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The South Caucasus and Great Power Confrontation

Is There a Silver Lining on the Horizon?

Gulshan Pashayeva

early 15 years ago, I evaluated several aspects of the geopolitical context in which the South Caucasus has found itself after the August 2008 events in Georgia in an article entitled "The Southern Caucasus: In Search of a Balance between Russia and the West." At that time, the expert community analyzed the developments in the South Caucasus and Balkans through the prism of the emerging Russia-West confrontation, taken to the next stage in part by the West's choice to violate Serbia's territorial integrity through its recognition of the independence of "Kosovo."

It was apparent, even back then, that the failure of the

aforementioned geopolitical actors to overcome their opposite positions on practical interpretations of the basic principles of international law—namely the principle of territorial integrity and the right of nations to self-determination transformed, somehow, into an avowed right of secession-would be of strategic consequence. According to an article published in August 2009 by Alexander Rahr of the German Council on Foreign Relations, the West did not want Russia to become a hegemon and to have a special influence in its "near abroad" (e.g., on Ukraine, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Therefore, in his opinion, the central conflict between the West and Russia had not

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yet been resolved, creating a danger of more conflicts.

His view turned out to be prophetic, as confirmed by subsequent events in intermediate Europe, a region that, from a geopolitical standpoint, lies between the West (EU and NATO) and Russia, encompassing six sovereign post-Soviet states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). Russia's annexation of Crimea and its continued destabilization of eastern Ukraine since 2014 has clearly demonstrated a renewal of great-power rivalry due to the failure to create a pan-European security system involving all the countries of Greater Europe, including Russia.

These developments once more demonstrated the vulnerability of states located at or near the beginning of the Eurasian landmass'

western peninsula. It was also crystal clear that the West and Russia were unable to adopt inclusive policies to transform this region ("intermediate Europe") from a "contested" area into one of effective cooperation, as I put it in

a 2015 publication co-produced by the European Policy Centre.

The onset of the present stage **⊥** in the conflict over Ukraine in February 2022 further heightened an already tense geopolitical standoff. Although this war has now entered into its third year, there is no clear sign that a peaceful settlement could be within reach. Rather, each passing day makes the situation more complicated and drags both sides towards a dead end in which neither one nor the other of the two direct belligerents is likely to emerge better off than each was before the full-scale fighting began again in earnest.

Today, this war in which two major geopolitical actors—the West and Russia—have become trapped is also having an impact on other regions around the globe. The European Union is one, obviously:

> its ambitions to achieve geopolitical autonomy (at least within the West, as a distinct pole), for instance, have been set back, and Brussels has had to scramble mightily to reconfigure the terms of its energy security. Another is the Silk

This essay will examine the latest developments in the South Caucasus through an inquiry into whether (and how) the evolving geopolitical rivalry between the West and Russia affects that part of the world.

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Road region in general, and the South Caucasus in particular.

This essay will examine the latest developments in this latter area through an inquiry into whether (and how) the evolving geopolitical rivalry between the West and Russia affects that part of the world. It will culminate with a consideration of whether there is any silver lining that could result from this situation, whereby the South Caucasus could become a politically and economically united region in the time ahead.

A Fragmented Region

T istorically, the South Caucasus has experienced various invasions and wars due to its location at the crossroads three powerful empires— Persian, Ottoman, and Russian. The Russian Empire was the last to govern this region, and with its decay in the early twentieth century, particularly following the February 1917 revolution in Russia, the necessary conditions arose for the three South Caucasian states-Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—to declare independence in May 1918. Although they were independent for only a short period before losing their freedom (Azerbaijan in April 1920, Armenia in December 1920, and Georgia in February 1921) to what shortly became the Soviet Union, this was a valuable experience in the history of all three nations.

The three countries each regained their independence only in 1991, after the dissolution of the USSR. These countries differ from each other in markedly evident ways: they have different political elites and civil society institutions, different ambitions towards membership in the EU and NATO and their Russia-led equivalents, and different levels of economic development based on the distribution of natural resources.

eorgia is traditionally seen Uas the most eager to join the West's two flagship institutions; more recently, it seems to have taken pragmatic steps to reduce its level of confrontation with Russia. Armenia, for its part, has traditionally associated its security with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) whilst also forging a strategic alliance with Iran; more recently, it seems to have begun to flirt with France and India in an attempt to geopolitically and geoeconomically diversify its strategic dependence on Russia.

