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HIGHLIGHT OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

Table of contents

- I. Azerbaijan celebrates the 3rd anniversary of the Victory in the Patriotic War
2
- II. Azerbaijan marks the anniversary of the Victory in the Patriotic War with military parade in Khankendi
4
- III. The EU urgently needs a balanced approach to the South Caucasus
7
- IV. The path to empowering the South Caucasus goes through regional cooperation
9
- V. The ripple effect of US-Azerbaijan discord on regional stability in the South Caucasus
12
- VI. The 10th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States was held in Astana
16
- VII. President Ilham Aliyev attends 16th Summit of Economic Cooperation Organization in Tashkent
21
- VIII. Baku hosts the 18th session of the SPECA Governing Council
22
- IX. The 5th meeting of the State Commissions on the delimitation of the state border between Azerbaijan and Armenia
25

I. Azerbaijan celebrates the 3rd anniversary of the Victory in the Patriotic War

On November 8, Azerbaijan marked the third anniversary of the 44-Day Patriotic War, a significant moment in the country's history when Azerbaijan liberated its territories from Armenian occupation. This war, spanning 44 days from September 27 to November 10, 2020, culminated in the recovery of a major portion of territories that had been under Armenian occupation since the early 1990s. A critical aspect of the conflict was Azerbaijan's approach to conducting military operations. The Azerbaijani forces were notably cautious to avoid endangering the civilian population in the Karabagh region. This contrasted with the actions of the Armenian forces, who were reported to have deliberately targeted civilian areas in Azerbaijani cities distant from the frontlines, resulting in 100 civilian deaths. In stark contrast, Azerbaijan chose not to launch attacks on civilian population. This humanitarian strategy adopted by Azerbaijan resulted in significantly fewer casualties among Armenian civilians in Karabagh, with the count being limited to 60 during the entire duration of the war. Experts have noted that the civilian casualty rate in this conflict was exceptionally low, falling below 2 percent, a figure remarkably lower than those observed in other recent conflicts.

The aftermath of the 44 Day War had broad and complex implications, affecting not only the involved parties but also the wider South Caucasus region. The impact of the war extended beyond the political and geopolitical realms, influencing aspects such as the economy, regional

connectivity, and integration. Three years on, it is evident that the 44 Day War has initiated a new chapter in the history of the South Caucasus, signaling significant shifts and developments in the region's landscape.

For nearly three decades prior to the 44-Day War, Armenia and Azerbaijan were engaged in extended peace negotiations, a period characterized by intermittent escalations and casualties, including military personnel and sometimes civilians, on both sides. Armenia's approach during this time was clear-cut: its leaders intended to extend the negotiations while reinforcing control over the occupied territories through the separatist regime. This strategy also involved settling illegal settlers from Armenia and the Middle East in these areas. Meanwhile, the international community did not effectively enforce the United Nations Security Council resolutions of 1993, which demanded the immediate withdrawal of occupying forces from Azerbaijani territories. The 44-Day War created a breakthrough in this stalemate, though it did not lead to complete resolutions. After the war ended with the signing of a trilateral statement by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia on November 10, 2020, Armenia refused to fulfill key elements of the agreement. Significantly, Yerevan did not agree to the Azerbaijani demand for the withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from Azerbaijani territories, where Russian peacekeeping forces were stationed as per the trilateral statement. The presence of Armenian forces, along with the illegal units of the local separatist regime within the Russian peacekeeping zone, continued to pose a security threat

to Azerbaijan. Even after Armenia officially recognized the presence of its troops on Azerbaijani land in July 2022 and committed to their withdrawal, the issue persisted. Concurrently, the leadership of the separatist entity in Karabagh disregarded Azerbaijan's proposals for the peaceful reintegration of the Armenian residents in Karabagh into Azerbaijan's constitutional framework.

The peace process in the aftermath of the 44 Day War was further complicated by the partial policies of the French government and certain Western political factions. These entities indirectly supported the separatist leaders, bolstering their rigid stance against Azerbaijan.

Despite Yerevan's official recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, including Karabagh, following the 44 Day War, the situation led to strained relations. In September 2023, a critical juncture was reached when Azerbaijan conducted a one-day anti-terror operation against the separatist regime in Karabagh, dealing a decisive blow to the separatist leadership. Faced with no other options, the separatist leaders ultimately surrendered and fully accepted Azerbaijan's terms.

This operation triggered a widespread departure of the Armenian population from the Karabagh region. Subsequent investigations by international entities, including a United Nations observer mission sent to Karabagh, refuted allegations of forced displacement and ethnic cleansing. Armenians who left Karabagh reported that their departure was voluntary and not due to mistreatment. They indicated that it was their own leaders who advised them to

evacuate after Azerbaijani control was established over the region. In response, Baku initiated various reintegration initiatives, inviting the Armenian community to return, and offering Azerbaijani citizenship, social benefits, and other rights.

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Therefore, the disbandment of the separatist regime in Karabagh symbolized the definitive end of the "Nagorno-Karabakh" project. This initiative, originally established in 1923 by the Soviet government as a means to exert influence over Azerbaijan, was later exploited by Armenia in its efforts to annex a portion of Azerbaijani territory.

The longstanding territorial dispute over Azerbaijan's occupied territories significantly hindered the economic growth and regional integration in the South Caucasus, involving both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Since gaining

independence in the early 1990s, the area has lost numerous opportunities due to this conflict. This discord not only destabilized regional peace and security but also inflated costs for various economic initiatives, complicated the transformation of the South Caucasus into a major transportation nexus, and deterred potential investments.

However, the trilateral agreement signed on November 10 by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia offered more than just a ceasefire; it laid a foundation for post-war development in the region. A critical aspect of this agreement, its 9th article, emphasized re-establishing transportation and communication links that had been severed since the First Karabagh War. It particularly focused on restoring these connections, including a corridor through Armenia's Syunik region, the Zangezur corridor, to link mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave.

Despite the agreement, Armenia has not fully adhered to its commitments, particularly regarding the withdrawal of its troops from Karabagh and the development of the Zangezur corridor. Consequently, negotiations over this corridor have not yielded tangible outcomes. Azerbaijan, meanwhile, has secured an alternative route through Iranian territory, lessening its reliance on the passage through Armenia. Nonetheless, the Zangezur corridor's opening appears imminent, which would benefit Armenia by ending its regional isolation and integrating it into broader transportation networks. This is highlighted in Armenia's "Crossroads for Peace" initiative announced in October

2023, aimed at fostering enhanced connectivity in the South Caucasus.

The resolution of this conflict presents a valuable opportunity for regional integration, not just within the South Caucasus among Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, but also with Russia, Iran, and Turkiye. Following the fall of the separatist regime in Karabagh, high-level meetings among these nations have occurred, coinciding with intensified peace negotiations between Baku and Yerevan.

The resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict marks a pivotal moment for the South Caucasus, opening doors to peace, stability, and cooperation. It is crucial for the international community, including the European Union and the United States, to support these efforts. The South Caucasus stands at a critical juncture, and it is imperative not to squander this opportunity for progress and regional harmony.

II. Azerbaijan marks the anniversary of the Victory in the Patriotic War with military parade in Khankendi

On November 8, a military parade dedicated to the third anniversary of the Victory in the Patriotic War was held in the city of Khankendi. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces Ilham Aliyev made a speech at the parade. In a speech during a parade, President Ilham Aliyev reflected on the historic victory in the Second Karabagh War, emphasizing the liberation of Shusha three years ago. This event marked the enemy's surrender and

symbolized a complete triumph for Azerbaijan. The president recounted the long period of occupation, during which the Azerbaijani people tirelessly worked towards liberating their lands. President Ilham Aliyev recalled his promise, made 20 years ago upon first assuming the presidency, to do everything within his power to restore Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. He had vowed to raise the Azerbaijani flag in every occupied area, a promise he reiterated five years ago during a military parade.

The speech praised the Azerbaijani Armed Forces for their bravery, heroism, and determination, which led to the enemy's expulsion from ancestral lands. The Shusha operation was highlighted as a particularly significant achievement, carried out under challenging conditions with immense strength and dedication.

The president also addressed the diminishing hopes for peace talks over the years, criticizing Armenia's refusal to voluntarily withdraw and the mediators' attempts to freeze the conflict. President Ilham Aliyev stressed that Azerbaijan never accepted this situation and had always been prepared to liberate its lands through war if necessary. President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that had the Armenian leadership and its foreign supporters heeded his warnings, the war could have been avoided. The 44-day war was a testament to Azerbaijan's resolve and the justness of their cause.

During the 44-day war, Azerbaijan faced considerable pressure and threats from

various sources. Despite this, the country remained steadfast in its mission. The head of state recounted how, during the war, he proposed that the enemy provide a schedule for vacating Azerbaijani lands, offering to cease hostilities upon such an agreement. This eventually led to the enemy's readiness to capitulate following the victory in Shusha, resulting in the signing of the Capitulation Act and the cessation of the war.

The decision to stop the war, especially when Azerbaijani forces were close to capturing Khankendi, was a deliberate and strategic choice. This choice, as emphasized by President Ilham Aliyev, has proven to be correct and wise, particularly with the military parade being held in Khankendi.

The end of the war on November 10, 2020, enabled Azerbaijan to reclaim the districts of Aghdam, Kalbadjar, and Lachin without any military conflict, as part of the capitulation agreement signed by Armenia. Armenia complied with this demand due to the evident strength of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces and the resolute leadership of Azerbaijan. This peaceful reclamation of territories spared the lives of many Azerbaijani soldiers.

Post-war, Azerbaijan continued to strengthen its military and rapidly secured strategic positions in the Karabagh region and along the Azerbaijan-Armenia border, which had been occupied for years. This move was in response to potential revanchist sentiments in Armenia and provocative actions encouraged by

external forces. President Ilham Aliyev explained that these military maneuvers were necessary to safeguard the border and signal to Armenia's political leadership the importance of adhering to the Capitulation Act, particularly the withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from Karabagh. However, contrary to the agreement, Armenia not only failed to withdraw its forces but also increased its military presence in the region. This situation was exacerbated by the lack of Azerbaijani control over the Lachin-Khankendi road, which was used to transport weapons and mines into the area.

In his speech, President Ilham Aliyev detailed the significance of various military operations conducted over the past three years, including the Farrukh and Saribaba-Girkgiz operations. These operations, President Ilham Aliyev emphasized, not only bolstered Azerbaijan's strategic positions but also served as a clear message to Armenia: that Karabagh belongs to Azerbaijan, and Armenia must withdraw its forces from Azerbaijani lands. President Ilham Aliyev expressed that if Armenia had heeded his warnings, the September anti-terror measures would not have been necessary, suggesting that Armenia's current predicaments stem from actions initiated in the early 1990s.

President Ilham Aliyev recalled how, in the past, Armenia, confident in its occupation of Azerbaijani lands and its military strength, underestimated Azerbaijan's resolve and capability. The head of state reiterated that Azerbaijan had always been

clear about not accepting the ongoing situation and was prepared to take military action if a peaceful resolution was not achieved. President Ilham Aliyev expressed disappointment that the professionalism and heroism displayed by Azerbaijan during the 44 days of conflict did not serve as a lesson for the Armenian leadership.

The September anti-terror operation, which lasted less than a day, was a decisive victory for Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani Army demonstrated its professionalism and heroism, capturing all strategic locations and effectively dissolving the so-called regime that Armenia had established in Azerbaijani territories 30 years ago. This operation restored historical justice and marked September 20, 2023, as a significant date in Azerbaijan's history, alongside November 8. On these dates, the Azerbaijani forces broke the enemy's defenses, leading to their surrender and the restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and state sovereignty.

President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that the era of separatism in Azerbaijan is over, with the entire territory now under Azerbaijani control. This achievement, President Ilham Aliyev credited to the bravery and sacrifices of the Azerbaijani soldiers present at the parade and throughout the country.

In his stirring speech, President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the long journey towards the present victory, spanning 20 years of strategic preparation and strengthening Azerbaijan's stance in

international law. President Ilham Aliyev credited the country's successful political maneuvering for the growing global recognition of Azerbaijan's rightful position. The economic reforms, President Ilham Aliyev noted, were pivotal in building an independent economy, allowing Azerbaijan to shape its destiny without external dependence.

President Ilham Aliyev highlighted that building a strong army was the top priority, with significant emphasis on material and technical supplies, modern weapons, and most importantly, instilling a sense of patriotism in the youth. President Ilham Aliyev stressed that victories are won not just by weapons and technology, but by the courage and willingness of soldiers and officers to risk their lives. The Azerbaijani forces, President Ilham Aliyev proudly recounted, overcame formidable defenses and treacherous terrain, demonstrating unmatched heroism and dedication. This bravery, President Ilham Aliyev assured, would forever be remembered and had showcased to the world the strength and resolve of the Azerbaijani people.

Regarding the 44-day war, President Ilham Aliyev mentioned the significance of the liberation of Shusha, Khankendi, and Khojaly and celebrated the achievement of raising the Azerbaijani flag in these key locations. The decision to halt military action three years ago, President Ilham Aliyev reiterated, was correct and paved the way for the full restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereignty.

