

# BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

Vol. 5 | No. 1 | Fall 2021

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**Stronger Together in the Greater Caspian Region**

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**Afghanistan and South-Central Asia Connectivity**

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**Afghanistan's Place on the Silk Road**

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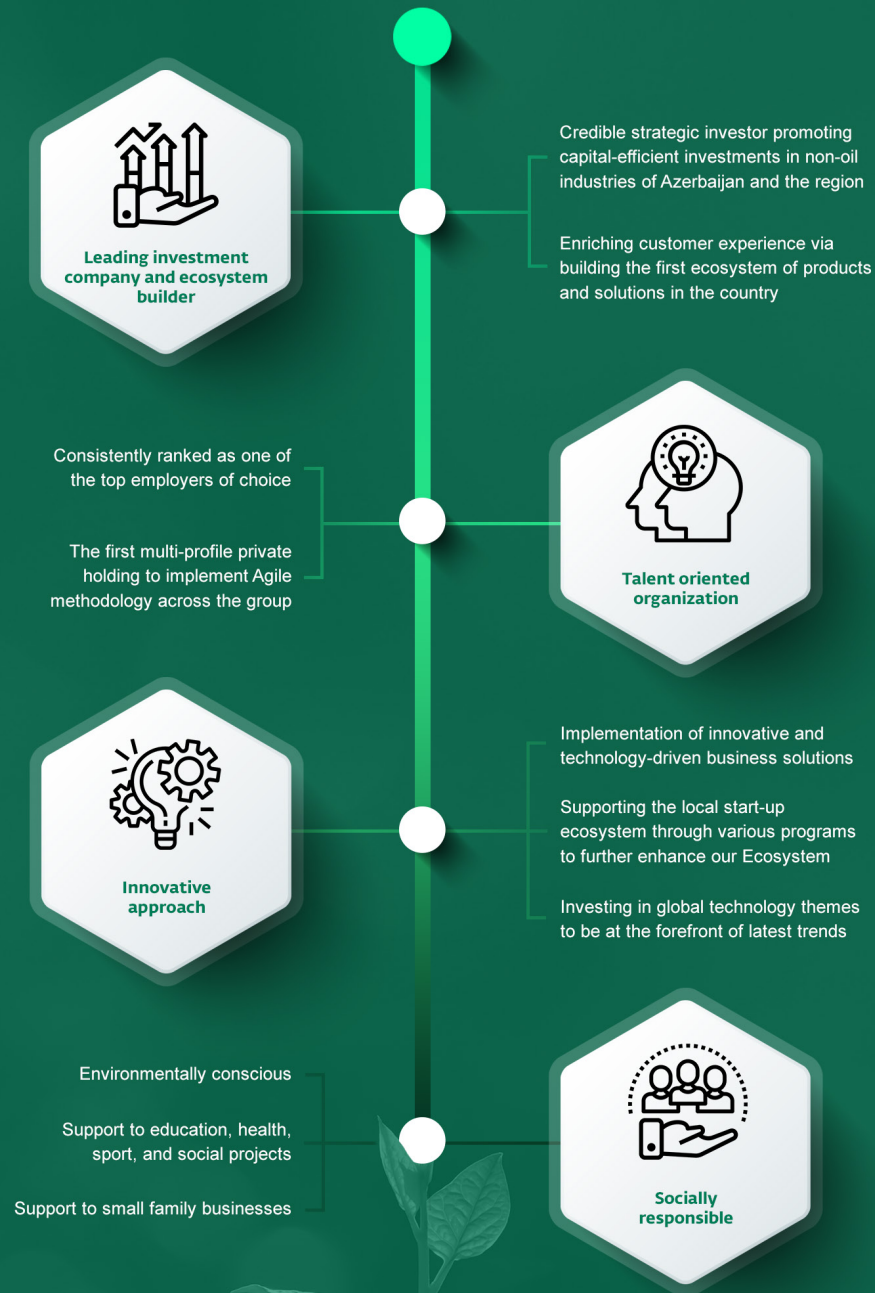
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# PASHA Holding at Glance



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Mr. Fariz Ismailzade, Editor-in-Chief  
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Mrs. Shabnam Maharramova, Communications and Content Management  
PR and Digital Content Management Specialist, ADA University

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# Stronger Together in the Greater Caspian Region

*Richard E. Hoagland*

On a cold December morning 30 years ago, the citizens of the 15 Soviet Socialist Republics awoke to discover that their country, the USSR, no longer existed. Some in the various republics, who had been agitating for independence, were elated. But most were simply bewildered and asked, “What now?”

On a warm September morning in the United States 20 years ago, just about a year after Vladimir Putin was first elected president of an independent Russia, members of Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda ope-rating out of Afghanistan hijacked aircraft

and crashed them into the iconic twin towers in New York City and into the heart of America’s military might, the Pentagon, in Washington, DC.

In the context of these two extraordinary historic events, the countries of the Greater Caspian Region—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia on the western side of the sea, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan on the eastern side—have lived their recent histories. And now a third historic event is shaping the region: the withdrawal of U.S. and other NATO troops from

*Richard E. Hoagland is a former Principal Deputy Assistant U.S. Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, having previously served as U.S. ambassador to Kazakhstan and Tajikistan as well as interim U.S. Co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group. All opinions expressed in this essay are solely the author’s and do not necessarily represent the views of any government or private organization. This essay is derived from the author’s personal experience and knowledge gained over 32 years as a U.S. diplomat in the Greater Caspian Region, as well as in South Asia. Parts of this essay, although now updated, first appeared as “Strategic Central Asia,” in *Cultural Perspectives, Geopolitics & Energy Security of Eurasia* published in 2017 by the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.*

Afghanistan and the triumph of the Taliban. These Caspian nations do not live in their own vacuum. Like all countries, they are influenced by global powers (e.g. the United States and the European Union), including two that are their immediate neighbors (e.g. Russia and China), as well as by regional powers like Turkey and Iran and, now inevitably, by Afghanistan.

This essay will examine the influence of outside powers on the Greater Caspian Region before recommending a new path for those countries.

## Key Players

Ask any random citizen on the street in the United States, or even in Europe, what first comes to mind when they hear the words *Caspian Sea*, and, after a pause, the answer might be, “the best caviar in the world.” A small number of more knowledgeable might answer, “natural resources, like oil and gas.” But for the most part, most Westerners have little knowledge and understanding of the eight countries on the southern rim of Russia that emerged from the fall of the Soviet Union. Nor

are they likely to know that the Greater Caspian Region over centuries—think the Han Chinese and the Roman, Persian, and Ottoman empires, not to mention the Russian Empire—and into the present is a strategically important center of competition for global power and influence.

Against the greater noise of conflicts and crises always headlining the daily news around the world, the Greater Caspian Region is usually only a quiet, background hum—if it’s heard at all. And yet, it bears close attention. Why? Certainly because it’s one of the major hydrocarbon-deposit centers of the world—for example, Tengiz, Kashagan, and Karachaganak in Kazakhstan; Galkynysh in Turkmenistan; and Shah Deniz in Azerbaijan, to name only the most prominent and well-known, although there are many, many other significant ones. But also because it is the locus of four global powers vying for influence: Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union—all for varying reasons and with sometimes conflicting intentions.

For the past 30 years, relations between the Greater Caspian Region countries and the West in general have been fraught; or, more

bluntly, might be described as a sometimes love-hate relationship. The one fundamental point that the United States, and the West in general, does not fully take into account is that the intellectual heritage of the former Soviet states of Central Asia and the South

Caucasus is *not* the Western heritage that developed over centuries from the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment—the three great intellectual transformations that created the institutions, cultural values, political structures, and worldview of the modern West.

Rather, the former Soviet states are the inheritors of the values of the Soviet and the earlier Russian Tsarist empires, with an unbroken line directly back to the Byzantine Empire overlaying their own histories as Near Eastern and Asian khanates and nomadic peoples. This “Byzantine-Soviet” worldview and its system of governance, in particular, de-emphasized the

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and even a degree of acceptance of organized crime as an element of power, and powerful intelligence agencies to knit it all together. This system benefitted only a privileged few without the existence of any long-established institutions to challenge that power. To put it succinctly: this heritage, which continues to endure, is radically different from the heritage of the West.

To better understand the significance of the Greater Caspian Region, we need to look at the international players that vie for influence in the eight countries on the southern rim of the former Soviet Union. Each will be examined in turn.

importance of the individual and glorified the power of the state headed by an autarchic leader. Especially during the Soviet period, this non-Western system established an unholy alliance of political leadership in the hands of the privileged few, a tolerance for

## Russia

Russia has long declared its former republics to be its special *sphere of influence*, sometimes substituting “privileged” for “special.” Because of history, economic ties, a colonial *lingua franca*, the Russified culture embraced by the elites, and a *tsunami* of propaganda emanating from the various Russian-language broadcast and online media channels that blanket the region, Russian near-absolute dominance there should be a foregone conclusion. But it’s not. Each state in the Greater Caspian Region jealously guards its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and ever more so since Russia’s annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, which was a quiet game-changer—a real wake-up call—for each of the governments in the region.

Further, Russia regularly warns leaders on the threat of the Islamic State and of the Taliban. While the threat does indeed exist because of the ISIS declaration of a sub-caliphate of

Khorasan in Afghanistan and its neighboring regions, the dire Russian admonitions purposely exaggerate the threat to try to impel the Greater Caspian Region states to turn more fully to Moscow for their own security. The catastrophe in Afghanistan, Moscow says, fully justifies its desire for a greater military presence in the countries of the Caspian region.

Russia already has a permanent military presence at Gyumri in Armenia, and in Central Asia at the Kant Airfield outside Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan and with its 201<sup>st</sup> Military Base at three locations in Tajikistan: Dushanbe, Qurghonteppa, and Kulob. The 201<sup>st</sup> is Russia’s largest military base outside the borders of the Russian Federation. Russia also has troops on the ground in Georgia (in Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and now also in Azerbaijan as “peacekeepers” after the conclusion to last year’s Second Karabakh War.

By contrast, while the United States did for a time have military

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facilities in Central Asia to support Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan (Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan, 2001-2005; the Manas Transit Center at the Bishkek International Airport, 2002-2014), and also had lesser-publicized access in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Washington repeatedly stated it had no desire for *permanent* military bases in Central Asia. While in theory it would be useful to reestablish a military presence in Central Asia, currently that is not in the cards, in part because Moscow has told the leaders in the region that it cannot happen: Moscow has insisted on a firm *nyet*.

Russia has created two multilateral structures for regional integration. The first is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in which the members pledge to support and defend each other's mutual security (the CSTO's six current members are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan). Despite annual summits and regular military exercises, the CSTO is still not seen as an especially effective organization, either by its members or more broadly in the greater Eurasian region. And whether it would respond in an emergency situation, is open to question. It is useful to note that during Kyrgyzstan's ethnic

turmoil in Osh that began in June 2010, Bishkek asked for security assistance from the CSTO, as did Armenia during the Second Karabakh War, but Moscow refused to deploy the CSTO to intervene because the CSTO exists to defend member states against *outside* aggressors.

The other, and more recently established Russia-dominated multilateral organization in the region is the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), comprising initially Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia, and now including Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. It should be noted that Moscow has been putting pressure on others to join, like Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Tajikistan, arguably the weakest state in the Central Asia region, has responded to Moscow lukewarmly, so far saying neither yes nor no, and Azerbaijan continues to kick the can down the road, although the government of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in Uzbekistan has recently expressed cautious interest.

Historically, Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed the EEU in the 1990s, but Moscow tended to pooh-pooh it until Putin's third presidential term, when he apparently saw it as potentially an effective tool of

*Putinism*, which some go so far as to dub *neo-Sovietism*. Some suspect that Moscow sees the EEU as a *bloc* structure—led by Moscow—that will inevitably take on a political dimension. So far, however, Kazakhstan has politely said *nyet* to any kind of political dimension—or, to go even further, a common currency—for the EEU. Why Kazakhstan? Because it rigorously guards its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, especially because its population, unlike the populations of the four other Central Asia states, is still just under 25 percent Slavic, concentrated largely in the northern part of the country bordering Russia and around the former capital, Almaty. It's especially the north that concerns Nur-Sultan (and why Nazarbayev moved the capital of his country from Almaty to Brezhnev's "Virgin Lands" city of Tselinograd on the southern Siberian steppe, located truly in the middle of nowhere). He did so because, from the 1990s to this very day, influential voices in Russia (and not just the clownish Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, himself born in Almaty) continue to call for the annexation of the northern third of Kazakhstan that some insist was always historically a part of Russia (Kazakhstan's present-day border with Russia was established in 1936).

## China

The looming elephant in the Greater Caspian Region is increasingly China, and Beijing's speeches and deeds deserves close observation. China's presence in the region has generally been politically benign as it has sought to gain access to Central Asia's hydrocarbon and mineral wealth to fuel its own economic growth. Even as China increasingly bought into Kazakhstan's oil sector and Turkmenistan's natural-gas sector (where it is the only foreign state allowed to operate the country's gas wells and pipelines directly on Turkmenistan's sovereign soil), the West, including the United States, saw no problem with Beijing's role, because there was no perceived political threat.

The West, however, perked up its ears in September 2013 when China's president Xi Jinping announced at Nazarbayev University in Astana (now Nur-Sultan) its New Silk Road Economic Belt running from east to west across Central Asia, through the Southern Caucasus, and on to the territory of the European Union. Initially, the United States, with its own New Silk Road Initiative of the early Obama Administration (that, in reality, existed only on paper), paid little attention because the American version of the

new Silk Road focused on forging north-south links from Russia's southern border into India, whereas China's stated goal was to facilitate transport of its industrial production, especially from western China, overland to the European continent.

China, as we now know, was making it up as it went along, and by 2014 had mostly formulated and finally announced its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. The Chinese plan is an essential part of Beijing's emergence onto the world stage as a global player and goes far beyond Central Asia to include elements in Pakistan now known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (from the Karakorum Mountains to the warm-water port of Gwadar), Southeast Asia, and maritime lanes through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean to all its littoral ports, including those in East Africa. By March 2015, China had released a comprehensive action plan for what it had by then come to call the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), emphasizing that it "is in line with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. It upholds the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, mutual noninterference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence."

The initial American response to China's New Silk Road Economic Belt was a rather simplistic shrug: "They do hardware; we do software," was the prevailing view in Washington, meaning that Beijing would probably focus on upgrading the east-west highways and rail lines along the southern rim of the former Soviet Union, while Washington focused on technical capacity-building for things such as customs modernization and border security. As China's BRI policy emerged, and as it began to buy up industries all the way from Xinjiang to the Black Sea, it became apparent that China was actually creating more of an industrial investment scheme, in part to stimulate economic growth among its western neighbors. Further, as never before, China began to emphasize the value of greatly expanded people-to-people engagement, a fundamental element in any superpower's foreign policy.

Near the end of 2014, U.S. diplomats met for the first time with appropriate contacts in Beijing to compare notes on each other's New Silk Road policies (I led that U.S. delegation). Those initial meetings were friendly and, to some participants and observers, surprisingly forthcoming, but they only scratched the surface. Follow-up came in May 2015,

again in Beijing, where the United States offered a short list of possibilities for concrete cooperation in Central Asia and beyond. Not much came of this at that time for at least three reasons: China was not sure of American intentions, the United States was only "testing the waters" but was not fully committed to cooperation, and, probably more important, because China had by that time already nominally allied its New Silk Road Economic Belt with Russia's Eurasian Economic Union. Because American policy was not fully invested in seeking Chinese collaboration in Central Asia and beyond, Washington let these initial forays fall by the wayside. And yet, the potential certainly does exist even now, at least theoretically, for Sino-American cooperation in the Greater Caspian Region. Whatever role China will now play in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan bears close watching. Should China gain a real foothold in Kabul, theoretically Beijing could become one of

the new back-channel lines of communication for Washington to the Taliban.

More broadly, the China-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) plays a certain role in Central Asia, certainly more so than the Russia-dominated CSTO. For many years, the SCO was seen by outsiders (and

even by some participants) as just one more international "talk shop." Soon after the SCO was founded, member state Uzbekistan recommended that the United States be granted observer status. Before the SCO could decide on this recommendation, however, Washington rejected the offer,

ideologically unwilling to be associated, even as an observer, with an organization comprised of Russia, China, and "unreformed" former Soviet states. This rejection was, perhaps, understandable but was short-sighted and typical of ideological decision-making in Washington. Now that the Taliban rule Afghanistan, it's unlikely that the SCO will play

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## Iran

Although Iran has common borders with Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, it is still a bit of a wildcard in the Greater Caspian Region. Tehran has long been interested in its former-Soviet neighbors but has been economically constrained by the international sanctions that have crippled its economy, and it has largely pursued its interests in the region through a foreign policy posture devoid of strictly ideological concerns of the sort that drives its policies in the Middle East. If international sanctions against Iran are significantly reduced—certainly a big *if*—its limited influence could begin to grow, perhaps even in a constructive manner. Still, Iranian-Caspian infrastructure continues to emerge, like the

Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railroad and Iran's upgrading of its port of Charbahar, in part for the use of landlocked Central Asia.

Nevertheless, Iran will have an uphill slog to gain any significant political influence in the Greater Caspian Region. The most natural affinities should exist between Dushanbe and Tehran, because, unlike the other Central Asian states that are generally Mongol-culture and Turkic-speaking by heritage, Tajikistan is a Persian-culture nation, having once in the long-distant past been an outpost of the ancient Persian Empire; the Tajik and Farsi languages are mutually intelligible. But even Dushanbe is more than a little leery of Tehran because Tajikistan's population is majority Sunni, except for the large but remote and sparsely populated Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast where Ismaili Shia predominate.

Likewise, Iran and Azerbaijan, two Shia-majority states, possess one important prerequisite for becoming natural allies, but secular

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Azerbaijan has kept its relations with Iran to the “correct” level at best, and Iran keeps a wary eye on its significant ethnic-Azerbaijani population in northern Iran.

All of the Greater Caspian Region states cast a wary eye toward Iran because it is a self-proclaimed Islamic revolutionary state, a fact that alienates the determinedly secular leaders elsewhere in the region. Still, Iran can expect to gain more influence in the region in coming years—even if slowly and incrementally—especially on the economic front, as its trade and energy linkages increase with the Caspian-littoral states.

## Turkey

Ankara should be a major player in the Greater Caspian Region, but it never really reached its full potential, especially in Central Asia, and, currently, seems more focused on its own internal issues. Immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, Turkey made a full-court press effort to become a major player in Central Asia because four of the region's five states (minus Tajikistan) are Turkic. However, it overplayed its hand and

was perceived as a state seeking domination rather than one offering to be a helpful partner. More recently, Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has caused caution throughout the region with his occasional musings about the reestablishment of the Ottoman Empire. Kazakhstan, however, has found a way to pay symbolic tribute to Turkey and to Turkic culture by designating its Silk Road city of Turkistan as the current Spiritual Capital of the Turkic World and reorganizing its regional state university there as Khodja Akhmet Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University.

In the Southern Caucasus, Turkey and Armenia maintain their post-Ottoman Empire standoff. Ankara is allied with Baku, primarily against Yerevan, but is not a dominant and decisive partner for Azerbaijan, despite their public rhetoric. Indeed, Israel is as much a key partner for Azerbaijan as Turkey is. So long as Turkey remains inward looking because of its own unresolved struggle to determine whether it will truly become European or if it will pursue its own neo-Ottoman (and increasingly authoritarian) course, Ankara will remain a player, but not a major one, in the region.

## The European Union

To one degree or another, all eight Greater Caspian states practice what Kazakhstan was the first to term a *multi-vector foreign policy*, meaning they seek generally to balance their relations with Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union. Balance, yes, but sometimes they also seek to play one off against the other. This is especially the case with Kyrgyzstan, which in recent years has lurched between Moscow and Washington in an attempt to instigate a bidding war for Bishkek's love.

Some Central Asian officials, as well as leaders in the Southern Caucasus states, will readily admit that Russia and China are immediate neighbors; the EU and the United States, though important, are rather far away. The European Union, as an entity that is a grouping of 27 member states and must make policy decisions by consensus, is not as big a player in the Greater Caspian Region as are some of

its individual members, like the United Kingdom, Germany, sometimes some of the Scandinavian countries, and even, quietly but effectively, Latvia. Even so, the EU has significantly increased its attention to and development assistance for the Greater Caspian Region since 2015. And so, clearly, the EU sees the region to its southeast as one that deserves considered attention.

## The United States

American policy immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of 15 new independent states was colored by a bit of *irrational exuberance*

that assumed, through Washington's rose-colored glasses, that of course the peoples of the former Soviet Union were naturally yearning to breathe the air of freedom and capitalism and that, with appropriate assistance, they would quickly become free-market liberal democracies. Using the authorities of

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the 1992 FREEDOM Support Act—in which FREEDOM is one of those quirky Congressional acronyms that stands for “Freedom for Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets”—Washington dedicated considerable resources to support the former Soviet republics as they transitioned, over a relatively short time (it was assumed, at least by the Washington ideologues), from communism and central planning toward the Western ideals of democracy and free markets. As we now know, it didn't turn out to be as simple as transitioning from one ideology to another.

From the beginning, U.S. policy for the Greater Caspian Region has been remarkably consistent. Fundamentally—and this has never changed in 30 years—it has been to preserve and protect the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of each state in the region. From the beginning, this has included supporting independent, sovereign states that uphold regional security, increase their economic integration with regional and global markets, and demonstrate respect for human rights and democratic governance, while not becoming sources of transnational threats to the United States or to any other nation.

From the onset, the United States has had embassies in every country in the region and has established a full range of programs, including humanitarian and developmental assistance. The implementation of U.S. policy in the Greater Caspian Region, as in other parts of the world, is not always readily visible and is almost never front-page news. America's military assistance in the region—quiet but effective—has been of real value. Russia is still the primary security partner for almost all of the nations in the region. But where it is welcome, the United States works with the countries' militaries and other security structures, especially the border guards, to modernize militaries and to ensure that border guards are increasingly capable of preventing the flow of contraband across borders, including narcotics and the components of weapons of mass destruction, while facilitating the passage of legitimate travelers and enhancing trade and commerce.

Over time, Washington has learned to take each country as it is, even if it occasionally falls into fits of finger-wagging and naming-and-shaming because of endemic corruption and human-rights violations. Still, policy-makers in Washington generally understand that the countries

of the Greater Caspian Region have now differentiated their own paths and, to be blunt, sometimes jostle against each other. The interests of one sometimes conflict with the interests of another: Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were mostly at loggerheads after the Tajikistan civil war of the early to mid-1990s, although that is now significantly changing with the new government in Tashkent. The animosity between Armenia and Azerbaijan needs no elaboration, although the outcome of the Second Karabakh War

had briefly raised hopes for their eventual reconciliation and even cooperation. Upstream and downstream countries throughout the region are still working to sort out what they see as nearly existential water rights. At the beginning of independence, borders were ill-defined, especially with the unusual system of enclaves and exclaves in the sensitive Fergana Valley that the Soviets carved up among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in a classic “divide and conquer” cartographic and ethnographic exercise in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the significant Azerbaijani

exclave of Nakhchivan that is totally surrounded by Armenia, Iran, and Turkey.

And now, with the historic—and troubling—developments taking place in Afghanistan, the United States is once again quietly increasing its interest in the region. It has no intention to displace Russia

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or China, but it does want to provide an alternative and a stronger partnership, where welcome, primarily because it will need these nations’ enhanced help to manage, initially, flows of refugees from Afghanistan and, more broadly, to prevent homegrown Islamic militant groups, especially in the Central Asian countries, from forging quiet links with the ideologically committed Taliban that would endanger the entire region.

### *Stronger Together*

At the dawn of the independence of the Greater Caspian Region states 30 years ago, it was said that “all roads led to Moscow.” That meant that supply chains for essentials like food and electricity were suddenly split among

separate sovereign entities that had little desire to cooperate laterally, at least at first, simply because they had to focus on establishing the fundamentals of their own national independence. Nevertheless, the passage of time and a healthy dose of strategic patience suggest that regional cooperation in the Greater Caspian Region might possibly be just a bit more than a schematic and idealistic gleam in Western eyes. Indeed, desires and concrete actions for connectivity are emerging.

During the 2015 General Debate of the UN General Assembly at UN headquarters in New York, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry met in a collective setting with the foreign ministers of all five Central Asian states—an historic first—in a format called the C5+1. To the surprise of many, and without any sharp elbows having been thrown about, the region’s five foreign ministers discussed with Kerry potentials for regional cooperation and wider responsibilities, including countering violent extremism in responsible ways. To his credit, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson continued the C5+1 format at the 2017 UN General Debate. Other countries like Japan and South Korea have also established C5-format meetings. And now, with Uzbekistan having emerged from its quarter century of isolation, the top leaders in the region are

beginning to meet on their own in a C5 format *without* the “+1.”

Their first summit took place in Astana in 2018, followed by a second summit in Tashkent in 2019. But the unexpected “retirement” of Kazakhstan’s Nazarbayev and the eventual election of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to that country’s presidency, followed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic, put a temporary halt to these summits. However, the five had agreed to study regional blocs like ASEAN and the Nordic Council, and they have considered the idea of establishing a permanent secretariat to begin working on formally establishing a Central Asian bloc. In August 2021, the five resumed their meetings and held a “third consultative meeting” in Avaza, Turkmenistan.

The flowering of this process should be strongly encouraged. Furthermore, the five should add a sixth, Azerbaijan, and they should even hold the door open for the eventual membership, when they are ready, of Armenia and Georgia, although that is likely to be further into the future: perhaps for the moment some sort of “observer status” would be more appropriate.

Such a bloc, whatever the members would choose to call it—the Association of Caspian Nations?—

separate sovereign entities that had little desire to cooperate laterally, at least at first, simply because they had to focus on establishing the fundamentals of their own national independence. Nevertheless, the passage of time and a healthy dose of strategic patience suggest that regional cooperation in the Greater Caspian Region might possibly be just a bit more than a schematic and idealistic gleam in Western eyes. Indeed, desires and concrete actions for connectivity are emerging.

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would work to fully modernize and harmonize its members' customs regulations to stimulate economic growth and international trade. Working for the common good, the bloc would, over time, improve and strengthen border security to facilitate the legitimate movement

of people and goods while guarding against the illicit smuggling of contraband of all sorts, including the elements of weapons of mass destruction and the illegal transit of terrorists and of trafficking in persons. The resulting new bloc would work, over time, to build associations of mutual trust and respect with existing international organizations.

Currently, the Greater Caspian Region is one of the most isolated and least connected regions of the world: it could significantly benefit by creating the conditions that would enhance its participation in the global economy. China understands this, and through BRI's Central Asian portion, Beijing has stated that this is a priority. Moscow

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*Such a bloc, whatever the members would choose to call it—the Association of Caspian Nations?—would not weaken its members' sovereignty and independence; it would strengthen its individual members and increase its citizens' security and prosperity.*

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would likely not be pleased by the emergence of such a bloc on its southern border. Washington, however, should state explicitly that it strongly supports the emergence of such a bloc. Such a bloc would not weaken its members' sovereignty and independence it would *strengthen* its individual members and increase its citizens' security and prosperity.

At their early-August 2021 meeting in Avaza, Turkmenistan, the five Central Asian leaders floated the idea of meeting soon once again, perhaps as early as December 2021. The Taliban conquest of Afghanistan makes such a meeting all the more necessary and even urgent, since it would provide an international platform for the five to join ranks to stand against the Taliban's theocratic state and against ISIS-Khorasan that threatens all of Central Asia. The silver lining of the disaster in Afghanistan might just possibly be the emergence of an official political bloc for the nations of the Greater Caspian Region. **BD**

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# Afghanistan and South-Central Asia Connectivity

*Edward Lemon*

In mid-July 2021, delegates from 50 countries and 30 organizations, including the presidents of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan and the prime minister of Pakistan, gathered in Tashkent to discuss how to better connect South and Central Asia, currently among the least integrated regions in the world. In his opening remarks President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan stated that “the time has come to realize that without strengthening cooperation and developing effective regional integration, we will not be able to overcome the challenges our countries face today.” The conference was the latest in a series of events signaling that Central Asian countries are taking greater ownership over regional affairs. Three weeks later, the heads of state from the five Central Asian countries met in on the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea in Turkmenistan.

This was the third such summit since 2018 that took place without the presence of the region’s larger neighbors or outside powers. Boosting regional trade, mitigating the negative effects of COVID-19, and the situation in Afghanistan topped the agenda.

Yet while the leaders of Central Asia and South Asia have paid a lot of lip-service to connecting their respective regions, prospects for the development of ties are inextricably linked to the stability of neighboring Afghanistan. Together, the Central Asian republics share a 2,000 km border with Afghanistan covering the 800 km desert border with Turkmenistan, the 137 km heavily fortified border with Uzbekistan, and the largely mountainous 1,344 km border with Tajikistan. The final readout of the leaders’ summit stated that “one of the most important factors

in maintaining and strengthening security and stability in Central Asia is the earliest possible settlement of the situation in neighboring Afghanistan.” Within ten days of the meeting, Kabul had fallen to the Taliban.

With the startlingly rapid capitulation of Afghanistan’s previous government, plans to bolster South-Central Asia connectivity discussed in Tashkent and Turkmenistan are in jeopardy. But even if Afghanistan becomes stable, the prospects of South and Central Asia moving closer to one another have their limitations. Their linkages remain minimal. Integra-

tion efforts led by China and Russia are more established, and South Asia’s leading states Pakistan and India neither can nor want to compete with Moscow and Beijing. Ambitious plans to connect the regions come up against the reality that their respective priorities lie elsewhere and fact that the two regions remain peripheral to one another.

Nonetheless, ties are slowly strengthening and, unlike in the past, much of the impetus for this comes from within the regions themselves, boding well for future development.

## *Historical Ties and Common Interests*

South and Central Asia have deep historical connections. In ancient times, Bactria—the easternmost part of the Hellenistic world thanks to Alexander the Great’s formidable campaign of conquest and diplomacy—spanned a territory of what is now Uzbekistan,

Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. Trade, migration, and invasions transferred knowledge, peoples, and cultures. Timur (Tamerlane), born in what is now Uzbekistan in 1336, expanded his possessions south in the late fourteenth century, founding the Timurid Empire in and around modern-day Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia.

*With the startlingly rapid capitulation of Afghanistan’s previous government, plans to bolster South-Central Asia connectivity discussed in Tashkent and Turkmenistan are in jeopardy. But even if Afghanistan becomes stable, the prospects of South and Central Asia moving closer to one another have their limitations.*

*Edward Lemon is Research Assistant Professor at The Bush School of Government and Public Service of Texas A&M University, Washington D.C. Campus, President of the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, and a Global Fellow at the Wilson Center.*

His descendant Babur (1483-1530) founded the Mughal Empire, which would bring the country many of its architectural gems. Extensive trade networks developed across the region. Afghan horse dealers brought horses from Bukhara, returning with cloth from India. Pilgrims, mercenaries, and caravans moved between the regions, exchanging goods and money but also ideas and secret intelligence.

Shifting trade patterns favoring maritime routes due to the advent of Western colonial rule in South and Southeast Asia, later followed by Russian imperial expansion into Central Asia, the adoption of protectionist policies by the Emir of Afghanistan, and the eventual establishment of the Soviet Union caused these networks to decline. Decades of conflict in Afghanistan also hampered ties.

Today the Central Asian and South Asian states have numerous overlapping interests. Foremost of these is a desire to see a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, which they see as crucial for the stability and development of the whole region. Stabilizing Afghanistan will be essential

to realizing joint infrastructure projects, as well as boosting regional trade.

For the landlocked Central Asian states, ports in Bandar Abbas and Chabahar (both in Iran) and Gwadar (Pakistan) are the nearest access to maritime trade networks, which still account for 80 percent of global trade by volume. Given their export-oriented models of economic development, Central Asian governments are perpetually looking for new markets for the goods and services produced by their respective states. South Asia also offers a market of some 1.5 billion people, although it is still markets in Europe, Russia, and China that are the favored destinations.

