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HIGHLIGHT OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

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I. Anniversaries of 44-Day War and anti-terror operation in Karabakh: Armenia's stalling threatens peace deal with Azerbaijan

September 2024 marks the fourth anniversary of the 44-Day Karabakh War (September 27–November 10, 2020) and the first anniversary of Azerbaijan's anti-terror operation against Armenian separatists in Karabakh on September 19–20, 2023. These two military incidents have profoundly shaped the ongoing peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as both sides attempt to reconcile their long-standing hostilities. Central to these efforts is the drafting of a peace treaty, initiated after Azerbaijan's proposals in March 2022. These proposals focus on key principles, including mutual recognition of territorial integrity and a commitment to non-use of force.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, speaking optimistically at the 79th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on September 26, 2024, stated, "Peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan is not only possible but within reach." Despite this hopeful tone, both Pashinyan and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov acknowledged the significant obstacles that still hinder the process. While a peace treaty may seem close, it remains elusive due to unresolved disagreements and deep-seated mistrust.

One major problem is Armenia's refusal to renounce any territorial claims against Azerbaijan before a treaty can be signed. Azerbaijan has emphasized repeatedly that for lasting peace to be achieved, Armenia must constitutionally declare an end to its aspirations to occupy Karabakh. Hikmat Hajiyev, the Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan and the Head of Foreign Policy Affairs Department of the Presidential Administration, reiterated this demand on September 18, stressing that Armenia must express its intention to live in peace with Azerbaijan. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeyhun Bayramov echoed similar concerns during his UNGA address, emphasizing the

importance of assurances from Armenia that revanchist forces will not reignite conflict.

Though Pashinyan has acknowledged the necessity of constitutional changes in Armenia, such a process is unlikely to occur before 2027. In his speech to the UNGA, Pashinyan sought to reassure the international community that Armenia's constitution would not hinder the peace treaty, suggesting that if any contradictions arose, constitutional amendments would be made. He proposed that a peace treaty could be signed based on the 13 articles already agreed upon (out of a total of 17), with the remaining four points to be negotiated later. However, the contents of these four unresolved articles have not been disclosed by either side, leaving significant uncertainty.

This idea of a "partial peace" has been firmly rejected by Azerbaijan. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeyhun Bayramov, during his UNGA speech, stated that the "‘partial peace’ is not an option" is not an option. President Ilham Aliyev reiterated this sentiment, stressing that the provisions Armenia proposed to remove from the treaty are essential. According to President Ilham Aliyev, without these key elements, the treaty would be incomplete.

The path to peace remains fraught with difficulties, as both nations struggle to reconcile their differences. While efforts toward a treaty continue, the unresolved issues reflect the deep historical grievances and geopolitical complexities that have long defined the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. The outcome of these negotiations will determine whether the region can move forward toward stability or remain mired in tension and uncertainty.

II. Azerbaijan's concerns over Armenia's reluctance in peace talks: distrust, militarization, and external influence

From Azerbaijan's perspective, the complex recent history between Armenia and Azerbaijan continues

to fuel distrust, complicating the peace process between the two countries. Several factors contribute to this strained relationship. Armenia's rapid militarization and revanchist rhetoric, both in political and social circles, raise alarms in Baku, signaling that Armenia may not be fully committed to achieving lasting peace. Additionally, delays in the peace treaty negotiations and inadequate Armenian proposals—such as the removal of unresolved articles from the draft treaty—are largely tactics to stall and buy time, rather than sincere efforts to move forward.

Further heightening tensions are reports from Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense regarding sporadic gunfire from Armenian positions along the border, which highlight the unpredictable and unstable nature of the current situation. Recent trilateral talks between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan, mediated by the United States during the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), also failed to deliver a breakthrough, further deepening Baku's frustration.

Azerbaijan is also wary of external influences, particularly from France, which is using Armenia for broader geopolitical agendas. Hikmat Hajiyev, the Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan and the Head of Foreign Policy Affairs Department of the Presidential Administration, criticized certain Western countries, especially those with a colonial past, for leveraging Armenia to promote their interests in the Caucasus, much as they once did in Africa. According to Baku, these interventions only complicate the peace process and delay a potential resolution. "The fact that certain Western countries with a colonial past are using Armenia to promote their policies and intrigues in the Caucasus, as they did in Africa, is producing the opposite effect," Hikmat Hajiyev warned in his recent interview with the Italian media.

Given these concerns, Baku is skeptical that a full peace treaty can be signed in the coming months. However, there remains the possibility of an interim agreement being reached, potentially during the United Nations Climate Change

Conference (COP 29), scheduled for November 2024 in Baku. In July, Hikmat Hajiyev suggested that an interim document could serve as a temporary measure, laying the groundwork for better bilateral relations and fostering neighborly ties between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This proposal differs from Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's preferred approach, as Azerbaijan views the interim document as a practical, temporary step while the peace process continues.

Despite the challenges and uncertainties that have marked recent relations between Baku and Yerevan, there have been some constructive developments. On August 30, the two countries signed a regulation concerning joint activities on the delimitation of their state borders. This agreement is particularly significant as it marks the first bilateral legal document signed between the parties. Moreover, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to use the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration as the primary framework for delimiting their borders, a notable step forward in resolving longstanding territorial disputes.

The question now remains whether the two countries can capitalize on these positive developments and take further steps toward peace and reconciliation. While significant obstacles remain, including ongoing distrust and external pressures, the potential for a new chapter in Azerbaijan-Armenia relations remains on the horizon. Only time will tell if the opportunity for peace can be seized.

III. The uncertain future of the Zangezur Corridor holds back regional connectivity

In a significant development this September, China joined forces with Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia as a partner in the Middle Corridor Initiative. This partnership was formalized with the participation of the China Railway Container Transport Corporation (CRTC) and was confirmed during the 8th International Silk Road Expo, held in

Xi'an on September 19-20, 2024. This move underscores the growing importance of the Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), which has emerged as a key trade link between China and Europe, passing through several Central Asian and South Caucasian countries.

