

# BAKU DIALOGUES

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# Will Armenia Accept the Peace Dividend on Offer?

## Never Closer...But Close Enough?

*Damjan Krnjević Mišković*

This essay seeks to provide informed guidance to those wishing to assess the likelihood of Armenia accepting the peace dividend on offer by Azerbaijan in the time ahead. Its publication takes place two years after the start of the Second Karabakh War; one month after brief yet deadly military clashes along the as-yet undelimited state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan; and against the backdrop of three important high-level meetings in the first two weeks of October 2022, the cumulative outcome of which has been portrayed as effectually constituting the start of substantive negotiations on an omnibus peace treaty.

There was no expectation that a breakthrough would be the immediate result of these meetings—specifically, the 2 October 2022 meeting in Geneva between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the 5 October 2022 meeting in Prague between President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia, and the 14 October 2022 meeting in Astana between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, these and other recent meetings appear to have gone well enough. Both the statements and readouts that emerged from these meetings indicate that the parties

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are still very much in the midst of a complex peace process of difficult-to-forecast duration and outcome. An important reason is the fact that there are a lot of intricately moving parts: aspects of this overall endeavor are concurrently being *mediated* by the President of Russia, *facilitated* by the President of the European Council, and *supported* by the U.S. Secretary of State and the U.S. National Security Advisor (and, to some extent, the presidents of France and Türkiye as well as the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) and their respective staffs.

Success is not a foregone conclusion: a derailment is still possible, notwithstanding the fact that each of these foreign players portray themselves as honest brokers and both Baku and Yerevan seem to trust sufficiently their various approaches. Although Moscow and the Western actors do not trust each other's intentions, initiatives, and actions in almost all other geopolitical theaters, the preponderance of the evidence, as of this writing, indicates that, by and large, the main foreign players have not actively and certainly not decisively undermined each other's efforts in the Armenia-Azerbaijan theater. Perhaps some behind-the-scenes coordination is still taking place. What is more certain

is that peacemaking efforts have regained a sense of urgency, as indicated by the events subsequent to a tweet posted by the U.S. National Security Advisor at the conclusion of a meeting between his Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts that he hosted at the White House on 28 September 2022 in which emphasis was placed on the importance of "pursuing time-bound and focused negotiations."

On 12 October 2022, Secretary of the Security Council of Armenia Armen Grigoryan stated on the country's state-run television network that "we should have a peace agreement by the end of the year." This unqualified expression of optimism could be interpreted as an answer of sorts to Aliyev's qualified statement to reporters in Prague on 6 October 2022: "in principle, I said some time ago that if Armenia is interested, the peace agreement could be signed by the end of the year." The statements of most other proponents and opponents alike have been both less explicit and less definitive—although they too concur that peace appears closer than it has in decades, raising hopes (or fears) that it is within reach. This is due to a number of factors. Two revolving around Armenia can be singled out at the onset. *First*, since war's end, Pashinyan seems to be

personally dedicated to ending the underlying territorial conflict with Azerbaijan. *Second*, the peace dividend for Armenia that would result from a comprehensive treaty with Azerbaijan would almost certainly be extended in short order to one with Türkiye; the achievement of the latter is assuredly dependent on that of the former—this is the message that has been conveyed by Ankara and is fully understood in Yerevan.

On this basis and others, we can assert that Pashinyan has made the following prudential determination on behalf of the citizens of Armenia: the sticker price of peace is worth paying. This, in turn, suggests that the prime minister has made a determined judgment that Armenia's sustainable political and economic future is predicated on rejecting a national allegiance to a halcyon past that fell to the wayside many centuries ago and has no realistic chance whatsoever of making a comeback. If the foregoing is accurate, what remains to be determined is *how* and *when* to make the payment.

### *Unviable Alternatives*

Unfortunately, the evident advantages for Armenia of making peace with Azerbaijan and Türkiye remains unconvincing for some. Comparing these with a brief examination of what would be required to overturn the definitive result of the Second Karabakh War and the consequences deriving thereof is thus warranted.

Here then, is what, at a minimum, this sort of conceit would need to entail in practice. *First*, the sudden discovery of massive hydrocarbon deposits in Armenia or the country's rapid transformation into the Singapore of the Silk Road region. *Second*, the aptitude to safely and forever push Türkiye back out of the South Caucasus. *Third*, the ability to incentivize the 'international community'—or, more accurately, leading actors from the West—to engage in the region on the side of Armenia more seriously and one-sidedly than has ever before been the case. And *fourth*, the wherewithal to entice Russia to actively and exclusively support

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Armenia's maximalist position by any means necessary—up to and including a readiness to engage in an offensive military campaign against Azerbaijan (and almost certainly Türkiye) for the sake of land the Kremlin has consistently recognized as being Azerbaijan's sovereign territory—and in political and economic conditions that are, shall we say, suboptimal for the Kremlin. We cannot leave it unsaid that a necessary prerequisite to the successful instauration of these novel circumstances on the part of Armenia would be the wholesale political isolation, economic constriction, and martial disassembly of Azerbaijan taking place more or less synchronously with the above.

