

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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Heydar Aliyev and the Building of Azerbaijani Statehood

Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr

Heydar Aliyev, nation affirmer and state builder, was among the most significant statesmen of his era. Of humble origins in a place distant from Baku, he gained early prominence within his native Azerbaijan and then rose quickly in the Soviet hierarchy during the late 1960s. By the 1980s he was among the leading power players in Moscow and decisionmakers of the Soviet Union. This experience was crucial when he returned to lead his native Azerbaijan in the 1990s in far from ideal circumstances. Thanks to his strategic thinking and ability to chart a complex path among national, regional, and world leaders, Heydar Aliyev set Azerbaijan firmly on the track that led it to become the successful middle power it is today.

Svante E. Cornell is Director of the American Foreign Policy Council's Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and co-founder of the Stockholm-based Institute for Security and Development Policy. S. Frederick Starr is Chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Distinguished Fellow for Eurasia at the American Foreign Policy Institute. The views expressed herein are their own.

The Soviet Era

In July 1969, Heydar Aliyev acceded to the post of First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, marking the beginning of his remarkable domination of the republic's political scene, which, with only a brief interlude, would last for more than three decades. Heydar Aliyev was born to a modest family in Nakhchivan in 1923, graduating from the local Pedagogical Institute at the young age of sixteen. He made a career in the Azerbaijani security services, beginning with the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, and joined the Communist Party in 1945.

Aliyev rose rapidly through the ranks, becoming deputy head of the Azerbaijani branch of the KGB

in 1964. His more specific activities in the security services, and indeed, throughout the Soviet period, are the subject of much speculation. Unfortunately, answers to most questions pertaining to this formative period of his career will

be gained only when the Russian government reopens Soviet-era archives, as it began to do after 1991 but then reversed course and closed them again. This, more than anything else, accounts for the fact that an authoritative biography of this foundational figure has yet to appear.

Many sources point to Heydar Aliyev's work in the KGB's Eastern Division, whose jurisdiction included Iran (where he may have worked during the short-lived, Soviet-backed "Azerbaijan People's Republic") and the Middle East. After a stint as head of the Azerbaijani KGB, he was elevated to the rank of head of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan. Nor did Aliyev's rise end there. In 1976, he became a candidate member of the Politburo in Moscow, the highest decisionmaking authority in the

Thanks to his strategic thinking and ability to chart a complex path among national, regional, and world leaders, Heydar Aliyev set Azerbaijan firmly on the track that led it to become the successful middle power it is today.

Soviet Union. By then, he was considered so necessary and effective in Azerbaijan that he was asked to continue in his position in Azerbaijan. When Yuri Andropov succeeded Leonid Brezhnev as Soviet leader in 1982, Aliyev became a

full member of the Politburo and a deputy prime minister of the Soviet Union—the third-highest position in the Soviet empire. A close associate of Andropov, Aliyev retained his high-ranking positions until 1987, when Mikhail Gorbachev, as part of his efforts under perestroika to recentralize power, rein in the national republics, and eliminate potential rivals, removed Aliyev from power.

Two aspects of Aliyev's Soviet career proved of key importance to the building of modern Azerbaijan. First, during his time as the head of the Communist Party, Aliyev actively facilitated the national revival that was germinating in Azerbaijan; second, his experience at the USSR's highest levels provided him with a crucial understanding of regional and world politics, which he was to apply to the

task of building Azerbaijan's place in the world during the 1990s up until his death in 2003.

At first sight, it would appear unlikely that a Communist Party leader with a past in the security services would tolerate, much less facilitate, a national revival. But the time during which Aliyev was most active in Soviet politics was a very peculiar one. The Brezhnev era was a time of relative stability and calm, following the upheavals of the Stalin and Khrushchev periods. Stalin's reign in particular, as everyone knows, had been characterized by war and terror: in Azerbaijan, the country's Stalinist-era leader, Mir Jafar Baghirov, had gone so far as to launch a massive campaign to destroy the literary and cultural *intelligentsia* of the country and thereby eradicate the collective memory of the Azerbaijani people.

Thanks to his close relations with key figures in Moscow, Aliyev

probably enjoyed more governing leeway and Azerbaijan more internal autonomy than existed in most of the other Soviet republics at that (or any other) time in the history of the Soviet Union. The manner in which he harnessed this autonomy reflected his personal priorities and, increasingly, those of Azerbaijan.

Two aspects of Aliyev's Soviet career proved of key importance to the building of modern Azerbaijan. First, during his time as the head of the Communist Party, Aliyev actively facilitated the national revival that was germinating in Azerbaijan; second, his experience at the USSR's highest levels provided him with a crucial understanding of regional and world politics.

Baghirov's tenure had led to the suppression and deaths of large numbers of writers, musicians, and artists. During Aliyev's reign, Soviet agencies in Azerbaijan relaxed their pressure on the *intelligentsia*, allowing greater creative freedom to writers and academics. This gave rise to the rebirth of patriotic literature in the Azerbaijani language, and to an impressive revival of the Azerbaijani *intelligentsia* overall. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, literature with strong national-patriotic overtones was being openly published in official journals issued by the Azerbaijani Union of Writers. Leaders of the 1918-1920 Azerbaijan People's Republic, including Mehmedemin Rasulzade,

were posthumously rehabilitated. As historian Audrey Altstadt observed in *The Azerbaijani Turks* (1992), this was no mere oversight; rather, it bore "the marks of a coordinated and conscious effort." As she concludes, "because Aliyev cannot be regarded as weak, uninformed, lax, or obtuse, it can be supposed that he permitted, perhaps encouraged, this upsurge of national self-investigation, this exploration of historic identity, and this expression of national pride."

Other recent accounts have gone further. In a rare and largely approving biography of Aliyev published in 2000, Turkish journalist Irfan Ülkü affirmed that Aliyev consciously acted as a protector of the emerging Azerbaijani *intelligentsia*. Ülkü, who spent time with Aliyev in 1991 in Nakhchivan, argues that Aliyev conducted his work informed by an explicit intention of ensuring that Azerbaijanis took control of their own republic, whose institutions through most of the Soviet era up to that point had been controlled by members of other ethnicities or nationalities. This is in fact precisely what Aliyev did. As historian Tadeusz Swietochowski notes

Heydar Aliyev's tenure during the Soviet era proved critical to laying the foundations for modern Azerbaijani statehood.

in *Russia and Azerbaijan* (1995), Aliyev "consolidated the native *no-menklatura* [...] of his thirty-five chief clients and protégés, almost all were ethnic Azerbaijanis."

In the process of making these changes, Heydar Aliyev gained in both self-confidence and effectiveness. With time, he felt sufficiently secure to make symbolic gestures to Azerbaijani nationhood that were widely noticed and appreciated. Aliyev continued the process of reclaiming Azerbaijani history, now fully rehabilitating Nariman Narimanov—the first Soviet ethnic-Azerbaijani leader of the Azerbaijan SSR who had been posthumously condemned in the 1930s for his alleged nationalism.

He also brought back to Azerbaijan the remains of Huseyn Javid, a great Azerbaijani poet who had fallen victim to the 1937 purges and died in 1941 in a remote part of Siberia. Aliyev's senior position in the Soviet hierarchy did not carry with it the right to speak on foreign affairs, but in November 1982 Aliyev nonetheless boldly announced to foreign journalists, including Richard Owen of *The Times*, that he hoped for the eventual reunification of northern

and southern Azerbaijan (the latter a reference to majority ethnic-Azerbaijani lands then and now ruled by the Islamic Republic of Iran).

Thus, Heydar Aliyev's tenure during the Soviet era proved critical to laying the foundations for modern Azerbaijani statehood. This becomes clear if Azerbaijan's trajectory is briefly compared with that of Central Asian states. It is true that Azerbaijan, unlike its Central Asian neighbors, had succeeded in achieving independent statehood in 1918. But in other respects, their Soviet experiences had been roughly similar. Like Azerbaijan, they had been assigned the task of supplying raw materials to the Soviet command economy and were subjected to efforts of russification, which particularly targeted the national elites and intellectuals. In spite of these parallels, Azerbaijan developed a much more robust national movement during the 1980s, which culminated in the emergence of the Azerbaijan Popular Front in 1988. And while its establishment was triggered by the emerging conflict with Armenia over the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and related issues, the reassertion of suppressed Azerbaijani identity began in the 1970s and flourished under Aliyev during the 1980s.

As we have seen, Heydar Aliyev's Soviet-era career remains the subject of much speculation and uncertainty, particularly as it pertains to the power politics in Moscow in the mid-1980s and the role Aliyev played in the fading years of the USSR. Until the Soviet archives are again made accessible to historians, however, a deeper account of this period is not possible. Still, it is clear that Aliyev developed an acute understanding of regional and global geopolitics during his years in the top leadership of the Soviet Union. This is perhaps best illustrated by Aliyev's reaction when U.S. President Bill Clinton dispatched former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski to Baku in 1995. It is said that in this conversation, Aliyev recalled how Brzezinski had deeply frustrated Soviet leaders during Jimmy Carter's presidency, fondly reminiscing about the times when the two statesmen had been on opposite sides of the Cold War.

Nakhchivan Interlude

As will be discussed below, Aliyev was successful in translating his geopolitical experience at the helm of a superpower to the needs of a small and nearly failed state that had just lost a war, which was Azerbaijan's condition

when he returned to lead it in the summer of 1993. Before examining Heydar Aliyev's return to lead Azerbaijan, however, a word is in order concerning his brief return to his native Nakhchivan, which writer-adventurer Thomas Goltz eloquently described in his memoir *Azerbaijan Diary* (1998).

After his fall from grace in 1987, Aliyev remained in Moscow for some time, but moved back to his native Nakhchivan in 1990. What triggered his return was the bloody Soviet crackdown on peaceful protesters in Baku on 20 January 1990. Aliyev made a public statement in Moscow condemning the crackdown—an unprecedented act for someone of his political background—and subsequently left the Soviet capital. It was from the remote vantage point of his hometown that Aliyev contemplated his return to the political stage in Baku.

Once back in Nakhchivan, Aliyev was elected to Azerbaijan's Supreme Soviet in 1990 and then elected to head Nakhchivan's provincial assembly (the latter made him *ex officio* Deputy Speaker of Azerbaijan's Supreme Soviet). This occurred despite the growing conflict between Aliyev and the last Soviet-era Azerbaijani leader, Ayaz Mutalibov, who had been appointed by Moscow immediately

following the brutal suppression of the Baku uprising in January 1990. During the chaotic period of the USSR's terminal decline, neither Mutalibov in Baku nor the Soviet authorities in Moscow were able to exert power over Nakhchivan—an exclave located between Armenia and Iran, with a short border with Türkiye but none with mainland Azerbaijan.

The first year of Azerbaijan's renewed independence saw chaos in Baku that was caused by the struggle for power between Mutalibov's government and the rising Popular Front, led by Soviet-era dissident and pan-Turkic nationalist Abulfaz Elchibey. This took place just as the conflict with Armenia escalated to full-scale war. However, Heydar Aliyev did not get involved in the politicking in Baku. Instead, he basically governed the newly renamed Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic independently, conducting feverish diplomacy with both Iran and Türkiye. His efforts to build relations with Tehran helped provide Nakhchivan with a secure source of Iranian natural gas. Even more consequential were his efforts to develop relations with Türkiye. One of the first matters to which Ankara gave attention following the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence was to rebuild the bridge connecting Türkiye with

Nakhchivan, the only actual border between Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Aliyev's efforts ensured that this bridge would henceforth be able to support the weight of tanks—a less than subtle indication to Yerevan that Ankara might involve itself directly in any Armenian attempt to expand the conflict to Nakhchivan.

Aliyev's efforts soon paid off: Turkish President Suleyman Demirel and Aliyev struck up a positive relationship that developed rapidly thereafter. Demirel soon concluded that the chaotic bickering in Baku had to end: he began urging Aliyev to return to the Azerbaijani capital, at the same time urging now-President Elchibey to invite Aliyev to return.

On 9 June 1993, Heydar Aliyev landed in Baku on board a Turkish government jet made available by Demirel. The conditions for his return to mainland Azerbaijan were not auspicious: a renegade Russian-supported military commander named Surat Huseynov had recently deserted the frontline in the war with Armenia, proceeded to barricade himself and his forces in their headquarters in Ganja, Azerbaijan's second-largest city. The site had recently been vacated by Russian military forces. These Russian troops had hastily departed their premises six months ahead

of their scheduled withdrawal, without notifying the Azerbaijani government, but leaving behind large supplies of armaments. Their intention was clear: to back Huseynov's uprising and thereby bring an end to the nationalist but inept Elchibey-led government.

Indeed, soon enough, Huseynov's forces began advancing on Baku unopposed, as the regular army melted away. (To his immense credit, Elchibey left Baku for his own native village, also in Nakhchivan, thus leaving the reins of national leadership to Aliyev.) But Heydar Aliyev managed to forestall this Russian-led coup attempt. Elected Speaker of the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet, he succeeded in striking a deal whereby coup-maker Huseynov was appointed prime minister whilst retaining the highest office in the land for himself. Less than a year later, Aliyev would, in dramatic fashion, publicly expose Huseynov's coup attempt against himself. This led to Huseynov's abrupt departure for Moscow, where he hoped to drum up support from his Russian backers.

Heydar Aliyev's Nakhchivan interlude is of central importance, representing both the culmination of his past and the gateway to his future. It signified his final break

with Moscow and demonstrated the elder statesman's uncanny ability to regroup and refocus his energies on new challenges of statecraft. It also caused him to develop a vision of Azerbaijan's foreign relations that relied heavily on kindred Türkiye but also sought normal relations with Iran and, most importantly, saw Azerbaijan's substantive independence from Russia as the lodestar of its foreign relations.

Building Independence

On 1 August 1997, and as cameras flashed, a beaming Heydar Aliyev stood next to U.S. President Bill Clinton in the White House. The contrast between this celebratory moment and the extremely fraught time only four years earlier, when he returned to Baku, was astonishing. In less than four years, Heydar Aliyev had consolidated power in Azerbaijan and survived at least two serious coup attempts. He had eradicated or incorporated the various militias that had formed in the early 1990s, thereby restoring the government's monopoly over the use of force. He had also tabled the conflict with Armenia by agreeing to a ceasefire in May 1994. Later that same year, he had struck a mammoth agreement with multinational oil

companies that was quickly dubbed the "Contract of the Century." And, as the photo-op with Clinton showed, Aliyev had placed Azerbaijan on the world map, benefiting from the country's critical geographical location and energy resources to make it a serious regional player: a sovereign and engaged subject of international politics and not just an object to be manipulated by outside forces.

The consolidation of power was itself a huge task: in late 1993, Azerbaijan did not have a proper constitution or a modern parliament, operating on the basis of Soviet-era documents and *ad hoc* arrangements. Aliyev was elected to the presidency in 1993, and a new Constitution, adopted in 1995, laid the ground for a political system heavily dominated by the executive branch. More concerning during the early years of Aliyev's return to Baku was the erosion of the state's monopoly over the use of force, which had been caused by the power of armed militias that had proliferated during the First Karabakh War. While these units fought the common enemy, they also engaged in organized crime and smuggling, and even vied for power in the capital. Not only did Aliyev have to contend with Huseynov's forces, but in 1995 he had to deal with a poorly integrated faction within the

Ministry of Internal Affairs that had planned an attempt on the president's life. By decisively dealing with two (perhaps more) coup attempts, Aliyev managed to do away with armed challengers to the state and to his own tenure as president.

A key to Heydar Aliyev's success was his understanding of the importance of external legitimacy, which he advanced by prudently managing the competing interests of foreign powers. In this effort, he shrewdly utilized Azerbaijan's oil reserves as an instrument of foreign policy. He built the unprecedented oil consortium mainly with Western multinationals, including American companies such as Amoco, Unocal, Exxon, and Pennzoil, as well as European companies like Norway's Statoil and the consortium's operator, British Petroleum (the latter's share doubled after its acquisition of Amoco in 1998). He also looked further afield, inviting Japanese, Turkish, and Saudi interests to join. In a measure to placate Russian objections to the deal, Aliyev

even divided Azerbaijan's own 20 percent share and provided half of that to Russia's Lukoil, thereby deftly driving a wedge between Russian energy interests and the Russian hawks that aimed to kill the deal. Aliyev's only failure was with Iran. He initially promised Tehran a symbolic 5 percent share of the consortium, but U.S. pressure eventually forced him to renege on this, at great diplomatic cost to himself. However, when the Shah Deniz gas consortium was developed several years later, Aliyev ensured that Iran's national oil company obtained a 10 percent share of that project.

Problems with Armenia did not end with the 1994 ceasefire agreement that ended the First Karabakh War. Unresolved also was the problem of international opinion, which in the early stages of the conflict had been massively pro-Armenian. This resulted from the international influence of the Armenian diaspora and also Azerbaijan's inexperience at strategic communication—particularly

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with Western audiences. However, Armenia's overreach and its ethnic cleansing of close to one million Azerbaijanis living within the borders of Armenia and in the former NKAO and adjoining districts of Azerbaijan allowed Baku to being to turn the tables. By 1996, Azerbaijan achieved a major diplomatic victory: at the OSCE's Lisbon summit, Baku gained support for basic principles for the resolution of the conflict that affirmed Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. However, the OSCE being a consensus-based organization, Armenia used its opposition to veto the project. Nonetheless, the OSCE issued a rare Chairman's statement that supported a solution based on the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, with appropriate self-government for the ethnic-Armenians of the former NKAO. This was supported by all OSCE participating states, except Armenia. Yerevan's diplomatic position never recovered from this setback.

The Karabakh crisis did not end with this announcement by the OSCE. After more than two decades of failed negotiations, Heydar

Aliyev's successor, his son Ilham Aliyev, would eventually resort in 2020 to military means to resolve that conflict. The fact that both key Western powers and Russia met the onset and outcome of the Second Karabakh War with relative indifference testifies to the degree that Azerbaijan had managed to shift international opinion on the conflict and neutralize Armenia's advantage. The foundations for this shift had been set by Heydar Aliyev's government in 1996. A year later, Armenia's President Levon Ter-Petrosyan had declared that Armenia had to sue for peace, for its position would only weaken over time. Unfortunately for Armenia, Ter-Petrosyan was overthrown in 1997, and replaced by a hardline government with leaders hailing from the former NKAO itself. But events in 2020 validated Ter-Petrosyan's conclusion.

What Aliyev Left Undone

Heydar Aliyev's achievements, of course, did not come for free. Whether by default or design, he left at least three major matters

Heydar Aliyev's achievements, of course, did not come for free. Whether by default or design, he left at least three major matters unaddressed and unresolved.

unaddressed and unresolved. First, down to his death in 2003, Heydar Aliyev had to accept the fact that Armenia, albeit with substantial backing from Russia, had militarily defeated Azerbaijan's forces in 1994. He sought repeatedly to achieve a negotiated solution to the conflict that respected Azerbaijan's red lines as he defined them, in order not to leave this critical issue unresolved for his successor to handle. When in 1999 he acquiesced to an American-led peace proposal involving a land swap, it resulted in the resignation of three close aides. The deal never came to pass, as a result of a likely Russian-orchestrated killing of the Armenian leadership through an act of terror in the Armenian parliament in November 1999. Still, Aliyev did not give up the quest for peace. In 2002 he sought to revive talks with Ter-Petrosyan's successor, Robert Kocharyan: he offered the full restoration of economic relations for the return of four of Azerbaijan's Armenia-occupied districts. In spite of this major concession, Yerevan refused. As a result, addressing the country's main foreign policy problem was left to Ilham Aliyev. Only in 2020, thanks to Ilham Aliyev's diplomatic acumen and the transformation of Azerbaijan's military, did Azerbaijan emerge victorious,

having secured the restoration of Azerbaijani control over more territories than a negotiated settlement would likely have yielded. However, victory came at a great cost in human lives on both sides.

Second, Heydar Aliyev did not manage to finalize the institutionalization of power in Azerbaijan that he had initiated. In most post-Soviet countries, the transition to independence led to the emergence of powerbrokers who merged their informal political and economic power in ways that would prove highly detrimental to political and economic development, and also highly resistant to change. Azerbaijan was no exception, and in many ways a prime example of this phenomenon. In Azerbaijan's case, these oligarchs and masters of intrigue even colluded with foreign powers to undermine presidential authority and thus compromise Azerbaijan's independence. For the most part, Heydar Aliyev's personal authority held these informal powerbrokers in check, but initially, several of them covertly refused to accept the authority of his successor. Indeed, only through a series of deft, methodical campaigns that took place between 2004 and 2015 (with a few even extending into the present) did Ilham Aliyev succeed in removing such challenges to state authority.

Third, Heydar Aliyev's presidential term was accompanied by a resolute centralization of power. While this brought an end to the raucous and disorderly politics of the early 1990s, Western observers began to complain of weakened electoral processes, local government, and certain individual rights. To be sure, both then and now few Azerbaijanis would desire a return to the politics of that period, which most remember as a period of chaos and deprivation, a time when Azerbaijan lost important parts of its territory, and an era of developmental abeyance. Since then, criticism of Azerbaijan's governance model has given rise to persistent friction with some of its Western partners and—perhaps most important—delayed the full development of its political culture, civil society, and media.

The Foundations of a Middle Power

During the 1990s, the South Caucasus saw the emergence of three states with very different approaches to international relations. Armenia made what amounted to a pact with the devil by accepting Russia's abrogation of its sovereignty as a price worth paying for the control over the

former NKAO and Azerbaijan's seven surrounding districts it had occupied during the First Karabakh War. However, this victory proved pyrrhic, for in 2020 Armenia's refusal to compromise resulted in fundamental losses. Defeat on the battlefield left it with less territory under its control than it would have obtained in any imaginable pre-2020 negotiated settlement with Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Armenia had isolated itself from major regional infrastructure projects that have developed over the past three decades. Today, Armenia is belatedly seeking to escape Moscow's influence, but Russian ownership of major assets in the Armenian economy, its major military presence that includes basing and border control rights, and its informal influence over the country's politics and administration makes this a formidable task—to say the least.

In many ways, Georgia followed the opposite path. Faced with enormous pressure from Russia, it bet hard on relations with the West—particularly on protection from the United States. But in August 2008, Moscow called this bluff and invaded Georgia, asserting effective control over two breakaway provinces and dealing a serious blow to Georgia's

sovereignty and territorial integrity. The country survived, but Russia succeeded to a significant degree in breaking its spirit. Notwithstanding its parliamentary politics, Georgia is now effectively controlled by an oligarch who runs the country from behind the scenes: his desire to preserve his own political and economic interests has led him and his government increasingly to distance Georgia from the West whilst professing an ongoing desire to join both the EU and NATO.

Azerbaijan, by contrast, sought a third way: to build independence by relying on its own resources, independent of any single foreign actor. Heydar Aliyev set the course for Azerbaijan to become a regional “middle power” or “keystone state.” While this strategy was greatly facilitated by the country’s advantageous geography and natural resources, it benefited in equal measure from the stability of its foreign policy and the steadiness with which the government advanced it. While Ilham Aliyev refined this approach and

adapted it to changing circumstances, it was Heydar Aliyev who, in the mid-1990s, first conceived and executed this pragmatic strategy, inculcating it into the government and society at large. This was manifested in his management of the relationships with Russia and Iran.

Heydar Aliyev’s personal standing and rapport with Russia’s Boris Yeltsin and his presidential successor, Vladimir Putin, enabled Azerbaijan, while joining Moscow’s Commonwealth of Independent States, to refuse Russian military bases on its territory. A similar balancing act with Iran combined a sober recognition of the existential threat posed by the regime in Tehran with an avoidance of the kinds of provocations committed by Elchibey’s Popular Front that had

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so enraged Iran’s leaders. Aliyev sought close ties with America and Europe, and even opened a constructive relationship with Israel. Unlike his Georgian counterpart and former Politburo colleague Eduard Shevardnadze, how-

ever, Aliyev understood that it would be unrealistic and counter-productive for Azerbaijan overtly to seek NATO membership. Meanwhile, Aliyev also strengthened Azerbaijan’s links with Türkiye, going so far as to declare to the Turkish parliament in 1995 that “we are one nation, but two states.” Indeed, he made it clear that his first priority was to build up Azerbaijan as a sovereign and self-governing state, and that ties with Türkiye were but one of many means to that end, albeit an important priority.

This, then, is the foundation of the notion of Azerbaijan as a “middle power” that his successor, Ilham Aliyev, has successfully built upon—perhaps even to a degree that Heydar Aliyev himself may not have dreamed possible. But such an outcome was not foreordained, even after he managed to consolidate power in the mid-1990s. It is difficult to overstate both the scale of the stakes at the time and the fragility of the Azerbaijani state at the moment of Heydar Aliyev’s return to Baku in June 1993. After all, Azerbaijan’s

nationalist, Popular Front-led government had opened talks with international oil companies for the development of the country’s large oil and gas resources in the Caspian Sea. If Huseynov’s Russian-backed coup had succeeded, the development of Azerbaijan’s oil and gas reserves would have been taking place under strong Russian influence. Even if Western companies had succeeded in striking a deal to develop the oilfields, the result would almost certainly have been exported through Russian-controlled pipelines. In all likelihood, Western companies would have agreed to this, as they had done in Kazakhstan in 1993.

The implications of such a development for the broader region would have been immense. It is all too easy to forget Moscow’s efforts in the 1990s to bring independent-minded Georgia under its wing. These included fomenting ethnic unrest in the South Ossetia and Abkhazia, then helping trigger a civil war between Georgia’s government and paramilitary formations, and, finally, attempting

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to assassinate Shevardnadze himself. At the very time Aliyev was striving to consolidate independent rule in Baku, Russia forced Shevardnadze to accept the presence of Russian military bases on Georgian territory and Russian control over Georgia's border with Türkiye. A lesser authority figure in Baku surely would

Heydar Aliyev was one of the defining statesmen of the post-Soviet world. He laid the foundation for Azerbaijan's emergence as a stable middle power able to determine in own fate. But his legacy is also significant for the broader swaths of land where Europe meets Asia and the Near East. As a result, he certainly left his mark on the world at-large.

United States needed suddenly to prosecute a war in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan would certainly not have been among the first countries to cooperate unconditionally with the Pentagon—which is exactly what Heydar Aliyev did, notwithstanding reservations expressed by several members of his cabinet.

have buckled under equivalent pressure, which undoubtedly would have been forthcoming.

There is no doubt that had Aliyev failed to derail Surat Huseynov's pro-Russian coup, the Russian army would also have returned to Azerbaijan, thus stifling the country's ability to forge an independent statehood. Similarly, had Heydar Aliyev remained in Nakhchivan, there would likely have been no east-west energy and connectivity corridor, and the entire South Caucasus would have remained under primary Russian influence. And following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, when the

Turning to the present, Central Asian countries would not have been able to consider the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus as a viable energy corridor to the West, which would have left Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in a much weaker position to oppose Russian efforts to dominate their region.

Overall, Heydar Aliyev was one of the defining statesmen of the post-Soviet world. His legacy is most obvious for Azerbaijan, as he laid the foundation for the country's emergence as a stable middle power that is—to a much more significant degree than its neighbors—able to determine in own fate.

He provided his country's subsequent leaders with the confidence to prioritize Azerbaijan's national interests as they see them, and to say "no" both to regional and great powers that seek to encroach on those interests.

But his legacy is also significant for the broader swaths of land where Europe meets Asia and the Near East. Indeed, his leadership was crucial in preventing the broader South Caucasus, this crossroads of Eurasia, from falling back under the

control of colonial overlordship. As a result, he certainly left his mark on the world at-large.

Heydar Aliyev was one of the defining statesmen of the post-Soviet world. He laid the foundation for Azerbaijan's emergence as a stable middle power able to determine in own fate. But his legacy is also significant for the broader swaths of land where Europe meets Asia and the Near East. As a result, he certainly left his mark on the world at-large. **BD**





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Heydar Aliyev As Architect and Founder

M. Hakan Yavuz

There is a story that Charles de Gaulle one day declared to Finance Minister Antoine Pinay, “the facts may prove me wrong, but history will prove me right,” to which Pinay replied, “but, *mon Général*, I thought history was written with facts.” At the centenary of his birth, Heydar Aliyev’s impact on Azerbaijani’s post-Soviet destiny has emerged as holistic, even if it is not yet fully appreciated in some part of the globe. Heydar Aliyev, like Charles de Gaulle, rescued his nation from collapse, reconstituted the state’s institutions, and set the course for his country to become aware of its potential. He crafted present-day Azerbaijan and its institutions, along with the memory and culture of his nation’s rise to independence. The formation of the Second Republic and Azerbaijan’s eventual military victory in the 2020 Second Karabakh War strategically bookmark Heydar Aliyev’s national

accomplishment and legacy. At its center stands the economic renewal of the country and the effectual redrawing of the strategic map of the Silk Road region.

