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Defining Strategic Direction

Azerbaijan and the New Regional Geopolitical Configuration

Gulshan Pashayeva

More than two years have passed since the Second Karabakh War ended and the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement was signed. This essay presents the main priority areas for Azerbaijan of the initial phase of the post-conflict period for which the specific work is currently underway. It then examines the impact of the evolving regional geopolitical landscape to the ongoing normalization process between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Five Cornerstone Areas

Within the foregoing strategic context, Azerbaijan has identified five cornerstone priority areas, each of which has been

advanced in 2022. First, Baku has continued decisively its large-scale post-conflict recovery, reconstruction, and restoration efforts in all conflict-affected territories. The ultimate aim of this priority area is to enable hundreds of thousands of IDPs to return to their homes in safety and dignity with all deliberate speed.

Numerous infrastructure projects have also been launched—some almost days after the war came to an end. A number of these projects have already been completed and many others are in the pipeline. Today, the construction of new highways, railways, airports, schools, hospitals, residential settlements, and so on are in full swing in the Karabakh and East Zangezur economic

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regions of Azerbaijan. The First State Program on the Great Return to the Liberated Territories, approved by presidential decree on 16 November 2022, is also being successfully implemented. In fact, a first group of Azerbaijani IDPs returned to Aghali in July 2022. This settlement, located in the liberated Zangilan district (the south-western tip of mainland Azerbaijan), was rebuilt in accordance with “smart village” principles and international best practices; according to Azerbaijani authorities, about 16,000 people will return to various rebuilt settlements in the Zangilan district by 2026.

At the same time, as Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, had said during a wide-ranging interview given to Azerbaijani television channels on 10 January 2023 that this year, former IDPs from the city of Lachin and villages of Zabukh and Sus will return to their homes very soon, adding that extensive construction and restoration work is already underway.

Azerbaijan's second priority area is mine clearance: significant work continues to take place, which is an important part of the

recovery of the liberated territories. Unfortunately, the contamination of the liberated territories, which are estimated to hold at least 1 million anti-personnel and anti-tank mines as well as other unexploded or abandoned munitions left behind by Armenian forces, coupled with Yerevan's unwillingness to provide accurate mine maps of these areas, not only creates a serious

impediment to post-conflict reconstruction but is also directly responsible for new Azerbaijani deaths and injuries. In fact, according to data received from the Mine Action Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan (ANAMA), in the period between the signing of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement that ended the Second Karabakh War and the end of 2022, 279 people became mine victims, including 45 fatalities (of these, 35 were identified as civilians).

Compounding this challenge is the fact that Armenians continue to plant new mines in the liberated Azerbaijani territories. As Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov stated at the OSCE ministerial meeting held in Poland in December 2022, “in total, 2,728 landmines, made in Armenia in 2021, have been

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found in the sovereign territories of Azerbaijan.” These mines were transferred from Armenia into Azerbaijan via the Lachin road, which Bayramov stated on the same occasion constitutes “a blatant abuse of this road, which was envisaged for humanitarian purposes only.” Echoing this statement, Deputy Foreign Minister Elnur Mammadov tweeted on 5 January 2023 that “since Aug 2022, over 2,700 Armenia-produced landmines have been discovered in Azerbaijan. We have evidence that these were manufactured by Armenia in 2021, and that Armenia used the humanitarian Lachin Corridor, the only route from Armenia to the liberated territories, to transport mines and weapons.”

The *third* priority area is the peace process with Armenia. Aliyev has repeatedly stated that Azerbaijan is ready to turn the page of enmity and conclude a peace treaty with Armenia. The Azerbaijani Government submitted a proposal containing five basic principles for the normalization of relations to Armenia, which was publicized in March 2022. They include mutual recognition of re-

spect for each other’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability of internationally recognized borders, and political independence; mutual confirmation of the absence of territorial claims against each other and acceptance of legally-binding obligations not to raise such a claim in future; obligation to refrain in their inter-state relations from undermining each other’s security,

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from any 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. Then, on 31 March 2022, the Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, expressed his country’s readiness to sign a peace treaty with Azerbaijan and to immediately launch talks on the text of a peace treaty.