Azerbaijan, for its part, has consistently pursued a more balanced

approach, using its abundant oil and gas resources to build a national security system through diplomatic means predicated on a multiplication of strategic partners, near and far. It became a full member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 2011 as part of the pursuit of what Hikmet Hajiyev called in the Fall 2020 edition of Baku Dialogues an "independent and pragmatic foreign policy based on the national interest" pursued on the basis of what he had called the "Four Ms": multi-vectoralism, multi-regionalism, multilateralism, and multiculturalism. More recently, it forged a strategic alliance with NATO member Türkiye and placed greater emphasis on reaching out to the Central Asian states and the Turkic world through the OTS, but also deepening engagement with some of the GCC states without sacrificing its commercial bonds with European countries and relations with neighboring Georgia, Iran, and Russia—not to mention traditional friends like Israel.

What is observable is the fact that none of the three South Caucasus states are politically or economically integrated with each other. In other words, the South Caucasus is characterized by fragmentation—this has been the case since 1991. The South Caucasus remains fragmented due

to three unresolved ethno-territorial conflicts. This legacy, which traces its origins back to the end of the Soviet period (i.e., the second half of the Gorbachev era, starting in late 1987 or early 1988), has colored the entire post-independence period of the region.

Having emerged in the late 1980s as a result of irredentist and secessionist movements in Soviet Azerbaijan and Soviet Georgia, these conflicts were not adequately resolved by the Soviet leadership. After Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia became independent in 1991, these conflicts culminated in the First Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan and two wars involving Georgia and separatist South Ossetia (1991-1992) and Abkhazia (1992-1993), respectively. Moreover, the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 and its recognition of the independence of the separatist forces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia caused an open confrontation between Russia and Georgia under the rule of Mikheil Saakashvili. Thus, these wars led not only to the occupation of around one-fifth of the internationally recognized territories of both Azerbaijan and Georgia, and the death and displacement of over one million people, but also to closed borders, mistrust, and hatred between the

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populations, along with other humanitarian problems, as direct consequences of these conflicts.

However, it seems safe to say that, on balance,

the Armenia-Azerbaijan confrontation was the main stumbling block to ending the fragmentation of the South Caucasus. In some ways, this has come to an end-or, at least, it seems to be coming to an end. Nevertheless, Armenia and Azerbaijan have not vet established inter-state relations, and the prospects of a peace treaty being signed are uncertain. Perhaps it can be put this way: the finish line is within sight, perhaps even within reach, but there is still some road left to travel. Hence the fact that the very basis of regional development and trans-regional cooperation among the three South Caucasian states remains only a possibility—not an actuality.

The Liberation of Karabakh

The outcome of the Second Karabakh War and Azerbaijan's establishment of complete control over Karabakh

The very basis of regional development and trans-regional cooperation among the three South Caucasian states remains only a possibility—not an actuality.

pation ended with the restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity through military and political means (still under Armenian occupation, however, are eight Azerbaijani exclave and border villages).

Furthermore, the balance of power in the region has drastically changed since November 2020, resulting in a new geopolitical reality. According to the terms that ended the Second Karabakh War, a Russian peacekeeping contingent is present in a certain part of the Karabakh economic region (this presence will remain until at least November 2025). And—as I wrote in my contribution to the edited volume Liberated Karabakh (2021)—one outcome of the war was that "Türkiye and Russia, two regional powers representing two different intergovernmental military alliances—namely, NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—not only strengthened their respective

following its localized counter-terrorism measures in September 2023 significantly changed the facts on the ground. Thus, the almost 30-year-long Armenian occuwith the restoration

positions in the South Caucasus, but also, for the first time anywhere in the post-Soviet space, formalized their cooperation through the establishment near Aghdam of a Joint Center for Monitoring the Ceasefire in Karabakh, in accordance with a memorandum signed by the defense chiefs of the two countries on 11 November 2020." Moreover, as observed by Damjan Krnjević Mišković in his Caucasus Strategic Perspectives article that appeared only weeks after the end of the war, the arrival of Turkish soldiers "in Azerbaijan at the very end of 2020 represents the first time in a century that Turkish troops are durably deployed in the South Caucasus. [Moreover,] this represents the first time tout court that non-Russian troops are deployed in the South Caucasus with the perspicuous consent of Russia, which had for two centuries held a monopoly on this matter in this part of what Moscow used to call its 'near-abroad."

The subsequent establishment and double expansion (in terms of numbers, duration, and scope) in Armenia of what is now called the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA), coupled with various initiatives by France (and Greece) and India to provide arms (and other forms of military cooperation) to Yerevan, alongside

plans for the EU to provide military assistance of Armenia under the European Peace Facility, has also contributed to this new geopolitical reality, albeit less than the foregoing factors (more on this last below).

Cince 2021, the Azerbaijani Government has also begun the realization of a comprehensive reconstruction and recovery program in the Karabakh and East Zangazur economic regions to enable hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani IDPs expelled from their homes in the early 1990s to return to their lands in safety and dignity. To date, numerous new highways, airports, residential settlements, hospitals, schools, etc. have been built in the liberated territories. Moreover, one of the priorities in the process of reconstruction is the restoration of the ecosystem and environmental protection. Due to the fact that these territories include almost all types of renewable energy sources, including hydro, solar, wind, and geothermal, it is envisaged to turn them into a net zero emission zone by 2050.