Similar to how de Gaulle had to address the divisive war in Algeria, Aliyev had to deal with the First Karabakh War. He astutely found the breathing space he needed to revamp the nation’s institutional infrastructure. In the early 1990s, ordinary Azerbaijanis were not yet adequately prepared to fight and win against Armenian military power (supported actively by Russia), as the concerns of achieving economic viability in a newly independent republic were manifestly a more urgent priority. Aliyev sought to find the ideal path for saving his country’s face and pride in ending the First Karabakh War without making the sorts of concessions to the Armenian side

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that would humiliate and demoralize the Azerbaijani people. This was a difficult yet courageous decision. To extend the time and space for ensuring Azerbaijan’s nascent yet fragile state as an independent republic, he found a narrow path to end that war without a conclusive peace agreement by negotiating a ceasefire that would not

cede Azerbaijan’s rightful claim to its territorial integrity. His unwavering stance that Azerbaijan could only be whole with all of its Karabakh territory included proved prescient—as the facts of history have sustained.

This essay examines the historical context that compelled Aliyev to carry forward his certain idea of what Azerbaijan should become in the formative years of the Second Republic. Aliyev was astute enough to realize how prophetic his leadership challenges were regarding expectations of a military victory in Karabakh, which discounted the possibility that Armenia could ultimately prevail.

The formation of the Second Republic and Azerbaijan’s eventual military victory in the 2020 Second Karabakh War strategically bookmark Heydar Aliyev’s national accomplishment and legacy. At its center stands the economic renewal of the country and the effectual redrawing of the strategic map of the Silk Road region.

According to contemporaneous notes taken by Ilhan Kesici, now a Turkish member of parliament and the late-Süleyman Demirel’s nephew-in law, after the defeat in the First Karabakh War, Aliyev told Demirel, then president of Türkiye, “yes, we lost the battle, but I am sure this defeat will lead to the

rebirth of a powerful Azerbaijan since time and justice are on our side and we will win.” As de Gaulle did when he went into temporary exile in London after France fell to the Nazis, Aliyev spoke up for Azerbaijan, reviving the essential honor that his country’s citizens would need in rebuilding their spirit of nationhood.

The first section of the essay summarizes Aliyev’s biographical details and his worldview orientation, along with his rise to power. The remaining section provides an overview of the key strategies Aliyev deployed in his efforts at the nation- and institution-building.

Life and Worldview

Heydar Aliyev was born on 10 May 1923 in Nakhchivan. He studied at the Nakhchivan Pedagogical School and graduated in 1939. He went on to study at the architectural department of the Industrial Institute of Azerbaijan (now known as the Azerbaijan State Oil Academy), but World War II conditions prevented him from finishing his education. In 1941, he became a civil service employee and worked for the state security agencies of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1944, he was sent to work in the channels of state security, which became the base for his steady professional and administrative rise and growing reputation. Aliyev eventually was promoted to the post of deputy chairman of the State Committee of Security, and in 1967 became its chair. Leading up to this period, he earned the military rank of lieutenant general and received higher education training as a promising public official in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). In 1957, he graduated from the department of history of Azerbaijan State University.

Aliyev was elected as the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of

Azerbaijan in 1969. He transformed the Azerbaijani economic and transportation systems between 1969 and 1982, the years of his tenure. During this period, he also built extensive networks with the nation's diverse sectors, while cultivating his unique brand of Azerbaijani republicanism. Elected a candidate (non-voting) member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Soviet Union's Communist Party in 1976, Aliyev was promoted to a full member of the Politburo in 1982 and, concurrently, First Deputy Chairman of the USSR's Council of Ministers. Aliyev had entered the highest-ranking inner sanctum of the Soviet Union leadership—the highest position ever held by an Azerbaijani in the Soviet Union. For twenty years, he served as a member of parliament of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and for five years as deputy chairman of the Supreme Soviet. In 1987, he was forced to resign from the Politburo because of irreconcilable disagreements with the policies of then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

After his removal from the Politburo, Aliyev returned to Nakhchivan, where he resolved to work towards his homeland's independence. Unfolding events in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), the forced exodus of

ethnic-Azerbaijanis from Armenia, and the Red Army's massacre of Azerbaijanis in Baku fortified and solidified his own identity as an Azerbaijani. He never hesitated to defend Azerbaijan's claims to territorial integrity, as he spoke publicly against the massacre in Baku and used fast-moving events of the time to nurture and strengthen the distinct symbols of Azerbaijani republicanism that ultimately would be enshrined in the political memory of future generations of Azerbaijani citizens and the nation's governing framework. Later, as President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Aliyev pursued a balanced foreign policy so as not to anger the Russian Federation whilst never compromising with the historically validated sovereignty of Azerbaijan. For instance, he consistently refused to allow new Russian military bases in the country, even though some of his fellow political figures suggested that it could help Azerbaijan to free Karabakh from occupation conclusively.

Even what might have seemed like small events in Aliyev's life became consequential for the evolution of his political thinking, especially to understand that revolutionary republican values could speak to ordinary Azerbaijanis looking for alternatives to those of

Soviet communism. Aliyev had set out to brand socialism in a purely Azerbaijani frame.

From his experiences in Nakhchivan, Baku, and Moscow, one then can flesh out a portrait of Aliyev as the effectual founder of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Heydar Aliyev was a product of the experiences of the clash between the Russian brand of Soviet imperialism and Azerbaijani nationalism—not just ephemeral ideals but organic ones that would certainly grow under his imposing presence. He had the political instincts to perform a complex and subtle geopolitical dance with his dual formative loyalties, ensuring he would never set aside his Azerbaijani roots in Nakhchivan. Crafting his own brand of Machiavellianism, he could stand reliably as a Soviet recruit while keeping the fight going for the rights of his people and for the preservation of the cultural and linguistic roots of Azerbaijani society.

Only when he was a member of the Politburo did Aliyev realize that what Soviet/Russian imperialism had inflicted upon Azerbaijani bodies paled in comparison to what the phenomenon has done to Azerbaijani minds. He was acutely aware of the squalid ideological surrender that had endured for

many decades and recognized how to treat the symptoms and rehabilitate a genuine essence of national honor for his people in the project of the Republic of Azerbaijan that he ended up leading from June 1993 to October 2003. Aliyev's emerging legacy was a product of multilayered conflicts: imperialism and nationalism, socialism and nationalism, war and peace, and equality and supremacy.

Aliyev's worldview acknowledged and synthesized seemingly disparate threads—some ideological and sociocultural and others more pragmatic, technocratic, and administrative. He was an impassioned socialist and a humanist as a public servant. He understood the dualistic realities then in operation, remaining protective of Azerbaijani roots while retaining fidelity to the Soviet Union's existence and viability. An Azerbaijani, a Turk, and Muslim (at least culturally if not strictly religious, notwithstanding his July 1994 hajj), he envisioned a role that superseded his bureaucratic obligations, where he would take on the role as the liberating guide for the Azerbaijani body politic after the sobering losses and destruction that Azerbaijan suffered in the hostilities before, during, and after the First Karabakh War.

Becoming a politically regal figure just as de Gaulle had done in France, Aliyev knew enough how to judge and evaluate the political tempers of Azerbaijanis to ensure that any opposition would have to be so motivated and loud as to be heard while comforting and guaranteeing to the people that he always was the empathetic protector who guaranteed the lives of ordinary Azerbaijanis would not be disrupted to the detriment of the public welfare.

Aliyev ensured that he had a ubiquitous presence in Azerbaijan, which allowed him to reconcile deftly the perceptions of a politically stable Azerbaijan with an eye toward Westernization that would fit nicely into the fabric of his country's transforming society. He never felt truly at home in the Soviet Union; for him, Azerbaijani identity was less a position than a movement toward the realization of his country's empowerment as an independent state that would set the path to thrive economically and politically.

In rehabilitating and then reforming the nascent country's fragmented institutions, Aliyev understood that the power of charisma permitted a justifiable opportunity to blend in myth with the factual undercurrents of history, primarily

as a mode of instilling pride and confidence in a people who were dejected by the twin events of military defeat and a socialist economy on the verge of total collapse. To enhance his power, he sought to disarm the destruc-

tive power of parties in parliament that romanticized nationalistic ideals while failing to consider the pragmatic necessities of technocratic administrative projects to strengthen the country's governing core. As with Charles de Gaulle, Heydar Aliyev stood above the political fray because he comprehended just how vital a constructed sense of national dignity was to the project of national renewal.

He understood the circumstances in which he found himself, namely that national victories only came from the perseverance of overcoming struggle after struggle in an endless stream whereby a vanquished opponent would be shortly replaced by yet another who would seek to dilute and neutralize Aliyev's political legitimacy. He rose to the top of the Soviet central bureaucracy with his uncannily instinctive skills in

As with Charles de Gaulle, Heydar Aliyev stood above the political fray because he comprehended just how vital a constructed sense of national dignity was to the project of national renewal.

networking, coalition building, and convincing displays of trust and fidelity. His political ego certainly was complicated, as he chose the moments when he could be most vindictive against his opponents, but only in combination with a message that he believed that millions of Azerbaijani citizens were optimistic that their society could be humane and peaceful.

He followed Machiavelli's teaching that it is best to be both feared and loved and he was mindful that this was sometimes "difficult," as Machiavelli put; in such circumstances, he prudently followed Machiavelli's assessment that it is "much safer" to be feared and understood properly the Florentine's advice to guard against allowing such fear to descend into hatred. Heydar Aliyev also understood another core Machiavellian insight: "one should never fall in the belief you can find someone to pick you up." He was perhaps the only successful political leader in the South Caucasus who understood how to strategically incorporate Machiavelli's teaching into his own statecraft.

When he took over the collapsing state of Azerbaijan in mid-1993, Aliyev moved to encircle his country with the friendship of its neighbors so that he could focus on domestic affairs. He emphasized *rapprochement* between Russia and Azerbaijan, Iran, and Azerbaijan, and even between Armenia and Azerbaijan. There was little room for sentimentality in his foreign policy—even in his relations with Türkiye, where he made sure Ankara stayed on the side of Azerbaijan, ensuring the oil pipelines pass through Türkiye and thus making it dependent on Azerbaijani energy resources. As a long-serving member of the KGB and the Politburo, he also appreciated the contributions of culture and nationalism to foreign policy formulation.

Aliyev concluded that Türkiye needed Azerbaijan as much as Azerbaijan needed Türkiye and went about making this happen. To have access to Central Asia and have a powerful footprint in the Caucasus, Türkiye desperately needed Azerbaijan. Kesici recalls Demirel saying that “spending time with Heyday Aliyev is like having a full course on international relations.” Türkiye and Azerbaijan—as two states and one nation (a formulation Aliyev immortalized, with the emphasis on the former)—share

the same fundamental interests. Therefore, they have always been intertwined for their respective geopolitical existence.

Sudeif Imamverdiyev recalls how Aliyev once said to him,

Our people and our elite, unlike Russians, have a very narrow view of their life and the world they live in. Their main concern is how to improve their standard of living. There is no big idea or a big cause. We need a bigger vision than ourselves and a bigger goal than improving our standard of living. The Karabakh situation, in that sense, has become a blessing to rebuild the nation's soul and to have a national cause to rally and unite the people.

Aliyev's main goal was to rebuild the state and galvanize the nation for liberating its occupied territories. As recounted by Imamverdiyev, Aliyev's analysis of contemporary Türkiye is significant:

It is a country that lives in the greatness of its past and there is a deep sense of will among the ordinary people to become great again. History for Türkiye is not the past, it is not passé, but it is rather a vision of the future.

But this is not how Aliyev believed Azerbaijan saw itself. He did not believe in Azerbaijan as it had existed in various past iterations,

because it had been a fragmented and defeated country. In order for it to become a stable and prosperous state with a restored sense of security, such a realization would be impossible if the occupied territories were not freed from Armenian control.

Aliyev thus knew how to be simultaneously utopian and realist. No different than what de Gaulle had accomplished in postwar France, Aliyev knew the country needed a symbolic history of an exclusively Azerbaijani state character to instill pride in the citizens so that he could get on with the pragmatic politics of rehabilitating the governing institutions and, most ur-

gently, the military so that it would protect and recover the country's legitimate territorial integrity. His experience in the Soviet bureaucratic service did not go in vain. Perhaps, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, if the U.S. had considered the value of pride for the Russian people as opposed to the pragmatic facts of the collapse of its Soviet political structure and hierarchy, the sense of humiliating plunder would not have been so

evident. Instead, Russians could have been granted their own myth of believing in their own liberation.

Heydar Aliyev's leadership in rallying the people of Azerbaijan to the cause of state and nation-building was exemplary. He demonstrated a keen understanding of the deep wound inflicted on Azerbaijani identity as a result of the Karabakh defeat. This understanding allowed him to connect

Heydar Aliyev recognized that the Armenian occupation of Karabakh was not only a territorial dispute and a violation of the country's sovereignty, but a deep wound on Azerbaijani identity.

with his people on a deeper level and give them a sense of purpose and belonging. Through his speeches and actions, Aliyev was able to galvanize the people of Azerbaijan and instill a sense of pride and determination.

He understood that the conflict over Karabakh was not just a territorial dispute but a matter of national identity, and he was able to articulate this sentiment effectively.

Aliyev's leadership was not just about rallying the people but also about ensuring that the state was strong and capable of protecting its citizens. He implemented policies that focused on economic development and modernization,

while also investing in the military and security forces. Aliyev's leadership in rallying the people of Azerbaijan was crucial in ultimately bringing about a resolution to the conflict over Karabakh. His rallying point was centered around the liberation of the occupied territories, particularly the city of Shusha. Heydar Aliyev recognized that the Armenian occupation of Karabakh was not only a territorial dispute and a violation of the country's sovereignty, but a deep wound on Azerbaijani identity.

The Failed State (1991-1993)

Ayaz Mutallibov (1938-2022), who was the newly-installed head of Azerbaijan's Communist Party at the time of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, declared independence for Azerbaijan in May 1991. The proclamation came easily enough, but the goal of sustaining and enhancing the country's independence proved to be more complex than what many realized at the time. The Communist Party was dissolved and within a week a presidential election took place in which the old communist elite ensured Mutallibov's election.

Yet, three forces threatened the fragile transformation to independence over the next several years. The onset of the First Karabakh War rode on a fresh wave of Azerbaijani nationalism but the economy was struggling to gain traction in the shift from tight state control to flexible market conditions. The security establishment, notably the military, was mired in a state of insufficient funding, lack of cohesion in the structure, and loss of commitment by units and divisions in the institution. In their place, private militia groups gained an upper hand but were too fragmented to coordinate and control. The string of defeats in the First Karabakh War, combined with a sudden surge of hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced peoples from Armenia and the occupied territories, produced a decline in those willing to accept the state authority as legitimate and led to societal fragmentation that verged on a loss of control.

The only dynamic force that seemed to supersede the growing state of chaos in the country was the ethno-nationalism-based Popular Front, established in 1988 and led by Abulfaz Elchibey (1938-2000), a minor Soviet-era Foreign Ministry official who became a dissident,

spent time in prison in the mid-1970s, and gradually emerged as Azerbaijan's leading anti-communist voice in the mid- to late-1980s who consistently defended and promoted Turkish nationalism.

Although Azerbaijan is located on the periphery of the Turkic world, its intellectuals played a formative role in cultivating strong sentiments of Turkish nationalism in what became the Republic of Türkiye. One cannot write about the intellectual origins of Turkish nationalism without acknowledging the role of Azerbaijani intellectuals such as Ali bey Huseynzade (1864-1940), Alimerdan bey Topcubasi (1863-1939), and, especially, Ahmedbey Agaoglu (1869-1939). Moreover, despite its comparatively smaller population, Azerbaijan had long prided itself on its secular and creative enlightenment. The first Muslim Republic was established in Azerbaijan; women were granted the right to vote in Azerbaijan before any other majority-Muslim country, the first opera to come from the Muslim world included a libretto cast in Azerbaijan; and the country has supported widespread appreciation for European music.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Azerbaijan simultaneously faced several identity crises. Immediately, a vacuum or void

emerged as the population wavered, alternated, and was confused about how to define and embrace a distinct Azerbaijani identity when many had only been familiar with a pan-Soviet identity for many decades. But the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, as well as the conflict over Karabakh and the massive ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanis from both the occupied territories of Azerbaijan as well as from neighboring Armenia, combined with the Soviet military intervention in Baku in January 1990, galvanized Azerbaijani Turkic identity under the leadership of Elchibey's Popular Front. All this produced a centripetal force to embolden a coherent and shared Azerbaijani Turkic identity.

With the conveniently expressed intention of preventing the massacre of ethnic Armenians during this period, Soviet troops attacked Baku and opened fire on the civilian population (more on this below). Known as "Black January," the massacre, according to official estimates at the time, left 147 civilians killed and at least 800 people injured. The attacks reinforced Azerbaijani nationalism, which was directed against Russians (in many ways the USSR's dominant nation) and Armenians. Aliyev returned to the political arena in 1990 by publicly remonstrating

Black January. He spoke publicly at the Azerbaijan Representation Office in Moscow the next day, condemning the massacre (“I consider [the Soviet military actions] to be illegal, hostile to democracy, totally contradicting the principles of humanism and the establishment of the legitimate state”) and called for those responsible for the crime committed against the people of Azerbaijan to be held to account. Soon thereafter, he resigned from the Communist Party, citing the Soviet Union’s refusal to account for all sides’ views and claims in the conflict over Karabakh.

Aliyev’s resignation was made public in July 1991, signaling his complete break from the Soviet Union’s agenda, especially in the context of the conflict over Karabakh. Aliyev was extremely disappointed with Gorbachev’s policies and concluded that the Soviet system was not going to survive. When the Kremlin organized a referendum to keep the Soviet Union intact in March 1991, Aliyev, then speaking on behalf of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, rejected the referendum and expressed his desire for Azerbaijani independence. In November 1992, at the constituent congress of the New Azerbaijan Party in Nakhchivan, Aliyev was elected chairman.

At the time of the Black January massacre in January 1990 and then Azerbaijan’s declaration of the restoration of its independence in May 1991, Mutallibov’s presidency was not seen as legitimate amongst many Azerbaijanis. While state institutions were in the hands of the corrupt Azerbaijani elite, nationalism gained a foothold initially against the corrupt elite and then against Russia and Armenia, as both of those nations sought to tie their allegiance tighter in the post-Soviet era. The radicalized dynamics of nationalism propelled the Azerbaijani Popular Front to power and its identity was stamped on the Popular Front leadership. Under Elchibey’s leadership, it called for Azerbaijan’s unconditional independence, stressing pan-Turkish nationalism and Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity to rebuff the Armenian claims on the former NKAO.

In the aftermath of Azerbaijan’s loss of more of its territories in Karabakh, Mutallibov was compelled to resign from his position as president in March 1992. However, just two months later, Mutallibov attempted to regain presidential power by forcing the parliament in Baku to declare the previous presidential elections null and void. He sought to capitalize on the public outrage over the loss of Shusha in

May 1992 to bolster his chances of reclaiming power. In response, Aliyev denounced Mutallibov’s actions as illegal and called upon the Popular Front to remove him from power and prevent him from attending a summit of the new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Moscow that was scheduled for later that month. Aliyev recognized that Mutallibov’s attempts to return to power were not in the best interest of Azerbaijan, as they would only further destabilize an already fragile political situation.

In June 1992, Elchibey emerged as the winner of the presidential election. Although he was quite popular at the time of his election, Elchibey was the sort of politician given more toward romanticizing political ideals than organizing the technocratic and administrative governing infrastructure the country sorely needed during its wartime transformation as a reborn, independent republic. Still, within one year of governing, Elchibey already had made an imprint on Azerbaijani history. He removed all Russian military bases and forces, replaced the Russian ruble with a new national currency, replaced the Cyrillic script as the written form of the language; and sent thousands of students at state expense to study in Türkiye (and only in Türkiye).

Nonetheless, Elchibey’s nationalist, pan-Turkic rhetoric—especially his anti-Iranian position—sparked concern in Ankara. Fazil Gazenferoglu, who worked for the Legal Office of the Presidency of Azerbaijan during Elchibey’s tenure, wrote in a 1998 book that “Elchibey’s Turkish rhetoric strengthened the nationalist movement in Türkiye, which, in turn, made politicians of different political lines in power uneasy and very uncomfortable. This encouraged Turkish leaders to look for an alternative leader for Azerbaijan to replace Elchibey. This person was Heydar Aliyev.” The entire Turkish government encouraged the switch, no doubt gravely concerned with Elchibey’s consistently harsh criticism of Iran (more than once, he described it as a “doomed state.”) With no sense of the danger this could trigger, he even predicted publicly that within five years Azerbaijan would be reunited with its “lost” territories, located in Iran. Elchibey’s illusory desires genuinely rattled Ankara, whose officials warned him repeatedly to restrain his rhetoric, with Elchibey repeatedly ignoring their requests. Understandably, this sort of rhetoric also greatly unnerved Tehran.

As Elchibey raised his voice against Russia and pulled Azerbaijan out of the newly-formed

CIS, Russia committed itself to Armenia and used its military might to undermine the Popular Front government (Iran also came to side with Armenia as a result of Elchibey's policies). Russia armed and encouraged the mutinous Colonel Surat Huseynov, the commander of a militia unit in Ganja, to overthrow Elchibey. Meanwhile, Elchibey and many parliamentarians called on Aliyev to lead the country, which Aliyev ultimately accepted, primarily because of the clear and present danger to Azerbaijani sovereignty represented by the fact that it was in many ways a failing if not a failed state. Indeed, in a state of mutiny, Azerbaijan was on the brink of disintegration—it was widely-felt that Armenian forces would take full advantage of the budding political chaos.

Against this backdrop, Heydar Aliyev arrived in Baku on 9 June 1993 for meetings with parliament before going to Ganja four days later to negotiate with Huseynov directly, who agreed to lay down his arms and declare his allegiance to the presently constituted state. This was precisely the evidence Azerbaijan's political establishment looked for in believing that Aliyev was uniquely predisposed to the task of establishing civility, stability, and consensus to the still young independent republic.

Six days after he arrived in Baku, Aliyev was elected speaker of the parliament. This was on 15 June 1993. Eight days later, parliament granted him presidential powers, citing emergency provisions to resolve the power vacuum and to ensure the country's constitutional processes could be maintained and adapted accordingly to orderly governing needs.

In this context, it is appropriate to remember the words of the current president, Ilham Aliyev: "It is easier to gain independence than to keep it." It was thanks to the statecraft of the elder Aliyev that the country would succeed in not only keeping its independence, but in strengthening and consolidating it. Azerbaijan has now matured into a thriving independent republic, mastering the narrow divide between the influential powers of both East and West. This would have been impossible without Aliyev's return to power. Indeed, the date on which Aliyev became the de facto leader of the country is known as National Salvation Day (15 June 1993).

Now out of power, Elchibey took refuge in his village in Nakhchivan and gave interviews about the events of his short-lived, chaotic presidency. Speaking about parliament's decision to turn to him

for leading the country, Aliyev described the political environment at the time: "There was a civil war here. People were shooting at one another. Everybody had an armed unit of his own. It took me two and a half years to restore order."

But unrest was still plainly evident. Alikram Hummatov, a colonel of the Azerbaijani army, kept the crisis going. On 21 June 1993, Hummatov declared the establishment of the Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic on Lankaran television. This was an attempt to prevent Aliyev's appointment as president. Although historically there was no tension between ethnic-Azerbaijanis Turks and ethnic-Talysh, a small ethnic-Talysh group led by Hummatov sought to enhance its power by calling for some sort of autonomy. The group's failure to mobilize the Talysh to their irredentist cause resulted in a failure of the insurrection. Aliyev's focus was on the national landscape, rejecting the demands of a small, diverse, yet vociferous spectrum calling for the fragmentation of the nascent republic and an ethnic-based identity as championed by the likes of Elchibey. Aliyev offered stability and order whilst giving public assurances that economic policies would be prioritized by the new government.

The Reconstruction of the State

When the presidential elections took place in October 1993, Aliyev gained an overwhelming majority of the votes, thereby becoming formally the president of a war-torn country that was a failing and perhaps even failed state at that point. He appointed Surat Huseynov as prime minister, simultaneously testing his ability in the office while gaining time to consolidate his power against Huseynov and initiating the task of rehabilitating state institutions free of militia presence. In October 1994, when Huseynov again tried to seize power against Aliyev, he was completely defeated and some of his closest associates were punished. During his second attempt at mutiny, Huseynov was initially supported by Rovsen Javadov, the commander of the OMON Forces, a special branch of the security apparatus established by Mutallibov that numbered some 800 highly trained men. However, Aliyev used his negotiation skills to sway Javadov to his side and isolate Huseynov. Within the context of seeking to focus on domestic crises and the rebuilding of the military, Aliyev agreed to a ceasefire to end the First Karabakh War, which froze the conflict over Karabakh,

resulted in the onset of a period of (ultimately fruitless) diplomatic negotiations, and provided space for him to attract international diplomatic and economic support for the Azerbaijani state.

But Aliyev’s more significant achievement—which became the linchpin in efforts to legitimize his leadership in Azerbaijan, especially on the urgent need to resuscitate and improve the economy—soon followed. On 20 September 1994, Aliyev signed what became known as the “Contract of the Century” to explore Azerbaijani energy resources in the offshore Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli oil fields. Prior to this historic achievement, Moscow and Tehran had opposed the presence of Western oil companies in Azerbaijan, but Aliyev found a way to accommodate both states’ concerns. The Contract of the Century was signed as a result of Aliyev having taken the lead in bringing together a diverse group consisting of representatives from 11 international energy companies, the State Oil Company of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SOCAR), and six foreign governments. Aliyev’s negotiations for this game-changing

deal were aimed at redefining the geostrategic map of the region and transforming Azerbaijan into a key player for promoting stability and security in the entire Silk Road region. His success has been immeasurable.

Subsequently, the Contract of the Century was to be augmented by major follow-up international agreements such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil export pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, which ultimately became the Southern Gas Corridor. In 2019, Richard Kauzlaurich, a diplomatic and intelligence analyst who served as U.S. ambassador to Azerbaijan during this period, reflected on the “Contract of the Century,” and why it deserves its label. He offered several reasons:

U.S. government support for the signing and implementation of the Contract of the Century was necessary to provide Azerbaijan with any hope for political and economic development. In 1994, it was not clear that there would be enough oil to justify the development of offshore Azerbaijan oil and gas, or that there would be a pipeline grid that could move this energy to world

Heydar Aliyev redefined the geostrategic map of the region and transformed Azerbaijan into a key player for promoting stability and security in the entire Silk Road region.

markets. [...] The leadership of President Heydar Aliyev was also essential. He saw the advantage of a U.S. geopolitical role in the development and transportation of Azerbaijan’s oil, to balance against Iranian and Russian efforts to undermine Azerbaijan’s independence.

The Contract of the Century exemplifies Heydar Aliyev’s strategic vision of positioning Azerbaijan as the most reliable, predictable, stable, secure, and friendly non-Western oil and gas supplier to Europe, to paraphrase a September 2022 assessment made by *Baku Dialogues* Co-Editor Damjan Krnjević Mišković at a European Commission-organized conference in Brussels. This vision led to the consolidation of Azerbaijan’s independence from Russia and garnered support from Western countries, which recognized Azerbaijan’s position and its right to independence. Furthermore, the agreement solidified the alliance between Azerbaijan and Georgia, while also incentivizing Türkiye to fully commit to Azerbaijan’s security.

The Contract of the Century exemplifies Heydar Aliyev’s strategic vision of positioning Azerbaijan as the most reliable, predictable, stable, secure, and friendly non-Western oil and gas supplier to Europe.

Türkiye’s relations with Azerbaijan warmed considerably and Türkiye gave full support to Aliyev. The clearest indication of this transformation in bilateral relations came with Aliyev’s visit to Ankara in February 1994. On that occasion, Aliyev signed an Agreement on the Development of Friendship and Comprehensive Cooperation and a Protocol on Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with Demirel as well as 15 agreements on trade, investment, and scientific and cultural cooperation. As stated in the treaty, “in the event that one of the parties is attacked by a third country or countries, they will take the necessary measures to eliminate the attack and take the necessary defensive measures.” (The August 2010 Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance and the June 2021 Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations, builds on this original formulation.)

