

# BULLETIN

HIGHLIGHT OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

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## **I. Iran's saber-rattling towards Azerbaijan threatens regional stability**

In the last few months, Iran's persistent provocations and hostility towards Azerbaijan have become almost a daily occurrence, which continue to undermine the stability of the region. Azerbaijan has consistently expressed its commitment to promoting friendly ties with Iran, but border violations, Iranian military drills at the border and near Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakhchivan, and provocative rhetoric emanating from the Iranian high-ranking officials make it increasingly difficult to maintain cordial relations. A joint statement released on March 11 by Azerbaijan's foreign and defense ministries reported that an Iranian military aircraft flew without stopping along a significant portion of the Azerbaijan-Iran border, starting from the Zangilan district and heading towards the Bilasuvar district, before returning.

“Contrary to the internationally accepted practice of warning the neighboring country in advance about approaching military aircraft to the state border, such a close proximity of a military aircraft of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the state border between the two countries and flying over the border line threatens the safety of civil aviation, and further deteriorates the bilateral relations. The flight of a military aircraft for more than half an hour near the liberated territories of Azerbaijan is a provocation and unfriendly behavior towards Azerbaijan. We would like to remind that last year the Iranian side also conducted large-scale military exercises along the Araz River near the borders of Azerbaijan. We strongly condemn the Iranian side for such a provocative step, urge them to provide an appropriate explanation, and refrain from such

confrontational steps in the future,” the joint statement from the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan read. On March 11, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Republic of Azerbaijan Seyyed Abbas Mousavi was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and was presented with a corresponding note of protest.

On March 9, Aykhan Hajizade, the spokesperson for Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry, informed local media that Azerbaijan had sent a note to Iran regarding the whereabouts of Farid Safarli, a 26-year-old Azerbaijani citizen who had been missing in Iran since February 20. Safarli was scheduled to fly to Germany on March 4, but no news of him has been reported since then. The Foreign Ministry is awaiting a response from Iran. Following a gunman's attack on its embassy in Tehran, Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry issued a warning to its citizens on January 27, advising them to avoid traveling to Iran unless absolutely necessary and to exercise extreme caution if they do travel. In the meantime, throughout March, Azerbaijan continued to detain individuals who are suspected of being Iran-backed agents of destabilization.

On March 28, Fazil Mustafa, the leader of the Great Order Party and a member of the Milli Majlis (parliament) and an outspoken critic of Iran, was shot multiple times while he was outside his residence located in the vicinity of Baku. He sustained injuries to his shoulder and leg, and was immediately transported to a hospital where he underwent surgery. The State Security Service of Azerbaijan labeled the incident as a terror attack and initiated a criminal investigation. On March 31, Aykhan Hajizada, Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan,

pointed out that the outcomes of the initial inquiry into the terrorist attack targeting Fazil Mustafa led to Iran.

“Recently, threats have been voiced and provocations were conducted against Azerbaijan from the territory of Iran. Examples include holding of military exercises by Iran along the borders of Azerbaijan, conducting of military flights over the border, issuing of anti-Azerbaijani statements by Iranian officials, filming, which involve even children and are conducted near the Khudafarin Bridge, and subsequent demonstration of threatening videos against Azerbaijan by Iranian security services such as IRGC, the terrorist attack against the Embassy of Azerbaijan to Iran, and the initial investigation of the terrorist attack against the member of the Milli Majlis Fazil Mustafa leading to Iran” Aykhan Hajizada said, adding that “Today, the brotherhood of Iran and Armenia remains a threat to the entire region. Over the past 30 years, Iran has, in fact, with its tacit consent, turned a blind eye to Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territories over the past 30 years. It is well known that Iran ignored the occupation of Karabakh and East Zangazur and the plundering of these territories, the sale of stones demolished from houses in these territories in Iranian markets, the destruction and desecration of 65 of the existing 67 mosques.”

Aykhan Hajizada made these remarks responding to Nasser Kanaani, Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran, who said that “it is expected from Azerbaijan's government to stay away from the trap set by enemies of the two countries' relations” and threatened that “the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot remain indifferent to the Zionist regime's plot from the soil of the Republic of Azerbaijan.”

“These threats of Iran will never intimidate Azerbaijan. Despite the military support sent from Iranian territory to Armenia, the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan destroyed the occupying Armed Forces of Armenia in 2020. In the future, any aggression and provocation against Azerbaijan will be resolutely prevented,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted in its official response, pointing out that “We recommend Nasser Kanaani, Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran, who referred in his allegations dated March 31 to the press briefing of Jeyhun Bayramov in the margins of his visit to the State of Israel, to listen carefully to the statements made by Minister Jeyhun Bayramov. During the press briefing with the Foreign Minister of Israel, Jeyhun Bayramov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan has not displayed any standpoint against Iran. In this regard, we consider this statement made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran as another anti-Azerbaijani step. We state that Azerbaijan has never allowed the use of its territory against third countries.”

On March 31, the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan was forced to respond to yet another provocative and slanderous remark coming from Iran. The head of Iran's ground forces Kioumars Heydari claimed that members of the Islamic State militant group had fought for Azerbaijan and were still based in the country. “The commander of the Land Forces of the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kioumars Heydari, has made vile defamatory and slanderous statements regarding Azerbaijan. K. Heydari, in his absurd thoughts, claims that “Zionist” forces allegedly exist in Azerbaijan and that Azerbaijan used ISIS terrorists brought from Syria during the 44-day Patriotic War and that they are still in the Azerbaijani territory. Moreover, he stated that Iran will not allow changes on the border

with Armenia,” the statement from the Ministry of Defense read.

“First of all, we declare that the Iranian side's accusations about the presence of any foreign forces in the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan are unfounded and completely unacceptable. In general, there are no extraneous forces in the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

We would like to remind K. Heydari that Armenia had been keeping the Azerbaijani territories under occupation for 30 years. As a result of this military aggression, a 132-kilometer section of the Azerbaijani-Iranian state border had also been occupied. However, the Iranian side had never made compromising statements about Armenia. On the contrary, the Iranian-Armenian brotherhood strengthened during this period,” the Ministry of Defense noted, adding that “The Republic of Azerbaijan supports the territorial integrity of all the countries and does not interfere in the internal affairs of other states. In response to the accusation that Azerbaijan allegedly used ISIS terrorists during the 44-day Patriotic War, we declare that the glorious Azerbaijan Army single-handedly liberated the occupied territories and signed a triumphal chronicle. This claim is nothing more than an absurd accusation and slander.”

The Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan has voiced their astonishment and pointed out the irony of the accusation against Azerbaijan made by a representative of a country widely recognized as a state sponsor of terrorism. “This claim is nothing more than an absurd accusation and slander. It is ironic and ridiculous that this accusation was made by a high-ranking military officer of a state that supports terrorism and whose name is known for committing terrorist acts in various

countries around the world,” the statement from the Ministry of Defense read.

These provocative actions represent a significant departure from the regional status quo. However, these developments are not occurring in isolation. Iran's growing assertiveness in its relations with Azerbaijan and its attempts to increase its influence in the South Caucasus are a response to the gradual decline of Russian hegemony in the region. These hostile actions taken by Iran are not the only indicators of an uptick in aggression. A violent attack in January against the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran resulted in the death of a security officer and injuries to two others. Azerbaijan called it a terrorist attack and withdrew its diplomats from Tehran.

