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I. Year in Review: 2023 as a landmark year for Azerbaijan

The year 2023 stands as a landmark period in the history of Azerbaijan, marked by significant strides in diplomacy, infrastructure, and regional stability. The year 2023 has been etched into Azerbaijan's annals as one of the most defining years since the Soviet Union's collapse. This past year marked a monumental achievement for Azerbaijan as it regained full sovereignty over its internationally recognized borders, completing the liberation of territories that had been under Armenian occupation since the early 1990s. This accomplishment cements President Ilham Aliyev's legacy as the principal architect of this strategic victory. The year also witnessed Azerbaijan making significant strides in other areas, including the rebuilding of reclaimed territories, bolstering energy exports, and diversifying its economy. Consequently, 2023 stands as a year of exceptional success and progress for Azerbaijan. Here's a look back at the key developments that shaped Azerbaijan's journey over the year.

Restoration of Territorial Integrity

In the early 1990s, Armenia occupied 20 percent of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territories, comprising the Karabakh region and seven adjacent districts. This occupation led to the displacement of over 700,000 Azerbaijanis, who were forced from their homes through violent ethnic cleansing and massacres. For nearly three decades, Baku endeavored to regain these occupied territories through international negotiations. However, these efforts remained fruitless, largely due to Yerevan's refusal to withdraw and its non-compliance with international mandates, including four United Nations Security Council resolutions from 1993.

In 2020, Azerbaijan resorted to military action to end this prolonged illegal occupation, successfully liberating a significant portion of the region during

what became known as the 44-Day War (September 27 – November 10). Despite this victory, a portion of the Karabakh region remained under the joint administration of a local separatist regime and Russian peacekeepers deployed in the aftermath of the conflict.

In the following years, Baku continued its efforts to reintegrate the remainder of the Karabakh region and its Armenian community, engaging in negotiations facilitated by Russia, the European Union, and the United States. These talks led to a significant diplomatic breakthrough, with Armenia acknowledging Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, the reintegration of Karabakh stalled as the local separatist authorities rejected Baku's overtures for dialogue. This impasse culminated in a brief but decisive military operation by Azerbaijan on September 19-20, 2023, which effectively dissolved the separatist regime on September 28, furthering Azerbaijan's quest to restore its territorial integrity.

The dissolution of the separatist regime in Azerbaijan marks a watershed moment in the nation's history, breaking the longstanding impasse of frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet region. This significant achievement serves as an exemplary model for other countries, such as Georgia and Ukraine, grappling with similar territorial disputes. This decisive action not only reshaped regional dynamics but also solidified President Ilham Aliyev's legacy as a transformative leader in Azerbaijan's history.

President Ilham Aliyev's success in reclaiming the occupied territories, a feat that seemed improbable just months before the 2020 conflict, attests to his strategic foresight and leadership. His ability to navigate the complex and often contentious geopolitical environment of the South Caucasus, amidst external influences and manipulations, has been a testament to his diplomatic acumen. The effective resolution of this long-standing conflict under his leadership has not

only enhanced Azerbaijan's stature on the global stage but also significantly boosted President Ilham Aliyev's standing and popularity among the Azerbaijani people. This historic accomplishment underscores Azerbaijan's resolve and capability in addressing and resolving protracted conflicts, setting a precedent in the region.

Rebuilding of liberated territories

The liberation of the Karabakh region and adjacent territories revealed the extensive destruction and looting perpetrated by Armenia during its years of occupation. President Ilham Aliyev, in his address to the nation on December 1, 2020, noted, "Everything is devastated – the infrastructure is destroyed, residential and administrative buildings are demolished". In response, Baku initiated a massive reconstruction effort to revive the once flourishing cities and villages of the Karabakh region.

This reconstruction is both expensive and time-consuming, hindered by several obstacles. The widespread contamination of these areas with landmines and other explosive remnants of war, coupled with Armenia's reluctance to provide comprehensive minefield maps, significantly hampers the process and inflates costs. Additionally, rebuilding entire cities and villages essentially from the ground up demands substantial financial resources and will take several years for Azerbaijan to fully implement.

Azerbaijan is shouldering the responsibility of rebuilding the liberated territories using its own financial resources, without international aid or loans. To date, the government has allocated 7 billion USD from the state budget for reconstruction and restoration activities. An additional 2.4 billion USD is planned for investment in 2024. Under the state program designed to facilitate the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs), an estimated total of about 30.5 billion Azerbaijani manats (roughly 18 billion USD) is

projected to be spent from 2022 to 2026. This program aims to resettle approximately 34,500 families, or around 140,000 Azerbaijani citizens, in the region by 2026. Already, more than a thousand families have returned to various parts of the liberated territories, marking the beginning of a new era in these once-abandoned lands.

In the past year, Azerbaijan has experienced a robust economic recovery from the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The nation has maintained macroeconomic stability and spurred growth, particularly in sectors outside the oil and gas industry. This progress is evident in the reduced inflation rate and a surplus in the balance of payments. Azerbaijan's strategic foreign exchange reserves have reached a substantial 68.3 billion US dollars, equating to 97 percent of its GDP, which significantly outweighs its direct foreign debt that stands at 10 percent of the GDP.

Economic Growth and Diversification

Looking ahead to 2024, the macroeconomic forecast for Azerbaijan is optimistic. The country is expected to witness real economic growth, maintain a manageable level of inflation, and sustain a surplus in the balance of payments. The government's budget for the forthcoming year is predicated on an oil price of 60 US dollars per barrel. It is anticipated that non-oil revenues will constitute over 75% of the state budget's current expenditures in 2024. The projected average annual economic growth rate is set at 2.9%, with the non-oil sector anticipated to grow by 4.8%.

Despite these diversification efforts, the energy sector continues to play a crucial role in Azerbaijan's economy. 2023 marked a significant year for Azerbaijan in building upon its earlier successes in the energy field since gaining independence. A notable development was the inclusion of Serbia in the list of countries importing natural gas from Azerbaijan. This was made possible by the inauguration of the Serbia-Bulgaria

Gas Interconnector in the Serbian city of Niš on December 10. The operationalization of this interconnector has been instrumental in broadening the reach of Azerbaijan's natural gas exports across Europe.

“We currently export our natural gas to eight countries, and Serbia is the ninth country. Seven of these nine countries are European, and, of course, today’s ceremony, the launch of the interconnector will make an important contribution to European energy security,” President Ilham Aliyev noted in his speech at the inauguration of the Serbia-Bulgaria gas interconnector.

Azerbaijan is optimistic about the steady increase in its natural gas exports, aiming to reach a target of 20 billion cubic meters (bcm) annually by 2027, in line with the energy agreement signed with the European Union (EU) in 2022. President Ilham Aliyev, in his recent address, highlighted this progress, noting that gas exports to Europe rose from just over 8 billion cubic meters in 2021 to an estimated 12 billion cubic meters in the current year, demonstrating a clear trajectory towards achieving this goal.

