National Interest* in March 2005, Cooper's preferred term became "imperial liberalism."

While those caught up in the spirit of that earlier moment in world politics differed on accents and minutiae, they can be said to have held in common the vainglorious claim that, in effect, humankind was done in principle with geopolitics, which was no longer understood as being a permanent condition of humanity but rather an overcomeable phase of world history that was on the very cusp of actualization. A hegemonic peace would reign over an ever-increasingly large swath of the earth, with 'rogue states' put down in quick succession in military demonstrations so awesome that effectually all other states would choose to fall in line: the strong expectation shared by those caught up in the spirit of that earlier moment in world politics was that *raison de planète* or *raison de démocratie* or some Atticized combination thereof would henceforth hold sway, evermore unopposed. On this subject—which at times could be excused for being thought of as falling under an imaginary academic rubric called Critical Studies in Secular Eschatology—much has already been written; there is no compellingly useful reason to pursue the matter in greater detail, given present purposes.

On the other hand, we observe that the strategic implications of the Biden Administration's foreign policy posture—exemplified by those of its speeches and deeds that revolve around the holding of the Summit for Democracy—have not yet been fully subjected to the sort of scrutiny that has been heretofore the norm in the United States and in those circles outside that country's borders that concern themselves with trying to understand America's foreign policy postures (or, for that matter, international relations *tout court*). A contribution to this sort of undertaking is therefore both necessary and proper. In a moment, we shall proceed to do so, as we have announced, in the form of a little thought experiment, having first concluded our preparations through a brief examination of a representative sample of the

'global coalition of democracies' proposals that were made in the 2000s—that is to say, in the wake of the publication of almost all of the texts examined in the preceding three paragraphs.

Writing in the *Washington Post* in May 2004, Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay effectually kicked it all off by calling for an "alliance of democracies" that, "like NATO during the Cold War, […] should become the focal point of American foreign policy. Unlike NATO, however, the alliance would not be formed to counter any country or be confined to a single region." However, this statement should be read next to what they proposed a little earlier in their piece: "respect for state sovereignty should be conditional on how states behave at home, not just abroad."

In a lengthy article published in the *Fordham International Law Journal* in February 2005, John Davenport advocated in favor of a "federation of democratic nations." His main proposal involved setting up a "new framework in which every major democratic State pledges ground troops and resources […] to a permanent alliance that […] would oppose tyranny, theocracy, and terrorism everywhere, and uphold fundamental human rights by force when necessary."

In September 2006, Anne Bayefsky argued in the *Jerusalem Post* for the establishment of an "international organization of democracies, by democracies, and for democracies" to be called the "United Democratic Nations." This proposal was explicitly put forward in support of a call by then U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist to establish a "council of democracies outside of the UN system [that would] truly monitor, examine, and expose human rights abuses around the globe." The next year, she published an edited volume called *The UN and Beyond* that expanded her core argument with the help of various contributors.

Also in September 2006, G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter championed the establishment of a "concert of democracies" in a report commissioned by the Princeton Project on National Security entitled *Forging a World Under Liberty and Law*. The "new institution" they advocated was designed to "strengthen security cooperation among the world's liberal democracies," "institutionalize and ratify the 'democratic peace,'" and serve as an "alternative forum for liberal democracies to authorize collective action, including the use of force, by a supermajority vote. Its membership would be selective, but self-selected." The report

even concluded with a one-page draft "Charter for a Concert of Democracies."

At the beginning of 2007, Daalder and Lindsay developed their original idea more fully in *The American Interest* whilst adopting the term—"concert of democracies"—favored by Ikenberry and Slaughter. They called for bringing the "established democracies together into a single institution [in order to] be best able to meet the many challenges that beset the new age of global politics." This institution would operate based on a "framework of binding mutual obligations" and focus on three things: first, "helping democracies confront their mutual security challenges;" second, "promote economic growth and development;" and third "promote democracy and human rights." The authors took pains to stress that they were "not proposing a photo-op bedecked gab fest" but rather a fully-fledged institution with its own secretariat, budget, regular ministerials and summits, and so on.

We can add that Daalder teamed up with Robert Kagan in August 2007 to coauthor an op-ed in the *Washington Post* called "The Next Intervention" that reaffirmed the idea of a "concert of democracies" and stated that the "policy of seeking consensus among the world's great democratic nations can form the basis for a new domestic consensus on the use of force."

It was within such a charged intellectual atmosphere that John McCain delivered a keynote address before the Hoover Institution in May 2007 calling for a "league of democracies" (this particular phrase was launched by Tod Lindberg in February 2007 in a *The Weekly Standard* article titled "The Treaty of Democratic Peace: What the World Needs Now;" subsequently, it was adopted by Kagan in a May 2008 *Financial Times* op-ed and rekindled in 2018 by Davenport in his book-length treatment of the subject). McCain's speech envisioned that this "league" would "form the core of an international order of peace based on freedom." He imagined it being "the one organization where the world's democracies could come together to discuss problems and solutions on the basis of shared principles and a common vision of the future." He also characterized his proposal as not being a form of idealism but "the truest kind of realism" because, as he put it, "today as in the past, our interests are inextricably linked to the global progress of our ideals."