The Azerbaijani proposal and the subsequent Armenian statement gave further legitimacy to

the Armenian-Azerbaijani normalization process that has been underway through distinct initiatives led by Russian and EU intermediaries. France and the United States have also increased their diplomatic support in this context. Three

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top-level meetings have been held through Russian facilitation (11 January 2021; 26 November 2021, and 31 October 2022), and four top-level meetings have been organized under the auspices of the President of the EU Council, Charles Michel (14 December 2021; 6 April 2022; 22 May 2022; and 31 August 2022). In addition, Aliyev and Pashinyan met in a one-off quadrilateral format with Charles Michel and French president Emmanuel Macron in Prague on 6 October 2022 on the margins of the first summit of the European Political Community. An agreed readout of this meeting indicated that Armenia and Azerbaijan “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.”

Furthermore, at their 31 October 2022 meeting with Russian president Vladimir Putin in Sochi, Aliyev and Pashinyan “agreed to refrain from the use of force or the threat of its use, to discuss and resolve all problematic issues solely on the basis of

mutual recognition of sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of borders, in accordance with the UN Charter and the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration.” Moreover, a trilateral working group co-chaired by the deputy prime ministers of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia on the unblocking of all economic and transport communications based on the provisions of the 11 January 2021 tripartite statement has held 11 meetings so far, although an outcome remains elusive.

The *fourth* priority area for 2022 is characterized by increasing face-to-face contacts as well as bilateral meetings between cabinet ministers and senior officials of the two states. For the first time after the end of the Second Karabakh War, such interaction between high-level offi-

cials from Azerbaijan and Armenia (i.e., Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan Hikmet Hajiyev and Secretary of the Security Council of Armenia Armen Grigoryan) took place in the framework of their trip to Brussels on 30 March 2022. During the substantive discussions, which were facilitated by Toivo Klaar, the EU's Special Representative for the South Caucasus, the participants focused on preparations for the upcoming meeting between EU Council President Charles Michel, President Aliyev, and Prime Minister Pashinyan on 6 April 2022. Incidentally, during a separate bilateral conversation between Hajiyev and Grigoryan, a press report indicated that they “reviewed the political and security situation and the full spectrum of issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan as a follow-up to the understandings reached during the meeting of leaders of both countries and President Michel, held in Brussels on 14 December 2021.”

Moreover, on 11 April 2022, the first direct phone conversation in roughly three decades occurred between the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers, Jeyhun Bayramov

and Ararat Mirzoyan. They discussed matters relating to the future peace treaty, humanitarian issues, and the establishment of the Joint Border Commission. Three official bilateral meetings have taken place between the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia during 2022. Some elements of the peace treaty that will cover future inter-state relations were discussed during the last two such meetings, which were held in Geneva on 2 October 2022 and in Washington on 7 November 2022. Three meetings were also held within the framework of the Joint Border Commission without any intermediaries.

The *fifth* and final priority area for 2022 was a demonstration of Azerbaijan's will and readiness to engage in direct negotiations with Karabakh Armenians residing in the part of the territory of Azerbaijan where the Russian peacekeeping contingent has been temporarily deployed.

Without providing many details, Aliyev has indicated on several occasions that such discussions have taken place at various levels. One such example is the joint

In 2022, Azerbaijan demonstrated both a will and a readiness to engage in direct negotiations with Karabakh Armenians.

work of a group from Azerbaijan's water management authority, the Azerbaijan Amelioration and Water Farm (OJSC), with local Karabakh Armenian experts in regard to the Sarsang reservoir—one of the six hydroelectric dams that are located in the part of the territory of Azerbaijan where the Russian peacekeeping contingent has been temporarily deployed. This group inspected the Sarsang reservoir on 22 August 2022 in order to conduct technical monitoring of the reservoir and to get acquainted with the current situation. At the same time, the issues of water distribution and restoration of water supply to irrigated lands were also discussed. The participants came to an agreement to regularly hold such meetings and inspections of the reservoir in the future.