For the South Asian states, Central Asia is a potential source of energy, given that the region sits on top of 5 percent of the world's natural gas, 2 percent of its oil reserves, and 12 percent of its uranium. For India, a presence in Central Asia, whose borders lie just 30 km from northern Pakistan, offers an opportunity to contain its rival. As China's role has dramatically risen, India's efforts to engage the region have grown in urgency. Energy-hungry Pakistan is interested in importing electricity from Central Asia.

## Expectations and Reality

Despite a lot of rhetoric about collective interests and historical ties, Central-South Asian relations have yet to realize their full potential in the modern era. Economic ties remain limited. Central Asia's trade with South Asia remains negligible. India's trade amounts to \$2 billion a year, a substantial increase from the \$94 million traded in 2000. Pakistan's trade comes in at \$1.5 billion. Afghanistan's trade stands at \$2 billion, the bulk of it imports from its northern neighbors. Central Asia accounts for under 1 percent of South Asia's trade. And just over 3 percent of Central Asia's trade is with South Asia. In comparison, Russia's trade volume was just under \$22 billion, while China had over double that amount with \$46 billion. Investment figures are even more insignificant. In short, economically each region is of peripheral importance to the other.

These figures do not account for the illicit trade that flows north from Afghanistan, particularly

opium and heroin. Most of this—estimated to be as much as 100 metric tons per year—transits through Tajikistan, bound for Russia and Europe. An estimated one third of the Tajik economy comes from the drug trade, much of it controlled by corrupt officials. Seizures pale in comparison to the drugs that transit the country, with only 1.6 tons seized in 2019.

As South Asia looks for energy supplies and Central Asia for access to the sea, efforts have been made to construct joint infrastructure projects and transport corridors to boost connectivity.

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These include the 7,200 km International North-South Transport Corridor project that has moved freight between India, Iran, Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Central Asia, and Europe since 2000. The \$3 billion yet-to-

be-constructed Termez-Mazar-e-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway—the memorandum for which was signed in February 2021—would connect Uzbekistan with ports in Pakistan, cutting transit times from 30 to 15 days. First envisaged in 1995, the 1,800 km Turkmenistan-

Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, which would ship gas from Turkmenistan to India, has remained a pipe dream. Work finally started on the Turkmen segment of the pipeline in 2015. Construction began in Afghanistan in 2018 only to be stopped after gunmen killed five workers just a few months later. Finally, a \$150 million Surkhan-Pul-i-Khumri line would supply electricity from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan.

Many of these projects have been supported by external actors like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC), which was set up with ADB funding in 1997 and includes the five Central Asian republics as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan, encourages economic cooperation, with a focus on developing rail and road corridors through and between members.

One of the most notable efforts to connect Central and South Asia by an outside power was America's New Silk Road initiative, which was first envisioned under U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in 2011. The policy came six years after the State Department reorganized its bureaus, de-coupling Central Asia from Russia and moving it towards Afghanistan with the

establishment of the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. Clinton's remarks at the New Silk Road Ministerial to launch the project evoked romanticized memories of a connected past:

For centuries, the nations of South and Central Asia were connected to each other and the rest of the continent by a sprawling trading network called the Silk Road. Afghanistan's bustling markets sat at the heart of this network. Afghan merchants traded their goods from the court of the Pharaohs to the Great Wall of China. As we look to the future of this region, let's take this precedent as inspiration for a long-term vision for Afghanistan and its neighbors. Let's set our sights on a new Silk Road—a web of economic and transit connections that will bind together a region too long torn apart by conflict and division.

The American initiative envisaged integrating Afghanistan further into the region by re-establishing trade routes and infrastructure links broken by decades of conflict. Signature projects included the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit-Trade Agreement and the Cross-Border Transport Agreement between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, both of which eased the movement of goods between the countries. The United States also supported the \$1 billion

C A S A - 1 0 0 0 regional electricity scheme, which supplies electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan, and potentially on to Pakistan. The move to export electricity sparked outrage by many in Tajikistan, who suffer from electricity rationing in winter months.

Many observers have written off the U.S.-led New Silk Road initiative, which was dropped as an explicit policy by the Trump Administration, as a failure. For one thing, its lofty goals do not match reality. Trade corridors could boost Central Asia's economic growth, create jobs, and reduce poverty. But the proposed corridors would cost trillions of dollars to complete. The source of this funding remains elusive. Trade figures were inflated by the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a supply network for the war in Afghanistan that transported non-lethal cargo from the Baltics through Russia and Central Asia. As relations with the Kremlin soured after the annexation of Crimea, the NDN was shut down in 2015.

Moreover, building infrastructure alone is not sufficient. It needs to be accompanied by measures

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to address other trade barriers, including customs processes and corruption. For freight forwarders, transport reliability and predictability are also crucial.

Research by Gael Raballand of the World Bank concluded that being landlocked reduces trade by more than 80 percent. Crossing borders is slow and burdensome, with corruption, tariffs, inefficient border processes, poor road infrastructure and complex regulations all creating obstacles to connectivity.

Plans for South-Central Asia connectivity have to compete with other more established connectivity projects. Here we can briefly mention the two most important. First (and most important) is the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Xi Jinping launched the Silk Road Economic Belt—the land component of what eventually became BRI—in Kazakhstan in 2013. This multi-trillion-dollar network of investments, ports, and transport corridors is far more ambitious than the Obama-era proposed corridors to the south.

Another competing project originates in Moscow. Russia launched its customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan in 2010, which became the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015, later adding Armenia and Kyrgyzstan as members. While trade has not increased significantly among members, it signals Russia's desire to maintain influence in what it used to call its "near abroad."

### *Rising Regionalism*

The latest efforts to stimulate linkages between South and Central Asia are significant because, unlike previous efforts, they are not being imposed from the outside but come from the region itself. For regional integration to be realized, it needs local buy-in from the public and private sectors of the respective countries. The catalyst for these latest efforts has been developments within Central Asia. For many years following independence, Central Asia was one of the least integrated parts of the world in terms of regional trade, investment, and multilateral cooperation.

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Regionalism was often exogenously enforced by external powers pursuing their own agendas, as discussed above. But in recent years this has started to change. With the death of President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan in 2016, his successor

has moved his country away from an isolationist policy whilst prioritizing the rebuilding ties with its Central Asian neighbors. With borders being reopened, trade between Central Asian states nearly doubled between 2017 to 2019, rising from \$2.7 billion to \$5.2 billion. Security ties between the Central Asian states has also grown in recent years, with eight joint military exercises since 2011, all but one of them coming since 2016.

Security ties are also growing between South and Central Asia, particularly between India and Central Asia. The U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the subsequent stationing of American troops in the region, coupled with a desire to contain Pakistan, drove India to become more active in Central Asian security matters. In the late 1990s,

India set up a small field hospital at Farkhor in Tajikistan and the next year began renovation work on Ayni air base in Tajikistan in 2002, its first attempt to set up a military base in the region to monitor conflict-torn Afghanistan and the activities of Pakistan. These efforts came to nothing as the Tajik government did not grant India rights to base any offensive forces

there. But India still maintains a presence at Ayni and evacuated its citizens from Kabul via that airfield in August 2021. And some reports indicate that as early as 2014 small numbers of Indian air force Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighter jets operated out of the base. As it has sought to strengthen ties with Central Asia, India has organized a growing number of military exercises, with 10 of the 12 exercises it has organized coming in the past five years. But these exercises seem to be largely symbolic, with fewer than 200 personnel involved in each. India's security ties with the region are dwarfed by those of Russia and China.

Rising regionalism is allowing the governments to address regional issues—such as border

delimitation, collective security, and trade—without external mediation from China, Russia, and the United States, potentially decreasing the influence of Beijing, Moscow, and Washington in these

areas in the future. Uzbekistan's emergence as a lynchpin in Central Asian regionalism challenges the position of the region's richest state, namely Kazakhstan. Still, the

two continue to cooperate. It was in this context that Uzbekistan held the aforementioned "Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity Challenges" conference in Tashkent in July 2021. Delegates discussed the importance of enhancing connectivity, deepening trade, investment, and people-to-people ties in the region.

But the situation in Afghanistan continues to be a significant stumbling block.

### *Dealing with the Taliban*

Much has changed since the July 2021 conference in Tashkent. On 15 August 2021, the Afghan government collapsed as President Ashraf Ghani fled and

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the Taliban swept into Kabul whilst meeting almost no resistance. Central Asian governments have long been concerned about spillovers of violence and terrorism from Afghanistan. As the Taliban advanced in July 2021 and captured numerous border posts, this concern became more acute. The Taliban itself has repeatedly stated that it has no interest in northern expansion. It is the Central Asian terrorist groups aligned with the Taliban or the Islamic State of Khurasan Province (ISKP) that are of greater concern. These include the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, founded in Uzbekistan in the 1990s, its splinter the Islamic Jihad Union, and the Taliban-aligned Uzbek-led Katibat Imam al-Bukhari.

On 22 June 2021, the main border crossing between Tajikistan and Afghanistan at Shir Khan Bandar was captured by Taliban forces. A Radio Free Europe investigation later revealed that Jamaat Ansurallah, a Tajik terrorist organization, controlled the border. It was founded in 2010 by Amriddin Tabarov, a minor warlord during Tajikistan's civil war who refused to sign on to the peace deal in 1997. Tabarov was killed in 2015. Unlike the Taliban, the group does claim to want to move north into Tajikistan. But it is a very marginal

organization, with at most a few hundred members, that draws its main support from the Rasht Valley—in particular, the village of Sherbegiyon, the home of some of its leading members like Tabarov and its current leader Muhammad Sharifov, known as Mahdi Arsalon. Whether this group, along with other relatively fringe Central Asian terrorist groups, pose a threat will depend in large part on whether the Taliban government can control them.

Another concern is ISKP, which claimed the attack on Kabul airport on 26 August 2021 that killed over 180 people. Unlike the Taliban, ISKP does have designs on expanding north. Although its capacity was depleted by U.S. airstrikes as well as its conflict with the Afghan government, the Taliban, and coalition forces, since early 2020 it has become more dangerous, re-focusing its attention on fighting the Taliban, which it considers to be a “higher religious duty” than attacking the U.S. and other “apostates.” Two scenarios in Afghanistan would pose a particular challenge to Central Asia. First, if the Taliban continues its conflict with ISKP and its allies, this could lead to these groups taking control of border districts or forcing them over into

neighboring countries. Second, and less likely, the Taliban comes to an understanding with them as well as Taliban-aligned Central Asian groups, which would result in Afghanistan re-emerging as a terrorist safe-haven and base for potential incursions into the north.

The continued uncertainty about the situation in Afghanistan also raises concerns over refugee flows. Hundreds of soldiers and thousands of civilians fled across the border as the Taliban went on the offensive in summer 2021. These numbers have increased since the Taliban takeover of the country. The Central Asian states have oscillated in their response to refugees, driven by security concerns and limited state capacity to take in large numbers. The Taliban have cooperated in facilitating the withdrawal of nationals from various countries, but the Central Asian countries have been less welcoming to Afghan

citizens trying to flee. Initially, the Committee on Emergency Situations in Tajikistan said the country could take in 100,000 Afghans, only for the Foreign Ministry to walk this back over concerns about terrorists infiltrating the country.

Russia has also long raised concerns about terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, in particular highlighting the danger posed by ISKP. President Vladimir Putin has urged the Central Asian republics to reject Afghan refugees: “We don’t want militants coming in pretending to be refugees, or to see a repeat of the 1990s and 2000s,” he told media. Uzbekistan has returned refugees to Afghanistan, citing assurances from the Taliban.

In short, Central Asia is not planning to accommodate large numbers of Afghans. To do so would upset relations with the new government in Kabul. Barring a conflict forcing masses of Afghans across the border, Central Asia is

more likely to host small numbers of refugees on a temporary basis before they are relocated to a third country.

Long before the fall of Kabul, the Central Asian states had also

begun to take increasing ownership over Afghan stabilization, which included developing ties with the Taliban. In March 2021, Tajikistan hosted the most recent “Heart of Asia” conference, the ninth meeting of an initiative launched by Turkey

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and Afghanistan in 2011. Since 2016, Uzbekistan has modified its previously hands-off approach, developing strong ties with Afghanistan. In March 2018, Tashkent hosted an international conference on

Afghanistan entitled “Peace Process, Security Cooperation, and Regional Connectivity.” Uzbekistan has also taken steps to develop trade, open flights, and host more Afghan students at its universities.

In preparation for a potential Taliban takeover, the Central Asian governments made overtures to the Taliban and welcomed its representatives. Two delegations from the Taliban visited Turkmenistan in the first half of 2021. Uzbekistan’s Mirziyoyev stated that communication with the Taliban is “natural” given new circumstances. Uzbekistan has also offered the use of a logistics facility in Termez on the border with Afghanistan to help the UN and EU provide humanitarian aid to its neighbor (the facility was opened in 2016 in an effort to boost trade). “We will use railroads to send them food that is being delivered to them from other countries. We will contribute as well,” Mirziyoyev stated.

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*While reaching out to the Taliban, the Central Asian governments have also prepared for renewed violence in Afghanistan with military exercises and tightened border security.*

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The sole Central Asian outlier is Tajikistan, which has long had connections to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance led by ethnic-Tajik Shah Ahmad Massoud. President Emomali Rahmon has emphasized the importance of the safety of the ethnic-Tajik population, which makes up around one third of the population of Afghanistan. He declared that Dushanbe will not recognize a government “created by humiliation and ignoring the interests of the people of Afghanistan as a whole, including those of ethnic minorities, such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, and others.” Tajikistan’s government still classifies the Taliban as an extremist organization, with the state media referring to it, even after the fall of Kabul, as the “radical Taliban movement” Tajikistan’s rhetoric and its support for opposition forces have already produced a rebuttal from the new government in Kabul.

While reaching out to the Taliban, the Central Asian governments have also prepared for renewed violence in Afghanistan with military exercises and tightened border security. The Central

Asian states have mobilized their conscription-based armies. Reports from Turkmenistan indicated that some reservists were being summoned to military recruiting posts and being told to stay on alert for possible quick deployment. In July 2021, the Tajik government called up 230,000 personnel for a military preparedness drill. With an estimated 16,500 individuals on active duty, it lacks the supplies to equip them reservists, despite claims to the contrary.

Russia and China, Central Asia’s primary external security partners, have also organized military exercises. Days before the fall of Kabul, Moscow organized war games with Uzbek and Tajik forces. One week later, Beijing’s Ministry of Public Security held an anti-terror drill with its Tajik counterparts. These drills focused on counter-terrorism and repelling an armed incursion into the country.

### *Wither Connectivity?*

Connectivity is being touted as a means to stabilize Afghanistan. But roads, rails, and pipelines cannot be built without stability (and capital, of course). Afghanistan faces a chicken-and-egg problem: if there is instability, investment is unlikely; but stability

could be enhanced by investment. For its part, the Taliban appear to be much more image-conscious than it was two decades ago when it was last in power. Its officials have held press conferences and adopted an active social media policy, reassuring foreign governments about the group’s intention to maintain the rule of law and safeguard investments. Speaking to Sky News, Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen stated that “Afghanistan is a bridge between Central Asia and South Asia and [the new government] will work to enable connectivity.” He affirmed the Taliban’s commitment to realizing the TAPI pipeline, establishing rail and electricity links with Turkmenistan, and building the Termez-Mazar-e-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway.

The Taliban’s official line on the illicit trade in narcotics, which is especially valuable to Tajikistan, has been clear. Another Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, has repeatedly told international media the Taliban would not allow the production of opium or other narcotics within its state. But this public signaling is likely part of a broader strategy to appear like a “responsible” government and to attract international aid. Opium is already becoming less important to Afghanistan’s economy, with production falling from \$1.7 billion



to \$400 million between 2017 and 2020, driven in part by competition from synthetic drugs. But eradicating production could result in backlash from communities where opium cultivation is essential to survival—many of which form parts of the group's support base.

Regardless of developments in Afghanistan, these projects remain beset with problems. TAPI remains unviable due to limited demand in Pakistan and India, coupled with Turkmenistan's financial troubles stemming from mismanagement and falling demand from China, the country's main customer for gas. Even if

Afghanistan were to stabilize and the new government in Kabul were capable of creating a safe and secure environment for investment, there are limitations to how strong South-Central Asia ties can become.

The bottom line is that each region has different priorities and remains peripheral to the other. Certainly, stabilizing Afghanistan would represent a step towards entrenching closer ties. But it will not change the geopolitical and geo-economic reality that relations with Russia, China, Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East will remain of greater importance to each region. **BD**

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# Afghanistan's Place on the Silk Road

*James J. Coyle*

In a weeklong *blitzkrieg* in August 2021, Taliban forces swept through all of Afghanistan's major cities and captured Kabul. As the American-trained and funded Afghan National Army melted away, the United States and its allies launched a massive airlift out of the country of its friends and forces. As if to emphasize that Gulliver had been bound by the Lilliputians, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) attacked the refugees' main entry point to Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport. The suicide bomber killed 13 U.S. servicemen (the first American fatalities in 18 months) and almost 100 Afghans, including Taliban soldiers guarding the airport periphery.

Pundits quickly seized on America's withdrawal from the world, the demise of the superpower, the fecklessness of American

security guarantees. The same articles were written when the United States abandoned Vietnam 45 years earlier. Since then, the world watched the collapse of the Soviet Union and America's unipolar moment. The critics were wrong in 1975 and are equally wrong in 2021.

The United States remains the world's preeminent superpower. Its nuclear arsenal is only rivaled by Russia; its conventional forces have no real peer competitor. America has a treaty network that spans the globe, and its economy remains the wonder of the world. The crush of would-be-immigrants crowding the country's southern borders are proof that it remains a culture that attracts more than repels. What is missing is the will to exercise any of these elements of national power in Afghanistan, a country in which the United States has no national interests.

*James J. Coyle is CEO of Coyle International Consulting Incorporated and a former Director of Middle East Studies at the U.S. Army War College. The opinions expressed are his own.*

It wasn't always the case. After the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, America had the need to defend its homeland from terrorist attack. And so, in early October 2001 U.S. president George W. Bush announced the commencement of operations against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Within two months, al-Qaeda had been routed from Tora Bora and escaped into Pakistan. With this, the reason for the American invasion no longer existed. In the hills outside the former West German capital of Bonn, working with such unlikely allies as the exiled former King of Afghanistan and the mullahs in Tehran, a loya jirga named the head of the Popalzai tribe of

Durrani Pashtuns, Hamid Karzai, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. From this point on, the future of Afghanistan should have been in the hands of its own citizenry. Instead, it took 20 years for an American president (namely, Joe Biden) to announce his country's disengagement. (In this period, Brown University's Watson Institute recently estimated that the United States spent at least \$2.26 trillion on the war effort in Afghanistan alone, with the total

number of casualties estimated to be between 171,000 and 174,000.) The American troops followed the example of the Soviets (1989), the British (1842, 1880, 1919, 2014), the Mughals (1653), and so on, and removed their troops.

The American and NATO withdrawal has created a power vacuum that worries regional powers and external players. For almost every country with a stake or interest in Afghanistan's future, the primary concern is making sure internal insecurity does not spill over its borders: either as encouragement for Islamist militants, as a wave of refugees, or as a disruption in trade flows.

*For almost every country with a stake or interest in Afghanistan's future, the primary concern is making sure internal insecurity does not spill over its borders.*

All would like to see their individual influence expanded in Afghanistan, but none seem to want to emulate the United States and its NATO allies by sending troops. Turkey may have found a unique military niche for its continuing engagement, but for China, the emphasis is on economic expansion; for Iran and Pakistan, it is the diplomatic track. And although Russia is flexing its military muscle, it is doing so from the safety of the other side of Afghanistan's northern border.



### Limited Turkish Presence

Turkey is willing to commit troops to protect the Kabul airport yet has requested payment from the United States for the service. The Taliban have asked for Turkish assistance in running the airport, but insists Turkish troops are unwelcome. The Turks, by contrast have taken the position that Turkish security for Turkish airport workers is a *sine qua non*. Turkey has entered into negotiations with the Taliban, banking that Ankara's position as the only Muslim-majority NATO member state and its previous unwillingness to fight the Taliban in the field will yield positive results. It is also counting on its allies Pakistan and Qatar to help convince the Taliban that Turkish forces should continue their current role of guaranteeing Kabul airport's safety for diplomats, NGOs, aid workers, and so on.

Turkey does not appear to have any direct interest in Afghanistan itself; rather, it appears the offer to protect the airport is part of an effort to smooth American feathers ruffled by closer Turkish-Russian ties. Turkey has already said it

will not reverse its purchase of the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system, and Washington has reiterated it will not remove sanctions. Thus, the entrenchment of an expeditionary force at the Kabul airport appears to be something of value the Turks can provide to the Biden Administration.

### China's Play

The Chinese have not been eager to see the Americans' withdrawal—an interesting development given Beijing's initial opposition to the 2001 American intervention. Beijing appears to recognize that the presence of American troops in its backyard has provided tangible benefits by keeping Islamist militants at bay. While China is glad to see the back of Uncle Sam, it would have liked for the departure to be delayed until the situation was stabilized. China has no real interest in involving itself militarily in its neighbor's territory.

Beijing has been in touch with the current Afghan government for about five years, trying to expand the Belt and Road

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*With America's presence in Afghanistan gone, there is now a tremendous opportunity upon which the Chinese can capitalize.*

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Initiative into that country. Reportedly, Chinese advances at that time were rebuffed after the Afghan government received heavy pressure from the Indians and Americans. With America's presence in Afghanistan gone, there is now a tremendous opportunity upon which the Chinese can capitalize.

If the area were to stabilize, China would expand its economic interests in the country from the meager investment of \$2.2 million in 2016. Beijing is particularly interested in expanding the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This is a series of highways, railways, and energy pipelines that would connect China and its long-term ally Pakistan to Afghanistan. One of the first steps in this project would be the construction of a Chinese financed Kabul-Peshawar highway. To make sure its economic expansion is not interrupted by a change in governments, China is also in frequent contact with Taliban officials. Apparently, China has been an arms supplier to the Taliban since 1996, and there are reports of secret contacts with the Taliban-allied Haqqani network to deny sanctuary to the Uighurs. Recent attacks, such as on a bus carrying nine Chinese engineers, demonstrate that the relationship is fraught with difficulties.

China is also interested in Afghanistan's natural resources. It already has a 30-year contract to extract copper from a mine at Mes Aynak. China would also like to tie up Afghan supplies of gold and lithium. (One estimate is that China already controls 51 percent of all lithium in the world).

### Pakistan's Interest

As Chinese plans are dependent on regional stability, and it has no plans to ensure that stability with its own troops, Beijing is pinning its hopes on Pakistan. Islamabad has had longstanding ties with the Taliban, even allowing the Taliban to maintain a presence in Quetta after it fled Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Foreign minister Wang Yi has encouraged Pakistan to maintain the regional peace "together" with China.

Pakistan's interests are primarily defensive. Having long supported the Taliban in the hope that Afghanistan would give it strategic depth in its perpetual struggle with India, the support has been a two-edged sword. The former Afghan government asked Pakistan repeatedly to take practical steps to close down Taliban support bases and bring the rebel group into negotiations. These were

demands that Islamabad neither could nor would meet. In fact, at least one report had Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence directorate summoning Taliban leaders in Spring 2021 and directing them to launch military operations against the former Afghan government.

Having supported the Taliban all these years, Pakistan now finds itself on the verge of having a fundamentalist regime on its doorstep—a case of discovering that sometimes one's wishes should not come true. Taliban military successes are already emboldening Pakistan's own Islamists to challenge the government. Further, ISIS-K (the group challenging the Taliban for not being fundamentalist enough) are loosely aligned with the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a group dedicated to the overthrow of the government in Islamabad. Pakistan is also concerned that unrest in Afghanistan could lead to a wave of refugees for whom they would be responsible under international law.

Islamabad has emphasized that a diplomatic solution is necessary to bring stability. To that end, it sponsored the peace talks in Qatar that led to the September 2020 disengagement agreement. Qatar was the logical place for these talks to take place since it was one of only three countries that recognized the Taliban the last time it was in power—and they have maintained an office in Doha for many years. Recently, Qatar urged both sides to accept third-party mediation. Qatar is the home of the Al-Jazeera cable and satellite television news network, and there may be an ideological element in Doha's willingness to allow talks on Qatari territory. More likely, however, Qatar prides itself as being a credible, neutral arbiter in conflict situations.

Biden's failure to meet the withdrawal deadline agreed upon by Donald Trump, his predecessor in the White House, coupled with Biden's subsequent decision to withdraw unilaterally, appeared to have killed the diplomatic track. The Taliban's cooperation with the United States in assisting with the

Kabul evacuation demonstrates that not all hope for diplomacy has been lost. Pakistan has not abandoned diplomacy. Aware that a Taliban government will want international recognition, it has pretended that the talks in Doha were fruitful and ongoing. As an example, when Biden announced his unilateral withdrawal, Pakistan's foreign office said the decision coincided with progress in the peace talks. Pakistan's efforts at peace talks earned it brownie points in Washington; important because the resumption of American military aid is a top priority of Pakistan's powerful military high command. Needing to appease the Taliban, however, Pakistan has also stated it will not allow the United States to station troops on its soil after their withdrawal from Afghanistan.

### *The Role of Iran*

Afghanistan's other neighbor is Iran, whose then-foreign minister Javad Zarif met with Taliban representatives in order to secure promises that the Taliban would not attack groups

protected under Sharia law: civilians, schools, mosques, and hospitals. This was particularly important to Iran given that its consulate in Mazar-e Sharif was wiped out by the Taliban in 1998. (Shia are considered a heretical sect by strict Sunni Islamists). Eight Iranian diplomats and a journalist were killed in that attack. Because of this—note that the Taliban have always denied responsibility for the attack—Tehran's overtures to the Taliban are meeting opposition within Iran from regime stalwarts such as Grand Ayatollah Saafi Golpaygani. Iran's interest in the Taliban comes from its desire to defeat ISIS-K. Despite numerous Iranian overtures to Kabul, former President Ashraf Ghani had been unable to stop the ISIS-K from using Afghanistan as a safe haven from which to launch attacks into Iran.

At its heart, Iran did not want to see a Taliban victory, fearing it would only add to the millions of Afghan refugees already on Iranian soil. In addition, Iran needs a window to trade and circumvent U.S. sanctions, something the

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previous Afghan government gave them. The Taliban's victory might result in the imposition of sanctions on Afghanistan, which would close this crucial opening to the world economy. There is also an ideological underpinning at play, since Tehran has long presented itself as the defender of Shia rights around the world. Almost half of Afghanistan is populated by the Shia Hazara minority, who were deeply oppressed the last time the Taliban

was in power. As a result, Zarif discussed with the former Afghan government the possibility of using Iranian proxy fighters from Hezbollah and Hamas to prop up the regime against Taliban advances. (The suggestion was met with silence.)

### *The Russian Gaze*

Russia applauded Taliban victories in northern Afghanistan because they share a common foe (the Islamic State), and the Kremlin believed the

military campaign demonstrated American security guarantees could not be replied upon. Taliban victories were perceived as gains for the

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countries of Central Asia that have grown dependent on Russia for security guarantees. At the same time, Russia expressed concern over the growing regional insecurity. Former Afghan Army troops have become a potentially destabilizing force by fleeing across Afghanistan's northern border

(and possible death). Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan all mobilized their forces. Tajikistan is a member of the Russian-backed Collective Security Organization and houses Russia's largest foreign military base—with 7,000 troops stationed there permanently. Russia has begun holding military maneuvers including tanks in the countries bordering Afghanistan and has reinforced Tajik forces with armored personnel carriers.

The Kremlin has also used the chaos to reassert its hegemony over the region. Having forced the

United States out of its post-Soviet military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Moscow is not eager to welcome American counterterrorist forces into its sphere of influence. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov bluntly warned the Americans in Geneva: "The redeployment of the American permanent military presence to the countries neighboring Afghanistan is unacceptable. We told the Americans in a direct and straightforward way that it would change a lot of things

not only in our perceptions of what's going on in that important region, but also in our relations with the United States."

By contrast, the Russians have offered the Americans the use of their own bases in Central Asia for intelligence gathering, according to the daily newspaper *Kommersant*. At the Geneva summit, Russian president Vladimir Putin supposedly told Biden that Russian bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan should be put to practical use, possibly including an exchange of information derived from drones. It is not the presence of American troops in

Central Asia to which the Kremlin objects, but troops whose presence is authorized by national governments instead of Moscow.

Another way to put this is that Russia has denied the countries of Central Asia their sovereignty.

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*Russian efforts to play all sides against each other is the Kremlin's modus operandi at the conclusion of hostilities throughout the Silk Road region.*

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Does Uzbekistan want American support against terrorists? Is Kyrgyzstan willing to reopen Manas to American troops? It doesn't matter. Regardless of the views and opinions of the governments

of these captive nations, Moscow has already decided that the Kremlin alone will make such decisions.

Russian efforts to play all sides against each other is the Kremlin's *modus operandi* at the conclusion of hostilities throughout the Silk Road region. Probably the most egregious example of this was in Georgia in 1993. Russian forces fought on the side of Abkhaz rebels against the central government, until Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze met a major Russian foreign policy goal: the president announced that Georgia would join the Moscow-backed

Commonwealth of Independent States. Having achieved their goal, Russian troops reversed their role and fired on the Abkhazians. They were then able to maintain their presence in Georgia as “peacekeepers” until the 2008 war.

In Moldova, the Russians maintained correct diplomatic relations with Chisinau even as its 14<sup>th</sup> Army fought on the side of the Transnistrian rebels. The result was a “peacekeeping” force consisting of one-third Moldovan, one-third Transnistrian, and one-third Russian—meaning Moscow controls two-thirds of any vote.

In Ukraine, relations are cold but correct with Kyiv, even as the Russian-supported breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk try to destroy the state. Putin gave the Ukrainians a peace plan to which all sides agreed; yet the sides cannot agree on sequencing of the steps, meaning there is little chance for agreement. This keeps Moscow in the position of kingmaker. Russia denies its direct involvement in the conflict, despite Putin’s admission that the “little green men” in Crimea were Russian special forces, and despite NATO evidence that Russian troops directly intervened in the fighting in February 2015 when it appeared that Ukrainian troops would win against the rebels.

In Azerbaijan’s formerly-occupied Karabakh region, Russia has been both a Co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group and the sponsor of unilateral peace efforts. Russia claimed to be neutral in the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict, despite evidence that Russian troops fought on both sides in the First Karabakh War. Since then, Russia has used the threat of Turkish intervention on behalf of Azerbaijan as justification to house 5,000 Russian troops on Armenian soil. It gave weaponry to Armenia while selling \$6 billion worth of munitions to Azerbaijan. It would be difficult to affirm that Russia invested the maximum of its diplomatic influence to bring the sides together.

When Russia’s allies in Yerevan (the followers of termed-out president Serzh Sarkisyan) were defeated at the polls in May 2018, it turned a blind eye when fighting erupted in September 2020. After a 44-day conflict—known as the Second Karabakh War—Azerbaijan regained control over all seven districts surrounding the former Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast as well as the city of Shusha and some other geographies in the aforementioned former oblast itself. In the Russian-brokered peace deal, Azerbaijan agreed to allow a Russian peacekeeping contingent of 1,960 to take control

of the rest from the ethnic-Armenian forces. Of particular note is that Russian troops are now stationed along the 5 km-wide Lachin corridor connecting this Russian peacekeeping zone, which contains a small ethnic-Armenian population, with Armenia.

Russians are also supposed to protect a transport corridor through Armenia’s Syunik province that will link Azerbaijan with its exclave of Nakhchivan. Having achieved its goal of placing Russian troops back into Azerbaijan (from which they had been previously expelled), Moscow does not appear to have done much to bring into existence what in Azerbaijani terminology is called the Zangezur corridor. No matter who wins on the battlefield, Russia always wins at the peace table.

If Armenia is willing to enter into economic relations with other countries in the region, then this would provide a missing piece in a continental transportation corridor across the Silk Road region designed to connect Europe and East Asia. This would stand a chance

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of benefitting all concerned. If Armenia decides to reopen its borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan (for instance, as part of a peace treaty), it could become a valuable road and rail transit route for freight and passengers uniting the Caspian with the Mediterranean.