Yet, some rogue elements within the Turkish state did not want Aliyev. For instance, a coup attempt against Aliyev was carried out by some Azerbaijani elements, including members of the OMON

forces, in March 1995. Led by Colonel Rovsen Javadov, who led the OMON, with the participation of rogue Turkish intelligence officers and, as Aliyev inferred in an interview to the NTV network on 6 May 1997, the Turkish ambassador to Azerbaijan. As soon as Demirel learned about the coup attempt, he called Aliyev and informed him about the plan. The plot was foiled, and its chief protagonists dealt with appropriately. Understandably, that attempted coup momentarily poisoned Azerbaijani-Turkish relations. However, the personal trust and cooperation that Demirel and Aliyev had built up restored bilateral ties in short order. Simply put, Demirel saw Aliyev as Azerbaijan's best prospect for achieving political stability.

There were other coup or assassination attempts to assassinate Aliyev, who emerged more powerful after each major crisis. One could argue that Aliyev firmly secured his power without subsequent major challenges by October 1998, when he began his second term—a more peaceful

The historical verdict recognizes Heydar Aliyev as the principal architect of a New Azerbaijan, which emerged from the ashes of a military defeat and its status as a failing if not failed state.

period in domestic affairs, during which he was able to more fully focus on the state's institution-building process. His presidential message remained consistent: enhance the independence of Azerbaijan, free the occupied territories, and create a stable and prosperous Azerbaijan. He moved to strengthen the Azerbaijani economy, built up the nation's military institutions, and engender closer ties with Russia, Türkiye, and Iran to strengthen the security belt around Azerbaijan.

At the dawn of the new independence era, political leaders in Azerbaijan came and went swiftly because they were unable to gain the upper hand in stabilizing the nascent republic, a situation that changed when Aliyev took office as president in June 1993 by a parliamentary decision (as noted above, he was directly elected by the people in October 1993). Thirty years later, the historical verdict recognizes Heydar Aliyev as the principal architect of a New Azerbaijan, which emerged from the ashes of a military defeat and its status as a failing if not failed state.

The dramatic reforms of the country's governing infrastructure proved more important than his efforts of giving Azerbaijanis a reason to celebrate their identity. He cultivated a culture of patriotism that was subtler but no less holistic than the outright, unapologetic, single-minded, and exclusivist nationalism promulgated by other leaders in the former Soviet Union (and elsewhere) in the first years of the post-Cold War era, including that of his predecessor. The governing bureaucracy and institutions were either revamped or new ones established to codify, regularize, and synergize the rules and norms of a functioning government for the benefit of Azerbaijani society. In the process, Aliyev neutralized political rivals by legitimizing the state's authority to implement its rules and to levy punitive measures on those that tried to upset, usurp, or take unconstitutional control of the nascent and thus still fragile institutions of the state. Aliyev sought an integrative approach to the building up of the country's capacity to generate revenues, collect taxes, and invest in public works and industries related to the country's natural resources.

Aliyev's project of rehabilitation, reconstruction, and national strength had six broad outcomes. *First*, establishing law and order by

eliminating rogue elements within the security establishment; *second*, drafting a new constitution to enhance the power of the executive and establishing new state institutions; *third*, providing a durable ceasefire with Armenia by freezing both the conflict over Karabakh and with Armenia itself; *fourth*, attracting international investment to extract Azerbaijani hydrocarbons and export them to Türkiye and Europe; *fifth*, pursuing non-confrontational and good neighborly relations with surrounding countries; and *sixth*, setting the foundation for the geopolitical and geo-economics redrawing of the map of the South Caucasus and the rest of the Silk Road region.

Ceasefire but No Peace

Aliyev was resolute from his earliest days as the country's new leader. In a 24 August 1993 address to National Assembly, he proclaimed,

Azerbaijani statehood will be defended, and the rights of the Azerbaijani people will be protected. As the chairman of the Azerbaijani parliament and Acting President, I declare that with the people around me we can find a way out of this situation. We shall take decisive, serious steps, try to establish stability in Baku and other regions, in

towns, districts, settlements, and villages, strengthen our struggle against crime, and overcome this difficult situation in Azerbaijan. You can be confident in it.

The last thing Aliyev wanted was confusion to feed underlying chaotic dynamics. In the early 1990s, Azerbaijan absorbed a combined total of nearly 1 million refugees from Armenia and internally-displaced persons cleansed by the Armenian occupation forces in Karabakh. This number represented about 13 percent of the country's total population. Moreover, the war left 240,000 disabled, along with 20,000 dead. At the time, the country was too poor to provide for the population's basic needs, as Aliyev's first goal was to end the conflict as expeditiously as possible to stabilize a rattled, disgruntled society while keeping open all options for the state's short- and long-term objectives to liberate Karabakh. To overcome Russia's effectually unconditional support for Armenia, Aliyev felt it wise to re-join the CIS to ensure Azerbaijan had a constant presence at the table. Working with Türkiye, Aliyev also mobilized international support to persuade the UN Security Council to pass four major resolutions in 1993 (822, 853, 874, and 884). These resolutions, as well as other international (and national) documents, provided

the legal ground for Azerbaijan to free its territories in the Second Karabakh War.

On 5 May 1994, with Russia as a mediator, the defense ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a ceasefire that would go into effect on 12 May. Neither on that occasion nor any other, Aliyev refused to sign anything more than a ceasefire with Armenia because he was confident that time, international law, and justice were on his side. Aliyev was aware of the costs of the occupation for Armenia, along with how Armenia perceived the magnitude of its military victory. His instincts suggested that the Armenians would do everything but act rationally, which meant that a mutually-acceptable, negotiated solution could not be achieved during this period.

Hikmet Çetin was Türkiye's foreign minister from November 1991 to July 1994 and held many discussions with Heydar Aliyev during this period, which puts him in a singular position to evaluate the Azerbaijani statesman. In a 12 January 2023 interview with me, Çetin recalled Aliyev's words:

The Armenians will never be able to digest Karabakh and the seven regions. On the contrary, their so-called victory will consume Armenian resources and its economic

and demographic potential. The worst thing is that they will become more dependent on Russia to keep those lands and they will never be able to free themselves from the Karabakh nationalists. Time and justice are on our side. We need time to address our economic conditions and unify our people. I need to build institutions and prepare our population to be patient for the freedom of our territories. The Armenian victory will become their worst nightmare and it will consume all their energies. Our defeat will become our rebirth!

Aliyev was correct and, in his long-term prediction, prophetic. Çetin recalled that Aliyev told him that,

The Armenians had bitten off more than they could chew. Let them bite and while each bite will be painful for us, it also will prepare us better for the final confrontation. They have no option but to compromise their sovereignty with Russia to keep those territories. The worst that the Karabakh Armenians will do is to manipulate Armenians in Armenia and exhaust their resources.

On the basis of his many conversations with Aliyev, Çetin was able to assess Heydar's legacy. In the same interview with me, Çetin stated the following:

President Heydar Aliyev's main concern was stability and order in Azerbaijan. He was

always suspicious of Russia and never liked Gorbachev. He always had good relations with Demirel and visited Ankara several times to brief Demirel. They had very good relations. For Aliyev, Türkiye under no circumstances would allow Armenia to humiliate Azerbaijan.

It is important to understand that the Armenian war against Azerbaijan over Karabakh was not just another slight bump in the road in bilateral-communal relations under the Russian and Soviet systems. Not the Karabakh *conflict* but the *outcome* of the First Karabakh War itself represents the transformation of relations. The latter was just another phase in a protracted conflict with consequences that were not yet revealed in either their scale or scope. The consequences have been more devastating in Armenia than in Azerbaijan. It ruined Armenia, made it hostage to its conquest, and drained its resources; whereas it had become a vindicating blessing for Azerbaijan to consolidate its national unity and to focus on improving the public welfare.

Yerevan's military victory in the First Karabakh War and the conquest of 20 percent of Azerbaijan's sovereign lands tempted Armenia to entertain wild dreams of entering

Baku with their tanks—a venture that would be impossible to realize because Armenia did not have sufficient resources to successfully conduct a large-scale invasion.

Armenian nationalism was heightened by irredentist sentiments that obscured realities and lured both its citizens and its sizeable and influential diaspora into perpetuating illusions that clearly were unachievable. Armenia became addicted to its unsubstantiated capacities for nationalism without considering the political ramifications it could have leveraged to stabilize the country's own domestic landscape. The objective of turning the occupied territories into a de facto extension of Armenia's homeland was never possible—certainly not in a negotiated settlement and, as it turned out, not on the battlefield.

Probing the depth of impact of the Armenian military victory reveals that it was hardly decisive or transformational in its political outcomes. The victory became a dangerous misapplication of political opportunity in the hands of the “Karabakh clan,” whose leading members exercised no restraint in consuming the resources that rightly belong to Armenians at home and across its diaspora. Instead of strategic measures, resources fed a global propaganda machine that

obscured the geopolitical practicalities and the short-sightedness of the country's economic picture. Politically, Armenian leaders used this to mask their failures so that the citizenry would not notice the huge infrastructure weaknesses in their economy and society.

Aliyev's political instincts were vastly superior to those of his counterparts in Armenia (especially in the post-Levon Ter-Petrosyan period), who were convinced that Azerbaijan could be reduced to a cowering status. Azerbaijan moved steadily (and often quietly) to its status as a normalized state focused on improving the daily public affairs that mattered for any functioning country.

Meanwhile, Armenia persuaded its people that military alertness would preserve its “invincibility.” Victory in war is never free of context, conditions, and contingencies. Winning on the battlefield leads to new challenges. When the U.S. as a major ally returned from World War II victoriously, it turned its attention immediately to building an economy that was no longer operating on a wartime premise. With defeat as Azerbaijan's context, Aliyev knew which goals to pursue to change the country's destiny: reframe, refresh, and rejuvenate a true sense of national

pride in unifying the country's identity; ameliorate and rehabilitate its institutions, strengthen its diplomatic profile, and rebuild and modernize its military. About a month prior to the ceasefire that ended the First Karabakh War, Aliyev went to the frontline in the Fuzuli district, speaking to the assembled Azerbaijani soldiers with a confidence that did not seem exaggerated:

You defend the honor of your mothers and fathers, your country, and your land. I believe that our just struggle will win. A day will come when all the Azerbaijani lands will be liberated, and all our citizens return home. The Armenian armed forces' position is within a kilometer's distance from the place where I am speaking. I am telling you and let the Armenian occupants hear, too: we are for peace, we want to put an end to the war. We want to apply all means for this purpose, achieve a ceasefire through the negotiations and end the war, but on one condition: the Armenian occupant forces must leave the Azerbaijani lands and ensure the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. We are negotiating on these conditions.

Having secured the much-needed ceasefire, Aliyev set out on his next major task: constitutional reform. In June 1995, he formed a constitutional committee to draft the new

document. On 12 November 1995, the new constitution was overwhelmingly accepted and came into force later that month. The new constitution enhanced the position of the president by giving the officeholder extensive powers to run the country. It was as strong a presidential system that engendered the political backing Aliyev needed to pursue the country's rebuilding project.

National Identity and Memory

When Aliyev was Speaker of the Parliament of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, he adopted the national flag of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (1918-1920) as Nakhchivan's flag on 17 November 1990. Aliyev also asked the Supreme Council of the Azerbaijan SSR to adopt the same flag as the national flag of Azerbaijan. On 5 February 1991, this request was approved by the Supreme Council of Azerbaijan.

Aliyev knew how to create a compelling narrative that sounded hopeful yet realistic to his people. He combined a sense of survival and agony with his confident assurance that the disaster on the battlefield would not be repeated

while also making it clear that the matter of Karabakh and Azerbaijan's historical territorial claims would not be negotiated away.

Relatedly, Aliyev proclaimed 31 March as the Day of Genocide against Azerbaijanis by Armenians. The commemoration became a vital emotional bond for Azerbaijanis, equating the value of memory to preserving and sustaining their dignity.

The memories of great bloodshed in Azerbaijan were recent and still raw: neither event had been absorbed fully for its emotional impact to be able to be assessed unemotionally. After all, the conflict over Karabakh had seen more than 20,000 civilians murdered and the events of Black January, as noted briefly above, had barely been processed or that grief had progressed through the stages of comprehending it fully. Azerbaijanis' nation-building did not begin with the onset of the Karabakh tragedy and the ethnic cleansing from Armenia, but it certainly was motivated by the events leading up to Black January.

Although this essay has already discussed Black January, it is necessary to return to it again

Heydar Aliyev cultivated a breadth and depth of sensitivities in composing a national identity that could be widely accepted.

presently. To express their deep dissatisfaction against the loss of territories and deportation of what at the time was already half million people from their indigenous land, Azerbaijani residents of Baku organized a series of demonstrations in December 1989. The demonstrators called for the removal of the Moscow-imposed administration and demanded independence from the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet government responded ferociously, with the invasion and massacre summarized in a May 1991 Human Rights Watch report titled *Conflict in the Soviet Union: Black January in Azerbaizhan* thusly:

Late at night on January 19, 1990, Soviet troops stormed Baku, the capital of the Republic of Azerbaizhan. They acted pursuant to a state of emergency declared by the USSR Supreme Soviet Presidium, signed by President [Mikhail] Gorbachev and disclosed to the Azerbaizhani public only after many citizens lay wounded or dead in the streets, hospitals, and morgues of Baku. [...] Our most striking finding is that, on the night of January 9-10, heavily armed Soviet soldiers assaulted the city of Baku as though it were an enemy position intended

for military destruction. [...] Indeed, the violence used by the Soviet Army on the night of January 19-20 was so out of proportion to the resistance offered by Azerbaizhanis as to constitute an exercise in collective punishment. Since Soviet officials have stated publicly that the purpose of the intervention of Soviet troops was to prevent the ouster of the Communist-dominated government of the Republic of Azerbaijan by the nationalist-minded, non-Communist opposition, the punishment inflicted on Baku by Soviet soldiers may have been intended as a warning to nationalists, not only in Azerbaizhan, but in the other Republics of the Soviet Union. The subsequent events in the Baltic Republics—where, in a remarkable parallel to the events in Baku, alleged civil disorder was cited as justification for violent intervention by Soviet troops—further confirms that the Soviet Government [headed by Gorbachev] has demonstrated that it will deal harshly with nationalist movements.

In 1995, Gorbachev characterized his decision to send Red Army troops to Baku as the gravest mistake of his political life. And so it was. The attack triggered the popular acceptance of the inevitability of Azerbaijan's independence and, perhaps, marked the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union itself.

In 2000, Aliyev declared the event as one of the “darkest pages in Azerbaijani history” and proclaimed 20 January as Remembrance Day of the Martyrs, to remember the sacrifices of those who were killed in the mission of fighting for the independence of their country. In issuing the presidential decree, Aliyev, as customary, struck the proper historical tone for Azerbaijanis who sought solace for their grief and assurances for their dignity:

Despite the fact that on 20 January the people of Azerbaijan were subjected to military, political, and moral aggression, they nevertheless demonstrated to the entire world that they were true to the historical traditions of heroism and resolved to oppose the severest ordeals in the name of the freedom and independence of their motherland, not sparing even their own lives for this cause. The sons and daughters of our motherland, who were martyred in the name of the freedom and independence of Azerbaijan, during the bloody events of January 1990, have by their selflessness and determination to sacrifice themselves written a shining page in the heroic annals of our people. Even today the people of Azerbaijan are proud of their daughters and sons who were ready to give their lives in the defense of their national dignity.

Aliyev cultivated a breadth and depth of sensitivities in composing a national identity that could be widely accepted. This had been one of Elchibey's many shortfalls, who rode his own political wave by focusing heavily on Turkish nationalist rhetoric. Understanding that identity was multilayered, Aliyev prudently emphasized a broader spectrum of Azerbaijanism over Turkism by citing the historical record in proper contexts and stressing accounts of the country's territorial unity and integrity. Thus, for instance, the 1995 Constitution changed the name of the country's official language from Turkish to Azerbaijani. Aliyev had a profound understanding of the power of anxiety, fear, and humiliation caused by historical grievances and injustices. The traumatic experience of losing Karabakh in war and the subsequent humiliation left a lasting impact on Azerbaijani society. However, instead of seeking revenge, Aliyev recognized the potential of this collective pain and turned it into a positive social force, facilitating the reconstruction of Azerbaijani society and the state.

Heydar Aliyev's policies in the South Caucasus and the Silk Road region more generally exemplify the concept of complex interdependence, where actors depend on each other for resources, cooperation, and security. Recognizing the importance of building interdependent relationships between countries in this increasingly important region, Aliyev established a network of economic and political

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ties that made military conflict between neighbors a less desirable option. With the aim of integrating Armenia into this regional web of interaction, Aliyev made considerable efforts to resolve the Karabakh issue through diplomatic means. However, when Armenia refused to address the matter within the context of UN Security Council resolution and the OSCE Minsk Group-led peace process, he had no option but to ensure Armenia remained isolated from regional developments.

This approach is based on the notion that in a more interdependent regional system, the costs of conflict and the benefits of cooperation are higher than in a less

interdependent one. Therefore, building interdependence through mutually-beneficial economic and political relationships can promote peace and stability by reducing the likelihood of military conflict. Aliyev's efforts to establish interdependence across the Silk Road region demonstrate the potential of this approach to prevent tensions from escalating into violence, and is a direct precursor to the now text-based regional integration approach embraced by the Central Asian states.

Despite Aliyev's efforts, the Armenian political leadership failed to understand his vision, and the Second Karabakh War was forced on Azerbaijan. However, this outcome does not detract from the importance of interdependence in conflict prevention, but rather highlights the necessity of all regional actors understanding and working towards the common goal of peaceful coexistence.

Aliyev's Geo-Strategic Vision

Azerbaijan's strategic location in the Silk Road region, combined with its status as the largest state in the South Caucasus, has made it a highly

valued geopolitical player. The country is predominantly Muslim, but it maintains a secular government. Azerbaijan shares borders with three major powers—Iran, Russia, and Türkiye—that directly affect the foreign policy interests of the European Union and its member states as well as the United States (not to mention other great powers, like China). Thanks to Aliyev's statecraft, Azerbaijan was able to take its rightful place as the northern guardian of what political scientists Geoffrey Kemp and Robert Harkavy in 1997 termed the "strategic energy ellipse," a reference to the significance of two oil and gas basins in the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. Today, the network of pipelines transporting Azerbaijani hydrocarbon resources represent the only transportation route of its kind to the Mediterranean that bypasses both Russia and Iran. The importance of the Caspian Basin as an alternative source of energy has led to a significant increase in investment in the region, which has fueled economic growth and development.

As recounted by Hafiz Pashayev in the Fall 2020 edition of *Baku Dialogues*, Zbigniew Brzezinski had a particular fondness for Azerbaijan, referring to the country as a regional "linchpin" in his 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard* (speaking

at Georgetown University that same year, he called Azerbaijan the region's "most strategically critical country"). Brzezinski was one of many who recognized that, thanks to Heydar Aliyev, Azerbaijan was coming to play a crucial integrative role in the Silk Road region.

Reflecting both on Heydar Aliyev's legacy and Brzezinski's appreciation of it, Pashayev (who served as Azerbaijan's first ambassador to the United States, with his term encompassing the entire period of Heydar Aliyev's presidency), wrote in these pages that,

We are, in a sense, a quintessential 'borderland country,' a formulation made famous by prominent historian Tadeusz Swietochowski; but unlike quite a few other borderlands, the political and economic emancipation of today's Azerbaijan has helped to complete the transformation of our country from an object of great power competition—a geography to be won and lost by others—into a strong and independent actor in international affairs: a keystone state imbued with a strong and unified national identity in a part of the world that remains a critical seam of world politics.

Two other episodes involving Heydar and Zbig (as he was called by his friends) related by Hafiz m. in the pages of

Baku Dialogues speak to the overall point of this essay.

The first involves a special high-level luncheon held at Blair House, the official guesthouse of the U.S. president, during Aliyev's historic visit to America in July-August 1997, organized at Brzezinski's urging. "I remember how during the luncheon," Pashayev writes, "one of the American dignitaries had asked the president if the Soviet Union would still have collapsed had he, Heydar Aliyev, been in charge instead of Mikhail Gorbachev." Pashayev recounted Aliyev's answer: "The president replied 'no,' showing strong confidence in his leadership and managerial capabilities. A few minutes later, he came back to the subject: 'it would have collapsed later, because its economic system was not right,' he said, adding that he would have managed the collapse in a much more orderly fashion."

The second episode involving Aliyev and Brzezinski that Pashayev recounted in these pages took place during one of the distinguished American diplomat's periodic visits to Azerbaijan. He carried with him a speech Aliyev had recently given, which he took to represent the Azerbaijan statesman's definitive foreign policy posture—words with which

Pashayev indicates Brzezinski agreed:

I regard Azerbaijan's policy over the last ten years and in the future as independent of anybody's interests. It must be based on observing our own values. [...] We have no specific orientations in foreign policy. Our orientation is based on promoting by means of foreign policy activity the attainment of set objectives, the strengthening of Azerbaijan's place in the world, and also our economic development via mutually advantageous cooperation.

Another expression Brzezinski used in his 1997 book to describe Azerbaijan is this: "the cork in the bottle containing the riches of the Caspian Sea Basin and Central Asia." This, too, corresponds to Aliyev's awareness that the construction of a major oil pipeline in the region would have a profound impact on the political landscape. He recognized that this project would be a game-changer, as it would not only boost the economic growth of Azerbaijan but also enhance the independence and sovereignty of the country and the Silk Road region more broadly. The pipeline and everything that would result from its construction would establish a secure and reliable energy corridor that would bypass Russia and Iran, giving Azerbaijan greater control over its energy

resources and strategically reduce Azerbaijan's dependence on its northern and southern neighbors. Thus, Brzezinski firmly supported Aliyev's vision of creating a regional integration and promoting stability and security in the South Caucasus. Brzezinski's foresight and support for the pipeline project were instrumental in its success, which has had a transformative impact on the region's political and economic landscape.

Heydar Aliyev's geo-strategic vision was multifaceted, and its central focus was on establishing Azerbaijan's status as a regional power—a keystone state, as several *Baku Dialogues* authors have rightly put it—while simultaneously safeguarding its independence in an ever-changing regional and global environment.

Thus, Aliyev recognized the significance of Azerbaijan's relationship with the United States, which would need to be established and, over time, strengthened without alienating Russia or Iran. Through his statecraft, he convinced both Moscow and Tehran that a robust and stable Azerbaijan was fundamental to the stability of the South Caucasus and to serving as a gatekeeper to Central Asia. However, he was also determined to prevent Russia from dominating what the

Kremlin liked to call at the time its “near abroad,” particularly Azerbaijan.

Aliyev’s geo-strategic vision extended beyond the South Caucasus, with a particular emphasis on Azerbaijan’s alignment with Türkiye and the role Ankara and Baku could play together across the Silk Road region. He championed a policy of cooperation with Central Asian republics that would increase their autonomy and consolidate their independence vis-à-vis not only Russia, but also a rising China. Recognizing the significance of oil and gas in global affairs and the potential for conflict between Russia and the Western powers, Aliyev made it a priority to establish alternative and more secure pipeline transit routes. His decision to build the pipeline via Georgia and Türkiye not only increased Azerbaijan’s economic importance but also brought these countries closer together, thus strengthening Azerbaijan’s statehood and security.

In short, Aliyev’s geo-strategic vision centered on protecting Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity and promoting economic independence by becoming a connectivity hub for different regions. He aimed to counterbalance the influence of superpowers, maintain a strong and autonomous foreign policy,

and build a strong Azerbaijani army. His legacy continues to shape Azerbaijani foreign and security policy to this day.

Indeed, Heydar Aliyev’s leadership and vision were essential to this historic moment in Azerbaijan’s history. The signing of the Contract of the Century placed Azerbaijan among the world’s consequential nations while laying the foundation for the country to become a responsible and dependable partner. Additionally, the signing of the Contract of the Century brought hope and prosperity to the people of Azerbaijan. It conveyed a strong message to the world that Azerbaijan was stable and open for business, resulting in hundreds of billions of dollars of investments flowing into the country and enhancing the quality of life of its now more than ten million citizens.

Aliyev’s Legacy

The following five points summarize the holistic impact of Heydar Aliyev as the Gaullist architect and founder the second Azerbaijani republic:

One, when Aliyev came back to power, Azerbaijan moved toward a pragmatically-driven and balanced foreign policy while learning how

to accommodate Moscow’s interests and ease its suspicions. He acknowledged that in the post-Soviet era, Russia still perceived its role as a hegemon in the South Caucasus and, as a result, ensured that his foreign and domestic policies would not be seen as confrontational or threatening to Russia.

Two, Aliyev realized the geopolitical and diplomatic leverage of economic independence and worked effectively to bring Western oil companies to Azerbaijan so that he could strengthen his nation’s profile as an independent republic by courting favor with the West and presenting itself as a valuable partner to all relevant actors involved in great power competition.

Three, on the Karabakh issue, Aliyev stipulated that not one inch of Azerbaijani territory would be ceded or surrendered. Azerbaijan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity was not up for negotiation with Armenians or anyone else. On the domestic political front, he kept his word and the people gave him the patience, time, and space he needed to start rebuilding the army for what would end up being called the Second Karabakh War, which was

a consequence of no breakthrough being achieved at the negotiating table despite Azerbaijan’s good-faith efforts.

Four, Aliyev was not predisposed to rhapsodizing ideologically with respect to the Turkic aspect of Azerbaijan’s identity politics. Rather, he was a realist who believed that the most constructive features of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations arose from acknowledging mutual interests and economic partnerships, such as an energy pipeline with transit rights over Türkiye; this was predicated on emphasizing “two states” over “one nation.” By understanding Iran’s security concerns and its domestic challenges, Aliyev pursued a nuanced, sensitive policy in setting a climate for cordial neighborly relations with Tehran.

Five, Aliyev had seen a long period of Azerbaijan’s contemporary history dominated by its status as a Soviet republic but that he had been availed of the opportunity to set forth a longer project of the country flourishing as an independent state. He was resolute and absolute in believing the potential of his beloved Azerbaijan could be fully realized. **BD**

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Unpacking ‘One Nation, Two States’

The Panoptic Aliyev-Demirel Fraternity

Ayça Ergun

The exceptional, privileged, and special relationship between Azerbaijan and Türkiye is well known. The two countries are not only friendly allies but also strategic partners whose foreign policy priorities and strategic and economic interests overlap. The leaders of both countries enjoy their partnership as statespersons and friends dating back to when President Heydar Aliyev led Azerbaijan and President Süleyman Demirel led Türkiye.

Both they and their respective successors have frequently referred to their brotherhood in the eyes of their respective publics and when addressing other audiences around the world. Thus, the same pattern has also been embraced by the

current presidents of the two states, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Ilham Aliyev, who both underline and highlight the motto of “one nation, two states” on almost all occasions related to foreign policy, peace, and security building in the Silk Road region, fostering economic ties, and constructing an energy and transportation hub and connectivity network in the region.

This motto is not only a reflection of the policies and priorities of the two states but is also a result of the societal perceptions, popular support, and meanings attributed to each other by their respective public opinions. The social dimension of bilateral relations constitutes the backbone of the preferences and priorities of the leaders

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of both countries. Linguistic and cultural affinity facilitates communication between ordinary citizens, who greet each other with a warm welcome, resulting in “feeling like at home” in each other’s countries.

Simply put, traveling to Türkiye for an ordinary Azerbaijani citizen does not really feel like going abroad: from the early years of restored independence, there was a pre-assumption of kinship with Anatolian Turks. For an ordinary citizen of Türkiye, who was much less literate on Azerbaijani culture and its people than his/her typical Azerbaijani counterpart, it was a sweet surprise to meet with people who speak (more or less) the same language. It was even more surprising to see how he/she was treated like “one of their own” in Azerbaijan, regardless of the occasion—whether due to a government visit, business trip, or to engage in trade (since Azerbaijan was not, until recently, a tourist destination for an ordinary citizen of Türkiye).

Indeed, various types of social encounters have made both ordinary Azerbaijanis and

ordinary Turks see how similar they are to each other. In the more than thirty years since Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1991, societal interaction and people-to-people contact have increased extensively through official visits, commercial relations, educational programs, civil societal initiatives, and intermarriages. One can thus argue that the framework adopted by Demirel and Heydar Aliyev has been significantly filled-in, adopted, reconstructed, and fortified by numerous groups and initiatives originating in the two societies themselves.