Another positive case was the construction of a connecting section 4.8 kilometers in length of a new road bypassing Lachin city by the Azerbaijani State Agency for Automobile Roads. This was done in consultation with the local Armenian community living in

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Karabakh. The road measures 32 kilometers in total length, with 10 kilometers passing through Armenia's territory. It became fully operational on 25 August 2022. This new Lachin road is considered one of the most important infrastructure projects that has been carried out in Azerbaijan's Karabakh and East Zangezur economic regions.

The point is that these and many other instances demonstrate that Azerbaijan is ready to reintegrate Karabakh Armenians “into its political, social, and economic space, guaranteeing the same rights and freedoms with all the citizens of Azerbaijan. The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan provides the solid legal framework in this regard,” as Foreign Minister Bayramov stated at the December 2022 OSCE ministerial meeting.

Monkeywrench

These initial steps towards the reintegration of Karabakh Armenians into Azerbaijan were interrupted in fall 2022 after the arrival of Ruben Vardanyan, an

until-recently Moscow-based Russian-Armenian oligarch to the part of Karabakh where the Russian peacekeeping contingent has been temporarily deployed. He has been involved in several large corruption scandals in Russia, including a huge money laundering network. Vardanyan renounced his Russian citizenship and stated that he came to Karabakh as a citizen of Armenia, which he acquired in 2021. He gave his reasons in a video that he posted on his Facebook page on 1 September 2022. Although he said that his move is a patriotic gesture, one can speculate that his motives can also be linked to the international sanctions that have currently been imposed on Russia.

After his appointment as “state minister” in early November 2022, Vardanyan has been trying to prevent the continuation of dialogue between Karabakh Armenians and Azerbaijan whilst presenting himself as the only “savior” of the Karabakh Armenians. Despite his desire to enter into negotiations with representatives of Azerbaijan, he has been unable to achieve this goal so far. According to Parvin Mirzazade, Ambassador-at-Large in the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry, Baku “long ago stated that it will not hold any talks with [him and others like him], because these obscure individuals are not

representatives of the Armenian population of Karabakh, but criminals illegally present in the territory of Azerbaijan, who have grossly violated the laws of the country and are subject to criminal prosecution.”

Among other negative consequences, Vardanyan’s appearance also resulted in the commencement of the peaceful protests of Azerbaijani eco-activists and NGOs, which have been underway on Lachin-Khankendi road since 12 December 2022. The main reason for these protests was the inadmissibility of Azerbaijani experts to monitor the illegal exploitation of the Gizilbulagh gold deposit and Damirli copper-molybdenum deposit, both of which are located in the part of Karabakh where the Russian peacekeeping contingent has been temporarily deployed.

It should be underlined that this group of experts from the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, the State Property Service under the Ministry of Economy, and AzerGold CJSC, was going to begin the preliminary monitoring in accordance with the illegal exploitation of the aforementioned two mineral deposits, as well as examine emerging environmental and other consequences. This had been agreed in talks with the

Russian peacekeepers’ command that had taken place on 3 and 7 December 2022. The agreement included provisions to inspect the environmental conditions at the two deposits, monitor

various areas, organize cadastral property records, and assess potential risks and threats to the environment and underground and surface water sources. However, the planned initial inspection and monitoring did not take place due to the provocation of some radical Karabakh Armenians who blocked the way to the mineral deposits. Consequently, Azerbaijani specialists were unable to complete their task.