At the same time, significant mine clearance work has been conducted by the Azerbaijan Mine Action Agency (ANAMA)—an important part of the recovery of the liberated territories. The Azerbaijani government estimates at least one million

mines were laid by Armenia during the years of occupation. Armenia's unwillingness to provide accurate minefield locations creates not only tremendous problems for post-conflict reconstruction, but also brings death and injuries. So far, the accuracy of previously provided information on minefields laid by Armenia in the Aghdam, Fuzuli, Jabrayil, and Zangilan districts has been estimated to be only 25 percent. As a result, 350 Azerbaijanis, both servicemen and civilians, have been killed or injured in mine explosions in the liberated territories since the end of the Second Karabakh War.

↑ nother terrible legacy of Athe Armenian occupation has come to light: the existence of mass graves. To date, 16 such burial sites have been discovered in various villages and cities freed from occupation, including those located in or near Asgaran, Saricali, Dashalti, Edilli, Farrukh, Yukhari Seyidahmedli, Khojaly, Shusha, and Kalbajar. These mass graves have provided more evidence that local Armenian separatists from Karabakh as well as armed detachments from Armenia committed war crimes during the First Karabakh War. Perhaps that is why Armenia is reluctant to provide information about the location of other mass graves. At the same time, the discovery of mass graves prompted work on identifying the fates of missing persons. As a result of the First Karabakh War, 3,890 Azerbaijani citizens (including 71 children, 267 women, and 326 elderly people) were registered as missing. Today Azerbaijan is working with the ICRC to collect DNA samples from the relatives of missing persons who are still waiting for news on their whereabouts. These samples will be used for the identification of persons buried in mass and nameless graves.

Thus, the fundamental rights of around one million forcibly expelled Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia and internally displaced persons from mountainous and lowland Karabakh-the direct victims of the Armenian aggression—have been violated for almost three decades. The culmination of these horrendous atrocities was the Khojaly massacre committed against innocent civilians of this town, located just down the road from Khankendi in the early hours of 26 February 1992 as a result of which 613 civilians were brutally murdered, including 106 women, 63 children, and 70 elderly citizens.

On 31 March 2024, the remains of seven victims of the Khojaly massacre who were recently found in mass graves and identified through DNA analysis were buried in the Alley of Martyrs of Khojaly. It seems likely that the remains of other victims of mass atrocities committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis will emerge from beneath the ground in liberated Azerbaijani territories in the time ahead. At the same time, holding the perpetrators of these mass atrocities accountable is of utmost importance, because doing so serves as a deterrent for the future.

gainst this backdrop, it is Anecessary to underline that the ethnic-Armenian separatist regime that was based in Khankendi during the occupation—together with successive Armenian governments and the Armenian diaspora—had allocated untold billions of dollars and devoted significant political resources to illegally settle thousands of Armenians in the occupied Azerbaijani territories and implement illegal infrastructure and commercial projects there. The deliberate destruction and pillage of Azerbaijani cultural heritage, as well as religious and historical monuments, has also been a part of their battle over perceptions. As Nasimi Aghayev wrote in July 2020, "Almost all once Azerbaijanipopulated towns, villages, and even streets, have been renamed after the occupation, and Armenianized, in a vicious attempt to erase any traces

of Azerbaijanis' age-old presence in Karabakh."

Only after the liberation of Karabakh did it finally become possible for former Azerbaijani IDPs to begin the return journey to their homes. The First State Program on the Great Return was endorsed by presidential decree and foresees that by the end of a five-year period, a total of 34,500 families (150,000 persons) will return to their lands. In fact, the first Azerbaijani IDPs returned to the village of Aghali, located in the Zangilan district, which was rebuilt based on the concept of a "smart village" in July 2022.

The existence of the so-called **▲** "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh" and the fate of its Armenian population have always been considered the main sticking points in the normalization of Armenian-Azerbaijani bilateral relations since the peace process began after the Second Karabakh War, with Armenia demanding an international presence in this region to secure the rights and security of this population. In contrast, Azerbaijan opposed any possible international presence (except the Russian peacekeeping force, which had been deployed there as a result of the terms that ended the Second Karabakh War), indicating that Baku sought direct negotiations

with the local Karabakh Armenians without any third-party mediation. Baku's stated purpose was to reintegrate Karabakh Armenians into the constitutional fabric of Azerbaijan as equal citizens.

In fact, the first meeting between representatives of Azerbaijan and representatives of the Karabakh Armenians was held on 1 March 2023 at the headquarters of the Russian peacekeeping force in Khojalv. However, despite the invitations issued by the Presidential Administration on March 13 and March 27 to "representatives of the Armenian public in Karabakh" to come to Baku for talks on "reintegration" and the "implementation of infrastructure projects," the Karabakh Armenians refused. They indicated a readiness to meet with Azerbaijani representatives only in Khojaly through the Russian peacekeeping mediation.