The head of state also addressed the misplaced confidence of the Armenian leadership and their supporters, affirming that the Azerbaijani forces had proven on the battlefield that Karabagh is Azerbaijan. President Ilham Aliyev warned of the potential for revanchist sentiments and cautioned any external forces against underestimating Azerbaijan's capabilities. President Ilham Aliyev stressed that Azerbaijan's army had demonstrated unparalleled professionalism and dedication in the 21st century, and its people's love for their homeland was unmatched.

Concluding his speech, President Ilham Aliyev declared that Azerbaijan did not seek a new war, having achieved its goals of restoring international law, historical justice, and national dignity. President Ilham Aliyev proclaimed the enemy's defeat and expressed pride in addressing the Victorious Armed Forces. However, he emphasized that the continued strengthening of the military would remain a priority, ensuring that Azerbaijan's achievements and security remain unchallenged.

III. The EU urgently needs a balanced approach to the South Caucasus

The recent developments in the South Caucasus, including the postponement and cancellation of high-level meetings and summits under the EU's mediation, highlight the challenges faced by the European Union in maintaining its role as a neutral facilitator in the Armenia-

Azerbaijan peace process. The actions and policies of France and some Western countries, clearly biased against Azerbaijan, have raised concerns about the EU's overall effectiveness in the region. This sentiment was echoed by Hikmet Hajiyev, Foreign Policy Advisor to the President of Azerbaijan, who criticized France's actions and militarization policy for undermining regional peace and stability, thereby jeopardizing the EU's policy towards the South Caucasus. Further complicating matters was the visit of German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock to Baku on November 5. Her use of Armenian names for Azerbaijani cities and an inaccurate claim about meeting with Azerbaijani IDPs during a press conference indicated a strained atmosphere in negotiations. Jeyhun Bayramov's, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, response to Baerbock's comments underscored the importance of respecting international law and accurate representation in diplomatic dialogues.

On October 25, Toivo Klaar, the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, announced the postponement of the scheduled Brussels meeting between Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and President Ilham Aliyev, mediated by European Council President Charles Michel. This delay, attributed to scheduling conflicts, follows the previous cancellation of a similar EU-brokered summit set for October 5 on the sidelines of the European Political Community event, which was called off by Azerbaijan. Klaar's reasoning of busy schedules for the Brussels summit's cancellation was met with skepticism. This skepticism intensified following

Azerbaijan's refusal to attend the Granada summit, which proceeded with Pashinyan's attendance along with leaders like French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and Charles Michel, but without President Ilham Aliyev. This development suggested potential further complications in the European-mediated Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. Baku's dissatisfaction stems from issues like France's military aid to Armenia, casting doubts on France's neutrality as a mediator, and negative portrayals in Western media and political circles. Despite Azerbaijan's high-level denials, Western media outlets have been actively circulating propaganda about Azerbaijan's alleged plans to invade Armenia.

“Here Azerbaijan, and indeed Armenia too are the collateral damage of the greater geopolitical power game”, Farid Shafiyev, Chairman of the Center of Analysis of International Relations, noted, pointing out that these developments might be part of a larger geopolitical strategy. Western powers could be using this scenario to expand their influence in Armenia and reduce Russia's role in the region, and, in this context, both Azerbaijan and Armenia might be unintended victims in this broader geopolitical game.

The strained relations between Azerbaijan and the EU, particularly the challenges facing the Brussels platform for Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks, are concerning for both sides. The EU is Azerbaijan's largest trading partner, accounting for a significant portion of its foreign trade. Conversely, Azerbaijan is a key EU partner in the South Caucasus, especially as an

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The Brussels format of the Armenia-Azerbaijani peace talks played an important role in resolving outstanding issues between Baku and Yerevan. The mutual recognition of territorial integrity between Armenia and Azerbaijan in October 2022, facilitated by the EU, marked a significant step towards this goal.

Moreover, the EU's support is essential for promoting regional integration in the South Caucasus and developing a cooperative platform among the three countries of the region. The EU should have a vested interest in supporting and benefiting from such integration. Enhanced ties among the South Caucasus countries can unlock their potential as economic partners and connectivity hubs for the EU, among other advantages. In light of these considerations, revitalizing the EU's constructive role in the South Caucasus is imperative. A balanced approach by the EU and its leading member states is crucial for restoring confidence in the EU's mediation efforts and advancing peace, stability, and prosperity in the region.

IV. The path to empowering the South Caucasus goes through regional cooperation

As global attention is focused on conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas tensions, significant shifts are occurring in the post-Soviet arena, particularly concerning the long-standing dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Karabagh region. With Azerbaijan's recent assertion of full sovereignty over Karabagh, a conflict that has spanned three decades appears to be drawing to a close, though the journey towards lasting peace continues.

In this evolving geopolitical landscape, the realignment of regional relationships, especially between Armenia and Russia, is drawing attention. Traditionally close allies

in both military and economic terms, this alliance is now being reassessed. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, in an interview with Italy's *La Repubblica*, expressed regret over Armenia's reliance on Russia, particularly in military matters. His remarks were reiterated in *The Wall Street Journal*, where he questioned the benefits of hosting Russian military bases in Armenia.

This perceived shift in Armenia's stance towards Russia, while highlighted by Western observers as a strategic realignment, warrants a more nuanced view. Armenia's economic ties with Russia remain strong, evidenced by a trade volume of \$4.6 billion, largely consisting of Armenian exports to Russia, including Western products now subject to sanctions. Furthermore, several Armenian companies have been blacklisted by the United States.

Armenia's political alignment also shows continued support for Russia. This is evident from Armenia's vote against Ukraine at the United Nations and its unique position within the Council of Europe. Additionally, Armenia's military involvement in Syria and its sustained relations with Iran further illustrate the complexity of its foreign policy and alliances.

The recent tensions between Yerevan and Moscow can be traced back to Armenia's expectations regarding Russian support for its claims in the Karabagh region of Azerbaijan. This area, along with several adjacent territories, was under Armenian

control for nearly three decades. However, as early as the 2016 clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it became apparent that Russia was not in a position to halt Azerbaijan's military advances. The current situation, with its focus on the so-called Zangezur corridor – a proposed link between Azerbaijan and its Nakhichevan exclave – has raised concerns among various news outlets and experts about the potential for renewed conflict.

To understand the situation more fully, it's important to revisit some fundamental aspects of the conflict. First, the conflict originated about thirty-five years ago with the Armenian slogan "miatsum" (unification), indicating that it began with an Armenian territorial claim. Second, the majority of the conflict's destruction and activities occurred within Azerbaijani territory, making Azerbaijan the most significantly impacted party. Third, the conflict saw the first complete ethnic cleansing in Armenia between 1988 and 1989, resulting in the expulsion of all Azerbaijanis from Armenian territory. Moreover, international law has generally sided with Azerbaijan, as evidenced by four United Nations resolutions calling for the withdrawal of occupying forces from Azerbaijani lands. While both nations have suffered due to the conflict, the portrayal of the situation in much of the Western media has often been skewed in favor of the Armenian perspective. This reporting bias tends to reflect Orientalist views, frequently tinged with Islamophobic and Turcophobic sentiments, which distort the

true nature of the conflict and its impact on both parties.

