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HIGHLIGHT OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

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I. President Ilham Aliyev wins election by a landslide

Azerbaijan's early presidential elections, initially slated for 2025, unfolded on February 7, 2024, marking a significant moment in the nation's political history. The snap elections resulted in President Ilham Aliyev's overwhelming victory as he secured 92.12% of the votes. This electoral process was observed by a substantial number of monitors, with 90,272 individuals overseeing the proceedings, highlighting the international and domestic interest in Azerbaijan's political process. Voter participation was notably high, with a turnout of 76.43%, indicating robust engagement from the electorate. The elections were conducted across 6,537 polling sites nationwide, accommodating a total voter list of 6,478,623 individuals. This expansive exercise covered all of Azerbaijan, including areas recently liberated from Armenian occupation, underlining the nation's efforts to integrate these territories into its political process. The voting process saw President Ilham Aliyev casting his ballots at Polling Station 14 of Constituency 122 in the newly liberated city of Khankendi.

The decision to conduct early presidential elections in Azerbaijan was significantly influenced by the aftermath of the counter-terrorist operation in Garabagh in September 2023, a context that President Ilham Aliyev himself highlighted when explaining the rationale behind the early elections on January 10. President Ilham Aliyev identified the restoration of the country's territorial integrity as “the beginning of a new era” for Azerbaijan, presenting it as the primary reason for the advancement of the electoral schedule.

President Ilham Aliyev articulated that the historical and national significance of holding the first elections across the entire territory of Azerbaijan, inclusive of the recently liberated areas, warranted the precedence of presidential elections over any other electoral

process. “I thought that the first elections to be held across the entire territory of our country should be the presidential elections,” President Ilham Aliyev said by pointing out the importance of timing and symbolic representation in the national electoral process. President Ilham Aliyev further elaborated, “If we were to hold this election on time, i.e., in April 2025, then municipal elections would be the first to be held. I thought that would not be right.”

Highlighting the elections' historical significance, President Ilham Aliyev, along with his family, chose to vote in Khankendi, within the Garabagh region, underscoring the event as the first election conducted in this area following its reintegration. This gesture not only marked a significant moment in Azerbaijan's political landscape but also symbolized the unity and territorial integrity of the nation in the post-conflict era.

President Ilham Aliyev's commanding victory in the snap election reaffirms his strong hold on the nation's leadership and reflects the prevailing public support for his administration. The high voter turnout and extensive observer presence underscore the election's significance and the broader implications for Azerbaijan's political trajectory and its standing on the international stage. As Azerbaijan continues to navigate its path forward, the outcome of this election is poised to shape the country's policies, governance, and its approach to both internal affairs and foreign relations in the years to come.

II. President Ilham Aliyev outlines Azerbaijan's new foreign policy priorities

In an inauguration speech on February 14, President Ilham Aliyev heralded a new chapter in Azerbaijan's political history, emphasizing the unprecedented nature of the recent presidential election held across the entirety of

Azerbaijan's sovereign territory. A significant highlight of President Ilham Aliyev's speech was his decision to cast his vote in Khankendi, a location deeply symbolic of Azerbaijan's tumultuous past and recent triumphs. President Ilham Aliyev described his act of voting as a definitive statement against the separatist forces that had occupied Azerbaijani lands for three decades. President Ilham Aliyev's vote, in his words, served as the "final nail in the coffin of Armenian separatists," marking an end to their claims and a victory for Azerbaijan's sovereignty. This moment was not just a routine participation in the democratic process but a symbolic gesture of reclaiming Azerbaijan's historical and territorial integrity.

As Azerbaijan embarks on this new era, President Ilham Aliyev expressed optimism for the country's future, buoyed by a history of overcoming challenges and achieving set goals. President Ilham Aliyev attributed these successes to the unity and resilience of the Azerbaijani people, who demonstrated their solidarity and commitment to national integrity during the elections. The President's vision for a strong, independent Azerbaijan was a recurring theme in his address, emphasizing the nation's achievements in restoring its territorial sovereignty without reliance on external political or economic support. President Ilham Aliyev's steadfast refusal to accept any proposals that compromised Azerbaijan's territorial integrity during negotiations underscored his unwavering commitment to seeing the Azerbaijani flag fly over every part of the country. President Ilham Aliyev's remarks about the significance of raising the flag in Shusha and Khankendi were symbolic affirmations of Azerbaijan's policy and determination to reclaim and honor its territory.

President Ilham Aliyev underscored the paramount importance of further strengthening Azerbaijan's Armed Forces as a

key national priority in the years to come. Reflecting on the advancements made after the 44-day War, President Aliyev highlighted the significant progress in military development, affirming that the Azerbaijan Army today is mightier than ever, as evidenced by the efficiency of the recent counter-terror operation. The President detailed the comprehensive steps underway to bolster the Armed Forces, including the acquisition of necessary weapons and equipment, the establishment of new armed units, and the significant expansion of the Special Forces and "Commando" units. This initiative underscores Azerbaijan's commitment to ensuring its military preparedness and deterrence capabilities, aiming to prevent any future provocations or threats against its sovereignty. President Ilham Aliyev's speech also touched upon the response to recent provocations by Armenia, sending a clear message that Azerbaijan is determined to defend itself against any aggression, emphasizing that no external support for Armenia can hinder Azerbaijan's resolve. President Ilham Aliyev firmly stated that Azerbaijan's policy is grounded in international law, rejecting any territorial claims by Armenia and warning against the costs of such baseless assertions.

Furthermore, the President announced ongoing efforts to establish a potent military-industrial complex, with significant investments planned to reduce foreign dependency in military procurement. This move not only aims to bolster Azerbaijan's defense capabilities but also underscores the country's pursuit of an independent political and economic policy. Amidst global tensions, President Ilham Aliyev pointed out the heightened global focus on military preparedness, asserting Azerbaijan's advantage based on its combat experience and the demonstrated prowess of its Army. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the critical importance of border security, outlining

measures to fortify Azerbaijan's borders to safeguard against existential threats.

President Ilham Aliyev outlined Azerbaijan's ambitious plans for the restoration of Garabagh and East Zangezur, emphasizing the nation's resilience and determination to rebuild and reintegrate the territories liberated from occupation. The President shared that the efforts on the ground have already garnered admiration from unbiased international observers, noting the unprecedented pace of reconstruction work amidst the challenges posed by extensive mine contamination.

The demining process has made significant strides with 120,000 hectares cleared, facilitating the successful repatriation of approximately 5,400 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to their ancestral homes, with plans to resettle 20,000 former IDPs by year-end. President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the extensive development plans, including the construction of hospitals, schools, sports facilities, and the rebuilding of the electricity sector, underscoring the scale of the nation's reconstruction efforts.

President Ilham Aliyev also stressed the importance of economic development to support these ambitious projects, citing encouraging early-year statistics that signal a robust recovery and growth trajectory for Azerbaijan's economy. President Ilham Aliyev detailed the remarkable progress made over the last two decades, from significant increases in GDP and foreign exchange reserves to substantial reductions in foreign debt, illustrating the country's financial independence and capacity to pursue autonomous policy-making.

The President drew attention to the substantial improvements in social welfare, including significant increases in minimum wage and pensions, as evidence of the government's commitment to enhancing the

living standards of its citizens. Furthermore, President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the ongoing reforms aimed at creating a conducive investment environment, particularly in the non-oil sector, to stimulate economic diversification and job creation.

A key pillar of President Ilham Aliyev's address was the social protection of families of martyrs and war-disabled individuals, with the state already providing homes to a large number of beneficiaries in this category. The President's commitment to continuing this support was clear, as was his vision for leveraging the potential of Garabagh and East Zangezur in agriculture, renewable energy, and tourism to fuel further economic growth.

President Ilham Aliyev outlined Azerbaijan's strategic goals, emphasizing the nation's commitment to technological advancement and renewable energy as key drivers of its future development. Recognizing the critical role of technology in modern military strategies, as demonstrated in the 44-day War and subsequent operations, President Ilham Aliyev reaffirmed the necessity of bolstering technological capabilities across various sectors, including the military-industrial complex and broader industrial development.