The Middle Corridor has been gaining momentum, particularly following disruptions along the Northern Route, which passes through Russia, in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Middle Corridor Multimodal joint venture, established in 2023, is designed to streamline cargo transport across this route by offering a "one-stop-shop" service for coordination, transparent tariffs, and reliable delivery schedules. This initiative reflects broader efforts by the involved countries to expand trade and boost economic cooperation along this route.

China and Kazakhstan have ambitious plans to increase cargo traffic through the Middle Corridor, aiming to transport 600 container trains per year in 2025 and 2026, with the number set to rise to 2,000 trains annually by 2029. This planned growth builds on a 65% increase in transit volumes between China and Europe through Kazakhstan in 2023, amounting to 2.76 million tons, up from 1.7 million tons in 2022.

Efforts to enhance the Middle Corridor's capacity are also underway in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan, for example, is focused on expanding the transit capacities of the Aktau and Kuryk seaports. A new container hub is being constructed in Aktau, expected to handle 300,000 TEU (twenty-foot equivalent units) annually. In Kuryk, a new grain terminal will launch later this year, further increasing the region's export potential.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan and Georgia have completed an expansion of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway line, boosting its capacity from 1 million to 5 million tons per year. Azerbaijan invested \$140 million in this project, and additional expansion is underway at the Baku Trade Port,

where the current capacity of 15 million tons will be increased to 25 million tons.

The European Union (EU) is also playing a critical role in supporting the development of the Middle Corridor. On October 3, 2024, the EU launched the Coordination Platform of the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, bringing together representatives from the EU, Central Asia, the Southern Caucasus, Türkiye, and international financial institutions. According to a press release from the European External Action Service (EEAS), the corridor is set to become a vital trade artery, connecting Europe with Central Asia and promoting cooperation, economic integration, and prosperity across the region.

Looking ahead, the EU plans to launch a regional transport program in 2025, focusing on infrastructure projects that will further strengthen the Middle Corridor's role as a key trade route. These efforts reflect the growing importance of the corridor in facilitating global trade, boosting regional connectivity, and enhancing economic opportunities across Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus.

While significant progress is being made along the Middle Corridor, a critical missing link in the South Caucasus is preventing the region from fully realizing its potential as a key part of this growing trade route. This missing piece is the Zangezur Corridor, which was agreed upon by Armenia and Azerbaijan as part of the Russia-brokered ceasefire following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Once completed, the corridor would connect mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave, passing through the southern region of Armenia, and thereby provide a more direct route along the Middle Corridor. For Armenia, this development could be transformative, turning the country from an isolated state into a vital transportation hub.

However, the implementation of the Zangezur Corridor has been fraught with geopolitical challenges. Although Azerbaijan is close to finishing its portion of the corridor, the project has faced delays, largely due to opposition from Iran. In early

October 2024, Iran once again expressed its strong objection to the Zangezur Corridor, instead endorsing Armenia's Crossroads for Peace initiative. Both initiatives aim to open new transportation routes across the region, but they differ in significant ways.

The most notable distinction is the role of Russian border guards in the Zangezur Corridor. This clause, included in the ceasefire agreement of November 2020, would place Russian forces along the corridor to ensure security. Armenia's Crossroads for Peace proposal, on the other hand, rejects this provision. It also seeks to modify the routes, especially the highway connections between western Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. While the Zangezur Corridor plans to reopen Soviet-era roadways and railways through Armenia's Syunik province, the Crossroads for Peace suggests alternative routes for road links, although it includes a railway along the same path.

Azerbaijan, having nearly completed its section of the highway in the Zangezur Corridor, opposes Armenia's alternative proposals, arguing that any new transportation links should include the original Zangezur route. This disagreement has stalled progress, leaving both the Zangezur Corridor and the Crossroads for Peace initiative without widespread support. Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Russia back the Zangezur Corridor, while Armenia has the backing of Iran and the United States for its own initiative.

As a result of these geopolitical tensions, neither project has moved forward as planned, leaving the South Caucasus unable to fully capitalize on its strategic location within the Middle Corridor. This deadlock particularly impacts Armenia, which remains disconnected from the trans-regional transportation networks that are rapidly expanding elsewhere in the region.

The opening of the Zangezur Corridor would not only offer a shorter and more efficient route for trade between Europe and China but would also have broader geoeconomic implications for the South Caucasus. It could integrate Armenia into a

rapidly growing network, providing economic opportunities and reducing its current isolation. However, until the geopolitical complexities are resolved, the Zangezur Corridor remains in a state of uncertainty, and the full potential of the Middle Corridor will remain unrealized for the South Caucasus.

IV. Geopolitical games threaten Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has always extended beyond the two nations' bilateral relations, with various regional and global powers seeking to influence its outcome to serve their own strategic interests. This dynamic remains even after the Second Karabakh War, which ended with Azerbaijan liberating its Karabakh region. Four years after war, Armenia and Azerbaijan continue to grapple with stalled peace negotiations and the challenging task of reopening regional transportation and communication links. One of the major obstacles to this progress is the ongoing interference from external powers, which has complicated the normalisation of relations and obstructed critical projects like the Zangezur corridor.

A significant hurdle to the peace treaty negotiations is the influence of revanchist factions in Armenia, determined to reclaim lost territories with the support of external allies such as France, India, and Iran. These groups, emboldened by political opposition and growing arms supplies from their foreign partners, openly express intentions of reigniting conflict with Azerbaijan. This rhetoric often draws on memories of the First Karabakh War (1992-1994), during which Armenia relied heavily on Russia's military backing.

With relations between Armenia and Russia now strained, Yerevan has increasingly turned to France and India for military support. These countries, facing their own geopolitical conflicts with Russia or Azerbaijan's allies like Türkiye and Pakistan, have found Armenia to be a useful instrument in advancing their strategic interests. The result has

been a diversion of focus away from peace talks, with external actors fueling revanchism and making genuine reconciliation between Armenia and Azerbaijan more elusive.