While the West has shown unequivocal support for the territorial integrity of nations like Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, its stance on Azerbaijan has been less clear, often viewed through an Orientalist lens. Interestingly, after the 2020 Second Karabagh War, some Western institutions and experts seemed to endorse Russian control over the Karabagh region.

The conflict in Ukraine has elevated the discourse on territorial integrity, leading the United States and the European Union to gradually reassess their positions on the Armenia-Azerbaijan territorial dispute.

However, not all Western entities align with Washington's perspective. France, for instance, has shifted from its mediator role to openly supporting Armenia by supplying modern weaponry, including air defense systems. This move is controversial given that Armenia's air defense is controlled by Russia. This situation echoes the U.S. response to Türkiye's acquisition of Russia's S-400 system and its implications for NATO's security. Yet, here we see France, a NATO member, planning to provide arms to a nation under Russian airspace control.

The ongoing narrative about Azerbaijan's alleged intentions to seize Armenian territory, consistently refuted by both Azerbaijani and U.S. officials as baseless, is counterproductive for regional stability.

For sustainable peace, both Armenia and Azerbaijan need to commit to a peace treaty anchored in the mutual recognition of territorial integrity. The media plays a critical role in this process, requiring unbiased reporting that fosters cooperation rather than perpetuating conflict through one-sided propaganda.

Additionally, both nations bear deep emotional scars from the conflict, necessitating joint efforts to foster reconciliation. International experiences, such as the British-Irish dialogue and Balkan peace initiatives, could provide valuable frameworks for this process.

Another pressing issue is the plight of refugees and internally displaced persons in both countries. While there's a focus on the Armenians who left the Karabagh region, a holistic approach is needed, acknowledging the rights of Azerbaijanis to return to Armenia. This comprehensive solution should include security guarantees and other necessary arrangements to facilitate the return and resettlement of displaced populations from both sides.

In the aftermath of conflict, transportation projects and economic initiatives hold the potential to dismantle the barriers erected by war. In this endeavor, the scope of efforts must extend beyond the bilateral dynamic between Armenia and Azerbaijan. A promising approach is the trilateral format involving South Caucasus countries, with Georgia potentially playing a pivotal role as a mediator. Central to this strategy is the notion that the nations of the South

Caucasus should reclaim agency over their collective future.

The key to freeing the South Caucasus from external influences lies in fostering genuine respect and reconciliation among its countries, rather than seeking support from external powers. This approach marks a shift from the historical reliance on Russia and the recent turn towards Western alliances. By embracing mutual respect and collaborative economic efforts, the South Caucasus can chart a course towards regional autonomy and sustainable peace.

V. The ripple effect of US-Azerbaijan discord on regional stability in the South Caucasus

In a significant development on November 16, Baku called off a scheduled meeting between the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers in Washington, scheduled for November 20. This cancellation highlighted a growing rift between Baku and Washington regarding the approach to US-mediated peace negotiations. The decision was influenced by comments made by US Assistant Secretary of State James O'Brien during a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on November 15.

On 27 November, United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken made a phone call to President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev. During the telephone conversation, President Ilham Aliyev said that "the latest statements and actions taken by the U.S. have seriously damaged Azerbaijan-U.S. relations. The head of state

noted that the remarks about our country, made by the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James O'Brien at the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe hearing on November 15, 2023, were biased, failed to reflect reality and were rejected by Azerbaijan. It was emphasized that Azerbaijani side took note of the statement about canceling the senior-level engagements with Azerbaijan and "no chance of business as usual", and responded adequately. President Ilham Aliyev reminded that Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on this matter on 16 November, and that Azerbaijan had in its turn canceled all senior-level visits from the U.S. With the aim of normalization of relationship, Secretary Blinken has asked to allow the visit of the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James O'Brien in December to Azerbaijan. President Ilham Aliyev has agreed to this proposal on the condition that after this visit the unfounded ban on the visits of Azerbaijani high-level officials to the United States will be lifted. Secretary Blinken has accepted that. Furthermore, it was stated that on 21 of November Armenia sent its comments with regard to Azerbaijan's proposals on the text of peace treaty, which was submitted on 11 of September 2023. Thus, Armenia has delayed its response for 70 days. 70-day long delay demonstrates again that Armenia misuses the text of the peace treaty as a pretext for the prolongation of negotiations process. During the telephone conversation the sides also exchanged views with respect to the upcoming meeting of the Commissions on the delimitation of the state borders which

will take place on 30 of November at the Azerbaijan-Armenia conditional border.”

O'Brien's remarks, particularly concerning the peace process, bilateral relations, and regional transit projects in the South Caucasus, have been a point of contention for Baku. He emphasized that the US could not go back to business as usual with Azerbaijan without substantial progress in the peace talks, mentioning the suspension of high-level visits and the cancellation of the Section 907 waiver of the Freedom Support Act of 1992. The amendment, adopted on October 24, 1992, bars the United States from offering assistance to Azerbaijan. Since 2002, the United States has been annually waiving the Section 907 amendment, following Azerbaijan's decision to allow the US to use its territory for supplying troops in Afghanistan. However, comments by Assistant Secretary of State James O'Brien have provoked a strong reaction from Baku. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted, “It turns out that the US side has always considered the support of Azerbaijan as occasional, while it should be remembered that history has always repeated itself.” For a long time, Azerbaijan has seen the Section 907 amendment as a stumbling block in its relationship with the United States. Baku has been vocal in its criticism of the amendment, arguing that it was unfairly implemented at a time when Azerbaijan was the victim of occupation, not Armenia. As Farid Shafiyev, Chairman of the Center for Analysis of International Relations, pointed out, “Let’s recall that the 907 amendment was adopted on 24 October 1992—the year when the Azerbaijani city Shusha was occupied by Armenian forces.”

The remarks by James O'Brien about a potential transit corridor traversing Iran indicate that the U.S. State Department's strong stance might be influenced by broader regional dynamics in the South Caucasus. O'Brien expressed concern over a future in the region dominated by Russia and Iran's involvement in its security, deeming it unstable and undesirable for both Azerbaijan and Armenia. He highlighted that these countries have the chance to choose a different path, noting Washington's preference for a land corridor through Armenia's southern region to mitigate Russian and Iranian influence in regional transit routes. Interestingly, this stance comes despite the U.S. not objecting to a recent Armenia-Iran agreement to construct a new road, intended to bolster the North-South project, a venture significant to both Moscow and Tehran.