President Ilham Aliyev stressed that the valor and bravery of the Azerbaijani soldiers were pivotal to the nation's victories, yet also pointed out the indispensable support provided by advanced technical means. In light of this, President Ilham Aliyev has mandated all relevant institutions to prioritize technological development, highlighting the importance of personnel training in achieving technological innovation. President Ilham Aliyev called for a nationwide mobilization to embrace technological advancements, digitization, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence to ensure that Azerbaijan does not lag behind in the global technological race.

Furthermore, President Ilham Aliyev underscored the potential threats from regional adversaries, cautioning that complacency is not an option for Azerbaijan. The nation's technological development, coupled with a highly trained and mobilized workforce, is essential to maintain its sovereignty and respond decisively to any provocations.

On the energy front, President Ilham Aliyev articulated ambitious plans for renewable energy, aiming to generate 5,000 megawatts of power from renewable sources by 2030, focusing on solar, wind, and hydropower. This initiative is not only realistic, based on existing contracts, but also positions Azerbaijan as a leader in renewable energy, contributing to global climate change mitigation efforts. The upcoming COP29 conference in Azerbaijan further highlights the country's commitment to environmental stewardship.

In addition to renewable energy, Azerbaijan continues to develop its conventional fuel resources, with ongoing efforts to stabilize oil production and expand natural gas exports to eight countries, primarily to meet increasing demand from the European Union. Azerbaijan's role as a reliable energy partner is underscored by new developments in major gas fields, increasing its capacity to support both domestic needs and international obligations.

President Ilham Aliyev's speech reflects a strategic vision for Azerbaijan, blending technological prowess with environmental responsibility. By investing in the future through technology and renewable energy, while continuing to harness its rich natural resources, Azerbaijan is poised to strengthen its position on the global stage, ensuring economic prosperity, national security, and environmental sustainability for generations to come.

President Ilham Aliyev also reaffirmed the country's ongoing commitment to enhancing its role as a pivotal global transport hub. Recognized for its strategic geographical positioning and robust transport infrastructure, Azerbaijan has become a central node in the international logistics network, fielding applications for cooperation from all directions: West, East, North, and South. The country's transport infrastructure, including railways that are undergoing modernization, highways, seaports, and shipyards, stands ready to meet the growing demands of global trade, particularly in a geopolitical landscape unlikely to see immediate change.

With the operation of eight international airports and a ninth underway in Lachin, Azerbaijan's readiness underscores its pivotal role in regional connectivity. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the economic and political dividends that stem from the nation's transit capabilities, suggesting that just as Azerbaijan has responded to Europe's calls for natural gas, it will similarly rise to meet increasing demands in transportation.

The President highlighted Azerbaijan's self-sufficiency and the principles guiding its bilateral cooperation and foreign policy—principles based on mutual respect, good relations, and non-interference. He pointed out that Azerbaijan's strong economy, military, domestic stability, and the unity between the people and the government are the cornerstones of its foreign policy, which is an extension of its domestic policy.

Ilham Aliyev's speech also touched on Azerbaijan's international standing, noting the country's election to the UN Security Council by 155 countries and its chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement, elected by 120 countries. Additionally, the decision to host the COP29 Conference in Azerbaijan was presented as a testament to the international community's support and acknowledgment of

Azerbaijan's role and policies on the global stage.

Addressing the attempts by some countries or groups to monopolize the voice of the international community, President Ilham Aliyev asserted that a limited number of countries cannot represent the global consensus. President Ilham Aliyev stressed that the international community's support during the 44-day War and the counter-terror operation illustrates Azerbaijan's respected position in the world, underscoring the nation's successful navigation of international relations and its adherence to principles that foster cooperation and mutual respect.

President Ilham Aliyev's inauguration speech put forward a bold vision for Azerbaijan's engagement with international organizations, emphasizing a strategic pivot towards fostering closer ties within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and other key international bodies. This move signifies a deepening commitment to regional solidarity and a clear articulation of Azerbaijan's foreign policy direction in the face of evolving global dynamics.

At the heart of President Aliyev's message is the prioritization of the OTS as a fundamental international platform for Azerbaijan, positioning it not just as an organization but as a familial community representing the Turkic world. The president's assertion that "Our family is the Turkic world" underlines a sense of belonging and mutual support among member states, which he contrasts with Azerbaijan's experiences of exclusion and unfulfilled promises from other quarters. This sentiment is set against a backdrop of geopolitical realignments, where Azerbaijan seeks to reinforce its ties with nations that share cultural, historical, and political affinities.

President Ilham Aliyev also highlighted Azerbaijan's active participation in the

Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), noting the support Azerbaijan has received during key moments of its recent history, including the 44-day War and anti-terror operations. The OIC's appreciation for Azerbaijan's respectful approach towards Islam and all religions underscores the country's role as a valued member of this global Islamic body.

Azerbaijan's foreign policy has increasingly focused on combating Islamophobia, a stance informed by factors that transcend its Muslim-majority demographic. This emphasis is partly driven by the consistent support Azerbaijan has received from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) during the prolonged occupation, throughout the 44-day War, and in the subsequent diplomatic negotiations post-conflict. This backing underscores the OIC's role as a crucial ally in Azerbaijan's efforts to reclaim its territories and navigate the post-war landscape.

Moreover, Azerbaijan has faced an uptick in politically motivated attacks, often tinged with Islamophobia. These assaults, primarily originating from elements within the Armenian diaspora in Western countries, have attempted to frame the conflict in the Caucasus as a religious battle between a Christian minority and a Muslim majority. Despite efforts towards normalization between Armenia and Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev has cautioned that such Islamophobic narratives are likely to proliferate, particularly as Azerbaijan makes strides in reasserting control over its previously occupied lands.

The geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus have grown increasingly intricate, particularly as external actors, notably France, seek to extend their influence amidst the broader West-Russia tensions spurred by the Russia-Ukraine conflict. France's interest in the region, particularly in supporting Armenia, has been perceived by Azerbaijan as an attempt to

establish a strategic foothold, potentially as part of broader neocolonial ambitions. This perception has been further reinforced by France's actions and statements that have been viewed as attempts to disadvantage Azerbaijan in the post-war era.

In response to these developments and the broader challenge of neocolonialism, Azerbaijan has taken a proactive stance. The country hosted an international conference in Baku titled "Neo-colonialism: Human Rights Violation and Injustice," which served as a platform for President Ilham Aliyev to emphasize the significance of combating neocolonial practices and advocating for human rights. This event also highlighted Azerbaijan's commitment to fostering alliances with nations and entities that oppose neocolonial tendencies, particularly those emanating from France.

Looking forward, Azerbaijan aims to bolster its foreign policy by supporting cooperation with countries that have experienced or are experiencing neocolonial pressures. This strategic orientation not only aims to safeguard Azerbaijan's national interests but also contributes to a broader effort to address and rectify the imbalances and injustices characteristic of neocolonial practices on the international stage.

The resolution of the Garabakh conflict has provided Azerbaijan with an opportunity to recalibrate its foreign policy, prioritizing alliances and partnerships that have demonstrated unwavering support during and after the conflict. In his inauguration speech following the February 2024 elections, President Ilham Aliyev paid tribute to the organizations that have stood by Azerbaijan, notably mentioning the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Non-Aligned Movement for their steadfast support. This gesture underscores the value Azerbaijan places on the solidarity shown by these entities throughout the challenging times of the

Garabakh War and its aftermath. The President's assurance of Azerbaijan's continued support for the NAM and its member countries reflects a desire to bolster the movement's position as a significant voice on the global stage.

Looking ahead, President Ilham Aliyev envisions an expansive foreign policy agenda for Azerbaijan, moving beyond the primary focus on resolving the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. With this issue largely addressed, Azerbaijan is poised to take a more proactive role in addressing global challenges such as climate change, Islamophobia, and neo-colonialism. Hosting and chairing COP29 represents a pivotal opportunity for Azerbaijan to lead on environmental issues, while the fight against Islamophobia and neo-colonialism aligns with Azerbaijan's broader commitment to justice and equity on the international stage.