As a researcher who started her academic career specializing in Azerbaijan, I have personally enjoyed time and again the feeling of “how similar, or even the same, we are.” During the early 1990s, I found myself “surprised again” by any new instances that reaffirmed Azerbaijani perceptions about Türkiye and Turks.

One can easily guess the scarcity of academic literature and resources on any post-Soviet country at that time, and information was extremely limited

The framework adopted by Demirel and Heydar Aliyev has been significantly filled-in, adopted, reconstructed, and fortified by numerous groups and initiatives originating in the two societies themselves.

for a young researcher wanting to conduct fieldwork.

I departed from Ankara to Baku with a name and phone number of an English-speaking contact person, who would supposedly help me while doing my research, and who I, of course, never met. I landed in this unknown city in the middle of the night, and the next day, the journey that has lasted until today began. I considered myself a total foreigner, and in the process of becoming “our girl,” I experienced how exceptional was the social dimension of the bilateral relationship. Cultural affinities reflected themselves in the care shown by my landladies and their families to convert me from a renter into the equivalent of their daughter, in the enormous support and help provided by my Azerbaijani colleagues who later became lifelong friends, in other post-graduate students who became like sisters to me, and in my respondents who showed their respect and appreciation for a young, female, and Turkish researcher who came all alone to conduct research and understand their country. Not only was my journey exceptional, but so too were the perceptions of Azerbaijanis about Turks and Türkiye and, more importantly, about the meaning attributed to special and privileged

bilateral relations. “One nation, two states,” indeed.

The bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Türkiye are subject to numerous analyses. The particular focus is on foreign policy, energy politics, strategic partnership, transportation projects, Türkiye’s stance on the conflict over Karabakh, evolving relations during and after the Second Karabakh War, and regional cooperation with other Turkic states. Most academic and analytic writings refer to the motto “one nation, two states,” but few examine its meaning. In other words, researchers often take this motto for granted without focusing on the construction of its meaning through attributes of public opinion and public perceptions.

Inspired by an academic researcher’s personal account, this essay builds upon two previous ones published in earlier editions of *Baku Dialogues* that also discusses at length related aspects of “one nation, two states.” This contribution particularly aims to analyze the social dimension of Azerbaijani-Turkish relations. Three cases will drive my argument: the Great Student Project (later titled Turkish Scholarships), the Second Karabakh War, and the natural disaster in Türkiye in February 2023.

My argument is that Azerbaijani perceptions about Türkiye and the Turks are historically rooted, dating back to the early twentieth century, and thus have a powerful memory dimension. Some of this is no doubt due to the fact that at the same moment in their respective histories, and with some notable examples of intellectual and even political cross-pollination, as it were, Azerbaijan and Türkiye opted for relatively similar progressive, secular, and parliamentary approaches to national governance. The Turkish journey has continued without a fundamental break ever since; Azerbaijan’s first attempt was cut down after only a few years, with the violent imposition of the Bolshevik regime. It is thus all the more remarkable that this historical appreciation was well-preserved during the more than seven decades of Soviet rule—during which, it should be noted, ordinary Azerbaijanis and ordinary Turks were largely kept apart—and, in fact, revitalized and then expanded in more recent years thanks in large part to Türkiye’s unconditional support for Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia over Karabakh and related issues.

The initial foreign policy initiatives and early encounters with actual Turks reinforced

Azerbaijanis’ presupposed perceptions of Türkiye. Moreover, Turkish policymakers consciously prioritized relations with Azerbaijan, starting in the early years of the post-Soviet period and continuing into the present. The end of the conflict over Karabakh, which came about thanks to Azerbaijan’s victory in the Second Karabakh War, has been considered the precondition for building up Türkiye’s diplomatic relations with Armenia. As for the Turkish public, sympathy and empathy with Azerbaijanis was more intuitional than substantiated, since Turks’ encounters and their knowledge of Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis were extremely limited. Shared emotions were based on the animosity exhibited by a common foe. Turkish perceptions of Azerbaijanis were built up and constructed only after actual interactions began to take place; although these have increased over time, they still remain relatively limited. Nonetheless, the bond continues to grow stronger.

Turkish Scholarships

The Great Student Project, initiated in 1992, was a significant tool to establish and increase the soft power of Türkiye in Azerbaijan and the Central Asian

states. It is one of the major initiatives in bridge-building between Türkiye and the Silk Road region, and has had a generational impact on the social, economic, and political transformation of these post-Soviet countries.

The project provides students with scholarships to obtain degrees from Turkish universities. The instrumentalization of higher education as a Turkish foreign policy tool provides graduates with a quality education and the necessary skills for a professional career, resulting in the formation of an important segment of the intellectual and professional elite of the target countries. Today, Azerbaijan has a significantly large group of professionals educated in Türkiye.

Particularly during the early years of independence, when Azerbaijan was in grave political, social, and economic turmoil, the Project provided a major opportunity to acquire an education at international standards. Azerbaijan's opening up to the world was facilitated through Türkiye. It contributed to the formation of qualified personnel, raised awareness of Türkiye, provided on-site

knowledge of Turkish society and politics, and established a critical mass of pro-Turkish professionals. Perhaps Türkiye was not considered as a model as such but rather presented a successful example of secular and democratic nation-state building while also constituting a source of inspiration for the construction of a new social, economic, and political order.

The spirit of brotherhood embedded in the historical memory of both states is a source of trust and solidarity. My previous research shows Azerbaijani students “felt at home” while studying in Türkiye. They are welcome, “feet protected and not excluded,” and are never treated as “foreigners.” Getting an education in Türkiye means “learning at international standards,” “a door to get to know the world,” “a tool for rising living standards,” and “a guarantee for a good profession and a position.” In other words, Azerbaijani students experience the internationalization of higher education in what can be called a semi-national context, and some used this opportunity as a stepping stone or bridge to move on to Western institutions.

Azerbaijan's opening up to the world was facilitated through Türkiye.

The Aftermath of Victory

It should be noted that in the past 30 years, Azerbaijani citizens have increasingly had occasions to travel to and learn about Türkiye. The country is a popular tourist destination, Turkish television channels and programs are watched, the products of its popular culture are widespread, and partnerships in trade and joint ventures are increasing.

The knowledge and awareness of Türkiye by Azerbaijani citizens is more updated than that of Turkish citizens of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani students now have opportunities to study abroad in places other than Türkiye. Yet Azerbaijani alumni of Turkish universities still play a remarkable role in maintaining institutionalized bilateral relations in various sectors and remain committed to further strengthening existing networks. In this respect, it can be argued that the Great Student Project has almost completed its mission of creating a Turkish brand in Azerbaijan. Under its new name, Turkish Scholarship, the Turkish government still provides opportunities to younger generations. Moreover, strengthening ties with Turkish alumni could pave the way for new institutionalization and opportunities for further collaboration at the societal level.

The Second Karabakh War itself, and Azerbaijan's victory therein, have changed the geopolitical and geo-strategic context of the South Caucasus and, in fact, the entire Silk Road region. More than ever before, Azerbaijan is now a confident actor with a consolidated nation thanks to having restored its territorial integrity and undertaking the swift reconstruction of its liberated lands. Meanwhile, Türkiye has re-defined its status as a regional power with a proactive position prior to, during, and after the war.

Public opinion polls show that Azerbaijan is considered the best ally for Türkiye, whose citizens empathize and sympathize with their Azerbaijani counterparts largely due to the presence of a common foe seen as an ongoing threat—even though acquaintances with Azerbaijanis are occasional and limited. The support of Turkish public opinion during the Second Karabakh War is possibly exceptional in the history of Azerbaijan's independence. The emotional attachment showed itself in the full coverage of the war in the news and the support messages of numerous social media accounts where the Azerbaijani and Turkish flags

emojis were extensively shared. It can be argued that the Turkish public was very much engaged in following the news during the war. While Azerbaijanis greatly appreciated their friendly ally and strategic partnership because of the political and moral support provided by the Turkish state and leadership, they were also pleased and genuinely touched to witness an outpouring of public support.

Possible scenarios for peace-building and discussions on regional cooperation mark the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War. Both countries are keen to engage in joint energy, trade, and transportation projects to contribute to region-based economic development. A would-be peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan would establish better grounds for regional cooperation. Azerbaijan's consent and blessing for the normalization of relations between Armenia and Türkiye will also eventually contribute to such cooperation and security-building in the region.

The 2023 Earthquake

Türkiye was hit by the biggest natural disaster in its history on 6 February 2023. The country was devastated by a massive earthquake in Kahramanmaraş, Adana,

Hatay, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adıyaman, Osmaniye, Kilis, Malatya, and Elazğ. The estimated number of deaths is more than 50,000, and around 107,000 people were wounded. While the entire nation was experiencing a tremendous tragedy, the state, political parties, civil society, communities, various groups, and individuals were doing their best to reach the cities and provide rescue and help. Foreign countries, and international charities were quick to provide humanitarian aid, and quite a few states sent rescue teams. It was not surprising for the Turkish public to see Azerbaijani help as the first to reach the earthquake zone, when the whole country was in a despair with pain and deep sorrow.

The solidarity exhibited by Azerbaijanis during this period fits into a broader pattern. As an observer of Azerbaijani society and politics for decades, I have witnessed myriad occasions in which the Azerbaijani public acted and reacted just like the Turkish one. These have included seeing people in the streets of Baku celebrating with Turkish flags when a Turkish sports team won an international game or tournament and supporting the Turkish representative in the Eurovision Song Contest.

In my early years in Azerbaijan, it was striking to see how common both countries' wedding and funeral traditions are and how family ties are similar. Therefore, it should not be striking to see the earthquake in Türkiye as a tragedy that was commonly felt and owned. The immediate reaction of Azerbaijani societal actors, families, groups, and individuals was to gather help, including sending goods and clothing to collection centers and asking for bank account numbers to send donations. Support messages were all over social media, and some even went to the earthquake zone.

The Azerbaijani people reached out to Türkiye with all available means. Three photographs were circulated widely. One was a military truck with the Azerbaijani and Turkish flags displayed, symbolic of the official stance of both governments of signifying togetherness. Another was an old lady in the snow carrying her blankets to her neighbor in need. And the last was a driver with a very old car stuffed with duvets and the Turkish flag flying on the top. All three images are proof of a solidarity that goes far beyond interstate relations. The societal bonds between Azerbaijan and Türkiye are well established and strengthened beyond age, income, profession, and

citizenship. These all help make the bilateral relationship truly exceptional. This is the great significance and undisputable veracity of the words spoken by İlham Aliyev, with Erdoğan at his side, during the opening ceremony of the Rize-Artvin Airport on 14 May 2022: "we are the closest countries in the world."

Intensification Ahead

The Azerbaijan-Türkiye bilateral relationship goes beyond the preferences of the leadership. Süleyman Demirel and Heydar Aliyev are the founding fathers of the existing special and privileged ties that are strongly backed by broad and deep societal support. The glorified partnership and alliance is likely to keep evolving in the upcoming years. It appears that there will be an intensification of the web of relations in the future, since the political elite in both countries prioritize each other without exception and are committed to the mutual representation of economic and strategic interests.

Still, the fact that both societies are bound to each other by emotions, sympathy, and friendship should not be taken for granted; this should be further institutionalized through the involvement

of various groups—namely civil society and academia.

Turkish civil society has significant experience in grassroots activism, the promotion of voluntarism, and has professionalized various types of advocacy. Turkish NGOs have also acquired skills and expertise in project-based activities. They have working relations and collaboration with Western civil society groups and have internationalized in the last few decades. Türkiye is not a donor country for civil societal activity abroad, yet the transfer of know-how and expertise could easily and safely be initiated with a reasonable amount of funding, backed by political will and agreement.

The second sphere for the further institutionalization of inter-societal cooperation is education. Most universities in Türkiye have

signed multiple agreements with Azerbaijani universities, which are useful in declaring an interest in co-operation. Yet in all too many cases, these remain on paper instead of in practice. Greater exchanges of students and staff, and the initiation of more joint projects and programs (at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels) would increase interaction. This would also contribute to the increased production of academic knowledge in both Azerbaijan and Türkiye and establish a scholarly community of intellectuals who can contribute to the scientific development of their respective countries.

In short: so as not to underestimate the exceptional societal support provided by both countries, non-state actors should be provided with further opportunities to contribute to the sustainability and endurance of bilateral relations. **BD**

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Shaping the Words of a Culture

Heydar Aliyev's Lasting Impact on the Identity of a Country

Elnur Gajiev

How can literature shape the voice of a people? How may it invite the re-discovery and reclamation of centuries' old tradition while simultaneously orienting a nation towards an uncertain, though desperately future filled with hope? How might words, poems, stories, and songs reveal an identity long repressed, yet now bold enough to form itself anew?

It would not be a surprise if a similar strand of inquiry kept Heydar Aliyev company as he envisioned the future for his fledgling nation through a time of great tumult and transition. For he was no stranger to the significant role of the arts in sustaining, developing, and proliferating the merits of culture,

particularly one with roots as deep as the literary arts of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan's rich literary tradition dates back more than one thousand years, influenced by Persian, Arabic, Turkic, and Russian cultures, amongst many others. During the Soviet era, Azerbaijani literature was notably subject to censorship, and writers were pressured to conform to official political and cultural norms. Nevertheless, many Azerbaijani writers used their work to subtly and subversively disparage the Soviet regime and to promote more democratic and Azerbaijani-centric ideals.

Astute in the many facets of societal, political, and cultural

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impact, Aliyev comprehended the critical role that literary expression played in the history of his country and, more importantly, should play in the future of the country he went on to build. He deeply understood how the literary arts had been instrumental to expressing collective identity, promoting cultural values, preserving traditions, and shaping social, spiritual, and political movements. Aliyev also appreciated the potential it had to offer in informing and influence the emerging yet wounded country's step out from the suppressed shadow of the Soviet regime and into the light of a new day and a new chapter—one that was to be written by the people of Azerbaijan themselves.

This essay explores the various ways in which Aliyev's understanding of the vital cultural role of literature translated into his numerous initiatives to support, preserve, and promote Azerbaijani literary arts, many of which continue to ripple through to this day.

Shaping Culture and Identity

Throughout his life in politics and leadership, Aliyev leveraged his position, influence, and power to specifically carve out space for the cultivation of uniquely Azerbaijani arts and practices. His contributions significantly supported and encouraged the development and promotion of Azerbaijani poetry, literature, and the literary arts. His leadership played a vital role in preserving the literary heritage of Azerbaijan and in encouraging new writers to create works that would contribute to a new chapter in the country's cultural identity.

This essay is intended to honor Aliyev's rippling impact on these areas by examining the role he played in the promotion, preservation, and cultivation of Azerbaijani literary culture.

One of Heydar Aliyev's most significant contributions to Azerbaijani literature was his effort to preserve the country's

Throughout his life in politics and leadership, Aliyev leveraged his position, influence, and power to specifically carve out space for the cultivation of uniquely Azerbaijani arts and practices.

literary heritage. He valued the importance of preserving the works of Azerbaijan's literary legends, like Nizami Ganjavi, Fuzuli, and Nasimi, amongst others. He recognized that the preservation of these works served to set firm roots within the newly developing conscience of Azerbaijani identity, as separate from Soviet sensibilities and norms.

Through connecting with works that far preceded Soviet rule, Aliyev intended to place the Soviet era within a much broader timeline of Azerbaijani cultural existence. Doing so could thereby reduce the imprint of Soviet values, as the people of his country became more acquainted with, and thus prouder of, the significant Azerbaijani cultural moments that existed long before the imposition of Bolshevik rule. It also served Aliyev that many of these ancient Azerbaijani writers opposed regimes, like that of the Soviet Union, that denied individual differences and repressed impassioned expression, thereby stoking the fire of a developing and distinct identity.

Aliyev supported the restoration and renovation of historical literary landmarks, such as the Nizami Museum of Azerbaijani Literature in Ganja, as well as the establishment of the National

Literature Museum in Baku, which now houses a collection of more than 300,000 books, manuscripts, and other literary works.

The Nizami Museum of Azerbaijani Literature is dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Azerbaijani literature, including poetry. It includes exhibitions on the history of Azerbaijani literature, as well as collections of works by Azerbaijani writers. The museum has played an important role in promoting Azerbaijani literature. And from the perspective of celebrating uniquely Azerbaijani arts and culture, its establishment was a rather significant achievement of Aliyev's presidency and legacy.

Additionally, Aliyev recognized and valued the importance of encouraging new writers and poets to contribute to Azerbaijani literature and the developing Azerbaijani cultural identity. He established several literary awards, including what is now known as the Heydar Aliyev Prize for Literature, awarded annually to Azerbaijani writers for their contributions to literature. Of note, in addition to the prize money, winners also receive a publishing contract with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, helping to promote their work in Azerbaijan and well beyond its borders.

Aliyev's leadership also prioritized the promotion of Azerbaijani artists on a global stage. This served to further solidify a sensibility and aesthetic that was uniquely Azerbaijani. To this end, his government promoted several literary events, such as book fairs and literary festivals, which helped to raise the profile of Azerbaijani literature. The Baku International Book Fair, for instance, which was first held in 1999, has become one of the largest literary events in the region, attracting publishers, writers, and literary scholars from around the world to Azerbaijan.

Critical to the sustained development of Azerbaijani literature and identity was Aliyev's support for the translation of foreign literary works into Azerbaijani. During the two periods in which he led the country, numerous works of foreign literature were translated into Azerbaijani, which helped to expose Azerbaijani readers to a broader range of literary works and styles. This effort was also part of Aliyev's broader goal of promoting cultural exchange and global understanding between Azerbaijan and other nations. The precedent this initiative set has continued to this day and has since evolved to prioritizing the translation of notable literary works in Azerbaijani to languages understood abroad.

Moreover, Aliyev's contributions to Azerbaijani literature and poetry extended beyond the national borders of Azerbaijan. He recognized the importance of promoting Azerbaijani literature and poetry internationally and established several mechanisms of literary and cultural exchange with other countries. These exchanges enabled Azerbaijani writers and poets to share their works with a wider audience, promoting cross-cultural understanding and dialogue.

Furthermore, during his presidency, Aliyev supported the establishment of several publishing houses and literary journals, which provided a platform for Azerbaijani writers to showcase their work. Aliyev recognized the importance of literary works in preserving and promoting Azerbaijani culture and heritage, and his support for writers was crucial in developing a diverse and vibrant literary scene in the country.

The Azerbaijani Writers' Union was also greatly strengthened during Aliyev's presidency, with the goal of more actively supporting and promoting Azerbaijani literature. The Union has played an important role in supporting writers in the country, including providing financial support for the publication

of their work. This institution has also organized literary events and festivals, which have helped to raise the profile of Azerbaijani literature, both domestically and internationally. Here too, Aliyev keenly understood the importance of the literary arts in promoting, preserving, and proliferating an emerging Azerbaijani cultural identity that integrated history, heritage, and headway.

In a more specific vein, Aliyev’s contributions to Azerbaijani literature had a profound impact on poetry in the region.

As any literary scholar (or perhaps even pedestrian) in Azerbaijan can attest, poetry has played a profound, even vital role in Azerbaijani literature since its very inception. As a writer himself, Aliyev recognized the particular im-

Aliyev keenly understood the importance of the literary arts in promoting, preserving, and proliferating an emerging Azerbaijani cultural identity that integrated history, heritage, and headway.

portance of poetry to the developing cultural identity of his country and its people. He supported the work of established poets and encouraged the development of new poets. The aforementioned Heydar Aliyev Prize for Literature has since been awarded to several poets, including Vagif Samadoglu, who

was recognized for his significant contributions to the long canon of Azerbaijani poetry.

Aliyev, himself, played a rather notable role in sustaining Azerbaijani poetry. Throughout his lifetime of public service, Aliyev supported the establishment of several literary foundations and organizations. During his presidency, he established several foundations and grants, which have provided financial and moral support to poets and other artists in the country. These have also supported the publication

of countless books and collections of poems, ensuring that the literary arts of Azerbaijan thrive ever further. This legacy has been carried forth since his passing in 2003 through the establishment of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, which continues to support and sustain the development of Azerbaijani poetry, as well as countless other art forms.

Aliyev’s support for poetry was not limited to the establishment of cultural institutions. He was also a writer himself and published several collections of

writings during his lifetime. These have been widely read and appreciated, and he, too, has been recognized as a noteworthy literary figure in the tapestry of Azerbaijani writers.

Aliyev began writing poetry at a young age, and his works were first published in various Azerbaijani literary magazines in the 1940s and 1950s. One of his earliest poems, “Azerbaijan,” was written in 1945, and was a celebration of the beauty of Azerbaijan’s landscapes, culture, and people.

Aliyev’s poetry has since been published in various collections, including *Selected Works* (1979), *Inexhaustible Source* (1997), and *Heydar Aliyev: Poems* (2004). Much of his poetry is characterized by its patriotic themes, as he often wrote about the history and traditions of Azerbaijan. His literary works often reflected a deep veneration for his country, its people, and its enduring culture. Aliyev’s writing style was characterized by simplicity and powerful imagery. Additionally, he dedicated time to writing essays and articles; he wrote extensively on topics related to Azerbaijani ethos, history, and politics, as well as on

Aliyev recognized the particular importance of poetry to the developing cultural identity of his country and its people.

issues of global consequence that were emerging at an especially pivotal and prospectively prolific moment in the history of his country.

Additionally, Aliyev’s poetry was known for its emotive language and its ability to evoke a sense of national pride and unity among Azerbaijanis. His poems often celebrated the natural beauty of Azerbaijan, its cultural heritage, and the resilience and determination of its people—all themes essential to crafting a national identity resilient enough to endure the tumult and trials of the first years as a reborn, independent nation. One such poem—titled “My Azerbaijan”—continues to be read widely through the country and has served a symbol of national pride in Azerbaijan.

Furthermore, Aliyev’s support for the literary arts extended beyond poetry and literature to other forms of artistic expression. During his presidency, he recognized the importance of art and culture in the development of Azerbaijani society, and he supported the establishment of several cultural institutions, including what would become the Heydar Aliyev

Cultural Center in Baku. The center includes galleries for contemporary art, music and dance studios, and other facilities for cultural events and activities.

Aliyev also recognized the potential of modern technologies for telling the

story of Azerbaijani reclamation and encouraged the development of new literary forms such as cinema and television. Heydar's support for the film industry in Azerbaijan led to the production of several critically acclaimed motion pictures and helped to elevate the country's budding film industry.

As a patron of the arts, Aliyev also provided financial support to artists in Azerbaijan. He established several scholarships and grants to support young artists in the country. This support was crucial in enabling many artists to pursue their work and develop their skills, contributing to the growth of the artistic community in Azerbaijan and thus the expressive voice of its people.

In addition to his support for individual artists, Aliyev also

His legacy has been carried forth since his passing in 2003 through the establishment of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, which continues to support and sustain the development of Azerbaijani poetry, as well as countless other art forms.

placed great importance on preserving and promoting virtually all other aspects of Azerbaijan's cultural heritage. For instance, he supported the establishment of several museums and cultural institutions, including the National

Museum of Azerbaijani Carpets and the Museum of Mugham. These institutions continue to play an important role in preserving traditional Azerbaijani art forms for the generations to come and making them accessible to a wider and more international audience.

A Legacy Sustained

Carrying the torch forward, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation was established in 2004 as a private charitable organization dedicated to promoting culture, education, and social welfare. The Foundation has been instrumental in supporting the literary arts of Azerbaijan, including literature and poetry, through various initiatives and programs.

One of the primary ways in which the Heydar Aliyev Foundation has supported the literary arts of Azerbaijan is by publishing books and collections of poetry. Since its inception, the Foundation has published over 500 books on various topics, including literature and poetry, primarily in Azerbaijani and Russian, but

also English and other languages. Among its many other activities, both at home and abroad, the Foundation provides funding and logistical support to writers and poets to publish their works, thus providing a platform for emerging writers and poets to showcase their talent and further the promotion of a uniquely Azerbaijani voice.

In addition to publishing books and collections of poetry, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation has established several literary events and festivals. One such event is the "Days of Azerbaijani Literature" festival, which takes place annually in various cities of Azerbaijan. This festival brings together

Heydar Aliyev's contributions to the literary arts and culture of Azerbaijan set the stage for the emergence of a uniquely Azerbaijani identity—one that honored the heritage of its history and traditions, acknowledged the difficulties endured over the past century, and stepped into the possibility of a future that is still very much unfolding.

writers, poets, and literary scholars from around the world to share their works, discuss their craft, and promote Azerbaijani literature and poetry internationally.

The Heydar Aliyev Foundation has also established several literary awards to recognize and encourage excellence in Azerbaijani literature and po-

etry. As noted above, one such award is the Heydar Aliyev Prize for Literature, which is awarded annually to a writer or poet for his or her significant contribution to Azerbaijani literature. The Foundation also sponsors the "Golden Pen" award, which recognizes emerging writers and poets for their talent and potential.

And so, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation has continued its namesake's legacy by making significant contributions to the literary arts of Azerbaijan, including literature and poetry, through various initiatives and programs. These efforts have helped to promote and preserve Azerbaijani culture, heritage,

and identity, while also ensuring that the literary arts of Azerbaijan continue to serve as an essential element in shaping a uniquely Azerbaijani consciousness, formed by diverse voices, perspectives, and approaches, though all unified under a shared identity.

Unique Identity

Heydar Aliyev's contributions to the literary arts and culture of Azerbaijan set the stage for the emergence of a uniquely Azerbaijani identity—one that honored the heritage of its history and traditions, acknowledged the difficulties endured over the past century, and stepped into the possibility of a future that is still very much unfolding. Aliyev's initiatives to preserve, promote, and proliferate the country's literary legacy, encourage new writers, and sponsor literary events has helped to develop and elevate the profile of Azerbaijani literature, both nationally and internationally. His leadership played a foundational

role in cultivating an environment amenable to literary expression, cultural veneration, and identity formation.

As writers Ivy Ross and Susan Magsamen so aptly put it, "Art creates culture, culture creates community, and community creates humanity." Aliyev's far-reaching support for the arts enabled many artists, writers, and poets to pursue their artistic callings and thereby contribute to the development and growth of culture, community, identity, and perhaps most importantly, humanity in his country of Azerbaijan.

Have those questions that once kept Aliyev company so many years ago found their answers in all that has unfolded since? Perhaps. Or perhaps, they have evolved to embrace the distinct contexts of a country and a world now 30 years later—questions intricately woven into the impact of words and the arts in further shaping the culture, identity, and humanity of Aliyev's greatest work, Azerbaijan. ^{BD}

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The Future of Global Uncertainties

Bilahari Kausikan

The title of this essay—“The Future of Global Uncertainties”—may seem paradoxical, if not downright nonsensical. After all, how can one speak about the future of uncertainties? It would indeed be a fool’s errand to try—that is, unless the parameters of uncertainty can be defined. But if the parameters of uncertainty can be defined, are they really uncertainties?

Although I confess to a penchant for paradox, the apparent contradiction will be more comprehensible if we bear in mind the distinction made by a former U.S. Secretary of Defense, the late Donald Rumsfeld, between “known unknowns” (“that is to say, we know there are some things we do not know”) and “unknown unknowns” (“the ones we don’t know we don’t know”).

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My emphasis will be on geopolitics: broadly speaking, while the world has indeed become more uncertain, what we are confronted with are primarily “known unknowns.”

Known Unknowns

Looking around the world today, I cannot but conclude that we have all seen this movie before. The cast of characters and locations may have changed. But whether we look at the war in Ukraine, or U.S.-China strategic rivalry, or aggressive Chinese behavior in the East and South China Seas and the Himalayas, or the consequent stresses on globalization and the risks of a world recession—we come to realize that the plots are not new. Rather, they are

new variants of old plots within established patterns of state behavior. Some readers may remember that there was a slew of articles and statements a few years ago—including some by practitioners who ought to have known better—that riffed on some variation of the theme of the “return” of great power competition. This word, “return,” struck me: when did great power competition ever go away? Competition is an inherent characteristic of relations among sovereign states that is never entirely absent at some level of intensity in all the international relationships. And, tragically, competition sometimes becomes conflict.

For most of the twentieth century, international order was contested, at times very violently during the First and Second World Wars, and then through proxies during the Cold War (once nuclear weapons made direct superpower conflict too dangerous). But after the Cold War ended, the fundamental reality of international relations was masked for time by the overwhelming

dominance of the United States and its allies—its proponents called this “unipolarity.” American dominance made it seem as if only one conception of international order was left standing, and even emboldened some to claim the “end of history.”