At the same time, the continuing presence of a more than 10,000-strong illegal Armenian armed detachment in Karabakh created serious impediments to the launch of direct interaction between Baku and Khankendi. Azerbaijan demanded the withdrawal or disarmament of the former, alongside the dissolution of the structures of the so-called "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh." Regretfully,

this took place only as a result of the Azerbaijani military's local counter-terrorism measures.

Very soon thereafter, Azerbaijani state representatives and those of the local Karabakh Armenian community met in the town of Yevlakh to discuss the reintegration of Armenians under the Azerbaijan Constitution. Two further meetings took place in short order in Khojaly and Yevlakh. A few days later, on 28 September 2023, a "decree" was signed by the head of the so-called "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh" to dissolve this illegal entity.

During th uring this period, around Karabakh Armenians left Azerbaijan. Today there are two opposing narratives regarding this departure. Some circles in Armenia (including the country's prime minister) and the West (including those serving as paid lobbyists like Luis Moreno Ocampo and Anders Fogh Rasmussen) have claimed that the Azerbaijani operation represented the culmination of an orchestrated "aggression" or "ethnic cleansing" campaign of forced displacement because this population suffered food and supply shortages over a period of several months and did not have unobstructed (i.e., free of Azerbaijani customs and border controls) passage from the Russian peacekeeping zone in parts of Karabakh to Armenia via the Lachin corridor.

The Azerbaijani narrative, on the other hand, revolved around President Ilham Aliyev's statement, made hours after the operation came to an end, that "before the operation, I once again gave a strict order to all our military units that the Armenian population living in the Karabakh region should not be affected by the anti-terrorist measures and that the civilian population be protected. We have achieved this by using high-preweapons." cision Moreover, Azerbaijani officials emphasized the country's commitment to the rights and safety of all residents, calling on Armenians to remain in their places of residence and be part of a multiethnic Azerbaijan, governed by the rule of law and mutual respect. At the same time, Azerbaijan facilitated the departure of ethnic-Armenians by providing safe and secure passage from Karabakh to Armenia. As Elin Suleymanov, Azerbaijan's ambassador to the UK put it in an interview with Reuters on 28 September 2023, "What should Azerbaijan do? We [...] don't want to keep anyone by force, [but] we don't encourage anyone to leave," he said, adding that Azerbaijani authorities had delivered requested medical,

fuel and other supplies. "We would prefer for people at least to be in a position to make a more informed decision on whether they want to stay." Thus, Baku argued that their departure amounted to a voluntary evacuation—a voluntary decision on the part of ethnic-Armenians unwilling to live in Karabakh under restored Azerbaijani sovereignty. One of the reasons for this decision, the thinking went, was the fact that the Karabakh Armenians had not forgotten the atrocities they committed against the Azerbaijanis in the early 1990s, and thus feared their retribution or revenge.

Tt is against this background **⊥** that a UN mission, led by its Resident Coordinator in Azerbaijan, Vladanka Andreeva, visited Karabakh on 1 October 2023. Alongside technical staff, the senior UN official was accompanied by Ramesh Rajasingham, the Director of the Coordination Division of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as well as representatives from the Food and Agriculture Organization, the UN Refugee Agency, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization.

The result of this on-the-ground mission was a press release that stated it had "visited the city of

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Khankendi, where the team met with the local population and interlocutors and saw first-hand the situation regarding health and education facilities. In parts of the city that the team visited, they saw no damage to civilian public infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and housing, or to cultural and religious structures. The mission saw that the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan was preparing for the resumption of health services and some utilities in the city." The press release also stated that "the team heard from interlocutors that between 50 and 1,000 ethnic Armenians remain in the Karabakh region" and "did not come across any reports-neither from the local population interviewed nor from the interlocutors-of incidences of violence against civilians following the latest ceasefire."

T A **T**estern media and **V V** European institutions such as the European Parliament have focused adamantly faulting Azerbaijan for the mass exodus of Karabakh Armenians at the expense of ignoring the big picture by deliberately avoiding any mention of the fate of Karabakh Azerbaijanis. However, human rights of all inhabitants of both mountainous and lowland Karabakh must be fully respected

regardless of their ethnic origin, religion, or language.