The bottom line is that Armenian revanchist success would be predicated on the instauration of novel geopolitical and geo-economic circumstances that Yerevan simply does not have the capability to engender, much less set in motion. Yet there are those who still champion Armenian maximalism and thus

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not only believe the opposite but champion its pursuit.

This is, of course, effectually impossible. But, we could hypothesize, not impossible per se. As a brief thought experiment, we could say that making all this possible would require the embrace of a belief in the sort of

divine intercession that so far has been limited primarily to the works and days of Moses and David: the founder and re-founder of a nation whose uniqueness is unbreakably tied to its covenantal status as 'am 'olam—the eternal nation. The logical progression of such a truly heretical position would, thus, require embracing a belief in the categorical substitution of Jerusalem by Etchmiadzin—or, even more radically, of Christ by Gregory—as the eschatological focal point of humanity. That would indubitably constitute the paradigmatic definition of both theological absurdity and ethnic hubris in the absence, of course, of a new divine revelation. A detailed consideration of such a hypothetical is evidently beyond the scope of this essay. To this can be added the obvious, namely that

there is no indication whatsoever that Pashinyan is inclined to embrace such or similar beliefs.

Unlike his opponents, Pashinyan evidently understands that it would be truly foolhardy for his country henceforth to advocate, much less pursue, policies that burden another generation of its citizens with the perpetuation of what amount to eschatological illusions and the realities of poverty and insecurity. As Gerald Libaridian so aptly phrased it in February 2021, “it takes a particular kind of impudence to prescribe again the cure to the disease that incapacitated the patient and brought him close to death.” (Statements made over a number of years by his former boss, Levon Ter-Petrosian, indicate that the former president, too, stands on the same side as Pashinyan of this crucial Armenian societal divide.)

But this sort of prudential reasoning has not sufficiently cleared the political deck in Yerevan—not to mention in competing centers of influence in the Armenian world. Regrettably, a central challenge remains Pashinyan’s seeming inability to bring under his full control the state’s “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force”—the fundamental characteristic of a functional, sovereign state as de-

finied and laid out by Max Weber in his famous 1919 lecture *Politics as a Vocation*. Recent events suggest that elements of Armenia’s armed forces, police, and even security services may be operating beyond Pashinyan’s authority: he seems to lack sufficient political power to bring them fully to heel (although this may be in the process of changing). Furthermore, there is credible speculation that such and similar elements receive support from at least three categories of actors: *first*, some opposition party leaders, whose irredentism was decidedly rejected at the ballot box by the citizens of Armenia in June 2021; *second*, various well-funded and influential diaspora organizations (including ones that advocate violence) operating for the most part beyond the borders of Armenia with impunity; and *third*, perhaps even elements in foreign decision-making centers whose interests, as they themselves understand them, would be deleteriously affected by peace between Armenia, on the one hand, and Azerbaijan and Türkiye, on the other hand.

It is with this in mind that we can turn to an examination of some of the threads that the ongoing peace process is supposed to weave closer together within a framework of legal and political sempiternity.

## Geopolitics

The territorial conflict over Karabakh came to an end on 10 November 2020 with the signing of a tripartite statement between the Prime Minister of Armenia, the President of Azerbaijan, and the President of Russia that concluded the Second Karabakh War. Through a sophisticated combination of strategic foresight, limited war objectives, operational artistry, active diplomacy, and impeccable geopolitical timing, Azerbaijan accomplished a feat that no other state anywhere in the world has been able to achieve since the end of the Cold War: the restoration of its territorial integrity executed effectually without the organized commission of grievous atrocities or similar defilements. And Baku did so, it must be added, against the diplomatic objections voiced by what is called by its proponents a “rules-based liberal international order.” Addressing the nation from liberated Shusha in August 2021, Ilham Aliyev de-

finied the country’s victory in the Second Karabakh War as being “unique in our history.”

In some Western decisionmaking and analytical circles, this war of restoration is still somehow portrayed as an aggressive act that intruded against the “rules-based liberal international order.” Fantastic interpretations have even been put

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forward that the war was somehow in violation of international law. Yet given that a number of binding UN Security Council resolutions and other such legally-binding documents—coupled with the official political position of every single sovereign state, including now Armenia it-

self (as indicated at least implicitly in Pashinyan’s various recent statements, including one reproduced below)—make it clear that the territories formerly occupied by Armenian forces are in fact sovereign Azerbaijani lands, it seems difficult to understand on what reasonable basis such claims continue to be made, much less taken seriously.

In truth, a sober, dispassionate examination of the circumstances that led to the Second Karabakh War as well as its outcome leads to the conclusion that there was nothing politically or legally (or, for that matter, morally) wrong with Azerbaijan's chosen course of action in 2020. The country acted well within its right of inherent self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter.