The most contentious post-war initiative, the proposed Zangezur corridor, epitomizes the geopolitical tug-of-war in the South Caucasus. Originally outlined in the 2020 trilateral agreement between Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, the corridor is intended to link Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave through southern Armenia. This strategic route has become a focal point for global powers seeking to expand their influence in the region.

Russia views the Zangezur corridor as a means to counterbalance the impact of Western sanctions on its transportation links, while simultaneously reinforcing its military presence in the South Caucasus. On the other hand, the United States sees this corridor as an opportunity to reduce the dependency of Central Asian states on Russian and Chinese routes to global markets, preferring that no Russian forces be involved in its operation.

Adding to this complexity is the intensifying disagreement between Russia and Iran over the corridor. Iran strongly opposes the project, fearing it could sever its access to Armenia and potentially diminish its role as a transit hub between Türkiye and Central Asia. Tehran's vocal opposition to the Zangezur corridor has even led to diplomatic tensions with Moscow, as evidenced by recent summits where Iranian officials warned against any geopolitical shifts that might threaten its influence in the region.

Iran's resistance to the Zangezur corridor has been consistent, with officials in Tehran openly rejecting any changes that might alter its strategic access to Europe via Armenia and Georgia. Iranian leaders have gone as far as issuing warnings of possible military responses if the corridor becomes operational without their consent. Despite Tehran's growing ties with Moscow amid the Ukraine conflict, the idea of a transport route

through Armenian territory remains unacceptable to Iran.

Even the proposed alternative, the Aras corridor, running parallel through Iranian territory, has not alleviated Tehran's concerns. Iranian experts argue that the strategic value of this route would be undermined if Armenia and Azerbaijan were to reach a peace agreement and Armenia normalises relations with Türkiye. As a result, Iran continues to view the Zangezur corridor as a threat to its geopolitical leverage.

Azerbaijan remains steadfast in its commitment to the Zangezur corridor, which it sees as crucial for linking its mainland to Nakhchivan and Türkiye. Earlier this year, President Ilham Aliyev made it clear that Azerbaijan would not consider opening its borders with Armenia elsewhere unless Armenia agrees to the Zangezur corridor's terms as outlined in the trilateral agreement.

The peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan remain fraught with complexities, primarily driven by the interference of external powers with competing agendas. What was initially envisioned as a step toward regional connectivity through the Zangezur corridor has devolved into a platform for geopolitical rivalries, involving countries like Russia, Iran, the United States, and others. These power struggles have left little room for meaningful bilateral dialogue, complicating the prospects for a sustainable resolution.

For Armenia to move towards peace with Azerbaijan, it must focus on mutual reconciliation rather than serving as a proxy for external powers. Only by reducing outside interference and prioritizing genuine regional cooperation there can be hope to turn the Zangezur corridor into a reality that enhances connectivity and brings lasting peace to the South Caucasus.

V. India's role in Armenia's revanchist agenda

In the early 1990s, Armenia managed to occupy 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territory, despite the latter's population being three times larger. This was possible due to Armenia's reliance on Russia, which used the country as a geopolitical tool to maintain influence in the South Caucasus following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Azerbaijan regained control of its occupied territories and restored its sovereignty within internationally recognized borders through the 44-day Karabakh War in 2020 and anti-terror operations against Armenian separatists in 2023. Armenia's relationship with Russia has cooled, though it remains formally aligned with Moscow through military and economic agreements. Despite this, Armenia continues to seek support from foreign powers to advance its ambitions, particularly against Azerbaijan. In recent years, it has expanded its network of allies, establishing strategic partnerships with countries like France and India. The growing military cooperation between India and Armenia stands out as a particularly significant development, raising concerns about its implications for peace and security in the South Caucasus.

India, though geographically distant from the South Caucasus, has taken deliberate steps to engage with Armenia and strengthen its presence in the region. Historically, ties between the two nations were limited, primarily focused on regional trade and Armenia's potential role in extending the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) through Iran. However, the first official visit by India's foreign minister to Armenia in October 2021 marked a turning point, signaling the beginning of a more strategic relationship.

Since the 2020 Karabakh War, India has significantly deepened its defense cooperation with Armenia. This partnership raises the possibility of India gradually filling the void left by Russia and positioning itself as Armenia's new security guarantor. In fact, Armenia has become India's largest arms purchaser for the 2024–2025

fiscal year, with military contracts valued at \$600 million.

Key arms deals between the two countries include Armenia's purchase of Pinaka multiple-barrel rocket systems, anti-tank missiles, and rockets. Additionally, Armenia has acquired Akash-15 surface-to-air missile systems, with deliveries expected by the end of 2024. In 2023, India exported its Zen Anti-Drone System (ZADS) to Armenia, following the delivery of Swathi weapon-locating radars in 2020, which marked India's first major international sale of this system.

As the defense relationship between Armenia and India continues to grow, both nations have taken steps to institutionalize their military ties. Armenia appointed a defense attaché to India in 2023, with India reciprocating in 2024. During their first military consultation in May 2024, the two countries agreed to enhance cooperation beyond arms trade, focusing on military education, tactical training, and experience sharing. There are also reports that India plans to supply Armenia with Pralay short-range ballistic missiles, which have a range of 150 to 500 kilometers and can carry a variety of warheads.

India's growing involvement in Armenia's defense sector is not just a reflection of their bilateral relationship but also part of a broader geopolitical shift. India's increasing engagement in the South Caucasus can be seen as a response to its concerns about the expanding influence of Türkiye and Pakistan in the region, particularly in the context of Azerbaijan's victories during the 2020 war. By providing military support to Armenia, India is securing a strategic foothold in the region, but this could also contribute to further tensions in the South Caucasus, complicating efforts to establish lasting peace.

The evolving alliance between Armenia and India highlights Armenia's ongoing reliance on external powers to bolster its military capabilities and pursue its foreign policy ambitions. However, this reliance also risks deepening regional divisions and

prolonging conflict, as it introduces new external actors into an already volatile situation.