President Ilham Aliyev's speech serves as a declaration of Azerbaijan's readiness to defend its interests and values against any external threats or challenges, emphasizing a proactive stance in international relations. By rallying against neocolonialism and advocating for the rights and sovereignty of nations, Azerbaijan seeks to position itself as a key player in shaping a more just and equitable global order.

President Ilham Aliyev also addressed the state of Azerbaijan-Armenia relations during his speech, positioning it as a matter that, while historically significant, has been disproportionately amplified on the international stage. President Ilham Aliyev's remarks underscored a clear preference for direct dialogue over the involvement of external mediators, questioning the neutrality and motives of those who have sought to insert themselves into the reconciliation process between the two nations.

President Ilham Aliyev articulated a firm stance on the resolution of the conflict, stating unequivocally that Azerbaijan has essentially

resolved its issues with Armenia through its own initiatives, including the proposition of a peace agreement. Highlighting Azerbaijan's role in authoring the five well-known principles and drafting the text of the peace agreement sent to Armenia, President Ilham Aliyev set the terms for normalization: adherence to international law by Armenia and the cessation of baseless claims against Azerbaijan. Failure to meet these terms, according to President Ilham Aliyev, would result in the non-signing of the agreement, a scenario he suggested would not significantly impact Azerbaijan given its current position and the territories it controls.

By suggesting the removal of Azerbaijan-Armenia relations from the international agenda, President Ilham Aliyev called for a shift in focus, urging international actors to "mind their own business" and affirming Azerbaijan's capacity to manage its affairs independently. President Ilham Aliyev's comments reflect a broader desire for respect for sovereignty, challenging the perceived need for external intervention in the peace process.

Concluding his address, President Ilham Aliyev expressed confidence in the new era that Azerbaijan has embarked upon, marked by its presence in territories once at the heart of the conflict with Armenia. His closing remarks conveyed a message of optimism for the future and a call to unity for the Azerbaijani people, as the nation moves forward from its historical challenges towards a path of continued success and prosperity.

III. Azerbaijan and the OTS: Forging a stronger Turkic alliance in a changing world

Following his successful re-election, President Ilham Aliyev articulated his vision for Azerbaijan's future, touching on both domestic and foreign policy objectives during his

inauguration. President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the critical importance of engaging with issues central to the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and broader global concerns such as climate change, combating Islamophobia, and tackling neocolonialism. These priorities underscore Azerbaijan's dedication to playing a pivotal role in regional and international forums, advocating for solidarity among Turkic states while addressing global challenges.

President Ilham Aliyev's address comes at a time when the geopolitical landscape is increasingly complex, especially in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This period has seen countries in the region grappling with the pressure to choose sides between Western alliances and Russian influence. The European Union's move to grant candidate status to Georgia and the visible shift of Armenia towards Western integration under Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's leadership are indicative of the changing alliances within the region. Meanwhile, Russia continues its efforts to retain its grip on Armenia while simultaneously attempting to draw Azerbaijan closer through memberships in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

However, President Ilham Aliyev's declaration of "clear dividing lines in the South Caucasus" reflects Azerbaijan's firm stance on maintaining its strategic autonomy, resisting pressures to align strictly with either the Western bloc or Russia. This stance is part of Azerbaijan's broader strategy to diversify its international partnerships and reinforce regional cooperation, particularly through the OTS. While the OTS has traditionally concentrated on cultural, economic, and transportation initiatives, President Ilham Aliyev's push to extend its scope to include military defense and defense industry collaboration marks a proactive step towards

addressing the security challenges facing the region.

This expanded cooperation within the OTS, particularly the initiative to bolster collective defense capabilities as highlighted in the 2022 Samarkand Declaration, illustrates Azerbaijan's ambition to lead in fostering a more secure and united Turkic world. President Ilham Aliyev's inauguration speech not only reaffirmed Azerbaijan's commitment to its national interests but also signaled its readiness to contribute significantly to regional stability and global issues, aligning with the broader objectives of the OTS and enhancing Azerbaijan's position on the world stage.

President Ilham Aliyev's advocacy for enhanced defense cooperation among the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) members highlights a significant pivot in Azerbaijan's foreign policy, emphasizing strategic collaborations beyond conventional geopolitical dynamics. This focus was notably articulated at the Astana summit in 2023 and further expanded upon during an international conference co-organized by the AIR Center and ADA University in Baku. President Ilham Aliyev underscored the critical need for "very close defense cooperation in the defense industry, joint manufacturing, joint training of military servicemen, [and] joint efforts with respect to the protection of our borders," emphasizing a multi-faceted approach to regional security and cooperation within the Turkic world.

The strategic emphasis on the OTS and defense cooperation stems, in part, from Azerbaijan's experiences and perceptions following the 44-day War. The country has encountered unjust decisions by several Western-based organizations, contributing to a decline in their credibility within Azerbaijani society. This disillusionment is rooted in the perception that these organizations have been biased, particularly in their handling of the Garabagh conflict and their support for Armenia during the war. Such instances, including the

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's (PACE) decision to freeze the mandate of the Azerbaijani delegation, have intensified debates in Azerbaijan about the potential withdrawal from these institutions.

The prevailing sentiment in Azerbaijan is one of disillusionment, stemming from the expectation that membership in international organizations would ensure impartiality and support on issues critical to national interests, such as the Garabagh conflict. Instead, biases in the international community have led to skepticism about the benefits of continued engagement with these entities. This context has propelled Azerbaijan to prioritize strategic alliances within the OTS framework, viewing it as a more reliable and supportive platform for addressing its security and defense concerns. President Ilham Aliyev's push for closer defense cooperation and shared initiatives within the OTS is reflective of a broader strategy to navigate international relations and regional security challenges, emphasizing the importance of solidarity among Turkic states in the face of global and regional complexities.

The Organization of Turkic States (OTS) has become an indispensable ally for Azerbaijan, providing a solid foundation of support during times of adversity and facilitating deeper diplomatic relationships among its members. This unwavering solidarity has resonated deeply with the Azerbaijani public, fueling a burgeoning enthusiasm for further cooperation and bolstering social backing for the OTS's endeavors. The landscape of global geopolitics, particularly influenced by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, has amplified the strategic importance of the OTS, positioning the Turkic states as essential actors in the increasingly interconnected world.

The significance of the OTS extends beyond regional dynamics, particularly as the world grapples with the challenges posed by the Russia-Ukraine war. This conflict has elevated the role of the Turkic states, highlighting their

importance as a critical transportation corridor bridging the East and West, especially amidst the instability affecting traditional routes like the Red Sea region. Furthermore, the OTS's role in the pursuit of alternative energy sources for Europe has become increasingly prominent, underlining its capacity to contribute solutions to some of the most pressing global issues.

Amidst the intricate geopolitical contestations involving Western powers, Russia, and China, President Ilham Aliyev envisions the geography of the OTS as poised to play a pivotal role in the evolving global order. President Ilham Aliyev perceives the Turkic states as having a unique opportunity to leverage their collective assets and strengths to assert themselves as a formidable power bloc. President Ilham Aliyev points to the expansive geographic expanse, vast lands, significant military capabilities, dynamic economies, rich natural resources, crucial transportation networks, youthful demographics, and the bonds of shared heritage as foundational pillars that could propel the Turkic states into prominence on the global stage.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasizes the necessity for the member states of the OTS to align their efforts and commit to a unified vision for their future. By consolidating their resources and capabilities, the Turkic states can enhance their strategic autonomy and influence in international affairs, navigating the complexities of global politics with a shared sense of purpose and solidarity. This collective approach not only strengthens the individual and collective security of the member states but also positions the OTS as a key player in addressing regional and global challenges, from security and energy to economic development and cultural cooperation.

President Ilham Aliyev's inaugural official visit to Türkiye since his triumph in the February 7 snap presidential elections on February 18-19 underscored the deep-rooted strategic

partnership between Azerbaijan and Türkiye. The visit, featuring both one-on-one and expanded meetings with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, served as a platform to review and commit to the continuous development of their bilateral ties through collaborative projects across various sectors.