Now, of course, prior to the commencement of hostilities in the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan took pains to ensure the steady improvement of its military capabilities; and it worked diligently to lock in the strong, virtually unconditional support of Türkiye that made it harder for other geopolitical actors to exert undue pressure on Azerbaijan to stick to evidently fruitless negotiations or renew its subscription to sterile agendas set by others, and so on. Here, words spoken by Aliyev on 12 February 2019 can be cited:

I have always said that the force factor is coming to the fore in the world. Look at how international law is flagrantly violated in various parts of the world. Whereas earlier attempts were made to somehow conceal that, today they don't even see the need for that. Today, the 'might is

right' principle prevails in the world. This is a new reality. We must be ready for it. The world is changing, and we must be prepared for these changes. Fortunately, we have been building up our economic and military power for many years. We were somewhat preparing ourselves for the current situation and are now ready for it. Therefore, the force factor has always been and will remain on the agenda. We see this in the example of not only our conflict but also in many other conflicts around the world. Therefore, we will use various opportunities, and the restoration of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan is our main goal. The people of Azerbaijan should know that this is the main task of every citizen and the main task of the state. We will continue our policy in this direction.

None of this takes away from the fact that emphasis needs to be placed on Yerevan's evident unwillingness, prior to the onset of the Second Karabakh War, to bring the occupation to an end peacefully, through good-faith negotiations. And it did not think Baku would respond decisively to what amounted to a war of attrition, in part because it overestimated the extent of its own external backing. This was obviously a failure of Armenian statecraft.

At the same time, it is not enough to point the finger solely at Armenia. The principal outside mediators to the conflict over Karabakh—the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group (Russia, France, and the United States)—were also at fault: there was a formal negotiation process that had effectually produced no concrete results on the ground since the May 1994 ceasefire mediated by Russia, in the sense that the Armenian occupation had not come to an end, Azerbaijani refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) had been prevented from exercising their right of return, and so on. In other words, for nearly three decades, the Minsk Group led negotiations the objectives of which were clearly and unambiguously set down on paper. The foreign mediators gave themselves the responsibility of leading a defined process to achieve a defined result, and yet the conflict remained unresolved: prior to the onset of the Second Karabakh War, none of the Minsk Group's defined objectives had been achieved—not even close. Thus, their actions or inaction—whether by design or circumstance—resulted in the perpetuation of a status quo that was the opposite of the agreed objectives. And by 10 November 2020, the conflict over Karabakh was effectually resolved; to be sure, against the designs of Armenia and with no in-

volvement by the Minsk Group. But effectually resolved, nonetheless.

With the above in mind, the following question can be raised: how then, exactly, is a state acting militarily to retake its own sovereign territories committing an act deserving of opprobrium by the most vocal proponents of a "rules-based liberal international order"—namely the United States and its allied fellow-travelers? Or, to employ a more radical formulation: how exactly did Azerbaijan commit anything resembling an act of aggression by liberating its lands universally acknowledged by the proponents of such an order as having been occupied? The salience of such and similar questions has only grown in the wake of unambiguous statements by the very same proponents of that very same order in the context of the conflict over Ukraine.

To be clear: until the Second Karabakh War, Yerevan's official foreign policy posture was rooted in an assessment that as 'Artsakh' is to Armenia, so South Ossetia (or Abkhazia, or the Donbass—take your pick) is to Russia. In other words, geopolitics in the South Caucasus will remain primarily within the referential purview of the traditional suzerain, who will remain on the side of Armenia.

Armenia The national interest of Armenia consists in entrenching a posture of clientelism and supplication towards the sole arbiter that truly matters, which will engender it to demonstrate solidarity and support for a state dedicated to the expression of nearly unconditional loyalty. Thus, Yerevan must continue to rely on its great power ally to maintain the status quo of occupation while feverishly encouraging its diaspora to convince rival great powers that genuine outreach on the part of Armenia to each of them will be forthcoming shortly. This is evidently not the way it was put in any written form. But the point is that the above formulations are consistent with the discursive logic informing Yerevan's official foreign policy posture prior to the war.

This is to be contrasted with Baku's foreign policy posture before, during, and after the Second Karabakh War (as above, the same terminological caveat applies). It can be understood thusly: in continuing to reach out to the world, Azerbaijan will not allow itself to become dependent on any single line of access to the outside world. The country will strategically harness the fact that most of the world's great powers look at the South Caucasus and conclude that they have variously important national security

and economic interests. And it will take advantage of the fact that there is tension between those same great powers in terms of how they each define their respective interests in this part of the world by managing relations between them in such a way as to ensure that Azerbaijan becomes a subject of the international system instead of a mere object of great power rivalry. (This strategic takeaway can be translated into contemporary international relations terminology: careful bandwagoning, pragmatic balancing, strategic hedging, finding a balance of interests, predictability, and strategic patience.)

### Statecraft

From such considerations, in the halls of power in Baku there emerged a bedrock principle of Azerbaijani statecraft: to formulate and execute a strategy that ensures it becomes sovereign and strong enough so that it—and it alone—may determine the time and manner of the restoration of its territorial integrity (given the fruitlessness of negotiations). Niccolò Machiavelli had written pretty much the same thing more succinctly more than five centuries ago: “one should never fall in the belief you can find someone to pick you up.” (NM, P. 24).