In response, Azerbaijan underlined its commitment to regional solutions in peace negotiations. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan asserted the country's sovereign right to decide on communication lines with neighboring countries, including Iran. This statement reaffirms Azerbaijan's support for the '3+2' format (involving Türkiye, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Armenia) as essential for the region's security. Azerbaijan advocates for the revival of the '3+3' cooperation platform, which currently operates as '3+2' due to Georgia's absence, as a means to address regional conflicts and security issues. This approach signifies Azerbaijan's focus on involving regional players in shaping the future of the South Caucasus.

The '3+2' format, rooted in the principle of "regional solutions to regional problems," aims to fill the power vacuum caused by Russia's waning influence in the South Caucasus, preventing it from becoming a battleground for major powers. This approach heralds a potential new security order in the region, one not dominated by external actors, thereby allowing Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to diversify their foreign policies and safeguard their sovereignty.

This development reflects a deepening divide over how to advance the peace talks, with Azerbaijan advocating for regional solutions to regional problems, while the United States and the European Union seek to maintain their influence over the negotiations. The situation underscores the complexity of the peace process and the challenges in aligning the approaches of different stakeholders involved in the South Caucasus region.

During a hearing before the United States Congressional Committee on Foreign Affairs, a notable statement by James O'Brien, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, has raised eyebrows in Azerbaijan. Discussing the Armenia-Azerbaijan disputes and the South Caucasus's future, O'Brien warned of the instability and undesirability of a future security framework in the region dominated by Russia and Iran. He emphasized that both Azerbaijan and Armenia have a chance to chart a different course. This comment follows a series of events that suggest a shift towards a new security architecture in the South Caucasus.

Russia's declining influence in the region, exacerbated by its military challenges in Ukraine and domestic economic issues, has reached a critical low. Recent developments between Armenia and Azerbaijan, particularly since the mid-2020s, indicate a deviation from Moscow's preferred trajectory. The Kremlin saw its influence wane, with its strategic "Karabagh card" losing relevance as the region increasingly had fallen under Baku's control. This change has led to Russia initiating a phased withdrawal of its peacekeeping forces, signaling the end of a centuries-long influence project in the area.

Concurrently, the South Caucasus is witnessing the growing clout of other external players, notably Türkiye and Western nations. This shift in power dynamics has led many to predict a potential military escalation in the region. Such concerns are not unfounded, given the region's critical security importance to Russia and Iran. Both countries have been vocal in their opposition to foreign intervention, often cautioning against severe repercussions should there be an "encroachment" by other powers. This evolving geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus presents a complex and rapidly changing scenario, with significant implications for regional stability and international relations.

The recent revitalization of the 3+3 regional cooperation platform, which includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, along with the neighboring powers of Türkiye, Iran, and Russia, marks a significant development in addressing the shifting power dynamics in the South

Caucasus. The platform's ministerial meeting on October 23, following a two-year hiatus and Georgia's absence, represents a crucial step in this peaceful approach to regional power realignment, effectively operating as a 2+3 formula.

This development aligns with Azerbaijan and Türkiye's advocacy for "regional solutions to regional problems." The 3+3 framework potentially heralds a new security order in the South Caucasus, one that is not controlled by external actors and that empowers the local states. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are presented with an opportunity to diversify their foreign policies, reducing the influence of any single external power.

This security structure allows Russia, Iran, and Türkiye to safeguard their interests in the region, ensuring their concerns are respected by the local countries. Consequently, the South Caucasus stands at a crossroads, moving beyond Russian hegemony to become a pivotal bridge between the East and the West. Projects like the Middle Corridor and the Zangezur corridor are emblematic of this transformation, positioning the region as a connective axis between various global powers.

However, the statement by Ambassador James O'Brien suggests a different perspective from the United States, one that could lead to unintended consequences for the South Caucasus nations. O'Brien's anticipation of limiting Russia and Iran's access to the regional security framework could provoke these powers, possibly leading to retaliatory actions. It is crucial to consider the potential repercussions of such a stance

and the delicate balance required to maintain peace and stability in this strategically important region.

In the intricate geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus, Baku and increasingly Tbilisi are exercising a fine balancing act among major global powers. Their diplomatic strategy focuses on avoiding over-alignment with any single power, striving to maintain amicable relations with all sides. This approach contrasts sharply with the foreign policy direction of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, which differs significantly from those of Armenia's neighbors.

An Armenian analyst has pointed out the high-risk nature of Pashinyan's approach, which involves antagonizing Russia without securing solid security assurances from Western nations. This strategy carries the risk of not only straining Armenia-Russia relations but also potentially escalating into a military conflict with broader implications for the entire South Caucasus region. Previously, the repercussions of Pashinyan's policies were primarily felt by the Armenian people; however, should he persist with his current foreign policy approach, Azerbaijanis and Georgians might also find themselves adversely impacted.

The developments in Ukraine since March 2014 and the 2008 war in Georgia serve as stark reminders of the delicate power balance in the region. These events highlight the risks associated with pursuing idealistic foreign policies without a thorough consideration of the prevailing geopolitical context. In the face of escalating great power rivalries, it is increasingly vital for the South Caucasus

countries to recognize and accommodate these realities in their diplomatic endeavors.

Moreover, it is imperative for external powers to avoid forcing these nations into binary choices between different alliances. Such pressures could dangerously destabilize the already fragile regional security and stability, necessitating a more nuanced and understanding approach from international actors towards the complex dynamics at play in the South Caucasus.

VI. The 10th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States was held in Astana

The 10th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) was held on November 3, 2023, in Astana, Kazakhstan's capital. Leaders and representatives from both full and observer member nations attended the summit. Key outcomes of the summit included the signing of the OTS Tenth Summit Declaration and significant resolutions like designating Astana as the "Turkish World Financial Center" for 2024 and Istanbul for 2025. A notable move was the granting of Observer Status to the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) within the OTS, marking a step towards broader regional collaboration. Several other agreements aligned with the organization's goals were also finalized.

The Astana Summit culminated in the adoption of the extensive Astana Summit Declaration, encompassing 156 articles. This declaration reflects a commitment to

further institutionalize the OTS and enhance cooperation through the OTS Secretariat, suggesting a shift towards more integrated or coordinated efforts among various sub-entities that had previously operated autonomously.

The declaration focuses on enhancing collaboration in areas such as politics, foreign policy, and security. It underscores a united approach to strengthen cooperation and solidarity among Turkic States under the OTS framework. On the economic front, the declaration highlights the signing of the Agreement Establishing the Turkic Investment Fund (TIF) in Ankara on March 16, 2023, by Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. This agreement, which aims to foster economic collaboration, has been ratified by the parliaments of all signatory states, with Kyrgyzstan being the exception.