Vasif Huseynov, head of department at the AIR Center, argues that the reason behind Iran's actions is simple: the changing regional geopolitics are not in Tehran's favor. Iran cannot accept the "encroachment" of external players in the South Caucasus. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has complicated the region's geopolitics for Iran, as the EU and the US have become more involved in mediating the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, effectively sidelining Russia. This was followed by the deployment of a monitoring mission to the Armenia-Azerbaijan border after the Prague summit on October 6. Until recently, Iran acknowledged the South Caucasus as falling under Russia's sphere of influence, a status quo that has persisted since the Russo-Persian War of 1828 and the subsequent Treaty of Turkmenchay, which granted Russia control over the region. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's continued dominance in the region remained acceptable to Iran, as it prevented the encroachment of rival powers like the United States and Turkey. However,

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has weakened its grip on the South Caucasus, creating opportunities for other powers and raising Iran's regional ambitions.

## **II. Azerbaijan pushes for reintegration in Karabakh amidst growing Armenian provocations**

On March 1st, the relevant authorities of Azerbaijan met with representatives of the Armenian community of Karabakh at the headquarters of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Khojaly district, Azerbaijan, mediated by Russian Major General Andrey Volkov. Ramin Mammadov, an Azerbaijani member of parliament, was appointed as the point person for contacts with the Armenian community in Karabakh. The Azerbaijani delegation included representatives of the monitoring group inspecting the illicit exploitation of natural resources in Karabakh, the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, the Ministry of the Economy, and AzerGold. These agencies have portfolios covering major concerns of Azerbaijani protesters demonstrating along the Lachin road since December 2022.

The Armenian community's delegation was headed by Samvel Shahramanyan, secretary of the de facto separatist regime's "security council" in Karabakh. During the meeting, the sides discussed the reintegration of Armenian residents in the region into the constitutional structure of the Republic of Azerbaijan. However, Armenian representatives denied this, stating that the agenda focused on uninterrupted gas and electricity supplies from Armenia to the Karabakh region, a "one-time visual tour" by an Azerbaijani specialized group

of the Gizilbulag and Damirli mines, and the complete opening of the Lachin road.

Previously, there were talks between Azerbaijani officials and the Armenian community in Karabakh, which were facilitated by Russian peacekeepers. However, these discussions came to a halt when Russian-Armenian oligarch Ruben Vardanyan was sent to Karabakh, as Baku believed he was acting as Moscow's agent to disrupt the peace process and prevent Karabakh's reintegration into Azerbaijan. Consequently, Azerbaijani officials refused to engage in any talks with him.

But talks resumed shortly after Vardanyan was dismissed from his position in the separatist Karabakh government. On February 24, representatives from the Armenian community and Azerbaijani authorities met once again with Russian mediation. Discussions reportedly covered topics such as electricity and gas supplies, as well as the opening of the Lachin road.

Several weeks after the March 1 meeting, the Office of the Azerbaijani President invited representatives from the Armenian community to Baku to discuss reintegration and infrastructure projects in Karabakh. This move could be seen as an attempt by Baku to sideline Russia's peacekeeping contingent and further advance the peaceful reintegration of the Armenian community in Karabakh.

Unfortunately, the separatist regime representatives declined the invitation, which could potentially harm the peace process. In response, the Armenian community insisted that future negotiations take place with the mediation of the Russian peacekeeping mission at the same location as the March 1 meeting. Some representatives also demanded that Baku treat the so-called

"Artsakh republic" as an equal partner, despite the ground realities and international efforts for peace.

In addition to these developments, a series of other regional events have heightened tensions and led many observers to warn of a potential escalation. The first major indication of a possible wider escalation occurred on March 5 when Azerbaijani armed units discovered the transfer of military supplies to the Karabakh region from Armenia via the unpaved Khankendi-Khalfali-Tursusu road (an alternative to the Lachin road). This led to a small-scale skirmish between the two sides when Azerbaijani forces tried to stop and inspect the suspected vehicles. The incident resulted in the deaths of five military personnel from both sides.

“The transportation of manpower, ammunition, mines, as well as other military equipment from Armenia for illegal Armenian armed detachments in the territory of Azerbaijan, where the Russian peacekeeping forces are temporarily deployed, has intensified in recent days. This transportation is carried out, in particular, by taking advantage of the night hours and foggy weather conditions. Illegal Armenian armed detachments carry out work on laying new roads along several routes passing through some mountainous and unpaved areas, as well as expanding old trails. For this purpose, military, engineering, and special equipment are used, as well as persons, undergoing military service under a contract, and local residents are involved as a labor force. Over the past few days, the intensification of unlawful construction and improvement work done by Armenians on the Khankendi-Khalfali-Turshsu road and Khankendi-Kosalar-Mirzalar-Turshsu road passing to the north of the

mentioned route was recorded by the Azerbaijan Army's technical surveillance means. These roads are also used for the provision and supply of the combat positions of illegal Armenian armed detachments. Despite numerous appeals of the Azerbaijani side and discussions in this regard, no necessary measures have been taken to suppress the transportation of ammunition and other military means to date. Taking into account the current situation, necessary local control measures were taken by the Azerbaijan Army Units to suppress the use of dirt roads north of the Lachin road for illegal activities, as well as the aggravation of the situation by the transportation of weapons and ammunition by Armenia and the commitment of potential provocations. In the days that followed, the Defense Ministry of Azerbaijan released video footage indicating the movement of Armenian Armed Forces units along the unpaved road, accompanied by the Russian peacekeeping contingent. The Defense Ministry reminded the Russian peacekeepers of their responsibilities under the November 10, 2020 trilateral agreement between Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, and called for the establishment of checkpoints along the Lachin road to better monitor movement between Armenia and the Karabakh region,” the statement from the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan read. Furthermore, on March 30, the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan announced that “in regard with the commissioning of the new Lachin road, several high grounds between Jaghazur and Zabukh villages of Lachin region, main and auxiliary roads, as well as large areas along the border were taken under the control of the Azerbaijan Army Units.”

The ongoing negotiations between Baku and Yerevan have failed to facilitate the



reintegration process of the Karabakh region with Azerbaijan. Baku has firmly opposed the involvement of any third party in the talks with the Armenian community of Karabakh, as well as the creation of an international mechanism towards this end. This stance has become a central component of Baku's position, coupled with the insistence on establishing checkpoints in the Lachin Corridor.

On the other hand, the Armenian leadership has rejected these proposed checkpoints and has vowed not to sign any peace treaty with Azerbaijan that does not include provisions regarding the security of the Armenian community in Karabakh. It is interesting to note that they have not demanded the right of "self-determination" for the Armenians in Karabakh, unlike previous. Ultimately, the deadlock in negotiations has created a perilous situation that could result in a military escalation between the two sides, as has occurred in the past.

The Munich meetings between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders in February were initially seen as a breakthrough in stalled peace negotiations, according to local and international observers. However, developments since then have shown that the optimism was premature, as neither side has taken any tangible steps towards resolving their ongoing disputes, including the Lachin standoff. Furthermore, reports suggest that both countries are concentrating their troops along the border, potentially preparing for escalation.

On March 14th, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan referred to the "increasingly aggressive rhetoric of Azerbaijan" as evidence that the possibility of escalation along the border of Armenia and Karabakh is very high. However, Pashinyan denied Armenia's role in

renewed tensions, saying they have deployed the EU monitoring mission along the border and have Russian peacekeeping forces in Karabakh. This approach is fraught with contradictions and adds to existing tensions.

Pashinyan's government is demonstrating a strong interest in freezing the existing status-quo and prolonging peace negotiations indefinitely, without any tangible outcome. Even after the Prague summit in October 2022, where both Armenia and Azerbaijan recognized each other's territorial integrity, the Armenian government subsequently denied recognizing Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. Armenia has also yet to start building its part of the transportation routes, unlike Azerbaijan.