Meanwhile, the initial registration of Armenian residents of the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan has started, and a special internet portal has been created by the State Migration Service for this specific purpose. Those ethnic-Armenian citizens of Azerbaijan who want to return can do so. Those who regrettably choose to reject the constitutional and political reality that Karabakh is Azerbaijan are, effectually, saying that this refusal is more important to them than continuing to live in Karabakh. There is no way around that conclusion except through claims that at the end of the day amount to sophistry.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Armenian-Russian relations started worsening after Nikol Pashinyan came to power in Armenia in 2018. However, after its defeat in the Second Karabakh War, Yerevan began to think about whether the exclusive reliance on Moscow for security guarantees (and economic development) was a mistake and began showing its readiness to get closer to the

West by diversifying its security arrangements.

Thus, in September 2023 Armenia and the United States conducted a ten-day joint military training exercise titled "Eagle Partner," which was designed to prepare the Armenian Armed Forces to take part in Western-led peacekeeping missions. Armenia is also currently trying to seek new security partners in the West, specifically France, in order to develop its security capabilities and enhance its military build-up. India is also among the new sources of support for its rearmament.

On the other hand, Armenia took some steps to reduce meaningful cooperation with Russian-dominated structures. For example, in February 2024, Pashinyan declared that his country was suspending cooperation with the CSTO because it had not fulfilled its commitment to defend Armenia. At the same time, Secretary of the Security Council of Armenia Armen Grigoryan said that Armenia expects the "CSTO to recognize the border of its responsibility; that is, the recognized 29,800-square-kilometer territory of Armenia, as well as the borders that exist with Georgia, Türkiye, Iran, and Azerbaijan. Unless the CSTO recognizes [them], this issue remains up in the air."

↑ rmenia has also joined the International Criminal Court (ICC) and its statute officially entered into force for Armenia on 1 February 2024. One practical consequence of this policy choice is that the country is now obligated to arrest Russian President Vladimir Putin should he find himself on Armenian soil, because the ICC has issued an arrest warrant for the Russian leader. Understandably, the Russian Foreign Ministry has called this decision of the Armenian government an "unfriendly step."

Furthermore, in March 2024, Pashinyan announced that, effective 1 August 2024, Armenia is terminating a protection arrangement under which Russian border guards are deployed at its main airport. The Russian side has confirmed this information.

At the same time, Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan stated in an interview on TRT World that was taped on the sidelines of the March 2024 Antalya Diplomatic Forum that the people of Armenia have European aspirations, and the idea of joining the EU is on the list of issues that are being actively discussed in Armenia nowadays. According to some Armenian media sources, Pashinyan made it clear at a closed meeting of his Civil Contract party on 8 March 2024 that the West

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demands from Armenia practical steps to distance itself from Russia and oust it from the region, because "Russia has long ago turned away from us." In this situation, "Armenia should apply to join the EU no later than the fall of this year."

In contrast, Armenia does not appear to have immediate ambitions to become a NATO member state. In a 1 April 2024 interview with Argentine TV channel Todo Noticias, Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan said that "joining NATO is not on Armenia's agenda." At the same time, Mirzoyan stated that "the problems that exist in relations with Russia cannot be hidden." He pointed out that "the security mechanisms that we had for several decades did not work. It is for this reason that we were forced to ask the European Union to send a mission and observe the situation on our border with Azerbaijan."

This EU mission (the EUMA), which marked its first anniversary on 20 February 2024, aims to contribute "to human security in conflict-affected areas in Armenia and through its presence on the ground aims to build confidence among the local population in border areas," as a recent press release affirms. However, the Azerbaijani side has another view on this issue. According to Aykhan

Hajizada, the Foreign Ministry's Spokesperson, EUMA has been actively exploited as "an anti-Azerbaijani propaganda tool" and has issued "statements calling the EUMA a deterrence force, and creating an illusion of a possible intervention by Azerbaijan, which has no grounds whatsoever." Hajizada added that "the EU was urged to take all necessary measures with a view to ensuring that the EUMA acts strictly as a neutral, civilian and unarmed mission, in line with its declared mandate, and refrains from any activity targeting Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity, or affects its legitimate security interests in any other manner."

At the same time, Hajizada expressed serious concerns about the 5 April 2024 trilateral meeting scheduled to take place in Brussels between the Prime Minister of Armenia, the U.S. Secretary of State, and the President of the EU Commission (it had been announced, in principle, during the European Political Community summit in Grenada in October 2023). In particular, Hajizada said that this meeting "is not conducted in a fully transparent manner, lacks regional inclusivity, and runs contrary to promoted and much needed confidence-building, and integrity in the region. It creates new dividing lines and so-called spheres

of influence in the region, instead of encouraging the Armenian side to negotiate in good faith." At the same time, he made it clear that the EU and the U.S. "share responsibility for any destabilizing action of Armenia" that may take place subsequent to the meeting, "given the revanchist mood in Armenia," explaining further that "such an open pro-Armenian public manifestation by Washington and Brussels might create a dangerous illusion in Armenia that EU and U.S. are going to support Armenia in its possible renewed provocations against Azerbaijan."