Of some relevance may be that at the moment he delivered his Hoover address, McCain was both a sitting U.S. senator and a candidate for the American presidency. Here is another quote from that speech: "if I am elected president, I will call a summit of the world's democracies in my first year to seek the views of my democratic counterparts and begin exploring the practical steps necessary to realize this vision." He repeated this pledge (as well as his call for the establishment of a "league of democracies") almost verbatim in a November 2007 *Foreign Affairs* article. As it happens, so did Joe Biden—during his successful candidacy for the American presidency. In January 2020, also in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*, he made the following pledge: "during my first year in office, the United States will organize and host a global Summit for Democracy to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world. It will bring together the world's democracies to strengthen our democratic institutions, honestly confront nations that are backsliding, and forge a common agenda." We can add that Biden served alongside McCain in the U.S. Senate for decades before going on to be Barack Obama's vice president and then, still later, being elected to the presidency itself. Lastly, we can mention that Biden and McCain developed a "great friendship," as can readily be seen from even a cursory examination of the text of the funeral oration he delivered at McCain's memorial service in August 2018.

As a postscript of sorts to our preparations for conducting a little thought experiment on the strategic implications of the Summit for Democracy, we observe that none of the aforementioned 'global coalition of democracies' proposals from the 2000s made much of the existence and influence of what can be said to be the world's largest organization of democratic states: the European Union. (The same cannot be said of Fukuyama, however; for example, in an April 2007 *The Guardian* op-ed, he stated his belief that the "European Union more accurately reflects what the world will look like at the end of history than the United States. The EU's attempt to transcend sovereignty and traditional power politics by establishing a transnational rule of law is much more in line with a 'post-historical world.'") Almost all the authors of those proposals in one way or another adopted the view that the EU's members may each be included in the alliance, federation, concert, league, or what have you, but only as distinct sovereign states and not, as its proponents might put it, as indivisible parts of a distinct economic and social order operating within a common, politically

institutionalized space—i.e., as a unified community of nations. Perhaps the authors of the aforementioned proposals were unimpressed by what came later to be called the "Brussels effect"—the term was conceived by Anu Bradford only in 2012—could become an effective handmaiden in the quest to what, as we shall see, the Biden Administration has termed the 'renewal of democracy.' Or perhaps they were unimpressed because the EU lacked a military (it still lacks one today); or because the EU's institutions could not independently formulate their own foreign policy (still today, the formulation of the EU's "common foreign and security policy" remains predominantly an intergovernmental process and its High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy cannot in any serious way be understood as being an actor in international politics of the same standing and caliber as, say, the foreign ministers of Germany or France, much less the UK Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Affairs or, for that matter, the equivalent cabinet position in some other sovereign states).

Further to our postscript, we observe that the aforementioned proposals make even shorter shrift of something that has existed since June 2000: the Community of Democracies. Lack of space and other constraints prevent us from saying too much about this entity—a contrivance of Polish foreign minister Bronislaw Geremek and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. We can, however, note briefly that it self-identifies as an "intergovernmental coalition of states which seeks to coordinate action on human rights and democracy at regional and international levels" in furtherance of a vision in which "every nation respects and upholds the core democratic values, principles, and standards" of its founding Warsaw Declaration; that it has a permanent secretariat headed by its own secretary general; and that a "democracy caucus" may still convene at the UN under its auspices.

Throwing Down the Gauntlet

Our preliminary overview having been completed, we now find ourselves sufficiently prepared to engage directly in a little thought experiment on the strategic implications of the Biden Administration's official rhetoric on the subject of the Summit for Democracy.

We begin by quoting the first sentence displayed on the Summit's official website: "since day one, the Biden-Harris Administration has made clear that renewing democracy in the United States and around the world is *essential* to meeting the unprecedented challenges of our time." (I have chosen to italicize 'essential' from this point on in the essay to draw the reader's attention to this word choice by the Biden Administration, which presumably was a purposeful one: in everyday contemporary English, it means something completely necessary or indispensable; the root of the word is Latin and is used to translate *ousia*, a Greek word that is pregnant with meaning in Western philosophical and Christian theological contexts).

This is the first sentence found on the Summit for Democracy's website: "since day one, the Biden-Harris Administration has made clear that renewing democracy in the United States and around the world is essential *to meeting the unprecedented challenges of our time."*

Let us next put this quite bold statement alongside the fact that the Biden Administration has made it clear in both speech and deed that at least some of these "unprecedented challenges" have to do with threats to the promotion and, in turn, universal acceptance, of what its proponents call the 'rules-based liberal international order.' Now, two of the main threats to this U.S.-led order-in-the-making—Biden indicated as much in his first major foreign policy speech as U.S. president, delivered in February 2021 at the State Department—are Russia and China: great powers that are perceived to be the chief opponents of "renewing democracy in the United States and around the world." In the last quarter of 2021, the Biden Administration identified two new concrete threats emanating from Moscow and Beijing, respectively: the possibility of a Russian military offensive into Ukraine and the possibility of a Chinese military offensive into Taiwan. Here we can underline that Ukraine and Taiwan were both invited to the Summit and thus are presumably understood to be democracies, according to whatever criteria were used; Russia and China were not and thus are presumably understood not to be, according to the same undisclosed criteria.