In the realm of renewable energy, 2023 marked significant progress for Azerbaijan, with this sector emerging as a key driver of economic diversification. Azerbaijan’s potential in renewable energy far exceeds its current installed capacity, offering ample room for growth. By the end of 2023, the nation achieved an installed electricity production capacity of 7.5 GW, while its economically viable renewable energy potential is estimated to be around 27 GW.

Azerbaijan’s advancements in renewable energy significantly contributed to its successful bid to host the 29th Conference of Parties (COP29) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. This prestigious international event gained an additional layer of significance with Armenia’s

symbolic and politically meaningful support for Azerbaijan’s candidacy, a gesture that emerged from a bilateral agreement between Baku and Yerevan on December 13. This agreement, which included a mutual release of prisoners detained since the end of the 44-Day War, exemplifies a growing spirit of cooperation and peace in the region.

As Azerbaijan prepares to host COP29 next year, the event will serve not just as a forum for global action against climate change but also as a testament to newfound peace and collaboration in the South Caucasus. The resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and the subsequent restoration of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity in 2023 mark the beginning of a new era in the interstate relations of the region, with promising prospects for stability and cooperation.

Advancements in Peace Negotiations with Armenia: One of the most notable achievements of the year was the considerable progress made in peace talks with Armenia. After years of tension and conflict, the two nations engaged in constructive dialogue, laying the groundwork for a lasting peace treaty. The agreement to exchange prisoners and the consensus on key articles of the peace agreement were pivotal moments.

Infrastructure and Development Projects

The year witnessed the completion and initiation of several major infrastructure projects, including transportation corridors and green energy initiatives. These developments not only boosted the domestic economy but also enhanced Azerbaijan's role as a key regional player in connectivity and sustainable development.

Cultural and Social Progress

Azerbaijan made significant strides in promoting its rich cultural heritage and enhancing social welfare programs. Efforts to preserve and promote Azerbaijani culture on the global stage were

complemented by initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life for its citizens.

Enhanced Regional and International Relations

Azerbaijan's foreign policy in 2023 was characterized by strengthened bilateral and multilateral relationships. The nation played a pivotal role in regional alliances and extended its influence in international forums.

Focus on Innovation and Technology

The year saw Azerbaijan emphasizing innovation and technological advancement. Investments in tech startups, digital infrastructure, and education in STEM fields signaled the country's commitment to being at the forefront of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Environmental Initiatives and Green Energy

Committed to tackling climate change, Azerbaijan undertook significant green energy projects, aligning with its goal of reducing carbon emissions and promoting sustainable energy sources.

In summary, 2023 was a year where Azerbaijan not only restored its territorial integrity consolidated its regional presence but also laid a strong foundation for future growth, stability, and prosperity, making it a historic year in the nation's development.

II. President Ilham Aliyev delivers annual New Year's address to the country

In his speech on the occasion of the World Azerbaijanis Solidarity Day and New Year, President Ilham Aliyev reflected on the events of 2023, highlighting the restoration of Azerbaijan's state sovereignty as a historic achievement. This milestone followed a one-day anti-terrorist operation that led to the expulsion of occupying forces from Azerbaijani territory and the defeat of

the enemy army, including the capture or destruction of their military hardware. President Aliyev noted that the conclusion of the Second Karabakh War in 2020, marked by the raising of the Azerbaijani flag in Shusha and other liberated areas, was not the end of their efforts. The goal was to fully restore state sovereignty, a task that has now been accomplished.

Despite efforts to resolve remaining issues peacefully over three years, Azerbaijan faced challenges, including military provocations and the continued presence of a 15,000-strong Armenian army in Karabakh. This army was not withdrawn, contrary to expectations, and instead, new weapons, ammunition, and military equipment were brought into the region, along with ongoing mine terror. President Aliyev expressed his congratulations to the people of Azerbaijan on this historic event, emphasizing the significance of restoring full state sovereignty for the country.

In his speech, President Ilham Aliyev discussed the actions leading to the restoration of the country's territorial integrity in 2023. Azerbaijan had warned Armenia and its supporters in the West that the situation with the separatist regime in the territory of Azerbaijan could not continue. Azerbaijan had offered a choice: either the dissolution of the separatist regime and the withdrawal of the Armenian army, or Azerbaijan would take action to restore sovereignty by force. President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that these warnings were ignored, leading to a decisive one-day anti-terrorist operation on September 19, resulting in the complete victory of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces. This operation saw the collapse of the separatist regime. President Ilham Aliyev praised the Army for their professionalism and heroism, honoring the memory of the martyrs and stating that their sacrifice was avenged on the battlefield. This victory was in memory of all those affected by the conflict, including civilians and victims of past conflicts.

Further, President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the establishment of a border checkpoint in the direction of Lachin in April 2023, marking the full restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Despite international anxiety and accusations, particularly from Western countries supporting Armenia, President Ilham Aliyev asserted Azerbaijan's right to control its territory and to act within international law. The president emphasized the inevitability of the September operation due to the lack of response from the occupiers and their supporters, declaring it a source of national pride.

President Ilham Aliyev, in his speech, highlighted the significant reconstruction efforts underway in Karabakh and East Zangezur, transforming them into vast construction sites. These regions, heavily impacted by previous conflicts, are witnessing the rebuilding of cities and villages, with about 5,000 displaced persons having returned to their native lands in 2023.

Significant events marking the return of displaced persons to their homes included festive celebrations in the village of Talish in March, in the city of Fuzuli and the village of Zabukh in August, and in Lachin during the Independence Day celebrations on May 28. Additionally, the village of Aghali saw the resettlement of displaced persons earlier.

Looking ahead to 2024, President Ilham Aliyev announced the restoration and reopening of several more residential settlements, including the villages of Karkijahan, Malibayli, and Turshsu. The head of the state also shared the news that residents of Khojaly and Khankendi would be returning to their homes. The president emphasized Azerbaijan's role as a nation of creators, contrasting this with the destruction and environmental damage he attributed to Armenian actions over 30 years, including the destruction of homes, historical buildings, mosques, and the perpetration of uricide and ecocide. President

Ilham Aliyev criticized double standards in the West regarding the treatment of these issues. He affirmed Azerbaijan's determination to continue its path, regardless of external pressures or accusations, and urged the Armenian leadership to learn from historical lessons and avoid actions that might provoke Azerbaijan's anger.

In his speech, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan discussed the country's successful economic and military advancements in the past year. He emphasized the importance of having an independent economy that does not rely on international financial institutions, noting that Azerbaijan has achieved this level of economic autonomy.

Significant progress was made in strengthening the Azerbaijani army. The president noted the elevation in professionalism and the creation of new armed units, which demonstrated their skills in the recent anti-terrorist operation. Azerbaijan has also been active in acquiring new weapons and military equipment, with several new contracts signed. Looking forward, President Ilham Aliyev announced plans to significantly increase domestic military production in the next year, with both public and private sectors investing at least one billion manats. This move aims to make Azerbaijan self-sufficient in critical military assets and a globally recognized player in military production.