At the same time, since 12 December 2022, Vardanyan has blamed Azerbaijan for the alleged blocking of Lachin-Khankendi road and trying to persuade the world that there is a risk of a “humanitarian crisis” (note that the Armenians still call the latter by the name Stepanakert, which was imposed in 1923 by the Soviet authorities in homage to Bolshevik revolutionary Stepan Shaumian, nicknamed the “Caucasian Lenin”).

Vardanyan has blamed Azerbaijan for the alleged blocking of Lachin-Khankendi road and trying to persuade the world that there is a risk of a “humanitarian crisis”

However, the unhindered passage of supplies and humanitarian vehicles has repeatedly demonstrated that this road has not been blocked in any way. Vehicles belonging to the Russian

peacekeepers and numerous cars and trucks belonging to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), as well as other humanitarian vehicles, continue to pass freely through the peaceful protest area on a daily basis. Simultaneously, as Bayramov said in a phone conversation with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried, there are no obstacles to the free passage of Armenian residents of Azerbaijan’s Karabakh region through the Lachin-Khankendi road.

Thus, Azerbaijan continues to abide by the terms of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement, whereby it “guarantee[s] the safety of citizens, vehicles and goods traveling along the Lachin corridor in both directions.” The point is that the road should be used for the humanitarian purposes only. As quite

correctly indicated by my colleague Farid Shafiyev in his article entitled “Azerbaijan’s Lachin Road Conundrum” published in *The National Interest* on 27 December 2022, “under the current circumstances, [...] it seems that the main problem over the Lachin road is not only the illegal extraction of resources or environmental damage but also its use (or misuse) for non-humanitarian purposes.” In this context, the illegal transfer of landmines produced by Armenia as late as 2021, Armenian military personnel, and various types of munitions are the most disturbing aspects of this conundrum, as discussed above.

The Lachin road issue was also mentioned by Aliyev during the aforementioned 10 January 2023 interview. He noted in particular that landmines produced by Armenian in 2021 were discovered in Saribaba, Girkhgiz, and other directions and questioned how they crossed into Azerbaijani territory, who carried them there, and who is responsible of this situation. Aliyev also added that the Russian peacekeeping forces have not been able to answer such and similar questions to this day.

These latest developments raise several unresolved matters, which are connected with each other with regards to the Lachin road. Two will be mentioned in this essay. *First*, the issue of establishing standards regarding the entrance and exit into that part of Karabakh where the Russian peacekeeping contingent has been temporarily deployed should be further investigated. Corresponding regulations, such as the establishment of Azerbaijani customs and border check points, should be arranged in the future in coordination with the Russian peacekeeping contingent. This would avoid the misuse of the Lachin road for non-humanitarian purposes.

Second, more consistent contacts and interaction should be set up between the Azerbaijani state structures, the Russian peacekeeping contingent, and local Karabakh Armenians in the coming years. Due to the fact that the territory where the Russian peacekeeping contingent has been temporarily deployed is part of Azerbaijan’s Karabakh economic region, the Azerbaijani government should be able to conduct

The year 2022 can thus be characterized as consisting of both positive trends and insufficient progress.

various post-conflict recovery and reconstruction activities in the future without any preconditions. This includes the aforementioned monitoring of the Gizilbulagh gold and Damirli copper-molybdenum deposits. The Russian peacekeeping contingent should support these activities because it has an obligation to strictly observe the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan in all cases. At the same time, one might hope that Karabakh Armenians will demonstrate their good will in this process too.

Regional Tectonics

In the context of Azerbaijan’s main priority areas with respect to the overall regional peace and normalization process with Armenia, the year 2022 can thus be characterized as consisting of both positive trends and insufficient progress. Incidentally, the fate of Karabakh’s ethnic-Armenian population also occupies a particular place in this context. Baku’s point is reasonable: it is paramount for Armenia to concentrate on its

The balance of power in the region, which has been drastically changed following Second Karabakh War, has also led to a sharp increase in Armenia’s dependence on external actors.

own internationally-recognized sovereign territory and recognize all of Karabakh as an integral part of territory of Azerbaijan—particularly the part of the territory in which the Armenian population lives. The Armenian establishment should also give an unambiguous answer to the question of the extent to which the question of Karabakh remains the main priority issue for Armenian political and state identity.