Speaking at the 10th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States, President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that strengthening relations with Turkic states is a high priority in Azerbaijan's foreign policy, highlighting the shared ethnic, cultural, and linguistic ties. Since the Nakhchivan Summit in 2009, cooperation in various fields has become institutionalized, elevating the OTS's international stature and political influence. President Ilham Aliyev also mentioned his extensive diplomatic engagements, including 20 visits to OTS Member and Observer states in the past two years, and reciprocated visits from leaders of these countries to Azerbaijan. President Ilham Aliyev expressed gratitude

for the support in declaring Shusha the Cultural Capital of the Turkic World for 2023, referencing the First Cultural Forum of the Turkic World held in October in Shusha. Highlighting economic cooperation, President Ilham Aliyev noted Azerbaijan's investment of over 20 billion US dollars in the economies of Turkic states, particularly Türkiye. President Ilham Aliyev mentioned the establishment of the Azerbaijan-Uzbekistan Investment Fund and the Azerbaijan-Kyrgyzstan Development Fund, demonstrating the deepening economic ties. The President also pointed out a 40 percent increase in Azerbaijan's trade turnover with Turkic states from January to September 2023 compared to the previous year. President Ilham Aliyev also addressed the importance of transportation and logistics in fostering relations, recognizing Azerbaijan's role as a reliable transit country between Central Asian markets, Türkiye, and Europe. President Ilham Aliyev concluded by affirming Azerbaijan's commitment to ensuring the East-West transportation corridor's sustainable operation.

In his speech, President Ilham Aliyev addressed the ongoing challenges to international law, highlighting the prevalence of wars and conflicts worldwide. President Ilham Aliyev stressed that under such conditions, a country's defence capability becomes its primary security guarantee. President Ilham Aliyev advocated for increased cooperation among the member states of the

Organization of Turkic States in security, defence, and defence industry sectors.

President Ilham Aliyev spoke about the long-standing conflict with Armenia, noting that Azerbaijan's territories were occupied by Armenia for nearly 30 years, during which an illegal regime was established. President Ilham Aliyev recounted the ethnic cleansing conducted by Armenia, resulting in over a million Azerbaijanis being expelled from their ancestral lands and the destruction of cities, villages, and cultural monuments by Armenian forces.

President Ilham Aliyev highlighted Azerbaijan's efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully, but pointed out that Armenia was intent on maintaining the status quo of occupation. President Ilham Aliyev referred to the Armenian Prime Minister's 2019 statement "Karabakh is Armenia, and full stop," made in the then-occupied city of Khankendi, as a termination of negotiations and an indication of Armenia's aggressive stance.

President Ilham Aliyev attributed the outbreak of the Second Karabagh War in 2020 to Armenia's provocative actions and statements, including military provocations. President Aliyev stated that Azerbaijan, exercising its right to self-defence as per Article 51 of the UN Charter, successfully restored its territorial integrity and historical justice during the 44-day Patriotic War, enforcing the UN Security Council resolutions that demanded Armenia's withdrawal from Azerbaijani territories.

Despite Armenia's occupation and ethnic cleansing policies, President Ilham Aliyev noted that Azerbaijan was the party that declared its readiness to sign a peace treaty with Armenia, based on five basic principles. President Ilham Aliyev observed that Armenia's actions remained contradictory, despite its formal recognition of Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity in 2022. President Ilham Aliyev condemned the continued presence of Armenian armed forces on Azerbaijani territory and recent actions by the Armenian Prime Minister as disrespectful and threatening to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

In his speech, President Ilham Aliyev discussed recent events in the liberated territories of Azerbaijan. On September 19, 2023, an explosion of landmines, planted by Armenian illegal armed formations, resulted in the deaths of six civilians and police personnel. Following this, Azerbaijan initiated local anti-terror operations to re-establish constitutional order and neutralize these illegal formations. The operation, which lasted 23 hours, led to the full restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereignty and constitutional order in these areas. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that there was no harm to civilians or civilian infrastructure during these measures, noting that Azerbaijan adhered to international humanitarian law. This was confirmed by a UN team that visited the region twice.

The President also spoke about the efforts undertaken by Azerbaijan in the reconstruction and restoration of the liberated territories following the end of the Patriotic War three years ago. The President mentioned that 7 billion US dollars from Azerbaijan's budget had already been allocated for these efforts, with an additional 2.4 billion US dollars planned for the following year.

Discussing the Great Return Program, President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the return of displaced persons to their rightful homes in the cities of Lachin and Fuzuli, and three villages. The President noted that over 140,000 people are expected to return to Karabagh and East Zangezur by the end of 2026.

President Ilham Aliyev expressed his gratitude to the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, for the construction of a school in Fuzuli, and to President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan for the ongoing construction of the Creativity Center in Fuzuli. He underscored these contributions as symbols of friendship and brotherhood between the peoples of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.

Since the Soviet Union's dissolution, the Turkic states, including Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, have experienced various phases of cooperation, culminating in the current organizational structure. The foundations for this collaboration were laid at the inaugural summit of Turkic State leaders in Ankara in 1992. This early collaboration evolved into the Cooperation

Council of Turkic-Speaking Countries (Turkic Council), officially established with a treaty signed in Nakhchivan in 2009. A pivotal moment came in 2021 during the 8th summit in Istanbul, where the council transformed into the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), marking its rebranding from the Turkic Council.

The victory of Azerbaijan in Karabakh in 2020, a founding OTS member, significantly raised the organization's profile. This event led to increased interactions among the Central Asian Turkic Republics, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye, both bilaterally and within the OTS framework. The organization's institutionalization and activities intensified post-victory, particularly in the context of global geopolitical shifts marked by the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the growing US-China rivalry. The significance of Central Asian Turkic states in global politics has been further highlighted by the series of 5+1 meetings held in 2023, involving these countries along with Russia, China, the USA, the EU, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye.

The OTS agenda focuses on deepening institutionalization, enhancing foreign policy and security cooperation, expanding economic and trade collaboration, and boosting transportation links. Rooted in a shared cultural and historical heritage, the member states have collectively penned a common history book up to the 15th century, with ongoing research extending beyond that period. Efforts are also underway to adopt a common alphabet

among the member states, further solidifying their cultural and linguistic ties.

The "Turkic World Vision-2040" document is pivotal for the Organization of Turkic States' (OTS) future, setting forth an ambitious blueprint for establishing a more robust international system. This vision highlights the need for cooperative and equitable representation and champions the promotion of universal values. Given the current global uncertainties, the document acknowledges the growing responsibilities of regional organizations and stresses the importance of strengthened cooperation among member states to address contemporary geopolitical challenges effectively.