A focal point of their discussions was the military cooperation between the two nations, which President Ilham Aliyev highlighted as a critical element of the strategic relationship shared by Baku and Ankara. Emphasizing the unity and synchronization of the military forces of the two countries, President Ilham Aliyev remarked, "Our armies are a single fist. Every year at least 10 military exercises are held both in Türkiye and Azerbaijan, and thus our military strength is further growing." President Ilham Aliyev reflected on the recent military engagements, including the 44-day War and an anti-terror operation conducted five months prior, as concrete evidence of the successful integration of the Turkish Army model into the Azerbaijani military framework.

This point not only signifies the increasing military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye but also highlights their commitment to enhancing their defense capabilities through joint training and exercises. The integration of military strategies and operations between the two countries demonstrates a unified front that strengthens their regional security posture and further solidifies their bond as key strategic allies in the region. President Ilham Aliyev's visit and discussions with President Erdogan thus mark another milestone in the fortification of the Azerbaijan-Türkiye strategic partnership, with military cooperation being a cornerstone of their collaborative efforts towards regional stability and security.

In contrast to his 2018 inauguration, where President Ilham Aliyev emphasized engagement with a broad spectrum of international bodies, including the U.N.

General Assembly, the Non-Aligned Movement, the OIC, and various European institutions, his post-2024 election discourse highlights a clear prioritization of the OTS. The declaration "Our family is the Turkic world and we have no other family" marks a poignant affirmation of Azerbaijan's commitment to deepening ties within the Turkic community, signaling a shift towards a more Turkic-centric foreign policy. A significant evolution in Azerbaijan's foreign policy priorities is evident in President Aliyev's enhanced focus on the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). President Ilham Aliyev's inauguration address accentuates the strategic importance of the OTS, envisaging it as a cornerstone for regional cooperation and a potent force for solidarity among Turkic nations. This shift reflects a deliberate strategy to harness the collective capabilities and shared heritage of the Turkic world, aiming to bolster regional unity and collaboratively tackle common challenges.

This focused approach towards the OTS does not, however, signify a retreat from global engagement. President Ilham Aliyev's active participation in international forums like the Munich Security Conference indicates Azerbaijan's ongoing commitment to maintaining a diverse portfolio of international partnerships. The strategic emphasis on the OTS is part of a broader vision that recognizes the importance of cultivating robust relations with other global actors. Such external collaborations are vital for amplifying the OTS's influence and efficacy on the international stage, contributing to a more interconnected and cooperative global community. By balancing a strong Turkic alliance with broad international cooperation, Azerbaijan aims to navigate the complex landscape of global geopolitics, promoting peace, stability, and prosperity both regionally and worldwide.

IV. Azerbaijan's strategic diplomacy focuses on strengthening sovereignty and cooperation

In the midst of the tumultuous global landscape shaped by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Azerbaijan's strategic maneuvers in foreign and security policies have emerged as a focal point for scholars and observers within the field of international relations. This period has spotlighted Azerbaijan's adept navigation through the complex interplay of global power dynamics, all the while championing its national interests and the quest to reclaim its territorial sovereignty. The nuanced approach adopted by Baku, characterized by its attempts to balance relationships with global superpowers, offers a compelling study in the diplomacy of maintaining equilibrium amidst competing interests.

Over the last two years, this balancing act has not only safeguarded Azerbaijan's national priorities but also presented a fascinating case study on the international stage. The ability of Azerbaijan to orchestrate the dismantling of the separatist regime in Garabagh—without inciting conflict with Russia, the region's predominant military patron—has sparked a breadth of analysis and debate.

These developments highlight the intricacies and potential misinterpretations inherent in Azerbaijan's foreign policy strategy. The active engagement of Azerbaijan at the Munich Security Conference (MSC) between February 16-18, coupled with President Ilham Aliyev's interactions with Western representatives, reinforces Azerbaijan's commitment to a multilateral approach in its foreign affairs. Such actions underscore the significance Baku places on fostering and expanding its relationships with Western partners.

This intricate dance on the global stage underlines the multifaceted nature of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Amidst the shifting

sands of regional geopolitics, Azerbaijan's endeavors to maintain a careful approach—juggling relations with both Eastern and Western powers—reflect a deep-seated commitment to its sovereign interests and the principles of multilateral diplomacy. As the country continues to navigate the complexities of its geopolitical context, its strategies offer rich insights into the challenges and opportunities inherent in pursuing a nuanced foreign policy in today's polarized world.

At a recent international conference, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan engaged in crucial discussions on the sidelines, marking significant moments for Azerbaijan's relations with Western countries. Notably, a groundbreaking meeting, facilitated by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, brought together the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan for the first time since the hostilities in September. This encounter occurred amidst escalating border tensions and Azerbaijan's concerns over the European Union's monitoring mission on the Armenian side, which Baku perceives as being manipulated for propaganda against Azerbaijan. This meeting allowed President Ilham Aliyev to directly address these issues with Chancellor Scholz, emphasizing the need for a fair and unbiased approach to conflict resolution.

The conference also featured a trilateral meeting involving Scholz, as well as a separate bilateral dialogue between President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, both aimed at reducing recent tensions and rekindling the momentum for peace between the two South Caucasian nations. The optimistic outlook shared by both parties post-meeting has ignited hope for resolving ongoing disputes through diplomatic channels, highlighting a mutual agreement to continue discussions. Despite the optimistic tone, the path to a peace treaty remains complex, with Azerbaijan insisting on the removal of Armenian territorial claims from its

constitution as a precondition for any agreement.

Additionally, President Ilham Aliyev's meetings with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky were important, set against the intricate geopolitical landscape of the region. The constructive dialogue with Blinken rejuvenated the bilateral relationship between Azerbaijan and the United States, which had experienced strains. Both nations reaffirmed their commitment to deepening their partnership, a relationship that has been beneficial for both sides over the past three decades. Azerbaijan's role in counter-terrorism, enhancing European energy security, and facilitating connectivity between Asia and Europe was acknowledged, affirming its position as a strategic ally for the United States. Similarly, the discussions with President Zelensky underscored the importance of Azerbaijan's independence and its strategic partnerships to navigate regional challenges and bolster its stance against dominant regional powers. These meetings collectively signal a positive shift in Azerbaijan's diplomatic engagements, emphasizing its strategic importance and commitment to peace and stability in the region.

President Ilham Aliyev's recent interaction with his Ukrainian counterpart has garnered significant attention, especially from Ukrainian media outlets, highlighting Azerbaijan's unwavering support for Ukraine amid its ongoing conflict. According to reports, President Ilham Aliyev reaffirmed Azerbaijan's solid stance on backing Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. His statement, "Our support for Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and integrity is unshakable and will not change. We, as a country that suffered from occupation, understand your situation perfectly and wish peace to Ukrainians and Ukraine," resonates deeply, reflecting a shared understanding and empathy stemming from

Azerbaijan's own experiences with restoring its territorial integrity.

Despite facing objections and threats from Russia, Azerbaijan has consistently provided Ukraine with vital assistance to mitigate the war's repercussions. This aid includes significant humanitarian support, such as offering free fuel from SOCAR's petrol stations in Ukraine and supplying essential energy equipment. The Ukrainian Ministry of Energy has acknowledged receiving 92 cargoes of energy equipment from Azerbaijan since March 2022, weighing over 1,585 tons. This contribution, comprising 51 power transformers, 111 transformer substations, and other critical supplies, underscores Azerbaijan's commitment to supporting Ukraine's energy infrastructure during these challenging times.

Ukrainian Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko expressed gratitude for Azerbaijan's support, noting the instrumental role of the provided equipment in restoring and maintaining energy facilities under attack, especially in frontline regions. This aid has been crucial for ensuring the stability of Ukraine's energy system and fulfilling the electricity and heating needs of its citizens.