This remains difficult—not the least of which due to opposition in the Armenian parliament from members of previous governments now in opposition; other Armenian nationalists; organized Armenian diaspora communities in the U.S., France, and elsewhere; and the most vocal Karabakh separatist representatives. Differences aside, what binds them together is irredentism: the unwillingness to accept the consequences of the defeat experienced in the Second Karabakh War. They would like to delay progress on the peace agenda in the hope that Armenia could, in the future, recover some of the formerly-occupied territories. Thus, former Foreign

Minister of Armenia Vardan Oskanyan called on Pashinyan “never be pressured in terms of time and not to rush on the road towards a comprehensive solution to the issue.”

Moreover, the balance of power in the region, which has been drastically changed following Second Karabakh War, has also led to a sharp increase in Armenia’s dependence on external actors. In fact, the positioning of Armenia as an integral element of the relationship between global and regional powers has always been very characteristic of Armenian socio-political thought. However, such an approach a priori turns Armenia into a hostage of the geopolitical and geo-economic contradictions of the leading actors, which, of course, does not contribute to the process of normalization of relations with Azerbaijan (and, for that matter, Türkiye).

This aspect has gained particular importance against the backdrop of the war raging in Ukraine, which is accompanied by an unprecedented deterioration in relations between Russia and the West. In fact, instead of persuading Armenia to abandon its revanchist aspirations and move further toward sustainable peace in the region, some external powers have recently increased their

support for Armenians’ vindictive behavior that undermines the likelihood of success in the ongoing normalization process.

One such external power is France. Back in November 2020, immediately after the end of the Second Karabakh War, both the Senate and the National Assembly of France adopted several harsh, anti-Azerbaijani resolutions that, inter alia, called on the government of Emmanuel Macron to recognize the ethnic-Armenian separatist regime in Karabakh. In the wake of the September 2022 escalation on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, the French Senate (on 15 November 2022), followed by the country’s National Assembly (on 30 November 2022) adopted new resolutions directed against the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Azerbaijan. Although, as reported, the latter document was approved unanimously, only 256 out of 577 members of National Assembly were present, which is only about 44 percent of the total number of representatives. Even though the country’s Foreign Ministry once again stated that these resolutions do not represent the official position of France, some statements by Macron indicate the opposite. In particular, in an interview with French television channel France2 that was broadcast literally a week

after the quadrilateral meeting in Prague, the French president claimed that Karabakh was an internationally unrecognized and disputed territory and even accused Moscow of destabilizing the situation in the region.

In response, Azerbaijan’s president called his French counterpart’s statement “insulting, unacceptable, false, and provocative.” Aliyev also mentioned that biased statements were also made against the Russian Federation, specifically that, as he characterized the French president’s words, “Russia played the Azerbaijani game.” Azerbaijan’s president firmly condemned and rejected these statements and noted that, taking into account the biased attitude of the French government, he no longer sees a “possibility for France to play a role in the normalization of Azerbaijan-Armenia relations.” After these events, Armenia’s attempt to turn the next trilateral meeting, which was to be held in Brussels on 7 December 2022, into a quadripartite meeting with the mandatory participation of Macron, was rejected by Azerbaijan.

The visit of a delegation of Karabakh’s ethnic-Armenian separatist regime to Paris for meetings with members of the French Senate and National Assembly and pro-Armenian politicians in

December 2022, as well as Arayik Harutyunyan’s interview on the state television channel France 24, together with a press conference organized by the government-controlled Agence France-Presse, showed once again that France not only speaks from a pro-Armenian position, but also actively supports the ethnic-Armenian separatist regime in Karabakh and directly intervenes in Azerbaijan’s internal affairs. This clearly does not represent conduct becoming of a state that purports to present itself as an impartial mediator or facilitator to the ongoing peace process.