Structured into four sections, this document outlines the OTS's goals and aspirations, aiming for integration and ultimately unity among Turkic states. Some analysts view this as a step towards forming a supranational entity akin to the European Union, with recent talks and agreements underscoring unity and collaboration across various domains.

The Turkic World Vision-2040 establishes specific objectives in economic and sectoral cooperation. Key among these is ensuring the free movement of goods, capital, services, technology, and people between member states, enhancing cooperation between different economic regions to boost intra-regional investments, harmonizing industrial structures, and integrating product markets. The Organization has made significant strides in this direction,

including agreements to create more favorable conditions and reduce trade barriers. These agreements include the “Freight Transport Agreement,” “Simplified Customs Corridor Agreement,” and “Trade Facilitation Strategic Document.”

Additionally, the ministerial meeting agreed to implement new-generation instruments to fortify economic and commercial ties between countries. This includes the signing of the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement and the establishment of the TURANSEZ Special Economic Zone. The primary goal at this stage is to increase the regional trade volume to 10% of the total trade volume of the member states, indicating a concerted effort to deepen economic integration and cooperation within the OTS framework.

A primary objective of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in transportation and customs is transforming the International East-West Central Corridor across the Caspian Sea into the most efficient and secure transit route between Asia and Europe. This initiative stems from three key motivations: to provide an alternative in the burgeoning Asia-Europe trade routes, to compensate for the closure of northern routes due to the Russia-Ukraine war, and most importantly, to enhance trade and cooperation among member states. Recognizing the vital role of transportation in facilitating trade and economic interdependence, work on the Middle Corridor began in 2012, initially led by Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and later joined by Kazakhstan.

While the OTS was founded on shared cultural and historical ties, foreign and security policies have become increasingly significant amid geopolitical shifts. The organization aims to create a stable political cooperation structure, developing permanent mechanisms at the foreign ministry, national security councils, and intelligence ministries levels. Additionally, at Azerbaijan's behest, a summit was convened for the first time at the level of foreign policy advisors, enabling the OTS to find common ground on issues impacting the Turkic states. This included unified support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and a collective stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

In recent years, the OTS has also pursued broader cooperation with regional and global organizations. Enhancing multi-layered collaboration with European entities, especially the Visegrad Group, is a goal set forth in the Vision 2040 Act. In terms of security, establishing a network for cooperation and data exchange among member states is vital to address challenges such as radicalization, violent extremism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and terrorism, and to ensure border security. By focusing on global regionalization opportunities, the OTS is emerging as a significant regional player.

As articulated in the Turkic World Vision-2040, the overarching goal for OTS member countries is integration, encompassing cultural, commercial, and economic dimensions. There is evident political will among member states to achieve this. An agreement to adopt a

common foreign and security policy on issues pertinent to the Turkic world further demonstrates this commitment. The declarations, leaders' statements, and activities within the OTS framework suggest a trajectory akin to the European Union's model of integration, moving towards greater cooperation and unity among its members and reflecting a collective vision for the future.

VII. President Ilham Aliyev attends 16th Summit of Economic Cooperation Organization in Tashkent

The 16th Summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization was held in the city of Tashkent, the capital of the Republic of Uzbekistan on November 8-9. In his speech, President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the flourishing strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. The President detailed his multiple visits to Uzbekistan last year, praising the nation's socio-economic development and reforms. President Ilham Aliyev also commended Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev for choosing Azerbaijan for his first state visit following his re-election, underlining the deep brotherly ties between the two countries.

President Ilham Aliyev then discussed Azerbaijan's active role in the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), mentioning the recent hosting of the ECO Council of Ministers in Shusha. President Ilham Aliyev also commemorated the third anniversary of Shusha's liberation from nearly 30 years of Armenian occupation.

Focusing on Azerbaijan's contributions to regional transportation and logistics, President Ilham Aliyev noted the country's substantial investments in infrastructure, transforming Azerbaijan into a key Eurasian hub. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the completion of Azerbaijani sections of the East-West and North-South Transport Corridors and ongoing expansions to increase cargo handling capacities. Highlighting Azerbaijan's economic development, President Ilham Aliyev mentioned the significant investments made in the country's economy over the past 20 years, with a substantial portion in the non-energy sector, showcasing a favourable investment climate. The President expressed his appreciation for Azerbaijan being selected as the host country for the ECO Clean Energy Center. He outlined the country's focus on renewable energy, citing Azerbaijan's substantial wind and solar power potential, both onshore and in the Caspian Sea. The President also pointed out Azerbaijan's future role as an exporter of green and hydrogen energy, with agreements and MoUs with leading global green energy companies to produce up to 10 gigawatts of renewable energy in the coming years. President Ilham Aliyev mentioned the inauguration of the Garadagh Solar Power Plant, the largest in the Caspian and Caucasus regions, developed by Masdar company. He also noted the construction of hydropower plants in liberated Karabagh and East Zangezur, with a capacity of 170 megawatts since 2021 and plans to

increase it to 500 megawatts in the coming years.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the impact of the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijan's territories for nearly 30 years, leading to over a million Azerbaijanis being displaced from their homes. In his speech, President Ilham Aliyev reflected on the 2020 Patriotic War, where Azerbaijan, asserting its right to self-defence as recognized by the UN Charter, overcame Armenia on the battlefield. This victory enforced the implementation of four UN Security Council resolutions from 1993, which had remained unimplemented for 27 years.

President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the devastation inflicted during the years of Armenian occupation, including the destruction of nine Azerbaijani cities and hundreds of villages. He pointed out the significant damage to Islamic cultural and historical heritage, with 65 of the 67 mosques in the region being demolished. The remaining two mosques were desecrated and used for agricultural purposes.

President Ilham Aliyev then discussed a crucial one-day anti-terror operation conducted by Azerbaijan on September 19-20 of the current year. This operation effectively dismantled the illegal separatist regime in Karabagh, leading to the full restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereignty over its internationally recognized territory. President Ilham Aliyev expressed pride in restoring territorial integrity and sovereignty through force, in alignment

with international law and the UN Charter. President Ilham Aliyev also conveyed his gratitude to the Member States of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) that have acknowledged Azerbaijan's historic victory. In closing, President Ilham Aliyev reaffirmed Azerbaijan's commitment to enhancing bilateral and multilateral cooperation with ECO Member States and announced Azerbaijan's readiness to host the next ECO Summit, emphasizing the country's dedication to fostering regional cooperation and development.

VIII. Baku hosts the 18th session of the SPECA Governing Council

The Governing Council of the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) held its 18th session on 23 November 2023 in Baku, Azerbaijan. Under the chairmanship of Azerbaijan, the SPECA participating States (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) discussed the outcomes of 2023 SPECA Economic Forum and adopted its conclusions and recommendations.