Azerbaijan's recent diplomatic endeavors, particularly its support for Ukraine, highlight its dedication to fostering strong relationships with Western nations. Amidst the complex web of regional geopolitics, Azerbaijan's strategic and balanced foreign policy approach emphasizes its commitment to multilateralism and solidarity with nations facing territorial challenges. This stance not only strengthens Azerbaijan's international partnerships but also reaffirms its role as a key player in promoting peace and stability within the region.

V. Azerbaijan commemorates the 32nd anniversary of the Khojaly genocide

February 26 marks the 32-year anniversary of the Khojaly genocide, a grim chapter in the history of Azerbaijani civilians during Armenia's military aggression and occupation of Azerbaijani territories. This act of ethnic cleansing and genocide against Azerbaijanis also included crimes against humanity in several settlements such as Baganis Ayrim, Jamilli, Karkijahan, Meshali, Malibeyli, Gushchular, and Garadagli, highlighting a systematic campaign throughout the occupation period. However, the massacre in Khojaly stands out as one of the most atrocious episodes.

On the night of February 25-26, 1992, after being besieged and cut off from ground traffic since October 1991 and deprived of energy supplies since January 1992, Khojaly was stormed by Armenian armed forces with the support of the former USSR's 366th Motorized Rifle Regiment following intense artillery bombardment. This assault resulted in the horrific massacre of 613 individuals, including 63 children, 106 women, and 70 elderly citizens. The violence was so severe that 8 families were entirely annihilated, 130 children lost at least one parent, and 25 children were orphaned. Additionally, the fate of 150 people, including 68 women and 26 children among the 1275 taken prisoner or hostage and subjected to cruel torture, remains unknown to this day.

The use of heavy weaponry against Khojaly, a city inhabited by peaceful Azerbaijanis, without any military necessity, the investigative materials documenting the atrocities against civilians, eyewitness accounts, and the admission by Armenia's then Defense Minister and former President, Serzh Sargsyan, clearly indicate that the massacre was not a tragic accident but a meticulously planned act of genocide executed by Armenia and its subordinate forces. Sargsyan's

statement, "Before Khojaly, the Azerbaijanis thought that ... the Armenians were people who could not raise their hand against the civilian population. We were able to break that [stereotype]," unequivocally confirms the deliberate nature of this crime against humanity.

The Khojaly genocide stands as a stark violation of international humanitarian law, including the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. This tragic incident is emblematic of the broader pattern of crimes against humanity perpetrated by Armenia against Azerbaijanis, underscoring a grievous disregard for basic human rights and international legal standards.

The enduring lack of accountability for these atrocities has emboldened further acts of violence, as evidenced during the 44-day Patriotic War, where Armenian forces targeted civilian populations in areas far removed from the frontlines, such as Ganja, Barda, and Terter. These actions highlight the catastrophic impact of failing to prosecute those responsible for such heinous crimes, which rightfully fall under the principle of universal jurisdiction due to their severity.

In this light, the call for global cooperation and support for measures aimed at ending the cycle of impunity is more urgent than ever. Both national and international efforts are essential to bring perpetrators to justice and uphold the principles of human rights and humanitarian law.

This year, as Azerbaijan commemorates the 32nd anniversary of the Khojaly genocide, it does so with a poignant symbol of resilience and justice: for the first time, the Azerbaijani tricolor flag flies over all its territories,

including Khojaly. This act not only signifies the liberation of these lands but also serves as a tribute to the victims of the genocide, reinforcing a collective commitment to remember, honor, and seek justice for their suffering.

The liberation of Khojaly, while a moment of national solidarity and strength, also underscores the importance of continuing to pursue justice for the crimes committed during Armenia's aggression. Azerbaijan remains dedicated to working within the framework of international law to ensure that those responsible for serious crimes are held accountable, emphasizing the necessity of global support and collaboration in these efforts. The Khojaly genocide is a somber reminder of the brutal consequences of ethnic hatred and militant nationalism. It underscores the urgent need for recognition, remembrance, and justice for the victims and their families, as well as the importance of international efforts to prevent such atrocities in the future.

In a poignant and resolute speech at the groundbreaking ceremony for Khojaly genocide memorial on February 26, President Ilham Aliyev articulated his unwavering commitment to addressing the atrocities committed in Khojaly, underscoring the nation's resolve in the aftermath of its regained sovereignty. "This is the first time we are commemorating the innocent Khojaly victims in the city of Khojaly on the anniversary of the Khojaly genocide. After 32 years, we have returned to our native lands. To perpetuate the memory of the victims of Khojaly, the foundation of a memorial complex will be laid here today, on February 26. I must inform you that this project was ready a long time ago, the location was selected – near the Khojaly Genocide Memorial in Baku. But every year I had certain hesitations regarding the construction of the memorial complex and postponed the project. Because, just like you, I

also believed and knew that we would return here, that we would return to Khojaly where a memorial complex would be created to perpetuate the memory of innocent victims. After 32 years, you are back. After 32 years, after that horrific tragedy, we are living, building and restoring every corner of Azerbaijan, every corner of Karabakh as its owners and as children of this Motherland,” President Ilham Aliyev underscored.

President Ilham Aliyev's address also conveyed a message of resilience and retribution, emphasizing that the actions of Armenia and its supporters, who believed they would evade accountability, were gravely mistaken. The President stressed that Armenia must relinquish its territorial claims against Azerbaijan and adhere to Baku's conditions as the sole pathway forward. The President reflected on the 44-day War and the counter-terror operation as moments of vindication, where the Azerbaijani forces, adhering to international humanitarian law, dismantled the Armenian military's capabilities and enforced capitulations without targeting and harming civilians.

Following the restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereignty on September 20, President Aliyev's first directive was the reconstruction of Khojaly, a town symbolizing the profound scars of conflict and injustice suffered by the Azerbaijani people. The President described the acts committed in Khojaly, where a horrific genocide led to the displacement of its residents and an attempt to erase its historical identity, as a "sordid crime" against the Azerbaijani people, emphasizing the global indifference to their plight.

“The Khojaly genocide will never be erased from the memory of our people. The people of Azerbaijan will never forget that bloody crime. Thirty-two years ago, the Armenian state committed this horrific tragedy and killed innocent people. A total of 613 people were brutally killed, 150 people went missing – of

course, their fate is also known, more than 1,000 people were taken hostage, more than 60 children, over 100 women and 70 old people were massacred by the Armenian savages and fascists in one night. Regrettably, our call for “Justice for Khojaly!” has fallen on deaf ears. It is true that 18 countries have recognized this bloody tragedy as an act of genocide thanks to our efforts. However, there are no large countries among those. International organizations, many of them have remained indifferent to this tragedy,” President Ilham Aliyev noted.

VI. Armenia stalls the progress toward the regional peace

On February 28-29, the Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia, Jeyhun Bayramov and Ararat Mirzoyan, convened in Berlin, Germany, for a new round of peace talks. This meeting was a follow-up to a previous engagement between the leaders of both nations, orchestrated at the behest of Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz during the Munich Security Conference on February 17. These peace talks are crucial for the security and stability of the South Caucasus region. However, the complex issues at hand, ranging from territorial disputes to constitutional disagreements, present significant challenges.

The Berlin discussions revealed significant hurdles, leading to an impasse. In spite of the initial hope for a quick resolution, recent developments have dimmed these prospects, with minimal progress being made. The stumbling blocks to peace are multifaceted, involving both geopolitical concerns and territorial disputes. One major issue is the fate of the land corridor linking Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave, referred to as the Zangezur corridor. Complicating matters further are the territorial claims against Azerbaijan found within Armenia's

constitutional documents. Azerbaijan has taken a firm stance, indicating it will not enter into a peace treaty unless Armenia amends its constitution. Adding to the complexity are the increasingly divergent positions regarding the delimitation process and the claims over border villages. Armenia's claims that more than 30 of its villages are under Azerbaijani control have exacerbated tensions. Although Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan acknowledged the presence of Azerbaijani enclaves within Armenian territory, Azerbaijan strongly refutes claims regarding the 30 villages. The intensification of this dispute indicates that the delimitation commission's last meeting in January did not achieve significant breakthroughs. The dialogues in Munich and Berlin, thus, have not yielded the hoped-for advancements towards peace.