Aliyev touched upon what he believes is behind France’s actions on this path and shared his insights during the aforementioned 10 January 2023 interview. He stated that the current situation is the result of the incumbent French government, adding that France and Azerbaijan have always cooperated and valued each other’s friendship in the previous period. More than ten of the countries’ cities were twinned, there were exchanges, presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande visited Azerbaijan, and so on. However, the current situation is completely different, he noted, concluding that he maintains hope that a government that values relations with Azerbaijan will be formed in France in the future.

Iran remains another external actor interested in strengthening its influence in the South Caucasus. It is no secret that contradictions have arisen from time to time in relations between Azerbaijan and Iran since the former regained its independence as the Soviet Union was collapsing. A continuous irritant has been the position of Tehran, which has maintained close ties with Yerevan despite the Armenian occupation of sovereign Azerbaijani lands. This closeness has remained in the wake of the Second Karabakh War and has been accompanied by several unprecedented deeds that have been interpreted by Baku as being provocative.

On numerous occasions Azerbaijan's president has made statements attributing responsibility to tactical deteriorations in relations with Iran at Tehran's doorstep. On 25 November 2022, for instance, while speaking at an international conference organized by ADA University's Institute for Development and Diplomacy, Aliyev said that

everything happening between Iran and Azerbaijan now was not generated by us. We are only responding and will respond to any anti-Azerbaijani steps, whether in words or actions. [...] We were not the generator

of this situation. We want this situation to end sooner than later. We want peace and friendly relations with all our neighbors, but at the same time, we will always defend our dignity, independence, and lifestyle. We will not allow any foreign player to impose its standards and will on our government and our people.

In his remarks, Aliyev added that it was hard to understand the geopolitical reasons behind Tehran's stance. He gave the example of military exercises. During the occupation of a 132-kilometer-long section of the Azerbaijani border, he noted, the Iranian armed forces never held any military exercises near the border with Azerbaijan, whereas since the liberation "two exercises within several months [were held] on our border, [accompanied by] words full of hatred and threats to Azerbaijan."

The Azerbaijani president also noted that "Iranian officials, including very high-ranking personalities, said that Armenian territorial integrity is a red line for Iran. Why [did] none of them said the same about us? For 30 years, our territory was under occupation. Did anyone hear from Iranian officials that Azerbaijan's territorial integrity is a red line? No." At the same time, official Tehran has indicated that it will not tolerate

"geopolitical changes in the map in the Caucasus," although it is unclear what "geopolitical changes" in the region are implied. Most probably, the Iranians are referring to the situation mandated by Article 9 of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement that ended the war, namely the establishment of what Baku calls the Zangezur Corridor that would reestablish a direct transportation link between mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave, ending three decades of Armenia's blockade.

In Armenia, Tehran's ambiguous posture has led to the appearance in the socio-political space of unsupported ideas about the possibility of Iran turning into a guarantor of the security of transport communications through the territory of Armenia, even "up to a direct military presence in the region," as one Armenian commentator recently put it. However, to any observer familiar with the realities of the South Caucasus, it is clear that Russia, Armenia's strategic ally and partner in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) military-political bloc, is the guarantor of the inviolability of that country's borders.

To date, Russia has tried to keep an equidistant position in regard to both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

It is also necessary to touch on the position of another external actor in the context of ongoing regional tectonics: the CSTO, an organization in which decisions are made by consensus and which includes six former Soviet republics: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. This is not the first time that Yerevan has been trying to involve the CSTO in relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, including during the Second Karabakh War. At its last summit, held in Yerevan in November 2022, the prevailing position of the CSTO on this issue was voiced by the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko: "We want a peaceful resolution of the conflict between two neighboring states that are friendly to us" and "the CSTO acts in such a way as to please one without harming the other." However, Pashinyan did not agree with this approach; he demanded that the CSTO recognize the actions of Azerbaijan as aggression and, having been rebuffed, refused to sign the CSTO summit's concluding document.