U.S. State T Towever, Department spokesman Matthew Miller pointed out that the Brussels meeting will focus "on Armenia's economic resilience," stressing that Armenia is working to diversify trade ties and address humanitarian needs. Nevertheless, he also did not rule out that Armenian-Azerbaijani issues will be discussed at this meeting, but added that this will not be the main agenda item of the meeting.

The Azerbaijani readout of the phone call that the U.S. Secretary of State made to President Aliyev on 3 April 2024 indicated that, "based on the information he received, discussions preceding the trilateral meeting included topics such

as military support for Armenia, joint military exercises, the establishment of military infrastructure along border areas with Azerbaijan, and Armenia's arming through the EU's European Peace Facility funded through the U.S. budget." He also reiterated Azerbaijan's view that the trilateral meeting "would ultimately escalate tensions and create new dividing lines instead of fostering peace and cooperation in the South Caucasus."

The Azerbaijani readout of the phone call that the President of the EU Commission made to President Aliyev on 4 April 2024 also referred to the aforementioned trilateral meeting. It indicated that the country's head of state had "reiterated Azerbaijan's standpoint on this meeting, similar to the discussions with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and emphasized the need for regional inclusivity."

The trilateral meeting took place on 5 April 2024, just as this edition of *Baku Dialogues* was being finalized. On Twitter, Pashinyan indicated that the "consultations" had been about "expanding economic cooperation to strengthen Armenia's economic, humanitarian, democratic resilience." At a joint press conference preceding the meeting, the President of the EU Commission

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announced 270€ million in grants to Armenia over the next four years, while the U.S. Secretary of State said that his country has "plans to provide over \$65 million in assistance from our FY23 budget funds." Both Washington and Brussels also indicated a willingness to invest in various infrastructure projects in Armenia, but refrained from making binding promises to do so.

All in all, in their public remarks, both of the Western representatives spoke equitably, although some of their formulations could be construed as leaning in Armenia's direction. For instance, the President of the EU Commission began her remarks by saying, "I'm glad to host a meeting in support of Armenia. We're delivering on a promise we made last October, the promise to stand shoulder to shoulder by Armenia." Her only reference to the EU's vision regarding the future of the entire region was contained in her final sentence: "We will continue to work all together for the future of Armenia in a stable and prosperous South Caucasus region."

This is to be contrasted to the U.S. Secretary of State's more articulated vision: "We are here to reaffirm transatlantic support for a democratic, prosperous future for the Armenian people—and a more integrated and a more peaceful South

Caucasus region," adding that "we want Armenia to take its place as a strong, independent nation at peace with its neighbors, connected to the region and the world." His final assessment struck an evenhanded tone:

Armenia, regional integration is a key to security and to prosperity. We see a more integrated South Caucasus with new transportation routes, energy cooperation, [and] telecommunications. This will promote diversified economies, expanded opportunity, and it will bolster peace and reconciliation efforts. There is a powerful future with a region that is increasingly integrated, that will benefit people in every connected country.

Encouragingly, both Ursula von der Leyen and Tony Blinken spoke of "displaced" ethnic-Armenians from Karabakh, thus (at least implicitly) refusing to follow Pashinyan's preferred formulation ("forcibly displaced"), which he repeated—likely with an eye to his domestic audience—during the joint press conference.

ne could thus conclude that what President Aliyev said to von der Leyen and Blinken during the aforementioned phone calls had a positive impact on the language that was used during the press conference. It may have even indirectly contributed to the manner in which Pashinyan formulated the Armenian position regarding the peace process:

I want to stress that we remain committed to the normalization of relations with Azerbaijan based on mutual recognition of each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity in accordance with the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1991. Armenia is also fully committed to the delimitation of borders based on the Alma-Ata Declaration and unblocking all the regional communications based on full respect for countries' sovereignty and jurisdiction, and the principles of equality and reciprocity.

Lastly, it should be noted that none of the speakers at the press conference mentioned Russia explicitly. However, it seems clear enough that the transatlantic expressions of support for not only Armenia, but Pashinyan personally were implicitly yet unmistakably directed at least in part against Moscow. The attempted turn toward the West seems to be accelerating—or, as von der Leyen put it, "the EU and Armenia are increasingly aligned in values and interests."

This could lead to geopolitical complications, for Armenia depends on Russia in many ways that are, at present, irreplaceable. Russia maintains a major military

base in Gyumri, controls two of Armenia's four borders, supplies most of its energy, and remains its top trading partner.

Armenia is also part of the Russia-run Eurasian Economic Union. Official economic statistics state that according to last year's data, about 36 percent of Armenia's trade turnover is with EAEU countries, mainly Russia. The conflict over Ukraine has also led directly to a dramatic increase in trade turnover with Russia. According to statistics, exports to the Russian market increased by 40 percent, while exports decreased to the United States by 38 percent and the EU 8.2 percent. Thus, the EAEU is the main export market for Armenian products, and it is difficult to assume that Armenia can reconsider its membership in this Union at the moment.