As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan noted “[the] assertion of the Prime Minister of Armenia that Azerbaijan had occupied the territories of 31 villages is part of political manipulations. We would like to remind the Prime Minister, who stated in his previous statements that there are 32 such villages, that Armenia first and foremost has obligations to return 8 villages of Azerbaijan. It would be appropriate to get an explanation why Armenia, which refers to the territorial integrity and conduct of delimitation on the basis of the borders of 1991 and the Alma-Ata Declaration, has not complied with these maps and agreements in the last 35 years, refused to accept the borders reflected in the Soviet maps, and occupied the territories of Azerbaijan,” adding that “[i]f Armenia is genuinely interested in the peace process, this country should abandon its claims against the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Azerbaijan.”

On February 12, a serious incident occurred that has significantly impacted the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia. An Azerbaijani serviceman from the State Border

Service was injured as a result of military provocation by the Armenian armed forces. This act of aggression marked a significant setback in the relations between the two countries, especially considering the stable situation that had prevailed over the last four to five months. Armenia's action not only undermined its own peace overtures but also raised critical questions about the objectives of the European Union Mission in Armenia, given that this provocation took place in territories under the Mission's observation. Such an event cast doubt on the effectiveness and intentions of international efforts to monitor and support peace in the region. In response to the attack that injured its serviceman, Azerbaijan took necessary measures to neutralize the threat posed by the Armenian military outpost. This action by Azerbaijan was strictly retaliatory, aimed at addressing the immediate danger and preventing further aggression.

On February 24, units of the Armenian armed forces, positioned in the Yukhari Shorzha settlement of the Basarkechar region fired upon Azerbaijani Army positions located in the direction of the Yellija settlement of the Kalbajar region using small arms. The Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan in its statement regarding the incident emphasized that in the interest of maintaining stability along the conditional border, the Azerbaijan Army Units refrained from taking any retaliatory measures in response to a provocation by the opposing side.

The incident involving the injury of an Azerbaijani serviceman due to an unprovoked sniper attack broke a period of stability lasting five months. This sustained calm, apart from the incident in early February, challenges the narratives promoted by certain political factions within Armenia and some Western circles, which have suggested a potential for aggression, particularly concerning the contentious Zangezur corridor. Azerbaijan's leadership has consistently dispelled such

narratives. President Ilham Aliyev, in a meeting with a German business delegation in Baku, reiterated Azerbaijan's stance against the use of force and directly addressed accusations from French President Emmanuel Macron and the EU's High Representative, Josep Borrell. President Ilham Aliyev criticized the unfounded assertions about Azerbaijan's supposed aggressive intentions towards Armenia, particularly questioning the basis of Borrell's warnings of "dire consequences" should Azerbaijan attack Armenia. "Borrell stated that if Azerbaijan were to attack Armenia, it would face dire consequences. Firstly, where did Borrell obtain this information suggesting that Azerbaijan is planning to attack Armenia? We have no such plans. These are mere insinuations by Mr. Macron", President Ilham Aliyev underscored.

This situation led to Azerbaijan expressing regret that, despite efforts by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, towards peace initiatives, Borrell's stance appears to drive a wedge between Azerbaijan and the European Union institutions. By adopting a pro-Armenian position, Borrell is seen as not only creating an impasse in EU-Azerbaijan relations but also distancing himself from the normalization process between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Azerbaijan's denouncement of Borrell's comments reflects deep-seated frustrations with an imbalance in the EU's approach to the conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts in the region.

Dismissing the rumors circulated by Armenia and its Western supporters regarding alleged plans by Azerbaijan to invade Armenia's sovereign territory, President Ilham Aliyev reiterated many times that Azerbaijan has no such intentions. In an interview with local TV channels on January 8, President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the lack of basis for such an attack and denied any ongoing preparations. President Ilham Aliyev urged Armenia to engage in bilateral diplomatic negotiations to

address remaining disputes, including those related to the delimitation process and the reopening of transportation links.

However, the core message from the President was distorted by various radical groups in Armenia, fueling fearmongering campaigns that propagated the idea of Azerbaijan's potential invasion and called for military and political support from Western powers. The situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been negatively affected also by the militarization of Armenia through the acquisition of military supplies from countries such as France and India. Additionally, Armenia has reneged on its commitments under agreements signed since the conclusion of the 44-day War, including the trilateral statement of November 10, 2020. This situation is reminiscent of the years between 1994 and 2020 – during which the Armenian governments imitated peace talks and nullified all efforts to resolve the conflict diplomatically.

Nevertheless, the prevailing "de facto peace" between Armenia and Azerbaijan signifies a constructive phase in the relations between these two nations, providing a hopeful groundwork for the establishment of a formal peace through the signing of a peace agreement. The ongoing interactions between officials and experts from both countries are crucial for cultivating mutual understanding and addressing the outstanding issues that have long marred the relationship between the two countries.

Yet, the journey towards a formal "de jure peace" appears to be a long one, fraught with complexities. The situation is further complicated by geopolitical concerns, such as the strategic significance of the Zangezur corridor, and is exacerbated by the current tensions in Armenian-Russian relations. The recent discussions in Berlin between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan have highlighted the ongoing stalemate in the peace process. While there is a clear desire for

peace from Azerbaijan, substantial hurdles remain, including disputes over territorial claims, constitutional issues, and differing views on border delineation. These challenges, particularly when entangled with broader geopolitical tensions, have stalled progress towards a peace agreement. Despite these difficulties, the current phase of "de facto peace" stands out as a significant positive development. Since the brief conflict in September 2023, the relative tranquility along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border is a rare opportunity for stability in a region that has seen its share of turmoil since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It is crucial to leverage this period of calm to sustain dialogue and work constructively towards resolving the lingering disputes that impede the path to peace.

At the same time, Armenia continues to undermine the fragile peace process in the region. The statements made by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan during an interview with the French TV channel France 24 in February are a deliberate attempt to exacerbate regional tensions and undermine the peace process. The choice of France for making such statements, immediately following a leadership meeting initiated by the German Chancellor, is a slight towards Germany's peace efforts and indicative of France's negative impact on the peace dialogue.

Prime Minister Pashinyan's assertions that Azerbaijan is preparing for an attack on Armenia and disregards international norms are designed to distort the truth and mislead the global community. Such allegations not only lack foundation but also obscure Armenia's destabilizing actions, including a policy of militarization and disruption of five months of stability in the region.

The Armenian leadership is disinterested in advancing the peace agenda between the two nations, as evidenced by ongoing territorial claims. Armenia should cease its antagonistic

rhetoric and seize the opportunities for transforming the South Caucasus into a zone of peace and cooperation. By emphasizing the importance of adhering to the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1991, which outlines the principles of sovereignty, jurisdiction, and equality for the delineation of borders and establishment of regional economic and transport relations, Prime Minister Pashinyan seeks to downplay Armenia's longstanding non-compliance with the same principles. In contrast, it is worth noting Azerbaijan's immediate post-war proposal of peace to Armenia based on five principal terms, in stark opposition to Armenia's continuous infringements, as evidenced by claims against Azerbaijani territory in Armenian constitutional and legislative documents, as well as in international representations.

Moreover, France is also actively undermining the peace process in the region. It is particularly troubling that France, despite its silence on the plight of Azerbaijanis, including displacement and mass massacres Azerbaijanis have suffered over nearly 30 years, has chosen to speak out about the rights and security of Armenians who left Azerbaijani territories voluntarily and without violence. France's lack of action and condemnation regarding Armenian aggression and the long-standing occupation of Azerbaijani territories, including the continued control over eight Azerbaijani villages by Armenia, is misaligned with France's declared commitment to territorial integrity, as stated in the Alma-Ata declaration. France is pursuing a divisive and harmful policy that escalates tension and obstructs peace and stability in the region. Such an approach by France will not lead to any productive outcome and will result in biased practices that hinder the peace process. There is a need for a balanced and fair approach to resolving the long-standing conflict, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and addressing the concerns and rights of all parties involved.