Accordingly, Azerbaijan's national strategy, conceived and executed first by Heydar Aliyev and then by Ilham Aliyev, may be formulated in accordance with Machiavellian terminology thusly: only by having recourse to “one's own arms” might “the state” become its own master in both peace and war; this requires the prudential execution of “virtue” (as opposed to the “profession of good”) and the opportunities provided by “fortune,” whose vicissitudes can best be “tamed” or even resisted by its “most excellent” prince (for the formulations in context, see NM, P. 6, 13, 15, and 25).

Machiavelli is particularly instructive here for two more reasons. First, because perhaps more than any political philosopher before or since, he understood that the sovereign part of “the state” is not the deliberative one, as in classical political philosophy, but rather the executive endowed with “great prudence” acting “decisively” and “alone” (again, references to the quoted formulations may be found, respectively, in NM, D. II:26, II:15, and I:2; see also D. I:9, III:6, and elsewhere). Second, because Machiavelli did not place much weight or trust on institutional designs intended to domesticate the executive power of the prince. This development came later, as

Harvey Mansfield has pointed out in *Taming the Prince* (1989): first in the works of Thomas Hobbes and then, more directly, in those produced by John Locke, Montesquieu, and the authors of the *Federalist Papers* collectively writing under the pseudonym Publius.

Be that as it may, no serious inquiry into the statecraft of Azerbaijan in the context of the Second Karabakh War—about how its leadership decided to fight a war of liberation, the preparations that took place, and the execution of these well-laid plans that brought about a victory that decisively changed the geopolitics of the Caucasus and perhaps beyond—can be complete without giving an account of the statesmanship of Ilham Aliyev, without whom the larger story of a nation's vindication would simply not have come about. A complete account of this statesmanship is beyond the ambition of this essay, but it is sufficient for present purposes to underline that one cannot speak of vindication without noting that Azerbaijan's statecraft is effectually predicated on a particularly sophisticated understanding of classical geopolitics, which we can define as consisting of more or less prudential exercises in acceptable exceptions by major powers conducive to the continued

operation of an international system. If a given international system precludes or disallows such exercises of acceptable exception—we can define these as a succession of power maneuvers understood in the context of the need to maintain equilibrium and legitimacy, operating according to a logic of restraint and proportioned reciprocity—it is either too rigid and hence ripe for renovation, or too amorphous and thus not really a system.

Furthermore, within such a conception of geopolitics, distinct regional orders can be established so long as they are anchored by what Giovanni Botero—a sixteenth century political and economic thinker and diplomat (who claimed to write in direct opposition to Machiavelli)—was the first to call in his 1589 book, titled *The Reason of State*, “middle powers,” which he defined as states that have “sufficient force and authority to stand on [their] own without the need of help from others” (Bot. *RS* I:2). In Botero’s telling, which is not so different

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from that of his declared opponent, leaders of middle powers tend to be acutely aware of the dexterity required to maintain security and project influence in a prudent manner beyond their immediate borders; and because of that, middle powers are apt to have facility in properly managing their finances and promoting trade and connectivity with their neighbors and their neighbors’ neighbors.

Unquestionably, Azerbaijan is one such middle power—better described by the likes of Nikolas Gvosdev, Gregory Gleason, and others in the pages of *Baku Dialogues* and elsewhere as a “keystone state”: a trusted interlocutor, reliable intermediary, and “critical mediator” between “status quo powers and revisionists.” This integrative power is supplemented by the fact that “an effective keystone state can serve as a pressure-release valve in the international system, particularly as the transition to conditions of non-polarity continues, by acting as a buffer and reducing the potential for conflict between major power centers.”

The story of Azerbaijan that emerges on the basis of such an account is thus one of leadership and success, foresight and perseverance, and modernization and the consolidation of power. Certainly, it is also an Armenian story about tragedy, in the original Aristotelian understanding of the term—about how successive Armenian leaders committed geopolitical malpractice through a combination of strategic complacency, the blind ambition exhibited in the continued defense of maximalist goals, and both a fundamental misunderstanding and woeful underestimation of the country’s main adversary. This sort of thing falls within the realm of what Aristotle called the “lesson of tragedy”—the mistaken demand men make that their particular and thus partial understanding of justice must prevail in the world (Arist. *Poet.* 1453a8-23. Consult also 1455b25-ff and 1460b6-ff. Cf. 1460b22 and 1461b24).

Thus, for the Armenians, the outcome of the Second Karabakh War rightly understood constitutes the

passing of an illusion. But for the Azerbaijanis, quite simply, the outcome of the war represents an exoneration. The story of Azerbaijan that emerged from the Second Karabakh War is truly an extraordinary one: how in less than a generation’s time, Azerbaijan was transformed from a failing if not failed state so weak that it had no choice but to accept an armistice that effectually normalized the occupation of around 20 percent of its territory by a neighbor almost three times smaller and more than three times less populated, into a victorious, exonerated, and proud state that understands the classical distinction between justice and hubris.

Machiavelli, who is famous for not strictly maintaining the line between the two, is nonetheless particularly instructive here for a further reason. To get at this with a maximum of brevity, we can turn once more to a passage written by Harvey Mansfield, Machiavelli’s most thoughtful living exegetist. In a 2006 book dedicated to the subject, Mansfield defined “manliness” as “confidence and [the ability to]

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command in a situation of risk” or “the assertion of meaning when meaning is at risk”—that is to say, the necessary retention of humanity combined with the possibility of excellence, understood as prudent or courageous or spirited action. An aim of that book on manliness, Mansfield suggested elsewhere, was to recapture the Greek notion of “spiritedness” (*thumos*) which the author defined as the “part of the soul that connects one’s own to the good. [...] It is first of all a wary reaction rather than eager forward movement, though it may attack if that is the best defense.”