Furthermore, amidst rising tensions between Yerevan and Moscow, Pashinyan announced

during a press conference on 10 January 2023 that he saw no reason for the CSTO to stage military drills in Armenia in 2023. In fact, CSTO holds annual military drills hosted by one of its members, and this year Armenia was due to host the drills. At this same press conference, he also stated that “Armenia expected concrete actions from its Russian partners and other partners in the field of security,” and also called on Russia to initiate a multinational mission via the UN Security Council if it is unable to ensure the security of the Armenian people in Karabakh. However, according to the Spokesperson for the Russian president Dmitry Peskov, “the topic of sending UN peacekeepers to Karabakh has been on the agenda more than once, but any missions can only be involved with the consent of both sides—both Baku and Yerevan.”

To date, Russia has tried to keep an equidistant position in regard to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Although Armenia hosts a Russian military base and Moscow has been the country’s key strategic ally, Russia maintains warm ties with Azerbaijan—especially after both

countries signed a Declaration on Allied Interaction on 22 February 2022.

While speaking at a press conference on European security issues, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted that Armenia has put Moscow in a difficult position by asking it to make a choice between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, when the neutral position of Russia does not suit Armenia, it attempts to actively involve other external actors in the process by, for example, inviting observer missions from the EU and the OSCE.

In fact, the readout of the quadrilateral meeting that took place in Prague on 6 October 2022 (discussed above) stated 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.” This EU observation mission started its activities in October 2022 and came to an end on 19 December 2022. The aim of this short-term mission was to build confidence and, through its reports, to contribute to the work

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of the Joint Border Commission that was established earlier in the year.

But, as it turned out, this was not the end of the story. The Azerbaijani president touched upon this issue during the aforementioned 10 January 2023 interview. He said that the EU mission ended in two months, in accordance with the agreement reached in Prague. “But on 20 December, the [EU] sent a new mission,” he said. “This is just manipulation. Representatives of the new mission are in Armenia now, where they are holding meetings with high-ranking officials. According to the information we have, they will be sent there again in February [2023] with a large delegation. Again, without our agreement.”

Furthermore, he stated that after the ‘passing away’ of the Minsk Group, the European Union started to play its role, and we supported it. I personally made a statement about it several times. I said that we appreciated it. However, if such games [note: a reference to the foregoing initiative] will go behind our backs, then the future of this format will be in doubt. France has virtually isolated itself from this process. America and Russia remain. In other words, this is how we see the negotiation at the moment. Of course, [the EU] can be there, but if, I say again, it treats us fairly.

This meant, presumably, that talks had already been underway on the deployment of a new EU civilian mission in Armenia. On 23 January 2023, a final decision on its deployment was made by the EU Council. It is unclear to what extent the Azerbaijani side’s “assessments, expectations, and concerns” were taken into account prior to this new deployment, or whether sufficient consideration was given to the argument that the “engagement of [the] EU in Armenia through a [new] mission must not serve as a pretext for Armenia to evade from [the] fulfillment of undertaken commitments (the cited text refers to language contained in the Foreign Ministry’s 24 January 2023 press release). If the Prague meeting is an indication, then the EU ought to have made such decisions in agreement with not only Armenia, but Azerbaijan as well.

This shift in the EU’s posture—undertaken, one suspects, at the initiative of countries like France—is to be contrasted with the steadfast approach of the United States. America continues to be closely engaged in supporting Armenia and Azerbaijan in the process towards reaching a peace treaty. Both U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken and U.S. National Security Advisor Jake

Sullivan have provided support and encouraged high-level government officials of both states to resolve outstanding issues at the negotiation table.

