

# BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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# Two Years of Non-War

## Can Armenia and Azerbaijan Make Peace?

*Ruslan Suleymanov*

The Second Karabakh War marked the end of one of the longest and bloodiest territorial conflicts in the post-Cold War era. The 2020 conflict saw the restoration of Azerbaijani sovereignty over land that had been occupied by Armenian forces for decades—lands that amounted to around 20 percent of Azerbaijan’s internationally-recognized territory. At the moment, Baku is rapidly restoring war-damaged lands and infrastructure step by step.

Nevertheless, the post-conflict settlement between Azerbaijan and Armenia remains incomplete. The terms that ended the war have not been implemented in full and a comprehensive peace treaty between Baku and Yerevan has not

yet been signed. Huge efforts are still required to overcome existing difficulties, challenges, and threats. One of the main stumbling blocks remains the issue of security. Recent skirmishes on the Azerbaijani-Armenian border in mid-September 2022 remind us that peace in the region is not yet as close as some may have imagined.

However, several top-level meetings that have taken place in the wake of these clashes suggest that a formal end to the state of war that effectually remains in existence between Armenia and Azerbaijan may soon come to an end.

In any case, over the last two years, the Azerbaijani authorities have managed to do a lot in terms of restoring the utility of

their liberated lands of Karabakh. Foreign investment is being actively attracted and modern infrastructure—including houses, hotels, schools, to say nothing of roads and airports—is being built. In addition, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are gradually returning to their historical homeland.

By and large, the past two years have made it clear that Azerbaijan’s Great Return to Karabakh project is already being successfully implemented: skepticism expressed in some quarters notwithstanding, it is highly unlikely that any actor will directly seek to impede its execution in the time ahead.

Ultimately, the future of the region largely depends on how the post-conflict process develops and on the success of negotiations on a comprehensive peace agreement between Baku and Yerevan. In this regard, it is very important for Azerbaijan and Armenia to strive for a direct and, if possible, confidential dialogue, that is, without intermediaries. It appears that this has now started to take place.

### *The Great Return*

Immediately after the Second Karabakh War, the Azerbaijani authorities began to carefully and consistently restore the country’s lands in the wake of 30 years of occupation. Thus, in 2021 the state budget included \$1.3 billion for reconstruction works in the liberated territories. Since then, funds have been implemented and works are well underway in the larger towns. As of June 2022, the Azerbaijani government has already invested more than \$2.5 billion in the reconstruction endeavor. According to the draft state budget for 2023, the funds allocated for the reconstruction of Azerbaijan’s liberated territories will reach \$1.7bn.

In July 2022, a historic operation was launched: the return of IDPs to the regions of the republic liberated from Armenian occupation. The first 10 families (totaling 58 people) returned to the Yeni Agali village in the Zangilan region, which was built on the basis of a “smart village” concept. In early September 2022, another 12 families, or 63 people, arrived in the settlement. On 15 September, after 29

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years, the bell rang at the Yeni Agali village school and children began to study there again. Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev has aptly called this repopulation project the "Great Return."

The process of restoring roads and transport networks in Karabakh also deserves special attention. The works have so far included 600 kilometers of roads, regional interlinking motorways, and more than 150 kilometers of railway tracks.

The flagship in this regard is certainly the 101-kilometer-long Victory Road to Shusha, which has already been completed. The construction of a large network of highways of 2, 4, and 6 lanes is also in full swing, including Shukurbayli-Jabrayil-Hadrut (39.7 kilometers); Xudaferin-Gubadli-Lachin-Khanlig-Gubadli (83 kilometers); Horadiz-Jebrayil-Zangilan-Agband (124 kilometers); Barda-Agdam (44.5 kilometers); and Toganali-Kalbajar-Istisu (80.7 kilometers). Due to the complexity of the terrain, they will be enriched by bridges and tunnels. All in all, the process of road building in Karabakh has become a symbol of the rapid postwar reconstruction of the liberated territories.

In February 2021, Aliyev laid the foundation of the Horadiz-Agbend railway line during his visit to the districts of Fuzuli, Zangilan, Lachin, and Jebrayil. The strategic importance of this railway line, with a total length of 100 kilometers, is enormous. First of all, this transportation infrastructure will play a decisive role in the transportation of Azerbaijani citizens to the liberated lands. Secondly, it will be instrumental in establishing a direct transportation link between Azerbaijan's mainland and its Nakhchivan exclave.

