



BULLETIN

HIGHLIGHT OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

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I. Liberation of Lachin and rebuilding Karabakh

Lachin became the last of three occupied districts due to be handed back by Armenia as part of the Russian-brokered peace deal following the six-week war. In a televised address to the nation on December 1, President Ilham Aliyev congratulated the nation on the return of Lachin. "We, for our part, have already restored justice. We have restored historical justice. Our goal is to prevent Armenian fascism from rearing its head in this region. If someone wants to provide Armenia with a territory for the establishment of a second state, let them give them a part of their territory," President Ilham Aliyev said in his televised speech. President Ilham Aliyev also emphasized the challenges facing the country regarding the process of the rebuilding the lands liberated from the occupation. "Everything is devastated – the infrastructure is destroyed, residential and administrative buildings are demolished. There are currently no living conditions in these places. But we will restore these regions, all our districts; we will take all steps to create a normal life for our citizens. As you know, the first projects have already started. Relevant funds have been allocated from the President's Contingency Fund. The construction of the Fuzuli-Shusha highway and the Barda-Aghdam railway has already begun. This shows that we plan this work as efficiently as possible and so that to organize all these activities without wasting time. Relevant government body has already been set up and all this work will be carried out in a coordinated manner," President Ilham Aliyev noted.

Seven districts around the former Nagorno-Karabakh region that were home to more than 700,000 Azerbaijanis before their occupation during the First Karabakh War (1988-1994)

have been entirely demolished and razed to the ground during the period they were under the control of Armenia. Apart from residential and administrative buildings, according to the official sources, 700 historic and cultural monuments damaged or destroyed; 927 libraries; 808 cultural centers; 85 music and art schools; 22 museums with over 100,000 artefacts; 4 art galleries, 4 theatres, 2 concert halls in these territories over the last thirty years. The reconstruction of the region is therefore a process that will take a long period of time and massive financial resources. According to some experts, this may take 5-10 years and cost more than 10 billion dollars. At the same time, Azerbaijan is determined that the life will be restored in the liberated lands which used to be one of the most prosperous parts of Azerbaijan in the past. The government already announced that it plans to allocate 2.2 billion manats (1.3 billion dollars) for reconstruction works in the liberated territories in 2021. "A restoration period is now setting in. Large-scale construction work will be carried out. Of course, first of all, Azerbaijani companies will take part in this work, and we will invite companies from countries that are friendly to us," President Ilham Aliyev noted in a meeting with the parliamentary delegation of Italy in Baku.

Baku has already signed first contracts with Turkish companies. The reconstruction process attracts European states, too. For example, James Sharp, British Ambassador to Azerbaijan, tweeted about his meeting with Ramin Guluzade, Azerbaijani Minister of Transport, Communications and High Technologies on December 1, stating that they discussed the construction of "smart cities" in "the territories liberated from the occupation". According to Vasif Huseynov, a senior adviser at the Center of Analysis of International Relations of Azerbaijan (AIR

Center), “it was a signal that the companies from those states who demonstrated anti-Azerbaijani position in the Second Karabakh War would not be welcome in the reconstruction of the liberated territories”. In his address on December 1, President Ilham Aliyev underscored that “the overall economic, agricultural and tourism potential of all the liberated districts is enormous. We must maximize this potential and turn the Karabakh region into one of the most beautiful areas not only in Azerbaijan, but also the world, and I am sure that we will achieve this”. Not a comprehensive state program has been announced yet that covers the reconstruction plans of the Azerbaijani government, but a number of measures have been taken and announcements have been made. Immediately after the liberation of the Shusha city, Azerbaijan announced the construction of a new road to the city that will be more than a hundred kilometers. Three companies from Turkey and Azerbaijan are involved in the process which is expected to complete in 1,5 years. Azerbaijan’s Highways State Agency has announced plans for new roads to be built in the near future connecting Karabakh region to the rest of Azerbaijan. The establishment of highways and railroads are seen as an important start for future reconstruction work in the region, as well as for economic build-up. The tripartite agreement between the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia that ended the Second Karabakh War on the 10th of November declared the opening of all communication channels in the region and provided Azerbaijan with a corridor with its landlocked exclave Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through Armenia. Azerbaijan is planning to build a highway and railroad communication to Nakhchivan which will also connect the country with its major strategic ally, Turkey.