Thus, Yerevan appears to be imitating negotiations in the hope of a better geopolitical situation that could strengthen their bargaining power and freeze the status quo. The current strategic approach of the Armenian government bears a striking resemblance to the tactics employed by past Armenian leaders, including Prime Minister Pashinyan himself, during the peace negotiations preceding the Second Karabakh War. For three decades, these leaders sought to prolong negotiations while gradually annexing Azerbaijani territories. These policies ultimately resulted in catastrophic consequences for regional peace and security, claiming thousands of lives on both sides. It is alarming, therefore, that Yerevan is reverting to these same tactics and narratives.

Azerbaijan has legitimate concerns about the current situation in the Karabakh region and along the border with Armenia. In recent weeks, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense has presented evidence of military personnel and equipment being transferred from Armenia to

Karabakh under the escort of Russian peacekeepers. Coupled with Armenia's failure to withdraw its armed forces from Azerbaijani territories, despite promising to do so by September 2022, it appears that Armenia is attempting to strengthen its military position in Azerbaijan and is preparing for potential escalation. Azerbaijan has also observed Iranian fighters being deployed to the Karabakh region and the provision of arms to Armenia by Iran.

This situation is highly dangerous and could easily erupt into violence. The solution to preventing such a scenario is well known. Armenia and Azerbaijan must return to EU-mediated peace talks, and Yerevan must fulfill its commitments by recognizing Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan and signing a peace treaty that includes this provision.

International mediators play a crucial role in facilitating a breakthrough in this context. Azerbaijan's concerns about the illegal trafficking of weapons and goods along the Lachin Corridor have been supported by the European Union. Toivo Klaar, the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, expressed in an interview with Azerbaijani media that it is legitimate to have transparency about what is being transported on the Lachin road. Klaar emphasized that this road should not be used for any military or illicit purposes. However, Klaar did not provide specifics on how transparency can be achieved. In contrast to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Klaar did not reject the idea of installing checkpoints for this purpose. Establishing checkpoints would be a significant step towards the reintegration of the Karabakh region with Azerbaijan. It would also reduce Russian influence in the region and contribute

to efforts to establish lasting peace between Baku and Yerevan.

Furthermore, the deployment of the EU monitoring mission in Armenia, as warned by the Azerbaijani side from the beginning, is being used by Yerevan as a way to avoid meaningful engagement in the peace process. Pashinyan does not deny this fact, stating that his government "has solved that problem" by deploying the monitoring mission. This attitude encourages Pashinyan to avoid implementing the commitments his government made in the trilateral statement of November 10th, 2020, and subsequent documents. However, the lack of pressure from the EU on Yerevan to recognize the Karabakh region as part of Azerbaijan and implement these commitments further increases Pashinyan's confidence.

### **III. Understanding Azerbaijan's conditions for peace with Armenia**

During an expanded meeting in Berlin on March 14 with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, President Ilham Aliyev underscored that "there is a good chance to reach an agreement, especially at a time when Armenia and Azerbaijan recognized each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty after the meetings in Sochi last October. It is a good idea to sign this agreement sooner rather than later. We have developed five principles based on international law, which, in our view, should form the basis of the peace agreement." President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that Azerbaijan's position consisted of two approaches. The first approach is signing a peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the second is the implementation of dialogue with the



Armenian residents of Azerbaijan's Karabakh region.

President Ilham Aliyev stated that the representative appointed by Azerbaijan had met with the residents of the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan on March 5, and representatives of the Armenian community of Karabakh were invited to the Administration of the President of Azerbaijan in Baku to continue contacts on their reintegration and the implementation of a number of infrastructure projects. President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev noted that all forms and manifestations of separatism were unacceptable and emphasized the importance of demonstrating a unified position in relation to separatist trends.

Touching upon the issue of the Lachin road in Azerbaijan, the head of state said that Armenia's claims about the blockade of this road were completely groundless, that there was traffic along the road, that more than 4,000 vehicles and over 150 people in need of medical assistance had passed along the road since December 12.

President Ilham Aliyev stated that the Azerbaijani side was concerned about the presence of Armenian armed forces in the Azerbaijani territories where Russian peacekeepers are temporarily stationed and using the Lachin road for military purposes and military transport. The head of state added that Armenia had not fulfilled its obligations regarding the opening of the Zangezur corridor under the Trilateral Statement and provided information about Azerbaijan's proposal to establish a border checkpoint at the end of the Lachin road on the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Emphasizing that the launch of the Zangezur corridor would create opportunities for the emergence of a new transport route, President Ilham Aliyev said

that Azerbaijan was rapidly continuing the construction of railways and highways in its territory.

In a congratulatory message to the people of Azerbaijan on the Novruz holiday from the liberated Talysh village on March 18, President Ilham Aliyev detailed Azerbaijan's vision for peace with Armenia. Talysh village was occupied by Armenian forces at the start of the First Karabakh War in 1991. However, during Azerbaijan's Aghdara operation of 1992, the village was freed from Armenian control. Sadly, the Armenian army recaptured Talysh in April 1994, and it suffered significant destruction and looting during the occupation. In 2016, during the Four-Day War, Azerbaijani troops liberated the strategic heights surrounding Talysh. The village was then among the hundreds of settlements that Azerbaijan liberated during the 44-Day War in 2020. On March 16, 2023, the first group of 20 internally displaced families were resettled in Talysh, as part of the government initiated the "Great Return" program. The program aims to resettle a total of 180 families in the village by the end of 2023, allowing them to return to their homes after decades of displacement.

During a recent statement, President Aliyev emphasized that the consequences of the 30-year-long Armenian occupation in Azerbaijani territory should not be forgotten, and must be taken into account when drafting a future peace treaty. He expressed concern about attempts to deny the occupation and the resulting destruction, including the atrocities committed in – "Hiroshima of the Caucasus" – Aghdam. The President's comments serve as a reminder of the significant impact of the occupation on Azerbaijan, and the importance of acknowledging the suffering and losses endured by the Azerbaijani people. By

acknowledging these realities, it is hoped that a lasting and equitable peace agreement can be reached that addresses the concerns of all parties involved.

“They want to forget it and make us forget it. It will never be the case. The realities of the occupation, the realities of the war and the post-war realities must and will be reflected in the peace negotiations. Otherwise, there will be no peace agreement,” President Ilham Aliyev noted.

President Ilham Aliyev criticized the lack of efforts from international organizations to resolve the conflict, which ultimately led to the 44-day War from September 27 to November 10, 2020. The president pointed out that Azerbaijan was forced to take action in order to restore its territorial integrity, in accordance with the UN Charter. President Ilham Aliyev also commented on Armenia's recent change in position. Previously, Armenia had asserted that "Karabakh is Armenia, full stop" and had threatened Azerbaijan with further conflict. However, the president suggested that Armenia is now attempting to seek new forms of patronage.

“Our lands were under occupation for nearly 30 years. Armenia carried out a policy of ethnic cleansing against our people. Hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis were forced out of their native lands, became refugees and displaced persons. Acts of genocide, injustice and war crimes were committed against our people. We will never forget that. We must never forget that,” President Ilham Aliyev noted, adding that “For 30 years, we raised our voice of justice in all international organizations because of the occupation. Unfortunately, there was no reaction to our words from any institution. On the contrary, the mediators involved in the Karabakh

conflict tries not to solve the issue but to freeze it. The new information that has been emerging over the two and a half years since the Second Karabakh War confirms this again.”

“Unfortunately, Armenia has not yet learned the lessons of the Second Karabakh War. Because we are seeing that revengeful forces have risen in Armenia. Territorial claims against Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani lands are still being put forward in Armenia. We are warning the Armenian leadership to refrain from these dirty deeds. We are also warning certain countries that stand behind Armenia from here, from the liberated village of Talish, to stop these dirty deeds. No external force can shatter the will of the state and the people of Azerbaijan. For 30 years, Armenia, as well as its patrons and allies, tried to use various opportunities and means to prevent us from doing our legitimate work. They wanted to tire us with meaningless negotiations. They wanted us to come to terms with the occupation,” President Ilham Aliyev underscored.