There is no doubt that the construction of airports also gives a huge impetus to the development of the liberated territories. In September 2021, an international airport in Fizuli was put into operation in a record seven months. A second one, located in Zangilan, is expected to be commissioned before the end of 2022. The construction of a third airport in the city of Lachin is slated for completion in 2024.

Another equally important issue for ensuring normal life in Karabakh is water resources. In this regard, of course, cooperation between Azerbaijan and Iran on the construction of Khudafarin and Maiden Tower hydroelectric power plants on the Araz River in

the formerly occupied lands is relevant. These two projects will generate a total installed capacity of 200 MW and 80 MW, respectively.

The project, which is to be completed by 2024, will allow Azerbaijan to produce an additional 358 million kWh of electricity per year, improve irrigation on 252,000 hectares of agricultural lands, and even result in the capacity to irrigate an additional 12,000 hectares of such lands. Although these facilities are being built by the Iranian side, they will be used jointly by the two states. This kind of cooperation between Baku and Tehran—as Fariz Ismailzade noted in his authorial contribution to an edited book on the Second Karabakh published by ADA University Press in September 2021 that he co-edited—"will not only bring economic benefits, but also provide a win-win aspect to Iranian-Azerbaijani relations and boost the regional focus on developing renewable sources of energy."

Also, the Ministry of Culture of Azerbaijan has cataloged 1,376 historical monuments and archaeological sites

of particular interest in the liberated territories, implementing their restoration in the reconstruction of cultural institutions demolished and/or vandalized by the Armenian occupation regime—i.e., libraries, museums, music schools, theaters, places of worship, etc.

It is symbolic that in May 2021, Shusha, the cultural capital of Azerbaijan, hosted the Khari Bulbul Music Festival for the first time in almost 30 years. It presented the works of musicians and artists from 13 countries of the world. In addition, in July 2021, Vagif Poetry Days were held in Shusha, which were previously held from 1982 to 1991. Events like these illustrate that Shusha, like the whole of Karabakh, has great spiritual significance for the Azerbaijani people—Karabakh is the nucleus of their national self-consciousness. The liberation of Karabakh is a new milestone in the recent history of Azerbaijan: the Azerbaijani people can now rightfully consider themselves to be a victorious people.

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## External Context

Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War brought Baku closer to its partners, starting with Türkiye, Pakistan, and Israel. The Azerbaijani side also demonstrated both the skill of its diplomacy and the high level of military cooperation with the rest of the world. Without a doubt, the Shusha Declaration signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan and Türkiye on 15 June

2021, has become a symbol of the strengthening and deepening of bilateral ties between Baku and Ankara. This document, among other things, stipulates a new level of "allied relations [...] on the basis of friendship and brotherhood between the two countries and peoples."

In parallel with this, Azerbaijan's success in the Second Karabakh War also contributed to the further development of relations with Israel. For the most part, it is about the economic sphere. Noteworthy in this regard are the increased trips by high-ranking Israeli officials to Azerbaijan, including Minister of Agriculture

and Rural Development Oded Forer and Minister of Finance Avigdor Lieberman, who visited Baku in spring 2022. It is also worth mentioning that the visit by Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz to Azerbaijan in early

October 2022 took place shortly after Iranian Deputy Defense Minister Admiral Amir Rastegari's visit to the country. Thus, Azerbaijan is one of the few states in the world that is able to conduct an open dialogue

and develop mutually beneficial relations with Israel and Iran concurrently. Furthermore, it is significant that now Tehran, being itself interested in rapprochement with Baku, as well as recognizing the strength and potential of its neighbor, began to react more restrainedly to the development of contacts between Azerbaijan and Israel.

By and large, Azerbaijan's victory in the 2020 war has fundamentally changed the balance of power in the region. "A new era started in the Caucasus with the Karabakh Victory," Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan emphasized in May 2022.

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In fact, Azerbaijan proved its leadership in the region not only by victory, but also by further developments in Karabakh itself. In addition, Baku continues to confirm its key regional standing through various multilateral format, for the most part those involving heightened connectivity cooperation.

Thus, the completion of regional oil and gas pipelines such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, the development of East-West transport corridors in the Silk Road region, the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway, and the development of new ports on the shores of the Caspian, starting from the Baku International Sea Trade Port (BSTP) in Alat, have made a huge contribution to the development of Azerbaijan as a link between Europe and Asia.