On the international front, Aliyev highlighted Azerbaijan's growing prestige, evidenced by the unanimous decision of countries worldwide to choose Azerbaijan as the host for the world's largest international conference on climate change, COP29, next year. This choice reflects the international community's respect and recognition of Azerbaijan's commitment to transitioning to green energy.

In terms of renewable energy, Azerbaijan has made notable strides. A major achievement was the inauguration of the region's largest renewable

energy plant—a 230-megawatt solar power plant—fully integrated into Azerbaijan's energy system. Additionally, agreements and memorandums of understanding have been signed to create 10,000 megawatts of renewable energy in Azerbaijan in the coming years, positioning the country as a world leader in this field. The hosting of COP29 in Azerbaijan underscores these achievements and the country's role in addressing climate change.

III. Azerbaijan and Armenia issue a historic joint statement

On December 13, in a notable development since the end of the 44-Day War, Armenia and Azerbaijan conducted a prisoner exchange. This exchange followed a major breakthrough in relations between the two nations on December 7 when both Baku and Yerevan jointly announced a series of confidence-building measures aimed at normalizing relations and forging a path towards a peace agreement. In a development reflecting the spirit of humanism and goodwill between Azerbaijan and Armenia, an agreement was reached for a mutual release of detained individuals. This agreement, a result of direct negotiations between the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan and the Office of the Prime Minister of Armenia, involved the release of 32 individuals of Armenian origin by Azerbaijan and two Azerbaijani servicemen by Armenia. The group being returned to Armenia included 26 individuals detained during anti-terror operations near Hadrut in December 2020, and an additional six apprehended at various times along the border. These individuals have already completed most of their respective sentences. It is important to note that this release did not extend to key figures of the separatist regime accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including Arayik Harutyunyan, Bako Sahakyan, Arkadi Ghukasyan, Ruben Vardanyan, Vagif Khachatryan, and

Alyosha Khosrovyan. Significantly, this agreement was reached independently, without the involvement of a third country, highlighting the capability of Azerbaijan and Armenia to advance the peace process through direct dialogue, eliminating the need for external mediators. Despite several lingering unresolved issues, the recent progress in direct consultations has kindled renewed hope for achieving a comprehensive peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The deal reached between Armenia and Azerbaijan extended beyond the significant prisoner exchange, encompassing several other noteworthy concessions. Notably, Armenia agreed to endorse Azerbaijan's bid to host the 29th Conference of Parties (COP29) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. This development occurred during the COP28 summit in Dubai, where Eastern European countries collectively decided to support Baku's bid. Subsequently, Yerevan withdrew its candidacy in favor of Azerbaijan. This diplomatic breakthrough has received international acclaim, with the United States, the European Union, and others issuing statements endorsing the progress towards a peace treaty.

As it was emphasized above, this deal was reached through direct bilateral negotiations between Baku and Yerevan, without third-party involvement. This approach marks a significant shift and highlights the growing possibility of enhanced bilateral cooperation in future endeavors. In contrast, the Western-led negotiation track, facilitated by the European Union and the United States, has encountered various hurdles, leading to the cancellation of multiple peace summits scheduled for this year. Meanwhile, Russia's traditional role as a dominant mediator in the region has been compromised following its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In recent times, there have been encouraging signs in the process of normalizing relations and

advancing peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite a delay of 70 days, the Armenian side, led by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, eventually responded to the peace agreement draft proposed by Azerbaijan in September. This response included a consensus on three out of the five articles suggested by Azerbaijan for the peace agreement. This development led to the sixth round of negotiations, where both parties worked on finalizing a written peace agreement. President Ilham Aliyev reported the successful resolution of many issues under the proposed peace agreement framework. Meanwhile, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, Jeyhun Bayramov, indicated optimistic progress as per Armenia's most recent proposal.

Baku and Yerevan are currently focused on finalizing a peace treaty, addressing several critical issues, including territorial and sovereignty guarantees, the return of ethnic Armenians to the Karabakh region, reopening transportation channels, and resolving the status of each country's exclaves. On December 6, at an international forum in Baku, President Ilham Aliyev outlined Azerbaijan's stance on these issues. The President emphasized the need for "firm, verified guarantees" from Armenia to prevent any potential revanchism.

In response to President Ilham Aliyev's remarks, a member of Armenia's ruling Civil Contract Party firmly denied any plans for military retaliation against Azerbaijan. The parliamentarian described any renewed conflict with Azerbaijan as a catastrophic option for Armenia. Azerbaijan, for its part, insists on formal assurances from Armenia, given the history of occupation, civilian casualties, and current revanchist attitudes within sections of Armenian society. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan acknowledged the trust deficit as a significant hurdle in the peace negotiations. He highlighted the need for a mechanism to address

disputed issues and create security guarantees, which are key topics in the ongoing discussions.

On the topic of the return of Armenian refugees, President Ilham Aliyev confirmed his country's readiness to welcome back Armenians who departed from the Karabakh region following Baku's anti-terrorist operation in September. The President mentioned that Armenians wishing to return could apply through a reintegration portal established by Azerbaijan earlier in the year. President Ilham Aliyev assured that the properties and cultural heritage of these individuals would be safeguarded. The President expressed the expectation that Armenia would reciprocate by facilitating the return of Azerbaijani people to their ancestral homes within Armenia.

The European Union has expressed support for Azerbaijan's commitment to ensure the security and preservation of Armenians returning to Karabakh. In a recent interview, European Council President Charles Michel emphasized that the safety of the Armenian population in Karabakh should be guaranteed under Azerbaijani law. Michel stated that the Azerbaijani authorities should be responsible for this assurance, rejecting calls from some Armenian groups for international guarantees.

Regarding the reopening of transportation links, particularly the Zangezur Corridor, discussions between Armenia and Azerbaijan remain ongoing. Armenia's reluctance to open the corridor as outlined in the November 10, 2020, trilateral statement has been a point of contention. Azerbaijan maintains its commitment to the agreement and views Armenia's stance as a breach of the document. Azerbaijan expects unfettered access through the Zangezur Corridor, implying no customs or border checks for traffic between western Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan exclave. While the Azerbaijani section of the corridor is nearing completion, the Armenian segment has yet to begin construction, with President Ilham Aliyev

urging Yerevan or other international entities to invest in its completion. The recent progress in peace negotiations offers hope for resolving these issues comprehensively, paving the way for a durable peace treaty. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan recently referred to the prisoner exchange as a starting point for addressing the remaining disputes. The ability of Baku and Yerevan to reach mutually beneficial compromises will be crucial in securing the future stability and security of the South Caucasus region.

IV. Azerbaijan to host COP29 in 2024

Azerbaijan is set to be the host for the 29th Conference of the Parties (COP29) under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2024. In a social media post, President Ilham Aliyev highlighted Azerbaijan's commitment to global climate action, emphasizing the country's focus on energy efficiency, clean environment, green growth, and the increasing role of renewable energy. President Ilham Aliyev expressed Azerbaijan's determination to contribute to global climate change efforts and assured that Baku will make every effort to ensure the success of COP29. "Hosting the 29th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP29) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2024 stems from our firm determination to contribute to global efforts to cope with climate change," the president noted.