Thinking through the implications of this notion of spiritedness helps to explain why politics properly understood can never simply be about self-interest, and why at the same it can never be simply about altruism. Spiritedness points to statesmanship, both the Machiavellian kind and a more ancient sort that goes back at least as far as the political writings of Aristotle and his teacher Plato. We could even say that spiritedness properly understood is the ancient virtue closest to Machiavelli’s understanding of “virtue,” in the sense that the effectual truth of either and thus both is shown in its effect or outcome as opposed to its intention or inherent excellence. Hence Machiavelli’s denigration, even

dismissal, of those “many” whose political science is predicated on having “imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth” (NM, P. 15).

### *Effectual Truth*

To understand the outcome of the Second Karabakh War and the logic of peacemaking that has come in its stead requires at least a grasp, if not an understanding, of what Machiavelli called—in the same passage cited above—the “effectual truth.” Although he did not phrase it this way, we may reason that a necessary part of “effectual truth” as Machiavelli sees it is that history never ends, the future is uncertain, one’s friends are always imperfect, power politics never go away, and no political cause is ever truly just. From this we can derive an important Machiavellian lesson: consistently guarding against the temptation to push aside the moderating insubordination of the ways of the world ought not to be seen as either reactionary cynicism or treason; but rather as a commonsensical and healthy caution against championing for a world as it never could be and advocating the use of all means to get there. This is effectually what happened to the Armenians at the moment of the

onset of the Second Karabakh War: they managed to bluff themselves into a corner from which they could not extricate themselves.

In other words, Armenia failed to see that its maximalist position was no longer tenable, certainly not in September 2020—an inexcusable act of geopolitical malpractice on the part of Yerevan that naturally produced the sort of response one would expect from the leadership of any serious, strategically conscious, and geopolitically literate keystone state such as Azerbaijan. Simply put, Armenia was outmatched, outgunned, and outmanoeuvred. A few months after the end of that war, Princeton University’s Michael Reynolds explained the situation thusly: “Armenian statecraft [...] revealed itself as a mix of delusional self-confidence and naive sentimentality [that led it] voluntarily to pursue self-destructive policies.” He then concluded his judgment thusly: “Armenia’s example perhaps suggests that historical trauma coupled with limited experience of sovereignty can lead states voluntarily to pursue self-destructive policies.” This accurate assessment is consistent not only with an understanding of Machiavellian “effectual truth,” but also, ironically, with Aristotle’s understanding of tragedy.

Making use of the aforementioned commonsensical and healthy caution does not mean turning away from one’s past achievements, but rather turning to face the real prospect of being outflanked because of one’s inability to learn from past mistakes. What was required most was a clinical examination of what *could not* be achieved. It is still what is most required—and it is a testament to Pashinyan’s virtue that he has displayed genuine flashes of having done so seriously, perhaps even doing so in a systematic fashion after having secured his reelection in June 2021. (Regretfully, this requirement is precisely what is still *not* being fulfilled by his opponents.) For instance, we could conclude that Pashinyan has grasped the effectually true and tragic danger of falsely equating blind ambition with classical “spiritedness” misunderstood as “virtue” in the Machiavellian sense. And for this, much credit should go to the Armenian prime minister. This grasping by Pashinyan continues to represent the Armenian hinge upon which peace with Azerbaijan (and Türkiye) remains possible.

To this we can add that there is no clearer public statement of Pashinyan’s peacemaking intention—a vital reason why we are justified in asserting that peace appears closer now than it has in



decades—than the one he made in the Armenian parliament on 14 September 2022, which is worth reproducing here:

We want to sign a document because of which many people will criticize us, scold us, call us traitors, they may even decide to remove us from power, but we will be grateful if as a result Armenia will have lasting peace and security in an area of 29,800 square kilometers. I clearly state that I will sign a document that will ensure that. I am not interested in what will happen to me, I am interested in what will happen to Armenia. I am ready to make tough decisions for the sake of peace.

The prime minister's reference to "29,800 kilometers" is key. It unmistakably excludes any territory that belonged to the Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and surrounding regions that was seized by Armenian forces during the First Karabakh War and occupied by them until late 2020. It also excludes any territory that presently falls within the purview of the Russian peace-keeping zone established under the terms of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement that ended the Second Karabakh War.

The prime minister's reference is thus rightly interpreted as ending Yerevan's political support for the

former NKAO. In an interview on Armenian state television that was broadcast the day before the Geneva meeting, Pashinyan went even further: "no one is ready to recognize the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, just as no one is ready to recognize Karabakh as part of Armenia. And we need to recognize this fact."