As Armenia and India strengthen their defense cooperation, the South Caucasus remains a region of heightened geopolitical interest, with the involvement of multiple international players shaping its future. Whether this growing partnership will bring security to Armenia or exacerbate tensions in the region remains to be seen, but it is clear that Armenia's ambitions continue to hinge on the support of powerful allies like India.

The deepening defense ties between India and Armenia, supported by the West, are raising concerns over regional stability in the South Caucasus. Both nations, while still maintaining defense partnerships with Russia, are benefiting from an evolving relationship with Western powers. For Armenia, this has meant a pro-Western pivot and aspirations for European Union membership, while India enjoys a unique "like-minded" partner status with NATO and access to advanced technologies like those in the semiconductor alliance.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has complicated the geopolitical landscape. Armenia and India, despite their defense ties to Russia, have not faced significant pushback from Western nations. Instead, the West has adopted a tolerant attitude, providing both countries with incentives to shift away from Russia. In Armenia's case, the country has seen a massive increase in trade with Russia, rising from \$2 billion before the Ukraine war to a projected \$16 billion. This spike has led many to believe Armenia is re-exporting sanctioned products to help Russia evade Western sanctions—a fact that has drawn little criticism from Western media or policymakers.

This favorable treatment from the West reveals a calculated strategy to leverage both India and Armenia within broader geopolitical frameworks. However, the implications for peace and security in the South Caucasus are concerning. Armenia's increased defense procurement, especially from

India, threatens to escalate tensions in the region. By providing military support at a critical juncture, India is seen as encouraging Armenian revanchism, potentially fueling an arms race. Azerbaijan has been vocal in its criticism of these developments, fearing that external military backing will further complicate peace efforts.

In addition, India's efforts to expand its geopolitical influence through Armenia are not limited to bilateral relations. New Delhi has positioned itself to build regional alliances through multi-framework agreements, such as the India-Armenia-Greece and India-Armenia-Cyprus partnerships. There is even potential for a defense alliance involving India, Iran, and Armenia, which would significantly impact the region's dynamics. These alliances offer India strategic flexibility, allowing it to counterbalance Turkish influence and deepen its foothold in the region through partnerships like the India-Iran-Armenia axis.

While India frames its defense dealings with Armenia as business-focused, the one-sided nature of these agreements raises concerns. By strengthening Armenia's military capabilities without equal engagement with Azerbaijan, India risks undermining peace efforts in the South Caucasus. As the arms race intensifies, the potential for lasting regional stability continues to dwindle.

VI. Ethno-nationalism meets geopolitics in the deepening Armenia-India partnership

In addition to the strategic considerations driving the deepening ties between India and Armenia, ideological affinities between the two nations further solidify this relationship. Armenia, increasingly viewed as a natural partner for India, shares certain ethno-nationalist underpinnings with the broader ideological movement promoted by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Now in his third term, Modi has advanced a Hindutva agenda, seeking to foster a homogeneous Hindu society and promote a sense of Hindu revivalism.

India, home to the world's largest Muslim minority, has witnessed a rise in religious tensions, particularly against Muslims and other religious minorities. This uptick in communal violence is fueled by Hindu extremism, often bolstered by the rhetoric of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Despite frequent communal riots and an overall decline in political freedoms and human rights, India continues to be portrayed by the West as a key "democratic ally," with little critique of its increasingly hostile domestic environment for minorities. Radical Hindu rhetoric, marginalization of the Muslim population, and a lack of clear policies to manage these communal tensions highlight India's internal challenges. However, these issues seem to have little impact on India's expanding influence and international partnerships.

A comparable form of ethno-nationalism is embedded in Armenia's political identity. Armenia's core ideology revolves around the notion of national homogeneity and the aspiration to unite Armenians within what they consider their "historical homeland." This nationalistic vision finds its roots in the 'Tseghakron' movement, founded by Nazi collaborator Garegin Nzhdeh, which is grounded in a belief in Aryan superiority. Over the years, Armenia has maintained a largely homogeneous population, a result of the systematic deportation of hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis from Armenia throughout the 20th century. This exclusionary policy continues, with successive Armenian governments refusing to allow these Azerbaijanis to return to their ancestral lands.

Despite the explicit ethno-nationalist rhetoric and Armenia's history of forced displacements, Western media and political circles have shown little interest in critically examining these dynamics. Instead, Armenia has often been portrayed as a victim, conveniently aligning with Western narratives that tend to embrace the country as a potential venue for democratic revolutions or geopolitical shifts. This selective sympathy ignores underlying issues, such as

Armenia's exclusionary nationalism, which is starkly reflected in anti-Turkish rallies and slogans calling for "Armenia without Turks." These aspects of Armenian society, coupled with the long-standing refusal of Karabakh Armenians to coexist with Azerbaijanis under Azerbaijani jurisdiction, reveal deeper tensions that are frequently overlooked in Western discourse.

This ideological convergence between India and Armenia, emphasizing ethno-nationalism and exclusionary politics, adds another dimension to their growing partnership. It also raises questions about the broader implications of these shared values, particularly when viewed against the backdrop of regional stability in the South Caucasus. As both nations pursue their strategic ambitions with the backing of larger powers, the consequences of their domestic and foreign policies are likely to reverberate beyond their borders.

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VII. Azerbaijan strengthens strategic ties with Central Asia

On August 9, 2024, President Ilham Aliyev attended the sixth consultative meeting of Central Asian leaders in Astana, Kazakhstan, marking his

second appearance as an honorary guest. This event, initiated in 2017 by Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, symbolizes the growing interconnectivity between Azerbaijan and Central Asia, a relationship that has gained significant momentum in recent years. Since 2022, President Aliyev has visited Central Asian countries 17 times, while Central Asian leaders have made 15 reciprocal visits to Azerbaijan. With the upcoming COP29 Summit in Baku in November 2024, this number is set to increase to 16.

The key objective of these high-level visits and summits is to foster a unified regional response to global and regional challenges, including those posed by the Russian-Ukrainian war and shifting geopolitical landscapes. At the latest Central Asian summit, Aliyev emphasized the shared historical, cultural, and geographical bonds between Azerbaijan and Central Asia, viewing them as part of a broader strategic region. This bond has led to the establishment of alliance relations and a series of strategic agreements.