Confirmation of Azerbaijan's role as the host for COP29 was made official during the plenary session of COP28 on December 11. This followed Baku receiving collective support from other Eastern European countries. The event is planned for November 2024. Mukhtar Babayev, Azerbaijan's Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources, emphasized the need for collective action and dedication to shared goals and aspirations in his remarks at the session. He acknowledged the vital importance of collaborative efforts in combating

climate change. He also noted the strong political will of President Ilham Aliyev and the support from other Eastern European Group member states for Azerbaijan's nomination, which played a significant role in achieving this outcome.

Azerbaijan has reaffirmed its commitments under the 2015 Paris Agreement, aiming to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 35 percent by 2030 and further to 40 percent by 2050. The country signed the Paris Agreement, a legally binding international treaty on climate change, in April 2016. Since then, Azerbaijan has been actively working towards achieving the goals prioritized by its government.

The Paris Agreement's primary objective is to substantially reduce global greenhouse gas emissions and maintain the global temperature increase well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels. It also encourages efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, recognizing the significant reduction in the risks and impacts of climate change this would entail.

The Agreement necessitates that signatory countries periodically review their collective progress in achieving the agreement's aims and its long-term objectives. It also emphasizes the need for providing financial support to developing countries, helping them both mitigate climate change and strengthen resilience, as well as enhancing their capabilities to adapt to climate impacts.

Azerbaijan has prioritized transitioning from traditional energy sources to alternative ones, aiming for renewables to constitute 30 percent of the country's electricity generation by 2030. Azerbaijan's renewable energy potential is estimated at around 37,000 MW, with 10,000 MW of this potential becoming accessible following the liberation of the country's territories in 2020. Wind power represents the largest portion of

Azerbaijan's renewable energy potential, accounting for 59.2 percent. Solar power follows, with a potential of 8,000 MW. Other promising renewable energy sources include biomass (900 MW), geothermal (800 MW), and hydropower (excluding large hydropower stations) at 650 MW. Additionally, Azerbaijan has plans to transform the liberated Garabagh and East Zangezur regions into a "Net-Zero Emission" Zone. This initiative is a part of the ongoing reconstruction and development projects in these areas, aligning with the broader goal to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 40 percent by 2050. The green energy potential in these liberated territories encompasses various renewable sources, including hydro, solar, wind, and geothermal energies. Furthermore, the Caspian Sea sector of Azerbaijan is also noteworthy for its renewable energy potential, estimated at 157 GW. This emphasizes the country's significant capacity and commitment to expanding its renewable energy sector.

It is worth noting that Armenia was among the Eastern European Group nations that supported Azerbaijan's bid to host COP29. On December 7, a joint statement was issued by Yerevan and Baku, announcing Yerevan's support for Azerbaijan's bid to host COP29. The Office of the Prime Minister of Armenia declared that, in a gesture of goodwill, the country would withdraw its own candidacy in favor of Azerbaijan's bid to host the conference. Following this, the government of Azerbaijan reciprocated by announcing its support for Armenia's candidature for membership in the COP Bureau representing the Eastern European Group.

On December 15, President Ilham Aliyev chaired a meeting regarding Azerbaijan being selected as the host country for the COP29 in Baku in 2024. This decision, made by all countries of the world, is seen as a significant show of confidence and respect for Azerbaijan. Highlighting the timing of this decision, just two and a half months after the anti-terror operation, President Ilham Aliyev noted that it is a

reaffirmation of global support for Azerbaijan. The president emphasized that the unanimous agreement to host COP29 in Baku demonstrates a collective endorsement from the international community.

Addressing accusations from certain Western countries, particularly France, following the anti-terror operation, President Ilham Aliyev defended Azerbaijan's actions as upholding international law and observing humanitarian norms. President Ilham Aliyev noted that even Armenia has come to terms with the situation, which is further evidenced by the decision to hold COP29 in Azerbaijan. The President criticized some French political leaders for their stance but noted that they will also eventually accept the situation. President Ilham Aliyev also spoke about the broader concept of the international community, stressing that it includes all nations globally, not just a limited group of 30-40 countries. President Ilham Aliyev pointed out Azerbaijan's leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement, supported by 120 countries, as an example of the widespread international backing for the country. The President noted the responsibility that comes with hosting large-scale international events. Azerbaijan has experience in this regard, having successfully hosted the International Astronautical Congress earlier in 2023. President Ilham Aliyev recalled that this prestigious event was first held in Baku 50 years ago and was again hosted in the capital of independent Azerbaijan in 2023. COP29, President Ilham Aliyev noted, is a significant event, expected to attract tens of thousands of foreign visitors, making Baku a global center for two weeks. President Ilham Aliyev estimated that 70,000-80,000 foreign visitors may attend the conference, underscoring the scale and importance of the event for Azerbaijan.

V. President Ilham Aliyev attends inauguration ceremony of Serbia-Bulgaria gas interconnector

On December 10, Serbia launched a new gas interconnector extending 170 kilometers from the Serbian city of Niš to the outskirts of Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. This new pipeline has an annual capacity of 1.8 billion cubic meters. This capacity is substantial, potentially covering up to 60% of Serbia's annual gas consumption. The pipeline will offer Serbia the opportunity to access alternative gas supplies from sources like Greece or Azerbaijan. At the same time, it will provide Bulgaria with the ability to access gas from Western Europe or the Adriatic Sea. The opening ceremony in Niš on Sunday was attended by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev, and President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev.

In a ceremony attended by President Ilham Aliyev and President Radev, the President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, expressed his inability to speak in detail about his country's achievements and ongoing projects. This restraint was due to specific laws enacted in Serbia, which prohibit boasting about governmental projects or discussing further development a month before elections. Vučić warmly welcomed his guests to Serbia and expressed his gratitude for their presence. He made it clear that he would adhere to these laws and would not participate in discussions that might contravene them. Despite this, he maintained a positive outlook, confidently anticipating a significant victory in the upcoming elections, which he referred to as a 'shared victory'. Apologizing to his guests for this limitation, Vučić delegated the responsibility of addressing the event to the Serbian Minister of Mining and Energy, Dubravka Djedovic Handanovic. As she is not a member of his political party and is not featured in election lists, her participation in discussing the project was not restricted by the

mentioned laws. This arrangement allowed for the continuation of the event and the sharing of relevant information while respecting the legal framework in place in Serbia.

At an inauguration ceremony President Ilham Aliyev delivered a speech highlighting the robust and dynamic development of Serbian-Azerbaijani relations. President Ilham Aliyev expressed his gratitude to President Vučić for the invitation and hospitality, and noted the frequency of their reciprocal visits as evidence of a strong partnership between Serbia and Azerbaijan.

President Ilham Aliyev mentioned the strategic partnership between the two nations, which is not only formalized in documents but also evident in actions and collaborative projects. President Ilham Aliyev acknowledged the restrictions on President Vučić's ability to speak due to local laws, but emphasized the significant contribution of their personal friendship to the strengthening of bilateral relations.