In his message, President Ilham Aliyev also reiterated Azerbaijan’s conditions for peace with Armenia. “Today, Armenia, which used to say that “Karabakh is Armenia, full stop” and threatened us with a new war, is going out of its way to find itself a new patron,” President Ilham Aliyev said, emphasizing that “All this is to no avail. There is one condition for them to live comfortably on an area of 29,000 square kilometers – Armenia must accept our conditions, officially recognize Karabakh as the territory of Azerbaijan, sign a peace treaty with us and carry out delimitation work according to our conditions. Only under these circumstances can they live comfortably on an area of 29,000 square kilometers, which is all they want now. If Armenia does not recognize

our territorial integrity, we will not recognize their territorial integrity either.”

At a press conference held on January 11, 2021, with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, President Ilham Aliyev declared that the conflict is a thing of the past, and that the focus should be on building a future where neighbors can live together peacefully and work towards enhancing regional stability and security. Since then, President Aliyev has reiterated Azerbaijan's readiness to sign a peace agreement with Armenia on the condition that Armenia acknowledges the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, which is recognized by the international community.

Initially, Russia took the lead in the negotiation process, organizing two meetings in 2021, one in Moscow on January 11 and another in Sochi on November 26. The Moscow meeting centered on the opening of transportation routes and showed little interest in engaging in dialogue on a comprehensive peace treaty. As 2021 ended with no concrete results, Azerbaijan took the initiative to launch specific discussions on the peace treaty. Azerbaijan presented a fresh five-point proposal to Armenia regarding the restoration of relations. The proposal was published on March 14, 2022, and comprised of the following points:

The states should mutually recognize each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity, the inviolability of internationally recognized borders, and political independence.

The states should mutually acknowledge the absence of any territorial claims against each other and commit to not making such claims in the future through legally binding agreements.

The states should refrain from threatening each other's security, using force against

political independence and territorial integrity, or engaging in any other activities that are inconsistent with the purposes of the UN Charter.

The states should engage in delimitation and demarcation of their shared borders and establish diplomatic relations.

The states should facilitate the opening of transport links and communications, and cooperate in other areas of mutual interest.

In March 2022, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan expressed his willingness to sign a peace agreement with Azerbaijan and commence peace talks immediately on March 31. However, this process faced backlash, particularly in the latter part of 2022.

The initiative for a peace treaty was introduced by European Council President Charles Michel, who hosted three meetings in Brussels on April 6, May 22, and August 31, with the first meeting held in the trilateral format on December 14, 2021. A subsequent meeting took place in Prague on October 6, where French President Emmanuel Macron was present as a special guest. Following the Prague meeting, the Armenian side unfortunately demanded a change from the trilateral format to a quadrilateral one, which would include the French President. Azerbaijan rejected this proposal as France had taken the Armenian side on several occasions during and after the Second Karabakh War.

In the summer and fall of 2022, Russia openly demonstrated its dissatisfaction with the EU's mediation and interfered more robustly in the negotiation process. As a result, the Sochi summit of the Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Russian leaders on October 31, 2022, was seen as Russia's attempt to reactivate its role.

Russia also submitted a draft of a peace treaty that stipulated the deferral of the so-called Karabakh issue to the future to prevent Armenia from recognizing Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. Although the Armenian side agreed to the Russian proposal, official Baku refused to accept such an arrangement.

In addition, Moscow became concerned about the establishment of direct communication channels between Baku and the Armenian community in the Karabakh region, prompting them to dispatch Ruben Vardanyan, a Russian oligarch of Armenian descent who has been linked to international money laundering, to Karabakh. After renouncing his Russian citizenship and being appointed as "state minister" of the unrecognized entity in Karabakh, Vardanyan disrupted the dialogue between Baku and the Karabakh Armenians.

Towards the end of 2022, Azerbaijani environmental activists and non-governmental organizations staged protests along the Lachin road, denouncing the illegal exploitation of Azerbaijan's natural resources by Armenia and the road's use for non-humanitarian purposes. The demonstrations also highlighted Azerbaijan's concerns over its sovereignty over the region. Despite Armenian claims that Azerbaijan is obliged to allow passage through the Lachin road, the Trilateral Statement of November 9/10, 2020 does not specify that the road can be used to transfer weapons, ammunition, or military personnel. Azerbaijan pointed out that it had evidence that the Armenian side used the road to transport landmines and other military equipment in 2021-2022.

It is important to note that Lachin was the first region outside the former Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast that Armenia occupied on May 18, 1992, as Armenian nationalists

considered establishing a road connection there to be a vital strategic goal. Lachin became the "Miatsum road," enabling military supply. In April 1993, Armenia attacked from two directions - Armenia proper and Karabakh via Kelbajar, another Azerbaijani region located between the former autonomy and Armenia.

Despite Armenia's claims of a "humanitarian disaster," both Armenians and goods were transported in and out of the region by trucks of the Russian peacekeeping forces and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) via this road. However, Armenia has refused to have their means of transport checked for security breaches. Armenia's appeal to two international bodies on this matter failed, and a request for Azerbaijan to open the Lachin road made by Armenia at the UN Security Council in December 2022, with the support of France, did not result in a statement being adopted on behalf of the council.

Armenia then turned to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), requesting that Azerbaijan open the Lachin road, but the ECHR noted that the idea that the road was blocked by Azerbaijan was disputed.

We believe that establishing a checkpoint on the Lachin road would provide a solution to the problem of non-humanitarian and military use of the road, as well as illegal extraction of Azerbaijan's natural resources. There is also a security threat from the presence of illegal armed units in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, which should have been withdrawn in accordance with Article 4 of the Trilateral Statement. The Armenian side insists on granting Karabakh a special status, with a focus on securing the rights and safety of the Armenian population rather than seeking

secession. However, while some Armenian officials in Yerevan don't overtly focus on secession, the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic representatives often advocate for "remedial secession" and "independence of Artsakh" in international forums and with various organizations.

Azerbaijan opposes granting any territorial status to Karabakh, seeing it as a potential source of future conflict. Instead, Azerbaijan offers rights and security assurances to Armenians that are in line with the Azerbaijani Constitution. Azerbaijan promises that Karabakh Armenians will have the same rights and privileges as any other Azerbaijani citizen.

Following the Second Karabakh War and the Trilateral Statement of November 9/10, 2020, Azerbaijan regained control of its inter-state border with Armenia, which had been irrelevant during the almost 30 years of Armenian occupation. The leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia signed another Trilateral Statement on November 26, 2021, which addressed this issue. In the statement, Russia proposed the establishment of a joint Armenian-Azerbaijani commission, with Russia acting as a consultant, to delimit and demarcate borders.

This matter was further discussed during the second and third meetings hosted by the European Council President, Charles Michel, in Brussels on April 6 and May 22, 2022, between the Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders. In line with the April 6 summit's outcomes, it was agreed to form a Joint Border Commission by the end of April. The commission's mandate would be to delimit the bilateral border between Armenia and Azerbaijan and ensure a stable security situation along and in the vicinity of the borderline.

On May 24, 2022, the Joint Border Commissions, led by the Azerbaijani and Armenian Deputy Prime Ministers, Shahin Mustafayev and Mher Grigoryan, respectively, met for the first time without intermediaries on the state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which was a positive outcome of the third meeting in Brussels on May 22, 2022.

However, tensions remain high over the inter-state border, and there have been armed clashes, including in September 2022. Armenia argues that Azerbaijan controls an area of Armenian territory due to its actions in May 2021 and September 2022, but without demarcated borders resulting from the 30 years of Armenian occupation, only the delimitation process can determine the exact location of the border.