In December 2023, in an international forum with experts from multiple countries, President Ilham Aliyev stressed that the present situation offers a historic chance for normalization of the Armenia-Azerbaijan relations and opening of a new peaceful chapter between the two countries. Indeed, the fundamental problem between the two nations, the disputes over the Garabagh region of Azerbaijan, has been resolved in line with the norms and principles of international law. Certainly, it would have been more ideal, if Azerbaijan and Armenia could have reached a settlement peacefully and with no bloodshed. But, unfortunately, the governments of Armenia prior to the Second Karabakh War and the separatist leaders prior to the counterterrorist operation in September 2023 refused to engage in meaningful negotiations with Baku. Nevertheless, it was possible to resolve the conflict and open a new era in the region thanks to the efforts of the Azerbaijani leadership.

During the 20 years of presidency, President Ilham Aliyev had made multiple contributions to peace and prosperity of the South Caucasus. The energy and connectivity projects that had been realized over the past two decades have brought about better living standards for both Georgia and Azerbaijan. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, the Southern Gas Corridor are the landmark projects in this context. Therefore, it is no surprise that the governments of Azerbaijan and Georgia have acknowledged extremely important strategic value of these relations and committed to further develop them.

The protracted occupation of the Garabagh region and seven adjacent districts had previously hindered the potential for comprehensive regional projects that could have included Armenia, thereby contributing to its economic development. This self-isolation, stemming from Armenia's refusal to

return occupied territories peacefully, meant the country played no role in significant energy and connectivity projects that have reshaped the South Caucasus. The borders between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye have been closed since the early 1990s, excluding Armenia from participating in transformative projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor. However, the resolution of this conflict opens a doorway to unprecedented opportunities for Armenia and regional integration.

Azerbaijan's successful efforts in restoring its territorial integrity under President Ilham Aliyev's leadership have positively influenced the diplomatic process towards regional integration. President Ilham Aliyev has been a vocal advocate for a peaceful and cooperative future for the South Caucasus. His address following the military operations in Garabagh emphasized a vision for the region rooted in peace, stability, and development. This vision includes Azerbaijan and Armenia resolving their disputes, signing a peace treaty, and embarking on cooperative efforts alongside Georgia.

The Georgian Prime Minister, Irakli Garibashvili, echoed this sentiment, advocating for a peaceful and stable future where the South Caucasus countries address regional issues collectively. President Ilham Aliyev's preference for Georgia as a venue for Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks underscores the importance of historical relations and geographical factors in facilitating the normalization process.

This scenario underlines a pivotal moment for Armenia to emerge from isolation and engage in the South Caucasus's economic and diplomatic activities. President Ilham Aliyev's approach, coupled with regional support, offers a foundation for stability, cooperation, and prosperity, benefiting all South Caucasus countries, including Armenia.

The emphasis on mutual recognition of territorial integrity between Armenia and Azerbaijan sets a strong basis for enduring peace and collaboration. As the possibility of conflict fades, the focus shifts towards constructing a framework for trilateral cooperation, transcending past grievances. This period heralds an opportunity for Armenia to embrace reconciliation, contribute to regional prosperity, and participate in a new era of cooperation. The responsibility now lies with Yerevan's leadership to partake in meaningful negotiations, adhere to previous agreements, and actively contribute to shaping a peaceful and prosperous South Caucasus.

VII. Armenia's constitutional revisions as a gateway to peace in the South Caucasus

The normalization process between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye is pivotal for regional peace and cooperation in the South Caucasus. However, a significant obstacle to this process is the Armenian Constitution, which harbors territorial claims that have fueled tensions and conflicts for decades. These claims against Azerbaijan and Türkiye are deeply embedded in Armenia's Declaration of Independence and have been a cornerstone of its foreign policy and national identity.

Former Armenian President Serzh Sarkisyan's remarks to young activists in 2011 about leaving the annexation of territories referred to as "Western Armenia" to future generations illustrate the deep-rooted nature of these ambitions. Such statements highlight the necessity of constitutional reform in Armenia to pave the way for genuine peace and normalization with its neighbors.

After the Second Karabakh War, President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan have both touched upon the need for constitutional changes. President

Ilham Aliyev has pointed out the importance of revising the Armenian Constitution for achieving lasting peace, and Pashinyan has suggested rewriting the constitution entirely. This consensus indicates a potential pathway toward addressing one of the core issues hindering regional stability.

The territorial claims enshrined in Armenia's foundational documents, including its Declaration of Independence and the 1995 Constitution, directly challenge the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Türkiye. These claims not only perpetuate a state of conflict but also isolate Armenia from participating in regional development projects and economic opportunities. The inclusion of Mount Ararat in the Armenian state flag as Ararat, symbolizing aspirations for unification with territories currently within Türkiye's borders, underscores the symbolic and practical challenges posed by Armenia's constitutional stance.

The failed implementation of protocols aimed at normalizing relations between Armenia and Türkiye in 2010 further demonstrates the legal and political complexities arising from Armenia's constitutional framework. The Armenian Constitutional Court's ruling that international agreements must not violate the Declaration of Independence or the constitution effectively maintains territorial claims and obstructs diplomatic progress.

For Armenia, revising or rewriting the constitution presents an opportunity to redefine its national identity and foreign policy in a manner conducive to peace, regional integration, and economic development. Removing territorial claims against its neighbors from its constitution could facilitate Armenia's participation in regional projects and improve relations with Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

However, the path to constitutional change is fraught with challenges. Opposition from

within Armenia to removing territorial claims and public sentiment against such amendments suggest that the process will require careful navigation, political will, and public engagement. Despite these obstacles, the benefits of a new constitution extend beyond diplomacy. It represents a step toward dismantling the legacy of conflict and opening avenues for cooperation, prosperity, and a shared future in the South Caucasus. The responsibility now lies with Armenia's leadership and its people to seize this historic opportunity for change, embracing a vision of peace and cooperation that transcends longstanding grievances and conflicts.

VIII. Debunking Western narratives in the South Caucasus

The aftermath of the 2023 operation by Azerbaijan to reclaim control over its Garabagh region from Armenian-backed separatists has captured the attention of the international community, particularly the Western media. This significant military action not only led to the collapse of the separatist regime but also prompted the departure of the Armenian population from the area. However, this event's roots extend much deeper into history, tracing back to the irredentist campaigns initiated by Armenian nationalists three decades prior. These campaigns aimed at unifying the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) with Armenia, under the banner of "miatsum" or unification, setting the stage for the ensuing conflict.

Western perspectives, especially among liberal circles, have often interpreted the Armenian irredentist movement through the lens of self-determination. This narrative, vigorously promoted by Armenian nationalist leaders and the diaspora post-1991 independence, conveniently overlooks the irredentist essence of their campaign. Such framing has facilitated a sympathetic view towards Armenia's actions

in Nagorno-Karabakh, despite the movement's inherent goal to annex territory from a neighboring state, Azerbaijan.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling in 2015 marked a significant legal acknowledgment of Armenia's "effective control" over the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, challenging the narrative of Armenian self-determination in Garabagh. This decision underscored the complex interplay of nationalism, territorial ambitions, and the international community's role in addressing conflicts rooted in irredentism.

The period of Armenian control over Azerbaijani territories from 1992 to 2020 is characterized by war crimes, significant displacement of people, establishment of illegal settlements, widespread landmine contamination, and the comprehensive destruction of infrastructure and cultural heritage. The conflict also adversely affected the Armenian population, yet the fundamental issue remains the concept of "miatsum" or unification. This notion, despite its controversial implications, found backing among some Western intellectuals and policymakers. However, their support often appeared motivated by political fundraising rather than ideological alignment, complicating the conflict's narrative and resolution efforts.