President Ilham Aliyev commended President Vučić for his leadership and achievements in Serbia, particularly in pursuing independent policies that align with the interests of the Serbian people and state. President Ilham Aliyev also recognized the importance of the event in contributing to Serbia's industrial development, especially in terms of energy resources and diversified supply networks.

Similarly, President Ilham Aliyev acknowledged the strong relationship with Bulgaria, highlighting the dynamic and strategic nature of the partnership with President Radev. This relationship was reinforced by reciprocal state visits and a shared strategic partnership agreement.

President Ilham Aliyev then turned his attention to the broader implications of the ceremony, which he viewed as a celebration of friendship and strategic partnership. President Ilham Aliyev congratulated both Serbia and Bulgaria on the

inauguration of the interconnector project, which promises to significantly enhance their energy security. Additionally, President Ilham Aliyev celebrated the expansion of Azerbaijan's gas export geography, with Serbia becoming the ninth country and the seventh European nation to receive Azerbaijani natural gas.

Finally, President Ilham Aliyev provided details about Azerbaijan's expanding role in European energy security, referencing a Memorandum of Understanding on strategic partnership in the field of energy signed with the European Union. This agreement outlines plans to double Azerbaijan's gas exports to Europe by 2027, a goal that Azerbaijan is confidently progressing towards, as evidenced by the increase in gas exports to Europe from 8 billion cubic meters in 2021 to an anticipated 12 billion cubic meters in the current year. This increase represents 50 percent of Azerbaijan's total gas exports, signifying the country's growing importance in the European energy landscape.

VI. President Ilham Aliyev attends "Karabakh: Back Home After 30 years. Accomplishments and Challenges" international conference

On December 6, the Forum titled "Karabakh: Back Home After 30 Years. Accomplishments and Challenges", co-organized by ADA University and the Center of Analysis of International Relations, has been held with the participation of President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev at ADA University. The forum focused on the redevelopment and challenges in Karabakh following Azerbaijan's recent restoration of territorial integrity and sovereignty. Hafiz Pashayev, the Rector of ADA University, opened the forum by welcoming President Aliyev and the participants. He emphasized the historic significance of the event, noting that Azerbaijan's

achievement in restoring its territorial integrity was a result of President Ilham Aliyev's visionary leadership and the unity of the Azerbaijani nation. He congratulated the president on this achievement and acknowledged the immense task of redevelopment and reconstruction in Karabakh, particularly the resettlement of Azerbaijani internally displaced persons (IDPs). Hafiz Pashayev highlighted the progress in the smart and eco-friendly village of Aghali in the liberated Zangilan region, which forum participants had the opportunity to visit. The forum, with over 60 foreign participants from esteemed think tanks and research centers, aimed to discuss various aspects of the return process and the applicability of international experience to the Azerbaijani context. Hafiz Pashayev thanked President Ilham Aliyev for his willingness to engage with the forum participants and discuss issues related to the return of IDPs. In his response, President Ilham Aliyev expressed his gratitude to Rector Pashayev for the invitation and noted his consistent participation in the ADA University Forum. President Ilham Aliyev mentioned the previous meeting with international experts in Shusha and expressed satisfaction that the participants had visited the Zangilan region to observe the resettlement and reconstruction process. The head of the state stressed the importance of such gatherings for understanding the international perspective on developments in the region.

In his speech at the Forum, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan discussed the evolving situation in the region, highlighting Azerbaijan's role as a key initiator of changes. President Ilham Aliyev reiterated Azerbaijan's long-standing desire to peacefully restore its sovereignty over its internationally recognized territory, a goal which also applied to the conflict with Armenia. However, President Ilham Aliyev expressed disappointment that a peaceful resolution is hard to achieve mainly due to intransigence of Armenia.

Reflecting on the developments since their last meeting in May, President Ilham Aliyev noted that the circumstances had changed. At that time, there were hopes that the Armenian leadership would adhere to its international commitments, especially the declaration signed on November 10, 2020, by the Armenian Prime Minister, the Russian President, and President Ilham Aliyev. This agreement was intended to end the longstanding conflict, with the expectation that Armenian forces would withdraw from Karabakh, which they did not.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that following the restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereignty two and a half years ago, they encountered a significant presence of Armenian military personnel in Karabakh, numbering around 15,000, in disregard of international law. For three years, Azerbaijan patiently sought a resolution, proposing two options for those living in Karabakh: to become Azerbaijani citizens, with legal and security assurances provided, or to relocate. President Ilham Aliyev mentioned that the option of a residence or work permit was also available for those not considering Azerbaijan as their country. However, President Ilham Aliyev expressed regret that these proposals and statements were not adequately addressed or responded to by the relevant parties. This lack of response contributed to the continued complexity and challenges in resolving the situation in the region.

In his speech, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan elaborated on the developments following the meeting in Shusha in May, focusing on the challenges and actions taken to restore Azerbaijan's sovereignty in the region. President Ilham Aliyev mentioned a meeting with people who returned to Lachin, where he publicly offered the opportunity for a peaceful resolution and even proposed amnesty for separatist leaders if they surrendered. However, President Ilham Aliyev expressed disappointment that this offer was not

taken seriously. As a result, the separatist leaders are now in Azerbaijan, facing the Azerbaijani justice system.

Despite these challenges, President Ilham Aliyev conveyed Azerbaijan's continued hope to establish contacts with the representatives of Karabakh Armenians. However, President Ilham Aliyev stated that the so-called authorities in that region prevented such dialogue. Aliyev highlighted two specific events in September that crossed critical boundaries: the congratulatory message from the Armenian Prime Minister to the so-called "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" on its so-called independence, and the so-called elections of a "president" in that region. These actions were seen as direct violations of previous verbal agreements and acknowledgments by the Armenian Prime Minister recognizing Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan.

Following these events, Azerbaijan conducted a one-day anti-terrorist operation to restore sovereignty. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that the operation was conducted with no damage to civilian infrastructure or civilian casualties. The operation ceased as soon as the opposing army surrendered, lasting less than 24 hours. President Ilham Aliyev then discussed the international challenges Azerbaijan faces, including misunderstandings with some partner countries. President Ilham Aliyev reiterated his commitment to explaining Azerbaijan's position and the importance of adherence to international law norms by all countries. President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that Azerbaijan's actions were self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter, noting that they were in line with international law and the sovereign right of Azerbaijan to control its territory.

In response to a question from Ambassador Matthew Bryza of the Jamestown Foundation, President Ilham Aliyev detailed the comprehensive efforts in reconstructing the liberated territories

and the plans for resettling displaced persons. The President emphasized the goal of creating comfortable living conditions using the best practices in architecture, technology, including green technology. The President addressed the issue of the Armenian population in Karabakh, reiterating Azerbaijan's stance that Armenians living there are considered Azerbaijani citizens. President Ilham Aliyev explained that they were offered the option to apply for Azerbaijani citizenship, with assurances of security and rights as per the Azerbaijani constitution and international commitments. Efforts were made to initiate dialogue with the Armenian community in Karabakh, including appointing a special presidential representative and organizing meetings. However, these overtures were met with refusal from the Armenian side. Following these rejections, Azerbaijan continued to promote its reintegration proposal publicly and through an electronic portal for citizenship applications.