In that extreme form, the delusion did not last very long. But a pale version still lingers on in the idea that certain values are, or ought to be, universal—or that certain interpretations of certain values are, or ought to be, universal. The origins and development of this immensely damaging idea has been examined critically in various places, including by Damjan Krnjević Mišković in an essay in the Winter 2021-2022 edition of *Baku Dialogues* titled “Atticism and the Summit for Democracy,” and will not be examined closely here.

One of the most foolish statements I have ever heard was something former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said in criticizing the 2014

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Russian annexation of Crimea: he called it “nineteenth century behavior in the twenty-first century.” There are many good reasons to criticize the annexation of Crimea, but this particular criticism was singularly foolish because it assumes that your adversary should share your values. Why should it? If a country shares your values, it would not be your adversary.

The conflict between the West and Russia over Ukraine that led to the annexation of Crimea, and the present war, arose precisely because of differences of values or interests—this pretty much amounts to the same thing, because values are interests. Every country has its own values, which are still interests to them: even if you find them abhorrent, you will have to deal with them—whether by diplomacy or deterrence. The West—particularly the EU and most of its member states—confuses posture for policy; it also confuses feeling virtuous for action. Nothing really effective was done about Crimea until it was too late to stop the current war. And it is worth reminding ourselves that when we talk about a “rules-based international order,” it is a mistake to believe that just because we may use the same words, or the same phrase, we all necessarily always mean the same thing. There will

inevitably be different interpretations of the rules, or different emphasis on different rules according to different interests; and this is true even among the closest of allies, partners, and friends—let alone rivals or competitors.

A parallel illusion was the idea that as China reformed and opened up economically, its political system would, if not exactly converge with Western democracies, at least move in a relatively more open direction. And there were some tentative steps in that direction at the local level, towards the end of the Hu Jintao Administration, which in retrospect, some may have over-interpreted out of wishful thinking. We owe Chinese president Xi Jinping a vote of thanks for making it clear to all—except the terminally naïve—that the purpose of reform in a Leninist system is always and only to strengthen and entrench the power of the vanguard Party that is characterized inter alia as holding a monopoly on power. Similarly, the U.S. and the EU ought to thank Russian president Vladimir Putin for inadvertently rescuing and revitalizing the idea of the West—the “global” West, so not just the United States, Canada, and the EU (and its member states), but also Japan, Australia, and South Korea, and, from time to time (on particular issues at least), other countries as well.

After the end of the Cold War, the idea of the West had loosened considerably, and looked to be in some danger of evaporating entirely. And the idea of the West was innervated precisely because of the fantasy that everybody would, whether they liked it or not and whether they are aware of it or not, in some sense, eventually become part of the West.

But if everybody is destined to become the West, what is the West? After the Cold War, even the U.S. couldn’t always agree and sometimes publicly and loudly disagreed. However, the period when American dominance masked the central reality of competing interests and strategic rivalry was historically abnormal and short. It only lasted the 20 years between 1989—when the Soviet Union was beginning to unravel and China was still reeling from the Tiananmen crisis—and 2008-2009, when the Global Financial Crisis led to widespread disillusionment, including from within America itself, with U.S.-led

We are now returning to a more historically normal period, where competition and rivalry between major powers is the primary structural reality of international relations, where international order is going to be contested, and where the possibility of war between major powers again looms over international relations.

globalization. It was also during this period that the very dominance of American power began to become self-subverting. Dominance led to hubris; hubris led the United States into debilitating adventures in the Middle East that were justified, at least in part, by reference to the pro-

motion of values claimed to be universal; and war in the Middle East distracted the U.S. at a crucial time, as China recovered from Tiananmen and began its period of spectacular growth that has led to relative changes in the global distribution of power.

The changes described above are only relative and not absolute. However, they will eventually lead to a more symmetrical strategic balance between the United States and China.

New Cold War?

The short and historically abnormal period of “unipolarity” is now over. We are now returning to a more historically

normal period, where competition and rivalry between major powers is the primary structural reality of international relations, where international order is going to be contested, and where the possibility of war between major powers again looms over international relations.

The possibility of war between major powers should be stressed, as war in other forms of state-sponsored violence has been a constant reality for many in the Middle East, Africa, and other parts of the Global South. The Ukraine war is unique only because it is occurring in the heart of Europe—or, to put things very bluntly, because white people are killing each other for a change—and also because nuclear weapons states and permanent members of the UN Security Council are engaged (Russia directly, and the U.S., UK, and France at a step removed).

These are familiar uncertainties, but things have also changed. The rest of this essay will analyze what I think has changed and what the implications of these changes may portend for future international order.

As dangerous as it undoubtedly is, and as egregious as Russia's violation of some of the most fundamental principles of international conduct has been, the

war in Ukraine, which has pitted a reenergized West against Russia, is actually a second-order issue in global geopolitics. Ukraine has become an unwitting proxy in the larger and more strategically important contest between the United States and China. U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on 25 April 2022 that the U.S. wants to use the war in Ukraine to harm the Kremlin: “we want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine.”

Left unsaid, but perhaps clear enough, is that this is meant as an object lesson for China. What Xi and Putin have in common—what serves as the foundation of the “no limits friendship between the two states”—is their shared contempt for the West, which they regard as at least effete, if not in irreversible and absolute decline. I do not know if the unexpectedly swift, cohesive, and resolute Western response to the war in Ukraine has really changed Xi's view of the West. But China's partnership with Russia has certainly placed Beijing in a very awkward position. This partnership has now become an additional serious complication at a time when China is already facing many other complicated internal and external issues.

That being said, no state is ever going to shun or refuse to deal with China, including all the Western states. But as long as Beijing cannot bring itself to directly criticize the Russian invasion, it will be very difficult—to say the least—for China to substantively improve relations with the European Union and its member states in order to temper or balance its strategic competition with the United States. Furthermore, Beijing making any statements about the need for negotiations and expressing concerns about the nuclear risk are not going to make a real difference in this respect; nor will cultivating relations with the Global South make a real difference. But China cannot risk a break with Russia because it has no other partner anywhere in the world of comparable strategic weight that shares its distrust of the American-led international order.

Nevertheless, Moscow cannot be happy with Beijing's tepid support that has highlighted the limits to their “no-limits” strategic cooperation. However, Russia also has no other partner of any strategic weight, anywhere in the world, that is prepared to stand on its side against the West or against any country that has, in its own interests, taken a nuanced position on Ukraine—because acting in your

own interests is not the same thing as siding with Russia.

Similarly, taking a strong stance against the invasion in furtherance of your own interests—as Singapore has done—is not the same thing as siding with the West. This seems to be a simple proposition, but it is one that some countries have great difficulty in understanding.

The larger point is this: unless the war takes a decisive turn in Russia's favor, which does not seem very likely, Russia and China are trapped in an unenviable geopolitical position. It follows that there is no strong incentive for the U.S. to seek any quick or permanent negotiated settlement. While there are those in the EU bloc that may still today have an interest in a quick and permanent negotiated settlement, the fact is they are incapable of dealing with Russia without the U.S.—and those Europeans are not willing to set the pace on this issue. Therefore, the most probable scenario is a prolonged war that will eventually taper off into a frozen conflict. Ultimately, the world will have to live with these consequences for the foreseeable future.

It is clear that the Western characterization of the conflict over Ukraine, and, more generally, of U.S.-China competition, as being

a contest between democracy and authoritarianism is both simplistic and ill advised. “Democracy” is a protean term and not every country regards every aspect of Western democracy with admiration or every aspect of every authoritarian system with revulsion. To frame the issue in this way is thus to limit support rather than expand it. However, the now common trope that describes U.S.-China competition as “a new Cold War” is perhaps an even more misleading framework because it evokes a superficially plausible, but in fact intellectually lazy and inappropriate historical analogy that fundamentally misrepresents the nature of that competition. This misrepresentation can be dangerous for both Washington and Beijing, as well as for the rest of the world, as states across the globe seek to position themselves in the evolving geopolitical environment.

One System, Not Two

There are key differences between the present-day U.S.-China competition and what would be required for this to seriously amount to a “new Cold War.” When all is said and done, the analogy simply does not hold up. China is not the new Soviet Union.

But the question remains whether America’s posture has remained the same.

Consider that during the Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviet Union led two separate systems connected with each other minimally and at their margins. Therefore, the choices for other states, including members of the Non-Aligned Movement like Singapore, were essentially binary—although, when national interests dictated, it was sometimes pretended to be otherwise.

Moreover, although the prospect of mutual destruction instilled prudence and eventually tempered their rivalry through the execution of the doctrine of *détente* during the Richard Nixon Administration by Henry Kissinger, the essential aim of U.S.-Soviet competition was for one system to displace the other—we all remember how Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev famously told a group of Western ambassadors in 1956 that “we will bury you.” However, it has been a very long time since anyone could seriously hope, or fear, that communism will replace capitalism on a global scale.

Now contrast this with the present situation. Whatever their differences—and they are great—the U.S. and China are both vital,

irreplaceable parts of a single global system, intimately enmeshed with each other and with the rest of the world by a web of supply chains of a scope, density, and complexity that is historically unprecedented. This intertwined web was established and quickly spread to all corners of the globe during the short post-Cold War period of unchallenged American dominance—the “unipolar moment” to which I referred earlier. It is now an established fact in its own right; and it has even managed to outlive that dominance. Its consequences are what we call globalization or interdependence.

There have been earlier periods of interdependence between rival major powers, but nothing like this complex web of supply chains has ever existed before. This is what distinguishes twenty-first-century interdependence from earlier interdependence periods. Certainly, neither the United States nor China are comfortable with this situation because their interdependence also exposes their mutual vulnerabilities, which is why both have tried to temper their vulnerabilities in this regard.

For its part, the United States and its allies have tried to enhance the resilience of the key sectors of their economies by diversification and by reducing dependence on China for

their most important supply chains. China, on the other hand, has tried to temper its vulnerabilities by attempting to become more self-reliant in key technologies and by placing more emphasis on domestic household consumption to drive its growth. It is doubtful that either will succeed—at least not entirely.

Both strategies—diversification and self-reliance—are easier said than done in the twenty-first century: for instance, in February 2023 it was announced that U.S.-China trade in good hit an all-time high of \$690 billion.

Even if their respective strategies do end up working, the measures both countries have adopted (and may adopt in the time ahead) will take a long time to have a significant effect. This is neither to say that a partial bifurcation of the system has not already occurred nor that there will not be further bifurcation—particularly in areas of technology with security implications, such as semiconductors, the internet, and big data. But it is doubtful that the system will ever divide across all sectors into two separate systems as existed during the Cold War. Complete deglobalization is highly improbable.

The cost of doing so—both for the two principal states at issue

and for pretty much all other countries—would just be too high. Whatever concerns about China’s behavior there may be, even the closest American ally is never going to cut itself off entirely from China. And few, if any (Western) companies are ever going to entirely forswear the Chinese market—in fact, most will probably pursue a “China plus” strategy to spread risks around more evenly. But that hardly amounts to the same thing. Moreover, whatever successes China may have in its research and development (R&D) efforts—and we should not underestimate China—Beijing has no real alternative (for the foreseeable future) other than to look to the global West for the critical enabling technologies that it needs to be able to put the results of its R&D to practical use.

Domestic household consumption relies on confidence and much better social safety nets to further free-up household spending. This

Like it or not, both the United States and China must accept the risks and vulnerabilities of remaining connected to each other. Washington and Beijing will compete robustly within the single system of which they are both vital parts. And the dynamics of competition within this system are fundamentally different from the competition between systems that existed during the Cold War.

is basically the case for every country, including China. Indeed, it will take some time for China to restore domestic confidence, given Beijing’s response to the pandemic—the so called zero-COVID approach—and, more importantly, the country’s chaotic exit from that same approach. It will take even more time to establish adequate social security nets in a country of China’s size and uneven development. The Chinese slogan of “dual circulation”—with “dual” here referring to an external component—acknowledges the country’s inability to separate itself from the world.

The conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing is that, like it or not, both the United States and China must accept the risks and vulnerabilities of remaining connected to each other. Washington and Beijing will compete robustly *within* the single system of which they are both vital parts. And the dynamics of competition within

this system are fundamentally different from the competition *between* systems that existed during the Cold War.

Competition within a single system is about achieving a position that will enable one to benefit from interdependence while mitigating one’s own vulnerabilities and exploiting the vulnerabilities of one’s rivals. In other words, competition within a single system is about using interdependence as a tool of competition—it is certainly not about one system displacing the other.

There is no better example of these complicated and complex dynamics than high-end semiconductors, which are the most serious Chinese vulnerability with regards to dependence on enabling technologies. All the most critical nodes in the semiconductor supply chain are held by the U.S., its allies, and its friends—yet China represents about 40 percent of the global semiconductor market. Basic economics textbooks teach us that it would be foolish for a country to completely cut off its own companies, and those headquartered in friendly and allied states, from 40 percent of the market without doing serious damage both to the states and the companies. And this, in turn, impels a policy of fine discriminations

rather than a heavy-handed approach—a scalpel, not an axe, as it were. In fact, as of August 2020, most applications for exemptions to bans on exports of technology to China has been approved by the United States government.

And so, the choices facing the United States and China, and also pretty much all other countries, are complex: they are no longer binary choices (if they ever were). This is important because complexity broadens both our ability to exercise agency and to find new options (provided we have the will to recognize the opportunities). Complexity also broadens both the agility and courage to seize these same opportunities on offer. And this is important because although China and the United States each indicate that they do not want to make third countries choose between them, in fact, they do want us to choose: China, in particular, devotes a great deal of resources on influence operations intended to impose false binary choices on us. The United States utilizes other means to achieve what is effectually the same result, including a long-standing policy of purposefully designing its own coercive measures (e.g., economic sanctions) to have extraterritorial reach (universal jurisdiction)—the chief aim of which is to compel non-American

entities engaging in otherwise legitimate and legal commercial activities with a targeted third state to adhere to American executive and legislative preferences. More recently, the United States has also begun making expanded use of its amended 1959 National Security Foreign Direct Product Rule, which enables the U.S. government to place controls on the re-export or transfer of foreign-made items if their production involves technology, software, or equipment if any part of their intellectual property originates in America.

Accordingly, while it is important not to be complacent about the uncertainties, we should also recognize that they are not unprecedented. We have survived and prospered amidst previous periods of uncertainty. The first prerequisite for doing so again is psychological poise and keeping a sense of perspective. No sovereign state is without agency. While this may be obvious in the case of continental-sized countries, it also holds true for tiny city states like Singapore and pretty much all

other countries in between (both in terms of size and power).

Questioning America

When deciding how a state ought to exercise its agency to protect and advance its interests in the midst of U.S.-China strategic rivalry, its leaders will need to begin by acknowledging that there are serious questions about both countries. What follows is an examination of some of these questions as they apply to both, starting with the United States.

The biggest concerns about the United States center on its domestic politics. Without getting into all the details, I think it is safe to say that all democracies are to some extent dysfunctional by design: distrust in an over-concentration of power

When deciding how a state ought to exercise its agency to protect and advance its interests in the midst of U.S.-China strategic rivalry, its leaders will need to begin by acknowledging that there are serious questions about both countries.

results in restraint at the cost of efficiency. Americans politely call this feature of democratic political systems “checks and balances.” Still, one can be forgiven for feeling that American politics are often more dysfunctional than absolutely necessary.

And even the foregoing has to be put in perspective. Consider that a vain, egocentric (to the point of being narcissistic), and fear-mongering demagogue runs for President of the United States and wins. Whilst this perhaps sounds like a description of former U.S. president Donald Trump, it also describes the basic premise of a 1935 novel titled *It Can't Happen Here* by the great American writer, Sinclair Lewis. Lewis based his plot on the political career of a real-life Louisiana politician, Huey Long, who was elected as Governor and then U.S. Senator as a member of the Democrat Party, and who might well have had become U.S. president had he not been assassinated in the same year as the novel was published. Similarly, even if Trump is defeated in 2024—or if he changes his mind about running this time around—it seems unreasonable to presuppose that a Trump-like political phenomenon will never again be manifested in the United States.

The purpose of highlighting Lewis's almost 90-year-old novel is that Trump, together with all that he represents, did not suddenly appear out of thin air; and the phenomenon he brought back to the fore will not suddenly vanish into the ether. He represents an established strain of American

political culture that periodically surfaces—one that political scientist Richard Hofstadter called “the paranoid style” in American politics. It would thus be imprudent to ignore these admittedly serious shortcomings of the American system. However, one should also not forget that despite its politics, the United States is still a major power, and that those who are overly focused on its periodically self-destructive and almost always ill-disciplined political process to the extent of underestimating the robustness of the American regime often have not lived long enough to regret it.

The fundamental sources of American strength, creativity, and resilience have never depended totally on what happens in Washington, DC. More fundamentally, they reside in its great universities and corporations, on the system personified by Wall Street, and on the Main Streets of its 50 states. American federal politics is not unimportant, but, in my view, is ultimately a second-order factor. Politics has never prevented the United States from eventually doing the right thing, or at least doing what is in its interests, but only after first having exhausted all the alternatives—to borrow from a quotation apocryphally attributed to Winston Churchill.

Thus, for instance, there seems to be a basic political consensus on the key issues of China and the war in Ukraine. At least for now. Still, there will surely be many political quarrels to come on these issues—quarrels within the U.S., between the U.S. and the EU, and within both the EU and NATO. Democracies are by nature quarrelsome, but there will be quarrels primarily over the means, not the ends, of policy. No state should allow itself to be distracted by American domestic politics nor to overreact to them. There is only one United States of America, and the rest of the world has to work with it—and to learn to do so in a new context.

And that new context is plain to see: with the end of the Cold War, the U.S. no longer faces any existential external threat of the kind posed by the Soviet Union. Today's Russia is seen as dangerous, but for economic and demographic reasons its long-term trajectory is downwards and has been accelerated by the Kremlin's disastrous miscalculation in Ukraine. China is a formidable rival, but competition within a system cannot be—by definition—existential because the survival of the system is not at stake. Moreover, China is the principal beneficiary of the existing system and has no strong

incentive to kick over the table and change it in any fundamental way for the simple reason that its own economy rests on the foundation of that same system—and, hence, on its perpetuation. Beijing may want to shift the U.S. to the periphery of the system and take its place at the center, but that is not an existential threat. Even if it had the capability to do so, which is doubtful, China cannot displace the U.S. from the system without the risk of undermining it entirely—and that is clearly not in Beijing's interest. In other words: reform, yes; revolution, no.

The point is ultimately a simple one: without an existential threat, there is no longer any reason for the United States to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, [and] oppose any foe” to uphold international order. The essential priorities of every post-Cold War U.S. administration have been domestic, with the George W. Bush Administration being the exception that proves the rule—and even this exception was not self-imposed but rather forced upon it by 9/11. Since then, every U.S. president has tried to rectify Bush's mistakes by disengaging from its Middle Eastern entanglements—with limited success, admittedly, until Biden finally cut the Gordian knot in 2021.

That ruthless move in particular, as well as the domestic focus of all post-Cold War administrations more generally, have often been misrepresented as the United States retreating from its self-appointed international “obligations,” but this should be more accurately understood as America redefining the terms of its engagement with the world. Again, this is not entirely new.

Half a century ago, the United States corrected the mistake it had made in Vietnam by withdrawing from direct intervention and towards maintaining stability in East Asia by assuming the role of an offshore balancer. It has been remarkably consistent in that role ever since. An analogous shift to an offshore balancer role is now occurring in the Middle East after the withdrawal from Afghanistan and, perhaps, sooner or later it will occur in Europe, too—delayed, but not diverted, by the war in Ukraine.

An offshore balancer is not in retreat, but demands more of its allies, partners, and friends to maintain balance. With former U.S. President Barack Obama, it took the form of an emphasis on multilateralism—and multilateralism is a form of burden sharing; his successor Donald Trump made unilateral and crudely transactional

demands; whereas Biden is consultative. But the present occupant of the White House does not consult allies, partners, and friends merely for the pleasure of their company. He is consulting states near and far to ascertain what they are prepared to do to further America's strategic concerns—and that is something that should never be forgotten.

For those countries that meet his expectations, Biden has gone further than any of his recent predecessors in providing them with tools to help the United States advance common strategic aims—the establishment of the Australia, United Kingdom, and United States Partnership (AUKUS) in 2021 is a good example. In this sense, Biden's consultative approach is a more polite form of Trump's crude transactionalism.

On the other hand, if a country does not meet his expectations, Biden will probably still be polite, but that country should not expect to be taken too seriously. This shift to a more transactional, whether polite or otherwise, American foreign policy is likely to be permanent. This is a fact that ASEAN, the GCC states, and even some of America's allies in Europe are only beginning to understand.

Questioning China

States ought to be concerned with China as well—not simply the United States. The most crucial questions about China revolve around what lessons, if any, Xi Jinping has taken from his experience of the United States over the past decade. And what has been the primary lesson? That there have been two transitions in the White House, and in the last one there was no change of approach towards China. Moreover, during this period Beijing has seen its most important partner commit a major blunder (i.e., the Ukraine war), which has put China in an awkward position.

More so than in the recent past, it is important to stress the personal (Xi Jinping) rather than the collective (China), because the most important consequence of the first decade of Xi's rule has involved him utilizing his high-profile anti-corruption campaign against senior Party cadres to crush all organized opposition and concentrate power around himself. This, in turn, led to the abolition of term limits for the top position. The most important consequence of all that has been to reintroduce a single point of failure into the Chinese system. Authoritarian systems are able to set goals and pursue them

relentlessly over the long term, but this is a strength only if the goal was correct in the first place. In China, the two ends of the political spectrum in this respect are set by Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Mao's ideologically-driven Great Leap Forward and subsequent Cultural Revolution were unmitigated disasters whilst Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic decision to begin a comprehensive process of "reform and open up" saved the Chinese Communist Party.

In no other system could a leader take a cold, hard look at his life's work, decide it had all gone wrong, and make a 180 degree turn without significant opposition. But it took millions of deaths, and the need to avert an existential threat to the Communist Party, to change course—too often, it takes catastrophes to force policy changes in a China-like authoritarian system.

So where is Xi situated on this spectrum? The optimists us can point to his recent reversal of China's zero-COVID policy that, botched though it was, was nevertheless the right thing to do. They could also point to the easing of controls on big tech companies' efforts to revive the property sector, the nuanced support for Russia, and to the quest to improve at least the atmosphere or relations with

America. All this would suggest that Xi may be reverting to Deng's style of pragmatism. Although this is not an assessment that can be entirely dismissed, I am inclined to be more skeptical: it is more prudent to continue to reserve judgment rather than to prematurely conclude that Xi has definitely shifted his overall approach.

Indeed, the foregoing examples may as easily be interpreted as being simply tactical adjustments to mitigate mounting internal and external problems, rather than a strategic change of direction. The spontaneous, country-wide protests against the country's zero-COVID policy brought together workers and students—a combination that surely had a very ominous resonance in modern Chinese history for the Communist Party. This should be put alongside the fact that these were directed against a policy that Xi had claimed as a personal achievement. Hence the argument that they could neither be ignored nor effectively contained (or repressed)—particularly in the context of long-term demographic trends, present slow growth, and high youth unemployment. The lack of preparation for the shift away from the zero-COVID policy clearly suggests an emergency response rather than a deliberate rethink. Even if the authorities

wanted to do it, there will be no going back to zero-COVID.

But the same cannot be said of the other examples I mentioned, which also may well be understood as emergency responses. For example, it was not wrong to try to dampen an over-leveraged and overvalued property sector, which may indirectly account for one quarter or more of China's GDP and thus pose a very serious systemic risk. But the response, which consisted basically of reverting to all macro-economic stimulus tools to try and boost growth, only further postpones rather than resolves the problem. It could even magnify its scope.

What about big tech? Well, it had already been cut down to size, and the relaxation is occurring within new parameters. Xi would probably not hesitate to act again in the event another Jack Ma-like character with ideas beyond what the Party considers his station in life should be foolish enough to take a higher profile. Certainly nothing occurred at the Twentieth Party Congress in October 2022—which took place only a month or so before these shifts—that suggests any strategic rethinking of the direction set in the first decade of Xi's rule. Those ten years have made it clear that Xi is a true Leninist, in the sense

that his solution to almost every issue has been to insist on strengthening the role of the Party and its ideology, which has now become synonymous with Xi after having been codified in four thick volumes (with, no doubt, more to come). And this synonymy has been true even of the most fundamental issues facing China.

At the First Plenum of the Eighteenth Party Congress in November 2012 (this is the one at which Xi became the top leader), the Chinese Communist Party itself acknowledged that the country's growth model—which had brought spectacular results in the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s—was not sustainable over the long run. That was an admission by the Party itself. The next year (in November 2013), the Eighteenth Party Congress held its Third Plenum and announced the outlines of a new growth model that promised “a decisive role for the market in the allocation of resources.” The timings of both the acknowledgement and the announcement suggests that they were probably based primarily on earlier work by Xi's immediate

predecessor, Jiang Zemin, and his outgoing team, rather than Xi himself, who was at the time probably more preoccupied with consolidating his power than charting a new strategic course for the economy per se.

At any rate, very little of that 2013 plan has been implemented—according to some academic estimates, no more than perhaps 20 percent. Xi's emphasis has clearly been on the state sector and Party control rather than the market. China is not about to collapse and probably will improvise its way forward, but it should be underlined

No state can avoid engaging with both the U.S. and China; and dealing with both simultaneously is a necessary condition for dealing effectively with either.

that growth has been the key pillar of the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy for three decades. And at the Nineteenth Party Congress in October 2017, Xi himself redefined China's “principal contradiction”—a classical Marxist term—to acknowledge the Chinese people's growing expectations for a better life. However, Xi has so far been halfhearted about making the market adjustments that the Party itself had deemed necessary to sustain growth to meet rising expectations. This seems to be a strong indicator

of where his true priorities may lie. Additionally, his “common prosperity” slogan is a clear indication that the Party does not approve of what it has dubbed the “disorderly expansion of capital”—this also points in the same direction.

In June 2021, Xi enjoined senior Party cadres to present an image of a “credible, lovable, and respectable China.” This suggests that he knows that his foreign policy has not exactly been a stellar success. The “wolf warriors” seem to have been leashed and muzzled—at least for now. But the real issue goes beyond overzealous diplomats.

More than any of his predecessors, Xi has tried to use the ethno-nationalist historical narrative of humiliation, rejuvenation, and the attainment of the Chinese Dream to justify the Party's monopoly of power and his personal ascendancy over it. With no other credible legitimating narratives, the Party cannot significantly modify or temper this narrative—and there is no indication that Xi thinks it necessary to do so. This essentially revanchist narrative instills Chinese foreign policy with

No country is without concerns about one or another aspect of both American and Chinese behavior; they exist even in the closest of American allies, and in states deeply dependent on China.

a strong sense of entitlement, which has resulted in aggressive and uncompromising behavior in the past several years. One can think of it this way: *if I am only trying to reclaim what was taken from us when we were weak—that is, not just territory, but, more fundamentally, the deference that we believe is due to a civilization that has always considered itself superior to all others—then why should we compromise? Why should we not instead strongly assert ourselves to regain our view? Indeed, not to do so makes us look weak in our people's eyes and risks undermining their support.* And for the Party, this is the primary consideration. To a Leninist state, diplomacy is only a tactical expedient or a secondary consideration.

The revanchist historical narrative, which the Chinese Communist Party uses to justify its rule, centers on Taiwan. In other words, the Chinese Dream cannot be achieved without reunification, as Xi has said himself several times. This, of course, does not mean that war between the U.S. and China is inevitable. True, Taiwan is the most dangerous potential

flashpoint, and Beijing will never forswear the option of reunification by force. But despite China's fierce rhetoric, and contrary to some rather alarmist assessments that suggests war is imminent, Beijing does not appear eager to go to war over Taiwan unless its hand is forced.

One important reason is that China still lacks the capability and the experience to launch an amphibious operation of the scale that would be necessary to triumph. Of course, China will eventually acquire this capability, but a war of reunification would still be an immense gamble. If China starts a war over Taiwan, it must win it—and it must win it quickly. Putin can survive a botched war against Ukraine, but no Chinese leader could survive a failed war against Taiwan. If a war over Taiwan fails, then even the foundations of the Chinese Communist Party's rule would be seriously shaken.

In any case, China is very unlikely to launch a war until its nuclear modernization program has given it the ability to deter a direct American response, as Russia has

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in Ukraine. At present, the biggest risk regarding Taiwan is not a war by design, but either an accident whose consequences take on a life of their own or Taiwanese domestic politics taking a turn that forces China's hand. Although both these risks have risen, it would be useful to keep in mind that Beijing has a plethora of non-kinetic options to deal with Taiwan—making use of these is, in my view, China's preference.