Nowadays, the importance of Baku is also growing in connection with the restructuring of international transport and trade chains in the wake of the conflict over Ukraine. Azerbaijan is gradually integrating into such large-scale transnational projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under the leadership of China. Covering 4,256 kilometers of railways and 508 kilometers of sea routes, this corridor stretches from the Chinese-Kazakh border to

Azerbaijan (via the Caspian Sea), Georgia, and Türkiye. The location of both the BTK and the BSTP in the central corridor has turned Azerbaijan into a keystone country in terms of realizing and reaching BRI's full potential.

In addition, Azerbaijan is a main component of the North-South transport corridor, on which Moscow, Baku, and Tehran are currently actively working. According to preliminary estimates, the total investment in the construction of the Qazvin-Resht-Astara section of this corridor is about \$400 million. The commodity market of the INSTC is estimated at the level of 25-26 million tons per year. The construction of this rail line was protracted due to the COVID-19 pandemic; it now appears that it will be fully completed in 2023. It is no coincidence that Azerbaijan, Russia, and Iran have reached several agreements in recent months on the simplification of customs procedures.

Then there is the matter of the recent agreement between Azerbaijan and the EU on the supply of additional gas by the former to the latter, which was made public during the visit of EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen to Baku in July 2022. As part of the deal, the European

Union will double its purchases of gas from Azerbaijan by 2027. This deal also expands the scope of strategic energy cooperation between the two sides, opening the way for cooperation in the supply of solar, wind, and hydrogen energy by Azerbaijan—a

prospect that would ensure many further decades of close cooperation between the two sides.

A landmark event, of course, was the inauguration of Greece-Bulgaria Gas Interconnector which was held on 1 October 2022. The total length of the Greece-Bulgaria Gas Interconnector (IGB) is 182 kilometers, and it connects the gas transmission networks of Bulgaria and Greece. The total cost of the interconnector is more than €240 million. IGB will deliver natural gas produced from Azerbaijan's "Shah Deniz-2" field to Bulgaria.

Actually, Azerbaijani gas is becoming one of the alternatives to Russian gas in Europe. However, at the same time, Baku manages to maintain close relations with Moscow, notwithstanding the fact that, in terms of energy supply, Baku

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*The Declaration on Allied Interaction with Moscow, the Shusha Declaration with Türkiye, and the MOU deepening the strategic energy partnership with the EU are all critical aspects of Azerbaijan's postwar geopolitical context.*

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is in some ways a competitor to its large neighbor. Of course, this is facilitated by the new allied nature of the Azerbaijani-Russian relations, which are now based on Declaration on Allied Interaction signed between the two countries

on 22 February 2022. As a matter of fact, this document, along with the aforementioned Shusha Declaration, helps Baku to maintain a balance in the region and avoid any insinuations of having "pro-Turkish" or "pro-Russian" approaches. The document signed with the EU in July 2022 should be at least partially understood within this geopolitical context.

In addition, during the Second Karabakh War, the Azerbaijani army proved its strength in practice. As Aliyev put in on 6 September 2022, "the combat experience of the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan, which fought the war of the 21st century, is being carefully studied in the military centers of countries nowadays."

In this regard, it is no coincidence that during the visit of the

Azerbaijani leader to Uzbekistan in June 2022, Baku and Tashkent reached an agreement on military-technical cooperation. Hence Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan can build a new axis of military-technical cooperation within the Turkic Council.

In parallel with this, the restoration and development of infrastructure in Karabakh has not gone unnoticed by foreign investors. After 30 years of neglect, this region of Azerbaijan is becoming more and more attractive to private enterprise. Definitely, Turkish firms have taken a lion's share of projects to rebuild Karabakh. In particular, in January 2021, İlhami Öztürk, the chairman of the Turkish TUMKIAD association, which units leading businesspeople and entrepreneurs in Türkiye, revealed plans to invest about \$50 million in the liberated lands. For the most part, Turkish companies are concentrated in the construction sector.

Other fraternal Turkic nations like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (both are Central Asian keystone states) have expressed their desire to actively invest in Karabakh. Astana has already begun construction of a Creative Development Center for Children in the Fizuli region and Tashkent is completing the construction of a large school in

the same city, which is expected to be put into operation this autumn.