On the basis of a straightforward reading of the aforementioned statement (i.e., the one displayed on the Summit's official website), we can properly infer that countering these concrete threats and

the states from which they originate would be "*essential*," for a failure to do so would impede both the worldwide 'renewal of democracy' and the ability of democratic states—selected and presumably led by America—to meet the "unprecedented challenges of our time." We can thus allow ourselves to take it to mean, more generally, that the Biden Administration sees it as being "*essential*" to defend the 'rules-based liberal international order' against the opponents of the 'renewal of democracy'—i.e., the "autocrats" to which the U.S. president referred in his opening address to the Summit who, as he put it, "seek to advance their own power, export and expand their influence around the world, and justify their repressive policies and practices as a more efficient way to address today's challenges."

The third step in our little thought experiment is slightly more speculative, but hardly blasphemous or heretical, namely that the view in Washington seems to be that neither Moscow nor Beijing would pose a challenge to the 'rules-based liberal international order' if each regime was to transformed into a democracy in the way that the Biden Administration understands the term. In other words, it may believe that the undemocratic nature of the Russian and Chinese regimes (and others it perceives to be autocratic) stands in the way of the "universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government," in Fukuyama's famous formulation.

And if this is in fact the belief, then it would mean that, at the end of the day, the Biden Administration considers the Russian and Chinese regimes (and others it perceives to be autocratic) to be illegitimate and not just, say, merely anachronistic (as Fukuyama believed to be the case with China). Furthermore, this would mean that "meeting the unprecedented challenges of our time" requires the transformation of the illegitimate nature of the Russian and Chinese forms of government (and others it perceives to be autocratic) into one that is legitimate. And since the Biden Administration seems to believe that the sole legitimate form of government is democracy (perhaps inspired by Fukuyama's hypothesis that democracy may constitute the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution"), then the solution involves—in one way or another—regime change.

From this line of not unreasonable speculation, we could properly infer that championing regime change in Moscow and Beijing (and perhaps in other places) is "essential

to meeting the unprecedented challenges of our time." Of course, doing so would be impractical, to say the least; and we do not mean to imply that the Biden Administration is pursuing an actionable policy of regime change towards Russia and China (and other states it perceives to be autocratic). But this fourth step in our little thought experiment does suggest a development in American foreign policymaking that may be compatible with the charge of advocating or suborning Atticism.

Let us therefore continue by attempting to bring all this a little more to the surface.

Autocratic Illegitimacy

We can proceed by noticing that the United States has no full-on, binding defensive military alliance with either Ukraine or Taiwan (neither does any other major power, for that matter). This fact, in principle, does not seem to make enough of a difference to the Biden Administration's semi-implicit imperative to weaken, isolate, contain, and even anathemize Russia and China (and other states it perceives to be autocratic) at every opportunity in the service of 'renewing democracy.' Moreover, the logic of the argument at the core of our little thought experiment would suggest that it also makes no difference that Russia and China have signaled clearly that they have vital interests at stake in Ukraine and Taiwan, respectively, because this signaling amounts to a sphere-of-influence argument (in mid-December 2021, Russia publicly tabled the texts of two draft security treaties—one with the United States and another with NATO—that can be together characterized as constituting more than a request and less than an ultimatum, which makes this argument even more explicit; as of this writing, however, China has not done anything similar). And the Biden Administration also sees this as being altogether illegitimate (Biden himself stated back in February 2009 at the Munich Security Conference, i.e., during his vice presidency, that "we will not recognize any nation as having a sphere of influence"). It thus gives no quarter to the substantial asymmetry in importance that the United States and Russia each ascribe to Ukraine and the United States and China each ascribe to Taiwan. In other words, the Biden Administration gives no quarter to the traditional geopolitical argument that "great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory," as John Mearsheimer put the matter in *Foreign Affairs* in September 2014—or

at least it gives no quarter to this traditional geopolitical argument as it applies to Russia and China (and at least to some other states it perceives to be autocratic). Hence the failure, as of this writing, of the Biden Administration to reach some sort of accommodation or understanding with the Russian Federation on the basis of the Kremlin's aforementioned proposals as well as the White House's unwillingness to produce any concrete proposal of its own.