The Armenian Foreign Ministry's official readout of the Geneva meeting should be interpreted in light of these and similar statements. The relevant portion of this readout is the following: "the sides exchanged views on the peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan, ensuring the rights and security guarantees for the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, including through the establishment of a discussion mechanism between Stepanakert [sic] and Baku." Such and similar statements represent Yerevan's acknowledgment that, as far as the Pashinyan government is concerned, the territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh has indeed come to an end.

### *Azerbaijan's Terms of Peace*

Perhaps the fundamental lesson that can be derived from the statecraft of Azerbaijan and the statesmanship of Ilham

Aliyev is that the conquest of a nation's past represents the liberation of its future liberty. This too, it seems to me, Pashinyan has effectually grasped. Now, in the case of Azerbaijan, the result is plain to see: an exonerated state and its vindicated statesman.

And having recovered in 2020 what had been taken in the 1990s, it should come as no surprise that Aliyev has stated on various occasions that the territorial conflict over Karabakh is now resolved. In a strict sense it is but in a broader one it is not: the underlying conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains in some sense unsettled and thus unresolved—if for no other reason because the interstate border has not yet been delimited. We can thus properly say that the 10 November 2021 tripartite statement is more than a narrow cease-fire agreement but less than a general peace treaty: only its first article deals with the cessation of hostilities in Karabakh and the effectual end of the territorial conflict over this same part

of Azerbaijan; the others lay out various concrete measures aiming towards a future predicated implicitly on the establishment of peaceful relations between two sovereign states: Armenia and Azerbaijan. The quest to end this underlying conflict is what is primarily at issue. On the second anniversary of the end of the territorial conflict over Karabakh, a formal peace agreement between Baku and Yerevan remains elusive, but by no means illusive.

Since the end of the Second Karabakh War, the quest for peace has been pursued by victor and vanquished alike. Baku and Yerevan may not be fully on the same page quite yet, but they seem to be reading from the same book written in a language they both understand. Aliyev obviously has the advantage and has not been circumspect in pressing it home on more than one occasion. Still, both he and Pashinyan clearly grasp the effectual truth that Armenia's tragedy would be compounded if it were to choose to meet Azerbaijan's outstretching

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hand with a clenched fist. And both also clearly grasp that the Armenian prime minister's opponents do not. From this follows that it is in Azerbaijan's national interest to conduct its speech and execute its deeds in such a manner as to provide support for the unfinished work to which Pashinyan seems to have committed himself and the country he leads but whose institutions he does not appear yet to fully control

This work by Pashinyan and his Azerbaijani counterpart will be understood to have been finished in the advent of an omnibus treaty being agreed, signed, and ratified. Such a document, should it see the light of day, will almost certainly be based in large part on the five principles put forward to Armenia in February 2022 and first laid out publicly on 14 March 2022 at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum by Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov. We here reproduce verbatim the formulations of what are reportedly contained in a single-page document as stated to the press by the Foreign Ministry's spokesperson, Leyla Abdullayeva, in the immediate aftermath of Bayramov's address on that occasion: *one*, the mutual recognition of respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and inviolability of internationally recognized bor-

ders and political independence of each other; *two*, 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; *three*, 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; *four*, the delimitation and demarcation of the state border and the establishment of diplomatic relations; and *five*, the unblocking of transportation and other communications, building other communications as appropriate, and the establishment of cooperation in other fields of mutual interest.

These five principles continue to serve as the foundation of Azerbaijan's peace offer as presented at the Geneva meeting of foreign ministers on 2 October 2022. All other interstate issues should be considered to be of less fundamental importance, at least to the Azerbaijani side. These include but are not limited to the question of reparations, missing persons, accountability for violations of the laws of war, and the future status of the Russian peacekeeping

contingent operating within the zone established by the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement.

Speaking on 22 April 2022 in Shusha during the Fifth Congress of World Azerbaijanis, Aliyev reiterated that in the event negotiations do not result in a treaty based on the five principles reproduced above, Baku will respond forcefully: "If they refuse," he said, "we will not recognize the territorial integrity of Armenia either and will officially declare that." As of this writing, no treaty has been produced; but at the same time, Baku has not made any such or similar declaration. After Geneva, Prague, and Astana, the prospects of the former have seemingly increased whilst the likelihood of the latter appears to have lessened.

However, readers should be mindful of the fact that in mid-September 2022 Azerbaijan *did* respond forcefully to shelling by Armenian forces into undisputed Azerbaijani territory and new attempts by Armenian forces to mine under the cover of darkness the as-yet undelimited state border between the two states, including supply roads linking Azerbaijani army forward positions in the liberated Lachin, Kalbajar, and Dashkasan districts. In its

immediate aftermath, Pashinyan reportedly called the Azerbaijani narrative a "lie," although an examination of the context of this and similar speeches and deeds raises the question of whether Pashinyan knew in advance that such acts of deliberate belligerence was being prepared for execution by what may effectually be rogue elements not entirely under his control. The answer, of course, matters greatly; but in the present context, it needs to be put alongside a hopeful yet sobering political reality: Aliyev keeps his word and Aliyev does not bluff.