Azerbaijan has made significant strides in strengthening its partnerships with Central Asian nations. Notable agreements include the Declaration on Strengthening Strategic Relations with Kazakhstan (August 2022), a Declaration of Strategic Partnership with Kyrgyzstan (April 2022), a similar partnership with Tajikistan (May 2024), and a Treaty on Alliance with Uzbekistan (August 2024). In addition, Azerbaijan had already signed a Strategic Partnership with Turkmenistan in 2017.

Alongside these agreements, Azerbaijan has established key financial mechanisms, such as a Supreme State Council with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, a \$500 million joint investment fund with Uzbekistan, and a \$25 million Development Fund with Kyrgyzstan. A planned \$300 million capital fund with Kazakhstan further underscores the economic dimension of these partnerships.

Azerbaijan has played a pivotal role in facilitating regional economic integration between Central Asia and the Caucasus. For example, in November

2023, Azerbaijan hosted the U.N. Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) Economic Forum in Baku, highlighting the importance of digital transformation, green energy, and transportation connections. This event attracted leaders from Georgia, Hungary, and the Gulf Cooperation Council, reflecting Azerbaijan's role as a bridge between Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

A key area of focus has been the Middle Corridor, a vital route connecting East and West. To enhance this corridor's capacity, Azerbaijan has modernized the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, increasing freight capacity from 1 million to 5 million tons, while also expanding the capacity of the Port of Baku to 25 million tons. With the largest merchant fleet in the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan is well-positioned to facilitate increased trade flow between Central Asia and global markets.

Energy cooperation remains a cornerstone of Azerbaijan's relations with Central Asia, particularly as sanctions on Russian energy have increased demand for alternative routes. Kazakhstan, for instance, has long relied on Azerbaijan as a transit hub for its oil exports, and this dependency has grown in recent years. Cooperation with Turkmenistan has also deepened, with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan resolving long-standing disputes over the Kepez/Serdar gas fields and renaming the field "Dostluk" (Friendship). Agreements to transport Turkmen gas via Azerbaijan, alongside new gas deals with Uzbekistan, illustrate Azerbaijan's growing role as a key energy hub.

Renewable energy is another promising area of cooperation. In November 2023, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan signed an agreement to unify their electricity systems, enabling the export of electricity from Central Asia to Europe via Azerbaijan. This step towards green energy integration highlights the region's commitment to sustainable development and energy security.

Azerbaijan's growing alliances with Central Asia demonstrate a shared vision for regional

cooperation, mutual economic development, and security. The region's strategic significance, particularly in light of global shifts, underscores the importance of these partnerships. As Azerbaijan and Central Asia continue to strengthen their ties, the potential for deeper cooperation in areas such as digitalization, energy, transportation, and trade will likely expand, contributing to the region's stability and prosperity.

President Ilham Aliyev's active diplomacy and the signing of numerous strategic agreements mark a new chapter in Azerbaijan-Central Asia relations. Through increased collaboration, these countries are well-positioned to navigate the complexities of the modern geopolitical landscape while enhancing their economic and strategic interests.

VIII. Azerbaijan and Central Asia's push for a common geopolitical space

Since regaining its independence, Azerbaijan has consistently prioritized strong relations with Central Asian countries, viewing these ties as essential not only for cultural and historical reasons but also for its broader geopolitical strategy. Over the years, Azerbaijan has positioned itself as a vital transit hub between East and West, striving to build solid relationships with its eastern and western neighbors alike to enhance its role as a bridge for global trade and connectivity. This strategic focus has become even more pronounced in recent years, following the liberation of Karabakh and the geopolitical shifts brought about by the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The collapse of the Soviet Union triggered a reshaping of the geopolitical landscape in Central Asia, where numerous regional and global powers sought to establish their influence. From the 2001 Afghanistan operation to the 2008 Russia-Georgia War and the 2014 annexation of Crimea, major powers repeatedly imposed pressure on regional states to align with their interests. This pressure has only intensified since the Russian-Ukrainian war began, compelling countries in the region to choose sides or seek strategic alliances.

Amid these dynamics, Azerbaijan has emerged as a model of independent and balanced foreign policy for Central Asian states. Demonstrating autonomy and a commitment to regional solidarity, Azerbaijan advocates for unity among regional powers to counter external pressures and establish a collective defense of their sovereignty and interests. Its calls to strengthen the Organization of Turkic States and expand military-security cooperation have resonated strongly with Central Asian countries, further solidifying their interest in deeper partnerships.

Azerbaijan's military and diplomatic achievements in liberating Karabakh have played a crucial role in enhancing its regional standing. Its ability to regain its territories not only through military strength but also through successful diplomacy has garnered the attention of neighboring Central Asian states. This success has shown that it is possible for post-Soviet countries to assert their sovereignty and reshape geopolitical realities in their favor, even in the face of challenges from larger powers.

Central Asian countries have taken note of Azerbaijan's effective diplomacy, which led to a broader acceptance of the new geopolitical landscape by most global powers. This acceptance of Azerbaijan's victories has transformed the nation into a center of attraction for Central Asian states, inspiring them to pursue stronger regional cooperation and learn from Azerbaijan's strategic approach. As a result, partnerships between Azerbaijan and Central Asian nations have deepened, with numerous high-level visits and joint initiatives reflecting their shared vision.

One of Azerbaijan's most significant contributions to regional cooperation has been its role in developing the Middle Corridor—a critical trade route connecting Asia to Europe. Azerbaijan laid the foundation for this corridor through a series of key infrastructure projects, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Supsa oil pipelines, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, the Southern Gas Corridor, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. These initiatives have not only boosted Azerbaijan's position as a strategic transit hub but

also provided Central Asian countries with essential access to global markets.

Given that many Central Asian nations are landlocked, with some even being double landlocked, Azerbaijan's infrastructure projects have served as crucial gateways to the world. For these countries, Azerbaijan represents a direct link to Western markets, while, for Azerbaijan, Central Asian states offer access to the vast economies of Asia. This reciprocal relationship underscores the strategic importance of the Middle Corridor in facilitating a seamless flow of trade, goods, and services between Asia and Europe.