Thus, Armenia today faces a hard choice of whether to abandon Russia without any serious plan to transform the still largely symbolic commitments made by the West into a geopolitically viable and geoeconomically sustainable strategy.

However, given the strategic importance of the South Caucasus region, it is somewhat unsettling that Moscow has not, at least for the time being, replied to these

latest developments in Armenia. There is no guarantee that the Kremlin will refrain from using one or more elements of its quite varied points of leverage—not all of which can be categorized as soft power tools—against Armenia in response to the policies of the Pashinyan government.

Western Bias

Azerbaijan's September 2024 counter-terrorism measures have been exploited by external actors, who have promoted a one-sided narrative that seriously hinders the peace process—or, at the very least, seriously hinders the ability of those external actors that have embraced this one-sided narrative from playing constructive roles in the peace process.

France's increasingly overt support of Armenia is one example of such a narrative that raises concerns in Azerbaijan. On the one hand, immediately after the end of the Second Karabakh War, the Senate and the National Assembly of France adopted harsh anti-Azerbaijani resolutions that called on the government to recognize the separatist regime in Karabakh. On the other hand, French President Emmanuel Macron's statements regarding this part of the world—one

would be hard-pressed not to notice their constant anti-Azerbaijani character—are further stirring tensions. In a joint press briefing after a meeting held at the Élysée Palace with Pashinyan on 21 February 2024, Macron vowed that his country would continue to develop and expand military cooperation with Armenia. He also stated that the exchange of gunfire along the Armenia-Azerbaijan undelimitated border on 13 September 2024 proved "that the danger of escalation remains real"—which is fair enough—but could not help describing Azerbaijan's response as "disproportionate," as it killed four Armenian soldiers.

Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry did not take kindly to his characterization: "It is unacceptable to blame Azerbaijan for taking a disproportionate response, while refraining from criticizing Armenia, who took unprovoked actions disrupting the stable situation that lasted for almost five months," the statement read.

The same document accused Macron of disregarding the historical context, i.e., the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territories and the ethnic cleansing campaign conducted by Armenia against Azerbaijanis. "As a country, which has never mentioned the

rights of Azerbaijanis violated for nearly 30 years, displaced from their territories, and subjected to mass massacres, the French side's statement about the rights and security of Armenians that left the territories of Azerbaijan at their own will and without any violence, is completely inappropriate."

Two days later, on 23 February 2024, Pashinyan received a delegation led by French Minister for the Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu. They discussed defense cooperation and Armenia-France collaboration in military education, combat training, and modernizing the Armenian Armed Forces. The French minister stressed his country's commitment to supplying air defense systems and armored vehicles to Armenia and emphasized France's self-sufficiency in arms production.

It seems, therefore, that a Paris-led campaign to militarize Armenia is currently underway.

The Russian side has not taken kindly to French ambitions directed at its centuries-old ally. Hence the statement made on 10 March 2024 by Maria Zakharova, the Spokesperson of the Russian Foreign Ministry, in which she criticized France's attempts to portray itself as a peacekeeper in Karabakh

"despite Russia's prominent role in peacekeeping efforts" there. She further suggested that France's increased activity in the South Caucasus may be seen as compensation for "its failed policies in Africa."

The EU High Representative I for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, has also demonstrated an anti-Azerbaijan stance in various statements. For example, on 22 January 2022, he expressed his particular solidarity with France and French diplomats who have been expelled from Azerbaijan. However, such an open expression of solidarity and justifying the actions of expelled French diplomats in Azerbaijan (they were accused of being spies) can be considered an intervention in the ongoing legal investigation process and thus an open neglect of diplomatic conduct rules and guidelines relating to the investigation of this case.

Aliyev touched upon this issue while receiving a delegation led by Managing Director of the German Eastern Business Association Michael Harms in Baku in early February 2024. He noted in particular that after restoring sovereignty and territorial integrity by dismantling the separatist stronghold in Karabakh, Azerbaijan came under

attack and was blamed by individuals such as Macron, Borrell, and others. At the same time, he added that "we are witnessing attempts to establish divisive lines in the South Caucasus. Many people in Azerbaijan think that our Muslim religion is the only way out given Georgia and Armenia are taken very close to the hearts of the European institutions and Azerbaijan is now being demonized." The potential strategic implications for the possible trajectory of domestic developments in Azerbaijan contained in this passage have not been suffi-

ciently appreciated and should be taken much more seriously.

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to have a different standard when it comes to Azerbaijan. "Is our issue less important than the issue of Ukraine?" he said.

Normalization of Relations?

The geopolitical land-

scape in the South Cau-

unchangeable.