Afghanistan plays a similar role east of the Caspian. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline has been on the drawing board for years; the Taliban is on record that they would protect the pipeline because of its potential importance to Afghanistan’s economic well-being. Similarly, the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative would benefit: achieving CPEC’s full potential is ultimately dependent on the establishment of stability in Afghanistan.

### *Stability Prognosis?*

The short-term prognosis for such stability is not good. Taliban leaders say they have learned their lessons and that they will not repeat their predecessors’



past mistakes. They have given promises to protect women, not oppress the Shia, and to crack-down on heroin traffickers. If they uphold these promises, they face internal opposition from ISIS-K that considers such actions heretical. Given the group's ideological beliefs and its track record of executing internal opponents, such reassurances should be taken with a grain of salt. Memories are long in this part of the world, and the excesses of the 1990s will not be easily forgotten.

In the longer-term, however, there is a glimmer of hope. The very things that have regional powers worried are the seeds for their solution. Russia, the Central Asian states, Iran, and China are all concerned that an Afghanistan without the Americans will become a haven for Islamist militants. Russia has agreements (unilateral or multilateral) with all the surrounding states. Russia and China announced that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) will begin counterterrorist cooperation. It will not be easy, but it is conceivable that a grand counterterrorist alliance could be formed.

It's just that the West is unlikely to be a particularly strong player in such a coalition.

Economic cooperation may come easier. China founded the SCO, and its members include Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Iran and Afghanistan are both Observer States. (By the time of publication of this article, the SCO may have accepted Iran into full membership). This provides a backbone for potential economic cooperation and could evolve into a free trade zone. According to liberal economic theory, increased trade flows among the various member and observer states would lead to both prosperity and stability. The former Afghan government previously expressed interest in such cooperation through its economic talks with the Chinese and its desire to construct the TAPI pipeline. Similarly, the Taliban's promise to protect such a pipeline indicates they

also desire economic cooperation with at least some of Afghanistan's surrounding states.

If TAPI were to come to fruition, it would be a game-changer for Afghanistan.

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Nicknamed the "peace pipeline" because it would give common interests to rival powers in South Asia, the agreements call for the construction of an 1814-km pipeline to deliver 33 billion cubic meters of Turkmen natural gas to countries along the route, including an allotment of 5 billion bcm to Afghanistan. In addition,

Afghanistan would receive between \$400 and \$500 million of transit fees annually. Just as the 1994 "Contract of the Century" to construct the 1,768 km-long Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and export Caspian hydrocarbon resources to the West raised Azerbaijan's economy, the influx of energy and transit fees to Afghanistan could propel its economic development.

Admittedly, short-term instability may endanger long-term diplomatic stability: if Afghanistan descends into a civil war as it did in the 1990s, the Taliban could fail to gain

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*If TAPI were to come to fruition, it would be a game-changer for Afghanistan. Nicknamed the "peace pipeline" because it would give common interests to rival powers in South Asia, it reminds one of the 1994 "Contract of the Century" that resulted in the construction of the BTC pipeline and propelled Azerbaijan's subsequent economic development.*

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diplomatic recognition. The West is unlikely to bestow its blessing on a government that engage in war crimes. Similarly, regional powers and external actors could become divided as countries choose sides in a conflict. Russia, China, and Iran have kept their diplomatic missions open in Kabul, however, indicating a willingness to

work with the new government. In either case, diplomacy would fail to provide the band-aid that would hold the country together.

The Taliban's success in recapturing Afghanistan may have profound effects on the populace. Although the Taliban have said they will not introduce all the draconian measures they did in the 1990s, their return to power is certainly resulting in the restoration of a more conservative/traditionalist society. As an example, the Taliban has said it will respect women's rights as long as they conform to Sharia law. At the same time,

however, women should not work or leave their houses for their own safety. The ideological divide between the West and the Taliban is wide.

The EU fears the Taliban will reintroduce a draconian form of Sharia law, including the subjugation of women, but they will be powerless to counter these events. The United States is withdrawing from South Asia except for a skeletal counterterrorist presence. It will condemn Taliban excesses, apply sanctions, but do nothing. When a U.S. president responds to a terrorist attack with the promise of retaliation “at a time and place of our choosing,” it means it has no plans or capabilities readily available. China is only concerned about internal stability and external economic growth: it will ignore the ideology of any ruling party, as it does in Africa. Other than a largely-declarative concern for the protection of human rights and the maintenance of stability, it appears that most external players to the Afghanistan drama care little about whether the Taliban rules in Kabul or not.

### *Looking to Moscow, Again*

That leaves Moscow, still concerned about terrorism on its southern borders. Russia bears the scars of the Soviet Union’s intervention in the 1980s: 13,310 soldiers killed, 35,478 wounded, and 311 missing (by contrast, estimates of Afghan dead in that war range from 562,000 to 2 million). That war also resulted in large numbers of Red Army soldiers addicted to heroin. This problem was compounded when the United States invaded Afghanistan, as the Taliban became dependent on opium production for their income. The main route for exporting drugs to their customers in the West was through the Central Asian states and Russia. This led to an increased role for Russian organized crime as well as an increased number of Russian addicts.

The ISIS-K attack on the Kabul airport may serve as a rallying point for the international community: Taliban, Russia, China, Iran, and the West are opposed to ISIS-K expanding its influence.

*Most external players to the Afghanistan drama care little about whether the Taliban rules in Kabul or not.*

Gaining Taliban support will require considerable work from the international community. An indigenous force that reconquered

Kabul with Western aid, the new government would like to gain access to Afghanistan’s funds held in foreign banks but has survived 20 years in exile without them.

Despite its bad experience 40 years ago, the Kremlin might be willing to involve itself more directly

*Since stability is a Russian goal in the area, the Kremlin may hold the key for a more peaceful Afghan future.*

in stabilizing the country through diplomatic and economic interventions. Moscow has already proven itself adept at supporting all

sides in various conflicts in the former Soviet space as well as in using the support it receives as a result to further Russian foreign policy goals. Since stability is a Russian goal in the area, the Kremlin may hold the key for a more peaceful Afghan future. BD

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# Post-Conflict Confidence-Building and Arms Control

## The Case of Armenia and Azerbaijan

*Stuart Maslen*

The armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia known as the Second Karabakh War that took place over a 44-day period in fall 2020 resulted inter alia in two consequences. First, significant contamination from explosive remnants of war, including cluster munition remnants; second, it laid bare a huge threat from anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines, particularly along the former Line of Contact that stretched for 280 km characterized by earthworks, barbed wire, and landmines forming defenses of between 3 and 7 km in depth.

The widespread use of mines and cluster munitions since the late 1980s has occurred amidst a lack of accession to key conventional arms controls treaties by neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan. Neither is a State Party to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (1980), the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (1997), or the Convention on Cluster Munitions (2008). In the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War, this essay considers whether there are now opportunities to build confidence in the region and contribute to a broader peace and reconciliation agenda through

*Stuart Maslen is Honorary Professor of International Law at the University of Pretoria, having previously served as Head of Research of the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights. The author would like to thank Juan Carlos Ruan, Director of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention Implementation Support Unit, for his comments on an earlier draft of this article. This does not signify any endorsement of the views expressed in the article, which remain those of the author alone.*

accession by both countries to one or more of these conventional weapons treaties.

The impact of explosive ordnance contamination on reconstruction and resettlement activities in Karabakh and other liberated areas of Azerbaijan is considerable and will remain so for many years to come. Indeed, the prolonged human suffering and myriad constraints on development will continue to present a compelling case for universalization in the South Caucasus of the conventional arms treaties. Over

the past 30 years, mines and explosive remnants of war have inflicted 2,800 casualties. Just since the end of the hostilities in November 2020 and through to early June 2021, a total of 142 Azerbaijani casualties were recorded (including 49 civilians), as well as four Russian peacekeepers, six Armenians involved in the recovery of human remains, and one Armenian casualty reported on Armenian soil. These incidents have mostly taken place within territory regained by Azerbaijan but where civilian populations are not currently resident or circulating.

When resettlement and wider land use occurs in these districts, the casualty figures are likely to be raised further—perhaps dramatically so.

Victim-activated protective systems such as landmines are increasingly seen as outdated, with other advanced military powers moving towards more sophisticated means of border security. Turkey is just one example of this. Perhaps there is now an opportunity to reflect on the regional context in the South Caucasus and to explore the possibility of adherence to global treaties that would achieve

three important objectives. First, help address the current situation through greater international support for clearance efforts in the liberated areas; second, limit (or better still prohibit) future mine-laying activities by both countries; and third, offer a valuable platform for confidence-building between the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Three treaties will be examined in chronological order of adoption. First, the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on

*The prolonged human suffering and myriad constraints on development will continue to present a compelling case for universalization in the South Caucasus of the conventional arms treaties.*

the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects that was adopted in Geneva in 1980 and entered into force in 1983—commonly known as the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, or the CCW. Second, the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction that was adopted in Oslo in 1997 and entered into force in 1999—colloquially called the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, or APMBC. Third, the Convention on Cluster Munitions that was adopted in Dublin in 2008 and entered into force in 2010.

### *The 1980 Convention*

The Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) was the indirect result of the failure of negotiating states to agree upon prohibitions and restrictions on specific conventional weapons when drafting the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions on the protection of the victims of international armed conflicts. From the negotiating arena of international humanitarian law (IHL) that took place under the aegis of the government

of Switzerland, states moved within the auspices of the United Nations to conclude the CCW, which they achieved in October 1980. Today, all five permanent members of the UN Security Council are party to the CCW, along with major military powers like India, Israel, Pakistan, and Turkey. Georgia, too, is a State Party, although Iran is not. As of early September 2021, 125 UN member states are parties to the CCW and an additional four are signatories. Both Azerbaijan and Armenia, however, remain outside.

Both the CCW's structure and the scope of its application is somewhat unusual. It comprises a framework treaty with a series of annexed protocols that regulate specific categories of conventional weapons: non-detectable fragments, landmines, incendiary weapons, blinding laser weapons, and explosive remnants of war. The CCW's structure allows for additional protocols to be added if and when the State Parties decide to do so; three have been added since the CCW's adoption, along with its three original protocols. By tradition, decisions among the states parties are taken by consensus.

The annexed Protocols contain detailed rules for the use in armed conflict of specific weapons that raise humanitarian concerns.

The CCW is primarily an IHL treaty, although it also comprises limited arms control elements that preclude the transfer of those weapons whose use is comprehensively prohibited. To join the Convention, a state must adhere to the framework Convention and at least two of the six annexed Protocols.

For the first two decades after coming into force, the CCW and its Protocols applied only in international armed conflicts—i.e., those between two or more sovereign states. This includes the 1980 Protocol II on landmines. In 2001, however, the scope of application of every protocol was expanded to also cover non-international armed conflicts—i.e., those between a state and a non-state armed group. This is known formally as the Amendment to Article I of the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain

*The reintegration of Karabakh into the rest of Azerbaijan requires a multi-layer, sequential policy approach characterized by a high tolerance for contingent and adaptive alternatives.*

Conventional Weapons which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects, entering into force in 2004. A State Party to the CCW must ratify this amendment of scope for it to apply (86 had done so as of early

September 2021). The 1996 Amended Protocol II, however, which substantively tightened restrictions on landmines, explicitly applies in all armed conflicts.

Next, we can discuss the two Protocols on landmines. The first is the Protocol on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Mines, Booby-Traps and Other Devices (adopted in 1980 and entered into force in 1983), commonly termed the 1980 Protocol II. It prohibits the targeting of civilians using anti-personnel or anti-vehicle mines as well as the indiscriminate use of any landmines (denoting instances where mines are emplaced or dispersed by aircraft, but are not directed against a lawful military objective).

This prohibition is fully in line with the customary international legal rules on the conduct of hostilities that already bind both Armenia and Azerbaijan (and all other UN member states). Indeed, the 1980 Protocol II adds little to those longstanding IHL rules, as exemplified in the International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC) Customary IHL Rule 1



(“The Principle of Distinction between Civilians and Combatants”) and Customary IHL Rule 11 (“Indiscriminate Attacks”).

There is no obligation under the Protocol to destroy any landmines nor any prohibition on production, import, or export. Their use is not comprehensively prohibited, either.

Rightly so, the ICRC refers to an “epidemic” of landmine injuries that resulted from the widespread indiscriminate use of anti-personnel mines, especially in the 1980s, in countries like Afghanistan, Angola, and Cambodia. This led to widespread clamor for the imposition of greater legal restrictions in armed conflicts. In 1993, France called formally for the revision of CCW Protocol II, which in turn led UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to convene the First Review Conference of the CCW in October 1995. The following May, an Amended Protocol II was adopted by the CCW States Parties.

The Protocol on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Mines, Booby-Traps and Other Devices as Amended in 1996 (Amended Protocol II) requires that all anti-personnel mines be detectable to a certain standard and that remotely delivered anti-personnel mines

self-destruct and self-deactivate within 120 days to a very high combined standard of inoperability. Manually emplaced anti-personnel mines must be marked and fenced wherever it is possible to do so. The Amended Protocol II also prohibited the transfer to anyone of non-detectable anti-personnel mines. Few restrictions, though, are imposed on anti-vehicle mines.

The two CCW Protocols on mines have been widely ratified. As of early September 2021, 95 UN member states are party to the 1980 Protocol II while 106 UN member states are party to the 1996 Amended Protocol II. All five permanent members of the UN Security Council are party to both the 1980 Protocol II and the 1996 Amended Protocol II.

One other CCW Protocol is particularly relevant to the post-conflict situation in Armenia and Azerbaijan: the Protocol on Explosive Remnants of War that was adopted in 2003 and entered into force in 2006 (Protocol V). As of early September 2021, 96 UN member states are party to it. Protocol V requires parties to a conflict to take measures to reduce the dangers posed by explosive remnants of war. These “ERW” are defined as unexploded ordnance and abandoned explosive ordnance

linked to an armed conflict. To facilitate clearance, Protocol V requires the exchange of information on use of munitions (subject to legitimate national security interests). Protocol V neither prohibits any weapon nor affects their production or transfer; it just concerns the post-conflict clear-up, especially for the benefit of the civilian population.

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan should be in a position to adhere to the CCW along with its 1980 Protocol II, its 1996 Amended Protocol II, and the 2003 Protocol V on explosive remnants of war. Indeed, it is surprising that neither has yet done so. In moving towards accession, each would in effect reinforce their respective existing obligations under IHL to safeguard civilians from the effects of weapons.

### *The 1997 Convention*

Notwithstanding the successful adoption of the Amended Protocol II by CCW States Parties in 1996, many UN member states were persuaded that nothing less than a total prohibition of anti-personnel mines would be sufficient to protect civilians from harm—both during armed conflicts and for years and decades afterwards. As well as the

direct humanitarian costs, the negative social and economic impacts are also very significant. Land cannot safely be used for agriculture or grazing livestock, physical infrastructure cannot be reconstructed, and refugees and the internally displaced are impeded from safe return. Clearance of mined areas is slow, dangerous, and expensive. In a 1994 *Foreign Affairs* article, Boutros-Ghali even called for anti-personnel mines to be considered “in the same legal and ethical category as biological and chemical weapons.”

At the closing of the First Review Conference of the CCW in May 1996, the Canadian delegation invited other interested states to come to that country later in the year in order to discuss a path toward a total global prohibition on anti-personnel mines. At the resulting conference, held in Ottawa in October 1996, Lloyd Axworthy, Canada’s foreign minister at the time, called on interested states to return to the Canadian capital before the end of 1997 to sign a treaty comprehensively outlawing anti-personnel mines. The collective efforts of pro-ban UN member states and various civil society groups—the process took place outside the UN framework—would result in the adoption, in Oslo in September 1997, of the

Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction by more than 120 UN member states. It entered into force in March 1999 and, as of early September 2021, 164 UN member states are party to the Convention, including, among many others, Afghanistan, France, Iraq, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

The core of the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention lies in its Article 1(1), according to which each State Party “undertakes never under any circumstances” to develop, produce, stockpile, transfer, or use anti-personnel mines. As the Convention is worded in the form of a disarmament treaty, and not an IHL treaty like the CCW (which is primarily limited to situations of armed conflict), the prohibition on use applies also in peacetime. In addition, the prohibition on use includes all and any use, including along an international border. No reservation to any of the provisions of the Convention is possible.

Central to any disarmament treaty is the duty to destroy stockpiles. Stockpiling of anti-personnel mines was explicitly prohibited in the 1997 Convention,

with a deadline set of four years from the date on which a state becomes party for completion of destruction. This four-year deadline is strict and cannot be extended. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan are believed to still possess Soviet-era mines. When the Soviet army left Azerbaijan in 1992, it had left landmines and other weapons behind. Armenia, too, secured stockpiles of Soviet anti-personnel mines, possibly as a result of the May 1992 Tashkent agreement under which Russia transferred weapons to several former Soviet republics, including Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention set an important precedent by also requiring the survey and clearance of mined areas, and within a set period of time. These are by far the most expensive and demanding obligations under the 1997 Convention. A range of deadlines were discussed during the negotiation of the Convention, but recognizing the varying nature of the challenge, states settled on an initial ten-year deadline with the possibility of securing additional deadlines of up to ten years at a time.

In the 20 years following the entry into force of the Convention, a total of at least 2,880 square kilometers of mined area was cleared worldwide,

along with the destruction of more than 4.6 million emplaced anti-personnel mines. In addition, approximately 53 million stockpiled anti-personnel mines were destroyed by the State Parties. What was in the 1990s a humanitarian crisis in many countries is now largely a social and developmental challenge. Over the same period, 32 States Parties to the Convention and one state not a party to the Convention (i.e., Nepal), as well as one other territory (Taiwan), completed mine clearance on their territory. Armenia and Azerbaijan are among 57 UN member states around the world that are still contaminated by anti-personnel mines and join a list of 31 other states that have still to accede to the Convention.

Although neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan supported the position of a total ban on anti-personnel mines during the negotiation of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention in 1997, both Yerevan and Baku have supported the humanitarian objectives of the Convention at various points and in various ways. For instance, both states attended several of the treaty negotiating meetings, and Armenia (but not Azerbaijan) came to the treaty signing conference in Ottawa in December 1997 as an observer. In a 2010 letter addressed to the civil-society research network The

Landmine Monitor, Armenia stated that it could not adhere to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention “at this moment” but said that it “supports the Treaty and values the idea of transparency and confidence-building measures.”

In the latest UN General Assembly resolution on the implementation of the Convention (A/RES/75/52)—adopted just days after the end of the Second Karabakh War—both Armenia and Azerbaijan voted in favor. Russia and the United States joined 15 other UN member states in abstaining from the resolution (there was no recorded vote against), which, interestingly, contained a clause “call[ing] upon all States that have not yet done so to become parties to the Convention without delay.”

Moreover, the two states have engaged in the Convention’s machinery to varying degrees. For instance, Azerbaijan submitted voluntary APMBC Article 7 transparency reports in 2008 and 2009, but has not done so since. Nonetheless, Azerbaijan has been by far the more active of the two in the context of the Convention in recent years. In a statement to the APMBC intersessional meetings which it attended (virtually) in June 2021, Azerbaijan called on all States Parties to the Convention to support its mine action efforts.

According to its statement: “despite the huge resources allocated by Azerbaijan, the [demining operation] still requires more resources given the size of the contaminated areas. Azerbaijan urgently seeks broad international donor support, also in terms of funds and provision of technical equipment required to continue its demining efforts.”

Key States Parties, such as the presidency of the annual meeting of States Parties or the five-yearly review conferences, can engage at a diplomatic level with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, discussing the long-term costs and impact of use. Of course, calls for financial assistance for demining are more likely to be met sympathetically by donors where there is confidence that new mines will not be laid. Thus, in the 1990s, for example, the World Bank required Croatia to support the ban on anti-personnel mines on its territory before financial assistance would be provided for mine clearance.

Early adherence to the APMBC by either Azerbaijan or Armenia on a unilateral basis may be unlikely at this stage. Signature

of the Convention has not been possible since its entry into force on 1 March 1999, so adherence would mean direct accession: a one-stop act resulting in a state becoming a full party, with all the associated obligations and prohibitions. Conversations involving Yerevan and Baku on taking simultaneous steps to engage with the treaty, however, may be more realistic and effective for regional stability.

There are important precedents of former adversaries joining the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention in a coordinated or semi-coordinated fashion. Greece, a signatory state, ratified the APMBC in September 2003 while its long-term adversary, Turkey, acceded on the same day. Both were former users of anti-personnel mines, with mines planted along their various borders. Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a bitter war in 1998-2000, which saw widespread use of landmines by both parties. Eritrea acceded to the Convention in 2001, becoming a State Party the following year; Ethiopia, which had already signed the Convention in 1997, ratified in 2004. These were

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bold and progressive decisions by states that realized that any military utility of anti-personnel mines was limited and was, in any event, far outweighed by the humanitarian and developmental costs of the weapons.

### *The 2008 Convention*

Concern about cluster munitions is also longstanding, resulting especially from their extensive use by the United States in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Hundreds of millions of submunitions were dropped by the U.S. Air Force, a significant percentage of which did not detonate on impact with the ground. Laos, the world's most heavily contaminated state from these cluster munition remnants, has decades of clearance still ahead of it. These “bombies,” as they are known locally, are especially hazardous to children.

In 1974, a group of countries led by Sweden called for the prohibition of a number of anti-personnel weapons, including “cluster warheads,” and these proposals were subsequently discussed in the diplomatic conferences that resulted in the coming into being of the two 1977 Additional Protocols and then the CCW. When the CCW

was adopted in 1980, however, it contained no measures on cluster munitions. The renewed use of these weapons by the United States in Afghanistan, starting in 2001, and then in Iraq, starting in 2003, underlined problems associated with the accuracy and reliability of a weapon intended to saturate areas with explosive force whilst increasing disquiet among national policymakers in a number of States Parties to the CCW. But it was Israel's heavy use in southern Lebanon in 2006 that proved to be a tipping point in the decisions of many states to move forward, whereby only a total prohibition would suffice to prevent future humanitarian harm.

In a negotiating process led by Norway, the Convention on Cluster Munitions was adopted in Dublin in May 2008 and entered into force in August 2010. As was the case with the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, the Convention on Cluster Munitions was negotiated at an ad hoc diplomatic conference convened outside UN auspices, as agreement to prohibit those weapons within the global organization's consensus-based framework proved impossible. As of early September 2021, 110 states were party to the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions, but neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan.



Similar to the core provisions of the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, UN member states adhering to the Convention on Cluster Munitions must never under any circumstances use, develop, produce, acquire, stockpile, retain, or transfer cluster munitions. The Convention defines a cluster munition as “a conventional munition that is designed to disperse or release explosive submunitions each weighing less than 20 kg, and includes those explosive submunitions.” All mines are explicitly excluded from the scope of the Convention on Cluster Munitions, as are munitions or submunitions designed to dispense flares, smoke, pyrotechnics, or chaff, as well as munitions or submunitions designed to produce electrical or electronic effects.

The Convention requires each State Party to destroy all stockpiles of cluster munitions within eight years of becoming party to it. But, uniquely for a disarmament treaty, a potentially unlimited number of extensions may be granted to that obligation, where destruction takes longer. Each extension may be accorded for a maximum period

of four years. According to the terms of the document, a meeting of States Parties or a review conference assesses the request by a State Party and decides by a majority of votes of States Parties present and voting whether to grant the request for an extension.

As is the case with the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, the Convention on Cluster Mu-

nitions requires that clearance and destruction of unexploded submunitions and any abandoned cluster munitions be completed within ten years of its entry into force for an affected state. It is,

however, possible to request extensions to the deadline from the other States Parties, of up to five years at a time.

The most detailed obligations on victim assistance of any disarmament treaty are set out in the Convention on Cluster Munitions. The Convention allocates clear responsibility to each State Party to “adequately” provide age- and gender-sensitive assistance to cluster munition victims in areas under its jurisdiction or control. The required assistance includes medical

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care, rehabilitation, and psychological support, as well as provision for their social and economic inclusion. The provision also sets out in detail how a State Party is to implement these obligations.

Armenia participated as an observer in several of the early meetings of States Parties of the Convention on Cluster Munitions but has not done so since 2014. In 2013, Armenia declared that it considered the Convention “one of the principal instruments of the International Humanitarian Law to achieve the goal of elimination of an entire category of excessively injurious conventional weapons.” It further declared its belief that “the simultaneous accession of the South Caucasus countries to the Convention will ensure its effectiveness and reciprocally reduce the security threat perception.” Azerbaijan participated, for the first time, as an observer in the Ninth Meeting of States Parties to the Convention on Cluster Munitions in September 2019.

All this took place before the Second Karabakh War. During the conflict, both sides reportedly used cluster munitions. While the full extent of contamination from cluster munition remnants is not known, in December 2020 Human Rights Watch declared that Armenian

forces “repeatedly fired” cluster munitions in “attacks on populated areas in Azerbaijan during the six-week war over Nagorno-Karabakh” (the same group had previously accused Azerbaijan of repeatedly using cluster munitions in residential areas of the occupied territories). In addition, both Yerevan and Baku had accused each other of perpetrating cluster munition attacks outside the conflict zone, with Human Rights Watch documenting dozens of fatal casualties and injuries in attacks that took place “roughly 30 km from the then-front line” in Azerbaijan’s Barda, Goranboy, and Tartar districts. In retrospect, it is hard to see what military advantage in the Second Karabakh War was gained by the use of cluster munitions.

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have said in the past that they cannot accede to the Convention until the resolution of the dispute over Karabakh is finalized. This position surely cannot reasonably be sustained any longer, particularly given the humanitarian impact of the use of these weapons in the 2020 conflict and the new situation on the ground that brought the occupation to an end. With sufficient political will, early adherence by both states should be possible. Accession to the Convention on Cluster Munitions—perhaps in a

coordinated fashion—would certainly constitute a confidence-building measure that also bolsters peace. It would also demonstrate the willingness of the relevant state authorities to do their utmost to protect their citizens and that of other states from the long-term harm of cluster munition remnants.

### Outlook and Opportunities

While individual adherence by either Armenia or Azerbaijan to the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention is perhaps unlikely just now, both could accede immediately to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and its two annexed protocols on landmines. There is no military or security reason not to do so. There are also good reasons for both Armenia and Azerbaijan, in joining the CCW, to adhere to its Protocol V on explosive remnants of war. Post-conflict clearance is significantly facilitated by the recording of use of munitions and the exchange of relevant information with other parties to a conflict, whether directly, through the good offices of the UN

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Secretary-General, or through the mediation of, say, Russia or other mutually-acceptable state actors.

Adherence to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention by Armenia and Azerbaijan

would be a bold and impactful step forward in the region. On the path towards treaty adherence, voluntary confidence-building measures could readily be taken now: for example, annual submission of voluntary Article 7 reports, including disclosure of the number of anti-personnel mines still held, and systematic participation as observers at the Convention meetings. Engagement with States Parties and other key stakeholders, including through side events, could help to identify alternative, safer means of protection of long borders. A commitment not to use, procure, or transfer mines to any recipient would also build confidence. The annual presidency of the Convention and the Implementation Support Unit are always ready to engage in positive discussions with future contracting states.

In recent months, we have seen positive steps being taken by Armenia to provide limited

information about minefield locations in the former occupied lands. In June 2021, for example, Yerevan transferred the maps of 97,000 anti-tank and anti-personnel mines planted during its occupation in the Agdam district of Azerbaijan while 15 Armenian detainees in Azerbaijan's custody were returned to Yerevan. Both sides acknowledged their appreciation to Georgia, the United States, the EU, and the Swedish OSCE chairmanship-in-office for their respective contributions to this effort. Hopefully, this step will be followed by others in the time ahead.

Finally, both Armenia and Azerbaijan could and should also adhere to the Convention on Cluster Munitions, such as through the coordinated deposit of instruments of accession. The use of cluster munitions during the Second Karabakh War was rightly criticized by many. In a statement issued a week before the end of

the war that inter alia referred to the aforementioned rocket attack against Barda that was “allegedly fired by Armenian forces from Nagorno-Karabakh [and] reportedly carried cluster munitions,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet declared: “Amid deeply troubling reports that cluster munitions have been used by both parties, I call once again on Armenia and Azerbaijan to stop using them, and to join the more than 100 States that have ratified the Convention on Cluster Munitions which comprehensively bans their use.” Use in populated areas poses a significant threat to civilians even when women and children are not being targeted.

Particularly in this post-conflict environment, maintaining the status quo would actually represent a step backwards. Adhering to the conventional arms control agreements would constitute a major step forward. BD

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# Setting Standards for Clearing Landmines

## Humanitarian Solutions to the Residue of War

*David Hewitson*

Landmines have been an extensive and persistent feature of many conflicts for at least the past century, manufactured on an industrial scale by many countries, and improvised by insurgent groups. They remain in the ground in some regions left over from World War II, Cold War proxy-conflicts, the Iran-Iraq War, and as a result of more recent conflicts including those in Syria, Afghanistan, Colombia, and the countries of the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan, after regaining large swaths of territory during the Second Karabakh War and as a result inheriting the extensive contamination associated

with the former line of control, now may rank within the top ten mine-contaminated countries in the world.

As a predominantly military or conflict created problem, it is often assumed that landmines are most susceptible to military solutions, but clearance of landmines during conflict has little in common with clearance of landmines once conflict has come to an end. A fundamentally different set of objectives, priorities, and constraints apply once war is over, demanding a very different set of methods, procedures, and plans. Although in the past military units have been involved in extensive post-conflict

*David Hewitson is Director of Operations at Fenix Insight Ltd., an advisory firm specializing in mine action strategy, policy, and practice. He has over 30 years' experience in humanitarian mine action during which time he has drafted a number of the core International Mine Action Standards (IMAS). Before joining the mine action sector, he served as an officer in surface ships and submarines in the UK Royal Navy and holds a degree in aeronautical and astronautical engineering.*

clearance programs (in places like Vietnam)—and in a number of countries government mine clearance authorities fall under a military or quasi-military ministerial structures—the main centers of expertise today are primarily found in those civilian organizations that have been involved in post-conflict land-

mine clearance on a constant basis for the last three decades and more.

Responses to landmines, as well as other explosive remnants of war, include more than just clearance. Destroying stockpiles of unused mines, advocating for the cessation of manufacture, sale, and use of landmines, providing affected populations with risk education, and helping victims of landmine accidents are all important. Collectively these integrated activities are known as humanitarian mine action (HMA).

Landmine clearance is an important element of the post-conflict reconstruction work taking place in Azerbaijan today. This essay looks at experience gained

*Landmine clearance is an important element of the post-conflict reconstruction work taking place in Azerbaijan today. This essay looks at experience gained in other countries during more than 30 years of humanitarian mine action, the differences between military and civilian mine action, and some of the lessons that may be applicable to Azerbaijan.*

in other countries during more than 30 years of humanitarian mine action, the differences between military and civilian mine action, and some of the lessons that may be applicable to Azerbaijan.

Historically, mines were most commonly laid for military defensive and tactical purposes, but they were, and are, used by insurgent groups to create fear in civilian populations in some conflicts. Irrespective of their original purpose, mines that remain in the ground after a conflict has ended affect people directly, by injuring or killing them, and indirectly, by denying access to productive land, prolonging suspicion between different groups, and impeding resettlement, economic activity, and reconstruction. Uncertainty about where mines might be located further magnifies the effects of these indiscriminate and long-lasting weapons.

Eventually, all human-made objects degrade under the influence of heat, cold, water, biology, chemistry, ultra-violet light, and



other factors, but those processes can take many decades to come to their respective ends. In areas containing mines that were laid over 70 years ago it is common to find examples that remain active even today.

### *The Evolution of Humanitarian Mine Action*

After World War II much of the mine clearance that took place in Europe was carried out by former combatants, some still prisoners of war, as well as many volunteers keen to help reconstruct the ravaged continent. Some of them had first-hand knowledge (having laid the mines themselves) whilst others had access to records, but even under those circumstances the casualty rates amongst that set of deminers would not be considered acceptable today. Some areas were fenced-off and left as being just too difficult to demine, such as the Skallingen Peninsula in Denmark, where mines were laid as part of Adolf Hitler's Atlantic Wall in the early 1940s, and where German ex-combatants conducted clearance in other nearby areas. The peninsula was not finally cleared until the mid 2000s.