Substantial corroborating evidence in support of all this can be found in U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken's various statements on Russia and China. On Russia, we can refer, for example, to a December 2021 television interview on Meet the Press in which he said that "Ukraine is important, and we are resolute in our commitment to its sovereignty, its territorial integrity. But there is something even bigger at stake here, and it's the basic rules of the road of the international system, rules that say that one country can't change the borders of another by force; one country can't dictate to another country its choices, its decisions in its foreign policy, with whom it will associate; one country can't exert a sphere of influence over others. That what—that's what Russia is purporting to assert; and if we let that go with impunity, then the entire system that provides for stability, prevents war from breaking out, is endangered." On China, we can refer, for example, to the very public spat between the four most senior American and Chinese foreign policy officials that took place in in Anchorage, Alaska in March 2021, in which Blinken, acting as host, stated that "the alternative to a rules-based order is a world in which might makes right and winners take all, and that would be a far more violent and unstable world for all of us." Or to Blinken's even more explicit statement, pronounced in a June 2021 interview to the *New York Times*, in which he claimed that the only two alternatives to a U.S.-led "free and open international order" were a world of no order that "inevitably leads to chaos" and a China-led order that would be "profoundly illiberal in nature."

Two parenthetic remarks are in order here. First, with regards to the possible objection that Blinken is not Biden, we observe that the U.S. president has stated publicly and with no qualification that "our competitors around the world […] know […] you [i.e., Blinken] speak for me." Second, it should almost go without saying that such and similar statements by Blinken constitute evidence of either ignorance or

mendacity with regards not only to America's past foreign policy postures but also, more importantly, to the correlation in history between extended periods of stability and a common commitment to the legitimacy of a balance of power system of international order in which states pursue their respective interests within commonly understood bounds and limits. That being said, pronouncing full judgment on Blinken's unawareness or cynicism is not what our little thought experiment is intended to accomplish and therefore will not be undertaken. Our focus is rather on the *prudence* of such and similar statements; of ascertaining whether these leave the Biden Administration open to the charge of advocating or suborning Atticism; and of at least pointing to whether such a charge, if valid, would have a deleterious effect on U.S. national interests.

On such a basis we could properly deduce that the Biden Administration sees Russia and China (and other states it perceives to be autocratic) as doubly illegitimate: illegitimate in their very nature and illegitimate in both the conception and execution of the foreign policies that defend their respective vital interests. This can be said to be the bottom-line assessment.

Now, if our little thought experiment is fallacious or mistaken—then fine: no harm, no foul. But if there is at least some probative value to it, then we could be warranted in suggesting that the foreign policy posture embraced by the Biden Administration—understood as the renewal of democracy around the globe as being "*essential*" to a defense of the 'rules-based liberal international order'—is incredibly ambitious. More so, in fact, that the one expressed by George W. Bush in his Second Inaugural: "the survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world. America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one." Furthermore, we could plausibly suggest that the Biden Administration's posture is in alignment with the one embraced by Woodrow Wilson, exemplified in his April 1917 address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress in which he requested a declaration of war against Germany. The key passage then was that "a steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations. No autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants. It must be a league of honor, a partnership of opinion. […] Only free peoples can hold their purpose and their honor steady to a common

end and prefer the interests of mankind to any narrow interest of their own. […] The world must be made safe for democracy."

Connecting the conceptual dots backwards from Biden to Bush and Wilson is not without political and scholarly controversy. Still, the linkages are quite far from being obscure—especially if we add to the mix the aforementioned proposals made by McCain and other Washington insiders back in the 2000s and to the writings that intellectually triggered the onset of the spirit of an earlier moment in world politics in which it could be said that America had in fact recuperated or perpetuated its standing and come back (or out) on top—at least one of which explicitly traced much of its core argument back to Kojève's famous lectures—the ones that introduced the idea of a political project whose goal was the actualization of the universal and homogeneous state. Furthermore, we observe that the postures of both Bush and Wilson were understood at the time of their exposition, at least in some circles, to be revisionist—revolutionary, even. Moreover, these same links do not appear to be evolutionarily antithetical either to a line of thinking that produced the 1823 Monroe Doctrine (and its 1904 Roosevelt Corollary), which is a sphere of influence argument in all but name; or even to one exemplified by Thomas Jefferson's repeated use of the phrase "empire of liberty" as early as nearly three years prior to the signing of the Treaty of Paris (1783) and then subsequently in correspondence with the likes of George Washington and James Madison.

Universal Sphere of Influence

Let us therefore make a bold statement of our own: taken to its logical conclusion, the Biden Administration's foreign policy posture could have at least two far-reaching implications: first, America's sphere of influence is universal because the objective that underlies it (i.e., the 'renewal of democracy') is universal; second, striving towards the objective embodied in that *and only that* sphere of influence is legitimate.

This, in turn, leads us to ask what may be a fundamental practical question: does the Biden Administration in its heart of hearts believe that the world should live at the end of history and perhaps even strive towards the actualization of the universal and homogeneous state? Or, to put the question less radically, does it believe—to paraphrase Fukuyama—that there is no fundamental contradiction in human life that cannot be resolved in the context of modern liberalism?