Dynamic, Fluid Multipolarity

Two inescapable realities for the world arise from the foregoing analysis. *First*, no state can avoid engaging with both the U.S. and China; and dealing with both simultaneously is a necessary condition for dealing effectively with either. Without the U.S., there can be no balance to China anywhere; and without engagement with China, the U.S. may well take most of the rest of the world for granted. *Second*, no country is without concerns about one or another aspect of both American and Chinese

behavior. The concerns are neither the same nor are they held with equal intensity, depending on the particular country. In some cases, they are not even explicitly articulated; indeed, they are often publicly denied. But they exist even in the closest of American allies, and in states deeply dependent on China.

Dealing with major powers—with whom we cannot avoid working but do not entirely trust—requires strategic autonomy. Even the closest of American allies seem to be moving in that direction. This does not mean that alliances like NATO or less formal arrangements like the Indo-Pacific Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) will break up, but they will become looser over time as states will want to preserve the widest possible range of options for themselves—including, for those who can, the nuclear option.

In other words, few if any countries will commit to aligning themselves across the entire gamut or range of issues with any single major power, and this will encourage the natural multipolarity of a diverse world. Multipolarity will not, however, be symmetrical: the

Ambiguity is an intrinsic characteristic of relationships where interdependence creates deep ties while, ironically, the very extent of those ties exposes those vulnerabilities.

United States and China will remain at the center of the international order. And it is also unlikely that the international system, which will evolve around the central axis of Sino-American relations, will have as clear a definition as did the bipolar Cold War structure. Rather, the international order will become more fluid.

Complex interdependence is making it increasingly difficult to neatly classify relationships as friend or foe. Ambiguity is an intrinsic characteristic of relationships where interdependence creates deep ties while, ironically, the very extent of those ties exposes those vulnerabilities. Globalization is under stress, but the more apocalyptic predictions about its future demise lack credibility. Managing the politics—both domestic and international—of globalization has become more difficult for almost everybody. But the technologies that drive globalization and interdependence cannot be unlearned: they have their own dynamic that may be slowed but not stopped.

Still, international relationships will become more complicated as

countries grapple with political and economic considerations that pull them in different directions. Perhaps an order of dynamic multipolarity is emerging. Such an order could be characterized by shifting combinations of regional middle powers and smaller countries continually arranging and rearranging themselves in variegated and overlapping patterns along the central axis of Sino-American relations, sometimes tilting in one direction, sometimes tilting the other way, and sometimes going their own way—i.e., sometimes ignoring both the U.S. and China, as dictated by their particular national interests in different domains and circumstances. In other words, we may see the emergence of an order of variable geometry and constant motion rather than static structures. We will have to learn to think of

concepts like “order,” and its corollaries “balance,” “equilibrium,” and even “stability” in dynamic rather than static terms.

To successfully navigate this emerging system will require a fundamental shift in mindset and approach that not every country will find comfortable embracing. Countries like Singapore may find it relatively easier to make this adjustment than most others, because what will be required is largely already our diplomatic modus operandi. But even countries like mine will still have to ensure that our institutions, and perhaps even more importantly, our politics, remain agile and courageous enough to continually adapt to this fluid emerging order without losing sight of our fundamental interests. **BD**

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'Appeasement' and the Current Crisis

How 'Munich' Impoverishes Western Grand Strategy

Christopher J. Fettweis

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy loves to remind any Western leader who seems about to go wobbling that appeasing aggressors is not only dishonorable but strategically unwise and dangerous. When Henry Kissinger, for instance, suggested in May 2022 at the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum at Davos that Ukraine may need to make territorial concessions to end the war, Zelenskyy said this: "It seems that Mr. Kissinger's calendar is not 2022, but 1938, and he thought he was talking to an audience not in Davos, but in Munich of that time." Indeed, Munich makes an appearance in every speech (and most off-hand remarks) that the

Ukrainian president makes, as if the conference happened in 2018 rather than 1938.

Zelenskyy knows his audience. The lessons of Munich and appeasement are deeply ingrained in the strategic consciousness of the United States and its allies. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the dangers posed by appeasing dictators is one of the central tenets of the Western foreign policy establishment. Those arguing for staunch opposition to Russian President Vladimir Putin employ the analogy as much as possible, accusing anyone who disagrees of being ignorant of the most basic of lessons that history supposedly teaches.

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The word "supposedly" is doing a lot of work in that sentence. This brief essay begins by providing a historical overview of appeasement and explains how the lessons of Munich have been mislearned by generations of Western policymakers. That infamous conference did not lead to the Second World War, which was coming no matter what British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain did at the negotiating table. The essay then turns to the effect of misremembrance on U.S. foreign policy to this day, including its influence on the debates regarding Russia's barbarous invasion of Ukraine. It would be best for everyone involved if the true history of the Munich conference was widely known, or barring that (since it is probably too late), that it was forgotten altogether. This essay provides a historical overview of appeasement, explains how the lessons of Munich have been mislearned by generations of Western policymakers, and then turns to the effect of misremembrance on U.S. foreign policy to this day.

Appeasement in History

It is hard to imagine anyone reading these words would be unfamiliar with the Munich conference, which took place in late September 1938 at which a settlement was reached between Britain, France, Italy, and Germany that enabled the latter, led by Adolf Hitler since 1933, to annex the predominantly ethnic-German Sudetenland, which had been incorporated into Czechoslovakia by the 1919 Treaty of Saint-Germain that had dismembered the Hapsburg Empire.

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Just in case such a person exists, however, the common understanding of its events begins with the First

World War, which had taught most Europeans a lesson about the pointlessness and savagery of modern warfare. The victors, in particular, recognized that battle had lost its romance, and that industrial-age warfare was to be avoided at all costs. What leaders in Paris and London were slow to realize was that their counterparts in Berlin (and Rome) not only did

not share their disgust, but were in fact—despite their endless protests to the contrary—eager to give it another go. The allies assumed for years that Hitler and his Italian fascist counterpart, Benito Mussolini, were reasonable men at heart, only to be proven tragically wrong.

When Hitler demanded territory in Czechoslovakia in 1938, the British employed a tool that had often paid substantial dividends in their recent history: they *appeased* him, or sought mutually acceptable solutions to disagreements, even when those solutions involved concessions on their part. As a result of this vacillation and weakness—so the conventional wisdom goes—Hitler drew conclusions about their resolve and the Second World War became inevitable. The standard narrative concludes that British appeasement merely encouraged Hitler’s ambitions, and just over one year later German troops entered Poland to start the Second World War. The apparent lesson here is that aggression, especially by dictators, cannot be appeased without encouraging future aggression. Their

appetite, it is often said, grows with the eating.

Appeasement has since carried a deep emotional resonance in the West, warning leaders of the dangers that accompany weakness and vacillation. The experience at Munich has shaped many decisions great and small, advising against cooperation and compromise, stiffening backbones, and encouraging war. It is also preposterously misunderstood. The association of appeasement with Munich—and the former’s resulting delegitimization—has impoverished the execution of U.S. and, by extension, Western grand strategy ever since.

First of all, appeasement often worked. The “official mind” of the British Foreign Office was both proud of its tradition of compromise and considered flexibility an asset. Britain found it wiser to

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return many of the gains it had made in the wars against Napoleon, for instance, caving in to French and Dutch demands, rather than fight over them. As historian Paul Kennedy argued in a 1983 book, London did not worry about

emboldening its rivals, who were often appeased by the Foreign Office at the height of Pax Britannica, especially over colonial matters, since doing so acknowledged that not all interests are equal, and that healthy international relationships often were the greatest interest of all. The British found that rarely would the costs of concession outweigh the risks of confrontation. The most obvious example—one whose long-term benefits far outweighed the cost of Chamberlain’s supposed blunder—was the systematic appeasement of the rising power across the Atlantic. Britain chose to cultivate its relationship with the United States through sagacious compromise and conciliation. And Britain succeeded brilliantly.

Over and over, generations of British leaders proved willing to sacrifice minor imperial interests, and in the process lose prestige, in order to establish and nourish an understanding between Anglo-Saxon states that would come to lay the foundation for the future world order. Appeasement began once the U.S. Civil War ended, as

London sought to restore relations with the winning side, even though it had been rooting for the South. In 1871, the British agreed to pay for supporting U.S. Confederate commerce raiders during the war and capitulated regarding fishing regulations sought by Washington. As Norman Rich showed in a 1992 book, London backed down in a 1895 dispute over the border between Venezuela and British Guyana in which the United States took an interest for some reason; the British encouraged Washington to increase its presence in the Pacific, including over Hawaii; they remained aloof during the Spanish-American War, agreeing to recognize American possession of the Philippines; and they declined to pursue any claims to the Panama Canal.

By prioritizing its partnership with the United States over other interests, the UK alleviated the hostility and suspicion that had persisted in many American circles since their successful revolution against the British, which famously began on 4 July 1776. In other words, the ensuing “special

Often (more often, in fact) the national interest is better served by accommodation and compromise. Appeasement often achieved central goals at minimal cost. It was a useful strategic tool.

relationship” did not form by accident. It was the result of deliberate policy: an end pursued through appeasement—the outcome of the British belief that not every rival had to be defeated or humiliated. Often (more often, in fact) the national interest is better served by accommodation and compromise. Appeasement often achieved central goals at minimal cost. It was a useful strategic tool.

In appeasing the United States, British leaders demonstrated that they understood how international relationships are affected disproportionately by the stronger power. As I argued at length in *Psychology of a Superpower* (2017), misperception is common in all interaction, particularly so when power asymmetry is present. Cooperative measures by strong countries are likely to be well received by the weak. Such measures are less risky for the strong, who have less to lose in interaction with others. “The British could afford to concede quite a lot,” wrote Paul Kennedy in 1983. They “had lots of buffer zones, lots of less-than-vital areas of interest,

lots of room for compromise.” Appeasement from a position of strength is often a wise choice. It is the opposite of domino-theory thinking, and when used wisely can offer the kind of flexibility unavailable to those under the spell of the credibility imperative. Had the Spanish Habsburgs been willing to appease on occasion, for example, they would have been far better off.

Appeasement is not always the correct move, of course. No tool is appropriate for every situation, and states that predictably, routinely appease quickly become victims. But the near-universal approbation that Chamberlain has

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received in the intervening decades is unwarranted. Hitler was simply unappeasable and insatiable—and, fortunately, unique. Perhaps German generals would have risen up to remove Hitler had Chamberlain shown more backbone at Munich, but that is one of history’s unknowable ‘what-ifs.’ A common criticism of Chamberlain—that the allies would have been better off fighting in 1938 than 1939—is simultaneously unfair and unfounded. As unready as

the Germans were for war, the allies were more so. Anyone who would assume that the French military would have performed better a year earlier carries the burden of proof. Appeasement probably also disappointed Hitler, who may well have hoped for a limited war in 1938 that might have kept the British on the sidelines. Thus, the criticism that Chamberlain has received from generations of historians is mostly unfair. The Second World War was coming, and there was little that anyone in London could have done to stop it. Appeasement was worth a try; it was cheap, at least, and did no actual harm.

The lesson that generations of policymakers took away from that 1938 conference is based on a misunderstanding of history—often a willful one—and it has all but removed an important tool from the kit of the superpowers to come.

Appeasement in U.S. Foreign Policy

Appeasing Hitler was a British policy, but that has not stopped many critics from blaming the United States for the outcome. Americans were too isolationist, apparently, and though eight years into a crippling depression the

United States should have intervened to stiffen French and British backbones, somehow. This is, in fact, the central premise of Robert Kagan’s new book, *The Ghost at the Feast* (2023). Never mind the obvious fact that, had the Roosevelt Administration demanded a seat at that conference and refused to cede Czechoslovakia to Hitler, it would not have ended the German leader’s desire for power and revenge against Britain and France, in particular. Precisely how the United States could have prevented the rise of Hitler, or tempered his unappeasable and undeterrable ambitions, is not as important as that America did not even try. At least to the revisionists.

Munich obsessives in the United States and elsewhere are apparently unfamiliar with the well-known (to scholars, at least) dangers of reasoning by analogy. Unfortunately for today’s decisionmakers, the past does not contain some sort of bottomless pit of wisdom for the present. Philosopher George Satayana, as it turns out, was wrong: history never repeats itself, no matter how urgently we sometimes wish it would (Satayana said, famously, that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” but the point he was trying to make was actually far more

complex and nuanced, as I have explained elsewhere). No two situations are the same, much less two states or two peoples. The variations of humanity and history guarantee that actions taken in one scenario will not produce identical outcomes in another. As a result—as historian Ernest May first pointed out in his groundbreaking *Lessons from the Past* (1973)—when leaders use history to inform and prescribe action, they often do so poorly.

The mere fact that historical analogy offers at best an incomplete guide to the present does not stop policymakers from applying lessons from the past, however. In a world that is complex and confusing, guidance must come from somewhere. A central part of leadership is to make decisions—often impossibly difficult decisions. It is no wonder, then, that they look for help wherever they can. In his memoirs, Harry Truman wrote: “I had trained myself to look back in history for precedents.” Other presidents seem to operate the same way. Indeed, a number of psychologists have suggested that it may be impossible for people to

reason or make decisions without some reference to experience. The human mind may be essentially incapable of performing without lending some structure to reality, even if by doing so it tends to oversimplify and distort that reality—a point made by Alexander L. George in *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy* (1980). Since it seems likely that history will always provide decisionmakers with assumptions about the future and with guesses regarding how their choices may play out, the Munich analogy, therefore, might never go away—logic and appropriateness notwithstanding. If decisionmakers were armed with a healthy skepticism toward historical analogy, they would, at the very least, question every allusion that is made toward Munich.

For more than a decade at Harvard University, historian May and political scientist Richard Neustadt co-taught a class on using history to inform policy-making and tried to identify ways that its application could be improved. Perhaps the most crucial exercise to minimize the odds that history would be misused was to write down

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likenesses and differences between the past and the current situation, to help determine closeness of fit. Often the simple act of writing can help bring clarity to an issue, since muddled thinking is harder to hide on paper than it is in our heads. Were today’s Munich obsessives forced to write down the likenesses and differences between the current situation and the crisis that Europe faced in 1938, they would see that the comparison does not hold up well.

There are some parallels between 1938 and 2022, of course. Both Hitler and Putin claimed to be interested in uniting fellow nationals just across their borders who were suffering discrimination. They both also met generally pacific European leaders who could not bring themselves to believe that their opponents would really contemplate war to achieve their aims. And they both were ready for war.

It is there that the similarities end, however. Hitler’s goals did

The influence of the 1938 Munich conference, and the weaknesses of the historical analogies based on it, have been pointed out by many different scholars over the years. Their work has had no effect whatsoever on Western policymakers, who remain as convinced as ever of the dangers of appeasement.

not stop with the Sudetenland, but there is no reason to believe that Putin has aspirations beyond Ukraine. Russian appetites are unlikely to grow with this eating, especially given how the war has unfolded so far. Much more importantly, even if Putin is hiding some grand design to re-establish the

Soviet Union, Russia of 2024 is not Germany of 1938. Germany was a great power, the leading military state of Europe, and a country able to impose its will on its neighbors. Whereas the Panzers were to sweep through both Poland and France in little over a month, Russia has not proven capable of lopping off any significant chunks of Ukraine in a year. For all his bluster and bravado, Putin is much weaker than Hitler was. There is no danger of emboldening him to greater aggression through appeasement.

The influence of the 1938 Munich conference, and the weaknesses of the historical analogies based on it, have been pointed out by many different scholars over the years, including the likes

of J.L. Richardson, Stephen R. Rock, Yuen Foong Khong, Jeffrey Record, and Paul Kennedy. Their work has had no effect whatsoever on Western policymakers, who remain as convinced as ever of the dangers of appeasement. If the overwhelming evidence that has already emerged has been insufficient to expunge the belief in the value of Munich's "lessons," one more lengthy discussion would certainly be

in vain. Perhaps it is enough to suggest that, in this instance, the common historical interpretation is wrong, and the mythic analogy is misapplied: *Allied vacillation at Munich did not inspire Hitler to become more aggressive, since attacking eastward was always part of his plans.* Even if it had, Hitler's Germany was a unique combination of great power combined with relentless expansionism. Comparing any leader that has come after to Hitler, or any country to Germany, is profoundly mistaken. This is a form of association fallacy known as *reductio ad Hitlerum*—a term coined in the early 1950s by philosopher Leo Strauss.

The appeasement analogy holds particular hypnotic power over America's various foreign policy hawks, for whom everything one needs to know about diplomacy was taught at Munich in 1938.

Despite the fact that Munich is remembered wrongly and too often, no single event has had a more deleterious impact on international politics, or has created such incorrect impressions about how states behave. Munich has become the enemy of compromise, the emotional ammunition that foreign policy hawks in America and Europe trudge out every time their countries consider

dishonorable accommodation rather than steadfast confrontation of various international evils.

That it is incorrectly remembered matters little; today appeasement is a powerful, loaded term, one that warns against weakness and negotiation. The notion that Britain and France emboldened Hitler through concession and brought the Second World War on themselves is a great example of the most dangerous kind of belief that persists among the faithful—one that is immune to influence from the material world. It is so deeply held that it no longer is subject to examination, having long passed from historical event to myth. "The rest of the world,"

in proud defiance of logic and evidence, "plays by Munich rules," warned prominent American neoconservatives (neocons) Lawrence F. Kaplan and William Kristol during the lead-up to the second Iraq war in 2003. The analogy will probably always be employed as part of issue advocacy for generations to come in the West, since it resonates like no other; but it should never be allowed to affect analysis.

The lessons from that unique conference are widely accepted, entirely misunderstood, and uniformly poisonous. The formula always takes the same, depressingly familiar form. If American (or, more broadly, Western) credibility wanes due to excessive cooperation (read: appeasement), the enemy *du jour* will be encouraged to undertake further challenges. Its appetite will once again grow with the eating, and decisionmakers in Beijing (or Tehran, or Moscow) will grow more belligerent. On the other hand, if the United States (and its allies) maintains its commitments and demonstrates a willingness to fight, enemy behavior will moderate. The choice

Munich does not so much teach as provide rhetorical ammunition to those who would be in favor of fighting aggressors and acting tough in all circumstances.

is always between confrontation and appeasement, or between deterrence and war. Conflict can be avoided only when rivals relent—when they realize that the United States and its allies

is determined to fight, at all times, even over the smallest of issues. The appeasement analogy holds particular hypnotic power over America's various foreign policy hawks, for whom everything one needs to know about diplomacy was taught at Munich in 1938. Indeed, it is hard to find any major work from the neoconservative school of thought that fails to make mention of Munich in some form.

Appeasement and the Contemporary Debate

Historical analogies are often employed to defend established, entrenched positions, and the Munich analogy is no different. Accusations of appeasement and underappreciation of history are used to support hawkish policies that would have existed no matter how Hitler was treated eighty-five years ago. In other words, Munich does not so much teach as provide

rhetorical ammunition to those who would be in favor of fighting aggressors and acting tough in all circumstances.

As the Trump era should have demonstrated to any skeptics, the need to be perceived as tough and macho is at the heart of many conceptions of foreign policy. Munich provides apparent historical support to justify that need. The analogy has become central to conceptions of masculinity in U.S. foreign policy—or at least to a certain conception of what some members of the foreign policy community would like to believe is masculine. Norman Podhoretz, an uber-hawk who is one of the patriarchs and leaders of the neoconservative movement, once explained that the British waived at Munich because they were undermined by a culture that had been weakened by insufficient testicular fortitude. In the October 1977 edition of *Harper's* (the title of the article is “A Culture of Appeasement”), he wrote that “homosexual feeling [...] accounted for a good deal of the pacifism that rose out of the trenches and into the upper reaches of the culture after [the First World War] was over.” A generation affected by poets and pacifists could not be expected to act honorably at the negotiating table or on the battlefield. British manhood was

fatally undermined by “dandies and aesthetes,” Podhoretz warned, and unless the United States is careful, it can happen here too, since “homosexual apologetics” are alive and well in America. Appeasement is not merely dangerous but unmasculine, effete, and gay—quite the opposite of everything certain analysts need their country to be.

Honor, hyper-masculinity, and Munich are linked in many ways. Indeed, the desire to respond to provocation is surely related to the psychological need on the part of many males to assert an insecure masculinity, to demonstrate that they are the kind of macho man that others can admire. U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt, a hero for so many of today's neocons, talked constantly of manliness and virility and feared above all that his nation was becoming effete (historian Richard Hofstadter attributes this in part to Roosevelt having to overcome the stigma of being sickly in his youth and upper-class, college-educated, and bespectacled as an adult.). “Psychologically, I think it is easier to get people emotionally involved in things that are expressive of macho,” observed Paul Nitze, one of America's most important Cold War-era decisionmakers, during one of the periodic missile defense debates. “As far as macho is concerned, it is the offense that

is most attractive; the defense suggests somebody that is sly, deceptive, dishonest,” he concluded. In past ages, real men conquered and colonized; today, at the very least, they must be prepared to fight, and determined never to appease.

In the context of countering Russia, resolution and resolve may indeed be the right policy now, and appeasement is not the best option for every situation—no foreign policy tool is. But no good can come out of comparing Putin to Hitler, or 2023 to 1938. Munich has taught the wrong lessons, and it is long past time Western decisionmakers forget them.

America's national determination to avoid appeasement makes war more likely, not less. It complicates diplomacy in the context of Crimea and across the Taiwan Strait; it makes war seem reasonable, or even wise, when no national interests are at stake; and, although it might make us feel tough, it impoverishes all of our security debates. The analogy resonates with the current generation of American and other Western leaders too much to go away any time soon, but if we can convince the next generation of its pointless and pathological nature, perhaps over the years, one funeral at time, the U.S. national obsession with Munich could finally be put to rest. **BD**

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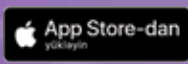

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Central Asia in Contemporary Geopolitics

Between Global Powers and Regional Integration

Urs Unkauf

What is generally true of the Silk Road region is particularly true with respect to its Central Asian part: the region acts as a bridge between geographies, civilizations, resource bases, and power centers. Geopolitically and geo-economically, Central Asia is one of the most important theaters of the twenty-first century. In his referential book *The Grand Chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote back in 1997 about the crucial importance of the Silk Road region (his term was “Eurasia”), and especially Central Asia, for global political supremacy. Nowadays, this region has been pushed back into the focus of geopolitics like no other due to the

Russian Federation’s attack on Ukraine that commenced on 24 February 2022 and the resulting, still ongoing war. Indeed, as Co-Editor of *Baku Dialogues* Damjan Krnjević Mišković has stated on various recent occasions, “the global importance of the Silk Road region today is greater than it has been in centuries.”

Brzezinski’s key, still-relevant insight is that developments in Central Asia would depend to a large extent on the reciprocal interplay of Western, Russian, Turkish, Iranian, and Chinese interests. In the mirror of current geopolitical processes, Central Asia is of particular importance as a surface of interaction and

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projection for the global powers—China, Russia, and the United States. Although the EU is trying to act as a shaping actor in the region through the recent launch of programs like Global Gateway, it has so far been of something between secondary and tertiary importance in its political impact, especially given the competition with sources of regional influence such as Türkiye, Iran, and (more and more) India.

It has meanwhile become clear that new global and regional power constellations, alliance structures, and economic corridors will emerge. Writing in mid-February 2023, former UN Assistant-Secretary-General Michael von der Schulenburg outlined the contours of a new global order in a remarkable article for the German publication *Makroskop: Magazine for Economic Policy*, in which he sees keystone states in Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico), South and Southeast Asia (India, Indonesia), Africa (Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa), and the Middle East (Egypt, Saudi Arabia) as new drivers of an intensifying multipolarity of the world order. Although this order will not

develop according to particular or hegemonic claims, one must at least take note of these processes.

It is also important to recognize that the current processes of change and transformation are not so much the consequences of intended and planned action, but rather genuinely self-generating processes that reinforce themselves across regions. Schulenburg did not include Central Asia, but he should have. The region and its two keystone states (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) can also be included in this series and identified as one of the spaces within this multipolar constellation that can be considered a special arena of cooperation, confrontation, and regional hegemonic aspirations of global powers.

Against such a background, this essay aims to provide a snapshot of Central Asia’s present geopolitical allocation in the context of broader international developments and trends. While the ambition of this essay is not to outline all challenges and opportunities, it does focus on the broad points that should be included in any strategic consideration of political and economic action in Central Asia.

Geopolitically and geo-economically, Central Asia is one of the most important theaters of the twenty-first century.

Regional Consolidation, Global Aspirations

In an age characterized by a green energy transition and hydrocarbon partnerships, Central Asia is home to some of the world's most important energy and raw material reserves, including oil and gas. It is a crucial transit route for fossil fuels from the Caspian Sea towards Türkiye and Europe, China, and potentially South Asia. The closure of the northern route and the continuing strategic uncertainty regarding the southern one means that, in terms of connectivity, the Middle Corridor that runs through Central Asia is now the only game in town.

Unsurprisingly, in this part of the world, the U.S. and its allies have sought to promulgate what its proponents call a rules-based international liberal order, including its democracy dimension. In contrast, Russia has sought to maintain its traditional influence in the context of strategic distraction in the Ukrainian theater. China has also sought to increase its economic and

political influence in Central Asia, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was, after all, launched in the region in 2013.

Central Asia is also a cultural crossroads, with a mix of ethnic and religious groups, including Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and

Christians of various denominations, most of which have had a presence in the region going back centuries. In the past, this cultural diversity has sometimes led to tensions between different groups, but it also provides opportunities for

increased cooperation and integration among different cultures. Again to paraphrase Krnjević, Central Asia is likely to attempt to become an active *subject* of international order instead of accepting to remain an *object* of great power politics in the years to come. And this will need to be taken into account by those same great powers.

The region's strategic importance and rich cultural heritage makes it an attractive destination for both economic and political investment

and development. As such, Central Asia will continue to be an important region to watch as the world continues to deepen its interconnections—

in contradiction to what is currently misperceived as a growing trend of decoupling, nearshoring, and other such concepts that simply do not reflect the actual reality on the ground.

The progressing regional integration of Central Asia is accompanied by an ongoing, and not always useful, competition between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for leadership. Nevertheless, there are attempts, especially through the Organization of Turkic States, to develop a stronger political dynamic that also tries to influence global developments from a joint regional approach. Other institutions are likely to come into their own quite soon—including one that is entirely homegrown and another that may, in time, reach out to some or all South Caucasus states.

The reasons for this lie not least in the strengthening of the region's two keystone states (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) through internal consolidation, the partial transformation of power within its elites,

Simply put, it seems highly unlikely that the region will abandon its established posture of multivectoral cooperation.

and the search for new alliance constellations in foreign policy given the war in Ukraine (beyond only Russia-led structures like the Eurasian Economic Union, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization).

Still, Central Asian “decoupling” from Russia is not a realistic option, and the analytical relevance of such a concept needs to be seriously questioned in light of the real interdependence that continues to characterize the region. The race for influence in Central Asia has gained momentum, although the signs of an emerging new bloc formation are giving it a new direction.

As I wrote in the Winter 2021-2022 edition of *Baku Dialogues*, the July 2021 Tashkent Summit on Cooperation between Central and South Asia established a political and technical platform for serious multilateral discussions on a mutually-beneficial strategic model of interregional cooperation. It also demonstrated that the emerging regionalism—a topic raised by the concerning countries themselves and not from outside—will be a *leitmotif* for future geostrategic

developments in the Silk Road region, as Edward Lemon wrote in the Fall 2021 edition of *Baku Dialogues*. The strategic significance of this conference should not be downplayed, much less forgotten. Simply put, it seems highly unlikely that the region will abandon its established posture of multivectoral cooperation. Regretfully, both the Joe Biden Administration and the EU, under de facto German guidance, have recommitted themselves to the conduct of a “values-driven” foreign policy, including the “friendshoring” of their respective foreign relations; what is almost entirely absent—particularly in Brussels and in some EU member states’ capitals—is a sober analysis of the Union’s actual geopolitical and foreign economic interests, much less a realistic understanding of how these could be successfully implemented. The hysterical reactions in Washington (and elsewhere) to French President Emmanuel Macron’s early April interview with *Les Échos* on his way back from a state visit to China (reproduced partly in English translation by *Politico*) are a case in point.