The first major HMA program was established in the late 1980s in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal

from Afghanistan. Most of the initial training was conducted in refugee camps in Pakistan, with demining teams crossing the border into Afghanistan to carry out a variety of landmine-related tasks. All came under the broad umbrella of the UN's Operation Salam. Instructors were generally provided on loan from Western militaries. Their own training and experience was based mostly on the clearance of minefields during ongoing military operations, often expected to be conducted in the face of hostile action by opposing forces. Few of the instructors had prior personal experience in extensive peacetime mine clearance. The result was that deminers were trained in procedures associated with clearance under combat conditions. This typically involved up to three personnel, lying on their stomachs, crawling forward slowly within a clearance lane, using mine detection techniques such as prodding the ground with bayonets. At the same time, smaller projects started within Afghanistan itself, managed mostly by ex-military personnel (including myself) who for the most part did not have specific combat mine clearance experience.

Over the following several years there was a slow and often bitterly resisted (by some technical advisers) change in the approach to

clearance. Two deminers, working together in a lane, one with a detector, the other using a bayonet, trowel, or other tools to investigate signals from the detector, eventually became one deminer working alone, detecting and investigating, while the other observed from a safe distance to make sure that procedures were being correctly followed. Finally, it was accepted, again after often extended and heated debate within the burgeoning demining community, that one deminer could work alone without being observed by a partner. A further improvement was the provision of specially designed personal protective equipment, consisting of ballistic visors and aprons, which allowed deminers to adopt a more ergonomically comfortable kneeling position.

The net effect of these changes was to increase the productivity of operations dramatically. Instead of three people in a clearance lane, delivering one unit of cleared square meters output between them, those three people now operated in three separate lanes, each delivering their own individual productive output. Not only that, but increased comfort and improved ergonomics meant that each deminer was producing more individual square meters per working day. These improvements arose

as civilian managers, following a pragmatic, evidence-based approach, gradually moved away from traditional military procedures.

To begin with, Western militaries had viewed the civilian mine action organizations with considerable suspicion, considering them as amateurs trying to do a military job. However, within a few years the position had completely reversed, with those same military units recognizing that the civilian humanitarian agencies had immeasurably more experience of clearing landmines. Suddenly they were asking whether their own military personnel could be embedded with the civilian agencies to gain experience.

By the mid 1990s there was increased public and governmental awareness of landmines as a global humanitarian issue. The efforts of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, working with a number of international institutions and supportive governments, led to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC), established in 1997 and often known as the Ottawa Convention after the city in which it was first signed. For the first time, countries that adopted the APMBC took on commitments, not just to stop manufacturing, selling, transferring, or using mine themselves, but also to clear all

mines on their own territories. In 1996, the global humanitarian mine action sector was worth around \$135 million; by 2006, the amount has increased to about \$500 million dollars per year. Since then, global annual declared funding has fluctuated between around one-third and two-thirds of \$1 billion per year. Other expenditures by commercial entities hiring landmine survey and clearance services increase the total amount further. As the scale of humanitarian operations expanded so too did the level of experience and expertise within the sector.

### *Manufactured and Improvised Landmines*

The post-2001 conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq brought with them the widespread use of increasingly sophisticated improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Many IEDs were used as landmines. In a repeat of the disagreements and arguments of the 1990s about mine clearance, the mid 2010s saw extended discussions about the clearance of IEDs in humanitarian contexts. Once again, the suggestion was that this was an exclusively military activity that could only be addressed by a small number of (extremely expensive) individuals with extensive military experience. But the constraints of the

real world intruded, as donor governments balked at the huge costs associated with the employment of such personnel. The fundamental importance of the distinction between “active” improvised devices in an ongoing conflict environment and those “abandoned” objects, left over after conflict had moved on, also became clearer.

IEDs that have a current intended purpose, and that are found in areas where they are being used as active weapons against specific targets, present a complex problem that are, in addition, wrapped up in wider issues of security and politics. Under such circumstances military responses are almost always unavoidable and essential, not least because they may demand the deployment of protective security assets, as well as require expensive, sophisticated equipment (such as for jamming radio or mobile phone signals) that are only effective within a comprehensive, up-to-date, and effective intelligence system.

Situations of insecurity also typically raise questions of whether any clearance operation can satisfy basic humanitarian expectations of political neutrality. If the user of an IED is still observing it, waiting to send to it the command signal to detonate (perhaps as a military patrol approaches) and someone

else seeks to find it and prevent it from functioning, then the user will view the clearance operation as a hostile act. He or she may take violent action against the clearance personnel. That same IED presents a

completely different situation several months or years later, when it has been abandoned, the batteries in its power source have flattened, or when the insurgent group that planted it has left the area. In much the same way that conventionally manufactured landmines become a form of “pollution” (rather than current military weaponry) once the war is over, so abandoned IEDs are suitable for a completely different non-military clearance response: one that can meet normal humanitarian demands and expectations.

### *Landmines and the Management of Risk*

At the heart of HMA is the question of managing risk. It is important to understand from the outset that this is not about managing one risk (the potential for physical harm caused by landmines), but rather about

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*Both the Second Karabakh War and the November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020, trilateral agreement concluded between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia represents major diplomatic failures for the West.*

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managing a complicated and dynamic collection of inter-related risks, only some of which are about direct human harm.

One of the basic principles of risk management is that taking action to re-

duce one risk can create other new risks. Mine clearance itself offers a clear example: in order to remove the risk to the civilian population of accidental harm arising from treading on landmines, safety risks must be accepted amongst those who will do the clearance work. Those risks are themselves managed through training, selection of appropriate equipment, application of effective procedures, and so on.

The International Organization for Standardization (commonly known by its acronym, ISO) defines risk as “the effect of uncertainty.” Uncertainty about exactly where landmines are, even when records and sketch maps are available, generates other risks—the main ones being wasting time and money clearing land that does not actually contain any landmines and clearing land that intended beneficiaries will not then accept as safe.

There is always an imperative to clear mines as quickly as possible after conflict so as to allow affected people to get on with their lives; but doing things too quickly brings with it the risk of missing mines and the possibility that still-contaminated land will be returned to civilian users who then become victims of those missed mines. The consequences of such events are not only unacceptable in terms of the harm and cost inflicted on people and their families; they can also lead to other potential land users rejecting released land because they have lost confidence in its safety. If that happens, then much of the effort (and cost) associated with the clearance work will have been wasted. It may be necessary to re-clear large areas, incurring yet more cost and delay, before the land is accepted as safe to use. Thus, all mine clearance operations seek to balance the demands of cost, speed, and quality. Doing things quickly may cost less (and may make land available sooner), but if the result is that farmers lose limbs or lives in areas claimed to have been cleared, then any economies will prove to have been false and supposed gains in time will quickly turn into further delays and additional cost.

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*All mine clearance operations seek to balance the demands of cost, speed, and quality.*

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In some quarters it has been, and still is, suggested that working to humanitarian standards slows down military units that would otherwise be able to complete clearance and release land for civil use more quickly. It is hard to see how this could be the case unless the supposed different approach was either more dangerous (resulting in more deaths or injuries to deminers) or accepted a lower quality of work (increasing the chance that unexploded mines would be left in land handed over to the civil population, who would themselves be at increased risk of death or injury). The only other possible rationale for approaching the task in a different way would be if military units had access to some much more capable mine detection technology. There is no evidence that this is the case. Indeed, the humanitarian sector is closely involved in the development of new technology. Manufacturers often use humanitarian operations to test their equipment, not least because it is humanitarian agencies that encounter landmines most frequently and in the largest numbers.

## *Keeping Busy vs. Making A Difference*

Successful and efficient mine clearance is not just about deploying deminers, mine detection dogs, and mechanical demining systems to deliver cleared land. It is also about ensuring that the work “makes a difference.”

When HMA first started, the focus was on being seen to do something. Lots of resources were procured, trained, and deployed. Measures of progress focused on mines found and square meters cleared—measures that have value in understanding the performance of operational elements yet do not provide any information as to whether activity is “making a difference.” Mine action “makes a difference” when people use land for productive purposes, when fewer people are killed or injured stepping on a landmine or picking up an unexploded munition, when economies grow, and when societies are confident about functioning free from the fear of landmines. Spending time and money on activity that fails to “make a difference” represents a waste of precious public money that could have been put to better use clearing areas where mines were present, and that people were going to use.

Combat mine clearance was (and is) all about getting through an obstacle as quickly as possible so that an attack can continue. In balancing combat risks, speed is of the essence. Finding every mine is less important. In a humanitarian environment the balance is very different. It is essential that every mine is found (or at least that missing a mine is a very, very rare occurrence). If there are any doubts about the safety of the land following clearance, people will not use it. If land is rejected by users, then the time, cost, and personal risks incurred by the deminers will have been wasted. In sum, the output of the clearance work is very different in the two situations.

Perhaps the idea that the military could somehow work more quickly, if it was only freed from the unnecessary constraints of humanitarian clearance operations, arises from a misconception about the relationship between combat clearance and the release of land for civil use. Whatever the explanation, it is unlikely that a government would be prepared to compromise on the quality of land made available to its own people (even if it would accept potentially high accident rates amongst its own troops). The result is that military units working in humanitarian programs, such as within UN peace-keeping operations, are required to work to humanitarian standards.

Measuring the outcomes of mine action (such as improved confidence and economic wellbeing) is often harder than measuring outputs (such as the physical area of land cleared). Properly understanding the links between clearing land, providing risk education, and helping the victims of landmine

accidents is even more difficult. Mine action is typically one of many recovery, reconstruction, and development initiatives in areas emerging from conflict. Showing which interventions lead to which beneficial effects (the outcomes) is difficult with many interacting social, political, and economic factors and influences operating in a rolling, dynamic way.

Recent studies in Mozambique and Afghanistan have used satellite imagery taken over many years to assess the density of nighttime light on the ground as a proxy indicator of economic activity. Such studies have provided robust evidence that mine action has had a positive effect on economic development, but other anticipated benefits on population movements, security and stability, and capacity development

often prove harder to identify and assess in measurable terms. While the positive evidence that mine action brings economic benefits is welcome, it is only a first step on increasing understanding of how to target and prioritize mine action so that it not only delivers some benefit, but instead delivers as much benefit as it can. The topic is one of ongoing and increasing professional and academic focus within the sector.

Increasing understanding is reflected in changes to planning, prioritization, and practice in mine action, but it also makes clearer the considerable challenges of achieving intended outcomes in the complex, dynamic environment of a human population and its socio-economic context.

### Humanitarian Space

Here it might be useful to take a step back and summarize some of what has been said or implied in previous sections. Through all aspects of the use, residual effects, and clearance responses to landmines—whether manufactured

or improvised—runs the common theme of the prevailing space and whether that space is military or humanitarian. Military units often talk about “permissive” or “non-permissive” situations, meaning circumstances in which there is freedom to move and operate or where movement is likely to attract a hostile response. In the military space ob-

jectives are primarily about protecting troops and other military assets to allow them to perform other functions. Those functions range from peacekeeping and security stabilization to full combat operations. Casualty rates amongst specialist clearance operators in non-permissive situations are often high. In Afghanistan and Iraq, including in the Kurdish areas close to the border with Syria, many specialist military and militia clearance operators have died or been injured while searching for and dealing with IEDs. Such casualty rates would be unacceptable in a humanitarian working context.

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For the mine clearance space to be humanitarian there must be a degree of security and stability. If there is not, then there is a constant risk that an HMA agency will appear to take one or the other side in conflict and be seen (rightly or wrongly) as a legitimate enemy by the opposing side. In some modern conflicts the difficulties are

compounded when there are not two sides, but many, ebbing and flowing in a mix of politics, clan and tribal warfare, and criminality (e.g., there are currently reported to be over 80 non-state armed groups active within Colombia).

Some humanitarian agencies are prepared to attempt to work in areas that are relatively insecure but doing so can bring significant risks. The June 2021 attack in northern Afghanistan by non-government elements on the HALO Trust, a non-profit humanitarian mine action agency, in which 10 mine clearance workers were killed (with two others dying



later from their injuries) and many others were wounded, illustrates the challenges of working in an area where some groups are supportive of clearance operations while others are not. Thankfully, such attacks are rare. The great majority of HMA around the world takes place in areas where the local government and people are wholly supportive of landmine clearance work.

Despite the objections and active hostility of some armed groups, humanitarian mine clearance agencies are wholly focused on removing mines and other unexploded remnants of war in order to help people and societies go about their lives and business free from the fear and influence of landmines. There is no reason why military units should not conduct mine clearance with humanitarian objectives in an environment that allows for humanitarian activity; but if they do so then there is also no reason why they should not approach the task in the same way as those organizations that operate for exclusively humanitarian reasons.

## *Efficiency and the Use of Public Money*

Some civilian mine clearance is carried out under contract to commercial enterprises (mostly in the oil and gas, minerals extraction, power, and construction sectors), but the great majority takes place within programs funded by foreign governmental donations or domestic budgetary allocations. In every case there is pressure to be efficient whilst satisfying expectations of safety and quality. That pressure became more focused in the wake of the financial crashes around 2008. Funding from international donors was expected to be in shorter supply. Domestic

budgets faced competing claims from different elements of society and the economy. The result was that there was less tolerance for the clearance of land that turned out to contain no mines, as well as

for improved prioritization of clearance in areas that would make the greatest difference when released. The approach to making sense of prioritization, targeting of effort, and delivery of the most useful land came together under the umbrella “land release” concept.

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Land release puts great emphasis on the collection and use of information to support good planning and the appropriate targeting of clearance assets onto land that is most likely to contain landmines. It also encourages better learning and improvement, using knowledge gained from clearance operations to increase understanding and help improve the efficiency of future operations.

## *The Role and Applicability of Standards*

The lessons learned, the experience gained, and the new methods developed over more than 30 years of constant operations worldwide would have been of only local value had there not been a focal mechanism for the sharing of good practice, encouraging the adoption of improved techniques, and discouraging poor practice. That mechanism has involved the development and adoption of globally and nationally accepted standards.

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When modern humanitarian mine action started, the various organizations engaged in practical clearance operations made sense of the circumstances they faced, independently of each other. Some adapted already existing military procedures and doctrine; others developed working practices from first principles. There were no common approaches or standards.

As the scale of HMA operations expanded—initially in Afghanistan and then into countries like Cambodia (from 1992), Mozambique (from 1993), Angola (from 1994), and elsewhere—it became clear that there was a need for some commonality in the fundamentals of how to approach the work.

The first set of standards—developed following a major international meeting that took place in Copenhagen in 1996—were released in 1997 by the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS). These focused on core aspects of the

practical conduct of clearance operations and reflected the lessons that had been learnt during the previous several years of humanitarian operations. By then, many of the traditional military combat clearance approaches had already been abandoned, as more appropriate techniques were developed by humanitarian operating organizations.

In 1999 the standards were reviewed, with the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) undertaking management on behalf of UNMAS. The first editions of what became the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) were developed and made available for public use. The IMAS are subject to ongoing review by a formally constituted review board composed of representatives from a wide range of UN agencies, international institutions, governments of mine-affected countries, academic bodies, and non-profit and commercial mine clearance organizations. A Steering Group provides higher level oversight and direction. The standards are formally approved and adopted within the context of the United Nations system.

The review process is designed to ensure that there are regular opportunities to update IMAS to reflect new understanding,

methods, and techniques. IMAS, especially those with the greatest day-to-day relevance, have been reviewed and updated several times since they were first published. In some cases, entirely new standards (such as those relating to IEDs) have been developed in response to changes in the operational context. All those involved in the review process have an interest in helping mine action become, as we say, “better, faster, cheaper.” At the same time, they also have an interest in preserving the basic aims of doing the work safely and reliably. As a global sector, with a wide variety of engaged organizations, there are few initiatives or innovations that do not come to the attention of the UN and other international organizations.

IMAS have no formal independent legal standing in their own right. In some cases, they attract legal force when they are referred to in contracts: for instance, any organization working under contract to UNMAS is required to satisfy IMAS; many commercial clients (such as in the oil and gas sector) choose to refer to IMAS in their contracts; during the recent clearance work in the Falkland Islands the UK Government chose to refer to IMAS in contracts for the clearance and separate monitoring service providers.

Although some mine action operations work to IMAS themselves, it is more usual to see them reflected at the local level in National Mine Action Standards (NMAS). NMAS draw on the IMAS as the basis for domestic standards; ones that are adapted to reflect the specifics of local legal, governmental, and program aspects. Unlike IMAS, NMAS usually do have formal legal standing through adoption in national legislation or other enforceable legal instruments. The current action plan for the APMBC includes a specific objective to keep NMAS up to date and aligned with IMAS. When there is an amendment to IMAS there should be an associated review at the NMAS level to identify whether any changes are required. If so, they should be implemented and the latest version of the affected NMAS be promulgated within the national mine action program. The challenges of staying up to date, working through national legal procedures, and ensuring the quality and acceptability of proposed changes, means that there may be some lag between changes in IMAS and adjustments in NMAS. Nevertheless, the standards that are available are designed to be enablers of efficient and effective mine action.

In Azerbaijan, the National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) has a body of NMAS that have been used to support an established and successful mine action program stretching back over 20 years. The national standards are in the process of being updated to reflect developments in the mine action program and to better align them with the most recent edition of IMAS. This will provide a stronger common framework for an expanding the number of demining operators that are responding to the demands of the reconstruction and resettlement plans in the territories of Azerbaijan regained during the Second Karabakh War. Under the coordination of ANAMA, the various ministries involved in mine action (including the ministries of defense, interior, and emergency situations) as well as expanding services drawn from the private sector and civil society will benefit from a more current NMAS. This will promote the safety and efficiency of operations around a common reference framework and encourage greater confidence in the quality of land cleared of landmines and other explosive remnants of war.

It is easy to imagine that standards matter only to those who carry out or inspect clearance work. It is true that those most closely associated with practical operations

do have the most obvious and detailed interest in what the standards say. But people who will end up using the cleared land—whether farmers, construction companies, private home occupiers, children playing outside schools or others—also have an interest, even if they may not be aware of the existence of the standards themselves.

They expect to be safe when they walk, drive or build on, excavate, or otherwise interact with land. If there is any doubt about whether land can be trusted it will not be used. Rejection of cleared land by users represents a complete failure of the mine clearance process. Standards, whether international or national, provide the foundation on which confidence is based: confidence amongst those who pay for clearance work to be conducted; confidence amongst those who carry out the work; and confidence amongst those who are expected to accept cleared land as safe.

### *Doing the Right Job, Doing the Job Right*

Mine clearance is a risk management process, dependent on the identification, collection, analysis, and use of information to drive evidence-based decisionmaking. The better mine

action operators and authorities are at making use of available information, the better targeted practical interventions will be. The land that is released for public use will be more tightly targeted (avoiding wasting effort on areas that prove to contain no mines) and is more likely to be used for beneficial social and economic activity.

Getting mine action right relies upon more than performing practical activities well. It demands intelligent selection and prioritization of tasks as well as the pursuit of constant improvement through learning and innovation. The task is often summarized as “doing the right job as well as doing the job right.” At the level of a national mine action program, mine action is difficult to get right. A range of strategic, planning, and management skills are needed at every level: from those who work on their hands and knees at the front of a mine clearance lane, through their immediate supervisors, to those with higher level responsibilities up to and including the ultimate national authorities. The better the information management system is, the better operational performance can be understood, monitored, and managed, and the better work plans can be developed and implemented. The better mine action is managed and delivered

at every level; the more benefit will be provided to those affected by mines. Selection of the wrong tasks, selection of tasks in the wrong order, inefficient, unsafe or poor-quality conduct of clearance operations will all diminish the extent to which mine action “makes a difference.” There is a powerful moral, as well as professional, obligation on all those involved to address the most difficult aspects of understanding how mine action “makes a difference,” not just how to ensure that demining assets are kept busy.

The HMA sector has learned a great deal over more than 30 years of constant, intensive, and varied landmine clearance operations all over the world. Much of what has been learned is reflected in IMAS and, by extension, NMAS. There are constant pressures and demands to be efficient as well as safe and reliable. The system for establishing, reviewing, and updating mine action standards is proven and effective in ensuring that new ideas, techniques, and methods are reflected in operational practice. When determining which standards and procedures are applicable to mine clearance work, it is not the nature of the organization performing the task that matters (whether

military, civil governmental, non-governmental or commercial), but the purpose of its work. In an insecure conflict environment military personnel, procedures, and equipment are wholly appropriate. In a post-conflict environment, then, the approaches and methods set out in IMAS and NMAS are the right ones to select—irrespective of what sort of organization is conducting the work.

The mine action sector continues to learn and improve, working from a basis of professional knowledge, competence, and standards that are rightly admired by other aid and development sectors. There should be no complacency. The task of clearing landmines to return land to civilian populations is too important, but any organization involved in the work can be confident that IMAS, and properly aligned NMAS, provide a solid foundation for its own procedures and practice. Whether interested outsiders, managers, monitors, or practitioners we can all offer our best wishes and support to those who work with machines, dogs, rats, or on their hands and knees to help remove and destroy landmines and other unexploded remnants of war. **BD**

# End of the War, But No Peace

## Will the Kremlin Change Its Old Paradigms?

Anar Valiyev

It would be naive to believe that the tectonic, paradigmatic shifts taking place in international relations would not have impacted upon Azerbaijan specifically and the Silk Road region generally (the strategic fallout from the U.S.-led withdrawal from Afghanistan is but the latest example). One of the most significant events of 2020 was the war fought between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In the early morning of 27 September 2020, official Baku reported the shelling of Azerbaijani villages by Armenian troops from positions in occupied Karabakh. Following reports of civilian deaths, Azerbaijan launched a counter-offensive operation along the entire line of contact to suppress the combat activity of the armed forces of Armenia and ensure the safety of its civilian population.

The Second Karabakh War lasted 44 days and claimed the lives of around 3,000 Azerbaijani soldiers and 92 civilians, who mostly were killed by strikes of SCUD-B ballistic missiles, cluster bombs, and artillery shells targeting Azerbaijani cities and villages in Ganja, Barda, Tartar, and others. Meanwhile, Armenian casualties are estimated at around 3,360 combatants, with dozens missing. The war almost ended on 8 November 2020 when Azerbaijani troops took the city of Shusha, which has strategic significance and towers over Karabakh's communist-era capital, Khankendi (the Armenians still call the city Stepanakert, a name imposed in 1923 by the Soviet authorities in homage to Bolshevik revolutionary Stepan Shaumian, nicknamed the "Caucasian Lenin"). Observing the imminent battlefield defeat of its Armenian ally and foreseeing

the full military resolution of the Karabakh conflict in a manner deleterious to Moscow's interests, the Russian establishment rushed to ensure an arrangement whereby its troops were able to enter Karabakh as peacekeepers.

On 10 November 2020, the presidents of Russia and Azerbaijan, together with the Armenian prime minister, signed a joint statement ending the Second Karabakh War. The agreement states that "the peacekeeping forces of the Russian Federation, namely, 1,960 troops armed with firearms, 90 armored vehicles, and 380 motor vehicles and units of special equipment, shall be deployed along the [new] contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh and along the Lachin Corridor." The agreement envisaged the complete withdrawal of Armenian military forces from all occupied territories and their replacement in a few areas by the aforementioned Russian troops and by the Azerbaijani military in the rest of the liberated

territories. The agreement also made provisions concerning the return of refugees and internally displaced persons under the "supervision" of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the unblocking of the transport and economic routes in the region, and so forth.

The tripartite agreement has some clear winners. Azerbaijan recaptured territory that was occupied by Armenian forces some 30 years ago without having to accept any sort of autonomy for Karabakh, as envisioned in past peace negotiations conducted largely under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group and its three Co-chairs (France, Russia, and the United States). However, the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in parts of Karabakh resulted in the end of an Azerbaijan point of pride: the absence of a Russian military presence on its soil.

Another clear winner was Russia. There are several reasons for the Kremlin to be satisfied with the consequences of

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Anar Valiyev is Dean of and Associate Professor in the School of Public and International Affairs at ADA University. He is Jean Monnet Chair at the same university.



the tripartite agreement. Moscow became not only *the* central party to manage peace operations between the conflicting sides; it also assured for itself a strong hand to have prevailing influence over both Armenia and Azerbaijan for the foreseeable future. For instance, another provision of the tripartite agreement concerns itself with the establishment of a 5 km wide Lachin Corridor, “which will provide a connection between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia” and “remain under the control of the Russian Federation peacekeeping forces.” The agreement further states that “within the next three years, a plan will be outlined for the construction of a new route via the Lachin Corridor [from Armenia to Khankendi], and the Russian peacekeeping forces shall be subsequently relocated to protect the route.” The final provision of the agreement states that “new transport links shall be built to connect the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and the western regions of Azerbaijan [...] in order to arrange unobstructed movement of persons, vehicles, and cargo in both directions. The Border Guard Service of the Russian Federal Security Service

shall be responsible for overseeing the transport connection.”

The question that is posed by the public, analysts, and scholars is this: what will be the next step in the Kremlin’s plans? What model of relations and governance will Russia chose to impose in the areas controlled by its peacekeepers in Karabakh? Will it establish a new model, or have recourse to one or more exiting ones, such as those in use in places like Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Crimea, and Donbass?

### *What Will Moscow Do?*

For a long time, Russia has played an important role in all the peace processes that have arisen in the former-Soviet parts of the Silk Road region. For instance, Moscow has demonstrated strong support for the establishment of statelets in Abkhazia, Ossetia, and Transnistria—even going so far as to recognize the independence of the first two. There and elsewhere, the Kremlin not only deployed peacekeeping forces but also strengthened separatist powers and bolstered

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*What model of relations and governance will Russia chose to impose in the areas controlled by its peacekeepers in Karabakh?*

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secessionist entities against the parent states (Georgia and Moldova, respectively). Providing economic, financial, and political support for the establishment of these quasi-state structures has also been a main Russian strategy.

Nevertheless, Moscow’s policy towards post-Soviet conflicts and post-Soviet states differs in several ways: Russia has never had a universal approach either to conflicts or to unrecognized entities in the Silk Road region.

From this perspective, two fundamentally different positions can be identified in Russia’s foreign policy posture towards this part of the world. The first one, which has been a constant since the collapse of the Soviet Union, can notionally be called *the status quo* position. This policy envisions the clear refusal of recognition to quasi-states (all the while encouraging unofficial support via various channels) and the acceptance of the territorial integrity of parent states. Moreover, Moscow has been involved in various peace talks and processes through which it has shown its positive or negative attitude to the involved parties,

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depending on their respective behaviors and attitudes towards Russia and its interests. Meanwhile, the conflicting sides have each continued

to court favor with the Kremlin, yielding on certain issues such as supporting Russian positions measured by voting according to Moscow’s preferences in multilateral fora like the UN, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe.

Thus, for example, Azerbaijan refused to support Western sanctions against Russia during the Ukrainian crisis, although it endorsed the territorial integrity of Ukraine in the UN General Assembly by voting in favor of a resolution adopted in March 2014 in response to the Russian annexation of Crimea. Such careful diplomatic maneuvering has created room for enduring bilateral relations to persist into the present, notwithstanding the appearance of a certain “othering of Russia” due to the potential threats the Kremlin may pose to Azerbaijan’s security. Baku’s policy could be described as a kind of “Finlandization,” akin to the Finnish pursuit of neutrality after World War II in the face of a hostile Soviet Union. For Azerbaijan, such a policy turned out to be successful,

in the sense that Russia did not get involved militarily in the Second Karabakh War, thus enabling Azerbaijan to crush Armenia's army its affiliated ethnic-Armenian separatist force. However, further developments may show that Baku may be forced to double down on its version of Finlandization. The presence of Russian peacekeepers will hover over Azerbaijan as a sort of Sword of Damocles over the next four years. Thus, Baku will be very cautious not to irritate the Russian establishment with any major pro-Western undertakings.

Russia's second foreign policy approach in this part of the world, which can be dubbed the *revisionist position*, can be described as consisting of the recognition of the independence of separatist entities, as was the case with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which of course constitutes the withdrawal of support for the territorial integrity of Georgia. But we can say that the revisionist policy is more an exception proving the rule; we can add that this second approach has served as a way to test the strength

of the red lines of the "liberal international order" as well as test how far Moscow can go in the region.

The 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, coupled with the latter's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, showed that the West was not going to clash with Russia over the recognition of statelets in this part of the world (the Russians skillfully used the precedent of the Kosovo Albanians' uni-

lateral declaration of independence, supported by parts of the West, as an analogy and justification for its own actions). Writing in the Winter 2021 issue of the journal *Orbis*, our colleague Damjan Krnjević Mišković identified the Russo-Georgian conflict as representing

the first of two events marking the end of the U.S.-led unipolar era or, as he put it, "the end of the 'end of history'" (together with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, which triggered the collapse of Western stock markets and the onset of a global financial recession). "This forty-day period in 2008 marked the moment in which the credibility of the West cracked on two critical

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fronts: great power politics and international economics. This called into question, in a fundamental way, the West's claim to primacy in global leadership, which rested not insignificantly on predictability and prosperity as well as on monopoly on patronage."

Meanwhile, we should understand that Russia's recognition of the two breakaway statelets was a response to Georgian defiance and Tbilisi's increasingly pro-Western inclination. Continued talks on Transnistria and Karabakh are mostly directed toward keeping Moldova and Azerbaijan, respectively, within the Kremlin's orbit. Meanwhile, Russia continues to make economic investments in, and promote trade with, Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia so as to enable these statelets to survive.

An examination of the Russian foreign policy paradigm produces the conclusion that Moscow has no plans to reestablish all or parts of the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire. The Kremlin's purpose is control, not conquest; influence, not rule. In most cases, Moscow is content with the status quo, whereby each government is controlled through some conflict or security dilemma that in turn allows Moscow to play the role of security guarantor or important mediator.

The activities of Russian troops in Karabakh show that they are performing more than a classical peacekeeping role: they ensure the separatist's rump statelet is protected militarily, involve themselves in constructing houses for the local ethnic-Armenian population, help rebuild infrastructure, and even indirectly support the local economy by buying products and services from the population. More importantly, Moscow does not make an effort to disarm the local separatist forces, thus turning a blind eye to their continuing presence in the territories under Russian control—in contravention of the tripartite agreement that states that the "peacekeeping forces of the Russian Federation shall be deployed concurrently with the withdrawal of the Armenian troops."

Moscow's plan toward the zone controlled by its peacekeepers in Karabakh can be pretty much understood. Russian soldiers have once again set foot on Azerbaijani soil, although they are not housed in military bases. The presence of fewer than 2,000 peacekeeping troops in Karabakh does not represent a military threat to Azerbaijan, although it has symbolic value and a political effect. Karabakh's ethnic-Armenian population is allowed to identify with being distinctly under the direct

supervision of the Russian military command—de facto neither becoming citizens of Azerbaijan again nor even truly remaining citizens of Armenia. Currently, all security issues and reconstruction efforts, as well other

challenges like relations with Azerbaijan, are under the effective control of Russia. From this perspective, we can see a direct analogy of rump Karabakh today with Ossetia before the August 2008 war. There have even been rumors on the distribution of Russian passports to Karabakh Armenians.

It is in the interest of the Russian establishment to keep Karabakh divided, partitioned, or segregated, for this prevents the reintegration of the Armenian-populated territories with the rest of Azerbaijan. The Kremlin's means would involve limitlessly "administering" security issues. Further, Moscow would like to push Armenia away from partaking in any type of negotiation processes and has made it clear it will represent the Karabakh Armenians. The Russians will,

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however, continue to press Armenia to recognize Azerbaijan's borders, support the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, and help Azerbaijan in reconstruction efforts. Still, those parts of Karabakh now under the control of Russian peacekeepers now represent a Moscow trading card with Baku. Parts can be handed over, piece by piece, over the next decade in exchange for preferences or concessions in other areas. Nevertheless, it is unlikely this may happen in the immediate future.