Additionally, the Armenian side continues to occupy eight Azerbaijani enclaves where it has been present since 1991, with another enclave under Azerbaijan's control. Unfortunately, Armenia's comments on the enclave issue suggest that Yerevan seeks unilateral recognition by Azerbaijan of the Armenian perception of the border.

Despite the establishment of a trilateral working group aimed at unblocking all economic and transport communications as outlined in the January 11, 2021 Trilateral Statement signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia, and despite more than ten meetings being held since then, progress has been slow. The statement outlines steps for the implementation of Article 9 of the November 10, 2020 Trilateral Statement, which guarantees the construction of new transportation and communications links connecting the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic with the western regions of Azerbaijan, and for Armenia to ensure the



safety of this route to allow for unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles, and goods in both directions. The proposed Zangazur Transportation Corridor would connect the main territory of Azerbaijan with its exclave, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, through a 44-km-long stretch of territory within Armenia. However, the Armenian side has been accused of delaying the process.

The Armenian side has raised concerns about the term 'corridor' not being mentioned in the Trilateral Statement and has requested the installation of customs and other checkpoints while also demanding uncontrolled passage along the Lachin road between Armenia and the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Yerevan has alleged that Azerbaijan seeks extraterritorial status for the Zangazur Corridor.

In June 2022, President, Ilham Aliyev, emphasized that Armenians have been using the Lachin road without any hindrance or restriction since 2020, while Azerbaijanis cannot do the same through the Armenia-Zangazur corridor to connect with Nakhchivan, which he considers unfair. President Aliyev pointed out that opening the Zangazur Corridor within a short time is a fundamental element of future peace in the region and that without such access, peace talks will be difficult. It should be noted that Azerbaijan is not seeking any extraterritoriality for the Zangazur Corridor as it will be guarded by the Russian Border Force, as stipulated in the Trilateral Statement of November 9/10, 2020.

In 2022, Armenia's Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, announced that Armenia is willing to provide access to Azerbaijan to connect with its Nakhchivan exclave through three existing roads. However, these roads are up to 250 kilometers long, and it is unclear how the

Armenian side will ensure the safety of passage.

Therefore, the opening of the passage through Zangazur remains a core issue in terms of Armenia's obligations under the Trilateral Statement.

The normalization of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia is impeded by several unresolved humanitarian issues. These issues include Armenia's refusal to disclose minefield locations, Armenia's lack of cooperation in providing information about Azerbaijani missing persons, and the protection of religious and cultural heritage.

European Council President Charles Michel hosted meetings between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders on December 14, 2021, April 6, 2022, and May 22, 2022, to address these concerns. After the second trilateral meeting, Michel emphasized the need for the swift resolution of all outstanding humanitarian issues, including the release of remaining detainees and comprehensive efforts to address the issue of missing persons. He also stated that the EU is prepared to support these initiatives. The EU will continue to support confidence-building measures between Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as humanitarian demining efforts, by providing expert advice, financial assistance, and aid to conflict-affected populations for their rehabilitation and reconstruction.

The liberated territories of Azerbaijan are among the most heavily mine-contaminated areas in the world, with numerous anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, as well as unexploded ordnance (UXO). Azerbaijan has initiated demining operations to clear mines, unexploded munitions, and other hazards left behind by Armenian forces.



Despite ongoing demining efforts, people are still losing their lives in Azerbaijan due to mine explosions. Since the end of the 44-day Second Karabakh War, over 200 individuals have become victims of mine explosions in the liberated territories. On June 12, 2021, Azerbaijan exchanged 15 Armenian prisoners for a map indicating the location of 97,000 mines in the formerly occupied Aghdam. On July 3, 2021, Armenia provided maps to Azerbaijan for approximately 92,000 anti-tank and anti-personnel mines planted during the occupation of Fuzuli and Zangilan districts. Armenia claimed to have submitted all mine maps of the liberated territories to Azerbaijan following talks mediated by the Russian Defense Ministry on December 4, 2021. On March 2, Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov announced that the mine-clearance process in the liberated Azerbaijani territories is being slowed down due to the low accuracy of Armenia's minefield maps.

Regarding the second humanitarian issue, there are Armenian detainees still in custody in Azerbaijan, which is in violation of Article 8 of the Trilateral Statement of November 10, 2020. This article clearly states that the exchange of prisoners of war, other detainees, and the bodies of the deceased must be carried out. Azerbaijan has already fulfilled its obligations under the agreement by releasing and repatriating over 70 Armenians who were entitled to POW status. However, the Armenian government has misrepresented and distorted facts related to this issue, leading to a lack of clear and objective perception by the international community. It is essential to emphasize that after the end of the conflict, anyone detained in Azerbaijan cannot be considered POWs in accordance with international humanitarian law. Detainees are being treated according to

international human rights and Azerbaijani law, with their rights being upheld.

Azerbaijan has also handed over the bodies of nearly 1,600 Armenian servicemen who died during the Second Karabakh War. However, Armenia has continuously refused to provide information on the fate of up to 4,000 Azerbaijani citizens missing since the First Karabakh War.

For almost three decades, the separatist regime in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan has tried to distort the origin and use of cultural and religious heritage located there. This deliberate destruction of cultural and religious monuments is considered a war crime under international law.

Azerbaijan has consistently claimed that under Armenian occupation, cultural and religious sites including mosques, libraries, museums, theaters, and more, were being destroyed. Despite repeated appeals to UNESCO for a fact-finding mission, none had been initiated until after the Second Karabakh War. Interestingly, UNESCO responded swiftly to the Armenian side's concerns about the fate of their cultural and religious heritage sites in Karabakh once it was liberated by Azerbaijan. This indicates a potential double standard in the treatment of Christian and Muslim cultural and religious heritage.

#### **IV. Marginalization of the Azerbaijani perspective during and after the 44-Day War**

The Armenian diaspora has been able to effectively integrate into various elites, including intellectual, academic, business, and cultural elites. They have also incorporated the "Armenian cause" into the global liberal

agenda, depicting themselves as one of the "historically oppressed" peoples. This has allowed them to amass significant political support and financial resources, which have been used to fuel military aggression and information warfare against Azerbaijan.

The Armenian diaspora's success in integrating into various elites can be traced back to before the collapse of the Soviet Union. They were able to attain strong and influential positions in Western nations due to their effective integration into intellectual, academic, business, and cultural elites. Furthermore, they incorporated their narrative of victimization into the broader global liberal agenda. This allowed them to depict themselves as one of the "historically oppressed" peoples and gain substantial resources for their "genocide recognition" campaigns.

During the 44-Day War, Azerbaijan faced a long list of accusations from Armenian lobby groups. The voice of Azerbaijanis was consistently ignored by these groups due to extensive Orientalist bias in Western academia and politics. This attitude still persists today, with Azerbaijani voices being suppressed and marginalized by some media outlets.

At the same time, there are various media outlets and journalists that consistently disseminate anti-Azerbaijani content. For instance, Open Caucasus Media, through its website [oc.media.org](http://oc.media.org), consistently neglects any Azerbaijani viewpoints about the country's conflict with Armenia, despite the fact that the website claims to "stand for equality for all and give voice to all the diverse people of the Caucasus." Multiple attempts by Azerbaijani experts to have their articles published on the website using the same process and format as Armenian experts have been regularly ignored.

Another such outlet is Opendemocracy.net, which presents itself as an independent media platform based in London. However, the platform's reporting on the South Caucasus is predominantly controlled by Armenians (see below), who promote extremely biased information about the conflict.