The logic of our little thought experiment implies that the answer is 'yes'—at least to the second version of the question. And if this is so, then the only concessions and accommodations America can make to Russia and China (and other states it perceives to be autocratic) can only be of a purely tactical nature: temporary lulls in a zero-sum, winner-take-all contest in which every single country across the globe will be pressured to pick a side. We all remember what George W. Bush said in the immediate wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks: "every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make: either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." At the time, for virtually every country, this was a relatively easy, straightforward choice—at least in principle. After all, what but a few states would have chosen to get in the way of an American reckoning? What but a few states would have desired to be wrathfully inscribed on an American list of perdition? At present, however, things are a little bit more nuanced. And yet, we may presently be entering into a stage in world politics in which the Biden Administration will ask virtually every state to make a similar sort of decision, with the forces of democracy being understood to be in "*essential*" opposition to the forces of autocracy.

It hardly seems unreasonable to suppose that those invited by the Biden Administration to the Summit for Democracy will be asked in short order to choose to align in some prescribed fashion with some sort of U.S.-led coalition of democracies—if they have not been already.

It hardly seems unreasonable to suppose that those invited by the Biden Administration to the Summit for Democracy will be asked in short order to choose to align in some prescribed fashion with some sort of U.S.-led coalition of democracies—if they have not been already. Quite many are unlikely to appreciate being put in the position of having to make this choice, for a plethora of perfectly sound, traditional reasons involving fear, honor, geopolitical or geo-economic interest, a combination thereof, or whatever else have you; most

will try to avoid doing so, at least explicitly, likely with varying degrees of success. It is of course too soon to tell with any degree of certainty, but we would be unsurprised should the responses (at least those not subjected to the rhetorical conventions of public messaging) fail to meet the Biden Administration's expectations—in terms of both their levels of fervor and unambiguity.

As a decidedly speculative parenthetic we may observe that, in some cases, this reticence may have something to do with how uncomfortably reminiscent this sort of choice is to the rationale that underpinned the Brezhnev Doctrine. We are fully cognizant that such a comparison may fall within the confines of blasphemy or heresy. Still, here is how the doctrine was originally set forth in the pages of *Pravda* in September 1968: the "weakening of any of the links in the world system of socialism directly affects all the socialist countries, and they cannot look indifferently upon this." Here is another quote from the same source: the "sovereignty of individual socialist countries cannot be set against the interests of world socialism and the world revolutionary movement." And a third: "even if a socialist country tries to adopt a position 'outside the blocs', it in fact retains its national independence only because of the power of the socialist commonwealth—and above all its chief force, the Soviet Union—and the strength of its armed forces."

We may be on somewhat more solid yet still speculative ground in observing that in other cases, the aforementioned reticence may have something to do with the uncomfortable linkage of the choice to align in some prescribed fashion with some sort of U.S.-led coalition of democracies to the work begun by Michael Walzer on designing a theory that would extend the argument about *jus ad bellum* to include *jus ad vim*. This last should be understood within the double context of our considerations of the 'rules-based liberal international order' and the logic of the argument that led us to refer to the championing—in principle, if not in practice—of a policy of regime change that we had earlier indicated may be compatible with the charge of advocating or suborning Atticism. To that end, we quote at some length from the preface to the fourth revised edition (2006) of Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977): "The immediate question for us is whether the permissions [for force-short-of-war] reach to regime change and democratization. […] [T]his is closely connected to questions about prevention.

Preventive war is not justifiable either in standard just war theory or in international law, but what we might think of as 'preventive force' can be justified when we are dealing with a brutal regime that has acted aggressively or murderously in the past and gives us reason to think that it might do so again. In such cases, we aim at containment but hope for regime change. And we can legitimately design the containment policy to advance this further purpose whenever that is possible—which means that we can use force, in limited ways, for the sake of producing a new (and if new then also democratic) regime." Walzer then concludes his prefatory by suggesting "one further step in the regime change argument," namely "what we may call 'politics-short-of-force,' non-coercive politics, the work of non-governmental organizations, like Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International, which also aim, in their own way, at regime change." He makes the connection explicit in his final sentences: "politics-short-of-force may depend on force-short-of-war. In fact, we have to sponsor and support this interaction—because these two together can help us avoid war itself." Such a strategy of "indirection," he speculates, may enable its proponents to "reach justice without the terrible destructiveness of war."

The contemporary situation is rendered even less clear-cut because both Russia and China have studiously avoided formulating their remonstration towards America's advocacy for a 'rules-based liberal international order' in binary or at least dichotomous terms.

Be that as it may, the contemporary situation is rendered even less clear-cut because both Russia and China have studiously avoided formulating their remonstration towards America's advocacy for a 'rules-based liberal international order' in binary or at least dichotomous terms. "Our position," one can almost hear their respective leaders and plenipotentiaries saying, "is that you *don't* have to make this decision: we require no profession of allegiance."

At the same time, Moscow and Beijing and many others around the globe—including at least a few U.S. treaty allies—have reformulated (at least in their minds' eye) the choice presented by the Biden Administration as involving one between adhering to a 'rules-based

liberal international order' and one more firmly or more fully or more centrally rooted in the UN Charter. A practical consequence of this sort of reformulation is the portrayal of the United States as the revisionist power, much like had been the case previously with Bush and Wilson.