After the use of force in September to restore sovereignty, President Ilham Aliyev noted that representatives from the Karabakh Armenians did engage in discussions. President Ilham Aliyev questioned why such engagement did not occur earlier, which could have prevented the need for military action. As for the current situation, the proposal for reintegration remains available, and the electronic portal is functional. President Ilham Aliyev stated that there have been some applications from Karabakh Armenians, with some choosing to stay in the area. Azerbaijan has assigned representatives from relevant agencies to assist those in need, ensuring their access to basic necessities. President Ilham Aliyev concluded by emphasizing that the offer for reintegration and citizenship remains open.

In response to the former President of the Jamestown Foundation Glenn Howard's question about the future of the Organization of Turkic States, President Ilham Aliyev shared his vision for

the organization's evolution, particularly in terms of security and defense. President Ilham Aliyev noted that his recent statements at the Organization of Turkic States Summit in Astana marked a shift from the usual focus on humanitarian, cultural, and historical ties. Given the current geopolitical climate, including the confrontation between Russia and the West and regional security concerns, President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the need for heightened attention to security. Reflecting on Azerbaijan's experience, President Ilham Aliyev noted that prioritizing security and defense, including building the army and security infrastructure, was crucial. This approach, the President argued, allowed Azerbaijan to achieve its goals, particularly in the context of the conflict with Armenia.

President Ilham Aliyev's message at the summit was to advocate for increased cooperation among Turkic states in defense and security. The President suggested joint efforts in defense industry collaboration, military training, and border protection, considering these as vital aspects of national security and stability for the member states. While not proposing the creation of a NATO-like institution, President Ilham Aliyev stressed the importance of a shared understanding and consensus on security cooperation. The President proposed developing a roadmap for such collaboration, with each member country contributing to the collective effort. President Ilham Aliyev concluded by saying that these ideas are preliminary and subject to further consultations among the member states. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that his proposals reflect Azerbaijan's position, influenced by recent experiences and the broader unpredictable global situation. The next steps will depend on the outcomes of these discussions and the willingness of other member states to engage in deeper security cooperation.

In response to Dennis Sammut's question about peace in the South Caucasus region, President Ilham Aliyev discussed his vision and efforts towards achieving peace, particularly with Armenia, following the 2020 Karabakh War. President Ilham Aliyev stated that the liberation of the territories was a main goal of his political life and expressed pride in achieving it. Regarding peace, President Ilham Aliyev believes that Azerbaijan brought peace through military means, challenging the notion that there was no military solution to the conflict, as previously stated by Minsk Group co-chairs.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that Azerbaijan was proactive in seeking a formal peace agreement post-war. Contrary to expectations, it was Azerbaijan, not international mediators or Armenia, that initiated discussions for a peace agreement and commissions on delimitation. President Ilham Aliyev shared that Azerbaijan even drafted the principles for a peace agreement and sent them to Armenia, making them public when there was no response.

The process of reaching an agreement has been slow, with Armenia taking significant time to respond to Azerbaijani drafts and comments. President Ilham Aliyev implied that the delay might be influenced by external advisories from European capitals. President Ilham Aliyev stressed the need for verified guarantees against revanchism from Armenia and for Armenia to fully accept the current situation, including Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

President Ilham Aliyev also noted the importance of constructive cooperation on border delimitation. President Ilham Aliyev expressed skepticism about Armenia's shift in stance from contesting territorial integrity to acknowledging Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, attributing it to the military outcome rather than an ideological change.

The President concluded that while a formal peace agreement is important, the real peace will be evident through tangible guarantees and actions. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the need for clear assurances that there will be no future conflict and that Armenia fully accepts the status quo, highlighting this as the key to lasting peace in the region.

In response to the President of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies Ekaterine Metreveli's question about the impact of Georgia's EU aspirations on Azerbaijan-Georgia relations and the role of the EU in the South Caucasus, President Ilham Aliyev provided a comprehensive perspective.

The President first acknowledged the strong partnership between Azerbaijan and Georgia, emphasizing that their collaboration extends beyond energy cooperation. President Ilham Aliyev expressed confidence that Georgia's potential EU membership would not affect their bilateral relationship or energy cooperation, given Europe's significant reliance on Azerbaijani energy resources.

Regarding Azerbaijan's stance towards EU membership, President Ilham Aliyev was pragmatic, stating that Azerbaijan does not aim to become an EU member, primarily because Azerbaijan would not be allowed to join. President Ilham Aliyev stressed the importance of living in reality and not pursuing unattainable goals.

President Ilham Aliyev criticized recent statements by EU officials, particularly Mr. Borrell, for misinformation and counterproductive comments about the situation in Karabakh. President Ilham Aliyev expressed disappointment in the European diplomat's handling of facts and accused him of supporting separatism, which he found contradictory and unjust.

The President also mentioned Azerbaijan's strong relationship with the European Commission,

highlighting strategic relations beyond energy, including future hydrogen projects and connectivity. President Ilham Aliyev pointed out the geopolitical significance of Azerbaijan's location, essential for European engagement with Central Asia, and suggested that the EU consider this before making certain statements.

In conclusion, President Ilham Aliyev expressed optimism that Georgia's potential EU membership could benefit Azerbaijan by having a close ally within the EU. President Ilham Aliyev hoped that Georgian representatives in the European Parliament would provide a more informed perspective on Azerbaijan, contributing to a more realistic understanding of the region within the EU.

In response to the question about connectivity efforts and the potential constraints in light of the return of Karabakh, President Ilham Aliyev discussed the nation's developments in transportation and its strategic partnership with Uzbekistan. President Ilham Aliyev expressed gratitude for Uzbekistan's support in rebuilding efforts, particularly in the construction of a school in Fuzuli named after Mirzo Ulugbek. President Ilham Aliyev noted the dynamic relationship between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, highlighting the mutual visits between the leaders and a broad agenda of cooperation encompassing transportation, energy, investments, and the automobile industry. The establishment of a joint investment fund with an initial reserve of 500 million dollars was noted as a significant step in mutual investment projects.

Regarding connectivity, President Aliyev congratulated Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China on the launch of a significant railroad project, which will greatly contribute to the Middle Corridor and be attractive for Azerbaijan. President Ilham Aliyev discussed the challenges in making the route commercially attractive through joint policies on tariffs, digitalization, and physical infrastructure investments. Azerbaijan has already

made significant advancements in upgrading its railroad infrastructure and plans further developments, including a new route bypassing Armenia via Iran and connecting with the Türkiye's railroad system.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the need for cooperation among countries in the region to enhance the commercial attractiveness of the Middle Corridor and suggested that Uzbekistan consider joining the cooperation format already established between Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye. This collaboration could redefine the transportation map of Eurasia. Regarding the reconstruction of Karabakh, President Ilham Aliyev identified landmines and time as the main challenges. President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the significant state investment dedicated to Karabakh reconstruction, surpassing investments in other parts of the country, with the primary goal of facilitating the return of displaced people to their homes.