Investors from EU countries are also showing interest in Karabakh. In particular, in December 2021, Italy and Azerbaijan signed an agreement on cooperation in the framework of the creation of the energy infrastructure of Karabakh. Thus, the Italian company Ansaldo Energia received a €5 million contract to create energy infrastructure in the liberated territories. Also, in March 2021, Hungary's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó said that six Hungarian companies would contribute to reconstruction projects in Azerbaijan. Thus, Hungary's Eximbank is believed to be providing a \$100 million credit to promote such ventures.

Along with this, the Japanese company TEPCO is working with BP to set up renewable energy plants in the liberated territories, including solar energy production facility. As Azerbaijan's Ministry of Energy informed in February 2022, TEPCO has prepared and submitted to the government a concept document titled "Green Energy Zone in the Liberated Territories." This is a strong indication that "green" energy projects are preferred in the construction work to be carried out in Karabakh. According to

preliminary estimates, the area's solar energy potential is 7,200 MW and wind energy potential is 2,000 MW.

Moreover, in June 2022, Azerbaijan's Energy Ministry and UAE-owned renewable energy company Masdar signed an Implementation Agreements on 4 GW onshore and offshore wind and solar power projects, including some located in Karabakh and East Zangezur, and 2 GW offshore wind and green hydrogen facilities. Also, in June 2022, Saudi Arabian ACWA Power's Chief Investment Officer (CIO) Clive Turton said his company is ready to work with Azerbaijan on decarbonization projects. "The Karabakh region has great potential both in the field of installing solar and wind power plants," he noted.

In parallel with this, delegations of foreign tourists are already arriving in Karabakh. Although such trips are, for the moment, more in the service of enabling such groups to familiarize themselves with the state of the region during the occupation as well as highlight the rapidity of the restoration work taking place, it is extremely important for influential foreigners to get acquainted with the postwar development of Karabakh. For example, one of the most frequent

visitors to the liberated territories in recent months has been Charles Veley, the founder of America's MTP (Most Traveled People) club, one of the four largest travel clubs in the world.

"We expect that the emerging Karabakh tourist zone and East Zangezur will attract about one million local foreign tourists by 2025," said Fuad Nagiyev, chairman of the State Tourism Agency in January 2022.

In their own way, media outlets with global reach that cover what is happening in Karabakh can also play an important role in these processes. Thus, for instance, on 18 September 2022 representatives of Al Jazeera, The Independent, El País, and a number of other foreign media visited the Fizuli region and then widely disseminated information about the situation in the region to an audience of many millions.

### *New Reality, Old Challenges*

The results of the Second Karabakh War have markedly shaped the new reality in the region. However, a number of urgent problems still remain on the regional agenda. It is extremely

important to implement all the provisions of the 10 November 2020 tripartite agreement. This includes paragraph 9 of this document, which states that "the Republic of Armenia 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."

However, almost two years later, the government of Armenia has done practically nothing to implement this clause. In turn, Baku raises this issue at many venues, both via bilateral and multilateral formats. For example, Iran and especially Türkiye, which will gain more direct access to the markets of Central Asia via this route, have already declared their interest in the Zangezur corridor. "This corridor will provide the shortest road link between China and Europe and will promote closer integration between Europe and Asia," said Azerbaijan's ambassador to Türkiye Rashad Mammadov in May 2022, adding that the realization of the corridor will ensure the establishment of direct land connections of the main part of Azerbaijan with both the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and Türkiye.

Another, no less important issue for Baku and Yerevan is the presence of Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh, who may vacate the area as early as November 2025 as per the terms of the tripartite agreement. Armenia may want to extend the mandate for the Russian military, but the language of the document in question indicates that it is sufficient for one of the three signatories to indicate a desire for these troops to leave. Thus, all need to agree for them to stay; it takes only one for them to leave. In public statements and official documents, Azerbaijan has underscored the temporary nature of the presence of Russian soldiers on its territory. This, in turn, suggests that plans are underway for all the territories and settlements of Karabakh, including those that fall within the Russian peacekeeping zone like Khankendi, will come under the full administrative and military control of Azerbaijan. Baku considers this matter to be separate from the peace process with Armenia.

In this regard, the return of the city of Lachin as well as the villages of Sus and Zabuh to the control of Azerbaijan at the end of August 2022 is a harbinger. "I want to say again that no one and nothing can stop us. [...] We are on the side of the law, justice, and international

law. We have restored our territorial integrity and are protecting it,” Aliyev said on 21 September 2022, during his visit to liberated Lachin.