On December 10, Azerbaijan also held a military parade to mark the country's victory over Armenia. The parade was presided over by President Ilham Aliyev and his guest of honor, President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan. During the victory parade, Azerbaijan displayed Armenian hardware and weapons captured during the Second Karabakh War.

II. Restoration of a stable peace in the region requires a revision of approaches

In a televised address to the nation on December 1, President Ilham Aliyev urged those dissatisfied with the outcome of the war to come to terms with the post-war reality and assist the restoration of a stable peace in the region. The South Caucasus needs a fresh perspective on security. Currently, there is no unanimity about a sound future peace based on the principle of territorial integrity in accordance with international law. Such a vision of peace would have allowed all regional actors to be free from the burden of past grievances and free to develop economic opportunities similar to the European project after World War II. Establishing such consensus will, in the end, benefit all stakeholders: Russia, Turkey, Iran, the European Union, and the United States. Criticizing the French Senate resolution that recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent entity, in his address to the nation, President Ilham Aliyev reiterated the impossibility of another Armenian state on Azerbaijani lands. “The demand that an Armenian state be created on historically and legally Azerbaijani lands defies all logic. This does not fit any logic or justice. What do you want from our lands? Countries located thousands of kilometers away from here are now adopting laws, their parliaments are discussing this issue. What does the French

Parliament have to do with this issue? How many years has France been co-chairing the Minsk Group? Has it lifted a finger? Has it taken a tangible step to address this issue? However, look, what happens after this issue has been resolved. The French Senate adopts a resolution to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh. If you like them so much, then, as I said during the war, give the city of Marseille to the Armenians, change its name, create a second state for them there. But no-one can interfere in our affairs," President Ilham Aliyev underscored.

It is concerning that those in the West who empathize with the current miserable situation of Armenia often voice the same position that brought Yerevan to its current impasse. French president Emmanuel Macron expressed an anti-Azerbaijani position and France's Senate adopted a declaration calling for the recognition of an independent Nagorno-Karabakh. France's stance is the expression of its anti-Turkish sentiment and pandering to the Armenian lobby. It will not help Armenia to recover from its wounds caused by a discredited policy based on territorial claims. The Armenian diaspora lobby, detached from the realities of the home country, denies the geography of Armenia by perpetuating hostility and resentment against Armenia's neighbors. The Second Karabakh War should be a reminder to the international community, and especially to America, Europe, and Russia, the principal mediators of the original conflict, that a ceasefire, no matter how long in duration, is fundamentally unstable. Turning blind eye to international law does not bring stability in any given region, despite whatever short-term gains global and regional actors might get from freezing a conflict—or leaving it unresolved. As Dr. Farid Shafiyev, Chairman of the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), pointed

out, "this is equally applicable to both the past twenty-seven years since the adoption of the UN Security Council resolutions on Nagorno-Karabakh and the expiration of the five-year Russian peacekeeping mandate under the ceasefire terms".

While there has been an overflow of articles in the Western media about the geopolitical implications of this conflict, mainly focusing on the roles of Russia and Turkey, the overwhelming majority of journalists and experts have concentrated on profiling the interests of the regional powers or the Western bloc, rather than discussing what might constitute a sustainable peace in the South Caucasus. Future peace should be based upon a sustainable agreement rooted in coexistence and cooperation. However, the main challenge is not the status of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, but the lack of will of Armenians to live with Azerbaijanis—either in Azerbaijan or even in Armenia.