In his response to the question about Azerbaijan's relationship with the European Union, President Ilham Aliyev provided an extensive overview of Azerbaijan's current and potential future engagements with the EU. President Ilham Aliyev acknowledged the positive and realistic approach of the European Council and the European Commission towards Azerbaijan, contrasting it with the European Parliament's stance. President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the extensive trade relationship between Azerbaijan and the EU, where the EU is Azerbaijan's primary trading partner, accounting for nearly 50% of its foreign trade. Azerbaijan has also signed or adopted declarations of strategic partnership with nine EU member states, indicating a deep level of cooperation.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the importance of the meetings organized by Charles Michel, President of the European Council, to find a lasting solution to the conflict between Armenia and

Azerbaijan. These meetings are part of an ongoing dialogue, and President Ilham Aliyev stressed the need for them to be result-oriented.

The President also mentioned Azerbaijan's cooperation with the European Commission in areas beyond energy, such as enlargement and digital connectivity. The Southern Gas Corridor Advisory Council, co-chaired by Azerbaijan and the European Energy Commission, is an example of this collaboration. President Ilham Aliyev highlighted Azerbaijan's efforts to increase gas supply to Europe, including investments to enhance production capabilities.

President Ilham Aliyev criticized some members of the European Parliament for their anti-Azerbaijani sentiments and resolutions, noting that such actions do not reflect the broader EU perspective or harm Azerbaijan-EU relations significantly. President Ilham Aliyev mentioned that Azerbaijan has ceased official contacts with the European Parliament due to these issues.

Overall, President Ilham Aliyev conveyed optimism about Azerbaijan's relationship with the European Union, especially in terms of strategic partnerships, energy cooperation, and shared geopolitical interests. The President emphasized the need to distinguish between the constructive engagement with the European Council and Commission and the less favorable interactions with certain elements within the European Parliament.

In his response to the question about Western platforms for peace talks and the role of the EU, President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the current state and potential future of Azerbaijan's engagement in international mediation efforts.

President Ilham Aliyev noted that Azerbaijan's recent decisions not to participate in negotiations in Granada, Brussels, and Washington were due to various factors. President Ilham Aliyev expressed dissatisfaction with the approach of some EU members, particularly France, which he felt had

compromised its neutrality and thus its role as a mediator. The President also criticized the European Parliament for scheduling an anti-Azerbaijan resolution to coincide with the Granada meeting, contributing to his decision not to attend.

Discussing the current state of mediation, President Ilham Aliyev mentioned the ongoing process organized by the European Council, the Moscow track involving negotiations between foreign ministers, and the Washington track, which seems uncertain following recent statements from the U.S. State Department. The President indicated that if the U.S. continues with its stance of “no business as usual” with Azerbaijan, the Washington track would likely be excluded from future negotiations.

President Ilham Aliyev suggested that bilateral negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, without any mediation, could be a viable option. He also mentioned the positive aspects of Azerbaijan's relations with the European Union, highlighting their work on a new cooperation agreement, which is largely agreed upon but currently on hold. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the importance of a balanced and realistic approach in international relations and mediation processes, advocating for direct and effective communication channels in resolving regional conflicts.

On the topic of transitional justice and reconciliation in the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev noted that Austria, due to its neutrality and international positioning, could be a good mediator in the process of peace and reconciliation. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the need for peace agreements to be perceived as just by all parties involved and pointed out that any agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan must be reciprocal, especially concerning the rights of national minorities in both countries. President Ilham Aliyev noted that recent developments have

brought the two nations closer to a peace agreement. The President expressed frustration with the lengthy response time from the Armenian side to Azerbaijan's proposals, suggesting a lack of urgency or political will for peace. The President also addressed the broader context of the conflict, including the historical aspects and the recent supply of weapons to Armenia by other countries. President Ilham Aliyev warned against any actions that might be perceived as a threat to Azerbaijan's security, stating that Azerbaijan would respond to protect its people if necessary. Regarding the role of the European Union, President Ilham Aliyev appreciated the realistic and practical approach of the European Council and the European Commission, contrasting it with the European Parliament's stance, which he viewed as less constructive.

Touching the issue of IDPs and the problem of landmines in Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the critical challenge that landmines pose in the return of displaced people to their homes. President Ilham Aliyev detailed the initiative he proposed at the summit of the Non-Aligned Movement to add humanitarian demining as the 18th Sustainable Development Goal.

President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the tragic consequences of landmines in Azerbaijan, noting the high number of casualties and injuries, including recent incidents. President Ilham Aliyev expressed frustration over the ineffectiveness of the mine maps provided by Armenia, stating that new mines were planted even after the 44-Day War. These mines, some produced as recently as 2021, pose an ongoing threat to returning refugees and deminers. President Ilham Aliyev pointed out the challenges in the demining process, including the need for more equipment and trained personnel. While financial support is not a primary concern, he emphasized the need for technical support and trained experts to accelerate the demining efforts. The President welcomed the

initiative to gather NGOs, civil society, and academics in Geneva to support his proposal for including humanitarian demining in the Sustainable Development Goals. President Ilham Aliyev stressed the importance of international collaboration in addressing the widespread issue of landmines, not only in Azerbaijan but in other affected countries around the world.

Commenting on the relationship between Azerbaijan and Central Asia, President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the deep-rooted historical and cultural connections and the evolving political and economic cooperation between the regions.

President Ilham Aliyev acknowledged the importance of people-to-people contacts and shared history as the foundation of current relationships. The President noted that the early years of independence for the countries in the region were challenging, with each nation preoccupied with building statehood and addressing domestic issues. However, recent years have seen increased integration among Central Asian countries, with Azerbaijan joining this process.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the significance of political stability, especially in the current global context of growing instability. President Ilham Aliyev's invitation to the Summit of Central Asian countries in Dushanbe as the only guest of honor was a testament to the respect and friendship between Azerbaijan and Central Asian nations. President Ilham Aliyev mentioned several ongoing projects that are fostering closer integration between Azerbaijan and Central Asia, including those in the spheres of economy, energy, and transportation. The geographical and historical connections between the regions, combined with current political interactions and concrete projects, are creating synergies. The President pointed out the mutual political support between the countries in international institutions, the growth in mutual trade, and the importance of

energy and transportation routes that connect them. He highlighted Azerbaijan's role as a key transit country for Central Asian countries to Europe, particularly in the current geopolitical context.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that technological development is a key aspect of Azerbaijan's development agenda. The President highlighted the country's engagement in space industry development, evidenced by its three satellites and participation in significant global events like the International Astronautical Congress. Azerbaijan's Ministry of Communications has been restructured to focus on Digital Development and Transport, indicating a commitment to embracing the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The World Economic Forum's selection of Azerbaijan as a regional hub for its Center for the Fourth Industrial Revolution demonstrates the country's readiness for technological transformation. This center covers both the Caucasus and Central Asia, positioning Azerbaijan as a leader in the region for technological advancement.