Here it is important to mention the threat posed by revanchist sentiments in Armenian society. There are two basic categories here: the political opposition in the country and the diaspora. The former is engaged in an internal political struggle by trying to put pressure on Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The latter—or at least its leadership, which is colloquially referred to as the Armenian lobby—has tasked itself with inciting their compatriots to engage in various forms of provocation. Both play a negative role, but the diaspora is doing so in ways that fall beyond the scope of legitimate political disagreement: their radical supporters have engaged in a series of recent attacks against Azerbaijani diplomatic missions abroad. In this context one could also mention periodic aggravations on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in particular in May and November 2021, as well as in mid-September 2022.

The delimitation of borders, as well as control over them, is an extremely topical issue for Baku and Yerevan today. A positive step in this direction was the formation

of a joint Azerbaijani-Armenian commission at the end of May 2022. How soon a peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia will be signed also largely depends on the productivity and success of its work. “Demarcation and delimitation works are urgently needed to clarify some contested areas, prevent further escalation between the warring sides, and ensure security and stability for the surrounding villages on both sides of the border”—to quote the words written by Fariz Ismailzade in his aforementioned book chapter.

The issue of demining the liberated lands should also be mentioned. If Armenia had fully provided accurate maps of mine fields, Azerbaijan’s task of demining would have been simplified. It also would have likely produced fewer casualties. As of 9 October 2022, 259 Azerbaijanis have been killed or injured by Armenian mines since the end of the Second Karabakh War, according to the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA). However, since November 2020, Azerbaijan has cleared 54,841 hectares of area. In addition, 25,751 anti-personnel and 12,547 anti-tank mines have been found by ANAMA. Reports also indicate that Armenian forces have planted at least 1,400 new landmines since the end of the war.

Also, the Azerbaijani leadership has had to overcome the consequences of environmental pollution and smuggling in Karabakh. “Armenia has savagely exploited gold and other precious metal deposits in Zangilan and other districts. In Zangilan, the Vejnali gold deposit was brutally exploited. They have also turned the area into an ecological disaster zone. The illegally mined gold was then smuggled abroad,” said Ilham Aliyev in May 2022.

An additional challenge for the region is the unclear position of individual countries and politicians regarding the Armenian-Azerbaijani settlement. For instance, the French and U.S. ambassadors refused to visit Shusha at the end of August 2022. “We consider French and U.S. ambassadors’ non acceptance invitation to Shusha as disrespect to Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity,” assistant to Azerbaijani President Hikmet Hajiyev pointed out in this context. On the other hand, Russian Ambassador to Azerbaijan Mikhail Bocharnikov visited the cultural capital of Azerbaijan in July 2022.

And then there are the provocative actions against Azerbaijan and Armenia by people who should just know better. The visit of Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives

Nancy Pelosi on 17-19 September 2022, who thought it in the interest of her country to make a number of harsh statements about Baku, was not only unhelpful but could have set back the peace process under different circumstances. Such and similar actions can clearly exacerbate an already sensitive and tense situation in the region.

### *Post-Conflict Settlement*

Regardless of all the existing difficulties and contradictions, Baku and Yerevan need to come to a common denominator and agree on the text of a peace agreement that will serve as a guarantor of stability and peace for the entire South Caucasus.

In March 2022, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs released 5 basic principles to which, in the opinion of Baku, the parties must adhere in order to establish diplomatic relations: the mutual recognition of respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and inviolability of internationally recognized borders and political independence of each other; the mutual confirmation of the absence of territorial claims against each other and the acceptance of legally-binding obligations not to raise such a claim in future; the obligation to refrain

in their inter-state relations from undermining the security of each other, from the threat or use of force both against political independence and territorial integrity, and in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the UN Charter; the delimitation and demarcation of the state border and the establishment of diplomatic relations; and the unblocking of transportation and other communications, building other communications as appropriate, and the establishment of cooperation in other fields of mutual interest.

“In principle, I said some time ago that if Armenia is interested, the peace agreement could be signed by the end of the year. [...] I must say that no-one—neither the Armenian side nor the European Union—has any questions about the five principles we have declared. Today, during the meeting with the President of France, I saw that these five principles are being accepted.” So said Aliyev in Prague on 6 October 2022 during the inaugural meeting of the European Political Community.