Perhaps two of the most explicit versions of such a counterargument have been expressed by China's Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi and Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, respectively. During the aforementioned talks in Alaska, Yang stated that "What China and the international community follow or uphold is the UN-centered international system and the international order underpinned by international law, not what is advocated by a small number of countries of the so-called rules-based international order. […] I do not think the overwhelming majority of countries in the world would recognize that the universal values advocated by the United States or that the opinion of the United States could represent international public opinion, and those countries would not recognize that the rules made by a small number of people would serve as the basis for the international order." A few months later, Lavrov stated in *Kommersant* (the statement was then reprinted in the pages of *Russia in Global Affairs*) that "by imposing the concept of a rules-bases order, the West seeks to shift the conversation on key issues to the platforms of its liking, where no dissident voices can be heard. […] In doing so, the West deliberately shies away from spelling out the rules it purports to follow, just as it refrains from explaining why they are needed. […] When someone acts against the West's will, it immediately responds with a groundless claim that 'the rules have been broken' […] and declares its 'right to hold the perpetrators accountable.'"

The Biden Administration's instinct may be simply to ignore or dismiss such and similar remonstrations. Surely, this would be a mistake—the authorial motives of those making them notwithstanding. Were it not to reflect studiously on them, it could more easily find itself embracing some of the more dangerous elements of the proposals from the 2000s with which we concluded the preparations to our little thought experiment (along with, perhaps, core elements of the spirit of the earlier moment in world politics to which we had referred earlier).

Already, the strategic implications of the Biden Administration's

official rhetoric on the subject of the Summit for Democracy leave the door open to that possibility. Closing it resolutely would seem to be in the U.S. national interest, if, that it, a proper measure of this interest may be understood to consist in ascertaining the likelihood of its garnering support from most of the states invited to *as well as* excluded from the Summit for Democracy—i.e., Russia, China, and others the Biden Administration perceives to be autocratic. On the other hand, a failure to do so could leave it recklessly open to the charge of advocating or suborning Atticism, which, given the concatenations of present circumstances, could come to be judged by posterity as having constituted an act of geopolitical malpractice.

Unlike Athens itself, neither Thucydides nor Xenophon judged the ambition of that city—exemplified through advocacy for or subornation of Atticism—as being either simply a natural right or a universal necessity.

Renewal and Remedies

We may be said to be impelled to offer another type of conclusion to this little thought experiment by observing that, unlike Athens itself, neither Thucydides nor Xenophon judged the ambition of that city—exemplified through advocacy for or subornation of Atticism—as being either simply a natural right or a universal necessity. The closest a Thucydidean *dramatis persona* comes to making such a claim in speech is found near the end of the dialogue between the Athenian envoys and the Melians that is conducted in a setting that was less subjected to the rhetorical conventions of public messaging as may appear to be the case at first blush. Therein, the former "conclude that always, by a necessity of nature, [both the gods, reputedly, and human beings, manifestly] rule to the limits of their power. And it was not we who made this law, nor were we the first who finding it in force have submitted to it, but having found it in being, will leave it in being for all time to come. And so we submit to it, knowing that you and anyone else, coming into the same power as we have, would do the very same thing" (Thuc. V.105.1-2). But "ruling to the limits of [a city's] power," which the Athenians basically identify both as a natural right and a universal necessity, is hardly the same as ruling

to the limits of a city's ambition, much less ruling to beyond these same limits. In other words, the Athenians mistake ambition for power: advocating or suborning Atticism is neither a natural right nor a universal necessity. This explains why Thucydides shows in his account that it was predominantly the seemingly free actions of the Athenians—in contradistinction to the reactions of others, including in the strict sense the onset of the war (see, e.g., Thuc. I.23.6, I.86.5, I.88, I.118.2, and I.139.1-4)—that led first to the transformation of a defensive alliance against Persia into a tribute system resulting in the "imperial greatness of Athens" and then to everything that came afterwards (the phrase in quotation marks is used by Christopher Bruell in a 1974 *American Political Science Review* article). The result of that everything—which involved honor as much as, if not more than, fear or interest (cf. the placement of 'honor' in the list spoken by the Athenians at I.75.3 with the one in the immediate sequel at I.76.2)—may be said to have produced what amounts to a tragedy, in the sense that the outcome of the conflict about which Thucydides and Xenophon write with authority was both the opposite of what had been intended by its chief advocates and a necessary consequence of the sum total of their overambitious actions and especially those of their political progeny.

Substantial corroborating evidence in support of all this may be collected by comparing the justifications offered by Pericles in his funeral oration with those of his valedictory speech. The action of the latter takes place in a situation of crisis brought on at least in part by pestilence; in that speech, he explicitly and repeatedly adds a reputational dimension to his earlier arguments regarding the necessity or inevitability of war or upheaval or motion. This, in turn, requires him to admit or at least to allow for the possibility that the Athenian course of action was not right or just. For instance: "It is no longer possible to step down […]. It may have been unjust to acquire, but [..] it is [now] dangerous to let go" (Thuc. II.63.2; cf. I.123.1 and the previous parenthetic regarding the shift of honor from first to second place in the earlier speeches of the Athenians to the Spartans—speeches that were made prior to the two Periclean speeches just mentioned). Thus, to his earlier argument that at stake is the preservation of Athenian freedom and security, Pericles adds in his valedictory the argument that a failure to keep pursuing the undertaken course of action will result in the humiliation of Athens—in a loss of its renown (a concept that, as it

happens, incorporates elements of honor, fear, and interest).