Aliyev particularly keeps his word and does not bluff in matters having to do with war and peace, for the Azerbaijani president's statecraft is congruent with the strategic logic contained in the precept first put forward by Vegetius, a Roman thinker whose main treatise on military matters Machiavelli knew quite well: "*Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum*" (Veg. *Mil.* III.Proem). Hence the earlier reference to Aliyev's remarks on 12 February 2019; hence also the deadly seriousness with which the president's warning, pronounced in Shusha in the same speech quoted earlier, should be taken—both by Pashinyan's proponents and opponents: "Given the consequences of the Second Karabakh War, the

Armenian side should understand what this might lead to.” The opponents to peace do not appear to have done so; perhaps the territorial outcome to the recent deadly clashes will provide a corrective to such miscalculations.

Or perhaps it will not: to affirm that peace appears closer than it has in decades, as we have done, is not the same thing as to affirm that a comprehensive settlement will actually be reached. Opportunity and outcome are not yet aligned sufficiently, much less fully. We remain in a moment of what social scientists call “high variance.” Both great reward and great calamity are still possible.

Nevertheless, the outcomes of the Geneva and Prague meetings, and the renewed political momentum that preceded it (and ought to follow from it), suggests that a payout of the peace dividend may take place in the time ahead. At the same time, Azerbaijan’s forceful response in mid-September suggests a rise in the opportunity cost for Armenia of opting to delay collecting it.

Certainly, it would be prudent for Yerevan to weigh the question of vacillating levels of trust in the intentionality of the other side against the virtually certain consequences

of its pursuit of a course of action resulting in the wholesale renewal of armed hostilities.

Clear-headed deliberations ought to involve Armenian proponents and opponents to peace alike taking another very close look at the line on the maps they and their adversaries have reportedly accepted as the basis of the delimitation and demarcation process of the state border between the two countries. It should be underlined that not only the *mediator*, but both the *facilitator* and *supporters* of the endeavor are aware of this commitment yet, in the case of the latter two, maybe not of its content (i.e., the exact trace of the line). Perhaps the deployment of a civilian EU mission to the Armenian side of the undelimited border with Azerbaijan will bring more specificity to the Western understanding of the situation.

In this context, we note that a third meeting of a bilateral commission on this critical issue is supposed to take place in Brussels in November 2022, but that during the Geneva meeting the Azerbaijani delegation proposed moving up the timing of the meeting to later in October 2022 due to the “recent tension on the undelimited border.” (It is worth noting that the announcement of work to establish this com-

mission is contained in the tripartite statement signed in Sochi on 26 November 2021 by the President of Russia, the President of Azerbaijan, and the Prime Minister of Armenia, and that this document refers to the scope of this body’s work as the “delimitation of the state border between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia with its subsequent demarcation with the consultative assistance of the Russian Federation at the request of the parties.” The first meeting of this bilateral commission was held on 24 May 2022, two days after the President of the European Council stated in Brussels that the President of Azerbaijan and the Prime Minister of Armenia had agreed it would take place.)

Perhaps Armenia’s decision to involve the EU in the delimitation process on the ground (and the EU’s agreement to do so) may have been the immediate cause of recent Russian statements that represent the first public evidence of Moscow’s dissatisfaction with what it may perceive as the EU’s attempt to shift its role from *facilitator* of the peace process to one akin to that of a *mediator*. After all, Yerevan’s choice to involve the European Union was a unilateral one and can be read as a violation of both the spirit and the letter of the Sochi tripartite statement.

However, the various statements and readouts stemming from the 14 October 2022 Astana meeting between the foreign ministers of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia suggest that the Russian response to the Armenian initiative will not produce a reaction by Moscow in the time ahead that could be construed as actively seeking to undermine the peace process.

Still, how exactly the Russian troops stationed on the Armenian side of the as-yet undelimited state border will get along with the EU civilian mission is presently unknown, as is the manner in which Azerbaijan will fulfill its commitment to “cooperate with this mission as far as it is concerned.” The outcome of the forthcoming meeting in Russia between the Prime Minister of Armenia, the President of Azerbaijan, and the President of Russia should provide more clarity in this regard.

Presumably, one topic of this discussion will involve the presidents of Azerbaijan and Russia seeking precise and clear information from the Prime Minister of Armenia on the exact purpose of the civilian EU mission, bearing in mind the text of the tripartite Sochi statement cited above. On 14 October 2022, an “EU technical assessment mission” arrived in Yerevan. This was inter-

preted as fulfilling the terms of the official statement issued in Prague by the presidents of France and the European Council that the EU mission “will start in October for a maximum of two months.” The same statement indicated that “the aim of this mission is to build confidence and, through its reports, to contribute to the border commissions.” The statement issued by the European External Action Service on 14 October 2022, however, employs language that is more expansive and substantive. It refers to the arrival of this “EU technical assessment mission” and defines its task as “prepar[ing] for the deployment of EU monitors to the Armenian side of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border later this month.” The same statement further adds that the EU High Representative has proposed to EU member states that they “further discuss” and presumably approve the deployment of an “[EU] monitoring mission, which will have as its primary aims contributing to stability and building confidence as well as supporting the work of the border commissions to improve security along the bilateral border.”