The collaborative efforts between Azerbaijan and Central Asian countries have intensified in the wake of the Karabakh victory and the Russian-Ukrainian war. More than 30 mutual visits and joint summits have been held to forge a single geographical and political space, aimed at enhancing coordination and cooperation across the region. This unified space will enable regional countries to streamline trade and logistics, making the flow of goods and services faster, more secure, and more transparent.

Azerbaijan's vision of creating a common regional space is not just about economic integration—it also involves building a united front against external pressures. By strengthening political and economic ties with Central Asian countries, Azerbaijan aims to create a collective defense mechanism that ensures stability, sovereignty, and resilience against geopolitical challenges. This approach highlights Azerbaijan's role as a leader in fostering regional solidarity and collaboration in the face of external threats.

IX. Integration efforts in the South Caucasus are undermined by great power rivalries

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to the emergence of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia as independent states, numerous initiatives have been launched to foster regional

integration. These efforts have aimed to create a framework that includes not only the three South Caucasian countries but also their neighbors—Russia, Iran, and Türkiye—and even non-regional powers like the European Union and the United States. However, the longstanding conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh has remained a significant barrier to these integration projects.

The geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus underwent a dramatic shift between 2020 and 2023. Through the 44-Day War in 2020 and a subsequent anti-terror operation in 2023, Azerbaijan successfully ended Armenia's occupation of its Karabakh region. This development created new opportunities for peace and regional integration. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the importance of these changes in his address following the country's victory over separatists in Karabakh, expressing optimism about the potential for future cooperation between the South Caucasian nations.

President Ilham Aliyev's vision for the region's future was clear: he advocated for a South Caucasus founded on peace, stability, and development, envisioning a time when Armenia and Azerbaijan could settle their differences and work toward a cooperative trilateral framework with Georgia. This optimistic outlook underscored Azerbaijan's commitment to regional solutions to regional problems.

Building on this momentum, Azerbaijan has been a strong proponent of the 3+3 cooperation format, which seeks to unite Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia with Russia, Iran, and Türkiye. Initially proposed by the presidents of Azerbaijan and Türkiye in December 2020, this initiative aims to address regional issues through a collective approach. Although the progress of the 3+3 format slowed after its first deputy ministerial meeting in December 2021, it regained traction in October 2023, following the dissolution of the separatist regime in Karabakh.

The 3+3 initiative aligns with Azerbaijan's strategic perspective of fostering regional solutions within the context of South Caucasus geopolitics. The next ministerial meeting in this format is set to take place in Ankara, reflecting a renewed focus on creating a cohesive and collaborative regional structure.

Despite these efforts, significant internal challenges persist, hindering the establishment of a trilateral cooperation platform involving Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. A central issue is the absence of a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has insisted that Armenia remove territorial claims against it and Türkiye from its constitution—a condition that requires constitutional amendments. Armenia's reluctance to address this issue has stalled progress in the peace talks, making it unlikely that a comprehensive trilateral cooperation framework will be realized in the near future.

Even if Armenia were to commit to constitutional changes, the process is not expected to be completed before 2027. In the meantime, establishing a consultation platform could serve as a preliminary step toward a broader integration effort. This phased approach would help lay the groundwork for a fully-fledged regional cooperation initiative once political conditions improve.

The external dynamics affecting regional integration in the South Caucasus are arguably even more challenging than the internal disputes. Historically a hotspot of great power rivalries, the South Caucasus has once again become a focal point of geopolitical competition, exacerbated by the intensifying confrontation between global powers.

The involvement of external actors like the United States, European Union, Russia, and Iran has added layers of complexity to the peace process and regional cooperation initiatives. The West's interest in leveraging South Caucasian transportation routes to diminish Russian and Chinese influence directly clashes with Russia and

Iran's aims to maintain their foothold in the region. Armenia's recent pivot toward the EU and the U.S., at the expense of its longstanding ties with Russia, has further fueled these tensions.

President Ilham Aliyev has warned of "dividing geopolitical lines" emerging in the South Caucasus as a result of these competing interests. The region, rather than moving toward cohesion, now resembles a volatile landscape that could erupt into conflict at any moment. The increasing military support to Armenia from countries like France, India, and Iran has contributed to the tensions, with France in particular seeking to assert its influence in the region as a countermeasure against Russia's actions in other parts of the world.

This great power rivalry has not only undermined the prospects for Armenia-Azerbaijan peace but also threatens the broader integration efforts that could stabilize the region. Without a unified approach from both local and external actors, the vision of a peaceful, cooperative South Caucasus remains a distant goal.

For the South Caucasus to move toward true integration, both internal and external obstacles must be addressed. Internally, Armenia and Azerbaijan need to resolve their territorial disputes and finalize a peace treaty that could pave the way for trilateral cooperation. Externally, the region must navigate the complex web of global power dynamics that currently drives division and instability.

As President Ilham Aliyev has emphasized, a peaceful and prosperous South Caucasus is within reach, but only if the region's leaders can overcome these challenges. A comprehensive strategy that addresses both local grievances and external geopolitical pressures is essential to transforming the South Caucasus from a battleground of competing interests into a cohesive and stable region.

Achieving this goal requires a clear commitment to regional unity, the renunciation of territorial claims, and a concerted effort to resist the manipulation of external powers. Only through this

balanced approach can the South Caucasus hope to build a sustainable framework for peace, development, and mutual prosperity.

X. The West targets Azerbaijan while Armenia-Russia trade ties go unchecked

Azerbaijan has increasingly become the target of criticism from Western political circles, influenced by Armenian and pro-Armenian groups. One of the most commonly cited issues used to fuel anti-Azerbaijani sentiment is the gas deal between Russia and Azerbaijan in November 2022, in which Azerbaijan agreed to purchase 1 billion cubic meters (bcm) of Russian gas. Critics, including members of the European Parliament, accused Azerbaijan of "reselling" Russian gas to Europe, despite these claims being officially refuted by the European Commission in September 2023.