Now, to this we may add that in the world of Greek tragedy, the arc of history does not bend towards justice, as it were: it knows no pity, listens to no excuses, and hears no complaints, to paraphrase Kurt Riezler. To the extent that justice is a theme in that world (which could not be said to have been simply the world of Thucydides, perhaps because his account ends before the conflict itself does), its character or nature is less determinant than its worldly weakness.

The political philosopher who most directly discoursed on how the worldly weakness of justice or right may be overcome was said by Leo Strauss in *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958) to have been insensitive to the "sacredness of 'the common.'" This same political philosopher, Niccolò Machiavelli, is also reputed to have been a teacher of evil, which from certain perspectives can be said to be not altogether untrue. What may very well be more generally true, however, is captured well by a traditional Swahili saying that Julius Nyerere was fond of relating to foreign audiences: "when the elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers." Would it not follow from this that whatever sensible measures the elephants may take to safeguard the grass will end up being beneficial to both the elephants and the grass? (An analogous point can be made with reference to Zbigniew Brzezinski's 1997 "grand chessboard" allegory: in chess, two players control all the pieces on the board; none of the pieces can ever have independent agency.) The presumed hoped-for answer could be said to be exposed at least to this evident difficulty: safeguarding the grass may require the elephants to cease moving. Thucydides wrote that his book concerned the greatest ever upheaval or motion because it affected all of Hellas (which at the time of writing was understood to be at its peak) and a significant part of the barbarians and thus, "so to speak, all of mankind" (Thuc. I.1.2; cf. Pl. *Rep*. 368e6). Now, of course, the opposite of motion is rest: Thucydides implies that he could not have written at least a substantial part of his book without the forced rest of exile, which in turn afforded him both the leisure and opportunity to gain access to observe the motion of both sides (see V.26.5). Rest is more a characteristic of peace, motion of war. Thucydides knew of both and concluded, sensibly, that one without the other is impossible. On such a basis did he claim to present an authoritative account of political life simply—of what Strauss called in *The City and Man* (1964) the "interplay" of rest

and motion and what Thucydides himself said was "searching for the truth" (I.20.3). What he could not do was to present an account of rest without motion or one of motion without rest: the nature of politics, he seems to say, is contained in the interplay of rest and motion. We repeat on the authority of Thucydides that neither perpetual peace nor perpetual war is possible; from this it necessarily follows that total victory in or through either peace or war is impossible. This, if true, would necessarily render the actualization of the universal and homogeneous state impossible.

Two suspicions may rise to the mind presently: does such an account not raise the question of whether the proverbial elephants can simply cease to move—whether, in other words, they can be at sempiternal rest? Is not the relationship between the elephants and the grass at least somewhat analogous to what the Athenians say to the Melians? And what they say in part is this: "claims of justice are adjudicated in human speech only where the parties are subject to equal compulsion; while those who have the upper hand do as they are able, and the weak make way for them" (Thuc. V.89). A looser and thus misleading although better-known translation of the same passage reads: "As the world goes, right is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." But this second translation does not correspond to what is actually written in the original Thucydidean text. Appreciating the superior fidelity of the first translation to the original makes it harder if not impossible for the reader to interpret the speech by the Athenian envoys as stating or implying that they claim there is no right or justice; and that they believe that a precondition of a *consideration* of justice in politics is equality of constraint or compulsion or power. Furthermore, appreciating the accuracy of that first translation helps the reader to understand that the Athenian envoys in the speech quoted above neither deny the tension between right or justice and power or might, nor simply equate them. In other words, the Athenian argument in that speech is "not that Athens and Melos are equally just, but that [the] superior power [of the Athenians] must silence the superior justice of the Melians"—to cite the interpretation provided by Clifford Orwin in *The Humanity of Thucydides* (1994). "Justice *prevails* only among equals in power—among such equals, not justice but equality in power prevails. Where right reigns, just as where it does not, it defers to compulsion," Orwin further clarifies.