This unilateral Armenian initiative, which the European Union has embraced, has reinvigorated discussions in some quarters regarding Yerevan’s intention

and posture in the context of the ongoing negotiations. Consider that in the same television appearance in which Grigoryan stated Armenia’s expectation that a peace agreement should be ready for signature by the end of 2022, he stated that “there was also an agreement that delimitation would happen by the end of the year, meaning the peace agreement and delimitation are interrelated.” Those in Baku and elsewhere who are prone to interpret Yerevan’s actions with caution, not to say suspicion, have indicated that Grigoryan’s emphasis linking the timing and perhaps content of completing work on a peace treaty and the delimitation of the border, coupled with the latest Armenian initiative inviting the presence of the European Union on the ground for the first time ever, represents yet another stalling tactic, which, they argue, is consistent with a longstanding pattern of behavior prior to the onset of the Second Karabakh War that established the country’s evident unwillingness to bring the occupation to an end peacefully, through good-faith negotiations, as discussed above.

As corroborating evidence of Armenia’s re-embrace of stalling tactics, they point to Yerevan’s repeated refusal to implement

Article 9 of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement that ended the Second Karabakh War, which we reproduce here in full:

All economic and transport links in the region shall be restored. The Republic of Armenia guarantees the safety of transport links between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to organize an unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles, and goods in both directions. Control over transport shall be exercised by the bodies of the Border Guard Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB) of Russia.

They also point to Yerevan’s repeated refusal to implement Article 4 of the same document, which requires the “withdrawal of the Armenian troops” concurrently with the deployment of the Russian peacekeeping forces (they arrived within hours of the end of the war). Here it is useful to underline that the linguistic formulation of this clause, both in English and in the original Russian, makes it clear that “Armenian troops” does not refer solely to the Armed Forces of Armenia but also to the men at arms under the command and control of the ethnic-Armenian secessionist entity that sees itself as the successor to the former NKAO.

And those same sorts of persons have contrasted Armenian reticence (bad faith) with Azerbaijan’s swiftness (good faith) in implementing the terms of Article 7 of the same document, whose relevant part we also reproduce here:

The Lachin Corridor (5 km wide), which will provide a connection between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia while not passing through the territory of Shusha, shall remain under the control of the Russian Federation peacemaking forces. As agreed by the Parties, within the next three years, a plan will be outlined for the construction of a new route via the Lachin Corridor, to provide a connection between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, and the Russian peacemaking forces shall be subsequently relocated to protect the route. The Republic of Azerbaijan shall guarantee the security of persons, vehicles and cargo moving along the Lachin Corridor in both directions.

### *The Bottom Line*

The concluding assessment that flows from the cumulation of our present considerations is that Pashinyan does not want another war; and that he is fully aware of the paucity of realistic alternatives to forging a

comprehensive peace agreement, the pursuit of which he has committed himself and his government despite the opposition he faces from various quarters and the possibility that all elements of the Armenian state are not under his full control.

Aliyev, too, does not want another war; he is genuinely desirous of peace on terms he feels befit a country that, as he said in Lachin on 21 September 2022, is “proud” to have “liberated our lands by force.” And it is precisely the sincere desire for such a peace that drives this statesman to strengthen preparations for martial deeds that may still be required to achieve it.

Pursuing a course of action that would require the commission of further deeds of this sort is not Azerbaijan’s preference. Baku may elect to do so again, however, if it judges that Yerevan has opted to re-embrace the sort of stalling tactics discussed above. And this is quite likely to result in another

Armenian story about tragedy, in the original Aristotelian understanding of the term, as discussed above.

Be that as it may, we may be approaching the point where the following bottom-line appraisal could be made unambiguously: neither Pashinyan nor Aliyev are malefactors who are merely ‘going through the motions’ of peace to gain the tactical approval of outsiders or special interests or anything of that sort. Moreover, at present we can say with confidence

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*When their vital interests are in play, the leaders of responsible, strategically conscious, and geopolitically literate keystone states like Azerbaijan do not bluff; they keep their word, too. This is the effectual truth that ought to drive the quest for peace to its successful conclusion.*

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that both have carefully weighed the advantages and disadvantages of peace, and that both seem to have concluded the former outweighs the latter. Both also clearly put the interests of their respective countries first, which is predicated on an unemotional assessment of their own red lines and hierarchy of preferences, those of the opposing side, and those of the various foreign players (i.e., those that are geographically proximate like Iran, Russia, and Türkiye and those that are farther away like the

EU, and its most engaged member states, and the United States).

Evidently, this does not mean that any aspect of the peace process is taking place against the background of equal power dynamics. Both Pashinyan and Aliyev know who is stronger and who is weaker; and both know this will not change—in fact, both know the power disparity will grow further the longer the process drags on. Finally, both are fully cognizant of the fact that when their vital interests are in play, the leaders of responsible, strategically

conscious, and geopolitically literate keystone states like Azerbaijan do not bluff; they keep their word, too. This is the effectual truth that ought to drive the quest for peace to its successful conclusion.

Neither opponents of the peace dividend on offer nor foreign players sympathetic to the weaker party ought to be under the illusion that downplaying the harshness of the foregoing assessment would serve their own interests in the long run or that of the object of their sympathy. <sup>BD</sup>

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