For Karabakh's ethnic-Armenians, the Russian intervention has been a mixed blessing. Saving them from imminent battlefield defeat, the Russians successfully pushed Yerevan out of the discussion and decreased its influence: they are now directly subjugated to Moscow through the presence of its peacekeeping force. While Russian troops control and safeguard Karabakh's ethnic-Armenian population, and keeps its numbers relatively low, Moscow discourages it from reintegrating with Azerbaijan and uses it as an instrument in negotiations with Baku.

This raises the question of the duration of the Russian peacekeeping presence. To keep its troops beyond the intended five years, Russia must work closely with Armenia and the Karabakh Armenian authorities to make sure that Azerbaijan cannot unilaterally ask Moscow to leave—an option fully compatible with the terms of the tripartite agreement. Since Moscow wants to avoid the threat of an Azerbaijani veto on extending the mission beyond 2025, the Kremlin must remain on the best possible terms with Azerbaijan, which means it must find a way to assure Baku that Karabakh is no longer a separatist territory. At the same time, Moscow needs to be ready to create a situation in which the local separatist forces, armed with Russian weapons, attack Azerbaijani positions in case Azerbaijan decides to invoke the clause of the tripartite agreement to push the Russians out of Karabakh. Meanwhile, of course, Russia has little reason to help Armenia and Azerbaijan normalize relations. From the Kremlin's perspective, Armenia needs to keep perceiving Azerbaijan as an enemy: this would make any government in Yerevan easy to manipulate whilst remaining reliant on Moscow's security guarantees to prevent an all-out collapse.

## *Will Russia Use the Minsk Group?*

After Azerbaijan's victory on the battlefield and sealed through diplomacy, official Baku has made it clear that discussions about the possibility of some sort of special status for the Karabakh Armenians are no longer on the table; the same clarity of expression has been made with regards to negotiations related to changes in Azerbaijan's internal territorial and administrative arrangements. Baku logically claims that since the war and indeed the conflict has ended, there is no further need for the OSCE Minsk Group to serve as a mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan—and certainly not on the core issues, since they are no longer subject to or objects of negotiation.

Baku's position has been examined by various experts and several retired senior Western diplomats, including America's former OSCE Co-chair, Richard Hoagland. In a March 2021 article entitled "Does the Minsk Group Still Have a Role?" he answers that it "depends on which side you ask. Yerevan is clear that it sees the continuation of the Minsk Group as essential for determining the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku is equally

firm in the other direction, asserting that Nagorno-Karabakh is an integral part of Azerbaijan and always will be.” In other words, as Hoagland puts it later in the same essay, “Armenia says ‘absolutely,’ whereas Baku says, ‘certainly not.’ And so the status quo of the Minsk Group is likely to continue bumping along in relative obscurity.”

Indeed, Yerevan continues to see the Minsk Group as its last, best hope, as it were, for influencing the Karabakh issue, by somehow being the forum in which Karabakh’s final status should be defined. The presence of France as a Co-chair (alongside America and Russia) enables Armenia still to hold onto the belief that its position is tenable. Baku, on the other hand, firmly asserts that Karabakh is integral part of Azerbaijan and that there is no need for outside powers to facilitate any sort of negotiations with its own citizenry. The Azerbaijani government even disbanded the Azerbaijani Community of Karabakh, an organization that for decades represented the interests of the community composed largely of IDPs, sending

a clear signal that Karabakh is now like any other region of Azerbaijan.

Baku’s position is easy enough to understand. For years the OSCE could not resolve the conflict and was playing the role of “nurse rather than doctor,” i.e., its Minsk Group was occupying itself primarily with preventing the outbreak of a future war rather than working seriously towards a solution to the conflict. Over time, Baku came to the conclusion that it preferred to deal with one big player and satisfy its conditions rather than trying to satiate a multiplicity.

Thus, for example, in negotiations to determine the precise border with Armenia or regarding technical issues with the Karabakh Armenians, Baku deals with Russia rather than with Armenia or the Co-chairs as a forum. In so doing, Baku demonstrates that Armenia has become an object of international politics rather than a subject. This new arrangement has also definitely marginalized the role of the Minsk Group, turning it into a useless mechanism.

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The culmination of relations between Azerbaijan and OSCE Minsk Group was demonstrated in full public view in December 2020 at the start of a meeting between President Ilham Aliyev and a not quite complete composition of the Co-chairs. Azerbaijan’s president said that, “unfortunately, the Minsk Group did not play any role in resolution of the conflict, although the Minsk Group had a mandate to do it for 28 years.” Aliyev conceded that although the Minsk Group did produce some ideas in an effort to resolve the dispute, these did not bear any fruit. He underlined that the regional status quo had been changed, and that Azerbaijan was the one that changed it:

we showed that the status quo can be changed by force, by courage, by wisdom, by policy, by concentration of efforts, by solidarity of Azerbaijani people, by the will of the Azerbaijani government and the spirit of Azerbaijani people and bravery of Azerbaijani soldier. We showed that we were right. And then, of course, Armenia was forced to sign the capitulation act. They would have never signed it voluntarily. We forced them, not Minsk Group, we, and President Putin. This is a reality.

The future and role of the Minsk Group thus remains unclear and dubious. In April 2021, the current Minsk Group

Co-Chairs—Russia’s Igor Popov, France’s Stephane Visconti, and America’s Andrew Schofer—released a statement, the core of which states that

The Co-chairs remind the sides that additional efforts are required to resolve remaining areas of concern and to create an atmosphere of mutual trust conducive to long-lasting peace. These include issues related to, inter alia: the return of all POWs and other detainees in accordance with the provisions of international humanitarian law, the exchange of all data necessary to conduct effective demining of conflict regions; the lifting of restrictions on access to Nagorno-Karabakh, including for representatives of international humanitarian organizations; the preservation and protection of religious and cultural heritage; and the fostering of direct contacts and co-operation between communities affected by the conflict as well as other people-to-people confidence building measures.

But this statement is nothing more than a pleading reminder to the two sides to pay attention to the Minsk Group’s mandate. The chief difficulty is that most of the provisions of that mandate have already been or are being implemented on the basis of the outcome of the Second Karabakh War—i.e., the de-occupation of territories, the deployment of peacekeepers, the establishment of a corridor connecting Karabakh



and Armenia, and the right of return of internally-displaced persons. Both the United States and France regard the Minsk Group as one of the rare opportunities to secure seats at the table of any future talks on Karabakh. Washington plans to return diplomatically to the South Caucasus while France, at least under President Emmanuel Macron, seeks to extend its influence.

However, it seems that the main outside powers (Turkey and Russia) are happy with the new normal in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations whereby they and they alone are the only two problem-solvers. Nevertheless, Moscow will not take steps to destroy the Minsk Group: keeping it alive, or at least on life support, provides an opportunity for the Kremlin to maintain a semblance of common ground with the United States and the European Union (through France). Another way to phrase this would be to say that Russia's monopolistic position in Karabakh can be leveraged in negotiations with the West. Baku perfectly understands that

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it is impossible to exclude the Minsk Group completely and is likely to try to balance its relations with the three Co-chairs and use this balancing to further its own interests. Yerevan, as noted above, sees the Minsk process as the only forum in which it could somehow influence the course of future peace talks. Moscow, meanwhile, is not going to allow Yerevan to dictate its conditions, and it seems most likely that Armenia will follow the Kremlin's lead.

### *What Would Azerbaijan Do?*

Throughout Azerbaijan's contemporary history, Baku's foreign policy posture towards Russia has been driven by two permanent determinants. On the one hand, Moscow's continued support for Yerevan and its stance of procrastination in the resolution of the Karabakh conflict have prevented Baku's active rapprochement with the West. Russia appears to believe that if the Karabakh conflict is genuinely solved,

Baku will immediately rush into anti-Russian alliances or pursue NATO membership. The unresolved issues of the Karabakh conflict has thus remained the principal leverage that Russia can use against Azerbaijan to keep the latter from engaging in unfriendly actions. The 2008 Russia-Georgia War, as well as Russia's occupation of Crimea and its suspected support for separatists in the Donbass, have further complicated Azerbaijan's position in this respect.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan's vast oil and gas reserves have encouraged it to preserve a rhetoric of independence in the formulation (and execution) of its foreign policy. The country's steadily increasing geostrategic importance, due in large part to its contribution to the EU's energy security, has enabled Baku not to become what is colloquially termed a puppet of the Kremlin. It was the blessing of natural resources that provided Azerbaijan with another option for adjusting its relations with Russia as a great power, an alternative both to balancing and bandwagoning. We

can define the former as allying against the primary source of threat and the latter as opting for allying with the source of principal danger. The third option forgoes the balancing-bandwagoning dichotomy in favor of what I and others have previously called strategic hedging.

The outcome of the Second Karabakh War further changed established paradigms and forced Azerbaijan to operate in an absolutely new environment. The question today concerns the nature of the window of opportunity that would allow Azerbaijan to finally resolve the underlying conflict without yielding any part of its sovereignty. As the neorealist international relations tradition would suggest, Azerbaijan's foreign policy strategy towards Russia has been affected largely by considerations over national security potentially threatened by Moscow. The alleged involve-

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ment of Russia in the Karabakh conflict, as well as its assertive behavior towards other post-Soviet states—something that potentially foreshadows a similar threat to Azerbaijan's sovereignty and

territorial integrity—certainly go a long way to explaining Azerbaijan's behavior towards Russia. By the neorealist standard, Azerbaijan should be choosing between balancing and bandwagoning when dealing with an overwhelming competitor.

The soundness of such a perspective is further reinforced by the substantive absence of the U.S. and the EU during and after the war, which for all intents and purposes made absolute Russia's regional monopoly (even when the Turkish positioning is factored in). Moreover, the controversial positions of France and later Germany both discredited the EU's position in the eyes of Azerbaijan and decreased the level of trust. At the same time, the Biden Administration has not brought any new change to American policies in region. It would not be a gross exaggeration to assert that both the Europeans and the Americans effectively took the side of Armenia in the conflict. Thus, the EU allocated around €1.5 billion to the Pashinyan government for the next 5 years on various projects while Baku received much, much less.

Meanwhile, U.S. and EU representatives push for negotiations on the status of the Karabakh

Armenians while Azerbaijan states that this is no longer a topic for discussion. Only Turkey is currently able to prevent Russia's dominance in Karabakh through its continued support for Azerbaijan and its presence at the Joint Center for Monitoring the Ceasefire in Karabakh. Moreover, Turkey continues to strengthen its position in Azerbaijan (and thus strengthening Azerbaijan's position towards Moscow) via joint military exercises, economic investments, and interfering in Moscow-Baku negotiations. The bottom line is that Turkey's strong position prevents Moscow from pushing Baku harder on, for example, joining the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Eurasian Economic Union. Thus, Turkish active involvement would seem to move Baku away from bandwagoning in favor of a return to a balancing policy.

The outcome of the Second Karabakh War proved that Azerbaijan's longstanding policy of strategic patience works: waiting for favorable moment to change the situation. One could say that only Russia's active engagement in the last days of the war took away Azerbaijan's full victory.

Over the next decade, Azerbaijan's policies are likely to be concentrated in a few directions: reconstruction of its liberated territories, doubling down on its strategic hedging policy, and expanding the importance of its role as a regional transport and logistics hub. Each will be addressed in turn.

*First*, the massive reconstruction of the liberated territories as well as populating them with returning IDPs. From this perspective, demining of all territories presents the biggest danger. So far, since the end of the military actions, dozens of Azerbaijani soldiers and civilians have lost their lives due to mines. Azerbaijan has had to negotiate for mine maps, but thus far has only received maps for two regions (Agdam and Fizuli). Without a doubt, reconstruction efforts would quicken if all parties cooperated on de-mining. Meanwhile, the government of Azerbaijan, through its reconstruction efforts, will try to win the hearts and minds of Karabakh Armenians, showing

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them the benefits of being under Azerbaijani rather than Russian control. Thus, Baku will try to slowly turn Shusha, the old capital of Karabakh, into an Azerbaijani showcase city and national cultural capital. Moreover, in order to repopulate Karabakh, Aliyev announced in

January 2021 that "settlements recently liberated from Armenian occupation will be re-established based on the smart city/smart village concept." The idea envisions the establishment of different, better governance systems and economic opportunities. With such modern terms and notions, the government hopes to draw displaced people back to the region.

*Second*, Azerbaijan will double down on its strategic hedging policy, trying to not yield to Russian demands to join the CSTO or the Eurasian Economic Union. During hard periods of negotiations, the Azerbaijani political establishment will draw Turkey into such discussions to shield itself from undue Russian pressure and influence. One can thus say that the

Shusha Declaration signed between Turkey and Azerbaijan, as well as discussions about establishing a Turkish base in Azerbaijan, serve the purpose of counterbalancing Russian influence.

Finally, Azerbaijan's priority will be to establish another transportation route to the West, and especially to Turkey. Trying to benefit economically from the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative, Baku seeks to secure a railroad/highway corridor via Armenia to Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, which, as it happens is the final provision of the tripartite agreement that ended the Second Karabakh War, as discussed above. In Azerbaijan, this project is often called the Zangezur corridor (an Azerbaijani ethnonym for the Armenian province of Syunik). By this route, Azerbaijan would gain direct access to Turkey and a significantly decreased time for delivering products from Europe to China and back. A full resolution of the Karabakh conflict would make it possible to unblock the transportation routes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, giving Baku a transportation route to Turkey, but also providing Yerevan a route to Russia. Thus, the north-south corridor could join the Belt and Road Initiative in Azerbaijan, which would become both a major geo-economic crossroads and hub

whilst extending the benefits of this transformation to the entire neighborhood. The Russian political establishment has hailed this idea and pushed Armenia to unblock transportation and communication lines in the hope that it will then control this 40-km long corridor.

### *The Price of Resolution*

Azerbaijan's victory in Karabakh has reshaped the region's geopolitical landscape. Baku was able to create a situation in which Turkey and Russia do not compete but cooperate in the region. Whether we call the result "competitive cooperation" or "co-operative competition," the point is that this puts the South Caucasus in a vastly different situation compared to Syria, Libya, and Ukraine. This benefits Azerbaijan by ensuring the country does not become a front line in the ongoing rivalry between the West and Russia. Baku's largest challenge—today and tomorrow—is the presence of the Russian peacekeepers. They can be a destabilizing factor, depending on the "needs" of the Russian authorities in relation to Baku and to Ankara.

Going forward, Russia's Karabakh policy will depend largely on how relations develop between Moscow and Baku and, of course, on how

relations develop between Moscow and Ankara in general. The historical record tells us that Russia has several tried-and-true options for the territories under its peacekeepers' control. It could recognize their independence, following the South Ossetia and Abkhazia cases. It could distribute Russian passports to the Karabakh Armenians, citing the willingness of its "new Russian citizens" to be annexed, as was the case with regards to Crimea. Lastly, it could declare all negotiations to be "unsuccessful," opening up a Donbass scenario. However, it does not appear at present that Moscow wishes to resort to any of these models: Russia is more likely to come up with a new formula. After all, recourse to existing ones would immediately alienate Baku: creating another strongly anti-Russian state in the Caucasus (after Georgia) is not in the Russian interest.

Beyond this, of course, is the fact that the Turkish factor in the region is much more important today than at any time previously. An assertive Turkey is a game-changer in the Caucasus. Thus, it seems probable that Russia will choose another way

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forward, such as pushing Armenia out of picture and negotiating unhurriedly with Azerbaijan. Unfortunately, Baku cannot rely either on the EU or the United States, which seem somehow to view the current

situation as the product of a clandestine agreement between Moscow and Ankara and, being unsatisfied with this state of affairs, seem intent on trying to change it.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's present policy toward the territories under the control of Russian peacekeepers is one of silent ignorance (although this silence has been punctured here and there quite recently). Since Baku claims that the conflict is over and that the country has restored its territorial integrity, the country's establishment prefers to disregard the lingering presence of an ethnic-Armenian separatist regime protected by Russia out of fear that Moscow will choose to play that card, as it has elsewhere. Obviously, in the coming years Baku will have to bargain hard with Moscow over the fate of said territories, armed with the near-certain knowledge that Russia's price could be steep indeed. **BD**

# Some Karabakh-related Aspects of Georgia's Regional Positioning

*Victor Kipiani*

One of the geopolitical consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic is the acceleration of a trend that predated its onset, namely the transformation of old centers of power and the appearance of new ones. This emerging new world is characterized by greater complexity, as regionalism becomes an even more important prism through which contemporary international relations can be examined. In a growing number of places across the globe, we seem to be ending up with overlapping or conflicting interests defined by the specific characteristics of different countries and how they each approach international affairs from the standpoint of their respective national agendas. In many corners of the globe, states that were formerly mere objects of world affairs are taking steps to be taken seriously as *bona fide* subjects of the

international order, itself in the midst of a makeover—the result of which none of us can as yet reasonably predict with any degree of certainty.

The South Caucasus—one of the world's most historically and culturally diverse regions—is one of the regional nodes of the Eurasian strategic space, defined by its proximity to Russia, Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. The editors of *Baku Dialogues* have identified the South Caucasus as an integral part of the Silk Road region, an intriguing term that at the very least serves as a reminder of the fact that our part of the world belongs to a geographic continuum that has influenced and been influenced in turn by a plethora of actors located at all points of the compass, but also that we stand at the confluence of an untold number of historical processes that go back millennia.

*Victor Kipiani is Chairman of Geocase, a Georgian think-tank, as well as Co-founder and Senior Partner of the Tbilisi-based law firm of MKD Law.*

Certainly, the South Caucasus is not simply a geographical expanse, but a critical crossroads over which the regional policies of the West, Russia, and China are at loggerheads. This is not even close to the entire pic-

ture, however. Iran and Turkey are immediate neighbors. Ukraine, Iraq and the Levantine states are quite close, as are Turkmenistan, and other Central Asian states. But so too are Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece, as are Afghanistan and Pakistan. And on it goes. All pursue their own interests, as do their respective allies, and in many cases there interests are not free of incompatibility. Indeed, it would be difficult

to deny that the South Caucasus is a front or a theatre in the meta-conflict that contraposes several normative worlds of international relations, only one of which is democratic in character. Of the three South Caucasus states,

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we share as a region by pursuing what is termed a multi-vector foreign policy.

The modern structure of relationships between the countries of the South Caucasus also has evolved over the past few years, progressing from mere bilateral relations to a more complex multi-layered system. In this diversity, many researchers and politicians see certain historic parallels as well as the

*The modern structure of relationships between the countries of the South Caucasus also has evolved over the past few years, progressing from mere bilateral relations to a more complex multi-layered system.*

one overtly aspires to NATO and EU membership as a matter of strategic priority, by all accounts the second is almost entirely dominated by Russian priorities and interests, and the third has opted to navigate the geopolitical shoals

new contours of a post-pandemic international order. For now, the Caucasian puzzle raises more questions than it provides answers. The question of the two so-called “frozen conflicts” on Georgian territory, the unresolved



complexities arising out of the Second Karabakh War's outcome (including the quest to establish a formal peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan), and neighbouring confrontations over the rearrangement of the South Caucasus model of power and the correct redistribution of interests therein are on the list of foreign policy priorities in many capitals around the world. What makes this complex regional order even more complicated is the equal lack among interested parties of sufficient interest in the resolution of these issues, the inadequate expression of such interests, and in some cases even the total absence of such interests.

Noteworthy is that even prior to the outbreak of the Second Karabakh War, the President of Georgia, Salome Zourabichvili, extended an offer for Tbilisi to serve as a peace platform for all parties to convene and meet. That offer was reiterated by our National Security Council during the war, and it still stands in its wake. In the meantime, we have continued to play our part, demonstrating the constructive relevance of Georgian soft power to the best of our ability. Here we can reproduce the 12 June 2021 words of U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken: "the U.S. welcomes the release by Azerbaijan of 15

Armenian detainees. We're grateful to the Government of Georgia for its vital role facilitating discussions between the sides. Such steps will bring the people of the region closer to the peaceful future they deserve." The statement did not add that the prisoners were exchanged for maps of 97,000 anti-tank and anti-personnel mines buried in Azerbaijan's newly-liberated Aghdam district, although the corresponding Azerbaijani one did, of course, while also underscoring the role played by Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili. Armenia also thanked us for our successful mediation, as did various European and OSCE officials. In a significant way, Georgia's important role in this postwar humanitarian endeavor serves to frame how we see the axis of the issue and our contemporary standing in the region more broadly.

### *Axis of the Issue*

Georgia's main political vectors in the South Caucasus are cooperation for peace and stability as well as maintaining good neighborly relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan—an approach that became even more prominent during the Second Karabakh War and one that has continued in its wake.

More precisely, I refer to the statement that Georgia's National Security Council issued near the beginning of the war—on 3 October 2020, to be precise—in

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*Tbilisi acted according to the conditions defined by the current reality in the region and was using the maximum of its abilities due to this reality.*

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which the Georgian side convincingly underlined the need to "take all necessary measures" to "stop the violence and resume dialogue" and concluded by underlining that "it is in our common interests to stop the armed confrontation and restore peace in the region as soon as possible."

On the same occasion, the National Security Council also announced that the Government of Georgia was taking specific measures in this regard: the "temporary suspension of the issuance of permits for transiting military cargo through its territory in the direction of both said countries, be it by air or land." It also offered up Tbilisi as a neutral location for negotiations between Yerevan and Baku.

Regarding the National Security Council's statement, one can distinguish between two principal issues. *First*, Georgia not only demonstrated its attitude towards the conflict but also expressed the country's readiness to participate

in the process of normalizing the situation in the region. *Second*, in this statement, Georgia's government distinctly explained the importance to the

country's two largest ethnic minorities (i.e. ethnic-Armenians and ethnic-Azerbaijanis) of maintaining stability and order. Thus, the National Security Council's statement and Georgia's policy towards conflicts in general could be summed up as: Tbilisi acted according to the conditions defined by the current reality in the region and was using the maximum of its abilities due to this reality.

When talking about a possible Georgian component in various efforts to normalize the new situation in Karabakh resulting from the outcome of the Second Karabakh War, it is noteworthy that in different mass media outlets the question of the quality of Tbilisi's coordination with Western partners has been considered more than once. On this topic, I should like to mention that any similar kind of coordination or communication undertaken by Georgia could only be defined by the reality of the current situation in the region and by Georgia's possibilities.

However, when discussing this specific topic it is important to clearly reiterate that Georgia's coordination with the West over issues linked to the South Caucasus should not depend solely upon the dynamics associated with the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the wake of the Second Karabakh War. It is important to remember that the partnership between Georgia and the West originally began as early as during the second half of the 1990s, when large hydrocarbon transport projects—e.g. the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (BTC), various South Caucasus gas pipelines—were initiated.

Aside from this aspect, which contributes strategically to the West's energy diversification strategy (and will do so for decades to come), another relevant issue for further discussion is the objective evaluation of how strong Western interests and influence truly are in the South Caucasus. Accordingly, when one speaks of Tbilisi's efforts to strengthen these interests, one should deliberately underline the fact that the

efforts of our Western partners are just as (if not even more) vitally important for any kind of Western-led cooperation or coordination in the South Caucasus.

### Transport Component

The 10 November 2020 tripartite agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia that brought the Second Karabakh War to an end—coupled with subsequent documents signed by the same three parties derived therefrom—call for new transport corridors on the territory of Azerbaijan and Armenia. Without going into too much detail regarding these projects, next I want to discuss whether or not they pose any kind of risk to Georgia's potential for transport and transit before proceeding to the other points I wish to make.

*There have been some pessimistic evaluations regarding the aforementioned new transport corridors. But when it comes to the potential weakening of existing Georgian corridors, I believe that this pessimism is to some extent exaggerated.*

Now, it's true that there have been some pessimistic evaluations regarding the aforementioned new transport corridors. But when it comes to the potential weakening of

existing Georgian corridors, I believe that this pessimism is to some extent exaggerated. Here are five basic points that can be made.

*One*, the decision to go ahead with a large transport project cannot be merely the subject of geopolitical discussions at the level of "I want this and I don't want that"—to put it in colloquial language. It is also important to remember that any project or initiative must be carried out according to a specific investment model. In other words, if a project is not based on clear and self-sufficient financial resources, then it will be impossible to carry it out, for it might well turn into a dubious deal or a half-completed enterprise. Without a genuine readiness to provide serious financial support, managing projects such as BTC, the various South Caucasus gas pipelines, or the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line solely according to geopolitical calculations would not have been sufficient.

*Two*, one must also mention the need for trust in the stability of the future operation of these corridors or projects. As a general rule of thumb, it takes several years to generate such trust, and through a series of complicated processes the project acquires its characteristic geopolitical and geo-economic

image. Nowadays, one could easily say that the so-called "Georgian transport corridors" have already obtained the signatures they need.

*Three*, certain paragraphs of the tripartite agreement on the creation of new transport corridors with the participation of Azerbaijan and Armenia are quite ambiguous and unclear. For example, no considered interpretation of these paragraphs gives a clear feeling that the implementation of a specific transport project is once and for all predefined by the signatory parties of the agreement. Guaranteeing the safety of these transport links is equally important, as is the extent to which the Russian Federation can play the role of impartial guarantor in this context.

*Four*, we will continue to pay attention to certain aspects, including those related to transport corridors going through Georgia's active maritime ports, which ensure the passage of goods to the Black Sea region. An intermodal system such as this, in terms of investments, is no less important since it has a direct impact on the economic component of freight transportation.

*Five*, one must also mention the two most important elements of the attractiveness of transit corridors passing through Georgia. The first of

these is Georgia's political system itself, which, although far from ideal, possesses indisputable advantages in terms of doing business thanks to the transparency, simplicity, and legibility of Georgian legislation.

In addition to this, what should also be taken into consideration in the big picture is the high level of Georgia's integration with Western markets compared to its South Caucasian neighbors. And it could even be asserted that such a steady political and economic integration with Western partners is an important question not only for Georgia but would also be in the respective interest of Baku and Yerevan.

### *A Factor of Regional Power*

The next interesting question to examine is the respective roles of Russia and Turkey in the Second Karabakh War and subsequently—the Russian factor, in this case, is a very specific one. Since Russia and Armenia maintain close relations

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through various agreements—whereas Moscow's links to Azerbaijan follow a more cooperative format—Russia was obliged to maintain a very delicate balance between the two warring parties.

Basically, neither of the parties to the Karabakh conflict was "hostile" towards Russia, and therefore Moscow's actions needed to be more weighed and complex compared to other conflicts and wars in the post-Soviet space. It was this specific factor that supposedly defined a certain number of "flexible" formulations that were included in the ceasefire agreement, as noted above.

Another defining and extremely important aspect should also be mentioned: the dyophysite or perhaps even triphysite factor of Moscow's involvement in the conflict. What is implied here is the general background of Russia-Turkey relations that intersect not only in the South Caucasus but in other parts around the world as well.

Despite Moscow's tactical interests in cooperating with Ankara, Russia did its best to limit Turkey's role in the post-conflict period. For example, the agreement is tripartite in nature, not quadrilateral. Russia also tried hard to neutralize Turkey's attempts to widen its role in the OSCE Minsk Group format (as well as those of Azerbaijan).

And let me now use Georgia's point of view in order to briefly discuss what attitude Turkey can have towards this issue. Firstly, Turkey is one of Georgia's main partners. Secondly, Ankara plays a significant role in issues of regional safety and consistently and openly supports Georgia's NATO membership ambitions.

What is also defined in the context of this issue is the presumed specificity of Georgia-Turkey relations with regards to limiting the spread of Russia's influence in the South Caucasus. Here I should also mention Ankara's desire to further deepen the country's close partnership with Azerbaijan as well as Turkey's practical interests in stabilizing

relations with Yerevan. The subsequent treatment of Turkey as an equal to Russia in observing the terms of the tripartite agreement (to which, I reiterate, Turkey was not a signatory) at the Joint Center for Monitoring the Ceasefire in Karabakh, located in the Qiyameddinli village near Agdam, speaks to this point. On the other hand, so does the fact that Turkish troops play no operational role on the ground in what is now understood to be the Russian peacekeeping zone in Karabakh (the area not under the direct military control of Azerbaijan in the wake of the Second Karabakh War, as defined in the aforementioned trilateral agreement).

### *Trilateral Format?*

It is almost not even worth asking what benefits any format of trilateral cooperation between Baku, Tbilisi, and Yerevan would bring to the three countries of the South Caucasus. Besides questions of peace and safety, some sort of trilateral partnership within the framework of the emerging new world order would give the South Caucasus

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qualitatively different characteristics and would make the region more interesting and appealing to foreign, especially Western, investors.

Unfortunately, the reality of the current situation in the short and medium term does not give much cause for optimism. Overall, the geopolitical paradigm of the South Caucasus is mostly limited to bilateral relations between Georgia and Armenia and Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Based on that, the quality of cooperation among the South Caucasus triangle of states for the foreseeable future will be defined by the quality of cooperation between Tbilisi and Yerevan, on the one hand, and Tbilisi and Baku, on the other. At this stage, one must repeat that this is the current state of the region's geopolitical reality—its Realpolitik, if a region can be said to have one—and that there seems to be little chance of this reality changing any time soon. These conditions underline Georgia's most important role as a potential pillar of the South Caucasus's overall

economic space. Consequently, the results of the country's internal reforms are becoming as important as the quality of Georgia's integration with international civilized society.

### *Issues in Perspective*

Many key issues are being accumulated in the context of discussions regarding regional processes in the short to medium term. The answers to some questions are slowly taking shape with more or less focus and clarity, and some might be made the subject of hypothetical modeling—at this stage, at any rate—whilst taking existing conditions into consideration.

For example, the quality and durability of the current geopolitical cohabitation enjoyed by Russia and Turkey in the South-

Caucasus is questionable, particularly as the two states come into contact in other parts of the world as well. No one can exclude that in what can be termed the “arrangement of priorities,” the South Caucasus might turn into an

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The basic challenge of the overall task remains the role of the West in the South Caucasus and the projection of Western interests onto the regional fabric. An unequivocal answer must be found to this question at this stage, especially given the noticeable deficit of clear geopolitical Western lines with regard to the Black Sea region—one of whose natural components I believe the South Caucasus to be. The most compelling factor of the overall Western vector is the United States, whereas globally Washington's recent zig-zag geopolitical signature unintentionally helps to create the aforementioned problem.

Another very important issue is the overall framework of the new world order that is currently being formed. Many of us Georgians believe that there are two fundamental trends that define its basic nature: the first of these is the counterweight parameter between the United States and China as well as how this is reflected on different geopolitical geographies. Here I can refer to President Joe Biden's recent statement effectively rejecting nation-building (the context was Afghanistan, with the rejected concept defined as “trying

to create a democratic, cohesive, and unified” country, something that has never been done over the many centuries of [its] history”), which is of course not the same as the rejection of the use of force there or anywhere else when a “vital national interest” is at stake. A few days later, at an event held at MGIMO in Moscow, the Russian foreign minister interpreted this statement, as well as one made by French president Emmanuel Macron around the same time, as being tantamount to saying “that it was time to give up on interfering in other countries' internal affairs in order to impose Western-style democracy on them.” He noted that if these statements “are a true reflection of their hard-won understanding of the matter,” then “our planet will be a safer place in the future.” In my view, this interpretation is not exactly persuasive, to put it diplomatically.

The second fundamental trend that defines the basic nature of the framework of the new order that is currently being formed is, in my opinion, the novel understanding of this new world order's multilateral characteristics as well as bringing regionalism to the fore. From this point of view, the geopolitical geography of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea—along with the South Caucasus lying in between—is



being established as an important regional center of this new world order.

To complete this analysis I can indicate that the South Caucasus and the Middle East are closely linked issues, as Svante Cornell writing in a previous edition of *Baku Dialogues* has

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*It is relatively simple to opt for international or overseas reliance, but much harder and trickier to define a right balance without tilting towards either complete dependency or absurd self-determination: both options promise nothing but self-inflicted wounds and much suffering.*

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elaborated. Despite differences on the surface, it is a fact that a number of measurable factors are leading these two regions' geopolitics to increasingly merge.

Of course, the above-mentioned questions imply several subsidiary questions and a certain depth of inquiry. I have only mentioned those basic lines of thought that will become fields for endless research by analysts over the coming years and will become routine responses for policymakers.