For its part, and despite some ups and downs, and, admittedly, even some moves designed to tactically undermine progress on some aspects of this multifaceted process, the Russian Federation continues to be the leading mediator in the process of normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. For better or worse, the peace process' chief agreements have been reached through the mediation of the Kremlin, as evidenced in four tripartite statements: 10 November 2020, 11 January 2021, 26 November 2021, and 31 October 2022. Read together, they cover almost all aspects of the post-conflict normalization process. However, Armenia's foreign minister refused to participate in a tripartite meeting with his Azerbaijani and Russian colleagues that had been scheduled to take place in Moscow on 23 December 2022. The situation on the Lachin road was cited as the reason.

In response to a question posed during the 10 January 2023 interview about whether the Armenian

side is simply flagrantly disrupting the process of negotiation by having refused to attend the aforementioned ministerial trilateral meeting, Aliyev indicated agreement. He also emphasized that it is not only enough to "articulate the issue of peace in the daily agenda, but also to convince the public and work on an actual peace agenda" on a daily basis.

Interestingly, Pashinyan held his own press conference on the same day. He touched upon some important aspects at the core of Armenian-Azerbaijani normalization process. Two statements can be highlighted here. *First*, he said that the fact is that both today and yesterday the entire international community perceived [Karabakh] as a part of Azerbaijan. The fact is that maybe we are not so pragmatic, and it seemed to us that the four resolutions of the UN Security Council are just texts written on paper, which we can ignore. It has been an approach that we have to think about. In general, I said that legitimacy should be at the heart of our actions. We have to face the facts.

Second, Pashinyan emphasized that it is not the "government of Armenia that should decide the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh and Nagorno-Karabakh relations, but

the Nagorno-Karabakh people should decide and be in communication with the authorities of Azerbaijan. The issue should be decided in this context."

Consider, in this context, the statement Aliyev made during his meeting with Dirk Schuebel, the EU's Special Envoy for the Eastern Partnership in November 2022, at which he underlined the necessity of having two tracks: *one*, the Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process; and *two*, issues related to the Armenian minority in Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and concerning their rights and security.

From Aliyev's perspective, on the one hand, "statements from Armenia are very controversial. They say they recognize our territorial integrity and sovereignty. Not only say but they signed under that in Prague and Sochi." On the other hand, representatives of Armenia sometimes make statements indicating they want to incorporate issues related to the ethnic-Armenian minority residing in Karabakh into the overall peace agreement, which is clearly a non-starter for Azerbaijan. Hence Aliyev's conclusion as stated to Schuebel: "a very clear position from the Armenian government about their agenda" is needed.

On the other hand, Aliyev has underlined that Azerbaijan is ready to continue engaging with local Armenians residing in the Russian peacekeeping zone about rights and security, but "not with those who have been sent from Moscow hiding in their pockets billions of stolen money from the Russian people, like this person called [Ruben] Vardanyan who was transferred from Moscow there with a very clear agenda." In the remarks quoted above, Aliyev added that such talks have started, and if not for the external interference and attempts to block this process from some countries, it could have had better dynamics." The overall point is clear: a considerable and steady efforts need to be made for the gradual reintegration of Karabakh Armenians into Azerbaijani society.

Today, in short, a lot depends on how all such and similar moves in various Armenian circles play out in the time to come. This is a distinct set of variables in the overall normalization of relations equation between Yerevan and Baku.

If winning peace is a priority for the Armenian government, then a peace treaty can be signed with Azerbaijan that will lead to the establishment of full

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diplomatic and friendly relations based on the common interest of both countries. It will also improve regional security and unlock new opportunities for the whole region. This will also contribute to the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations, too.

External players may come and go, and their influence can increase or decrease; but at the

end of the day, a geographical constant remains: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye are neighbors. It is precisely because of this fact that there is simply no alternative to the process of normalizing relations between them. This is the only way to lay a solid foundation for the future peace, stability, and development of the South Caucasus and the rest of the Silk Road region. **BD**

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