The geopolitical landscape in **▲** the South Caucasus is going through a period of transformation. Some states are trying to change their foreign and security aspirations by moving away from traditional to new allies, while others are trying to ensure their own strategic posture remains unchangeable. According to Emil Avdaliani's February 2024 analysis, "the South Caucasus is undergoing a geopo-

> litical transformation. The war in Ukraine and the effective resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan mean that the region is entering a new age."

Today, Armenia and Azerbaijan are at a very important stage of bilateral their discussions. They want to normalize

ties and establish inter-state relations. Azerbaijan, though, demands certain quite logical changes in Armenia's current constitution as an antidote against future territorial revanchism. Pashinyan has also emphasized the necessity for Armenia to adopt a new constitution, reflecting geopolitical changes.

While discussing the issue of a new constitution and its connection with Armenia's Declaration of Independence, political scientist Areg Kochinyan noted that the Declaration of Independence of Armenia addresses the recognition of the Armenian genocide, the fulfillment of the people's aspirations, and the reunification of Armenia and the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (and other foreign territories), yet none of these points applies to the Republic of Armenia. In his opinion, if the Declaration of Independence does not pertain to the foundations of statehood and state goals, then the connection between it and the Constitution should be severed. He therefore suggested the separation of the Declaration of Independence from the Constitution. He has also suggested that the only viable option for the establishment of peace is coexistence with Türkiye and Azerbaijan.

Speaking at a joint press conference with his Azerbaijani counterpart in mid-February 2024, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said:

There is no doubt that the signing of a lasting peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia will be a new source of hope for peace, tranquility, and stability in our region and the world. We stand shoulder to shoulder with Azerbaijan in this process. With the end of the occupation in Karabakh, a historic window of opportunity for lasting peace in our region has opened. It is critical that this window of opportunity is not closed. I believe that Armenia should think long-term and evaluate this process with a strategic perspective. We invite third parties to make constructive contributions instead poisoning the process.

Consolidated Vision?

Trrespective of whether the West **L**and Russia are locked into a new Cold War or something like it, it is clear that great power confrontation is part of the new global reality. Azerbaijan and Armenia (and Georgia) should work together now to ensure that outside players' geopolitical rivalry is not reflected in the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus. As Azerbaijan's presidential adviser Hikmat Hajiyev put it on 1 March 2024:

> There are forces in our region that implement militarization policy, promote arms race, try to create new separating and dividing lines in the region,

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and at the same time, they want to bring their geopolitical intrigues outside the South Caucasus region to the region. There are certain forces that try to develop the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan not as a border, but as a kind of confrontation line, which is unfortunate. We expect that Armenia will not repeat the mistakes of previous years and will pursue a policy that will serve lasting peace in the region. This is the intention of Azerbaijan.

In this context, Pashinyan's recent statement on 28 March 2024 is quite exceptional. He noted that Armenia does not recognize any government in exile and there is only one legitimate government

in Armenia, which is located within Azerbaijan and Armenia boundaries the (and Georgia) should work the Cabinet room. Pashinyan together now to ensure that expressed outside players' geopolitical cern about the rivalry is not reflected in potential threat to the geopolitical landscape Armenia's national of the South Caucasus. posed security the actions

and statements of certain groups, and stressed the need for clarity and decisive action to prevent external forces from exploiting such situations.

This seemed to be a direct response to the remarks published

earlier in the same day by the former "president" of the so-called "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh" in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*. When asked whether there was a government in exile, he stated, "Yes, the office of the president and the offices of the judicial and legislative bodies of Artsakh are located in the building where I am hosting you. Parliamentarians can gather here to vote. A decree was signed in October [2023], which stipulates that all government ministers remain in their positions on a voluntary basis."

Pashinyan now faces a difficult dilemma, since he seems to be interpreting this interview as part of a

pattern of ongoing political behavior that is contrary to that of his government—with no end in sight. Taking legal action, including the arrest and detention of Karabakh separatists operating in

Armenia, could lead to even greater tension within Armenian society.

It is clear that, despite almost three and a half years that have passed since Armenia was defeated in the Second Karabakh War, there is no consolidated vision of the

Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process in Armenia. However, it is time for Armenians to move away from myths and accept the new reality on the ground, reject the tragically romantic paradigms of the past, and work towards the establishment of pragmatic relations with both Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

Indeed, signing what may be titled the "Agreement on Peace and Establishment of Interstate Relations" will not only formally end the state of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan and thus

contribute to the establishment of inter-state relations, but it will also provide an enabling environment for future generations to lay a foundation for trust, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the time ahead. It can also eventually contribute to the transformation of the South Caucasus into an area of regional stability and cooperation. Finally, it can contribute to the aspiration, shared by the Silk Road region's most serious leaders, for this part of the world to transform itself from an object of great power rivalry to a subject of international order. BD

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