Michael Rubin, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), has published a series of op-eds in various media outlets, including the National Interest and Washington Examiner, that are openly biased against Azerbaijan. In November 2020 alone, Rubin published ten op-eds that spread misleading and false information about Azerbaijan. For example, he mentioned the false historical assumption that Stalin "transferred" Karabakh to Azerbaijan. He also relied on baseless and unconfirmed allegations about Azerbaijan's military counter-operation, which was conducted on its internationally recognized territory that had been held under Armenian occupation for 27 years. In addition, Rubin voiced an extremist opinion that Azerbaijan intends to complete the genocide that the Ottomans began just over a century ago, while advancing an Islamophobic undertone about a jihadist war against Christians. His policy advice is similarly uninformed and carries a lack of expertise.

John Marshall Evans, a former United States Ambassador to Armenia, has also participated in spreading anti-Azerbaijani sentiment and supporting the Armenian governmental position. He has made extreme claims, such as Azerbaijan's wish to commit genocide in the region, and downplayed the attacks on Ganja and other regions of Azerbaijan. Throughout the war, Evans contributed to Armenian state-run propaganda and interacted with the Twitter accounts of state officials of Armenia

and the so-called “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic”, delivering only a one-sided narrative of the events. While Evans criticized Azerbaijan for allegedly setting fire to Karabakh's forests, he ignored instances of Armenians openly setting fire to Kalbajar, which were covered by the international media.

In July 2021, the Georgian Institute of Politics organized a Summer Academy in Tbilisi with the financial support of the Heinrich Boell Stiftung, which invited Georgian, Azerbaijani, and Armenian experts and researchers to write a research paper after the event. Senior Advisor Vasif Huseynov attended the academy and wrote a paper about the policies of the European Union towards the South Caucasus, which was checked by Sonja Schiffers, Director of the South Caucasus office of the Heinrich Boell Stiftung. Schiffers demonstrated a biased approach towards the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and political issues relating to Azerbaijan. She challenged Huseynov's statement that Armenia and Azerbaijan should recognize each other's territorial conflicts, which is a basic principle of international law, and made other political judgments that were more biased than academic feedback.

On September 29, 2021, an article was published by Neil Hauer in the US-based Newlines Institute, claiming to be written by a journalist and analyst based in Yerevan. However, it was evident from his previous writings and social media posts that he held a biased and prejudiced view against Azerbaijan, as discussed earlier. Hauer's piece contained baseless accusations against Azerbaijan, and a response by one of the AIR Center's staff members was rejected by the Newlines Institute. Another expert at the AIR Center submitted a different piece on post-war

opportunities and economic development prospects for both Armenia and Azerbaijan, which was also rejected by the institute due to one critical sentence about the Armenian perspective on regional cooperation. The AIR Center faced rejections from other platforms as well, such as Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights (ISHR) and the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, which published four anti-Azerbaijan op-eds and refused to accept a different perspective on matters related to regional security.

Eldar Mamedov, a Latvian political scientist, has written articles and publications that aim to discredit Azerbaijan's reputation and impede its efforts to strengthen ties with the Western world. His works are disseminated through various channels, including social media and expert blogs. He is often given space in Responsible Statecraft, the online magazine of the Quincy Institute, where Mamedov propagates mostly pro-Iranian, sometimes pro-Russian, and consistently anti-Azerbaijani views. Mamedov's profile page on Responsible Statecraft clearly shows his underlying intention to promote the interests of the Iranian government while casting Azerbaijan in a negatively light. In December 2022, in the course of the Qatargate scandal at the European Parliament, the center-left Socialists & Democrats group in the European Parliament suspended Mamedov and referred him to the Belgian authorities as part of an internal investigation into alleged foreign interference in Brussels. Politico.eu, reporting about Mamedov's suspension, noted that “His writing is largely targeted against Azerbaijan. He has also sought to defend himself against accusations he is friendly toward Iran, and notably toward a U.S.-based lobby that is often seen as soft on the regime and in favor of reducing sanctions on Tehran.” Quite

shockingly, the European Parliament had always ignored the information provided by the Azerbaijani side revealing the real intentions and suspicious links of Mamedov.

There are groups based in Sweden, such as the Stockholm-based Blankspot organization, that have launched a public relations campaign against Azerbaijan, disseminating negative information and conducting information-based offensives. One of Blankspot's leading voices, Rasmus Canbäck, spreads disinformation and propaganda about Azerbaijan through his works and social media posts, projecting a negative image of the country and trying to undermine contacts between Azerbaijanis and European politicians. German media outlets have also propagated the Armenian perspective in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, disregarding the Azerbaijani version of the narratives they disseminate. In a recent interview with Der Spiegel, an international expert on the South Caucasus, Laurence Broers, discussed the prospects for an Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty in the coming year, with the interviewer focusing on "Azerbaijani irredentism" and ignoring the issue of Armenian irredentism against Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani viewpoints and voices have consistently been dismissed and marginalized in such discussions.

The Armenian state also engaged in military aggression against Azerbaijan during this time period. They launched missile attacks on civilian areas in Azerbaijan's cities and towns while using human shields to protect their own military installations. The Armenian state also used disinformation campaigns to spread false information about Azerbaijan's actions during the war.

Despite these challenges, Azerbaijan was able to achieve a decisive victory in the 44-Day War.

They were able to liberate their territories that had been occupied by Armenia for nearly three decades. Azerbaijan also demonstrated its commitment to international law and human rights by treating Armenian prisoners of war with dignity and respect.

Moving forward, it is important to challenge the dominant narrative that has been created by Armenian lobby groups and the Armenian state. This can be done by amplifying Azerbaijani voices and providing accurate information about the events that took place during the 44-Day War. It is also important to hold those responsible for war crimes accountable for their actions.

#### **V. Growing role of Azerbaijan and Türkiye in Central Asia's shifting geopolitical landscape**

Türkiye and Azerbaijan, along with the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), are positioning themselves as a bridge between Central Asia and the European continent. The ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia has led to a shift in the geopolitical landscape of the region. Previously within Russia's sphere of influence, Central Asian governments are now reconsidering their position, seeking to distance themselves from Moscow and explore other opportunities. The question arises as to whether this indicates that Central Asia and the EU are aligning their geostrategic interests or if it is merely a convenient alliance due to the EU's forced separation from Russia.

The war in Ukraine has negatively impacted Türkiye and other Central Asian nations due to the sanctions imposed against the Kremlin. However, the region's geostrategic significance is increasing, along with the potential for greater options. Central Asia,

which contains centuries-old trade routes and abundant mineral resources, has regained historical significance, especially with the revival of the old Silk Road after China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, the EU is increasingly considering connecting with Central Asia for the resources it needs after being forced to separate from Russia.

The landlocked countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) are currently sandwiched between Russia to the north, China to the east, and Iran-Afghanistan to the south. They see an opportunity to enhance their partnerships with the West. Furthermore, the OTS provides Central Asian states with an essential platform for maintaining stability and development. Nevertheless, the Central Asian countries must decide which path to pursue. They can follow China's grand plans with its BRI, or they can opt for the European continent, which offers a vast market, democratic standards, and human rights protection criteria. This decision-making process is likely to take at least one generation, but Türkiye and Azerbaijan, with their cultural and geographical ties to Central Asia, economic ties to Europe, and inclination to serve as a bridge, can play a significant role in this process.

For some time now, Europe has been partnering closely with Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia. In fact, the EU is Türkiye's largest trading partner in terms of imports and exports, and is the main source of investments for the country. Similarly, the EU accounts for almost 37% of Azerbaijan's total trade, and represents nearly one-third of Central Asia's total external trade, making it the region's primary trading partner. While the volume of trade between the EU and Central Asia is still

relatively small, the EU is the biggest investor in the region, with EU firms accounting for 40% of the investment in Central Asia.