A European Commission spokesperson clarified the situation, stating that the volume of Russian gas imported into Azerbaijan is significantly smaller than the gas exported from Azerbaijan to Europe, making the claims of reselling unsubstantiated. Yet, despite this official denial, Armenian experts, politicians, and certain Western media outlets continue to keep the issue alive, portraying Azerbaijan as an ally of Russia in the South Caucasus. These pro-Armenian voices argue that this supposed alliance necessitates stronger military, economic, and political support from the West for Armenia.

Curiously, while Azerbaijan is subjected to ongoing criticism, a far more significant development is unfolding between Armenia and Russia that has not attracted comparable scrutiny. During his visit to Armenia on September 13, Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Aleksey Overchuk emphasized that relations between Moscow and Yerevan remain strong, pointing to the remarkable growth in bilateral trade. According to Overchuk, trade between Armenia and Russia grew by 55.8% in 2023, reaching \$7.4 billion, with projections

indicating that this figure could exceed \$16 billion by the end of this year.

This surge in trade between Armenia and Russia, up from just \$2.3 billion in 2020, raises questions about its underlying causes. There is substantial evidence suggesting that this growth is linked to Armenia's role in re-exporting goods to help Russia circumvent Western sanctions. Both the European Union and the United States have hinted at Armenia's involvement in assisting Russia in evading these sanctions, yet this issue has not received the same level of attention or criticism as Azerbaijan's gas deal.

This discrepancy highlights two critical questions. First, would Armenia's trade relations with Russia have experienced such dramatic growth without genuine tension between the two nations? Second, why do Western political circles and media remain largely silent on Armenia's circumvention of sanctions while focusing their criticism on Azerbaijan's comparatively minor dealings with Russia?

The reality is that Azerbaijan's energy relationship with Russia is minimal in scale. As the European Commission has confirmed, Azerbaijan's import of just one bcm of Russian gas is insignificant compared to its vast gas exports to Europe. Furthermore, Azerbaijan has shown no signs of deepening its ties with Russia; for example, President Putin's recent visit to Azerbaijan did not result in any major agreements or commitments, highlighting Azerbaijan's cautious approach. Baku has made it clear that it does not intend to join Russian-led initiatives like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) or the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), emphasizing its commitment to maintaining a balanced foreign policy.

In stark contrast, Armenia's relationship with Russia tells a different story. Despite occasional rhetoric about strained relations, Armenia's economic ties with Russia have strengthened significantly. As of the first half of 2024, Armenia's trade turnover with Russia exceeded \$8 billion, more than three times that of Azerbaijan's \$2.5

billion trade with Russia. This is notable given Armenia's smaller economy and population size. Armenia remains firmly entrenched in the EAEU and CSTO and shows no signs of distancing itself from these alliances.

These developments suggest that the supposed tensions between Yerevan and Moscow might be more of a political tactic than a genuine strategic shift. It appears that Armenia's growing ties with Russia may be a calculated move to maintain its role in helping Moscow circumvent Western sanctions while avoiding direct backlash from the West.

The heart of this issue is not necessarily the nature of Armenia-Russia relations but rather the double standards applied by Western institutions and media. Azerbaijan continues to face disproportionate criticism for its limited interactions with Russia, while Armenia's extensive economic and political alignment with Moscow largely escapes scrutiny. This imbalance reveals a bias that understates Armenia's ties to Russia while overemphasizing Azerbaijan's multivector foreign policy.

Ultimately, these contrasting narratives expose a selective approach in how the West views its relationships with countries in the South Caucasus. While Azerbaijan remains committed to its balanced foreign policy and strategic partnership with the European Union, Armenia's deepening engagement with Russia challenges the narrative of its supposed pivot toward the West. The reality of the region's geopolitics is far more nuanced, with Azerbaijan actively pursuing diverse alliances and Armenia's anti-Russian stance appearing less genuine than often portrayed.

XI. Azerbaijan's strategy for peace and climate action at COP29

Azerbaijan has firmly positioned environmental protection at the forefront of its domestic and international policies. The country's hosting of COP29 serves as a testament to its commitment to

advancing global ecological security. Over recent years, Azerbaijan has emerged as a key player in addressing environmental challenges, demonstrating that ecological security is not just a regional concern but a critical aspect of global stability.

Hosting COP29 in Azerbaijan is a notable diplomatic achievement that underscores the country's successes in foreign policy. By bringing this significant international summit to Baku, Azerbaijan not only confirms its status as an influential actor in global affairs but also showcases its strategic approach to addressing environmental issues. Azerbaijan has been applying modern solutions to ecological challenges, promoting sustainable development, and creating a platform to raise global awareness about these pressing concerns.

However, in the lead-up to COP29, Azerbaijan has faced a surge in political pressure and negative campaigns, particularly from pro-Armenian groups. These efforts are aimed at damaging Azerbaijan's international image and undermining its growing influence on the world stage. The intention behind these campaigns appears to be to sway the political discourse and impose terms on Azerbaijan through increased scrutiny. Yet, such tactics not only distract from the primary goal of ecological security but also undermine the spirit of international cooperation.

This political maneuvering poses a risk to the fragile peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Both nations are closer than ever to reaching a peace agreement, and the politicization of a climate summit like COP29 could jeopardize these efforts. Using the platform of a globally significant event to escalate tensions and create divisions is counterproductive, as it goes against the summit's goal of fostering unity and collective action on climate issues.

Politicizing COP29 for narrow political gains is a disservice to its mission. This summit is designed to advance international dialogue on climate change, ecological security, and sustainable development.

Azerbaijan remains steadfast in its commitment to addressing these global challenges and is determined to ensure that COP29 remains focused on its primary objectives. Any attempts to use the event as a tool for exerting pressure on Azerbaijan detract from the urgency of the climate crisis that requires the world's attention and collaborative solutions.