### *The Caucasian Puzzle*

The fact is that the South Caucasus is once again at the center of global attention, while the modern structure of relationships

between the countries of the region has evolved over the past few years from a bilateral model to a more complex multi-layered system. In any case, the collapse of the Soviet Union left a legacy that the three countries of the region are still trying to overcome. Also, it is important

to note that the so-called "ethnic conflicts" of the South Caucasus are primarily related to the shifting sands of geopolitics in the region. The latter point is especially true when speaking about the conflicts in Georgia and Azerbaijan, whose reduction to the category of "ethnicity" reflects either a lack of knowledge or an attempt to distort their essence. At bottom, each is ultimately about territory and international law.

To this I wish to add that the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have reverberated with major shifts to what used to be commonly referred as the liberal international order—the culmination of the development of a Modern World Order, one could say—and have borne us ever more

swiftly towards an even more contemporaneous term I can call "World 2.0." When it comes to the destiny of small nations like Georgia, the question is one of two worlds: beyond simply maintaining oneself on the map, one must become a distinctive and unique contributor to the global community, acting as a *sui generis* participant in world affairs on an equal and non-discriminatory basis.

It is also worth emphasizing that it is relatively simple to opt for international or overseas reliance, but much harder and trickier to define a right balance without tilting towards either complete dependency or absurd self-determination: both options promise nothing but self-inflicted wounds and much suffering. Various historical examples of such blunders can illustrate the depth and complexity of the choice. Besides, it is even more worth remembering that abiding by strategic values while rationalizing reality is the hardest mission a small nation must face. Doing so is reminiscent of F. Scott

Fitzgerald's 1936 statement: "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." But it is precisely that first-rate intelligence that we need—and we Georgians, as a small nation, certainly do need to retain the ability to function. The remainder of Fitzgerald's statement is worth reproducing: "One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise. This philosophy fitted on to my early adult life, when I saw the improbable, the implausible, often the 'impossible' come true."

As a result of all of this, the Caucasian puzzle raises more questions than it provides answers—which is hardly surprising since the region's importance is felt far beyond its boundaries and since the diversity of the Caucasus is truly a contributor to the grand design of Eurasian security. In addition to a general toolkit, ours is a region that also requires a very tailor-made approach. BD

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# The Fifth Element

## Iran in Post-Second-Karabakh War Environment

*Jahangir Arasli*

The set of outcomes produced by the Second Karabakh War has decisively changed the geopolitics and geo-economics of the Greater Caucasus region and, one could argue, the Silk Road region as a whole. The status quo that existed for more than a quarter of a century has been altered with the crucial politico-military success of Azerbaijan, which liberated in less than two months most of its territories in the former Nagorno-Karabakh oblast and those surrounding it from almost three decades of occupation by Armenian forces.

The resulting new regional reality has created new opportunities as well as new challenges. In the aftermath of the war, most political and security analyses have focused either on its two belligerents (Armenia and Azerbaijan) or the two regional powers (Russia and

Turkey) that have been directly and visibly engaged in shaping the postwar setting. Thus, the discourse generally overlooks the fifth element of the new regional equation, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Such disregard is unreasonable—and not simply because Tehran is located much closer to the conflict zone than Moscow or Ankara. Caught amidst its own complex security environment, exacerbated threats perceptions, inner power struggles, and aggravating economic and ethnic problems, Iran may potentially play the role of spoiler vis-à-vis the newly established and still fragile status quo. Alternatively, it may—under certain conditions—act as a contributor to regional postwar stabilization.

To better understand this fifth element and its possible effects on the new regional equation, the

present essay will consider the set of motivations that seem to inform Iran's strategy towards the post-Second Karabakh War realities of the Greater Caucasus. Iran's strategy remains trapped between growing economic incentives, on the one hand, and its security and ideological paradigms, on the other hand. Tehran has yet to define its preferences and make its choices. These, once defined, are almost certain to bring to bear significant influence on (and be influenced by) the region's yet-to-be-set-in-stone strategic trajectory: remaining in a stage of antagonisms and rivalry, moving towards a stage characterized by mutually beneficial cooperation, or something in between.

### *Iran's Dual-Policy Track*

Iran essentially kept a low-profile role during the First Karabakh War and the interbellum period that followed, focusing instead on other regions and issues that it considered as more relevant to its security. Having officially denounced the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijan's sovereign territory, Tehran nonetheless went about establishing a beneficial relationship with Armenia that has continued into the present.

The primary emphasis of this resulting bilateral cooperation has been economic: Iran actively invested in the Armenian economy and encouraged the establishment of what has turned out to be a lucrative trading relationship. Figures from early 2019, for example, show that there were 5,301 companies with Iranian capital operating in Armenia (36.6 percent of the total number of foreign companies) and that Armenia was Iran's fifth largest trading partner.

There were also some security aspects to the bilateral relationship, given the transit access provided by Iran to Russia for the latter's resupply of its military bases and outposts in Armenia. This aspect of the relationship gained in importance in the wake of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, a direct consequence of which was Tbilisi's refusal to allow Russia to use its territory as a resupply transit route for its military positions in Armenia.

All told, Tehran has considered relations with Armenia to be a strategic asset providing a vital transportation corridor to Russia and Europe as well as a barrier against various potential security threats.

*Jahangir Arasli is an independent researcher based in Baku.*

In contrast, Iran's relations with Azerbaijan remained cloudy during the interbellum period. Bilateral ties were for the most part characterized by mutual distrust albeit veiled behind a façade of polite diplomatic discourse that emphasized friendly and good-neighborly relations. Azerbaijan's secular political system, its involvement in international transportation- and energy-related projects in the Caspian Sea region, and its multi-vector foreign policy all became irritants for Iran.

Moreover, Azerbaijan's security cooperation with the United States, and especially Israel, was seen by Tehran as tantamount to waving a red flag. In addition, the existence of a huge, indigenous ethnic-Azerbaijani community in Iran produced, at least subconsciously, a fear of separatism in the eyes of the Islamic Republic's authorities. In turn, Baku's concern centered on Tehran's covert support for anti-government politico-religious groups in Azerbaijan as well as for other subversive activities, like the terrorist

plot against Israeli targets in Baku allegedly masterminded by Iranian proxies.

Thus, for a quarter of century, Iran effectually became a beneficiary of the conflict's status quo, skillfully balancing between the two belligerents whilst never calling into question Azerbaijan's sovereignty over Karabakh and the other occupied regions. While keeping close watch on Azerbaijan, Tehran, in parallel, profited from its relationship with Armenia, which, by 2018-2019, had risen to the level of a strategic partnership in all but name.

Meanwhile, by 2020 the prospects of a political settlement to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict had faded due in great measure to the obstructionist policies of Armenia's new leadership, which

in some areas had gone further than the one it had replaced a few years earlier. Against this background, Azerbaijan exercised its legitimate right to restore its sovereignty and territorial integrity through a sophisticated military operation against

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the Armenian occupation forces that began on the morning of 27 September 2020 and ended in the early hours of 10 November 2020.

### *Tanks and Words*

The start of the Second Karabakh War was a strategic surprise for Tehran. Iran's initial reactions were cautious and limited to calling on both sides to cease hostilities. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei reemphasized that Karabakh and the other Armenian-occupied regions were a part of Azerbaijan, and Iranian diplomats attempted to mediate a ceasefire—an initiative that did not bear fruit. However, with the successful breaching of the main Armenian defense line by the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan and their subsequent advance deep into the occupied lands through the Aras River valley, which borders Iran, Tehran's tactical posture changed dramatically.

In the last week of October 2020, after Azerbaijan had regained control over its entire common border with Iran, Tehran undertook a significant military deployment on its side of the Aras River. Although officially branded as a preventive measure to

“ensure the integrity of our national territory,” the troops' movements made it clear that they were not following regular, established procedures.

To reiterate: the Iranian military deployment did not begin at the start of the Second Karabakh War but almost a month later, and only after Azerbaijan's military successes became evident. Moreover, Iran deployed its troops along the entirety of the Iran-Azerbaijan border, including along its border with Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan exclave, where no fighting had or would take place. The composition of the deployed forces was also quite impressive: it involved up to eight brigades, both regular Iranian Army units and those belonging to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)—and the deployed forces included not only infantry units but armor and artillery ones as well.

Six of the brigades that were deployed were not garrisoned in Iran's East Azerbaijan province, which borders the Republic of Azerbaijan; rather, their permanent bases were located in more distant provinces: Qazvin, Mazandaran, and West Azerbaijan. Interestingly, the two primacy garrison formations based in the

East Azerbaijan province—namely, the IRGC 31<sup>st</sup> Ashoura Mechanized Infantry Division and the Army 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division—remained in their respective barracks in Tabriz, the provincial capital: they did not join their brothers in arms deployed to the border with Azerbaijan, notwithstanding the fact that these two formations constituted the most proximate available assets. Speculation at the time was focused on the likelihood that those two divisions were held in reserve to be able to react in the event of remonstrations by the ethnic-Azerbaijani majority population in that part of Iran.

Iran also positioned its most sophisticated air defense assets near the Azerbaijani border, under the guise of protecting its territory against stray missiles and drones from the combat zone (indeed, a few rockets and mortar shells did land inadvertently inside Iran during the war). Among them was the only Iranian battalion of SA-15 Gauntlet surface-to-air missiles—the same that had shot down Ukraine International Airlines flight 752 near Tehran in January 2020. The repositioning of that system potentially pointed to the evocation of fears concerning the possibility of a sudden strike against Iranian nuclear facilities by what it termed a “non-regional player” (e.g., the United States

and Israel). Simultaneously, the Iranian Air Force and the IRGC Aerospace Force commenced previously unannounced large-scale drills and publicly revealed underground missile bases. Completing the picture, engineering units with river-crossing equipment were also deployed to the area.

None of this was done in secret. The Iranian high command conducted all of the aforementioned military movements openly: footage was shown of armored columns and firepower assets moving towards the border with Azerbaijan.

In short, a public show of force by Iran took place during the Second Karabakh War: the potential option of military action “beyond” the Aras River had made its suggestive appearance.

The attendant rhetoric heightened significantly in the immediate aftermath of the 10 November 2020 tripartite agreement that cemented Azerbaijan’s victory in the Second Karabakh War. The concerns voiced by Iranian officials focused on two key points.

First, Iran rejected any revision of existing interstate borders, referring to them as constituting the “regional status-quo.” In late

October 2020, Major General Seyyed Abdolrahim Moussavi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian Army, stated that “respect for the territorial integrity of countries and the protection of official international borders are among our known principles and we will not tolerate any changes for territorial integrity and oppose them.” Just a few days prior to the end of the Second Karabakh War, Brigadier General Kioumars Heidari, the Commander of the Iranian Army Ground Forces, asserted that “no power can try to change the geography of the region; we will not tolerate it.” Just after the tripartite agreement came into force, Saeed Khatibzadeh, the Foreign Ministry’s spokesperson, stated that “the geographical borders of the Islamic Republic in this region did not change at all and will not change in the future. Our perception of what has been announced is just a simple transit route [presumably a reference to Article 9 of the tripartite agreement], the security of which should be discussed and the Islamic Republic of Iran is following the issue closely.”

Second, Iran would combat any security threats arising from the conflict zone, specifically, be it the supposed “Israeli presence” in Azerbaijan or the alleged participation of “Syrian combatants”

in the war. More specifically, Major General Moussavi pointed out that the military “will deal severely” with the presence of “Takfiri terrorists, ISIL, and the Zionists”—i.e., Sunni jihadists, the Islamic State, and Israel—on the border with Azerbaijan. Army spokesperson Brigadier General Abolfazl Shekarchi echoed this statement, referring to the threat of “Israeli spy bases and Takfiris” in the region that “will not be tolerated in any way.” Khatibzadeh (the Foreign Ministry’s spokesperson) also indicated that “no player outside the region can set foot in this region and we have said it explicitly and those who should get the message have taken it. Outside of this path, it is natural that no process will take place.”

Shortly prior to and soon after the cessation of hostilities with Armenia, Baku repeatedly expressed official appreciation for Iran’s support for Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity and its intention to advance further bilateral relations. Still, subsequent developments indicated that such diplomatic messaging did not sufficiently assuage Iranian concerns.

For example, on 17 November 2020, Azerbaijan’s president, Ilham Aliyev, visited the centuries-old Khudafarin Bridge, located near



the liberated city of Jabrayil, located on the Aras River—right on the border with Iran. The next day, a photo of him in the crosshairs of an Iranian sniper's telescopic rifle sight was leaked on social media. It is difficult to believe that an ordinary Iranian soldier would have done so on his own initiative; it is thus conceivable to interpret this embarrassing episode as a veiled threatening message sent by hardline elements within the Islamic Republic. It should be noted that neither Azerbaijan nor Iran made any official statement regarding the incident.

This was followed less than one month later by another incident that triggered a brief diplomatic row over Azerbaijan between Iran and Turkey. On 10 December 2021, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan gave an address in Baku on the occasion of the Victory Day parade in which he recited verses of Bakhtiyar Vahabzade's 1959 poem "Gülüstan" that refers to the "forcible separation" of Azerbaijanis across the Aras River. The Iranian response was swift. Foreign Minister Javad Zarif tweeted that "Pres. Erdogan was not informed that what he ill-recited in Baku refers to the forcible separation of areas north of Aras from Iranian motherland. Didn't he realize that he was undermining

the sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan? NO ONE can talk about OUR beloved Azerbaijan." Zarif was presumably referring to the terms of the peace treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) between the Russian Empire and the Sublime State of Iran that set part of the border between the two empires at the Aras River. The outcry in Iran was due to the interpretation of Erdogan's words as a "manifestation of pan-Turkic ambitions," in the words of one official. The Turkish ambassador was summoned to the Foreign Ministry in Tehran, protesters gathered in front of the Turkish Consulate in Tabriz, and the local media furiously accused Turkey of "imperial revisionism." Meanwhile, 225 of 290 members of the Iranian parliament issued a proclamation declaring that "Azerbaijan will not be separated from Ayatollah Khamenei, the revolution, and Iran." A few days later, after high-level conciliatory statements were made by Ankara, the situation deescalated, with President Rouhani saying, "in my opinion, with the explanations [they] gave, we can move beyond this issue, but the sensitivity of our people is very important. Based on my past knowledge of Mr. Erdogan, it is very unlikely that he had any intention of insulting our territorial integrity."

The point here is that a significant shift in Iran's approach to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict took place in the last three months of 2020 through the adoption of a tougher posture towards Azerbaijan. The swift transformation of the region's geopolitical scenery due to Azerbaijan's victory in war first caught Iran's strategic elites off-guard. Tehran signaled its discontent by employing confrontational rhetoric to indicate its concerns and delineate its red lines coupled with the heightening of its military presence on the border with Azerbaijan.

### *What Worries Iran?*

Iran's reflexive actions and statements between October and December 2020 mirror its deepening concerns about the geopolitical, security, and economic effects of the new postwar configuration in the South Caucasus. The Iranian calculus is presumably basing on the following set of considerations.

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First, Iran's strategic elites are anxious about the potential rise of ethnic-Azerbaijani irredentism in the country's northwest in the aftermath of Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War. Even before the end of the war, ethnic-Azerbaijani

protesters in Iran had demanded the closure of the country's border with Armenia to prevent what was alleged to have been the shipment of Russian arms supplies to Armenian forces. Tehran considered even those limited demonstrations as a harbinger of how an empowered Republic of Azerbaijan may boost ethno-centric demands in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Given the size and influence of the ethnic-Azerbaijani community in Iran, any potential instability triggered by ethnic-Azerbaijani demonstrations in the country may prove consequential for an Iranian unitary state.

Second, Turkish hyperactivity in Iran's neighborhood profoundly troubles Iran. The potent mix of historical memory, past revendications, geopolitical rivalry, and economic competition over

resources and transit routes fuel Tehran's perception of a Turkish neo-Ottoman grand strategy aiming to build a "Turkic world" under the auspices of Ankara. Bearing in mind what can be termed an emerging strategic symbiosis between Turkey and Azerbaijan—embodied in the phrase "one nation, two states"—that unquestionably contributed to the latter's battlefield successes, certain quarters in Tehran perceive Baku as a vanguard of Ankara's ambitions in the Silk Road region. Particularly, the potential for Turkey to have access to the Caspian Sea littoral goes contrary the Iranian concept of this area as being "free of foreign powers." Tehran would also be unhappy with a potential lasting Turkish military presence in Azerbaijan. There are other side effects, too. In particular, Tehran's allegations about the presence in Azerbaijan of the "Takfiri"—i.e., Turkey-outsourced Syrian combatants that Iran and its proxies are fighting in Syria—evoke patterns of the historic Shia-Sunni rivalry.

Third, Iran anticipates that the new realities in the South Caucasus resulting from the outcome of the Second Karabakh War could negatively affect its economic and trade interests. More specifically, the primary matter of concern is the so-called longitudinal Zangezur transit corridor—a

42 km-long sector of the Iran-Armenia border that would provide vital transportation access into Armenia itself, and then to Georgia, Russia, and Europe (via the Black Sea). Under the provisions of the tripartite agreement, the formerly defunct (latitudinal) transportation corridor Turkey-Armenia-Azerbaijan-Central Asia will become operational eventually, thus creating a viable alternative to existing transit routes that traverse Iran. The emerging corridor would bypass Iran, which would likely deprive the country of much-needed transport and cargo transit revenues—not only at the local level between Nakhchivan and the main part of Azerbaijan, but also at the trans-regional level. With regards to the latter, Iran is naturally concerned that it could find itself largely excluded from an important branch of the Belt and Road Initiative as well as from upcoming regional energy-related projects.

Fourth, Iran's frankly delusional perception of Azerbaijan as a forward staging base for an Israeli surprise attack against Iran's nuclear infrastructure has become fashionable again, given the heightening level of Israeli-Azerbaijani cooperation in the field of defense and security. A sophisticated intelligence operation in November 2020 to

assassinate Mohsen Fahrizadeh, the chief Iranian nuclear scientist, only amplified such fears—a reflection of the degree of security neurosis in the Iranian establishment over the survivability of its nuclear program.

Last, but not least, one should not neglect the weight of historical memory for the Iranian nation. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, imperial Iran was engaged in a long-lasting struggle with both the Ottoman and Russian empires for control over the Caucasus—a struggle it ultimately lost. The reemergence of a strategic game with the same trio of players in the region no-doubt evokes negative *déjà vu* sentiments amongst Iranian elites—obvious differences in the correlation of forces and governing ideologies notwithstanding.

These and similar considerations have given cause to observers like Alex Vatanka of Washington's Middle East Institute to assert that the outcome of the Second Karabakh War constitutes Iran's "worst nightmare;" Umut Başar of the IRAM Center in Ankara to opine that the outcome of

the war effectively ejected Iran from the South Caucasus by relegating it into a "losers club" together with Armenia; and Middle East political analyst Dnyanesh Kamat to assert that the war's result amounts to a "strategic disaster" for Tehran. Perhaps the situation is not quite so dramatic. No doubt, though, that the sorts of considerations outlined above have contributed to further strengthening the Iranian establishment's besieged fortress mentality that has been embedded deeply into the country's strategic culture since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. One thing's for sure: the South Caucasus is now a top priority in Iran's matrix of national security concerns.

### *How Will Iran Respond?*

Iran's initial knee-jerk reactions during and in the immediate aftermath of the Second Karabakh War clearly indicate its unease with the collapse of the former status-quo with regards to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Still, it is safe to assume that Tehran has been busily deliberating about how to recalibrate its approach and initiate damage-control

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procedures sooner rather than later. Ever since the dawn of the Islamic Republic, Tehran has demonstrated in many instances a sophisticated ability to adapt rapidly to new realities and devise effective counter-strategies. Tehran's future course of action would be exceedingly difficult to attempt to chart at present. Still, it appears already possible to surmise several operational outlines. Of course, not being privy to the inner workings of the Iranian establishment, what follows is by definition a speculative endeavor.

Iran may consider synchronization with Russia to counterbalance a hyperactive Turkey in the South Caucasus. Although the Iranians may feel themselves to have been sidelined by the Russians as they went about unilaterally brokering the tripartite agreement that ended the Second Karabakh War, Tehran at present enjoys a cozier relationship with Moscow than it does with Ankara. At least in the South Caucasus theater, the same could be said for the Kremlin's attitude towards Iran, given that Russia is becoming increasingly concerned by Turkey's growing influence in the post-Soviet space. This last consideration could result in Moscow choosing, eventually, to abandon its desire to erode NATO cohesion through the cultivation of Turkey and turn instead to Tehran in order

to contain Ankara's encroachment in an area it considers its legitimate sphere of influence.

In broader terms, Russia continues to contemplate its South Caucasus policy through the prism of its overall confrontation with the United States. It is most likely that the perpetuation of such an approach would be welcomed with open arms by Tehran. The idea of a tactical alliance with Iran is already present in some strategic quarters and think-tanks in Moscow.

Already, both players already depend on each other in the region: Iran remains a vital logistical hub for supplying the Russian 102<sup>nd</sup> Military Base deployed in Armenia, and Russian forces effectively serve as a guarantee for Iran's continued access to Armenia via the Zangezur corridor. Moscow and Tehran are also discussing the feasibility of Iran's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union.

That being said, one point should not be ignored: in the last three decades, Iran has acted as a strategic lone wolf on the international stage and has proven to be a tough partner. Thus, any plausible Russo-Iranian situational partnership in the South Caucasus would neither be an easy nor a linear undertaking, as was demonstrated, for

instance, by frictions in the Syrian theater. Although dependent on many dynamic factors, including hard-to-predict developments in two sets of bilateral relationships (Russia-Turkey and Iran-Turkey), a marriage of convenience, as it were, between Russia and Iran in the South Caucasus may yet emerge as a significant geopolitical factor in the time ahead.

Potentially, Tehran may also start rearranging assets it has invested in foreign conflicts taking place in other theaters in order to free up resources to focus more on engagement within the South Caucasus. Iran's major focus on supporting prolonged expeditionary warfare in the Levant, Iraq, and Yemen is consuming efforts, blood, and money: for sound strategic reasons, until the outcome Second Karabakh War transformed the regional equation, Iran could afford to relegate the South Caucasus to the relative sidelines. Extracting itself with elegance from present priorities in other theaters would not be easy, as Iran is presently quite bogged down in the perennial conflicts characteristic of those areas.

Yet, the emerging shift towards a partial normalization of relations with the Arab Gulf states could potentially ease Tehran's burden

and allow it to focus more on its northern theater. It may seem odd at first blush, but a certain form of pragmatic collaboration between Iran and its Arab regional rivals to contain mounting Turkish pressure is not an impossible scenario. Another option in this regard remains raising the Kurdish question, which has for decades caused Turkey to react in a predictable manner. Generally, the rapidly evolving geopolitics of the Middle East, but also of Central and South Asia (especially in the wake of the American abandonment of Afghanistan) is likely to be an important factor in determining Iran's future posture towards the South Caucasus.

Iran may also consider strengthening its relations with Armenia to counterbalance an emboldened Azerbaijan and keep open its own access to the strategic Zangezur corridor. For instance, the project to construct an Iran-Armenia railway and connect it to the existing regional transportation network is already on the table. In January 2021, Tehran and Yerevan signed an agreement to increase their annual bilateral trade turnover to \$1 billion. And Iran appears to be quite willing not only to fill the market niche created by the recently-announced Armenian boycott of Turkish goods but also to build a gas pipeline to Armenia.

But most of all, the Iranians are reportedly interested in forming a multi-modal Persian Gulf-Black Sea International Transport and Transit Corridor that would connect Iran with Europe and Russia. If operationalized, this last would multiply Iranian export options, grant them access to Europe without having to involve Turkey, and instantly become a competitor to the east-west Zangezur corridor championed by Azerbaijan and Turkey in the wake of the Second Karabakh War.

To ultimately achieve such an objective, one could reasonably surmise that Iran may be prepared to manage the reinforcement of Armenian military capabilities: the UN arms embargo against Iran expired in October 2020, clearing the way for Tehran to legally export weapons. The plausibility of the scenario is reinforced by the fact that Armenia may well be seeking Iranian support to counterbalance and mitigate Azerbaijan's military superiority by providing a land-sea bypass access route to Russia via Iran's Caspian Sea ports.

Beyond that, Iran could undertake measures to tighten its control over the country's ethnic-Azerbaijani community. To ensure its loyalty, both carrots and sticks would be employed, perhaps more of the latter than the former.

The arrest and conviction of ethnic-Azerbaijani activists in January 2021 gives credence to the thesis that the stick rather than the carrot remains a preferred instrument of choice for the Islamic Republic, which remains dominated by the security apparatus led by the IRGC.

Finally, the shifting balance of power in the South Caucasus, coupled with rising Turkish ambitions in the region, would likely constitute an additional argument for the hardliners in Iran's security establishment to accelerate the acquisition and operationalization of the ultimate deterrence tool: nuclear weapons.

### *Confrontational Relapse*

After its initial uneasy reactions demonstrated at the end of 2020, Tehran toned down its rhetoric, moderated its actions, and began accommodating itself to new realities. As early as January 2021, Iran's foreign minister visited Azerbaijan, Russia, and Armenia to discuss postwar developments. Zarif's trip was an indication of Iran's willingness to assume a more proactive policy towards the region as well as participate in postwar reconstruction and development projects. In particular, the Islamic Republic's

chief diplomat extended an offer to the three countries he visited to utilize Iran as their principal gateway to the Persian Gulf.

Throughout 2021, Iranian officials have also carried out a greater number of discussions with their counterparts in both Armenia and Azerbaijan on possible mutual projects related to interregional transportation routes, primarily the Persian Gulf-Black Sea Transit Corridor and the International North-South Transport Corridor. They also expressed an interest in taking up a share of the \$25 billion reconstruction portfolio for the liberated regions offered up by Azerbaijan.

However, the prospect for postwar development in the South Caucasus based on the vision set forth in the tripartite agreement has been marred by a lack of progress in the implementation of its provisions. The chosen tactics of the Armenian government include delaying the process of unblocking communications routes and delineating the interstate Armenia-Azerbaijan border, as well

as indicating an unwillingness to recognize Karabakh and the surrounding regions as integral parts of Azerbaijan (all of which are preconditions for concluding a broader peace treaty). These have contributed to a gradual increase in tensions between Yerevan and Baku. Multiple border skirmishes between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces took place in the spring and summer of 2021, as Baku began upping political and military pressure on Yerevan to force it to fulfill its obligations under the tripartite agreement.

This recurrence of tensions indirectly involved Iran as well. At end of June 2021, after Azerbaijan and Turkey had begun joint naval drills in the Caspian Sea, Iran launched its own wargame in the same area. In mid-August 2021, Azerbaijan submitted a diplomatic note to Tehran to protest Iran-based

trucks traffic entering those parts of Karabakh controlled by the Russian peacekeepers without having cleared Azerbaijani customs and border controls. Two weeks later, Azerbaijan's military temporarily halted traffic between Armenia and Iran

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for the same reason. And in mid-September 2021, as this edition of *Baku Dialogues* was going to press, something similar took place.

### *Speculating About Tomorrow*

For Iran, the outcome of the Second Karabakh War basically amounted to a “black swan event.” Having been focused almost exclusively for the better part of three decades on its confrontation with the United States, Israel, and the Arab Gulf states, Tehran suddenly and unexpectedly had to deal with a sweeping transformation in its northern backyard.

Elements of this transformation include the military victory that empowered Azerbaijan, the weakening of Armenia upon its defeat, the resulting Russian military-peacekeeping presence, and the unfolding penetration of Turkey into the Silk Road region. Against this background, Iran has felt itself sidelined from the region’s diplomatic processes and deprived of potential dividends from regional energy projects and transit trade routes. Beyond feeling politically

and economically excluded, it has also become wary of the potential security gap emerging on its doorstep.

Such a paradigm shift has increased the level of strategic apprehension in Tehran, imposing on Iran’s establishment a need to figure out available ways and means to deal with this new regional reality. So far, the response has been more reactive than proactive. However, there is no reason to think that Iran will remain defensive or passive in the time ahead. Its complex national security machinery—with its delicate balance between hardliners and pragmatists—will elaborate the Islamic Republic’s strategy sooner rather than later.

This has not yet happened, however. The June 2021 presidential elections that brought Ebrahim Raisi to power resulted in a political transition that has not yet been fully completed. By the time this edition of *Baku Dialogues* is printed, informed observers of developments in Iran may be in a better position to ascertain in which strategic direction the new conservative government will choose to go.

What is certain is that the competing interests of Russia, Turkey, and Iran will greatly determine the security

equilibrium in the South Caucasus in the time ahead. Beyond the internal dynamics within this strategic triangle, external influencing factors also need to be taken into account by the new administration in Tehran.

Foremost amongst these is the still-in-the-making policy of the Biden Administration towards Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran. Particularly unknown, as of this writing, is the White House’s concrete intention regarding the warming of relations with Iran. At least for now, it appears that Tehran sees a window of opportunity opening up in Washington. But how wide and for how long? In the case of even a partial normalization of relations and the easing of punishing sanctions, Tehran would likely feel emboldened in its foreign policy—the reverberations of which would probably be felt in the South Caucasus. In addition, if America toughens its posture towards both Russia and Turkey, then this is likely to result in a push for Moscow and Ankara to cooperate more closely with each other. This could in turn cause further distress and consternation in Iran.

Then there is China and the EU as factors. The development—negative or positive—of their respective relations with Iran may

also (at least indirectly) influence Tehran’s policy towards the South Caucasus. A case in point is the March 2021 China-Iran strategic agreement, whose full details have not been made public. More recently, the effects of the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 and the range of its potential consequences also could emerge as a paramount factor influencing Iranian strategy not only towards the South Caucasus but the Silk Road region as a whole (as well as other theaters).

Here we can reiterate the basic point of this essay: no accurate forecast of the future of the South Caucasus can be made without factoring in the fifth element of the new regional equation—the Islamic Republic of Iran—alongside the two belligerents of the Second Karabakh War (Armenia and Azerbaijan) and its two most visibly active regional powers (Russia and Turkey).

In all likelihood, Iran will eventually assume a more active role in the postwar disposition of the South Caucasus. This can consist in Tehran choosing to disrupt an already-emerged equilibrium and thus act as a spoiler—especially if it feels its security is at stake: after all, Iran has legitimate strategic interests in the South Caucasus. At the same time,

Tehran's inflated threat perception and a tendency to assume a zero-sum posture sometimes disproportionately affects the clarity of its strategic thinking.

One evident way to avoid the spoiler scenario is for the Islamic Republic to be incentivized sufficiently to include itself in shared regional projects that are integral to the postwar vision set forth in the tripartite agreement that ended the Second Karabakh War. Determining shared interests and building confidence to

advance them is, to my mind, the only prospective way to overcome historic antagonisms, mistrust, and geopolitical rivalries. The dividends are obvious to grasp but hardly straightforward to achieve: multilateral regional collaboration that benefits all sides and that, in turn, comes to serve as the keystone of a new and inclusive regional security architecture—one that, by inheritance and geography, and perhaps in the not-too-distant future by strategic disposition, ought to include Iran. **BD**

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# Iran and Azerbaijan After the Second Karabakh War

*Vali Kaleji*

The Republic of Azerbaijan is the Islamic Republic of Iran's important and influential neighbor: deep historical, cultural, religious, and ethno-linguistic ties have led to the formation of deep and wide-ranging relations between the two countries. The four northwestern provinces of Iran (i.e., Gilan, Ardabil, East Azerbaijan, and West Azerbaijan) have common geographical borders with both the main part of Azerbaijan and its exclave, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic; they also have deep and close commonalities based on Islam and Shiism, as well as sharing the Azerbaijani culture and language. All this has provided the ground for closeness between the citizens of the regions on both sides of the border.

Moreover, the valuable capacities and opportunities for Iran and Azerbaijan in developing bilateral

social and cultural relations are also clearly indicated in the significant increase of Iranian tourists visiting Azerbaijan; but also the no-visa requirement for Iranian citizens traveling to Nakhchivan; the presence of Azerbaijani citizens in Iran, especially in the majority ethnic-Azerbaijani provinces in northwestern Iran and the religious cities of Qom and Mashhad; the launching of the Nakhchivan-Tabriz-Tehran-Mashhad passenger train route; and the development of healthcare and wellness tourism facilities geared towards Azerbaijani citizens in cities such as Tabriz.