A critical concern with the Western perspective on the post-2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is its apparent omission of the historical backdrop leading to the recent escalations. The situation's roots trace back to 1987–1990, marked by the Armenian leadership's campaigns to ethnically cleanse Azerbaijanis from Armenia and the Garabagh region. Following their defeat in the 2020 war, separatist leaders refused to engage in peace dialogues with Azerbaijan, highlighting a persistent rejection of reconciliation.

Throughout the occupation years (1993–2020), Armenia enjoyed robust support from Russia, which significantly influenced the conflict dynamics. Russia's military and political backing was crucial for Armenia to maintain control over the occupied territories. Concurrently, Armenia endorsed separatist movements in Georgia and Ukraine and participated in military operations in Syria, reflecting a broader geopolitical stance aligned with Russian interests. These actions and alliances have significantly shaped the complex landscape of South Caucasus geopolitics and the ongoing efforts to resolve the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

The portrayal and response to the conflict in the South Caucasus by Western media and political entities have often overlooked or misrepresented key aspects of the situation on the ground. A notable instance of this is the 1992 Amendment 907 to the Freedom Support Act by the US Congress, which barred military assistance to Azerbaijan. This legislation came into effect at a time when Azerbaijan itself was facing invasion and had recently experienced the Khojaly massacre, highlighting a disconnect between Western policy responses and the realities of the conflict.

Further complicating the international stance, in January 2024, the US Department of State placed Azerbaijan on the Special Watch List for Religious Freedom Offenders, prompted by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). The USCIRF's concerns centered on the potential threats to Christian Armenian monuments in Garabagh, seemingly ignoring the extensive destruction of Azerbaijani Muslim heritage in Armenia, including in Garabagh under Armenian control.

These international actions have inadvertently strengthened the position of the occupying forces in Garabagh, reinforcing their opposition to peace initiatives. For a lasting peace in the region, it is imperative for major global actors to adopt an impartial and

informed approach. The South Caucasus's long history of conflict and suffering calls for a balanced narrative and support from the West, moving beyond one-sided narratives that have historically favored irredentist agendas.

IX. A new chapter in climate leadership: Azerbaijan's strategy for COP29 success

Azerbaijan is increasingly embracing its role as a host for international events and as a supporter of significant interregional energy and connectivity initiatives, aligning with its strategic vision to enhance economic growth and foster regional collaboration. In a notable milestone, Baku, Azerbaijan's capital, is set to host the 2024 UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP 29) from November 11-22. This marks the first time such a prestigious event will be held in the South Caucasus region, underscoring Azerbaijan's commitment to addressing global challenges. The conference presents a unique platform to unite heads of state, government officials, civil society, business leaders, and international entities to engage in critical discussions on climate change. It aims to hasten the execution of the Paris Agreement while concentrating on establishing long-term climate strategies and goals.

Baku's capacity to host the UNFCCC COP 29 is bolstered by its extensive history of managing significant international gatherings. As Azerbaijan's largest city and a pivotal transportation nexus, Baku is strategically situated at the junction of Europe and Asia, making it an exemplary venue for such events. Its well-connected international airport further enhances its appeal as a global meeting spot. The city's track record includes successfully hosting a variety of notable events, such as the 57th Eurovision Song Contest in 2012, the First European Games in June 2015, the World

Chess Cup and Chess Olympiad in 2015 and 2016 respectively, the 4th Islamic Solidarity Games in 2017, select matches of UEFA Euro 2020, and the Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement Parliamentary Network (NAM PN) in June-July 2022. These events have not only contributed to the city's infrastructure development and enhancements but have also provided Baku with invaluable experience in areas such as security management, communication infrastructure upgrading, digital technology provision, cultural event design, and tourism sector support.

The forthcoming UNFCCC COP 29 conference in Baku is more than just an event; it represents a convergence of global efforts to combat climate change. It also highlights Azerbaijan's growing importance as a facilitator of international dialogue and cooperation. Through hosting such pivotal gatherings, Azerbaijan demonstrates its dedication to playing a central role in global discussions on sustainability, energy, and climate change, contributing significantly to the international community's efforts to create a more sustainable and cooperative future.

Tourism holds a prominent position within Azerbaijan's diversified economic strategy, particularly as a critical component of its non-oil sector. The nation's active role in hosting international events and spearheading infrastructure projects significantly bolsters its appeal as a tourism destination, fostering both economic prosperity and social progress. For example, the European Games attracted over 28,000 foreign tourists to Azerbaijan, with the majority coming from countries such as the Russian Federation, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, Spain, the U.S., and the United Arab Emirates. Similarly, the Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement Parliamentary Network (NAM PN) in Baku drew parliamentarians from over 40 NAM Member States, showcasing Azerbaijan's capability to host dignitaries and facilitate

international discourse. Additionally, the liberation of Garabagh and the subsequent visit of conference participants to the city of Shusha underscore Azerbaijan's efforts in promoting cultural and historical tourism.

In a significant environmental stride, Azerbaijan has declared 2024 the "Green World Solidarity Year," highlighting its dedication to environmental conservation and climate action. This initiative complements Azerbaijan's ambition to host COP29 in Baku, further reinforcing its reputation as a seasoned host of major international events. Despite its wealth in fossil fuels, Azerbaijan is committed to a sustainable energy future. The country's heavy reliance on oil and natural gas is being counterbalanced by investments in green growth strategies and renewable energy projects, aiming to establish Azerbaijan as a "green energy hub" in the region. This ambition aligns with the global push towards sustainable development and the European Green Deal objectives, as demonstrated by the Black Sea underwater electric cable project. This project, a collaborative effort between Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, and Hungary, is poised to facilitate the regional transition to green energy, signifying Azerbaijan's role as a reliable energy partner and its proactive stance in the global fight against climate change.

Through these concerted efforts in promoting tourism, environmental stewardship, and sustainable energy, Azerbaijan is not only enhancing its economic and social landscape but also contributing significantly to global sustainability goals. Its strategic approach to hosting international events, combined with a commitment to green initiatives, positions Azerbaijan as an influential player on the international stage, driving positive change within and beyond its borders.

The upcoming COP29 summit, set to take place in Baku, Azerbaijan, represents a pivotal moment in the global climate change dialogue, significantly surpassing the scale and scope of

any prior international event hosted by the country. Recognizing the summit's importance, President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree establishing an Organizational Committee to oversee the preparation and execution of this monumental event. This committee is tasked with developing and implementing an Action Plan for the 29th session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP29), alongside the 19th session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol and the 6th session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement. The Azerbaijani Cabinet of Ministers has also been directed to secure funding for these initiatives, highlighting the government's commitment to ensuring the summit's success.

The context set by the previous COP28 in Dubai, which emerged as the largest UN climate summit to date with representation from approximately 200 nations and 80,000 attendees, underscores the critical nature of the discussions anticipated at COP29. Central to the COP28 agenda was the challenge of addressing fossil fuel emissions, alongside the establishment of a "loss and damage" fund to support vulnerable nations. Additionally, the summit laid the groundwork for setting a new collective quantified goal on climate finance, starting from a baseline of USD 100 billion per year, aimed at supporting the development and implementation of national climate plans by 2025.

COP29 in Baku is expected to continue these discussions with a focused emphasis on financial mechanisms and long-term strategic goals, reflecting the ongoing need for substantial progress in reducing global greenhouse gas emissions. The slow pace of climate action to date, alongside challenges in securing financial and technological support for vulnerable nations, underscores the significance of the Baku summit as a forum for

bolstering international cooperation and commitment to the Paris Agreement.

Moreover, the Baku COP29 offers an opportunity for Azerbaijan to highlight additional critical issues, such as the environmental impact of warfare and landmine contamination, both of which are of particular relevance to the country. Azerbaijan's own experiences with environmental degradation and landmine threats could inform broader discussions on the nexus between environmental security and peace.

The COP29 summit also presents a unique opportunity for Azerbaijan to champion the acceleration of the green transition within its economy and beyond. By leveraging its role as the host nation, Azerbaijan can advocate for increased adoption of renewable energy sources and contribute to shaping a more sustainable and resilient global energy landscape. In doing so, COP29 could mark a significant step forward in the collective effort to combat climate change and achieve long-term environmental sustainability.