Ultimately, hosting COP29 in Baku is more than just an environmental commitment; it is also a strategic move to promote peace and stability in the region and beyond. Azerbaijan's efforts to transform COP29 into a symbol of both ecological progress and international peacebuilding highlight its role as a responsible global actor. The country's focus on sustainability and stability not only strengthens its international reputation but also positions it as a leader in both environmental security and diplomatic initiatives.

Moreover, Azerbaijan's vision for COP29 goes beyond environmental dialogue. The country has proposed a global truce during the summit, advocating for a pause in military operations worldwide while the event takes place. This initiative aims to transform COP29 into a peace conference, potentially reducing military escalations in conflict zones and contributing to a broader effort for global stability. Despite its own longstanding conflict with Armenia, Azerbaijan has even extended an invitation to its neighbor to participate in the summit, signaling a desire to use this moment for dialogue and reconciliation.

On September 17, the COP29 Presidency unveiled a series of initiatives under its "Action Agenda" aimed at accelerating progress on climate action and enhancing the formal negotiated agenda of the summit. These initiatives reflect an ambitious strategy by the COP29 Presidency to drive progress across key areas such as energy, finance, agriculture, cities, human development, and the intersection of climate and peace. Notable among these initiatives are the Baku Initiative on Climate Finance, Investment, and Trade (BICFIT), the Baku Initiative on Human Development for Climate Resilience, and the Multisectoral Actions Pathways

(MAP) for Resilient and Healthy Cities. These efforts highlight the COP29 Presidency's commitment to integrating cross-sectoral approaches that address the complexities of climate challenges.

A central component of the COP29 initiatives is the COP Truce Appeal, modeled on the Olympic Truce, which emphasizes the crucial link between peace and climate action. The COP29 Peace and Climate Initiative, a separate yet complementary effort, aims to establish a center of excellence to match resources with the needs of the most vulnerable communities. This initiative also seeks to foster tangible outcomes that operationalize peace-focused climate solutions.

The importance of these initiatives cannot be overstated, as climate change is increasingly reshaping the global security landscape. The effects of climate change extend far beyond environmental concerns, influencing peacebuilding efforts and creating new security challenges. Regions recovering from conflicts, like Azerbaijan following the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, face severe environmental issues such as land contamination and soil degradation, which hinder economic recovery and the return of displaced people to their homes. The presence of landmines in the Karabakh region, for example, prevents safe access to agricultural lands and disrupts efforts toward sustainable development.

Scientific research consistently shows that armed conflicts directly impact climate change, often leading to new sources of greenhouse gas emissions. During active conflicts, infrastructure such as oil production and storage facilities are frequently targeted, resulting in fires, spills, and other environmental damages. In the former Karabakh war, significant environmental harm was caused by deliberate burning of forests and homes, highlighting the interplay between conflict and ecological degradation.

The COP Truce Appeal gains its significance from historical precedents of using global events as moments to foster peace. Inspired by the ancient

tradition of the Olympic Truce, where athletes and spectators could travel safely during the games, this concept has evolved into a broader call for ceasefires during global summits. The United Nations adopted its first resolution on the Olympic Truce in 1993, encouraging nations to suspend conflicts and promote peace during the Olympic Games.

Historical examples underscore the power of these truces. During the 1994 Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, athletes from war-torn Yugoslavia participated despite the ongoing Balkan conflict, thanks to diplomatic efforts. Similarly, during tensions in the Persian Gulf in the late 1990s, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan sought a truce during the Olympic Games to facilitate diplomatic dialogue. Even during World War I, the famous Christmas truce of 1914 saw soldiers from opposing sides come together briefly to exchange greetings and play football, a symbolic gesture of peace amidst conflict.

The COP29 Truce Appeal aims to build on this legacy by creating a window of opportunity for peace alongside discussions on climate action. The initiative represents a chance to align global efforts towards a dual goal of mitigating climate change while promoting stability and preventing conflict. By linking the concepts of peace and climate action, COP29 seeks to underscore that global challenges require collective solutions, where both environmental sustainability and human security are prioritized.

The relevance of the COP Truce Appeal is heightened by the current global landscape, where numerous conflicts are ongoing. From the war in Ukraine to the conflicts in Yemen, South Sudan, and other regions, the world is witnessing a surge in high-intensity clashes. According to the International Crisis Group, there are currently over 20 high-intensity conflicts, with a total of 359 crises globally when including chronic and escalating tensions. This increase in conflicts is part of a broader shift towards a multipolar world, where medium and large powers assert their influence, often at the expense of smaller nations.

Within this volatile environment, the need for a global truce during COP29 becomes even more critical. A truce could create a platform for dialogue, reduce hostilities, and bring attention to the interconnectedness of peace and environmental health. Just as the Olympic Truce has historically enabled brief pauses in conflict for the sake of sportsmanship and diplomacy, the COP29 Truce Appeal aims to encourage nations to prioritize dialogue and cooperation in the face of pressing global challenges.

COP29 presents an opportunity to expand the list of global events that promote peace alongside action on issues critical to the future of humanity. By advocating for a truce during its proceedings, COP29 aligns with the United Nations' broader mission to foster peace, stability, and the sustainable development of global communities. This initiative not only reinforces the spirit of international cooperation but also sets the stage for a new peace agenda that integrates the urgent need to address climate change with the imperative of global security.

As the world grapples with complex crises, COP29's emphasis on the peace-climate nexus offers a powerful reminder that sustainable solutions must encompass both environmental and human dimensions. The call for a truce, drawing on historical examples of successful ceasefires, symbolizes a commitment to dialogue and conflict resolution in an increasingly divided world. Through these efforts, COP29 seeks to transform the global narrative, emphasizing that true progress lies in unity and collective action.

Azerbaijan's vision for COP29 reflects its broader goal of integrating ecological issues with a comprehensive peace agenda. By advocating for a global truce and leading efforts to mitigate climate change, Azerbaijan demonstrates its dedication to creating a safer, more sustainable world. This approach solidifies Azerbaijan's standing within the international community and underscores its

leadership in addressing the dual challenges of ecological degradation and geopolitical instability.