Although the outbreak of COVID-19 and the resulting travel restrictions imposed by both Tehran and Baku have had a negative impact on this trend over the last two years, it is expected that people-to-people contact between the two countries will return to

previous levels when the pandemic is brought under control.

In the political field, cooperation and consultations between the two countries in recent years have entered a new and qualitatively different phase. For instance, Iran's former president, Hassan Rouhani, met more than ten times in bilateral and multilateral fora with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Ilham Aliyev—unprecedented in the history of the diplomatic relations between the two countries. In addition to developing the bilateral relationship, during the Rouhani Baku and Tehran were able to establish new forms of multilateral cooperation, namely the Iran-Azerbaijan-Russia and Iran-Azerbaijan-Turkey trilateral mechanisms.

Moreover, economic and trade cooperation between Iran and Azerbaijan has entered a new phase. The trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Iran amounted to \$339.1 million in 2020. Of the total turnover, the export of Azerbaijani products to Iran amounted to \$38.4 million, while import from Iran

totaled \$300.6 million. Moreover, trade turnover between the two countries amounted to \$134.1 million during the first four months of 2021. At present, Azerbaijan is Iran's first economic partner in the South Caucasus, and more than 51 percent of Iran's trade volume with the region is allocated to Azerbaijan.

More than 1,600 Iranian companies have been registered in Azerbaijan. Joint border markets have been established; together, the two countries are developing the Aras Free Trade Zone and the Mako Free Trade Zone; the capacity of border terminals has been increased at Bilesvar, Astara and Poldasht; a joint venture automobile production company involving Iran Khodro has built the Khazar Car Factory in the Nefchala industrial park; and the two countries are closely cooperating in Nakhchivan,

especially in the areas of transit and gas swapping. Electricity exchanges between Iran and Azerbaijan take place at six border points; cooperation between the two countries is moving forward in the construction and completion of the Khoda Afarin

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*Vali Kaleji is a Senior Researcher at both the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) and The Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies (IRAS) in Tehran. He holds a PhD in Regional Studies (Central Asia and the South Caucasus) from the University of Tehran.*



and Qiz Qala-e-Si' hydroelectricity dams and the construction of power plants near the Aras River borderline in the Iranian town of Marazad and Azerbaijan's Ordubad; and Tehran and Baku are working on various customs, banking, insurance, and visa facilities. All these are important infrastructure measures that have helped to advance economic and trade relations between the two countries.

In this regard, the project of connecting the Qazvin-Rasht-Astara railway in Iran to the railway network of Azerbaijan, which is being implemented within the framework of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), represents one of the major transit and economic opportunities for Iran. Azerbaijan is integral to the success of the main rail route that will run from Russia to India. The Iran-Azerbaijan-Russia trilateral mechanism could become a factor in providing Iran with a connection to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). And Azerbaijan can play a role in helping Iranian ports in the Persian Gulf and the Oman Sea connect to Georgian ports on the Black Sea coast. A significant jump in trade volume with Azerbaijan and the whole of the South Caucasus could result from such and similar endeavors and initiatives.

Almost all the sections of the INSTC are already operational. The Astara-Astara railway (connecting the Iranian and Azerbaijani cities that share a name and straddle the border between the two countries) was officially inaugurated in a ceremony held in late March 2018, followed a year later by the inauguration of the Rasht-Qazvin railway. One section remains unbuilt, however: the 130-km long stretch from Astara to Rasht, which is located on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea and is adjacent to the Iranian border with the Republic of Azerbaijan. Work on this section has encountered financial problems and is tied to a successful conclusion of Iran's nuclear talks with the Biden Administration and the lifting of economic sanctions illegally imposed during the era of Donald Trump's presidency.

Also, cooperation between Tehran and Baku on issues related to the Caspian Sea has developed significantly in recent years—a positive change in comparison with the cold and sometimes tense atmosphere of the 1990s. The participation of the two countries in signing the Convention on the Legal Regime of the Caspian Sea (2018); cooperation in the exploration, extraction, and production of hydrocarbons from Caspian Sea; the participation of Naftiran Intertrade

Company limited (NICO) in the development of the Shah Deniz gas field; joint cooperation regarding Caspian environmental issues; and the establishment of trade relations between the Port of Baku and the Iranian ports of Astara, Bandar Anzali, Amirabad, Nowshahr, and the Bandar Turkeman represent some of the fruits of this cooperation between the two countries in the context of the Caspian in recent years.

Lastly, the quality of relations between Tehran and Baku has increased significantly in recent years in the field of security and defense. Important examples include: cooperation between the border forces of the two countries on the land, along the Aras river, and in the Caspian Sea; the joint fight against drug trafficking and the illegal smuggling of goods but also working together to combat extremism and terrorism.

In this regard, Azerbaijan's navy made its first-ever visit to Iran in mid-October 2017, signaling the warming of ties between the formerly wary neighbors and Baku's growing desire to increase military cooperation with Tehran. Less than a fortnight later, Baku hosted the first meeting of the Azerbaijani and Iranian Joint Working Group on Military Cooperation, led by Azerbaijani Defense Minister

Zakir Hasanov and Iranian Deputy Minister of Defense Hojatollah Ghoreishi. Since then, Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami has visited Baku and, for the first time after Azerbaijan regained its independence, Iran's Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces Mohammad Bagheri visited Baku in January 2019 and met with President Aliyev.

The sum total of developments in various socio-cultural, political, economic, and security-defense spheres—some of which occurred for the first time after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of Republic of Azerbaijan—clearly shows that relations between Tehran and Baku have entered a new and qualitatively different phase.

Both sides ought to endeavor not only to maintain this trend but strengthen it in the time ahead. The recent appointment of a new government in Iran in the wake of June 2021 presidential election opens new horizons in this regard.

### *The Larger Context*

Geographically, Iran holds a special position along the southern periphery of the South Caucasus. Alone among the region's



three major neighbors (Iran, Russia, Turkey), Iran shares a border with liberated regions adjacent to Karabakh, including Zangilan, Jabrayil, and Fuzuli. Therefore, no country was in closer proximity to the conflict zone: the Second Karabakh War temporarily undermined the security of Iran's northwestern border, particularly affecting the provinces of Ardabil and Eastern Azerbaijan.

These borders were considered safe by Tehran after the 1994 ceasefire that ended the First Karabakh War: Iran mainly felt threatened along its borders with Afghanistan and Iraq. However, once the Second Karabakh War broke out, several rockets and mortar shells inadvertently landed inside Iran, especially in the village of Khoda Afarin, located near the border with Armenia in our Eastern Azerbaijan Province. This put Tehran in a precarious position vis-à-vis the two belligerents to its north, as Iran sought to remain neutral whilst maintaining its principled position regarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states in a conflict that was directly affecting its own security.

Iran did, however, quickly take steps to safeguard its exposed provinces. For the first time since 1994, the regular Iranian Armed Forces, along with units from the Islamic

Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), deployed to the country's northwest during the Second Karabakh War in order to patrol the state borders it shares with Azerbaijan and Armenia. In fact, this operation represented an effort on the part of Tehran to prevent any further changes in the geopolitics of the region or shifts in internationally recognized borders.

Politically, as the only immediate neighbor to the South Caucasus that had maintained diplomatic relations with its three states, Iran tried to reduce tensions and end the war more rapidly. In this regard, Iran's then president, Hassan Rouhani, held separate telephone conversations with his counterparts in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, and Russia. Iran's main response to the conflict was a regional diplomatic tour led by Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Seyed Abbas Araqchi to Baku, Moscow, Yerevan, and Ankara in late October 2021. As Iran's Special Envoy for the Settlement of the Karabakh Conflict, Araqchi presented Iran's initiative to resolve this conflict and achieve lasting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In parallel with these diplomatic efforts, senior Iranian officials clearly emphasized the need for the

return of the occupied territories to the rule of Azerbaijan. An Iranian government spokesman, Ali Rabiei, on 6 October 2020 noted that "Iran holds a very clear position on the need to observe and recognize the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and it has repeatedly emphasized this legitimate right within the framework of international law and UN resolutions." Indeed, Ali Akbar Velayati, the advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader on international affairs who had previously served as Foreign Minister and in that capacity as a mediator during the period of the First Karabakh War, stated on the same day in a newspaper interview that "we call on Armenia to return those occupied parts to the Republic of Azerbaijan. More than one million Azerbaijanis have been displaced after the occupation of those areas and must return home soon."

Finally, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself remarked in a live broadcast on 3 November 2020 that "the war between Iran's two neighboring countries is a bitter issue which has to speedily come to an end." He further noted that "all the territories of Azerbaijan occupied by Armenia must be liberated and all these territories must be returned to Azerbaijan," adding that the security of the Armenian nationals too should be guaranteed.

He further stressed that the international borders should be respected and that terrorists should never think of approaching Iranian borders because, if they do so, they will be dealt-with strongly. In response to this position, Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry issued the following statement: "we highly appreciate the statement made by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and the support given to the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan."

Clearly, statements such as these brought Tehran and Baku closer during the Second Karabakh War. Therefore, it can be said that the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan have entered a new phase in its wake. Against this background, a number of important issues have been taken up, eight of which will be examined in the sections that follow.

### *Basic Position*

The first issue we can discuss concerns Iran's position in the Second Karabakh War, which represents a continuation of Tehran's position during the First Karabakh War. This is not how

some observers and analysts chose to portray the situation. During the Second Karabakh War, such people wrongly asserted that Iran's position on the return of Karabakh and surrounding areas to the sovereignty of Azerbaijan was new and different from Tehran's previous position. On the contrary,

Iran's position in this regard was in line with the position taken from the period of the First Karabakh War onwards. From the beginning of the Karabakh crisis in the early 1990s, the Iranian government has recognized the region then known as Nagorno-Karabakh and the regions surrounding it as integral parts of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Over the past three decades, this position never changed. In essence, Iran's opposition to ethnic secessionist dynamics is one of the fundamental factors in Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus. Iranian society is comprised of various ethnic groups and, therefore, Iran opposes any ethno-political dynamic that is separatist.

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Iran never recognized the self-declared independence of Karabakh, Abkhazia, or South Ossetia despite the good and close relationship that exists between Iran and Armenia, on the one hand, and Iran and the Russian Federation, on the other hand. Over the past decades, this Iranian approach to ethnic

dynamics and separatism has been consistent and has been observed, for example, in Chechnya, Dagestan, and in Iraqi Kurdistan. For a better understanding of this position, it is sufficient to compare Iran's position with Syria's, which has recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as Russia's annexation of Crimea. But despite the close relations between Iran and Syria, Iran has its own logic and approach in the field of foreign policy—especially in the field of ethnic and territorial separatism—and this issue is one of the red lines of Iran's foreign policy.

In addition, regarding the Karabakh conflict, Iran's foreign policy encompasses other principles as well, some of the

most important of which are: non-recognition of the so-called 'Republic of Artsakh' and other political developments in the Karabakh region including elections and referenda; a balanced approach and the maintenance of relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan; opposing the use of force to resolve the Karabakh crisis; maintaining the rights and security of the Armenians of Karabakh in peace talks and plans; opposing the interference of trans-regional powers in the resolution of the Karabakh crisis; opposing the stationing of international peacekeeping forces along the Iranian border; being ready to mediate the process of peace- and dispute-resolution upon a request from the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia; and no change in internationally recognized borders of sovereign states.

We have already cited the Supreme Leader's 3 November 2020 statement, pronounced on the auspicious occasion of the birth anniversary of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). The point to emphasize is that not all of the positions enunciated on that day were new; rather, they have been on Iran's foreign policy agenda since the early 1990s. Therefore, Iran's position during the Second Karabakh War was not at all new and different from its past position.

For example, when Iran's Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces Mohammad Bagheri visited Baku in January 2019 (as noted above), he clearly mentioned that "Iran considers Karabakh to be Azerbaijani territory and supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. Changing borders by force is unacceptable, and Iran always stands by the [Azerbaijani] side on this issue." This position by Iran's top military commander two years before the onset of the Second Karabakh War clearly shows that Iran's stance in support of the return of the occupied territories to the sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War was not new.

## Borders

The second issue we can discuss revolves around the question of borders and border changes: de facto versus de jure, the completion of the demarcation of the border between Iran and Azerbaijan, and related issues.

Iran's northwestern border with the main part of Azerbaijan and its exclave, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, is 750 km long, of which about 132 km had been controlled by Armenian forces

prior to the Second Karabakh War. Azerbaijan's successful re-taking of the provinces of Fuzuli, Jabrayil, and Zangilan during the Second Karabakh War transformed the understanding of the status of this 132 km section of Iran's border from de facto to de jure. This important geopolitical change has had positive implications for Tehran and Baku. For instance, a border with a de facto entity has been replaced with a de jure state, namely the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Prior to the Second Karabakh War, Iran bordered on a gray zone region mainly populated by Armenians (which had been due to conflict-induced population shifts) and run by a political regime loyal to Yerevan whose territory was recognized internationally as being a part of Azerbaijan. Therefore, as a result of the Second Karabakh War, the 750 km border between Iran and Azerbaijan was fully recognized and with the deployment of the border forces of Azerbaijan in the 132 km border strip and the transfer of the border outpost in the Khoda Afarin region to within the borders of Iran, the common border came under the official control of the two countries, after three decades of a grey zone situation.

### *Dams and Power Plants*

The third issue we can discuss centers on the construction of the Khoda Afarin and Qiz Qala-e-Si' dams on the common border of the Aras river. The Khoda Afarin Dam is an earth-fill embankment dam on the Aras River straddling the international border between Iran and Azerbaijan. It is located 8 km west of Khomarlu in Iran's East Azerbaijan province and 14 km southwest of Soltanli in the Jabrayil District of Azerbaijan. Construction of the dam began in 2008 with Iranian financial support, but at that time the Jabrayil District was under the de facto control of Armenian forces. Therefore, in addition to coordinating construction with the Armenian forces, the Iranian government obtained permission from the Azerbaijani government to build this dam and its hydroelectric power plant, and the resulting document was approved by the Iranian parliament (the Islamic Consultative Assembly), which shows that Iran recognized this district as being a part of Azerbaijani sovereignty.

Iran also established a border outpost in the Jabrayil District adjacent to the Khoda Afarin

Dam in coordination with the Azerbaijani government to secure the Khoda Afarin Dam and its power plant. But in practice, due to the conditions prevailing in the region, the construction process of the dam was very slow and prior to the start of the Second Karabakh War, the Khoda Afarin Dam and its power plant could not be put into operation. In fact, the area's de facto control by Armenian forces prevented Iran from actually exploiting this facility. This issue naturally had a negative impact on the construction and completion of the Qiz Qala-e-Si' Dam, which is located 12 km downstream of the Khoda Afarin Dam.

But after the Second Karabakh War and the stabilization and normalization of the border regime along the aforementioned 132 km stretch of the border between Iran and Azerbaijan, an opportunity to complete the Khoda Afarin and Qiz Qala-e-Si' dams, along with their power plants, arose. Shortly after the Second Karabakh War came to an end, Iranian and Azerbaijani representatives of the Joint Technical Commission on the Khoda-Afarin Dam held a meeting in the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan in mid-December 2020 to discuss the joint operation of these

hydropower plants. The two countries agreed to install a 100-megawatt turbine on the Iranian side and a 100-megawatt turbine on the Azerbaijani side at the Khoda Afarin Dam. Indeed, with the deployment of the border forces of Azerbaijan in Jabrayil, the Iranian border outpost in the Khoda Afarin region was transferred to the Iranian side of the Aras river.

Thus, the Qiz Qala-e-Si' Dam was officially opened by Iran's energy minister, Reza Ardakanian, in mid-May 2021. He then left for the Aras Dam by helicopter, 30 km northwest of the city of Jolfa, to participate in a ceremony marking the fiftieth anniversary of the joint operation of the Aras and Mil-Mugan dams built along the Aras River. The ceremony also included the participation of Sabuhi Mammadov, Prime Minister of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, and Mohammad Reza Pour Mohammadi, Governor of Eastern Azerbaijan. Arbakanian's Azerbaijani colleague, Parviz Shahbazov, also attended and underlined that the "Khudaferin and Giz Galasi HPPs, with a total installed capacity of 200 MW and 80 MW, respectively, will be built soon. As a result, we will be able to produce 716 million kilowatt-hours of electricity per year."

Thus, one of the valuable opportunities for Tehran and Baku after the Second Karabakh War has consisted of increasing cooperation in the construction and completion of the Khoda Afarin and Qiz Qala-e-Si' dams and their power plants, which can contribute to the prosperity of rural and agricultural areas on both sides of the Aras River.

## Railways

The fourth issue we can discuss revolves around the potential to revive a part of the Soviet-era railway network, thus strengthening Iran's transport connection with the Caucasus and beyond after decades of lost opportunities resulting from the outcome of the First Karabakh War.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the Soviet Union built a railway connection between Baku and Nakhchivan through Armenia's Meghri region, running parallel to Iran's border. The Iranian railway

connected in the Julfa District of Nakhchivan through the city of Jolfa in Iran's East Azerbaijan Province. In 1990 and 1991, the volume of cargo exchanges through the Jolfa border crossing amounted to 2.69 and 2.37 million tons, respectively, amounting to over 10 percent of Iran's imports. After the First Karabakh War, the regions of Fuzuli, Jabrayil, and Zangilan bordering on Iranian came under Armenian de facto control and the railway connection between Nakhchivan and mainland Azerbaijan was severed. While the northern railways from Armenia to Georgia and Azerbaijan to Russia continued to operate, Iran's railway connection with the Caucasus was cut due to the outcome of the First Karabakh War and cargo exchanges across this border dropped sharply.

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Earlier, I had mentioned the Astara-Rasht-Qazvin railway in the context of the INSTC—a major transit and economic opportunity for Iran—and I also indicated the reasons why

one section remains incomplete. One of the terms of the tripartite agreement (Article 9) that ended the Second Karabakh War holds out the possibility for Iran to become reconnected to the southern railway network in the South Caucasus after three decades: "All economic and transport connections in the region shall be unblocked"—to quote from the document. The most direct interpretation of this sentence has understandably raised our expectations that after three decades, the deadlocks created in the region's transportation system, especially those involving railways, will be removed.

A revival of these Soviet-era railway lines would provide Iran with two new rail routes, both originating in Jolfa and Nakhchivan's Julfa District. The first route (south-north) is the Jolfa railway connection to Nakhchivan that then proceeds on to Yerevan and Tbilisi. The second route (west-east) runs from Jolfa to Nakhchivan and then crosses the southern borders of Armenia and then mainland Azerbaijan before proceeding to Baku and from there onward to Russia. At Julfa, the railway route divides into three branches: south to Jolfa in Iran, west

and north to Yerevan, and east along Armenia's southern border towards Azerbaijan.

For this reason, in the wake of the tripartite agreement, Tehran quickly articulated its support for the Nakhchivan connection. Iran's then-foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, stated that "the re-opening of the Julfa-Nakhchivan railway line is necessary for Iran's access to neighboring countries and the Eurasian market." In order to pursue the plan to revive the Soviet-era railway, Iran's Transport and Urban Development Minister Mohammad Eslami and the Managing Director of Iran Railways, Saeed Rasouli, visited Yerevan in late May 2021 and Nakhchivan as well as Baku in June 2021. Iranian officials emphasized that existing infrastructure can potentially join Nakhchivan to the rest of Azerbaijan Republic, while the Tabriz-Nakhchivan railway could be revived and extended to Tbilisi. They also raised the possibility of constructing a railway from Nakhchivan to Kars in Turkey.

In practice, however, the realization of the rail projects is fraught with many difficulties. A substantial challenge is the



difference in how Yerevan and Baku interpret the aforementioned Article 9 of the tripartite agreement. Here we can reproduce it in full:

All economic and transport connections in the region shall be unblocked. The Republic of Armenia shall guarantee the security of transport connections between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to arrange unobstructed movement of persons, vehicles and cargo in both directions. The Border Guard Service of the Russian Federal Security Service shall be responsible for overseeing the transport connections.

As agreed by the Parties, new transport links shall be built to connect the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and the western regions of Azerbaijan.

While the Azerbaijani side believes the document gives it the right to establish an overland transit corridor linking mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave via Armenia's southern Syunik province (what Azerbaijan refers to as the "Zangezur corridor"), the Armenian side emphasizes that, in the agreement, the term "corridor," used four times in other parts of the tripartite agreement, refers only to Lachin. Until both parties find a way to clear

up the ambiguity found in Article 9, the full-on implementation of any further region-wide plans—including those put forth by Iran and Turkey—is unlikely.

The main question remains whether Armenia will ultimately agree to join the proposed effort to expand intra-regional economic ties, including the revival of Soviet-era connections that traverse the southern borders of the Caucasus. If this problem is overcome, a significant part of the Soviet-era railway will need major reconstruction. I visited Aghdam in April 2021 and witnessed the condition of the railway network in that area, which is unusable and needs to be completely replaced. I strongly believe that reviving the Soviet-era railroads in the South Caucasus could help regional convergence dynamics whilst achieving its full connectivity potential. In fact, such a revival could play a similar role in reconciling Armenia and Azerbaijan as did the European Coal and Steel Community with respect to France and Germany in the 1950s.

### 3+3

The fifth issue we can discuss concerns Iran's role in the proposed 3+3 regional format for the South Caucasus; a similar

proposal was elaborated by the Turkish president during his visit to Baku to attend the Victory Day parade in December 2020. Ankara's vision of the Six-Country Regional Cooperation Platform would bring together Iran, Russia, and Turkey together with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Iran's proposal, which involves the same states, also aims to serve as a new post-war regional integration platform. During a late-January 2021 meeting between Zarif and Aliyev in Baku, Azerbaijan's president welcomed Iran's interest in the proposal for a six-way regional cooperation platform, saying that "the initiative would benefit peace and [advance the] common interests of the region's countries." Indeed, a few days later, during the Russian leg of the same regional diplomatic tour, Zarif emphasized in Moscow that "we are looking to form a six-party cooperation union in the region, and this is the most important goal of this regional trip."

Iran boasts some key strengths and opportunities for pursuing the 3+3 Regional Cooperation Format in the South Caucasus. Iran is geographically the only state that borders Armenia, the main part of Azerbaijan, and the latter's Nakhchivan exclave. The borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan being closed, Iran has for decades

served as the sole transportation route between Nakhchivan and mainland Azerbaijan. Iranian participation is also crucial for reviving the Soviet-era railway network, as discussed above. Thus, the 3+3 initiative, if carried out successfully, would provide Iran with two new rail routes.

Indeed, as also noted above, Iran is the only country that has regular diplomatic relations with all three South Caucasus states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Aside from the closed border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenian-Turkish relations have been severed since 1993 whilst relations between Georgia and Russia have been strained since 2008. Therefore, only Iran would be in a leading position to host a high-level 3+3 meeting. Furthermore, Iran sits astride two important trans-continental transportation corridors. The INSTC, which crosses Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia, has at its center the Rasht-Astara railway line, as discussed above. Additionally, the Persian Gulf-Black Sea Transit Corridor links up Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, and Iran. Therefore, Tehran's 3+3 cooperation plan for the South Caucasus could result in the combining of these two important and strategic transit corridors.

In addition to the substantial challenge centered on dissonant interpretations of Article 9 of the tripartite agreement, Georgia's opposition to the 3+3 format represents another one. Tbilisi's official position is that it will not take part in any regional body with Russia unless Moscow ends its occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In addition, Tbilisi is concerned that the northern trans-regional route passing through Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey (first and foremost, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad) would be marginalized as a result of the revival of Soviet-era road and rail corridors to the south. Despite all these problems and challenges, I believe that the Caucasus region, analogous to post-World War II western Europe, can overcome these conditions and move towards greater regional cooperation by focusing on communication corridors and rail networks.

### *Demining*

The sixth issue we can discuss concerns Iran's participation in demining Azerbaijan's liberated territories. My visit to Aghdam and other areas in April 2021 allowed me to see firsthand the extent of the minefields. Iran experienced similar conditions in the context of the eight-year war with Iraq in which

five of our provinces in the west and south had been heavily mined by Baghdad. Many soldiers and civilians were killed or wounded by landmines during and after that war, and it took years for those areas to be demined.

It comes as no surprise that Azerbaijan has indicated that before starting reconstruction, clearing the liberated territories from mines and unexploded ordnance is a priority. "It will take up to 13 years for the complete demining of all Azerbaijani lands liberated from the Armenian occupation in Karabakh," said Gazanfar Ahmadov, director of the National Agency for Mine Action in Azerbaijan (ANAMA). For this reason, Aliyev in early February 2021 described Azerbaijan's mine clearance operations in the territories recently liberated from Armenian occupation as being "a priority task," adding that "this should be done in such a way that no accidents occur after the work is completed."

In such circumstances, the demining specialists of the Iranian Armed Forces, based on their extensive demining experience acquired in the context of the Iran-Iraq war, have a very good capacity to participate in demining the liberated areas along with the demining groups of Azerbaijan,

Russia, and Turkey (and perhaps others). The Ministry of Defense and Support of the Armed Forces of Iran as well as companies subordinate to the ministry have indicated their readiness to take part in this process.

Based on the principles of humanism, these companies are ready to clean up part of these territories free of charge, and the rest on a contractual basis, as Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan Seyyed Abbas Mousavi has noted. The fact is that the extent of the demined areas is such that without the participation of various countries, including Iran, one cannot expect demining to be completed in the near future, which will certainly affect negatively the process and speed of reconstruction of the liberated areas.

### *Joint Center*

The seventh issue we can discuss concerns Iran's possible presence and participation in the Joint Center for Monitoring the Ceasefire in Karabakh, currently staffed by Russian and Turkish personnel. Notwithstanding the fact that unlike Russia and Turkey, Iran borders the liberated territories of Zangilan, Jabrayil, and Fuzuli—and thus was directly affected

by the Second Karabakh War—unfortunately Iran does not participate in Joint Center's work.

The fact is that one cannot ignore the security concerns of a country whose villages and border areas were hit with the bullets and rockets of the war. There is no doubt that the presence of representatives of the Iranian Armed Forces in the Joint Center could contribute to peace, stability, and security in the region. Iran, like Russia, has diplomatic relations with Armenia, and these relations surely could be put to use in taking effective steps to manage the sensitive post-war situation. Therefore, I believe this issue belongs on the agenda of the talks taking place between the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the Russian Federation.

### *Reconstruction*

The eighth and final issue we can discuss revolves around Iranian participation in the reconstruction of the liberated territories. Azerbaijan has already begun to implement large-scale development and reconstruction projects in the liberated territories, and the Azerbaijani government has announced the allocation of an initial \$1.3 billion to that end. In this regard, high-ranking officials

of Azerbaijan, including the president, have invited friendly countries, including Iran, to take part in reconstruction efforts. One comparative advantage is Iran's geographic proximity. Another is the lower cost of labor as well as construction equipment and material. A third is the high capability and capacity of Iranian companies. A fourth is cultural: the ethnic, linguistic, and religious closeness between the citizens of Iran that live in the areas bordering Azerbaijan.

And a fifth is, of course, the nature of our bilateral relationship: during his visit to Tehran in December 2020, Azerbaijan's Deputy Prime Minister Shahin Mustafayev hailed Iran as a friendly country and a brotherly neighbor of Azerbaijan, saying Azerbaijan holds strategic relations with the Islamic Republic. During the visit, Mustafayev met with the Head of the Iranian Presidential Administration Mahmoud Vaezi, Energy Minister Reza Ardakanian, and Defense and Armed Forces Support Minister Amir Hatami. Mustafayev again visited Tehran in May 2021, with Vaezi noting that "today, with the will of the presidents of the two countries relations have reached to a strategic level at all areas." For his part, Mustafayev underlined that the "level of relations between the two countries have reached the highest level in the recent years and the

political will of the presidents of the two countries have been very effective in this endeavor."

Still, despite all this, there is a feeling and perception in Iran that reconstruction opportunities are greater for companies from countries like Turkey, Russia, Pakistan, Italy, and Israel: in practice, Iranian companies have not yet been able to establish a foothold in the process of reconstruction of the liberated areas.

Some critics and experts in Iran argue that, compared with contracts concluded between the Azerbaijani government and Turkish and Italian companies for the construction of roads, airports, and other infrastructure, no specific and significant contracts have been awarded to Iranian companies. Therefore, in order to reverse this trend, it is necessary for the two countries—especially within the framework of their joint economic commission—to take practical and tangible steps towards the award of contracts to Iranian companies.

### *Concerns and Ambiguities*

Notwithstanding all the opportunities for the strategic advancement of relations between the two countries in the

wake of the Second Karabakh War, there are concerns and ambiguities inside Iran regarding the present situation in the South Caucasus. We should not turn a blind eye to these concerns and talk only about the development of capacities and the deepening of cooperation between the two countries. Concerns and misunderstandings should not be allowed to accumulate, lest they cast a shadow on recent efforts. Here we can speak of four such concerns and ambiguities from the Iranian perspective.

The first concern is the possibility of the resumption of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan—whether in the theater encompassing the zone of operation of the Russian peacekeepers, the liberated areas, or the sliver of Armenian territory between Nakhchivan and the main part of the Republic of Azerbaijan. As noted above, neither Georgia, Russia, nor Turkey directly borders these regions; but Iran does. Just as the Second Karabakh War directly affected Iran's northwestern areas, so would the resumption of hostilities. Therefore, it is clear that Iran neither supports nor welcomes any war or conflict in the region between its two northern neighbors.

The Iranian second concern centers on the question of establishing what Baku calls the Zangezur corridor. The prevailing perception in Iran is that this corridor would cut the land border between Iran and Armenia. Some commentaries, coupled with the publication of various maps in press outlets based in Azerbaijan and Turkey regarding the corridor route and potential placement of pipelines or energy transmission lines, completely ignore the weight of the border between Iran and Armenia. This has understandably caused various types of concerns and ambiguities in Iran, especially among academic elites and media centers.

In April 2021 I participated in a conference hosted by ADA University under the slogan "New Vision for South Caucasus: Post-Conflict Development and Cooperation." I heard President Aliyev underline that "Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, and Iran share the same approach to regional cooperation. The main area of concentration now is transportation, because it's a situation which is called 'win-win.' Everybody wins from that." I then availed myself of the opportunity to ask the president a question about the aforementioned ambiguity directly, and he

explicitly stressed that the establishment of a corridor between Nakhchivan and the main part of Azerbaijan would pose no threat to the Iranian-Armenian border. However, it seems that with the continuation of these discussions in Iranian media and the country's analytical space, this issue should still be addressed by Azerbaijan's officials, media, and experts.

The third concern from the Iranian perspective is the intensification of the activities of some pan-Turkic radical groups since the end of the Second Karabakh War, which understandably has raised unease inside Iran due to the possibility this could incite ethnic and separatist movements in the Azerbaijani populated regions of northwestern Iran. This is a sensitive subject, of course. But given the mutual respect that exists between Iran and Azerbaijan for each other's territorial integrity, coupled with Iran's support for the return of the Armenian-occupied territories to the rule of Azerbaijan prior to and during the Second Karabakh War, Tehran naturally expects Baku to address this matter.

More attention should be paid to the activities of some groups and those media outlets that are stimulating ethnic sentiments and separatism in the Azerbaijani-populated regions of northwestern Iran. Historical, cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic ties between these regions and the Republic of Azerbaijan are valuable assets that should not be allowed to become instrumentalized political tools of some groups and media, for this would cause discord and tension between Tehran and Baku.

Iran's fourth concern is the possible presence and participation of Israeli companies in the process of the reconstruction of the

liberated areas near the Iranian border—that is to say, the regions of Fuzuli, Jabrayil, and Zangilan. Iran reasonable fears this could provide space and possibility

for espionage and other security actions against Iran's national interests and security. Therefore, in the process of reconstruction of the liberated areas—especially in the areas adjacent to the Iranian border—it would be better for Baku to pay more

attention to this issue and the sensitivities of Tehran so that a “third factor” does not negatively affect the developing relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Even if these Iranian concerns and ambiguities are not true or exaggerated, they should still be taken into account: perceptions and misperceptions should also be addressed. In the framework of track-one diplomacy, these should be given more attention at the level of the officials of Azerbaijan. In this regard, the government and people of Iran should be assured that there are no concerns or threats regarding these four issues.