In his address, President Ilham Aliyev commemorated the 25th anniversary of the United Nations Special Program for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA). President Ilham Aliyev noted that Azerbaijan is currently chairing SPECA and expressed gratitude to the heads of Central Asian states for supporting Azerbaijan's initiative to hold the first-ever Summit of SPECA Member States. President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the successful

multifaceted relations developed over the past 25 years and the cooperation between Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan across various multilateral platforms. President Ilham Aliyev also mentioned the attendance of the prime ministers of Georgia and Hungary and the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council at the Summit as guests of honour, emphasizing the potential for expanding economic cooperation.

Reflecting on the early days of SPECA, President Ilham Aliyev observed that the Member States were then newly independent, facing numerous challenges. Over the past 25 years, these nations have overcome major challenges, reinforced their state sovereignty, established themselves as valuable members of the international community, and achieved rapid economic development. President Ilham Aliyev underscored the importance of political stability for economic growth, contrasting the peace, stability, and security in SPECA countries with the wars and conflicts in other parts of the world.

President Ilham Aliyev criticized countries that fail to establish true independence, citing the example of Armenia, a neighbour of Azerbaijan. President Ilham Aliyev argued that such countries, trying to balance between multiple foreign patrons, cannot be considered genuinely independent, as their foreign policies do not reflect their people's will and are influenced by external sponsors. In contrast, President Ilham Aliyev praised SPECA Member States for their true independence, evidenced by their pursuit

of independent foreign and domestic policies.

President Ilham Aliyev expressed his approval of the recent United Nations General Assembly resolution commemorating the 25th anniversary of the United Nations Special Program for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA). President Ilham Aliyev announced Azerbaijan's commitment to contribute 3.5 million US dollars to the SPECA Trust Fund, established under the auspices of the UN.

Highlighting the economic forum held alongside SPECA Week in Baku, President Ilham Aliyev noted its role in enhancing business relations between the member countries. President Ilham Aliyev also mentioned an exhibition at the Baku Expo Center showcasing the development achievements of these nations.

President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the deep historical and cultural connections between Azerbaijan and the Central Asian countries. President Ilham Aliyev described Azerbaijan and Central Asia as part of a unified historical, cultural, and geopolitical space, growing in strategic importance. Recalling his invitation as a guest of honour to the Summit of the Heads of Central Asian States in Dushanbe in September, President Ilham Aliyev expressed gratitude and viewed the current Summit as a continuation of that meeting.

Speaking of Azerbaijan's economic strength, President Ilham Aliyev credited it for enabling an independent foreign policy. President Ilham Aliyev detailed significant growth in Azerbaijan's GDP, budget revenues, and foreign trade turnover over the past two decades. President Ilham

Aliyev also highlighted the reduction in poverty levels and the establishment of a favorable investment climate, with substantial investments in the non-oil sector.

President Ilham Aliyev outlined Azerbaijan's strategic role in regional transportation and logistics. The country's significant investments in transportation infrastructure have positioned it as a key Eurasian hub along the East-West and North-South transportation corridors, reflecting its growing economic and geopolitical significance.

In his address, President Ilham Aliyev recounted the challenges faced by Azerbaijan in the early years of its independence, highlighting the occupation of nearly 20 percent of its internationally recognized territory by Armenia. He described the resulting ethnic cleansing that led to over one million Azerbaijanis being expelled from their ancestral lands. President Ilham Aliyev criticized the nearly 30 years of fruitless negotiations due to Armenia's intention to maintain the occupation. The President pointed out that the situation worsened following the Armenian Prime Minister's statement in the then-occupied city of Khankendi, declaring "Karabakh is Armenia, full stop," which effectively derailed the negotiation process.

President Ilham Aliyev then spoke of the significant victory achieved by Azerbaijan in November 2020, during the 44-day Patriotic War. This victory ended the occupation and enforced the implementation of four UN Security Council resolutions from 1993 that had been ignored for 27 years. However,

President Ilham Aliyev expressed disappointment that Armenia continued to fail in fulfilling its obligations, leaving a sizable military contingent within Azerbaijan's sovereign territories and engaging in military provocations. To address these ongoing threats, President Ilham Aliyev discussed the anti-terror operation conducted in Karabakh on September 19-20, which effectively restored Azerbaijani sovereignty over the entire territory, including the town of Khojaly, the site of a genocide against the Azerbaijani people in 1992. President Ilham Aliyev expressed his gratitude to the countries that recognized Azerbaijan's historic victory in eradicating aggressive separatism from its territory.

President Ilham Aliyev also highlighted the ongoing large-scale restoration and reconstruction efforts in the liberated territories. These efforts include building new cities and villages, with plans to restore 100 residential settlements, including nine cities and eight settlements. President Ilham Aliyev mentioned the Great Return Program, under which internally displaced persons (IDPs) are returning to their ancestral lands, with an anticipated 140,000 IDPs resettled by the end of 2026.

In his concluding remarks, President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the symbolic gestures of brotherhood and support from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. President Ilham Aliyev mentioned the inauguration of a school in the city of Fuzuli, named after the renowned Uzbek astronomer and mathematician Mirzo Ulugbek, a gift from Uzbekistan to Azerbaijan. The school, designed to accommodate 960 students,

was opened in August. President Ilham Aliyev also noted the ongoing construction of a creativity center in Fuzuli, named after the famous Kazakh composer Kurmangazy, a gift from Kazakhstan, which is scheduled to be unveiled the following year. President Ilham Aliyev expressed his gratitude to Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev for their fraternal support. In his closing statement, President Ilham Aliyev thanked the heads of state and government for accepting his invitation to the Summit and attending it. President Ilham Aliyev expressed his optimism that the Summit would provide a new momentum to the relationships among the participating nations, further strengthening their ties and cooperation.

IX. The 5th meeting of the State Commissions on the delimitation of the state border between Azerbaijan and Armenia

On November 30, a significant meeting took place between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia regarding the delimitation of their state borders. The fifth meeting of the State Commission on the delimitation of the state border, chaired by Shahin Mustafayev, Deputy Prime Minister of Azerbaijan, and Mher Grigoryan, Deputy Prime Minister of Armenia, was held on the border between the two nations.

During this meeting, the participants addressed several organizational and procedural topics and continued discussions on border delimitation issues. A notable progress was the initial agreement on the text of the Regulation governing the organization and conduct of meetings and joint working sessions between the respective commissions of Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The two sides also decided to commence negotiations on the draft Regulation for the joint operations of these commissions. They committed to intensifying the frequency of commission meetings to expedite the process. Additionally, there was a consensus to determine the date and location for the subsequent meeting of the Commissions.

This meeting represents a step forward in the ongoing efforts to delineate the state border between Azerbaijan and Armenia, indicating a move towards resolving one of the key issues in bilateral relations.