In the meantime, serious non-Western geostrategic actors are redoubling their efforts to become even more active in the region. Türkiye immediately comes to mind. But several of its Middle

Eastern neighbors (e.g., Iran, Israel, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia) are rushing to catch up. And they are more likely than not to succeed—admittedly, not all in the same way and to the same extent. And, of course, the breakthrough smartly facilitated by China in the resumption of diplomatic contacts between Riyadh and Tehran should not be seen as a one-off: Beijing’s influence, beyond the evident economic dimension, is also likely to increase. Against this emerging reality, Brzezinski’s advocacy of “benign hegemony”—his recommendation for the United States to play the role of “Eurasia’s arbiter”—represents a perfect illustration of a tendency in American strategic thinking that, if pursued by the U.S. at this stage, not only stands no chance of succeeding but could also have a consequence of shutting out the Europeans through the geopolitical equivalent of a ‘guilt-by-association’ reaction on the part of the Central Asians themselves.

New Dynamics Shaping Potentials

When analyzing Central Asia, it is fundamentally important to understand the five core states and their respective leaders as actors with real and

growing agency, and not just as instruments or mere subjects responding pliantly to the whims, preferences, and interests of outsiders (as noted above). This is not to say that the great powers do not now, and will not in the future, play significant roles. But it certainly does mean that more than three decades after securing independence, the five core Central Asian countries have successfully consolidated their state autonomy in an otherwise quite fragile and volatile part of the world, and that they neither are nor desire ever again to be under anyone’s thumb.

In recent decades, the anchoring of national sovereignty as the basis of an interest-driven foreign policy and the shaping of national identities have been the decisive elements. Another lesson that shapes these countries is their experience that economic prosperity does not need to go hand in hand with liberal democracy—the latter is, anyhow, an alien concept for Central Asia. In fact, their experience (like that of other states, notably Singapore but also China) speaks to the point that non-Western political arrangements that lean towards technocratic governance can sometimes be highly effective under the condition of fragile external constellations and limited room for maneuver. If one considers developments in

neighboring theaters (Afghanistan and Iraq are obvious but hardly singular examples), one clearly realizes that the standards upheld abroad by liberal democracies in the tradition of the Atlantic-oriented West are hardly applicable to Central Asia and the rest of the Silk Road region.

Secondly, it is noteworthy that both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan faced the challenge of consolidating internal governance in 2022, albeit the former in a more radical form. Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has succeeded in consolidating and, at the same time, limiting his own power after the suppression of a movement that began as a protest over social policy measures but was quickly infiltrated and instrumentalized by terrorist elements. For the groups that claimed close association with his predecessor, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the Tokayev-driven process of resulting political reforms is associated with a lasting loss of power.

In Uzbekistan, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev was confronted with separatist tendencies in the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan, located in the western part of the country, and subsequently refrained from a constitutional reform with a centralist orientation. While Tashkent played host to all

relevant external actors at a July 2021 conference (discussed above) in the run-up to presidential elections in October of that year, its beyond-the-region political ambitions since then have been somewhat more modest.

At the same time, there was an increased struggle for regional leadership and, not least in the wake of the war in Ukraine, for more foreign investments. Astana is in the process of internal consolidation following a constitutional referendum and early presidential elections in 2022, as well as early elections to the lower house of parliament that took place on 19 March 2023.

Also of relevance is the fact that Tokayev made it clear directly (and publicly) to Russian President Vladimir Putin at the June 2022 International Economic Forum held in St. Petersburg that his country disapproves of the annexation of Ukrainian territory. Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon also had strong words to share regarding Russia's posture towards its southern neighbors during a summit of Central Asian countries and Russia in Astana in October 2022. These developments need to be considered alongside the fact that, on the other hand, Central Asia had been seriously

underestimated by the United States and, even more so, by the European Union. Up to now, a serious mid- to long-term strategic approach that goes beyond wishful thinking, taking into account the complex realities and constellations of power, is simply missing in Western deliberations about Central Asia.

Geopolitics Through Business

Although the normative maxims of a “rule-based international liberal order” and “value-driven foreign policy” are becoming increasingly important for the foreign policies of all EU and NATO member states—especially for Germany as one of the driving forces within these alliances, these aspirations are confronted with a complex reality that can better be described as multipolar or polycentric. This implies that in addition to China, Russia, and the United States, aspiring global actors are striving to pursue their own particular agendas. For the Central Asian countries, China, Russia, and Türkiye currently exert much greater sustainable influence than the EU, despite its revised 2019 strategy for the region. Although the West currently

claims to shape change primarily through the power of normative concepts, a look at geopolitical realities shows that economic factors have a more resounding effect—and not only in the Silk Road region. China and Russia are pushing ahead with trade and investment projects without actively intervening in domestic policy processes or imposing conditions on the countries that make up the region. This makes quite a difference.

The respective roles of the various cultural, economic, or security instruments to which at least some Silk Road region states belong—e.g., the Organization of Turkic States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—are also gaining importance. In addition, the transformation process from state economies to market economy structures is not yet complete in these countries, as evidenced by the recent measures of economic reforms in Kazakhstan. In geo-economic terms, a window of opportunity is currently opening for the EU and its more agile member states. The closure of Kazakhstan's trade mission in Moscow and Uzbekistan's increased Westerly turn illustrates these trends. At the same time, Russia is striving to maintain

and expand its influence in the region in various ways, old and new, which its leaders are critically eyeing as their nations step into their fourth decade of political independence.

Former Kyrgyz Prime Minister Djoomart Otorbaev emphasizes the impact on regional developments of foreign investments and foreign trade cooperation in his 2023 book *Central Asia's Economic Rebirth in the Shadow of the New Great Game*. In this sense, the West has a welcome opportunity to promote economic development beyond the region without involving another external player with a serious impact on regional issues. The states of Central Asia are very well aware of the current constellation of influence on the “chessboard” and, as sovereign states for more than three decades now, act according to their respective national interests. These do not imply exclusivity in foreign relations, but rather according to what Kazakhstan's First President Nursultan Nazarbayev concisely phrased as a multivectoral foreign policy. This concept allows countries to credibly reject Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity without disengaging from Russia in the same way as the West has chosen

to do, which in each of their cases would neither be possible nor reasonable. This also explains the increasing importance of foreign trade with the EU in general and Germany in particular, although Russia remains an important economic partner for those countries—the conflict over Ukraine notwithstanding. The question of the extent to which sustainable value creation is taking place in the states of Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in the course of the relocation of companies from Russia as a result of the war can only be answered once the necessary data has been collected.

Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan pursue an ambivalent strategy with regard to integration into geopolitical structures. Their basic position is that the scope for interaction is to be expanded and dependencies reduced and, if possible, avoided. While Kazakhstan is acting from its position as the leading regional economic power and an important supplier of hydrocarbons still needed by Europe,

Uzbekistan remains in the initial phase of its equivalent outreach process after decades of extensive foreign policy isolation under its former president, Islam Karimov, who died in office in September 2016.

Increased involvement by Western companies not only promises entry into previously unexploited markets, but also has the not inconsiderable potential to help shape the transformation processes of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and thus make a formative contribution to their development and, perhaps, that of Central Asia as a whole. At the same time, Western corporate ignorance of strategic business development opportunities in Central Asia, which remains widespread apart from a few pioneering achievements, is taking its revenge. For example, the dominant focus of German foreign trade on Russia, without at the same time exploiting the potential of neighboring Central Asian states, is proving to be a structural competitive disadvantage in these markets compared to

Chinese and Russian hegemonic aspirations in Central Asia are perceived by the concerned countries themselves as challenging, but not as major impediments for pursuing their own political and economic agendas.

other economic stakeholders like China, India, and Türkiye.

For a generally sophisticated advanced industrial democracy like Germany, it is difficult to explain why, for instance, the German Chamber of Commerce in Moscow is only now organizing a business delegation to Uzbekistan. Or why various regional business associations in Germany that had previously focused on Russia are only now reorienting themselves towards Central Asia. In other words, it can be asked with a certain cynicism whether it took the conflict over Ukraine—and especially the Western decision to impose a sanctions and export restrictions regime on Russia—for Germany to begin seizing the economic opportunities that had been on offer for quite some time in Central Asia.

Unsurprisingly, the impression of being the second choice to Russia is being received only with moderate enthusiasm in Central Asia itself. At the same time, optimism prevails regarding the resulting opportunities for their own economic development. Better late than never, one could say. Again unsurprisingly, the leading economy of the EU, in particular, is reflected in this field of perception, which is characterized by ambiguity.

Challenges and Opportunities

It is well worth taking seriously the conclusion professed by Timothy Garton Ash, Ivan Krastev, and Mark Leonard in a policy brief published by the European Council on Foreign Relations in February 2023:

the West will have to live, as one pole of a multipolar world, with hostile dictatorships such as China and Russia, but also with independent major powers such as India and Türkiye. This may end up being the biggest geopolitical turning point revealed by the war: that the consolidation of the West is taking place in an increasingly divided post-Western world.

Chinese and Russian hegemonic aspirations in Central Asia are perceived by the concerned countries themselves as challenging, but not as major impediments for pursuing their own political and economic agendas. One could say that they have gotten used to it, and that each of the five states has settled on ways to accommodate, if not always counter, them in ways that Western analysts would consider to be successful.

Both Beijing and Moscow have taken an active interest in the

region, and both have used political and economic influence to ensure that their respective interests are well served. As a result, the five Central Asian states have become increasingly reliant on their powerful neighbors for trade, investment, and security. This has created a difficult balance between asserting substantive independence and managing complex relationships with powerful outsiders.

Another major geopolitical challenge in Central Asia is the ongoing conflicts in nearby theaters. The Syrian and Afghan civil wars have created massive refugee crises, which have in turn placed an immense burden on the infrastructure and resources of many Central Asian nations. The lack of political stability in these countries has also caused a security vacuum, allowing terrorist groups to gain a foothold in the region. Finally, the energy resources of Central Asia have created a number of economic and security concerns. In particular, Russia's interest in controlling the region's energy resources has led to several diplomatic standoffs

(and more) to gain control of these resources. This has put many Central Asian countries in a difficult position, as they must balance their own policy preferences with the interests of foreign powers.

Strategic Multi-Level Approaches Needed

The contemporary geopolitical situation predestines Central Asia to be a crucial area of interaction between global and regional powers in the twenty-first century. At the same time, the countries of the region are developing their own foreign policy agendas, each rooted in realist understandings of their respective national interests.

Although strong ties with China and Russia will remain, the Central Asian elites are now moving towards a more diversified portfolio in their foreign policy and trade relations.

Although strong ties with China and Russia will remain, the Central Asian elites are now moving towards a more diversified portfolio in their foreign policy and trade relations. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are somewhat known in the West, but the other three core states of Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan)

are virtually unknown. This assessment could not be made of any of the other outside powers. Lamentably, the opportunities and challenges of these three countries are too little analyzed in their own dynamics. This essay, which looks at the region from a geostrategic perspective, is no exception. Nevertheless, studying their genuine development processes and the resulting opportunities and perspectives in more detail is worthwhile.

While the dragon, the bear and, to a certain extent, the eagle vie for economic and political influence in the region, the question for the EU and especially Germany is the significance of Central Asia in their respective foreign policy agendas. It is also clear that the region plays a role that should not be underestimated in solving global issues, such as the fight against international terrorism, irregular migration, and the effects of climate change.

A long-term assertion of one's own interests in

A long-term assertion of one's own interests in Central Asia can only succeed if a cooperation mechanism can be established that adequately accounts for the perspective of the countries concerned without strategically neglecting one's own goals.

Central Asia can only succeed if a cooperation mechanism can be established that adequately accounts for the perspective of the countries concerned without strategically neglecting one's own goals. In the past, Central Asia was often a space for the projection of fascination and obsession, the attempt to recognize the proximate in the alien. Based on this, numerous approaches to a deeper understanding of the region and its cultures and people have reached their limits, and the soft factor of approximation through cultural diplomacy has been substantially neglected.

Germany and the EU, and foreign stakeholders in general, will need to act much more as partners rather than as instructors for the development of the political and economic systems in the countries of Central Asia. The timeframe for such action is limited, and other stakeholders consider the hesitation exhibited by the EU and member states like Germany as an incentive for their own strategic approaches.

This requires staying power and the increased structural development of regional competencies, for example, through the establishment of new conferences and think-tank platforms in close coordination with Central Asian countries themselves. To achieve this, it will be essential for the EU and its leading member states to institutionalize a constructive

symbiosis of economic, political, and intellectual engagement with Central Asia. The EU is at the beginning of a process that will significantly determine what role the Union and its member states will play in the future of world politics. Without a Silk Road region dimension, it stands a greater chance of becoming quite a peripheral player. ^{BD}

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The Pashinyan Conundrum

Predictably Unpredictable, Consistently Inconsistent

Onnik James Krikorian

Resolving the conflict in Karabakh requires a careful assessment of the roles of Russia, the EU, and the United States—states that have been involved as mediator, facilitator, and supporter of the peace process, respectively. Moscow believes two things: *one*, that the EU and the U.S. are hoping to edge Russia out of the region; and *two*, that there is a particular interest in removing the Russian peace-keeping contingent from Karabakh when its first and possibly last five-year term expires at the end of 2025.

Ultimately, finding a solution to the conflict over Karabakh and the broader Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict will require a delicate balancing act among the various

stakeholders involved, with a focus on promoting peace, stability, and security in the region. But in the absence of such an environment, there are concerns that competition between the actors involved could disrupt what progress has reportedly been made to date.

Regardless of that rivalry, however, it should be remembered that any peace deal will be signed by the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders—and nobody else. But here, too, the situation is unclear. Despite Azerbaijan's decisive victory over Armenia in the 2020 Karabakh war, a final peace treaty remains elusive nearly two and a half years after the trilateral Armenia-Azerbaijan-Russia ceasefire statement was announced on 10 November 2020.

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Progress and Delay

There are not implausible concerns that Yerevan is intent on delaying the signing of a peace agreement, while Baku is increasingly losing its patience. Nonetheless, in a 26 October 2022 address last year to the Armenian National Assembly, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan echoed words from Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev that a peace agreement could be signed by the end of the same year. Though many were skeptical, both announcements followed what appeared to be a productive meeting between the two leaders on 6 October 2022, which had been facilitated by European Council President Charles Michel at the European Political Community Summit in Prague.

In two meetings held that day, the three men were also joined by French President Emmanuel Macron to build on what appeared to be genuine momentum towards peace registered at an also seemingly productive meeting between Armenian Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan and

Azerbaijan Presidential Advisor Hikmet Hajiyev in Washington on 27 September 2022. That date was also significant: it was the second anniversary of the outbreak of the 2020 Karabakh war.

Facilitated by U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, that meeting also highlighted serious American interest in directly participating in Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations. A further sign of this came on 7 November 2022, when Armenian and Azerbaijani delegations led by foreign ministers Ararat Mirzoyan and Jeyhun Bayramov were also held in Washington. The talks were both bilateral and trilateral, with the latter convened and facilitated by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Blinken had also hosted Bayramov and Mirzoyan on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly annual high-level meeting on 19 September 2022 and the meetings culminating in the Prague Summit appeared to confirm that U.S. and the E.U. had identified a window of opportunity with Russia distracted in Ukraine. Time was also of the essence and all

Finding a solution to the conflict over Karabakh and the broader Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict will require a delicate balancing act among the various stakeholders involved.

sides stressed the need to ‘expedite’ the negotiation process.

In March 2022, Azerbaijan had already made public its five-point framework for the normalization of relations with Armenia to which Yerevan ostensibly responded favorably, though with one caveat: the issue of the rights and security of the ethnic-Armenian population in Karabakh. This particular issue, incidentally, was discussed during the 27 September 2022 meeting in Washington.

According to a leaked summary, the discussion centered on the establishment of an “internationally visible” dialogue mechanism “without prejudice to Azerbaijan’s sovereignty.”

And prior to the Prague meeting, Mirzoyan and Bayramov also met in Geneva on 2 October 2022. Details from that meeting confirmed what had been apparently discussed at the 27 September 2022 meeting, including a dialogue mechanism, and Grigoryan confirmed those details in an interview the same month.

There was one bone of contention, however. Grigoryan’s claim that the talks in Washington included agreement on an *internationally mediated* rather than *internationally visible* discussion mechanism

There are not implausible concerns that Yerevan is intent on delaying the signing of a peace agreement, while Baku is increasingly losing its patience.

elicited a firm response from Hikmet Hajiyev, who flatly denied the possibility of such a format. His counterpart in the negotiations, (Grigoryan) did, however, confirm that any peace agreement

would omit mention of Nagorno-Karabakh as a separate entity and that it would be for Karabakh’s ethnic-Armenian community to directly negotiate with Baku. This sparked outrage among the opposition in Armenia and the de facto authorities in Karabakh.

During another speech to the Armenian National Assembly in April 2022, Pashinyan had already irked both by claiming the international community was pressuring him to “lower the bar” on Karabakh’s status—a key issue. This was taken to mean that demands for independence would be dropped, and that the negotiation process would diverge into two: Armenia-Azerbaijan and

Baku-Karabakh, the latter of which would now become an internal matter for Azerbaijan.

This had arguably always been the most likely outcome of the 2020 Karabakh War, given that the seven formerly occupied regions of Azerbaijan surrounding the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) had been either taken back during the fighting or returned as part of the trilateral ceasefire statement. This has now left the ethnic-Armenian Karabakh entity, whose boundaries now correspond to the zone within which the Russian peacekeepers operate, geographically isolated and connected to Armenia only via the 5-kilometer wide Lachin Corridor, arguably putting to rest any realistic hopes for independence.

In layman’s terms, in the post-2020 situation, it is difficult to imagine that the ethnic-Armenian population of Karabakh can be self-sufficient—it had always been reliant on Yerevan prior to 2020 anyway.

In this new landscape, however, it will be increasingly reliant on nurturing good relations with Baku. All energy and natural resources such as water pass through territory now back under Azerbaijan’s control. This makes the need for dialogue between Baku and the Karabakh Armenians inevitable.

Pashinyan had also said the same on Armenian Public Television on 1 October 2020, claiming that he had

In the post-2020 situation, it is difficult to imagine that the ethnic-Armenian population of Karabakh can be self-sufficient—it had always been reliant on Yerevan prior to 2020 anyway. In this new landscape, however, it will be increasingly reliant on nurturing good relations with Baku.

discussed this with the de facto authorities in Karabakh and that they too had concluded that “Karabakh-Azerbaijan dialogue is the right course.” With the possibility of Baku requesting the Russian peacekeeping contingent to leave Karabakh in 2025, thus likely returning the Lachin Corridor to

Azerbaijani control, there were few other logical conclusions.

However, Pashinyan also said that it was necessary to deploy an international monitoring mission amid growing dissatisfaction with Moscow and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for

what Yerevan considered an inadequate response to the 2020 Karabakh War. Incidents in the breakaway region itself, and subsequent military clashes in September 2022 on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, have only deepened such resentment.

This has likely only emboldened the West. Though Armenia has traditionally relied on Russia for its economic and military security, Pashinyan had been careful to tread a fine line between the West and Moscow after he came to power in 2018. By not responding to an offer to deploy a CSTO monitoring team in favor of an unarmed EU civilian mission, Pashinyan can now be seen to be clearly distancing Armenia from Russia.

The 40-personnel strong European Union Monitoring Capacity (EUMCAP)—announced at the 6 October 2022 meeting in Prague—was deployed on 20 October 2022 and was made up of seconded monitors from the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in neighboring Georgia. Temporary in nature, its term would last only two months, leading some Armenian analysts to suggest that its extension into a longer-term and larger mission would allow Armenia to delay the signing of a peace deal.

It is unknown whether such calls influenced Pashinyan, but towards the end of December 2022, Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan formally requested that a dedicated European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) replace EUMCAP. In February 2023, EUMA started its two-year mission with an expanded but still unarmed civilian staff of around 100, which is composed of 50 actual monitors. Though only operating on the Armenian side of the (non-delineated) border, Baku had nonetheless agreed to cooperate with EUMCAP whenever necessary, but it did not greet news of EUMA so calmly.

Russia reacted harshly too, with many again believing that Moscow could now seek to disrupt the delicate normalization process facilitated by Brussels in retaliation. Although the Charles Michel-facilitated negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan started in December 2021—i.e., three months before the 24 February 2022 onset of the Russia-Ukraine war—Moscow had since come to believe that it was being increasingly sidelined and that at stake were the Russian-brokered trilateral November 2020 ceasefire and subsequent statements.

Indeed, by December 2022, any hopes of signing a peace treaty by the end of the year were disappearing fast. UN Assistant Secretary-General for Europe, Central Asia and the Americas Miroslav Jenča told the UN Security Council on 20 December 2022 that renewed tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan now threatened any “glimmer of hope” that had hitherto existed.

But it was not just Russia that frustrated the earlier momentum. The very presence of additional international and regional actors had already led to the phenomena of ‘forum shopping’—disrupting progress in one track by jumping to another if and when Yerevan and Baku saw it more favorable to their respective positions.

There were already indications of deepening disagreements between Yerevan and Baku in late November 2022 when Aliyev announced at conference held at ADA University’s Institute for Development and Diplomacy in Baku that Pashinyan unexpectedly insisted on the presence of French President Emmanuel Macron at another Charles Michel-facilitated

trilateral meeting between the two leaders on 7 December 2022 in Brussels. Azerbaijan pulled out of the meeting as result, especially following what Baku considered to be ‘unacceptable’ comments made by Macron in an interview on French television aired just seven days after the Prague meetings had taken place.

The Brussels Process was thus brought to a standstill, with even some Armenian analysts remaining confused by what still appears to be Pashinyan acting on a whim—something that has defined much of his political career to date.

The Pashinyan Factor

Indeed, and though putting to one side any issues with Baku’s position, it is essential to understand Pashinyan’s personality and character traits in order to ascertain how serious and ready he might be to sign a long overdue peace treaty.

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Prior to coming to power, the former journalist was known for being bold, confrontational, and unpredictable. His relationship with former leaders Robert Kocharyan

and Serzh Sargsyan has been particularly volatile and has also shaped his modus operandi today.

Born in the scenic town of Ijevan in the Tavoush region of Armenia in 1975, Pashinyan represents a distinct change in the leadership of the country since the resignation of Levon Ter-Petrosyan. While Kocharyan and Sargsyan were widely referred to as belonging to the “Karabakh Clan” of Armenian politics and were synonymous with authoritarianism, corruption, and falsified elections, Pashinyan was the first Armenian leader since the resumption of the country’s independence to have actually been born in the country.

Even Levon Ter-Petrosyan had been born in Aleppo, Syria, in 1947 with his parents moving to Armenia two years later, while both Kocharyan and Sargsyan were born in Karabakh and climbed the ranks of the Communist Party—particularly the Komsomol youth organization—during the Soviet era.

They held prominent positions in the ethnic-Armenian Karabakh entity during the early 1990s conflict,

with Kocharyan eventually assuming the de facto presidency in 1994 and Sargsyan serving in several official positions within its defense structures.

Both men also moved to Armenia to serve under Ter-Petrosyan, with Sargsyan becoming Minister of Defense, National Security Minister, and Minister of Interior in 1993, 1995, and 1996 respectively. Kocharyan moved to Armenia later and became the country’s prime minister in March 1997. The two Karabakhtsi joined forces with then Defense Minister Vazgen Sargsyan to oppose what is believed to have been a concessionary peace deal with Azerbaijan favored by Ter-Petrosyan.

In addition, Ter-Petrosyan’s reputation was marred by the contentious 1996 presidential election that saw him secure a second term in office. Following the election, opposition supporters protested outside the Armenian National Assembly and forcibly entered the building. The resulting state of emergency led to the deployment of the army. These events tarnished Ter-Petrosyan’s image and made

Ter-Petrosyan’s fall from political grace has been a lesson of how the Karabakh issue can make or break Armenian leaders. Pashinyan is fully aware of this.

him susceptible to the palace coup d’état orchestrated by Kocharyan and the two Sargsyans.

Ter-Petrosyan’s fall from political grace has been a lesson of how the Karabakh issue can make or break Armenian leaders. Pashinyan is fully aware of this, and it probably explains why he surrounds himself only with absolute loyalists today.

After Ter-Petrosyan stepped down in 1998, Kocharyan was elected president in March of the same year. There were questions about his eligibility to run, as candidates were supposed to have resided in Armenia for the previous ten years. However, many international observers overlooked this fact, hoping that the Karabakh hardliner would be more successful in negotiating a peace treaty than his predecessor.

Serzh Sargsyan became Kocharyan’s Chief of Staff and held various other positions in the Armenian government during this period—Defense Minister, National Security Council Secretary, and finally Prime Minister. Sargsyan would eventually become Kocharyan’s hand-picked choice as successor when his second and constitutionally final presidential term would end in 2008. Both men were inseparable, with Sargsyan widely

referred to as Armenia’s infamous “Grey Cardinal” who lurked in the shadows.

Upon coming to power, Kocharyan had also lifted the ban on the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaksutyun (ARF-D). Ter-Petrosyan had banned the nationalist party in December 1994, arresting many key figures for allegedly plotting a coup d’état and being prepared to engage in terrorism. The ARF-D were to become Kocharyan’s main support base and eventually Pashinyan’s bitterest of political foes, especially following the 2020 Karabakh War.

It was within this context that Pashinyan became active under the Ter-Petrosyan administration, founding the *Oragir* (Diary) newspaper that was particularly critical of Serzh Sargsyan. Indeed, in 1999, and already making a name for himself as a firebrand and risk-taker, he was sentenced to one year in prison after refusing to pay a libel fine of approximately \$25,000 for his articles alleging that Sargsyan was corrupt—especially through his association with Mikhail Baghdasarov, an oligarch who held lucrative monopolies on the import of fuel and aviation.

After this was commuted to a suspended sentence, Pashinyan

founded the *Haykakan Zhamanak* newspaper. Although he resigned as editor when he entered parliament in 2017, the newspaper is still associated with him through his wife. It is noteworthy that in 2002, *Haykakan Zhamanak* republished Ter-Petrosyan's 1997 article "War or Peace," which advocated for a concessionary agreement with Azerbaijan and the return of the seven regions surrounding the former NKAO, which were then under Armenian control. According to Ter-Petrosyan, Armenia would not be able to maintain the status quo and would suffer economically and militarily for the perpetuation of such an approach.

Regardless, there was a predictable response to Pashinyan's journalistic activities from the authorities and the corrupt network of oligarchs that flourished under Kocharyan. In November 2004, for example, Pashinyan's car blew up in what he claims was an assassination attempt, or at least a warning from oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, aka Dodi Gago (Stupid Gagik). This nonetheless did not prevent Pashinyan from forming ties with Tsarukyan during the later 2018 Velvet Revolution that swept him to power. Sometimes his allegiances or allies can also shift.

Pashinyan's transformation into a politician, however, was not to occur until 2007 when he became a leading figure in the Alyentrak (Alternative) movement and contested the parliamentary election the same year as part of the Impeachment bloc. Failing to meet the five percent threshold for representation in the Armenian National Assembly, Pashinyan attempted to stage street protests to contest the vote, but literally only a few hundred turned out in support.

In 2008, following Ter-Petrosyan's dramatic return to politics the previous year, Pashinyan again rose to prominence as a major figure in the first president's re-election campaign, which had one aim: to prevent Kocharyan from passing on power to Sargsyan. This was to have devastating consequences.

On 1 March 2008, when Armenian riot police dispersed a tent camp that had been erected in Yerevan's Liberty Square following the disputed vote, Pashinyan took over the organization of the barricades that had been erected near the French embassy. A state of emergency was declared, and the army was called out. Ten people died. "We must liberate our city from the Karabakhtsi scum," Pashinyan is alleged to have said to the demonstrators, presumably referring to Kocharyan and Sargsyan.

Pashinyan went into hiding and re-appeared only in June 2009, at which point he was arrested. He was amnestied in May 2011 and the following year was elected to parliament as part of Ter-Petrosyan's Armenian National Congress (ANC) bloc, though he increasingly became critical of its leadership. As always, Pashinyan favored a more confrontational and erratic approach than Ter-Petrosyan and accused the former president of deceiving his own supporters.

By 2015, Pashinyan formed the Civil Contract political party—the party in power today—that had previously existed only as a political movement. Joining the "Way Out" electoral bloc, Pashinyan was elected to parliament in the 2017 elections, setting out to prevent what many had predicted would be Sargsyan's attempt to become prime minister after his second and final presidential term came to an end. This was made possible because of the enactment of constitutional changes from a presidential to a parliamentary system of governance.