In the framework of track-two diplomacy—so at the non-governmental level, the media, and academic and study centers within Azerbaijan—the level of cooperation can be increased with counterparts in Iran to better address the latter's concerns. For example, for each of the four concerns and ambiguities, independent conferences and roundtables could be organized at which journalists, experts, and researchers from the two countries could exchange views and clear up misunderstandings.

Here it should be noted that the development of relations between the two countries has opponents both inside and outside the region.

### *Bilateral Ties, Regional Convergence*

Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan have been growing in recent years, particularly during Hassan Rouhani term in presidential office. Relations between the two countries in various political, economic, trade, social, cultural, security, and defense fields experienced significant growth that was not comparable to the situation before August 2013, when he came to power. Meanwhile, the Second Karabakh War, which ended with Azerbaijan's military victory, has provided new opportunities for the further development of relations between Tehran and Baku, some of the important aspects of which have been mentioned in this essay.

These opportunities are not limited to Iran and Azerbaijan, for in a regional context the scope is extendable to include Armenia, Georgia, Russia, and Turkey. This is the same opportunity that has been presented in the framework of Iran's 3+3 plan and Turkey's similar

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proposal. The implementation of such a plan will both require and encourage a reduction of tensions and a lowering of the risk of a resumption of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, stabilizing the international border between the two countries, signing a mutual non-aggression treaty, and resolving disputes between Yerevan and Baku over the interpretation of Article 9 of the tripartite agreement. Undoubtedly, the starting point for cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the post-war period could be communication corridors, especially the revival of the Soviet-era railway lines in the South Caucasus region.

Iran can certainly contribute to a process of regional convergence in the South Caucasus. As I have already noted, Iran is the only neighboring country that has regular diplomatic relations with all three South Caucasus countries. And so, Iran is quite well-positioned to host a high-level meeting in a six-party (3+3) format. This should be seen as an advantageous capacity. I have no doubt that the hope and expectation of the nations concerned—including Iran, which has very close and historical ties with the South Caucasus—is the establishment of peace, stability, security, and development of the region. **BD**

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# The Challenges of Identity Politics in Iran

*Ramin Jabbarli*

In recent decades, identity has played a prominent role in politics across the globe. The world has witnessed a transition from mainly class-based to identity-based social movements. From civil rights and feminist movements in the West to the nationalist movements in the (former) Soviet Union, all were identity-oriented movements. Indeed, the rise of new social movements in the world is, in some sense, an extension of the rise of identity-oriented movements. Currently, even class grievances are problematized in the intersection of class and other collective identities such as race, ethnicity, religion, and citizenship status. Iran is not an exception in this trend. Precisely because of its ethnic and religious diversity, identity is that much more of an important factor in contemporary Iranian politics.

Collective identities are identities that are shared by members of a group. Generally, individuals have more than one collective identity and these can be based on religion, ethnicity, nationality, and so on. The strength and relative salience of each of these collective identities for an individual depends on many socio-political and contextual factors. While for some individuals, religious identity is the most important one, others may prefer to emphasize their ethnic identity over their national and religious ones. Studying various cases shows that when a group collectively engages in politics, its collective identity becomes politically relevant. Thus, in order to understand political and social movements in a society, it is crucial to investigate identity motives and their developments. Generally, individuals take part in collective actions as members of a group.

*Ramin Jabbarli is completing his doctorate in sociology at the University of Washington, Seattle, and has published widely on the identity and mobilization of ethnic minorities in Iran. His academic research focuses on ethnic conflict, identity, and social movements in autocratic regimes, with an emphasis on Iran and the Middle East.*

They weigh the costs and benefits of their action for the group to which they belong. This goes a long way towards explaining why answers to the question “who are we?” is important

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to take into consideration when examining issues related to the political participation of people.

Sociologists and social movement scholars have studied the causal relationship between group identification and mobilization. A leading figure in this burgeoning field, Bert Klandermans of Vrije University in Amsterdam, has delineated the causal relationship between group identification and mobilization in his numerous publications. His research indicates that a collective identity gains political relevance when it becomes the focus of a struggle for power—in other words, when the issue of collective identity becomes politicized. This struggle can focus on various things, like scarce resources, prestige, and political, cultural, or economic power. The involvement of social groups in a struggle on behalf of a collective group to change, alter, or defend a situation politicizes the relevant collective identity and makes that

identity more salient or more important for the group members. Then, this increased salience strengthens group identification and finally, strong group identifica-

tion results in a consensus over social movements' viewpoints and facilitates coordination for actions among members of a group.

Sometimes, the politicization of collective identities is just the beginning of a story. Its complexity can increase when different collective identities are in conflict. As noted above, individuals have multiple identities. However, shared grievances and the awareness of said grievances can make one identity more important than others.

Under some conditions, individuals may have dual identities—two salient identities—as when, for instance, both subordinate ethnic identity and superordinate national identity come to be important for individuals. Since there is a causal link between identity salience and political actions, having two salient identities leads to a complex political stance. This is mainly dependent on state policies: when people have dual identities, the outcome

may vary from integration—by keeping both identities—to developing a separatist identity, which means having a strong subgroup ethnic identity and relegating national identity to the sidelines.

Tracing these developments in Iran shows that the political implications of identity politics not only impact on the internal security of Iran but also reveals some of the country's geopolitical advantages and risks. Current ethnic relations in Iran, and their regional implications, cannot be understood without taking into account the development, salience, and historical context of the country's religious, national, and ethnic identities.

**E**thnic-Azerbaijani Turks in Iran—a group that comprises approximately one-third of Iran's population of 84 million—will be the main focus of this essay. Herein, I will begin by explaining the historical junctures and socio-political processes that have politicized collective identities before briefly discussing the geopolitical implications of politicized identities.

A note on language before proceeding: in this essay, the terms 'Azerbaijani Turks' and 'Azerbaijanis' and 'ethnic-Azerbaijanis' are used interchangeably. Unless noted otherwise, references to 'Azerbaijan' are to be understood to be referring to those parts of present-day north-west Iran that have been historically (and are presently) populated by ethnic-Azerbaijanis.

### *The Safavid Empire and Inclusive Identity*

**T**he sixteenth century was a turning point in the history of the peoples living under the Safavid empire. Although its inhabitants were predominantly Sunni, the founder of the Safavid dynasty, Shah Isma'il, in 1501 declared Shia sect of Islam as the empire's official religion and implemented policies

that converted almost the entire population to Shia Islam. This has had a long-lasting socio-political impact on Iranians, mainly due to its intense (and distinct) rituals. A religious sect needs intense rituals to hold people with different ethnic backgrounds

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together. A religion with intense and emotional rituals decreases inter-ethnic differences and increases similarities as members of a sectarian supra-identity—the Shia sect, in this case. Historically, religions with intense rituals impeded the disintegration of multiethnic empires by employing such

a mechanism. The major developments in Shia rituals happened under the Safavid empire. Most of the Shia-specific rituals that are related to the tragic battle of Karbala (fought in October 680) evolved and were promoted systematically in these years—that is to say, some nine centuries later.

Shia rituals played a significant role in maintaining Shia solidarity over the centuries. At present, 90-95 percent of the Iranian population is Shia. The religious identity of most Iranians is a legacy of the Safavid empire and the forced conversion from Sunni Islam to Shia Islam of the population under its control. The development of Shia rituals even continued after the collapse of the Safavid empire until 1925 and the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty.

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*Since the geography of Shia identity exceeds the borders of Iran, a strong religious supra-identity in the age of nation-states brings opportunities to have an impact on the citizens of other countries. This soft power is an important tool in Iran's geopolitical involvements.*

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The conversion to Shia Islam has had unintended consequences for society and the region. It allowed the multiethnic state of Iran to establish Shia Islam as a supra-identity to maintain social cohesion and hamper ethnic conflicts inside the country. It also brought some geo-

political advantages. Since the geography of Shia identity exceeds the borders of Iran, a strong religious supra-identity in the age of nation-states brings opportunities to have an impact on the citizens of other countries. This soft power is an important tool in Iran's geopolitical involvements.

### *Toward Exclusive Nationalism*

**T**he period of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) involved a shift from an inclusive religious identity to an exclusive Persian-centered nation-building project. It was under Pahlavi rule that inter-ethnic differences became more prominent and ethnic minorities



came to express openly their grievances. These grievances were then able to be turned into claims of various sorts. The culmination of this claims-seeking was the formation of the autonomous regions of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan in northwest Iran, which were in turn followed by brutal campaigns of suppression orchestrated by the political center of the country.

A comparison of Azerbaijanis' movements prior to and after the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925 demonstrates continuity in both the demands and grievances of ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran. Prior to 1925, Azerbaijanis mainly focused on demanding state decentralization and the establishment of a federative system. Although we can trace continuity in the demands of Azerbaijanis before and after the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, the exclusive nationalism of the Pahlavi regime also caused the emergence of new grievances. Each will be examined in turn.

Iranian Azerbaijan, and especially Tabriz, played a vanguard role in the Constitutional Revolution of Iran. One of the most important outcomes of the revolution for Azerbaijanis was the provincial committee. As Leiden University's Touraj Atabaki writes in *Azerbaijan: Ethnicity and Autonomy in Twentieth-Century Iran* (1993), "the role which Azerbaijanis played in urging the Majles to adopt the idea of provincial councils cannot be overestimated."

The Constitutional Revolution began in 1905 with a series of protests leading up to August 1906 when the Shah's government capitulated and conceded to convene a National Assembly (Majles). Shortly thereafter, in September 1906, the Council of Tabriz (Anjoman-e Tabriz) was founded in order to elect deputies for the National Assembly but soon became a regional parliament in its own right. The Supplementary Code, which established provincial and local councils, was ratified by Muhammad Ali Shah in October

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1907 and contained 122 articles on provincial and local committees' law. According to this, an *ayalat* or province was defined as being a part of the country that has its own central government and sub-provinces (*velayat*). In total, Iran was divided into four provinces, with Azerbaijan becoming one of these. The law went on to explain how provincial committees were to be formed, the election of deputies conducted, and the scope of these committees' authority in each province. Academic research points to the weight of national elements in Azerbaijan's committee. For instance, in his book, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran* (2011), prominent historical sociologist Nader Sohrabi argues that "newspapers, Assembly minutes, and memoirs clearly indicate that some kind of national organization of committees was in the making."

In June 1908, the Shah ordered a bombardment of the Majles in Tehran. A civil war between constitutionalists and royalists began, with most of the drama taking place in Tabriz. When news of the Majles bombardment reached Tabriz, the Council of Tabriz withheld the news from the public in order to muster and arm constitutionalist forces in the city against the royalists. From here, its forces

were led by one of the great figures of the Constitutional Revolution (and an ethnic Azerbaijani), Sattar Khan. In the course of the next 13 months, the constitutionalists were able to gain the upper hand in the civil war and force the Shah to make further concessions.

However, the Constitutional Revolution came to an inglorious end. With the help of the Russian Empire, the Shah managed to re-establish control over the country and stifled parliamentary politics. But the legacy of Azerbaijan's role in the Constitutional Revolution lived on in the memories of the intelligentsia and later activists like Shia cleric, parliamentarian, and political leader Mohammad Khatami. Here the veracity of the continuity thesis is clear: the role of Azerbaijan in calling for provincial councils—and its role in organizing and mounting the constitutional cause—are clear indications of the ideology of federalism and popular support for the cause.

Moreover, an examination of the short-lived Azadistan provincial state in Azerbaijan (it lasted from early 1920 and fell in September of the same year) demonstrates both the similarity and the continuity of the claims and demands in the movement as well. Although the dispute between Tehran and



Tabriz in this movement erupted over the treaty between Iran and Britain, the demands of the Azadistan movement were very similar to those of the constitutionalists of Azerbaijan as well as those of the Azerbaijani Democratic Party (ADP), an anti-Pahlavi party supported by the Soviet Union that ruled the Azerbaijan People's Government from November 1945 to December 1946 under the leadership of Jafar Pishevari. Decentralized governance was a common theme in the demands of all these movements.

In various writings, Ervand Abrahamian, a leading historian of modern Iran, argued that, as he put it in one publication, Khiyabani had complained that Azerbaijan “received neither fair parliamentary representation nor just budgetary allocations from the central governments.” Khiyabani was consistent with the idea of federalism. He wanted greater local autonomy for Azerbaijan within the framework of Iran, as indicated by his calls for provincial councils and his attempts to set up a local government.

Twenty years after the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, Azerbaijanis still had the same demands. An analysis of articles in *Azerbaijan*, the official mouthpiece of the ADP, as well as

various other documents from that era, makes it clear that the ADP movement represented a continuation of the same trend, albeit in a different political context: the articles published in various newspapers at the time support this continuity thesis. In the paragraphs that follow, I will refer to some of the characteristics. One difference between the ADP-led movement and the two prior movements—namely the constitutionalist one and the Azadistan one—is that the ADP placed greater emphasis on cultural autonomy, the right to be educated in the mother tongue, and making the Azerbaijani language an official language in Iran's Azerbaijan province.

The ADP strongly demanded a federative system or a provincial and sub-provincial committee. Here we can only make reference to the main threads of the arguments and demands made in outlets such as *Azerbaijan*, the ADP's official newspaper. First, democracy and freedom cannot be established in Iran without decentralizing power. Second, local self-governance is a right guaranteed by the Constitution. Third, references in the 1941 Atlantic Charter to self-determination apply to the rights of Azerbaijanis in Iran. Fourth, although self-determination is a “natural right,” the ADP does not

consider itself a secessionist party and self-determination is not necessarily equivalent to separatism and should not be understood as a call for the disintegration of the country. Fifth, examples like the United States, the Soviet Union, and Switzerland demonstrate that self-determination can strengthen the unity of a country.

Even today across Iran, there is a strong assumption among people that political change is not possible without the involvement of Iranian Azerbaijan. We see the same assumption in various articles found in the newspaper *Azerbaijan* in the period immediately following World War II. For instance, in an article that appeared in mid-September 1945, entitled “Azerbaijan Once Again Takes its Historic Burden,” the author refers

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to the role of Azerbaijan in political change and argues that the Freedom of Azerbaijan is necessary as a prior condition for this change. The ADP does not demand provincial governance merely for decreasing the power of the central government, ADP leaders also think that the provincial government will allow

them to preserve their culture and language, but also to get rid of internal colonization. In the same article, the ADP demands ethnic rights and by saying that “the other ethnicities are waiting to see our first step” considers Azerbaijan as a vanguard in demanding ethnic rights as well.

### *A New Grievance*

There is a significant difference between the constitutional revolution and the Khiyabani movement, on the one hand, and the ADP, on the other hand. In contrast to the first two, the ADP placed greater emphasis on cultural rights such as education in the mother language, the preservation of culture, and making the Azerbaijani language an official one in Iranian Azerbaijan. This shift in emphasis was mainly due to an increase in the cultural oppression of Azerbaijanis after the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran. Prior to this, minority ethnicities in Iran had not had to contend with an exclusivist version of Persian nationalism.

The transition to a modern state in Iran under the Pahlavi dynasty also coincided with the transition to exclusive Persian nationalism and Aryanist ideology in Iran, which used state power as a means to force the assimilation of non-Persian ethnicities. Prior to the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, ethnic groups were able to publish some newspapers in their mother tongues. We can see newspapers printed in the Azerbaijani language or bilingual newspapers (Azerbaijani-Persian) appearing in this period. Even the official organ of Khiyabani movement, *Tajaddod*, was a bilingual newspaper. Reza Shah's regime tried to create a monolithic Iranian nation based on the Persian language and culture. Thus, the ADP movement represented not only a struggle for provincial governance but was also a backlash against the frankly racist policies of Reza Shah that targeted the cultural heritages of non-Persian Iranians.

One indication of this backlash was the resumption of newspapers published (in whole or in part) in the Azerbaijani

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language during the ADP period. The official organ of the ADP, *Azerbaijan*, was a bilingual newspaper and from the newspaper's first issue, articles featuring discussions of cultural rights and education in the mother language were present, along those arguing for the need for the provincial government. Jafar Pishevari, the ADP's leader, considered language as the foundation of national identity. Indeed, Pishavari used the term "Iranian nations" in his speeches and complained about insufficient budgetary allocations for Azerbaijani culture. In one such speech, he asserted that a consequence of Reza Shah's coup had been the destruction of Azerbaijan's culture.

The resilience of the ADP in putting forward language demands can also be seen in its response to critiques by the *Tehran* newspaper. After *Tehran* accused the ADP of separatism because of its demands for Azerbaijani to gain official language status and for education to be conducted in this same language, in mid-September 1945 the ADP

responded with an article called "Mother Language." In this article, the ADP defended the right of Azerbaijani children to be educated exclusively in their mother tongue until grade three, arguing that Persian should be introduced into the curriculum thereafter and be taught alongside Azerbaijani. Explaining the pedagogical soundness of this approach, the article then went on to discuss the political importance of preserving the mother language before concluding that "a nation without its own language will be enslaved."

Universal education has been launched during in this period, too, whereas prior to the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, only 5 percent of the population had been literate. Although universal education has provided some opportunities in the process of exclusive nation-building, it had a double-edged impact on society. On the one hand, universal education had allowed the government to implement its forced assimilationist program in schools; on the other hand, universal education has made linguistic and ethnic differences more visible in society. The ban on language usage, which was and remains a main marker of ethnicity, significantly intensified subordinate ethnicities' perceptions of being discriminated against.

Banning non-Persian languages, economic and cultural discrimination against Azerbaijanis and other non-Persians, and the lack of fair political representation in the executive branch of government all resulted in the further politicization of the identities of Azerbaijanis and some other major ethnic groups. In the ADP's newspaper, *Azerbaijan*, numerous articles written during the rule of the Azerbaijan People's Government, which began in November 1945 and came to an end in December 1946, demanded an integrative policy toward non-Persian ethnicities (as opposed to an assimilationist policy) as central to the struggle to preserve their respective identities. Otherwise, numerous articles made clear, the ADP would be compelled to pursue a separatist identity project.

Along with increasing the pressure on various non-Persian ethnic groups, the Pahlavi regime also imposed new restrictions on clerics and religious groups; it also radically restricted the wearing of the hijab. In the decades that followed, clerics also developed their own set of grievances. Since control over the network of religious groups and mosques remained with the clerics, by the time the Pahlavi regime began to wobble, this network was able easily to facilitate mass mobilization against

the dynasty and take the lead in organizing what eventually became the Islamic Revolution.

The backlash against the Pahlavi regime's exclusive nation-building project was strong for at least two reasons. First, by excluding non-Persians from the nation-building project the regime politicized the identities of the major ethnic minorities. Second, the Pahlavi regime virtually abandoned the use of the supra-identity of Shiism without replacing it with a new inclusive supra-identity. This failure in exclusive nation-building resulted in the politicization and radicalization of aggrieved ethnic and religious groups. Thus, not only did ethnic identities become more prominent and more politicized over time as a result of rising ethnic grievances and the placement of barriers to the promotion of Shia identity, but these also triggered the involvement of aggrieved clerics in the struggle for political power.

And we all know the result: all these struggles and grievances, especially the active anti-Pahlavi regime involvement of clerics in Iran, finally led to the 1979 revolution. It was not by chance that right after the Islamic Revolution (in 1980) the Muslim People's Republic Party, a moderate party

associated with Azerbaijani Shia Islamic cleric Sayyid Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari, demanded decentralization and greater language rights along with others. The point is that ideological differences aside, a remarkable continuity can be traced in between various ethnic-Azerbaijani movements in Iran from the Constitutional Revolution onwards.

### *Inclusive Supra-identity Serving Exclusive Nationalism*

Iranians of different ideological, religious, and ethnic backgrounds were all involved in the processes leading up to the 1979 revolution. Virtually every major identity group had its own grievances against the Pahlavi regime and, in turn, incentives to join the movement to overthrow the dynasty. But ultimately, it was the movement spearheaded by Shia fundamentalists that emerged victorious. As soon as they consolidated power, they moved to eliminate opponents and rivals through various means.

The Islamic Revolution also had implications on issues having to do with collective identities. For instance, the Islamic revolutionaries made use of a wide range of

propaganda tools at their disposal to revive Shiism as the official and overarching identity of the country, which effectively encompassed the ethnically diverse, yet religiously homogeneous society. They also declared Islamic solidarity as the main principle of

their foreign policy. Yet, as Brenda Shaffer aptly put it in the inaugural re-launched edition of *Baku Dialogues*, "Tehran almost always puts pragmatic interests above ideology in instances where Islamic solidarity conflicts with primary geopolitical interests."

The revolution also had a consequential impact on national and ethnic identities. Although the Islamic regime had denounced the nationalist account of the Pahlavi regime, in practice the doctrine of Persian supremacy has remained untouched. The country's ethnic minorities continued to suffer from economic, cultural, and political discriminations in the wake of the 1979 revolution. Moreover, the provisions regarding ethnic equality and language rights contained in the Islamic Republic's

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constitution have never been implemented in practice.

Despite all this, revolutionary Iran was able to manage, for a time, the ethnic grievances of predominantly Shia ethnicities through the promotion of Shia Islam as the country's most salient

identity. Unlike the Sunni sect, the Shia one has a greater capability to unite its believers and to strengthen their sense of Shia solidarity. This strength stems from Shia's intense, repetitive, emotional, and collectively practiced rituals. Practicing intense religious rituals turns these into a most salient collective identity. Under this condition, ethnic minorities with a strong sense of Shia identity may find they are able to disregard ethnic discriminations, at least to a certain extent. In addition to this, promoting religious identity as the most salient identity in a modern nation-state paves the way towards covert ethnic domination. One reason that after the Islamic Revolution Persian supremacy continued relatively undetected is because it was nested below the country's Shia identity. This situation has made the

boundaries of dominant Persian ethnicity less visible, eased domination due to lack of strong awareness, and finally perpetuated ethnic discrimination. However, the trend may change when the level of religiosity declines, when events question the authenticity of religious solidarity, or when religious identity comes into conflict with other collective identities.

### *The Islamic Solidarity Principle in Action*

It was no accident that Iran used religious rather than nationalistic rhetoric to mobilize Iranians during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, which lasted from 1980 to 1988. During that war, countless individuals of discriminated ethnic backgrounds, particularly Azerbaijanis, sacrificed their lives on the frontline to defend Iran. Given that ethnic minority groups comprise over 50 percent of Iran's population, and that each group experiences various forms of discrimination, the war itself played a significant role in creating interethnic solidarity.

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Under the Islamic Republic, Shia Islam has been promoted as the country's umbrella identity to which people are expected to adhere. Additionally, the Iranian regime has continually declared "Islamic solidarity" as its principal foreign policy approach. Such a policy allowed for salient religious identity to transcend the boundaries of ethnic identity and, therefore, hamper ethnic grievances. In fact, because Iran is a predominantly Shiite country (90 to 95 percent), the strength and popularity of Shiite Islamic belief have effectively spilled into the concept of Iranian national identity, thereby strengthening the sense of belonging to Iran.

Although the Islamic Republic of Iran professes Islamic solidarity as the main principle in its foreign policy, the regime has been very selective in applying it in practice. For instance, not only has Iran remained silent with respect to the tragic plight of China's Uyghur minority—a Turkic ethnic group whose members traditionally

professes Islam and resides mostly in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—but has also recently signed a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with China. In the case of the Chechens in Russia, the principle of Islamic solidarity has not been practiced, either.

Indeed, what Iran has been doing is best described as using Islam as a tool of soft power in various Near Eastern countries, putting it in the service of achieving geopolitical objectives. Especially through the promotion of Shia identity among Shias in the Near East, Iran has been trying to transform local Shia identities into a supra-identity. As discussed above, unlike Sunni identity, Shia identity has a greater capability of becoming the most salient identity. It is no coincidence that one of Iran's main cultural initiatives in the Near East involves encouraging Shias to practice intense rituals. Iran supports and facilitates practicing these rituals among the Shia communities in many countries, including Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Lebanon—and even among minority Shias in predominantly Sunni Saudi Arabia.

Iran knows full well that these rituals can create barriers to the integration of Shia communities into the respective national identities of the countries in which they

reside whilst at the same time facilitating solidarity with the main Shia country, namely Iran. In general, the function of these seemingly non-political cultural programs is to prepare a social base for Iran's potential presence and intervention—not Islamic solidarity. The main reason is that Iran mostly uses Shia communities living in predominantly Sunni countries to execute its geopolitical ambitions.

For instance, Iran's Lebanon policy is one of the main obstacles to the integration of Shia Lebanese into the national identity of Lebanon. The network of Iran's proxies in predominantly Muslim countries such as Yemen, Iraq, and Syria also demonstrate that the function of salient Shia supra-identity consists in using local Shia communities for Iran's geopolitical interests.

### *The Case of the Karabakh Conflict*

Yet another example of Iran's identity politics can be seen through the lens of the First and Second Karabakh Wars. During the latter, waves of protests by Azerbaijani Turks took place across Iran due to Tehran's perceived support for Armenia. Demands included that the border with Armenia be closed. Although Iran maintains



an officially neutral stance with respect to recognizing Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and its Islamic solidarity principle, nevertheless it has upheld good relations with Armenia over the past three decades and has supported Yerevan, *inter alia*, by allowing its territory to be used by Russia for transporting military supplies to Armenia. Even back in 1992, there were demonstrations against the Iranian regime's Karabakh policy in cities like Tabriz, Urmia, and Tehran.

Primarily due to geopolitical concerns and its concerns about the possibility of the domino effect Azerbaijan's independence could produce on their co-ethnics inside Iran, Tehran has tended to lean towards Yerevan. Such concerns are nothing new. Historical documents suggest that similar concerns were raised following the establishment of the short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic on 28 May 1918. An independent Azerbaijan has always been conceived as a potential threat to Iranian national security. The Iranian regime has preferred to see the

Republic of Azerbaijan mired in problems, which reduces its attractiveness to co-ethnics in Iran. This is a policy designed to deter the inspiring effect of independence on aggrieved Azerbaijanis in Iran.

The Iranian regime's hope for internal solidarity has not been very successful. In contrast to Tehran's hopes, its foreign policy approach has weakened the sense of belonging to the Iranian national identity among ethnic-Azerbaijanis in the country. This has happened primarily because Iran's Karabakh policy was inconsistent with its acclaimed foreign policy principle of Islamic solidarity. Iran has mostly refrained from expressing Islamic solidarity towards the Republic of Azerbaijan, which is also a predominantly Shia nation. The result has been a feeling of betrayal by ethnic-

Azerbaijanis in Iran towards the central ruling authority in Tehran.

Such an attitude has not only decreased the resonance of Iran's Islamic discourse among its Azerbaijani citizens but also damaged the salience of the country's overarching religious

collective identity. Indeed, the third wave of a survey dataset known as Values and Attitudes of Iranians (2015) clearly demonstrates a trend of declining religiosity in Iran. According to this data, 66 percent of Iranians believe that people within the country have become less religious today as compared to five years ago and will become even less religious in the next five years. The percentage of decline in religiosity for Azerbaijanis in Iran is higher than Iran's national average, standing at 70 percent. Of course, state control over religious affairs contributed to the increasing subjective secularization as well. Studies on different cases suggest that state control over religion decreases religiosity. Overall, the failure of Iran's identity politics has crucial implications for Iran because it paves the way for the salience of ethnic-Azerbaijani identity in the country.

The First Karabakh War was an external shock to Iran because it unveiled the regime's exclusive Persian nationalist nature that had been covered by a collective Shia identity. This raised more awareness of ethnic discrimination. Only 39 percent of Azerbaijanis in Iran, according to the aforementioned dataset, say that the state does not discriminate against ethnic minorities. Once one of Iran's most loyal

ethnic minorities, Azerbaijanis Turks have gradually become increasingly disillusioned. Awareness of ethnic inequality and discrimination in the context of declining religiosity is accelerating ethnic cleavages among Azerbaijanis in Iran. Recent developments show that the salient Azerbaijani identity translates into action. Despite state repression, the level of expressed solidarity of Azerbaijanis in Iran with the Republic of Azerbaijan is unprecedented.

The Second Karabakh War ignited waves of protests from dissidents within neighboring Iran, where Azerbaijani Turks comprise approximately one-third of its population. Protests took place in various cities in both Iran's northwestern provinces and Tehran. From its onset, Iranian authorities arrested hundreds of ethnic-Azerbaijanis peacefully protesting Russian military aid to Armenia and Iran's support of Armenia. In the last year, Azerbaijanis' focus in Iran was on protesting Iran's Karabakh policy and expressing solidarity with Azerbaijanis in the Republic of Azerbaijan. According to human rights reports, in the last year, 87 percent of arrested Azerbaijanis were detained because of their participation in protests related to Karabakh. Some of the arrestees were reportedly

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tortured and beaten by both police and intelligence officers.

The forced assimilationist policies by the Iranian government and discrimination against minorities, on the one hand, and the decline of religiosity in Iran, on the other hand, have not only politicized ethnic-Azerbaijani identity in Iran but also radicalized Azerbaijanis' identity decision. In addition to these factors, the victory of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War has increased the level of the ethnic pride of Azerbaijanis in Iran. People tend to identify themselves more with a collective identity of which they are proud. All these factors may augment ethnic mobilization because the increased salience of Azerbaijani identity strengthens their identification as Azerbaijanis rather than Shias or Iranians, and, finally, strong group identification leads to a consensus over Azerbaijani social movements' viewpoints and facilitates coordination for collective action.

Although the Shia supra-identity may have some advantages for Iran in its regional politics, the Azerbaijani identity poses challenges to internal Iranian security through questioning the nature and authenticity of the national and Shia identities. Under this condition, the salience of Azerbaijani identity can be consequential for Iran, particularly at critical moments such

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as those involving political turmoil or when the central government is weak. Furthermore, Azerbaijani Turks are the only non-Persian ethnic groups that live in both peripheral and central regions of Iran. The geographical proximity to the center of power increases Azerbaijanis' potential impact on political processes. Thus, aggrieved Azerbaijanis with their salient identity and weaker ties to the country's other ethnic groups can pursue their own political goals when conditions are favorable.

During the post-Second Karabakh War period, the liberation of the occupied territories revived even further the ethnic-Azerbaijani

movement in Iran. On 24 July 2021, for example, following calls by civil society activists and ethnic-Azerbaijani opposition parties, a protest rally of ethnic Azerbaijanis was held in Tabriz in solidarity with Arab groups upset with the diverting of water from predominantly Arab-populated Khuzestan province's rivers to the predominantly Persian-populated provinces in the central regions of Iran. In addition to expressing support for Arabs in Iran, Azerbaijanis were also demanding their own ethnic rights and were protesting what they perceived as the regime's economic, cultural, and political discrimination against them. For the first time in decades, during this protest ethnic-Azerbaijanis expressed their wish to establish a national government within the framework of the Iranian state by chanting slogans such as "Freedom, Justice, National Government." Empowered by the confidence and pride earned by their ethnic kin in the Second Karabakh War, ethnic-Azerbaijanis in Iran appear to be reacting more frequently to their general exclusion from the executive branch of the Iranian state and experienced discrimination.

Moreover, for the moment it seems that the new government is more ethnically and politically exclusive than the previous one; and

in the latest presidential election, even members of the political elite considered close to the Supreme Leader, such as his adviser Ali Larijani, were not allowed to run for the presidency. The ethnocentric trend is an important development and may have longer-term political implications for the country. Growing opposition among political elites is almost a prerequisite for successful change in autocracies. Given the increasing number of excluded elites, the odds of cleavage and tension among political elites is likely to increase in the time ahead. As such, the political activism of Azerbaijanis, at both the center and the periphery, could be regarded as a political opportunity by various political groups. It seems that in the post-election environment ethnic identities will remain politized as well. The new president, Ebrahim Raisi, is said to have played a repressive role in the post-1979 period. Since signs of change in the regime's policies toward ethnic groups have not yet made their appearance, maintaining a continuity of policy is likely to result in a more active approach by ethnic-Azerbaijanis and other minorities in the context of the salience of their respective identities in Iranian politics. BD



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