The partnership between the EU, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia is particularly growing in the energy sector. Azerbaijan, for example, has already established itself as a reliable energy partner for the EU, exporting natural gas to European energy markets via the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) since 2020. This has supported EU energy security and Europe's efforts to decrease its dependence on Russian gas. The ongoing energy crisis in Europe has further emphasized the importance of diversifying gas supplies and routes, making the export of Azerbaijani natural gas to Europe even more crucial for the EU's energy security.

In recent years, the EU and Azerbaijan have been in talks to increase natural gas exports and develop green energy cooperation. In July 2022, they signed a new Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy, which includes a commitment to double the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor to deliver at least 20 billion cubic meters to the EU annually by 2027. Additionally, they inaugurated a high-level working group on the EU's Economic Investment Plan, which aims to attract up to €2 billion of investment in Azerbaijan. In February 2023, the EU and Azerbaijan held their first Ministerial Meeting of the Green Energy Advisory Council, which aims to expand cooperation on the green agenda and turn Azerbaijan into a green energy supplier for European markets.

Similarly, the EU is also increasing its partnership with Türkiye for energy, with the country potentially becoming the energy hub for the EU since all of Central Asia and



Azerbaijan's gas has to pass through Türkiye. This would not only strengthen Türkiye's geopolitical significance but also ensure its long-term energy security.

The EU's green transition of the economy and energy will also impact its future energy relations with Türkiye and the region, with some experts arguing that energy sustainability will require EU-Türkiye cooperation in the decarbonization process. This increasing energy ties between the EU and Türkiye will eventually lead to a de facto integration of Türkiye with the EU, at least at the economic level.

Regarding Central Asia, the Southern Corridor for gas pipelines, which now should be called the "Central Corridor" given the absence of the North Corridor with the halt to the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, is opening up trade for the Central Asian republics towards the EU via Azerbaijan. Kazakhstan, for example, is among the top 10 oil exporters with rich gas and uranium reserves. While it currently exports oil to Europe through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) pipeline passing through Russia, Kazakhstan is now considering the new BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) pipeline to connect to the Southern Corridor.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has negatively impacted traditional connectivity. As a result, the Middle Corridor, which is a corridor for goods exchange and connectivity and can also be called the "Central Corridor" like the Northern Corridors (both the Eurasian Land Bridge and New Eurasian Land Bridge), passes through Russian and Belarusian territory that are now heavily sanctioned and may remain so for a long time. This could make it the backbone of a new regional economic zone comprising Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Türkiye towards Europe.

In November 2022, the EU and all Central Asian foreign ministers held the "EU-Central Asia Ministerial meeting" and the "EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference" in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. During the event, the EU launched five flagship initiatives (on satellite technology, water & energy, sustainable transport connections, skills development, sustainable energy connectivity) of its "Global Gateway," demonstrating interest in expanding its partnership. The Global Gateway is an EU project that aims to mobilize up to 300 billion Euros (one third of BRI) in investments between 2021 and 2027 to support the global recovery after Covid, and has become an alternative to the BRI in the continents of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. After the event, Borrel stated that "it is obvious that the region is looking to diversify its relationships, and that Türkiye and the EU are seen as partners of choice."

Therefore, it seems that the energy-resources security nexus, currently shifting after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is really pushing the EU towards an increased partnership with Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia, and vice versa. However, it remains to be seen whether this will be able to shift the Great Power Competition in general in favor of the EU, considering some geopolitical and domestic factors.

The 19th century saw the British and Russian Empires competing over Central Asia, a period known as the "Great Game." Today, China and Russia are the revisionist empires vying to maintain or expand their spheres of influence. Their goal is to challenge the Western world order dominated by democratic and liberal values, as outlined in their manifesto in February 2022.



Despite retaining some of its Soviet-era influence, Russia appears to be losing its grip on the region, particularly after its invasion of Ukraine. While Central Asian nations are still trying to rely less on Russia for connectivity, Russia failed to integrate them into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the countries are implementing a de-Russification policy at the cultural level. For instance, the Central Asian republics have been moving away from the Russian language for decades and have decided to change their alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin to align themselves more closely with the West.

Central Asia is vital to Moscow during Western sanctions, and the Kremlin is working to deepen economic ties by implementing joint projects in the fields of transport, energy, and industry. The possibility of supporting Central Asian states in Russia's import substitution programs is crucial for the Kremlin. While Russia is attempting to expand its alliances, such as its recent agreements with Iran, it faces significant challenges in retaining power in the region.

In contrast, China retains significant economic and political influence in the region due to its geographical and historical ties. China's principle of non-interference in domestic affairs is also attractive to autocratic regimes, and it has increased cooperation with its Central Asian neighbors in energy and regional security. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a China-led intergovernmental political, economic, and security organization, is an alternative to Russia's Turkic influence in Central Asia. It may complement the BRI economic initiative and become a major competitor to the Western multilateral system, although the level of

engagement its members intend to give it in the long run is uncertain.

Western governments have traditionally underestimated the significance of Central Asia, prioritizing democracy and liberal reforms over economic cooperation. As a result, they have been largely absent from the region.

While Western countries have fallen behind in economic and strategic engagements, the recent Russian invasion of a sovereign country has given them new momentum, and a Grand Bargain could be on the horizon for Central Asia and the EU. Brussels is trying to capitalize on this opportunity and gain a foothold in the Great Powers' competition in Central Asia by proposing pragmatic agreements. However, Europe's democratic standards pose a challenge in forming partnerships with Central Asia Republics, which are still far from European standards. Additionally, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Caucasus region is a smaller but important issue, with Europe stepping up to solve the conflict as Russia plays a crucial role there. The EU has intensified its efforts to achieve a long-term and durable peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

At a security level, the relationship between the EU and Central Asia must also be taken into consideration. The EU is in NATO, while Central Asia is in the SCO, which could lead to economic interdependence and systemic rivalry. Türkiye could be the crucial actor here, acting as a geographical and cultural bridge between East and West, particularly between Europe and Central Asia. Türkiye's leadership in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and proposal for a stronger partnership with Europe could benefit both parties economically. However, there are security

concerns as Türkiye must balance its NATO membership with its stable relationships with Russia and China. Türkiye has even expressed its intent to become a full member of the SCO, although it is unclear if this would be possible without withdrawing from NATO.

Finally, Azerbaijan's strategic geographic location and rich hydrocarbon reserves make it a pivotal country in the region. Türkiye and Europe must pass through Azerbaijan to reach Central Asia, as other passages via Iranian and Russian territories are closed. Azerbaijan holds a great bargaining power and can exert influence over both Türkiye and the EU, particularly in matters of energy security.

## **VI. How Azerbaijan helped to reinvent the Non-Aligned Movement**

The Summit-level Meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement Contact Group in response to COVID-19 took place in Azerbaijan's capital city, Baku, on 2 March. Speaking at the Summit of NAM Contact Group on fight against COVID-19, President Ilham Aliyev noted that “the new world order is in the process of reshaping. Now the world is witnessing the most serious East-West confrontation since the end of the Cold War, with repercussions for the remaining part of the world. As the second largest international institution after the UN, NAM should play a more visible and efficient role in the international arena and actively participate in reshaping the new world order.”

Since assuming the chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement in 2019, Azerbaijan has made significant efforts to revitalize the institution and enhance its influence in contemporary international relations. In 2020, Azerbaijan's chairmanship coincided with the onset of the pandemic, prompting the country

to take various measures to unite member states against its ramifications.

Under Azerbaijan's leadership, the Non-Aligned Movement held its first-ever virtual extraordinary summit of member states, attended by over 45 member states and international organizations. This historic event was instrumental in bringing together the movement's members to combat COVID-19 and counter the vaccine nationalism of some wealthy countries. Azerbaijan initiated two resolutions to ensure universal and fair access to vaccines for all countries, which were adopted at the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly in 2021.