Unfortunately, the signals thus far give little hope for the drastic changes necessary to create a future sustainable peace. For example, Vazgen Manukyan, the candidate for the premiership proposed by the opposition, instead of seeking to resolve the regional conflicts and bring peace and security to the region, vowed to take a leading role in any anti-Turkish alliance. To create a stable and long-lasting peace, policymakers should bring attention all displaced peoples, including Azerbaijanis in Armenia and Armenians in the rest of Azerbaijan (250,000 Azerbaijanis were expelled from Armenia and 360,000 Armenians left Azerbaijan in 1988–90). True reconciliation is not possible without efforts to return to more integrated populations such as were prevalent in pre-conflict days. For instance, only in the twentieth century a large Azerbaijani population of Yerevan became a minority and then completely disappeared. At

the same time, some voices have spoken out about a vision of future cooperation. Armenia's new Minister of Economy, Vahan Kerobyan, in an interview with Public TV of Armenia, discussed the benefits of opening the country's borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey; they "will open and many vast opportunities will be provided. Perhaps the Azerbaijani market will open for us, and our market for Azerbaijan."

In his address to the nation on December 1, President İlham Aliyev highlighted that the transit corridor between the main territory of Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan, running through the Armenian Megri region, will open up vast opportunities for all regional countries. Armenia desperately needs a new vision of its own future based on improved relations with its neighbors. If Armenia continues to insist on the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh and other xenophobic narratives, the country will be trapped and further isolated, unable to have an independent foreign and economic policy.

III. Armenia-Azerbaijan Propaganda War and Western Media Bias

One of the most worrying trends observed during the Second Karabakh War was misinformation campaign and systematic dissemination of false narratives under the guise of objective journalism. Armenians and Armenian sponsored experts launched a misinformation campaign, blaming Azerbaijan for the destruction of Christian heritage during the war. What's more, Western media outlets refused to grant the Azerbaijani side a right of reply, essentially encouraging the spreading of fake news and such false narratives. For instance, Christina Maranci, professor and chair of the Armenian Art and Architecture Department at Tufts University, published an

article in the Conversation titled "Armenians displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh fear their medieval churches will be destroyed". In the article, Christina Maranci intentionally misrepresents the 1921 decision of the Soviet Union on Nagorno-Karabakh. This often mischaracterized by the Armenian side decision of the Caucasian Bureau decided to "keep" Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan, thus once again confirming that the region was a part of Azerbaijan in the first place. Furthermore, Christina Maranci completely ignores the systematic destruction of Azerbaijani cities and infrastructure, including Azerbaijan's religious heritage, mosques and places of worship during the decades-long occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenia. After the Second Karabakh War ended, the international community witnessed the magnitude of the destruction. The city of Agdam was dubbed by many as the "Hiroshima of Caucasus" due to the extent of destruction that the city has endured. As many Muslim holy places in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, Agdam Mosque was also desecrated and almost destroyed, turned into pigsty and animal stables. Around 67 mosques in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan were fully destroyed and, despite repeated calls from the government of Azerbaijan, UNESCO refused to send a fact-finding mission. However, once Armenians voiced their concern about Armenian churches in Karabakh, UNESCO demanded immediate access despite the problem with landmines in the newly liberated territories.

By comparison, Azerbaijan has vowed to restore and protect all religious shrines in the de-occupied territories, including Christian churches. As a matter of fact, two Armenian shrines – Gazanchesots church in Shusha and Dadivank monastery in Vank, which were at the spotlight of the Western media remain

overall intact. Gazanchesots suffered from accidental rocket strike, and the government of Azerbaijan pledges to restore it as they did the Armenian Church in Baku. For centuries, Christian heritage existed in the territory of Azerbaijan, which was mostly reigned by Azerbaijani/Turkic rulers. As the conflict erupted in 1988, many Western experts raised concern about the Armenian heritage, especially khachkars tomb-stones. Yet, Armenian Church right in the heart of Baku, damaged during the events of the early 1990s, has been fully restored and nearly 5,000 Armenian manuscripts are kept in the library of the church.

Another piece of propaganda and deliberate misinformation was published by the New York Review of Books titled "Armenia's Tragedy in Shushi", written by Viken Berberian. Despite the fact that the article is blatant misrepresentation and distortion of the history of Shusha, it was, nevertheless, managed to get published, which raises question about the journalistic integrity of the editors in the New York Review of Books. Shusha was established by the Azerbaijani-Turkic ruler Panakh ali Khan in 1752 as the capital of the Karabakh khanate. During Shusha's whole history until its capture on May 8, 1992, the city's population was mainly overwhelmingly Turkic/Azerbaijani (Thomas de Waal, Black Garden, NYU Press, 2013, p. 13). After the Russian conquest in 1823, the Turkic population (called "Tatars" by the Russians) was 72 percent ("Opisanie Karabakhskoj provintsii sostavlennoe v 1823 g. po rasporiazheniiu glavnoupravliaiushego v Gruzii Ermolova deistvitel'nim statskim sovetnikom Mogilevskim i polkovnikom Ermolovim 2-m" Tbilisi, 1866). By 1897 the Russian settlement policy had diminished this proportion to 41 percent. Nevertheless, the author chose to ignore these inconvenient for

his own narrative historical facts and focused only on the period between 1897 to 1920 instead.

As Dr. Farid Shafiyev and Dr. Esmira Jafarova pointed out, "the Russian conquest of the South Caucasus, which included the Karabakh khanate, changed the fate of the people who had been living there more or less peacefully for centuries. Specifically, worse days arrived for Muslim Azerbaijanis and better ones for Christian Armenians". The American scholar Tadeusz Swietochowski also pointed out that Armenians enjoyed a Russian protective shield that enabled them to advance socially and politically at a fast pace and to capture important economic positions in the region (Russian Azerbaijan, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p.37).

Historically, both communities suffered from attacks and lootings. In 1920, it was mostly Armenians who suffered from violence instigated by territorial dispute between young republics, Azerbaijan and Armenia, both of which eventually were incorporated into the Soviet Union. The fall of Shusha in May 1992 was a turning point in the modern history of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It led to the ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijani population of the entire region of historical Karabakh, which was and is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. De Waal wrote that "After Armenian forces captured the town, hundreds of people swarmed into it, looting and burning." Most historical buildings were destroyed, along with museums and the residences of many famous Azerbaijani musicians like Uzeyir Hajibeyov (composer of first opera from out of the east, Leyli and Mejnun) and the singer Bulbul. Armenian warlords tried to erase the Azerbaijani heritage of the city. For example, the Yukhari Govhar Agha mosque was "renovated" by Iranians and rebranded as Iranian heritage. But

for most of its occupation by Armenians, Shusha was a “sad city” as the current Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan described it recently. While Armenian nationalists deplored their recent loss of Shusha, Pashinyan bitterly exclaimed that Shusha was lost 30 years ago since little was invested there to develop or even maintain the city.

Shusha has enormous symbolic importance for both Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The same is true for Armenia’s capital Yerevan, which contained almost half Azerbaijani population therein in the beginning of the twentieth century, but eventually fully expelled in 1988-89. The only survived Blue Mosque in Yerevan was also rebranded by Armenian authorities as “Persian” heritage. Viken Berberian focused exclusively on Armenian tragedies without mentioning the well-known evidence of the massacres and expulsions of Azerbaijanis from Armenia. In the whole article, he limits this subject to a single sentence about Khojaly – a town that was entirely exterminated, including women and children among 613 victims. The author misrepresents further the causes of the recent war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which was driven by warlord-presidents Robert Kocharyan (1998-2008) and Serge Sargsyan (2008-2018) as well as by the incumbent Nikol Pashinyan’s populist demagogy. According to Gerard Libaridian, ex-adviser to president Levon Ter-Petrosian (1991-1998), the Armenian side abandoned the sober reasoning, while the entire international community spoke against the occupation of Azerbaijani territories, especially the seven districts around Nagorno-Karabakh.

The conflict was ignited by irredentist claims from Armenian nationalists in February 1988. The few reasonable voices among the Armenian diaspora were drowned out and

suppressed by jingoist rhetoric. As the Armenian scholar Arman Grigorian points out, the Armenian media is responsible for encouraging the nationalist mythology that led to the current impasse for Armenia. By publishing such misinformed pieces that are designed to misled the readers and create false narratives, Western media outlets only further complicate the already difficult process of reconciliation between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.

IV. Armenia plunges into political crisis after defeat in the Second Karabakh War

The unexpected, and ultimately, devastating military defeat in the Second Karabakh War has provoked an overwhelming political crisis in Armenia. Having been consistently misinformed by the government about the real situation on the frontline during the war, Armenians had believed that their army had the control over the situation. The capitulation all of a sudden in the night of the November 9 was therefore a great shock for the Armenian people who took to the streets protesting against the government and calling for Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s resignation. In the following days, some top members of the government, including Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan and Defense Minister Davit Tonoyan resigned from their positions. In a televised address to the nation on November 16, President Armen Sarkisyan of Armenia, who had previously declared that the peace deal had not been consulted with him in advance, called for snap parliamentary elections, saying that this is needed to resolve a political crisis sparked by the war. Amidst this troubled period, the verbal fighting between Prime Minister and the former leaders of Armenia disclosed some important nuances about the country’s foreign policy. On

December 4, talking to a local television channel, Robert Kocharyan, Armenia's second President, harshly criticized the foreign policy of the Pashinyan government and blamed him on the military defeat in the war.

One of the most key moments in Kocharyan's interview was regarding the outbreak of violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan in July 2020. Kocharyan disclosed that, on the contrary to what was previously stated by the Armenian leadership, it was Armenia that provoked the confrontation. Recalling the statements of the Armenian government at the time of the border confrontation, Pashinyan had accused Azerbaijan of "provocations" that would "not go unanswered" and his defense minister said Armenian forces would react "including by taking advantageous positions" in Azerbaijani territory. Kocharyan's statement does therefore cast light on the background of the July fighting which was apparently provoked by Armenia to expand the geography of the conflict and problematize Azerbaijan's transport with its Western partners.

Kocharyan also touched upon the diplomatic failures and provocations of the Armenian leadership that brought "the war in Karabakh closer". "I am sure that the authorities did everything to make the war inevitable. Firstly, the negotiation process was deliberately stalled. With our mutually exclusive statements we created a situation in which the co-chairs [of the Minsk Group of the OSCE] did not know what the Armenian side wanted. It seemed that Armenia does everything for a dead end. And the war began at a time when no one doubted that the negotiations were being thwarted by the Armenian side," Kocharyan said, adding that "the defeated authorities, who signed the capitulation, must be replaced in the name of the people." Prime Minister Pashinyan's responses to former

President is not less revealing. Declaring that the international community has always recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, Pashinyan asserts that this happened so thanks to the diplomatic failures of his predecessors. "The fact that the Karabakh issue began to be perceived as a territorial dispute and became our biggest problem, the fact that Armenia gradually began to be perceived by the international community as an occupier, did not happen in the last two years. And in the last two years, an attempt has been made to get out of this vicious circle", he protests. Defending his foreign policy course, Pashinyan argued that his government failed in the attempts to relieve itself from the burden of the diplomatic failures of his predecessors, not in its own diplomacy.

While it is true that former leaders of Armenia did little to resolve the conflict and prevent its drift to the eventual tragedy for Armenians, Pashinyan failed to pursue a different policy, although he had such an opportunity when he came to power. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan had transformed into its most non-confrontational period following Armenia's Velvet Revolution in 2018, that brought Pashinyan to the premiership. The year after the government change in Armenia, the conflict marked its arguably most peaceful year in 2019 when the casualties on the frontline declined substantially. For example, while 39 military servicemen were killed in 2017, the year before Armenia's power change in 2018, casualties dropped to eight, including one civilian, in 2019. This happened against the backdrop of secret negotiations between the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan initiated by the former. It later became clear, however, that Pashinyan may have aimed for certain stability on the frontline while he was busy with domestic power struggles. Soon he

quickly abandoned his peace-building initiatives and demonstrated a more radicalized nationalistic position towards the conflict. His “Karabakh is Armenia, period” statement, which indirectly meant the unification between the Karabakh region and Armenia, was a blow to the peace negotiations that was arguably much more destructive than any moves by his immediate predecessor Serzh Sargsyan”. Unfortunately, it seems that Armenia leaders are still not capable of abandoning the confrontational political mindset that caused enormous economic, political, humanitarian and other problems to the South Caucasus over the last thirty years.

V. United Nations General Assembly convenes special session on the coronavirus pandemic

On December 3-4, the 31st United Nations General Assembly special session on the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) – the first-ever special session to address a pandemic – has been convened. The special session symbolized the institutional readiness of the world to fight the common enemy as a united force and was held at the initiative of President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev. Azerbaijan responded immediately to the spread of COVID-19 and undertook necessary measures. The government put the country into lockdown and strengthened it as the situation so demanded after the first infection case on 28 February was detected. The special Coronavirus Support Fund was established with 19 March 2020 Presidential Decree and the government prepared social, economic and financial support package worth about \$2,5 billion, using solely domestic resources. Many new hospitals were built for COVID-19 patients and local production of medical masks was introduced. Azerbaijan is also still battling the COVID-19, however, it has been doing so in

a well-prepared and consistent manner. At the same time, as Dr. Esmira Jafarova, a board member at the Center of Analysis of International Relations of Azerbaijan (AIR Center), pointed out, “Azerbaijan did not confine its efforts to domestic achievements. Azerbaijan made two voluntary contributions to the WHO amounting to 10 million US dollars in total and delivered humanitarian and financial assistance to over thirty countries”.

The urgency of the crisis places a special premium on the role of the United Nations in mustering global solidarity and continuous commitment to curbing the COVID-19, especially given that some governments opted in favor of their own national agendas, pursued mutual criticisms and recriminations instead of cooperating in these difficult times”. As the incumbent Chair of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) for 2019-2022, President Ilham Aliyev during the online summit convened by his initiative on 4 May, proposed that NAM countries could initiate convening the special online session of the UN General Assembly on COVID-19 on the level of heads of state and government. Azerbaijan’s initiative was supported by 150 UN member states. The only country that rejected the initiative was Armenia, probably because it was Azerbaijan’s initiative.

In his video address as the chairman of the NAM, president of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev stressed the importance of multilateralism and collective efforts to stave off the COVID-19 threat. It was noted that the pandemic has stalled global progress, intensified global divide and increased poverty. It is therefore vital that equal access to medical facilities, drugs and a COVID-19 vaccine for everyone is ensured. President Aliyev also noted that Azerbaijan supported UN Secretary General’s call for global ceasefires. However, the ceasefire between

Armenia and Azerbaijan that was in place since 1994 has been constantly violated by Armenia. President Ilham Aliyev also spoke of the recent 44 days' war between Armenia and Azerbaijan that lasted from 27 September to 10 November. Having expressed disappointment over the non-implementation of four UN Security Council resolutions (822, 853, 874 and 884) on Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict by the Republic of Armenia, President Aliyev also highlighted the long list of political and military provocations committed by the incumbent leadership of Armenia aimed at disrupting the OSCE-led peace process. Armenia's consistent provocations behooved Azerbaijan's military counteroffensive.

The special session was chaired by UN General Assembly President Volkan Bozkir who pointed out that "The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted life for everyone around the world. It has challenged our world in ways unlike any other crisis in the 75-year history of the United Nations. COVID-19 is first and foremost a global health crisis. But it is at the same time an economic crisis, a development crisis, a humanitarian crisis, and a human rights crisis. We face the deepest global recession since the Great Depression and the broadest collapse in incomes since 1870. The world economy has shrunk by 4.4 %. Global extreme poverty is expected to rise for the first time in over 20 years. Up to 115 million people are at risk of being pushed into extreme poverty. Foreign investments have been evaporating. Trade and travel restrictions; steep declines in export earnings, tourism and remittances, all put at risk the livelihoods of billions all around the world. Our global development trajectory has been hijacked. Each country is feeling the pressure, yet, those that were already lagging behind, took the worst hit. Ongoing humanitarian crises have worsened, as a

famine of unprecedented proportion threatens the poorest people in the world".

VI. The Southern Gas Corridor opens up gas supply to Europe

On December 31, the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) AG notified the commencement of gas flows from Azerbaijan to Europe. The first gas has reached Greece and Bulgaria, via the Nea Mesimvria interconnection point with DESFA, as well as Italy, via the Melendugno interconnection point with SNAM Rete Gas (SRG). While the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), the last stretch of the Southern Gas Corridor, became operational on November 15, the European Commission welcomed the start of operation of the TAP and also expressed its desire to extend the gas corridor into the Western Balkans. Tim McPhie, the spokesperson for Climate Action and Energy at the European Commission, noted that "the project will increase choice and competition, improve energy security and diversify gas supply, particularly in Italy, Greece and Bulgaria, as well as the South-East European region. TAP is a project of EU common interest and an important part of the Southern gas corridor". Meanwhile, Azerbaijan and Turkey also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the construction of a new gas pipeline that will run from Turkey's Ighdir province to Azerbaijan's Nakhichevan exclave. The pipeline is expected to be completed within a year and will significantly boost Nakhichevan's energy security.

Since Azerbaijan has regained its independence in 1991, Baku proved itself as a reliable energy partner for the West and established a sound and sustainable producer-consumer dialogue by exporting its hydrocarbon resources to global energy markets. Baku continues to successfully

cooperate with partners and support inter-regional Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) energy projects. It is worth noting that the SGC is very important for the EU as a new gas source and supply route. Diversification of supply sources and routes is key to EU energy security. Gas supplies from Azerbaijan will reach South Eastern, Central, and Western Europe, and those regions have high gas dependence on a few suppliers. As Shahmar Hajiyev, a leading adviser at the Center of Analysis of International Relations of Azerbaijan (AIR Center), noted, “Azerbaijan’s position and the availability of its own energy resources have enabled the country to become a regional energy and infrastructure hub for global energy markets”.

At the same time, the SGC opens up the opportunity for the export of new gas sources from Central Asia to the European gas market. In this regard, the EU and United States should increase their support for linking the Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP) with the SGC. The TCP can become a complementary element of the SGC, and access to Turkmen gas sources could play a significant role in EU energy security. Currently, the main export routes for Turkmen gas are through China and Russia. China is the largest importer of natural gas from Turkmenistan. For example, in 2019, Turkmenistan exported to China over 30 bcm (billion cubic meters) of natural gas via the Central Asia-China gas pipeline. However, dependence on China as well as gas price disputes with Russia are a major issue for Turkmenistan and it is in Ashgabat’s interest to diversify its export routes. Turkmenistan, the EU, and the United States should intensify their dialogue and promote the TCP more actively. The incoming Biden administration should strengthen its support for energy security of its European allies and reaffirm its commitment for supporting natural gas supply

from the Caspian and Central Asian regions to European energy market. At the same time, the Biden administration has to focus on security and full economic integration of these regions. The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict was a real challenge not only for the security of the South Caucasus but also for the whole Caspian region. The forty-four-day Karabakh War of 2020 has finally resolved the long-lasting bloody conflict as Azerbaijan managed to restore its territorial integrity. Now, during the post-conflict period, the US must play a more active role and support the peace process and regional economic integration.