At the same time, one of the most urgent tasks for Azerbaijan remains the issue of reintegration of the ethnic-Armenian minority of Karabakh into Azerbaijani society. As Ismailzade

underscored in this aforementioned chapter, Baku “must develop a positive and forward-looking stimulus package that include both economic and security arrangements, preparations for which seems to be nearing their end.”

On the other hand, a lot, of course, depends on the willingness of Karabakh’s Armenian minority to again be part of Azerbaijan. The incessant provocations and revanchist speeches made by some representatives of political parties in Armenia and the Armenian diaspora abroad only serve to alienate the Armenians of Karabakh and make it less possible for them to co-exist with other peoples within the framework of the Azerbaijani state.

Here we can again refer to Aliyev’s words uttered in Prague: “We plan to step up consultations within the framework of our foreign policy agenda and continue informal relations with representatives of the Armenian population of Karabakh. I must say that such interaction has been ongoing for some time now. I think this will lead to a complete understanding with the population still living in the area of responsibility of the Russian peacekeeping contingent because there is simply no other option of integrating into Azerbaijani society. If people believe that they need to live as

citizens of Azerbaijan, I think they will not regret that.”

Moscow and Brussels can make their positive contribution to the cause of a peaceful settlement. In view of the fact that Russia is now involved in an armed conflict on the territory of Ukraine, the European Union has begun to gradually seize the initiative. Thus, in May and August 2022, it was through the mediation of the President of the EU Council Charles Michel that talks between Aliyev and Pashinyan took place. The next talks in this format are preliminarily scheduled to take place in Brussels in November 2022 this year.

Meanwhile, on 6 October 2022, Aliyev and Pashinyan met in Prague with the participation of French President Emmanuel Macron and the President of the EU Council, Charles Michel. Following the meeting, a statement released by France and the EU indicated that Azerbaijan and Armenia had “confirmed their commitment to the Charter of the United Nations and the Alma Ata 1991 Declaration through which both recognize each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty.” In fact, this means that Karabakh has once again been confirmed as an integral part of Azerbaijan. Recognizing

Azerbaijan’s sovereignty, Armenia recognizes the power of Azerbaijan over Karabakh. The same statement also indicated that “there was an agreement by Armenia to facilitate a civilian EU mission alongside the border with Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan agreed to cooperate with this mission as far as it is concerned. The mission will start in October for a maximum of two months. The aim of this mission is to build confidence and, through its reports, to contribute to the border commissions.”

However, Moscow continues to play a coordinating role on the issue of border delimitation. Thus, at the end of August 2022, a second meeting of the Commission on the delimitation and demarcation of the Azerbaijani-Armenian border was held in the Russian capital, after the first such meeting was held in Brussels at the end of May 2022. So, Moscow and Brussels can complement each other’s efforts, especially in the wake of the Prague summit, which paved the way for the two principal mediators to help Baku and Yerevan hammer out the details of a peace agreement that may put an end to one of the longest and bloodiest territorial conflicts in the post-Cold War era.

One important point is that Baku and Yerevan need a new negotiating format, since the OSCE Minsk



Group is no longer an acceptable one. As Aliyev put it in June 2022, “the OSCE Minsk Group is dead, it is impossible to revive it.” The Azerbaijani side called on Armenia to engage in direct talks many times. However, the Armenian side has not responded to this suggestion yet, although there are reports of direct informal talks taking place on the margins of various meetings. All in all, the latest developments demonstrate that direct dialogue between Baku and Yerevan is the optimal way forward.

One of the new platforms in the future could be the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where, as SCO Secretary-General Zhang Ming said in March 2022, the granting of observer status to Azerbaijan and Armenia is now being actively discussed. The 3+3 regional platform proposed by the Azerbaijani and Turkish presidents also remains relevant. This format could bring Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia together with Iran,

Russia, and Türkiye in order to solve all the urgent regional issues without any external actors. However, it is well-known that Tbilisi is not prone to participate in this format due to its unresolved territorial disputes with Russia regarding two breakaway entities (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) that unilaterally declared their independence from Georgia in 2008, with Russian political and military support. At the same time, since Moscow has gotten bogged down in Ukraine, Tbilisi gained some room to play a certain mediation role between Baku and Yerevan.

In any case, it is important for Baku and Yerevan to establish a direct and mutually trusting dialogue, without mediators. The first bilateral meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia Jeyhun Bayramov and Ararat Mirzoyan, held in Tbilisi in July 2022, and then in Geneva on 2 October 2022, demonstrated that such a direct dialogue between the parties is possible. **BD**

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