Thus armed, we can recognize that Thucydides too discoursed on how the weakness of right may be overcome, albeit less directly than Machiavelli. We can also recognize here an illustration of the Straussian statement that Thucydides has a "sense of the sacredness of 'the common'" as well as his remark, published much later, that "all people of judgment and taste feel" an "admiration" for Thucydides. This may help to explain why he was never reputed to be a teacher of evil. Yet, paradoxically, it would seem that he was more, not less, circumspect on how (or even whether) the weakness of right may be overcome, perhaps because he was more concerned with the character or nature of justice rather than, as was Machiavelli, with the manipulation of worldly conditions that could "remedy" the weakness of right and thus lead to its eventual strengthening, for this last would require the wherewithal "to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity" (NM, *P.* 15). On this basis we could conclude that any speeches and deeds concerning the 'renewal of democracy' are less universal and thus less inherently choiceworthy than speeches and deeds concerning the renewal of justice because only by doing the latter would a "sense of the sacredness of 'the common'" be able to be put on public display and, in turn, be subjected to proper scrutiny and thus judgment. (We could also reproduce Strauss' judgment that "Pericles was indeed dedicated wholeheartedly to the common good of the city but to its common good unjustly understood. He did not realize that the unjust understanding of the common good is bound to undermine dedication to the common good however understood"). Further corroborating evidence in support of this last can be introduced with recourse to Thucydides' explicit judgment, made near the very end of his work, that "now most of all, for the first time at least in my lifetime, the Athenians appear to have enjoyed a good regime. For there was a judicious [or rightful] blending of the few and the many, and this is what first enabled the city to raise itself out of its wretched circumstances" (Thuc. VIII.97.2). The likely incompatibility of this good regime with the one that produced the chief advocates and political progeny of the conflict at issue should almost go without saying; as should the fact that what is conceivably Thucydides' definition of statecraft—"to know how to remain moderate in prosperity and take care that the state grows concurrently in security as in renown" (Thuc. VIII.24.4)—is given in an explicitly non-Athenian context.

We may observe that Strauss makes reference to some of this in a posthumously published article on Thucydides' work that may advance our present consideration in at least two ways. First, the restoration of hope for Athens' salvation can be brought about only through a connection or conspiracy involving the founders of the good regime and Pericles' nephew and ward—that is to say, one of his progeny in more ways than one whom, uncoincidentally, Strauss qualifies without reservation as a man of "unquestioned predominance," notwithstanding what we might call his Machiavellian notoriety. Second, this Athenian hope, as other hopes spoken of by Thucydides, came to naught—but not through the fault of the nephew. The reasons for this are told by Xenophon in the *Hellenica* and are thus not strictly speaking part of the world of Thucydides. In this way, the latter's emphasis may be said to have remained on the aforementioned conspiracy or connection and not on the coming to naught of the hope for the salvation of Athens.

Nonetheless, a hint with respect to where Thucydides himself stands on the latter subject may be found in a passage from his lengthiest comment on any aspect of the war of the Spartans and the Athenians (and their respective affiliates or subordinates) and how they waged it against each other. The immediate context is Thucydides' judgment that in times of civil discord there occurs such harsh things as "have been and will be always, so long as there is the same nature of human beings." In the immediate sequel he then makes a general statement: "in times of peace and prosperity both cities and individuals have minds of a better cast, from not falling subject to overwhelming necessities. But war, filching away the easy provision of the everyday, is a violent teacher, which brings most men's tempers level with their fortunes" (Thuc. III.82.2).

We could draw to a close our little thought experiment with a tentative suggestion: uncovering whether there is a way in which to effectuate the cessation of elephantine movement, such that the safeguarding of both the animal and the plant would be the result, ought to entail the conduct of a fully-fledged inquiry into the teaching contained in the Thucydidean text (together with its Xenophontic sequel) and the two books that Machiavelli says contain everything he knows: *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. That tentative suggestion leads to another: the charge of advocating or suborning Atticism may perhaps be removed, or at least more properly addressed; and the greatness of the sort to which we referred above may perhaps be preserved, or at least salvaged.

Impracticable would be such an attempt now and in these pages. For present purposes it is sufficient to put forward—less but still somewhat tentatively—an interrogatory. Might perhaps an important difference between the Athenians then and the Biden Administration now be, as Thucydides writes, that the representatives of the former (in the form of the Athenians at Melos, at any rate) claim both to be used to hearing that their empire must one day end and that this prospect was not unsettling to them? A proper explication of this questions would surely require working through the hypothesis that the Athenians as depicted by Thucydides (at least in certain moments) were more prepared to consider making proper use of the sort of "remedies" to which Machiavelli points than the Biden Administration would be willing to be in both speech and deed. And this would, in turn, require us to consider, at a minimum, the interplay Machiavelli describes between necessity, fortune, virtue, and, as he sometimes does, opportunity.

To do any of this now would invariably take us much too far beyond the confines of what we had announced at the onset to be a little thought experiment on the strategic implications of the Biden Administration's official rhetoric on the subject of the Summit for Democracy and the opening this may provide for leveling a charge of advocating or suborning Atticism. Still, we beg indulgence for reproducing one final statement, contained in a passage taken from a series of lectures Riezler delivered in 1953 on the topic of "political decisions in modern society," which were published in the journal *Ethics* early in the following year and that we had earlier paraphrased in part: "History knows no pity. I have seen in a long life empires crumble, nations being defeated and yet in the last moment being saved by mistakes of the enemy, others surviving against all odds by sheer staying power and the capacity to endure. History listens to no excuses; it did not help anybody in the past and will not help anybody in a still more cruel future to point at public opinion, too powerful to resist; [or] at mass-emotions, though natural and understandable and the offsprings of moral conviction. Pitiless history simply does not listen; it does not hear complaints and excuses after the event." BD

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION