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I. The restoration of the liberated territories

The restoration and development of the newly liberated territories is the top priority for the government of Azerbaijan. It implies wide participation of private and state-owned companies, as well as foreign investors in the process. Currently, Azerbaijan is developing a concept of restoration and reconstruction of its liberated territories, which includes attracting foreign investors to the development of these territories. On January 19, the institute of the special representative in the liberated territories was set up. In an online meeting, President Ilham Aliyev named his first special representative for the newly liberated historical city of Shusha. "The first appointment is to Shusha District and this is absolutely natural. Shusha has a special place in the hearts of the Azerbaijani people. Shusha is the crown of Karabakh," the president told his representative for Shusha, Aydin Karimov, who was earlier dispatched to the city to inspect and analyze the situation on the scene. President Ilham Aliyev has reiterated the government's determination to have rebuilt Shusha by preserving its historical appearance. "The city has been declared cultural capital of Azerbaijan and after restoration, Shusha will be a very lively city. Both local and international events should be held there - festivals, competitions, and tours. Shusha will be the cultural capital not only of Azerbaijan, but also the region," President Ilham Aliyev told Aydin Karimov. Aydin Karimov previously served as an adviser to the chairman of the State Committee for Urban Planning and Architecture and took part in the implementation of the large-scale urban development project White City in Baku. President Ilham Aliyev added that Shusha was properly protected by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces. "The Azerbaijani servicemen are

guarding Shusha. They control and will continue to control the adjacent heights. A commandant's office has been set up in Shusha and an institute of civil administration is being established now," President Ilham Aliyev said, adding that "Shusha occupies a special place in the history of Azerbaijan, and the restoration and revival of Shusha is our common cause".

The restoration of territories in and around Karabakh was also a major topic of the meeting between the Minister of Economy of the Republic of Azerbaijan Mikayil Jabbarov and US Ambassador to Azerbaijan Lee Litzenberger on January 27. During the meeting, the possible involvement of US companies in the restoration of reclaimed territories in Nagorno-Karabakh and around it was discussed. In turn, the US ambassador expressed his satisfaction with the restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, noting the importance of ensuring sustainable peace in the region. Litzenberger expressed the willingness of US companies to participate in projects for the restoration of the liberated territories, and above all, in projects for water resources management, construction of roads, other infrastructure, and digital technologies.

II. Trilateral meeting between the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia

On January 11, President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian met at a trilateral summit in Moscow with Russian President Vladimir Putin, at the latter's initiative. The four-hour-long talks served as an important follow-up to the ceasefire statement signed by the three leaders on November 9, 2020, which ended the 44-day Second Karabakh War. The meeting took place against the backdrop of growing political

instability in Armenia, where protestors attempted to block the road to the airport in order to prevent Prime Minister Pashinian from leaving for Moscow. A meeting between the Presidents of Russia and Azerbaijan and Armenia's Prime Minister in Moscow on January 11, 2021, resulted in the signing of a second trilateral declaration. The document is primarily built upon the ninth article of the November 9 trilateral statement – the restoration of all economic and transport links and development of infrastructure projects in the region. According to this new Moscow Declaration, the unblocking of all communications in the region will be supervised by a Trilateral Working Group under the co-chairmanship of the Deputy Prime Ministers of Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. This Working Group must conduct its first meeting by 30 January and decide on the main priorities of this process. Sub-groups of experts representing relevant state bodies of all three parties will also be established. This expert group is tasked with preparing a list of projects and the resources necessary for their implementation within a month after the first meeting of the Trilateral Working Group takes place. Subsequently, by March 1, 2021, the Trilateral Working Group has to submit the list for approval and provide a schedule of the measures to be undertaken towards the restoration of existing and establishment of new transport infrastructure in the region. The joint concluding statement of the Moscow summit declared establishing railway and automobile communication as a priority and seeks to ensure international shipping across Azerbaijan and Armenia as well as cargo transit by the two countries across each other's territories. On January 31, a trilateral meeting of the deputy prime ministers of Azerbaijan, Russia, and Armenia was convened in Moscow to discuss the implementation of the clauses of the November 10 Statement. The parties

agreed to establish and complete the formation of expert subgroups to deal with the provision of transport, including security, border, customs, sanitary, by February 2, 2021 and hold their first meetings by February 5, 2021. Vasif Huseynov, a senior advisor at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), noted that “overall, the January 11 summit left the resolution of many other issues regarding the conflict to the future. This includes, primarily, questions about the portion of the Karabakh region under the joint control of Armenians and Russian peacekeepers”.

III. Turkish-Russian Joint Monitoring Center opens in Aghdam

On January 30, a Turkish-Russian Joint Monitoring Centre has started operation in Aghdam district to monitor the implementation of the clauses of the trilateral statement signed between Azerbaijan, Russia, and Armenia on November 10, 2020. Aghdam is one of the districts that Azerbaijan liberated as a result of the Second Karabakh War. The opening ceremony has been attended by Minister of Defense of Azerbaijan Zakir Hasanov, Deputy Minister of National Defense of Turkey Yusuf Emre Garaosmanoglu, and Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin. The area of the Turkish-Russian Joint Center is about 4 hectares. There are 65 modular administrative and living rooms in the area, the actual joint monitoring centre, a briefing room, a 100-seat canteen, a medical center, a laundry room, a barber, a tailor, a shop, sport and other facilities, and four monitoring towers. The whole territory has been fenced along the perimeter, 4 observation towers have been installed, and 24-hour security has been organized. The centre is guarded by the military servicemen of the Azerbaijani Army. 60 military servicemen

from both Turkey and Russia will serve at the Monitoring Center. The Turkish staff of the monitoring center is led by Major General Abdullah Katirci, and the Russian staff is led by Major General Viktor Fedorenko.

IV. Turkmenistan boosts energy ties with Azerbaijan

On January 21, 2021, Baku and Ashgabat signed a memorandum of understanding on joint exploration and development of hydrocarbon resources of the “Dostluk” offshore oil field in the Caspian Sea. President Ilham Aliyev said the memorandum “reflects both the nature and spirit of our fraternal friendly relations”, describing it as “historic”, explaining that it is the first time that the two countries have embarked on “joint work to use a deposit in the Caspian Sea”. “Today's signing opens a new page in the use of the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian. This project will promote the strengthening of the energy security of our countries as well as of our neighbours. It opens up big export opportunities and, in this way, will promote the growth of the welfare of our peoples,” President Ilham Aliyev pointed out.

The deposit had for years been a matter of dispute between Baku and Ashgabat since it was located at the junction of the national sectors of the two countries in the sea. The field, which had been a bone of contention between Baku and Ashgabat since the late 1990s, has been renamed “Dostluq” which means “friendship” in both languages. Previously, Azerbaijan called it “Kapaz”, while Turkmenistan named it “Sardar”. Turkmenistan even considered to take the disputed issue to the International Arbitration Court. However, later, both countries agreed not to do any work in the area until issues regarding the division of the Caspian seabed

were agreed on. On August 12, 2018, five littoral states of the Caspian Sea – Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan – signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. The Caspian Convention resolved many disputed issues between the five Caspian littoral states, and one of the key clauses of the Convention was supposed to facilitate the building of the undersea pipelines with the consent of the countries only involved in the project.

After the ratification of the Caspian Convention, cooperation between Baku and Ashgabat have gained major new impetus. During the visit of the president of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev to Turkmenistan in November 2018, several important Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan documents were signed, such as “the Program of Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Government of Turkmenistan in the Field of Transport for 2019-2022” and “the Agreement on Long-term Trade and Economic Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Government of Turkmenistan”. The visit of the President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov to Azerbaijan on March 11, 2020 further strengthened bilateral relations.

The President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov called the memorandum a “historic document”, adding that the memorandum signifies “a fundamentally new phase in energy cooperation” between the two countries in the Caspian. It “opens up new opportunities for joint work on a firm international legal basis, and additional serious incentives are being created for an inflow of major foreign investments into our region on... a long-term basis”, President Berdimuhamedov noted. The most important area of bilateral cooperation is cooperation in the Caspian Sea, as well as transportation.

Joint exploration of Dostlug field will increase oil export potential of the country as well as create favorable conditions to strengthen energy cooperation, especially in natural gas sector as Turkmenistan's total proved gas reserves in the region is substantial. In 2019, gas production amounted to 63.2 billion cubic meters (bcm), of which roughly half of production was designated for domestic market. Along with Russia, China is the main buyer of the Turkmen natural gas. In 2019, the natural gas supply to China was slightly more than 30 bcm. The gas was supplied via the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, which connects rich gas sources of Central Asia to China's gas transmission system. Another major natural gas export route for Turkmenistan is Russia. However, gas disputes with Russia over Gazprom's demand to revise the oil-linked price formula agreed in 2008 and later cut gas supplies from Turkmenistan hit Turkmenistan's economy hard. Only in 2019 Gazprom has signed a five-year contract to import 5.5 bcm of gas a year from Turkmenistan. So far, asymmetric dependence on Chinese and Russian markets has been a critical vulnerability for Turkmenistan.

During the signing ceremony, President Berdimuhamedov said that "this document opens up a fundamentally new phase in the partnership between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan in the strategic energy field". For this, he added, the two countries "have everything necessary" – the political will, equipment, highly-skilled staff and "an enormous experience of work in the oil and gas industry", the "main key" to successful activity in the Caspian being a centuries-long history of "firm fraternal ties".

In this context, gas transit from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan via the potential Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP) might open up new energy markets for Ashgabat. Both the EU and the U.S.

have voiced their support for energy cooperation in the Caspian Sea. In fact, the EU relaunched the negotiations with Ashgabat over TCP after the Caspian Convention was signed. TCP could deliver Turkmen hydrocarbon resources to Europe and help Turkmenistan to diversify its energy export routes. As Shahmar Hajiyev, a senior advisor at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), put it, "energy cooperation between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan is of interest to both countries. First of all, Azerbaijan welcomes other countries to join SGC on the basis of mutual economic benefits. In this regard, the energy cooperation between Baku and Ashgabat may also strengthen Azerbaijan's position as energy hub in the region. For Turkmenistan, the energy cooperation is even more important, as the country is highly dependent on natural gas exports, and new markets for the sale of natural gas, especially the European energy market, are very attractive. By diversifying energy export routes, Ashgabat could reduce its dependence on a few destinations, as well as may have a more favorable position in gas negotiations".

During the signing ceremony, President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that there are already trilateral formats of cooperation - Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan-Turkey and Azerbaijan-Afghanistan-Turkey, and that this cooperation targets a specific result - to create more favorable conditions for doing business and for the implementation of major infrastructure projects. "At present, we are two independent energy powers and making one more contribution to the cause of strengthening cooperation in the Caspian. I am confident that the Caspian - even though it is a natural border between our countries - will continue to unite our countries and peoples," President Ilham Aliyev added. President Berdimuhamedov also

noted that together with Afghan, Georgian and Turkish partners, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan are actively working toward an effective functioning of the Lapis Lazuli transport corridor, which is meant to become a major continental thoroughfare between Asia and Europe.

V. Cooperation between Azerbaijan, Pakistan and Turkey gains momentum

On January 13, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of Turkey came together in a trilateral meeting in Islamabad. Organized for the first time in November 2017 in Baku, this format of the cooperation between the countries has been gaining momentum over the last years. Baku is striving to develop relations with its two partners in almost all spheres as reflected in the agenda of the trilateral meeting that covered a wide range of issues including those related to the cooperation in technology, science, culture, economy and military. The Declaration signed by the three ministers expressed the sides' support to each other in the most fateful challenges faced by them. Reiterating the support of the sides to resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict within the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan, the Declaration highlighted their solidarity in Azerbaijan's efforts to rebuild and restore liberated territories. In a similar vein, the declaration expressed the sides' support to Pakistan in the conflict over Jammu and Kashmir calling for its resolution in accordance with the UN Security Council resolutions, and to Turkey in the settlement of the disputes in Cyprus, the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean on the basis of international law. Nevertheless, the sides are cautious to

stress that this is a peace platform, not an alliance directed against any other state or group of states. Jeyhun Bayramov, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan, talking at the press conference held after the trilateral meeting, expressed gratitude to Turkey and Pakistan for their support to Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War. "These friendly countries condemned the occupation, attacks and war crimes of Armenia, supported the discussion based on our sovereignty and territorial integrity, and loudly declared the recognition of the borders of states and the establishment of justice in the international arena. We highly appreciate this principled position", Jeyhun Bayramov noted. This gratitude is also noticed in the society of Azerbaijan where the flags of Turkey and Pakistan were often raised alongside Azerbaijani flag during and since the war.

Compared to Pakistan – Turkey partnership that dates back to the early 1950s when the two countries came together in the Western-aligned Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), the history of Azerbaijan's close relationship with Pakistan started in 1990s, after Azerbaijan's restoration of independent statehood. Being one of the first countries recognizing Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union, Pakistan categorically opposed Armenia's occupation of Karabakh and therefore rejected to establish diplomatic relations. Bilateral relations between Baku and Islamabad have been on a growing track since then. The progress has been recorded in most major spheres, but primarily, in the military-strategic cooperation. Having signed a defense agreement in September 2002, Azerbaijan and Pakistan agreed on the legal framework of the military cooperation that includes primarily joint military exercises and exchange of information.

The 2015 marked another milestone in the bilateral ties between the two countries when they signed a declaration on strategic partnership aimed at enhancing relations by deepening and expanding cooperation in the political, economic, defense and security spheres, as well as trade, energy, investment, tourism, transport, science and technology, environment, information, youth and sports. The two countries are committed, particularly, to bolstering economic relations which are often seen as falling short of its true potential. There are new projects and opportunities to increase mutual trade which was less than 15 million dollars in 2019. The opening of Azerbaijan's Trade House in Pakistan, establishment of working groups to explore investment opportunities, expanding the legal framework in the field of food security and trade, investing in the textile, pharmaceutical and energy sectors, as well as developing cooperation between small and medium-sized businesses are in the agenda of the Pakistan-Azerbaijan relations. The launch of direct flights between Azerbaijan and Pakistan in the near future is also expected to make a significant contribution to the intensification of mutual ties.

Azerbaijan, over the years since its independence, has established or joined several platforms for cooperation with Turkey, its major ally in international relations. Turkey is the only country with which Azerbaijan has a defense agreement committing the sides, in line with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, to cooperate when either country faces aggression from a third state or group of states. Agreed by the 2010 Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support (ASPMS), Azerbaijan and Turkey have been developing defense cooperation that is a major pillar of Azerbaijan's security policies. This bilateral military cooperation and the

Turkish combat drones obtained by Azerbaijan were hailed by the Azerbaijani president for having played an "exceptional" role in the country's military victory over Armenia during the 44-day war. The Turkey-Azerbaijani partnership in the non-military spheres has likewise recorded new highs in recent years. In 2020, having signed a preferential trade agreement, the two states aim at reaching a \$15 billion trade volume target. According to the Azerbaijan's Statistical Committee, the trade turnover between the two countries accounted for 4.5 billion dollars in 2019, marking a significant rise from its volume of less than 600 million dollars in 2005. The establishment of visa-free travel and the recent agreement on the travel with identity card as a border crossing document are likely to further boost the relations between the two countries that characterize themselves as "one nation, two states". Overall, a long list of other agreements has been reached by Turkey and Azerbaijan over the last few years profoundly reinforcing strategic partnership between the two countries and enabling them to confront regional and global challenges together. As Vasif Huseynov pointed out, "the Pakistan-Azerbaijan-Turkey trilateral cooperation platform constitutes, therefore, an important element in Azerbaijan's foreign policies. Not only does this allow Azerbaijan to confront security challenges more assertively, but also provides a unique opportunity to revive the country's economy that has been affected by the fall of oil prices and global economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic".

VI. Nakhchivan Corridor will strengthen the connectivity in the South Caucasus

Along with political advantages, the victory of Azerbaijan in the war created substantial

economic advantages for itself and regional countries. According to the 9th clause of the trilateral declaration, all economic and transport links in the region will be restored and the Republic of Armenia guarantees the safety of transport links between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to organize an unhindered movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions. The Nakhchivan corridor will become an integral part of both north-south and east-west transport corridors going through the South Caucasus. The new corridor will put an end to the economic blockade of Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. Currently, Nakhchivan linked to Azerbaijan either through Iran in the south or Turkey in the west. A direct line with Nakhchivan will shorten the travel time and cut transportations costs. The Nakhchivan Corridor will create new economic opportunities for the regional countries as well. Through this corridor, Turkey will get a direct access to Azerbaijan without using the land routes via Georgia and Iran. Compared to the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, which connects Azerbaijan to Turkey through Georgia, the road within the new corridor will be about 340 km shorter. As this corridor will shorten the transportation distance and decrease the transportation costs, the bilateral trade between Azerbaijan and Turkey will increase. It will also positively affect the tourism relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey as it will create a more comfortable land route for the movement of tourists. In a broader sense, the corridor promises to give Ankara another route to access the Caspian Sea and the Turkic world of Central Asia. It is also worth noting that Turkey has announced plans to build a new railway link from Turkey to Nakhchivan, which would expand cargo and passenger transportation in the region and boost the capacity of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad. The

total investment amount will be \$200-270 million and a 230 kilometers long line will start from Kars-Iğdır and continue to Nakhchivan. From there, the line will be connected to the railway line that continues to Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and other regions of Azerbaijan through the Nakhchivan corridor. The connection of the Kars-Nakhchivan railway to the Nakhchivan corridor will also boost economic relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey.

The issue of restoring and opening of new transport lines between Azerbaijan and Armenia has called into question Georgia's role as a transit country. However, the already existing and secure transit routes from Georgia are not likely to diminish in their role. The fully operational infrastructure like the various pipelines, roads and major railway transits that have made Georgia a transit country are to remain as relevant and still pose advantages for the country. As Ulviyya Bayramli, an advisor at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), pointed out, "one transport line is unlikely to fulfill all the bilateral trade and transport needs of Turkey and Azerbaijan. The two transit routes connecting Azerbaijan and Turkey should be seen as complementary, rather than contradictory to each other".

The cooperative relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia can be rightfully used as an example of the benefits that regional cooperation can deliver. Built on regional energy and transit projects, the two countries have managed to maintain positive relations despite the threats and power shifts of the past 30 years. Over the years, Azerbaijan has become Georgia's major provider of energy security; Georgia, in turn, has become a transit country through which Azerbaijan has been able to export its energy supplies. Built on a shared understanding of regional challenges

and common interests in energy and trade, the two countries have managed to enjoy stable relations. Additionally, successful cooperation has made further opportunities for mutual partnerships a possibility. Azerbaijan also remains as the largest foreign direct investor in Georgia and Azerbaijani companies are the largest taxpayers in the country, as strong and prosperous Georgia is only of interest for Azerbaijan.

The creation of the Nakhchivan corridor is also advantageous for Russia as it creates an alternative land links to the regional countries. The southern part of Russia's railway network is connected to Azerbaijan railways, and using this connection, Russian trains could easily reach the Nakhchivan corridor and then be directed to the lines that extend to Armenia, Turkey and Iran. For Russia, this road could also serve as an alternative pathway to the markets of the Middle East. Taking into account that in recent years the trade turnover between Russia and Turkey has been considerably growing and due to political issues, Russia was not able to use land routes of Georgia for getting a direct link to Armenia, the Nakhchivan corridor will create great economic advantages for Russia. Armenia could also significantly benefit from the Nakhchivan corridor if it chooses to return to peaceful policies and cooperation. By using this corridor, Armenia could end its economic isolation, join the regional transport projects and, more importantly, to get a land link to the market of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which was one of the main economic obstacles for Armenia in recent years. The absence of land roads between Russia and Armenia was also negatively affecting bilateral trade relations between them. Thus, the Nakhchivan corridor could become an effective project for the development of economic relations of Armenia with EEU, including Russia. By using

this corridor, Armenia also could obtain a rail connection with Iran. The planned construction of a railroad between Armenia and Iran through the Megri region has been postponed because of the high costs. Now the new corridor gives a great chance for Armenia to eliminate the problems related to the transportation of cargos to Iran. Establishing the Nakhchivan corridor in parallel to BTK Azerbaijan will add a new artery to the Middle Corridor, the mainland corridor that connects Asia with Europe and will strengthen its position as a regional transportation hub in the region. As Orkhan Baghirov, a leading advisor at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), noted, "along with regional countries, the planned corridor should be in the interests of European, Central Asian countries and China as it creates a new alternative for the transportation of cargos both in eastern and western directions. All the mentioned advantages show that the Nakhchivan corridor could become one of the main elements of the new order in South Caucasus – *Pax Caucasia*".

VII. *Pax Caucasia*: Peace in the South Caucasus should be based on reciprocity

On November 10, 2020, Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a ceasefire declaration, under the auspices of Russia, that ended the 44-day war. The ceasefire declaration contains several critical clauses, which, if fully implemented, could create a real opportunity for sustainable peace in the region. In this regard, the role of the West may prove essential. At the same time, the Second Karabakh War has revealed the intellectual shallowness of the Western strategic thinking about the South Caucasus. The West should leave its obsolete and stereotypical views

about the South Caucasus at the door and reengage with the region more pragmatically. Despite all the challenges, there is a major chance for the development of the region. Both the US and the EU could play a much more constructive role in the region by helping, among other things, to reconcile the belligerent parties and restore destroyed sites, including both Islamic and Christian cultural monuments. Both actors could also more actively support connectivity projects which will strengthen the regional cooperation, including the Azerbaijan-Nakhchivan Corridor, which will link Azerbaijan's landlocked exclave Nakhchivan with the mainland.

The ceasefire declaration contains crucial clauses about the opening of communication and transportation links in the region. Azerbaijan committed to allow a flow of people and goods, monitored by Russian peacekeepers, through the so-called Lachin corridor, which connects Armenia with the Armenian population in Karabakh. In the meantime, in accordance with the declaration, Armenia pledged to grant land access through its Megri region between Azerbaijan proper and the Nakhichevan exclave. Other communication lines are also about to be opened. Azerbaijan has already signed an agreement with Russia for the delivery of humanitarian supplies to Armenians in Karabakh through Azerbaijani territories. The potential for opening transportation links can create the ground for future regional cooperation and better connectivity. Azerbaijan invested in and successfully implemented a number of transportation projects – the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad, Trans-Caspian fiber-optic line, and others – to promote greater connectivity between Europe and Asia. In contrast, Armenia has, for all these years, owing to the occupation of Azerbaijani territories, been left isolated from regional

projects, including oil and gas pipelines. Georgia, as a transit beneficiary, earns millions of dollars from closer regional cooperation. The end of the Second Karabakh War has opened up new infrastructure opportunities for the South Caucasus. Since the conclusion of the fighting, Azerbaijani and regional officials, including Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have offered an alternative future for the South Caucasus and even invited Armenia to join regional projects from which it had been isolated for decades. By renouncing its territorial claims, Armenia might put an end to its isolation. However, thus far revanchist and extremist forces in Armenia have prevailed over the political discourse in the country.

Securing a lasting peace in the region requires a genuine push and equal effort from all sides. Unfortunately, so far it seems that Azerbaijan is the only one who is pulling its weight. Azerbaijan has been consistent in demonstrating goodwill, particularly when it comes to addressing the needs of ordinary people in the region. Baku was willing to allow humanitarian work by Russian peacekeepers to alleviate the many hardships faced by the local Armenian population residing in the areas under those peacekeepers' control and facilitated the transfer of goods through mainland. The items are transported via rail as far as Barda city, then taken by road to the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Azerbaijan allowed such an assistance to take place in consideration of the advent of winter despite the fact that Baku was not under any obligation to do so, as President Ilham Aliyev recently noted. Azerbaijan also allowed Armenian citizens to continue using the parts of the Gorus–Kafan road that pass through the newly liberated Azerbaijani territories. Unfortunately, instead of appreciating this constructive step by Azerbaijan, Armenian extremists put derogative graffiti on a highway

sign portraying the Azerbaijani map placed on the Azerbaijani part of the highway. Videos of Armenians criticizing their own government as well as Azerbaijan for placing this sign alongside the Gorus–Kafan highway went viral on social media. Azerbaijan also gave a ten-day extension of the deadline for the Armenian troops and illegal settlers in Kalbajar to leave the region. Unfortunately, this sign of goodwill was not reciprocated by the Armenian side. On the contrary, the Armenian population engaged in full-scale looting in Kalbajar—destroying and burning houses, cutting down trees, cutting electricity transmission lines, and damaging infrastructure and religious and cultural monuments. The most egregious example of such looting activity was the removal of 800-year-old frescoes from the walls of the Khudaveng (Dadivang) monastery in Kalbajar.

All of this shows that Azerbaijan is genuinely interested in building lasting peace in the region. Azerbaijan and Turkey also proposed to launch a multilateral cooperation platform involving all six countries of the region—Turkey, Azerbaijan, Russia, Iran, Georgia, and also Armenia. At the same time, building peace in the region should be a two-way street. Unfortunately, Azerbaijan’s efforts to advance confidence-building with Armenia are falling on deaf ears on the Armenian side. Success in unblocking all communications and launching new cooperation platforms is contingent upon the goodwill and dedication of all parties—and Armenia’s willingness to turn the page on a history marred by occupation, irredentism, heightened nationalism, and expansionism. Such policies have caused enormous damage and calamities in a region that has already lost many opportunities for peace and prosperity. Moreover, utterly delusional nationalistic and irredentist forces in Armenia are still trying to upend the fragile peace in the region,

undermining the chances of achieving lasting peace and security in the South Caucasus.

During the almost 30-year occupation of the territories of Azerbaijan, the Armenia troops have committed numerous acts of humanitarian, environmental, religious and cultural vandalism. By destroying cultural and religious sites, renaming the cities, Armenia sought to falsify the history and erase all traces of Azerbaijani cultural heritage in the occupied territories. Moreover, with the liberation of the occupied lands as a result of the 44-day war, numerous instances of war crimes and destruction committed during the occupation of Azerbaijani lands by Armenian troops have been discovered. Memorial sites built in memory of those who fought and died during the Second World War in Fuzuli, Jebrail, Gubadli, Zangilan, Aghdam, Lachin were damaged or destroyed. Destruction of those memorials by a country that glorifies Nazi accomplices like Garegin Nzhdeh and Drastamat Kanayan is offensive not only for the Azerbaijani people, but also for all those who fought and sacrificed their lives in the fight against Nazism during the Second World War.

Just recently, as a result of an anti-terror operation, Azerbaijan captured dozens Armenian militias in the forest area around the liberated Hadrut settlement in the Khojavand district of Azerbaijan, who, by going through the Lachin corridor after the declaration of November 10, arrived at the newly liberated territories to carry out acts of sabotage against Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, this kind of sabotage has historically been a part of Armenia’s modus operandi towards Azerbaijan. Armenian terrorist organizations systematically and deliberately carried out acts of terrorism on Azerbaijani territory. On March 19, 1994, 14 civilians lost their lives and 49 were injured as a result of the bombed attack

perpetrated at the “20 January” metro station in Baku. It goes without saying that such actions only serve to increase animosity and diminish the chances of reconciliation between the two states. Such incidents compromise the structural integrity of the newly achieved fragile peace in the region.

At the same time, one of the crucial clauses of the November 10 declaration still remains unimplemented. According to Paragraph 4, all Armenian armed forces should be withdrawn from Azerbaijani territories. The influx of Armenian militants and military cargo through the Lachin corridor into the territories of Azerbaijan is a critical issue. So far, it seems that the Russian peacekeeping mission is unwilling to engage with Azerbaijani authorities on this matter. In a territory currently controlled by Russian peacekeepers, Armenian militants are still unrestrained and occasionally attack Azerbaijani positions and settlements. Russia insists of the inability of its peacekeepers to disarm the Armenians. However, Moscow already managed to make Armenians withdraw from three formerly occupied regions—Agdam, Kelbajar, and Lachin—in line with a clause contained in the November 10 declaration. Unfortunately, it should be underscored that Russian peacekeepers are not acting against these Armenian militants, though their deployment was conditional on the full withdrawal of Armenian troops.

Building durable peace in the region should be a collective effort. The situation in which

Azerbaijan is the only one who is pulling its weight and continuously demonstrating goodwill and patience, while others engage in sabotage and undercut any peace efforts is inherently unsustainable and cannot last forever. As Dr. Farid Shafiyev, Chairman of the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), pointed out, “the year 2021 will be decisive in terms of the direction of the region: towards peace or renewed tension. One thing is for sure, however: Azerbaijan has exhibited its strategic patience and determination to fully restore control over its internationally recognized territory, and it will continue to do so in the future”. As Dr. Esmira Jafarova, a Board Member of the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), noted, “unilateral efforts will not deliver solid results and might eventually fall by the wayside. It is important that both sides engage in cooperative behaviors towards each other for the benefit of building a *Pax Caucasia*”, adding that “*Pax Caucasia* should no longer remain a distant dream; for the first time since the independence of the former Soviet republics of the South Caucasus, prospects for achieving this ideal seem within reach. It is high time to heal old wounds and move forward: towards a better, prosperous, and peaceful South Caucasus”.