VII. Azerbaijan and Afghanistan discuss boosting bilateral ties

On December 21, President Ilham Aliyev met National Security Adviser of Afghanistan Hamdullah Muhib and the head of the Afghan presidential administration, Muhammad Shakir Korgar, to discuss prospects for boosting bilateral cooperation. At the meeting, President Ilham Aliyev praised his Afghan counterpart for giving Azerbaijan political support starting from the very first days of the conflict and for Kabul's support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. The meeting pointed out achievements accomplished toward the development of bilateral ties and it was noted that there is good potential for expansion of cooperation between the two countries. The special role that the Azerbaijani and Afghan presidents' personal relations have played toward the development of relations was highlighted at the meeting. It was also pointed out that the fact that the Karabakh conflict had ended was important toward ensuring security and stability in the region and that it created wide opportunities for multilateral cooperation. The meeting also discussed prospects for economic, security, investment, transport and other cooperation,

the development of the Lapis Lazuli international transport corridor and Azerbaijan's participation in peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan. On December 21, Deputy Minister of Defence of the Republic of Azerbaijan Karim Valiyev also received the Afghan delegation led by the two officials to discuss the current state of and prospects for the development of military cooperation between the two countries. Chief of State Security Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ali Naghiyev also met the Afghan officials and other members of the delegation on December 21 to discuss expanding cooperation between the two countries' security agencies toward stepping up stability and security in the region.

VIII. Year in Review

Since 2019, the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center) has worked to provide strategic insights and comprehensive analysis of global and regional processes, simultaneously aiming at raising the international community's awareness of Azerbaijan's foreign policy priorities, particularly the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and regional security. In 2020, AIR Center accelerated and expanded its work in all of its major areas of focus. The global COVID-19 pandemic and the historic victory of Azerbaijan in the 44-day Patriotic War, as well as Azerbaijan's Chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement, transport and energy projects in which Azerbaijan participates have been just a few of major topics covered by the Center in 2020. In terms of international cooperation, the Center signed 8 Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) with various international research institutes and think tanks in 2020, including with the Middle East Institute (MEI) in the US, University of Toronto's Center for European, Russian, and

Eurasian Studies (CERES) in Canada, the Euro-Gulf Information Center (EGIC) in Italy, the Center for Contemporary Middle Eastern Studies (CEMOC) in Argentina and the National Institute for Strategic Studies in Ukraine. In 2020, 9 publications were successfully published in English, French, Russian and Azerbaijani languages, either directly or with the Center's support. The list includes a report by Professor Malcolm Shaw QC and Naomi Hart on the war crimes and the international legal responsibilities of Armenia as the belligerent occupier of Azerbaijani territories, a monograph entitled "the City of Yerevan" by Nazim Mustafa, a report prepared with the suggestion of the Center by France-based COJEP International in French on the Armenian diaspora and lobby organizations in France and their assistance to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, a report prepared by the Center's staff entitled "The Forgotten Victim of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: Environmental Impact of the Conflict", as well as a report on the use of mercenaries and foreign fighters by Armenia against Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War.

This year also saw the launch of the first issue of the Caucasus Strategic Perspectives (CSP), the Center's first in-house academic journal on foreign and security policy. The Center also started publishing monthly bulletins in English, covering main directions of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. The Center held 14 events and webinars, including an international conference entitled "IDP Women's Call for Justice: Addressing Their Needs in Peace and Security Agenda", a webinar entitled "Regional Geopolitical Polarization and Turkey-Azerbaijan Relations", a webinar on the "Fate of Multilateralism during COVID-19 Crisis", an international video conference on the "Global Energy and International Political Risks" jointly with Russia's Valdai International Discussion

Club, a webinar titled “The United States in the Caspian Region: A Think-Tank Discussion” jointly with the Caspian Political Center, a webinar entitled “Development of Belarusian-Azerbaijani Relations in the Post-Pandemic Period” together with the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. Over the past year, the Center’s experts delivered top-level analysis and outstanding research products. They also got published in “The National Interest”, “Jamestown Foundation”, “Euractiv”, “The London Post”, “New Eastern Europe”, “Geopolitical Monitor”, “Nezavisimaya

Gazeta”, “Vesti Kavkaza”, “Yeni Şafak”, “Anadolu Agency”, among others.

In the year ahead, the AIR Center will continue to engage in thought leadership by providing essential insights and analysis into key trends and topics in the region, as well as leveraging its expertise and resources to expand international community’s awareness of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy priorities.