In its current chairmanship role, Azerbaijan continues to make new initiatives and has called upon member states to take an active role in achieving these objectives. Azerbaijan is one of the leading voices calling for the reform of the United Nations Security Council, characterizing the body as "reminiscent of the past" and not reflective of modern reality. Azerbaijan proposes the allocation of one permanent seat to the Non-Aligned Movement and one seat for the African continent at the UNSC, with the country holding the post of Chairman of the Movement occupying the rotating seat. President Aliyev has urged other member states to begin consultations on this issue and submit their views to the relevant UN Committee.

The Azerbaijani chairmanship remains committed to the post-pandemic recovery efforts, particularly for developing countries. This year, Baku has introduced two key initiatives to support this path. The first initiative involves a call for the establishment of a UN High-Level Panel to develop recommendations on global measures for the post-pandemic period. President Aliyev has

emphasized the importance of this Panel in addressing the challenges posed by COVID-19. The second initiative entails the declaration of two Global Calls to aid the post-pandemic recovery of Africa and Small Island Developing States. Azerbaijan has already contributed 1 million US dollars as the first donor and has invited other members to join in supporting this initiative.

Moreover, Azerbaijan is also interested in forming a global movement of countries dealing with the challenge of landmine contamination. As one of the most mine-contaminated areas in the world, up to 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territories have been extensively contaminated with landmines by Armenia during the illegal occupation of Azerbaijan's lands from 1992 to 2020. According to international experts, clearing the area of landmines will require nearly 30 years and 25 billion US dollars. Hence, President Aliyev proposed the formation of a Like-Minded Group of Mine-Affected Countries to raise global awareness and address this pressing issue.

Over the past three years, the institutionalization of the Non-Aligned Movement has been a significant priority for the Azerbaijani chairmanship. Baku has successfully gathered support for launching the parliamentary and youth networks of the NAM. The first meeting of the parliamentary network occurred in Baku in June of last year, with member countries expressing their desire to continue this initiative. The second meeting of the network is scheduled to take place in Bahrain on March 13. In addition, President Ilham Aliyev has received support from member states to establish a NAM support office in New York and a permanent secretariat for the NAM Youth Organization in Baku.

These measures represent the initial steps towards institutionalizing the Movement, which has made little progress in this direction until now due to disagreements and conflicts among certain member states and a lack of shared vision regarding the NAM. However, given the increasing tensions in international relations between major powers and the reemergence of Cold War attitudes, countries caught between these rivalries must come together and combine their efforts to protect their interests. Consequently, it is probable that efforts to institutionalize and strengthen the NAM will continue in the years ahead.

#### **VII. Key highlights from President Ilham Aliyev's speech at the 10th Global Baku Forum**

On March 9, Baku hosted the 10th Global Forum themed "The World of Today: Challenges and Hopes" and organized by the Nizami Ganjavi International Center under the patronage of President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev. Speaking at the opening ceremony of the Forum, President Ilham Aliyev covered several topics, including Azerbaijan's chairmanship in the Non-Aligned Movement, Azerbaijan's efforts in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and promoting multilateralism, and its experience in conflict resolution with Armenia.

On the topic of multilateralism, President Ilham Aliyev pointed out Azerbaijan has worked to revitalize the Non-Aligned Movement, which had great traditions but had become passive during a certain period. Azerbaijan organized international events and three summits, including one dedicated to the fight against the pandemic. Azerbaijan was vocal against vaccine nationalism and unequal

distribution of vaccines. They also provided financial and humanitarian assistance to more than 80 countries, with most being members of the Non-Aligned Movement. The country also provided \$10 million in direct donations to the World Health Organization to help them fight the coronavirus.

In terms of conflict resolution, President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that Azerbaijan has experience with both peaceful and non-peaceful approaches. Azerbaijan attempted to resolve the conflict with Armenia peacefully but faced obstacles due to Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territories, leading to more than one million Azerbaijanis becoming homeless and refugees. Despite Azerbaijan's attempts to persuade Armenia to comply with UN Security Council resolutions, which demanded the immediate, complete, unconditional withdrawal of Armenian troops from Azerbaijani territories, Armenia ignored these resolutions. In 1992, the OSCE created the Minsk Group to resolve the conflict, but for 28 years, it did not produce any results. Azerbaijan did not agree with their approach to freeze the conflict, so they used their right to self-defense, according to the UN Charter, to liberate their territories by force. Azerbaijan was rebuilding its territory, which is 10,000 square kilometers and totally devastated. Azerbaijan did not commit any war crimes or genocide, unlike Armenia, and took revenge on the battlefield. Azerbaijan launched an initiative for peace negotiations after the war ended in November 2020 and presented five principles that could be the basis for a peace agreement with Armenia. President Ilham Aliyev noted that Azerbaijan hopes that international actors will persuade Armenia not to miss this chance for peace. Regarding the Armenian minority in Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan is a multi-confessional, multi-ethnic country, and

Armenians have lived in peace and security in Azerbaijan for centuries. The government of Azerbaijan protects the rights of all minorities living in the country, including Armenians, who have equal opportunities and access to education and employment.

In the speech, President Ilham Aliyev also highlighted the significant events that took place last year, with a focus on Azerbaijan's role in the European energy market. The first major event discussed was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on the Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy between Azerbaijan and the European Commission. The Memorandum is being implemented, and as a result, Azerbaijan has substantially increased its natural gas supply to Europe. In 2021, Azerbaijan exported 19 billion cubic meters of natural gas, and this year the number is expected to exceed 24 billion cubic meters, with at least half of it going to Europe.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that Azerbaijan's increased natural gas exports have helped and will continue to help European consumers gain access to natural gas, considering the current geopolitical situation. Azerbaijan has also increased investments in its gas fields and is working on expanding the export pipelines to meet the growing demand in Europe. The Southern Gas Corridor was commissioned, and President Ilham Aliyev stated that they are now working on expanding the system.

President Ilham Aliyev also mentioned that since the Russia-Ukraine War started, Azerbaijan has received requests from more than 10 European countries with respect to gas supplies or increasing gas supply. Azerbaijan is considered a reliable partner by the European Commission, and it has been exporting oil, oil products, natural gas, electricity, and

petrochemicals to international markets, including European markets.

Another significant event discussed was the signing of an agreement on green energy and transmission between Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary, and Romania in Bucharest. The agreement will see the construction of a transmission line from offshore wind farms in Azerbaijan to Europe. President Ilham Aliyev also stated that part of the transmission line will go under the Black Sea, and they are currently working on a feasibility study. The project's first Steering Committee took place in Baku in February, and President Ilham Aliyev also emphasized that this project will be a massive change in the European energy map.

President Ilham Aliyev also underscored Azerbaijan's commitment to green energy and stated that the country has signed contracts and MOUs with several leading energy companies worldwide, which will create 25

gigawatts of green energy in Azerbaijan, specifically solar and wind. Azerbaijan plans to export green hydrogen, and the International Finance Corporation has approved the final assessment of Azerbaijan's offshore wind potential in the Caspian Sea, which is 157 gigawatts, in addition to 40 onshore.

President Ilham Aliyev also highlighted Azerbaijan's role in transportation corridors, emphasizing that last year, transits through Azerbaijan grew by more than 75%. Azerbaijan's modern transportation infrastructure is needed more than ever, with railroad connections, highway connections, the most extensive Caspian shipping fleet, and the region's biggest air cargo fleet. President Ilham Aliyev stated that Azerbaijan has contributed significantly to transportation security, as many countries are now looking for new routes, and Azerbaijan is one of them.