Addressing the challenges and opportunities of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, President Ilham Aliyev discussed the importance of employment and education in adapting to the changing job landscape. The focus on vocational training and cooperation with leading IT companies aligns with Azerbaijan's goal to become a center for technological development.

Regarding the potential impact of green energy projects, President Ilham Aliyev mentioned the prospect of building a subsea cable across the Caspian Sea, accompanied by a fiber optic cable, to facilitate energy and data transmission to Europe. President Ilham Aliyev acknowledged that while Azerbaijan may not currently be at the forefront of producing cutting-edge technological innovations,

the country is strategically positioning itself to apply these innovations effectively.

President Ilham Aliyev concluded by reiterating the importance of education, starting from early childhood through to university, to prepare the workforce for the demands of a technologically advanced future. President Ilham Aliyev underscored the country's commitment to being proactive in adapting to and utilizing technological advancements for the benefit of its people and the region.

The President also highlighted the importance of Azerbaijan in providing transit services for Central Asian countries, particularly Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The transportation of oil from these countries through Azerbaijan's infrastructure, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, exemplifies the growing significance of these routes for diversifying supply channels. Azerbaijan is evaluating the potential expansion of its shipyard to increase its production capacity of various types of vessels, including tankers, dry cargo vessels, and ferry boats. This expansion reflects the anticipated growth in cargo volumes through the Trans-Caspian route and the importance of the Middle Corridor. To accommodate the expected increase in cargo, Azerbaijan is also expanding its trade seaport's capacity from 15 million to 25 million tons, including the capacity for 1 million TEU (Twenty-foot Equivalent Units). This expansion is part of Azerbaijan's contribution to enhancing the Middle Corridor's capabilities in the coming years.

Additionally, President Ilham Aliyev mentioned the collaboration with Türkiye, Kazakhstan, and Georgia to work on tariffs, digitalization, and customs administration to make the transportation process more efficient. The President also discussed the ongoing work on the North-South Transportation Corridor, which crosses Azerbaijan and can integrate into the Middle Corridor network.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the good relationships among the countries involved in the Middle Corridor and the shared benefits derived from these collaborative efforts. President Ilham Aliyev noted that the recent geopolitical changes have significantly increased the importance of the corridor through the Caspian, highlighting the region's strategic position in global transportation and trade networks.

President Ilham Aliyev reflected on the potential for increased cooperation and consultation among the countries of the Southern Caucasus, specifically Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The President acknowledged a recent positive development where the prime ministers of these three countries met on the sidelines of an international event, indicating the beginning of a dialogue.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the successful integration and mutual benefits already achieved through the cooperation between Georgia and Azerbaijan. These achievements, President Ilham Aliyev noted, have made both countries more significant to Europe than they would have been individually. President Ilham Aliyev expressed openness to Armenia joining these existing projects, contingent upon the signing of a peace agreement and assuming shared responsibilities.

The President highlighted the importance of Armenia demonstrating a willingness to be a good neighbor and to engage constructively in regional cooperation. President Ilham Aliyev questioned Armenia's current foreign policy approach, suggesting a need for a more strategic and consistent direction. President Ilham Aliyev suggested that for Armenia to preserve its sovereignty and stability, it must integrate into the regional framework and foster an environment of reconciliation and reduced hostility. The President mentioned the need for increased intellectual and cultural exchanges to influence public opinion positively and reduce hatred. However, President Ilham Aliyev also pointed out recent incidents that

have set back progress, such as the burning of the Azerbaijani flag in Yerevan, which raises questions about mutual safety and trust.

President Ilham Aliyev discussed the comprehensive approach Azerbaijan is taking in the reconstruction and development of the liberated territories, emphasizing the focus on the return of displaced persons and the creation of sustainable living conditions. President Ilham Aliyev highlighted a survey conducted among former refugees to understand their willingness to return to their native lands. The survey revealed a majority were eager to return, despite the long years of displacement and the absence of infrastructure in the liberated areas. In response, the government aims to provide even better living conditions than those in urban centers like Baku and Sumgayit.

The President explained that the plan for the liberated territories involves not only rebuilding infrastructure but also ensuring these regions are environmentally friendly and based on green energy. Employment opportunities are being created through the establishment of industrial facilities in areas like Aghdam, Jabrayil, and Lachin. Future forums could be held in Lachin, which is rapidly developing and expected to have a significant population by the next spring. The goal is to have 140,000 people return to the liberated territories by the end of 2026. Furthermore, the President mentioned the introduction of a new governance model in the liberated territories, with the appointment of special representatives directly responsible to the President. This model may later be applied to other parts of Azerbaijan.

The President also spoke about the broader impact of the reconstruction efforts. The development programs in Karabakh, Eastern Zangezur, and Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic are setting a precedent for the rest of the country. The focus on renewable energy and sustainable development in these regions is expected to have a positive

multiplicative effect, contributing to economic development, employment, and the alleviation of overpopulation in major cities.

In his detailed response, President Ilham Aliyev addressed the challenges and developments surrounding the establishment of a transportation corridor connecting Azerbaijan's western regions and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. The President expressed frustration over Armenia's non-compliance with commitments outlined in the tripartite agreement, particularly regarding the construction of a railroad connection.

President Ilham Aliyev highlighted Azerbaijan's adherence to its international commitments and contrasted it with Armenia's failure to fulfill its obligations. President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that despite urging the Armenian Prime Minister to initiate at least a feasibility study for the railroad connection, no progress had been made. Consequently, Azerbaijan sought an alternative route through Iran, which is already under construction. This alternative route, though costlier, would bypass Armenia, providing direct connectivity between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan and further to Turkey.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the strategic importance of this corridor, not only for Azerbaijan but also for international trade, especially considering the expected cargo from Central Asia and potentially China. The President mentioned that the corridor would initially handle five to seven million tons of cargo per year, significantly contributing to regional connectivity.

President Ilham Aliyev criticized Armenia for missing the opportunity to benefit from this international corridor and noted Armenia's isolated position due to closed borders and lack of railroad connections with neighboring countries.

President Ilham Aliyev suggested that Armenia urgently needs to construct the necessary 42-kilometer railroad segment at its own expense or with European funding.

Further, President Ilham Aliyev insisted on the unrestricted movement between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, without customs or border checks, drawing a parallel with the Russia-Kaliningrad railroad connection. President Ilham Aliyev expressed dismay over statements from the U.S. State Department opposing the alternative route through Iran, questioning the rationale behind such interference.

In conclusion, President Ilham Aliyev reiterated the strategic significance of the transportation corridor, which, once completed, will benefit many countries and contribute to regional stability and connectivity. President Ilham Aliyev criticized the lack of support and understanding from certain international actors, underscoring the need for realistic and constructive engagement in regional infrastructure projects.