In what at the time seemed like a futile endeavor, Pashinyan embarked on a 200-kilometer march from Armenia's second largest city of Gyumri to Yerevan.

Pashinyan's and his "My Step" alliance arrived in the Armenian capital on 13 April 2017, four days after Sargsyan announced that he would seek the premiership despite his earlier promises not to do so. Sargsyan was then elected by the Armenian National Assembly on 17 April. A campaign of civil disobedience that paralyzed and brought Yerevan to a standstill followed, while similar protests occurred nationwide on a scale never seen before.

Despite the naysayers, Pashinyan's gamble appeared to be succeeding. Using his trademark populism and confrontational tactics, including a live televised meeting with Sargsyan at the Marriott Armenia hotel on Republic Square, Pashinyan demanded only that his archenemy resign as a way out of the crisis. True to form, there was no room for compromise in Pashinyan's playbook.

In response, Sargsyan told Pashinyan, in what was clearly a threat of violence, that the opposition had failed to learn the lesson of 1 March 2008 before walking out of the meeting live on air. Pashinyan had again gambled and was detained by masked police in chaotic scenes on Republic Square just hours later.

The gamble, however, paid off.

Tens of thousands gathered in the square later the same evening and Pashinyan was released the following day, when Sargsyan also resigned. The problem was, however, that Sargsyan's Republican Party still controlled the parliament, and it would be they that would elect his replacement. Again using the politics of the street, Pashinyan called on his supporters to continue blocking traffic and to stage a general strike.

The tactic worked and Pashinyan was eventually elected prime minister on 8 May 2018.

But while many point to the perceived democratic nature of what has become known as the Velvet Revolution, there were also concerns that most outside observers ignored. Seeking to shore up support in Karabakh, Pashinyan traveled to the region the following day to mark Victory Day. This tendency towards populism, however, would partially contribute to the inevitability of the 2020 Karabakh War.

Indeed, during the Velvet Revolution there had already been signs of such a manipulation of nationalist rhetoric, even though it appeared to contradict Pashinyan's

earlier position on the conflict. Not only had he donned a military-style camouflage t-shirt for the 2018 Velvet Revolution, but he had also grown a beard in an apparent attempt to resemble an Armenian fighter from the First Karabakh War.

And in August 2019, on another visit to Karabakh, Pashinyan declared "Artsakh is Armenia and that's it." Pashinyan had anyway declared on numerous occasions during the Velvet Revolution and afterwards that Karabakh would become "an inseparable part of the Republic of Armenia." Though possibly intended for domestic political purposes, the interpretation of these words, as well as their ramifications in Azerbaijan, which had hoped that Pashinyan might finally be the one to sign a peace deal, was obvious.

And in another populist twist, Pashinyan's Minister of Defense, David Tonoyan, even revealed a new defense policy doctrine of "new war for new territories" while Pashinyan also attended the inauguration of Karabakh's new de facto president following its 2020 presidential elections, unrecognized by any country, including Armenia, and with the inauguration ceremony being held in Shusha. Of cultural significance to Azerbaijan, this

was a provocative move that would have devastating ramifications later.

Adding to the slide towards war, a panel discussion between Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev and Pashinyan in February 2020 at the annual Munich Security Conference descended into a series of mutual recriminations. By the time of the July 2020 clashes on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, the road to war appeared to some observers to be irreversible.

In August 2020, for example, Pashinyan's wife, Anna Hakobyan posed for controversial photographs dressed in military fatigues looking down the sights of a Kalashnikov rifle as part of her ill-thought out "Women for Peace" initiative. And, in September 2020, just four days before the war broke out, Pashinyan confidant and Speaker of the Armenian National Assembly Alen Simonyan posted on social media a photograph of himself holding a pomegranate with the comment "Akna is my homeland."

Akna is the Armenian nationalist name for Aghdam, the once bustling Azerbaijani market town that was razed to the ground after Armenian forces captured it in 1993. Some Armenian critics of Pashinyan's circle believe that its

trademark populism and risk-taking had proven reckless and destructive.

Indeed, following his participation in the February 2020 debate at the Munich Security Conference, Pashinyan released a set of his own principles, known as the "Munich Principles," which consisted of six points. These principles effectively dismissed the "Basic" or "Madrid" Principles of the OSCE Minsk Group, which had been at the core of all negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan since 2007. Additionally, in April 2020, Pashinyan had also rejected a modified version of the 2015 "Lavrov Plan," which itself had been a variation of the 2011 "Kazan Plan."

Despite having effectively walking away from the OSCE Minsk Group, Pashinyan and other Armenian officials nonetheless continue to this day to raise its role following the country's crushing defeat in the 2020 Karabakh War—even though the Ukraine-Russia war had arguably proven to be the last nail in the coffin of the troika co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States.

Yet, despite this and the terms of the November 2020 trilateral ceasefire statement, Pashinyan managed to win snap elections called for 20

June 2021. A remarkable feat given the circumstances, Pashinyan had taken another risk and was only fortunate that his main opponents were those allied with or led by his old foes, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan.

Even so, some analysts contend that Pashinyan's reelection granted him the legitimacy to engage in peace talks with Azerbaijan. However, others have noted that Pashinyan's Civil Contract party still promoted the idea of remedial secession for Karabakh in its election manifesto while simultaneously advocating for a "peace agenda." This inconsistency has become a trademark of Pashinyan's leadership, with the ability to contradict himself sometimes even in the same sentence.

In April 2022, Pashinyan continued to be a master of populism even though he also admitted his responsibility for the 2020 Karabakh War. Other leaders might have lost power, but Pashinyan's comments were taken in stride by most citizens of Armenia. His belief that the war could have been avoided had he returned the seven previously occupied regions and that the international community expected Armenia to lower its demands on the region's status were interpreted

as a rejection of pursuing independence for Karabakh.

Except for one notable exception in the early part of 2023, Pashinyan's language has also changed. No longer using "Artsakh" to refer to the breakaway region—a term that for some denotes independence and also the inclusion of the seven formerly occupied regions—he now refers to "Mountainous Karabakh."

Though still concerned that large-scale protests might break out, the demonstrations that did occur following Pashinyan's speech were relatively small. While some experts predicted that crowds of 50,000-60,000 people would gather outside the National Assembly to unseat him, the protests that lasted for two months typically only drew 3,000-5,000 people daily, with a maximum of 10,000 on two occasions.

A combination of fatigue and a feeling of hopelessness among the general population, as well as deep popular resentment towards Armenia's second and third presidents, worked to his advantage. Even the 27 April 2022 hit-and-run killing by Pashinyan's speeding motorcade of a 29-year-old expectant mother in Yerevan, who coincidentally worked in Karabakh, failed to ignite popular anger.

In addition, the anti-Pashinyan protests held by activists in the Armenian diaspora did not gain any traction, with only a small number of supporters mostly affiliated with Dashnaktsutyun lobbying groups such as the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA). Furthermore, the ongoing standoff on the Lachin Corridor that began on 12 December 2022 has also not sparked significant outrage in Armenia or the diaspora, despite Pashinyan's apparent unwillingness to intervene.

The few demonstrations that occurred in Yerevan during this period were attended mainly by a few hundred Karabakh Armenians that were stranded or were studying in the capital.

Despite this, some analysts suggest that the protests on 14-15 September 2022, which occurred during clashes on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border resulting in over 300 deaths on both sides, were a warning sign. Spontaneous in nature at a time of intense fighting, the bulk of the crowds only dispersed once Pashinyan took to Facebook saying that there was no such deal on the table. Only the ARF-D (again) remained on the streets.

But this was a warning to Pashinyan. Though the opposition

remains marginalized and unpopular, the situation may yet change as time passes—if new leaders emerge ahead of upcoming parliamentary elections in 2026. According to a June 2022 survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI), only 17 percent of respondents in Armenia said they trusted Pashinyan. Though only 3 percent said they trusted Kocharyan, a staggering 64 percent said they trusted no leader in the country, leaving a vacuum that one day might be filled.

Other Concerns

There are other concerns too. Pashinyan's pivot towards a more pro-Western stance at the expense of the country's longstanding ties with Moscow could create an opportunity for Russia to destabilize Armenia's domestic political environment as the date of the next parliamentary election draws closer. However, following the perceived inaction of the Russian peacekeeping force on the Lachin highway and Russia's posture during the 2020 Karabakh War, there has also been a reported increase in anti-Russian sentiment in Armenia, limiting Moscow's options.

But that is not to say that Russia does not have a way forward.

Armenia is reliant on cheap energy from Russia and the economy is closely linked to it as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. Many households in Armenia are also reliant on remittances from family members working in Russia. If Moscow wanted to tighten the screws on the Pashinyan government, it does possess some levers.

There is also the issue of Iran, which is admittedly not my area of specialization. Still, it is clear enough that relations with Iran have always been of importance to Armenia and the recent friction between Baku and Tehran has definitely emboldened Armenian nationalists and, possibly, the Armenian government, too. This increased in October 2022 when Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian inaugurated a consulate in the southern Armenian city of Kapan.

Many took this as direct support for Armenia's territorial integrity in light of what some claim is the threat by Baku of military action to force the opening of a route between Azerbaijan and its exclave of Nakhichevan, also known as the Zangezur Corridor, as stipulated by the November 2020 trilateral ceasefire statement. If such a route were opened, they charge, Armenia would be cut off from Iran, which

is one of only two conduits for Yerevan to trade with the outside world.

Baku, however, denies such claims. It should be noted, in this context, that previous peace proposals have always featured such a route—most notably in 2001, when a system of overpasses was discussed at Key West so as not to block or interrupt Armenia's direct access to its southern neighbor. Ironically, Russian FSB border guards continue to patrol that border, so it is questionable whether such fears are genuine, though some also allege that any tensions in the area could provide Moscow with a pretext to increase its presence.

However, it is unclear to what extent Armenia might be swayed by its trade and other relations with Iran, given that this also potentially runs counter to improving relations with the West. That said, neither the EU nor the U.S. is willing or able to provide Yerevan with hard security guarantees.

Prospects for Agreement

Meanwhile, surveys indicate that the overwhelming majority of Armenians firmly oppose the idea of Karabakh becoming part of Azerbaijan, even with an

autonomous status, but it remains unclear whether the general public would again mobilize in protest if a settlement reinstating Azerbaijani control over the region were to be signed. At present, the only conceivable factor that could dissuade Pashinyan from signing a peace agreement in 2023 is the possibility that external actors and the EUMA presence will allow him to prolong negotiations.

Pashinyan appears particularly reluctant to grant Azerbaijan the "unimpeded" access to its exclave of Nakhichevan. His government is also opposed to any reference to a 'corridor,' despite Yerevan using the term for other transit projects running through its territory that do not imply any loss of sovereignty.

There is some reason to hope that Yerevan and Baku may reach an agreement, however, as Aliyev has stated since at least December 2021 that border and customs checks should be reciprocal. This means that if there are no checkpoints on Lachin, then there should be none on the Zangezur Corridor; or if there are checkpoints on the latter, then there should be on the former. However, Pashinyan seems hesitant to relinquish control over the Zangezur route to the Border Guard Service of the Russian FSB, as provided in

the November 2020 trilateral ceasefire statement, and this is likely supported by Brussels and Washington.

Even so, Pashinyan continues to possess few viable mechanisms for further delay; even if he were to do this, then this would likely not be favorable for the Karabakh Armenians—especially as the future of the Russian peacekeeping contingent looks increasingly uncertain. Though the Karabakh entity hopes for a return to a new status quo, the situation on the ground is unfavorable for the ethnic-Armenian population, to say the least.

Pashinyan may also be relying on the outcome of the upcoming Turkish elections in May 2023 to determine whether the normalization process between Ankara and Yerevan can be completed irrespective of completing a peace deal with Azerbaijan, leading to the establishment of diplomatic relations and the opening of the Armenia-Türkiye land border. This has been a longstanding hope since the 2009 Zurich Protocols, which aimed to normalize relations with Türkiye and make signing a peace treaty with Azerbaijan less urgent by reducing Armenia's geographical isolation in the region.

If that is the case, this too can be considered a gamble by Pashinyan.

Though it is believed that a new government led by the current Turkish opposition would lead to less boisterous support for Azerbaijan, there is nothing to indicate

that Ankara would forgo the core concerns of Baku in its dealings with Yerevan. Moreover, it could well be that a new Turkish government would have the normalization of relations low on its list of priorities, given so many other more pressing issues in a post-Erdogan environment.

It is instructive to note in this context that even though Türkiye reversed the ban on direct trade with Armenia by allowing cargo flights since the first week of January 2023, none to date have actually been launched.

Confounding problems, and despite the deployment of EUMA, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on 20 March 2023 again raised the issue of a CSTO monitoring mission being dispatched to the Armenia-Azerbaijan border in a meeting with his counterpart, Ararat Mirzoyan. The issue of how Karabakh's ethnic-Armenian population will be incorporated into Azerbaijan—and with

From a logical perspective, it appears unlikely that the deadlock between Armenia and Azerbaijan can continue beyond 2023, as time is running out.

what rights and guarantees—was also discussed. While the EU and the U.S. seem more inclined to a quick solution to the problem so as to justify the with-

drawal of Russian peacekeepers, Moscow seems to favor a more protracted settlement process, leading many to conclude that it is more interested in prolonging the conflict in order to keep boots on the ground.

Pashinyan has already gone on record as saying that this is the solution that Armenia favors, while also pursuing the Charles Michel-facilitated process which, at time of writing, appears stalled. Ultimately, and even though it will, of course, depend on Aliyev too, Pashinyan's history makes it difficult to predict whether he will sign a peace deal or not—and also which one.

From a logical perspective, it appears unlikely that the deadlock between Armenia and Azerbaijan can continue beyond 2023, as time is running out. There are two main reasons for this. *Firstly*, there is uncertainty over when the Russian peacekeeping force will withdraw from the ethnic-Armenian Karabakh entity in

2025. *Secondly*, Armenia is scheduled to hold parliamentary elections in 2026 (as noted above). This implies that any peace agreement reached after 2023

may not allow sufficient time for the Armenian populace to experience any concrete advantages before the next election cycle, during which the issue of Karabakh could be a delicate matter.

On the one hand, Pashinyan has good reasons to wait and see if Baku will soften its demands. On the other, delaying a resolution could have disastrous consequences not only for Armenia but also for the ethnic-Armenian population in Karabakh. Currently, the Armenian narrative claims that Baku aims to “ethnically cleanse” the region, though this is more accurately characterized as depopulation. The problem with such existential narratives, however, is that they can sometimes become self-fulfilling.

Pashinyan's predictably unpredictable and consistently inconsistent approach remains the most difficult conundrum to decipher of all.

Even before 2020, both Armenia and the ethnic-Armenian Karabakh entity faced severe demographic problems and, in the case of the latter, such a tendency

can only but increase in the absence of a peace deal and the loss of any resources that it once possessed outside the former NKAO.

Regardless, while most observers see resolution only through the prism of regional and other international actors, it should be remembered that, at the end of the day, it still comes down to a decision by Armenia and Azerbaijan. In this context and given his tendency to change his opinion and allegiances unexpectedly, as efforts to end a conflict that has lasted over three decades continue, Pashinyan's predictably unpredictable and consistently inconsistent approach remains the most difficult conundrum to decipher of all. ^{BD}

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Armenia-Türkiye Relations

Attempts at Normalization

Könül Şahin

The Armenian and Turkish people have lived together for centuries in the same geography under various regime types and within various political forms. As countries, Armenia and Türkiye initially established diplomatic relations during the brief period of the first Armenian republic, which corresponded to the nascent years of the Republic of Türkiye. The absorption of Armenia into the Soviet Union put an end to this initial phase. It was only after Armenia regained its independence, in the context of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, that conditions enabling the renewal of state-to-state ties were again established.

This essay provides an account of this complicated journey, which has not yet reached its destination. It is intended to serve as an analytic contribution to ongoing efforts by Ankara and Yerevan to normalize

bilateral relations within the framework of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, with which it remains politically preconditioned. This essay also carries an oftentimes implicit subtext—no less important in a certain sense—namely, the role played by Azerbaijan in general and Heydar Aliyev in particular (2023 marks the centenary of his birth and the vigenary of his death) in influencing the development of the Armenia-Türkiye relationship.

The Ter-Petrosyan Period

Armenia regained independence from the Soviet Union with a referendum held on 21 September 1991, with Türkiye recognized the country's independence on 16 December 1991—one of the first countries to do so. Türkiye even invited Armenia to be a founding member of the

Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC) with an agreement signed at a summit held in Istanbul on 25 June 1992.

Indeed, months before Yerevan's declaration of independence, Soviet Armenia's Deputy Foreign Minister Ashot Yeghiazarian attended the first founding conference of the Black Sea Cooperation Organization held in Ankara in December 1990. Yeghiazarian met with Volkan Vural, Türkiye's Ambassador to the Soviet Union, during which they discussed the situation in the South Caucasus. Yeghiazarian also invited Vural to visit Armenia, which he accepted: the visit took place in April 1991.

Vural thus became the first Turkish ambassador to visit Armenia. He described that visit in an article he wrote in 2021 for the Global Relations Forum website, characterizing the country's foreign minister, Raffi Hovannisian, a U.S. citizen, as being "unlike any other Armenian" he had met. Vural's account continued thusly:

Even at the beginning of our conversation, his cold demeanor had not escaped my attention. He was in a state of questioning why I was visiting Armenia in American English. It was not hard not to feel that he was suspicious of the relations between the two countries and was looking

for bad intentions behind them. Upon this situation, I cut the meeting short and said goodbye to him without entering into a possibly bitter argument.

After this meeting with Hovannisian, Vural met with Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan. The Turkish diplomat writes that Ter-Petrosyan welcomed him in a friendlier way and spoke openly about how the normalization of Armenia-Türkiye relations would contribute to the solution of many problems between the two neighboring countries:

Ter-Petrosyan got up from his desk and looked towards the balcony and said to me: 'Please take a look, there is the Alican border gate 25-30 kilometers away. This door is closed to us. However, if it is opened, there will be direct trade between the two countries and the economy will revive. We have to cut the power for 5-6 hours every day,' gesturing to the light fixtures in his office. 'If we can get electricity from you, our life and industry will be much better.'

At the end of 1991, Türkiye recognized the independence of Azerbaijan first and then other countries that had left the Soviet Union, including Armenia.

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Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel sent a letter to Ter-Petrosyan on 24 December 1991, which contained the following passage:

While recognizing the independence of the Republic of Armenia, our government has acted with the understanding that in its relations with the Republic of Türkiye and other neighbors, Armenia will adhere to the basic principles of international law, especially respect for its territorial integrity and the principle of immutability, fulfill all the requirements of good neighborly relations, and act in this direction. I believe that relations between the Republic of Türkiye and the Republic of Armenia will be established and developed on the basis of respect for these fundamental principles and mutual benefit.

Although Türkiye established diplomatic relations with the other former Soviet republics, it did not with Armenia. One of the reasons for this was the inclusion of language in the Declaration of Independence of Armenia that presented claims against Türkiye's territorial integrity (this document was signed by Ter-Petrosyan and the

Secretary of the Armenian SSR Supreme Soviet Ara Sahakyan on 23 August 1990). Specifically, Article 11 of this text, which sets out the principles on which the independent state will be based, referred to Eastern Anatolia as Western Armenia. This was interpreted in Ankara as an indirect territorial claim by Armenia against Türkiye.

Another Article in the same document (on the "Armenian Genocide") also prevented the establishment of diplomatic relations between the newly-independent Armenia and Türkiye. This was a second reason why it was ultimately impossible for Türkiye to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia.

But the main reason why diplomatic relations between Armenia and Türkiye were not established, and why the border between the two states remains closed, was the Armenian occupation of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and the seven surrounding regions of Azerbaijan—a period that was characterized by campaigns of

This essay provides an account of the complicated journey of Armenia-Türkiye relations, which has not yet reached its destination.

ethnic cleansing, the ultimate consequence of which was that *not a single* ethnic-Azerbaijani (and only 50 other non-ethnic-Armenians, out of a total recorded population of 145,053) inhabited the occupied lands in 2015 (the year the last census was published by the occupation forces). The single-worst massacre of civilians during the First Karabakh War, which took place in Khojaly in February 1992, had a particular impact: it left a deep impression on the people of Türkiye and made the normalization process between Ankara and Yerevan even more difficult.

In 1992, during the First Karabakh War, the border between Armenia and Türkiye was not officially closed, with the Alican-Margara and Kars-Gyumri border crossings sometimes remaining open (the Abkhaz Railway line, which connected Armenia with the outside world, was also unusable due to the civil war in Georgia). As a result, Armenia was left to fend for itself in its food crisis, which peaked in August 1992—with the supply of wheat being a particularly acute problem.

In this context, Ter-Petrosyan contacted Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel and Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin

in connection with the possible transportation of wheat through Türkiye. In his letter to Demirel, the Armenian president wrote the following: "You and I have the opportunity to prove to our peoples that we can cooperate. Let's try not to miss this opportunity." Before formulating his response, Demirel told Çetin to discuss this humanitarian issue with the Azerbaijani authorities, whose representatives indicated that they had no objection to the provision of Turkish assistance.

Demirel then wrote the following reply to Ter-Petrosyan: "We are ready to host your delegation in Ankara to discuss wheat transportation issues, quantities, and conditions. We hope that our region will be an island of stability, harmony, and cooperation. Türkiye will continue its constructive activities in this area."

Thus, wheat aid was provided to Armenia through Türkiye via the Kars-Gyumri railway in 1992-1993. Gerard Libaridian, who was Ter-Petrosyan's chief adviser from 1991-1997, recalls those days as follows: "Even when the grain from Europe didn't arrive in time, Türkiye would send from their own supplies. Thus, this is a great argument against the idea Türkiye would do anything to annihilate us."

Armenia's Attack on Nakhchivan

Armenian armed forces attacked Nakhchivan on 18 May 1992. Then Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, Heydar Aliyev, held a telephone conversation with Ter-Petrosyan to stop the fighting, with Ter-Petrosyan saying that the forces in Sederek were not under his control. At the end of the six-hour battle, the Armenian forces advanced in the direction of Sederek and captured the strategically important Mil hill and three heights.

Heydar Aliyev, who held a press conference to announce the seriousness of the situation to the world, told the Reuters news agency that six people were killed and 54 people were injured: "The situation is very difficult, the Armenians have captured three hills, they are still attacking Sederek."

At the same press conference, when asked by a Turkish reporter, "What is your message to Ankara in accordance with the provisions of the Kars Treaty?" Heydar Aliyev replied: "Türkiye should fulfill its commitments."

Returning to Ankara from Budapest on 18 May 1992, Demirel convened a meeting of the Council of Ministers late in the night. Its published conclusion held Armenia responsible for the attacks and concluded that "Türkiye's balanced policy towards achieving peace through negotiations will inevitably be seriously affected in the face of the latest attacks by the Armenians."

The next day, Deputy Prime Minister Erdal İnönü was even more explicit, stating that Türkiye will not accept any forced change of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan: "The consequences of the attacks on Nakhchivan will be severe."

İNönü also called Hovannisian and warned Armenia to stop the attacks on Nakhchivan with all deliberate speed. On 19-20 May 1992, representatives of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and Armenia met at the border, but no agreement could be reached on a ceasefire.

On 23 May 1992, the Nakhchivan self-defense forces recaptured the occupied areas, and on 28 May, a ceasefire was reached between Nakhchivan and Armenia. Coincidentally, that day also marked an important milestone in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, with Demirel traveling to Nakhchivan

to meet with Heydar Aliyev so that they could jointly open the Umut-Hasret bridge, which spans the Aras River border between the two countries. Demirel spoke to the people there and expressed his support for Nakhchivan: "We are here to tell you that you are not alone. Whoever tries to gain territory by using force should know that there is someone stronger than him."

After the Nakhchivan crisis was resolved, relations between Armenia and Türkiye became more tense. On 10 September 1992, Hovannisian gave a speech in Istanbul at a Council of Europe conference in which he said that although Armenia is willing to establish relations with Türkiye and that Ter-Petrosyan is actively working in this direction, Türkiye refuses to open its borders and establish diplomatic relations: "Turkey could not maintain its neutrality on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. There are Turkish military advisers and officers in Azerbaijan."

At the same event, Hovannisian also touched upon the Kurdish and Cyprus issues, further escalating bilateral tensions. In response, Çetin stated that Hovannisian's allegations were unfounded and that such an offensive speech will not be beneficial for the establishment of good neighborly relations

with Türkiye. One month after this incident, Hovannisian announced his resignation, which had been requested by Ter-Petrosyan. In a statement made years later, Ter-Petrosyan said that the reason for Hovannisian's resignation was the speech he gave in Istanbul.

On 2 April 1993, the Kalbajar region of Azerbaijan was occupied by Armenian forces. This, too, caused a great reaction in Turkish public and political circles. In a next-day statement on this subject, the Turkish Foreign Ministry said that the Armenia-Türkiye border was closed, that rail and air connections with Armenia were cut, and that transit trade to Armenia via Türkiye was also stopped. The Foreign Ministry also sent a protest note to Armenia that demanded that "all Armenian forces immediately withdraw from Azerbaijani territory."

Only days later, on 17 April 1993, Turkish President Turgut Özal passed away. Ter-Petrosyan accepted an invitation to attend the funeral.

The Armenian delegation also consisted of the new foreign minister, Vahan Papazyan, and Libaridian. On 20 April 1993, Libaridian was received by Demirel in Ankara. According to Libaridian's

subsequent account, Demirel took out a map from the drawer, pointed to the Kalbajar region, said that it stood outside of the former NKAO, and indicated that the Armenian forces should withdraw from there as soon as possible. During this visit, a meeting was also held between Demirel, Ter-Petrosyan, and Azerbaijan's President Abulfaz Elchibey. Although a protocol was drawn up to resolve the problem, no conclusion was reached. A month after Özal's death, Demirel became the ninth president of Türkiye.

After the 9 May 1994 ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Bishkek that ended the First Karabakh War, the issue of opening the airspace between Armenia and Türkiye came to the fore: in April 1995, representatives of the two countries signed an agreement on the opening of their airspace.

Although this agreement was realized as a result of Armenia-Türkiye diplomatic contacts, it is also possible to say that pressure by the EU Civil Aviation Conference had an effect. As a result of the agreement, Yerevan-Istanbul charter flights started.

On 22 September 1996, Armenia held its second presidential elections since independence. Ter-Petrosyan was

reelected by the narrowest of margins. Three days later, tens of thousands of Armenian citizens came out in Yerevan to protest the election results, storming the parliament building and beating up the Speaker (Babken Ararktsyan) and Deputy Speaker (Ara Sahakyan). The government sent tanks and troops to enforce the ban on rallies and demonstrations. One contemporary media report put it this way: "In Yerevan, tanks with escorts of special riot police patrolled the streets and throughout the country security forces arrested hundreds of opposition activists."

In September 1997, Levon Ter-Petrosyan declared that he was ready to accept an international plan finally to settle the Karabakh conflict. The plan foresaw the return of the occupied regions of Azerbaijan, including the return of Azerbaijani IDPs, as a precondition for negotiations on the final status of the former NKAO. Several senior members of the Ter-Petrosyan Administration, including Prime Minister Robert Kocharyan, Defense Minister Vazgen Sargsyan, and Interior Minister Serzh Sargsyan, refused to accept this plan. Partly as a result of these resignations, Ter-Petrosyan himself resigned in February 1998, saying that that he was doing so to avoid destabilizing the country.

It is fitting to end this section by reproducing one of Ter-Petrosyan's most succinct statements on the foregoing matters, which he made during the eighth congress of the Armenian National Movement Party on 8 June 1996: "I believe that the existence of Armenia as an independent country will be under question without improving our relations with our two neighbors, Turkey and Azerbaijan."

The Kocharyan Period

On 30 March 1998, Robert Kocharyan was elected President of Armenia. There were complaints that he was ineligible to run for this post under the Armenian constitution, which required candidates to have resided in Armenia for the previous ten years and to be Armenian citizens. Kocharyan did not meet these two requirements because he was born a citizen of the Azerbaijani SSR, and it was only in 1997 that he moved to Armenia to hold the post of Prime Minister until Ter-Petrosyan's resignation.

Be that as it may, Kocharyan's candidacy was approved by the Armenian Central Electoral Commission. His justification for running in that election was, essentially, to enforce the 1 December

1989 decision of the Supreme Council of the Armenian SSR and the NKAO Regional Council on the "reunification" of the NKAO with the Armenian SSR. Kocharyan was supported by Vazgen Sargsyan's Republican Party and by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaksutyun (ARF-D), which Ter-Petrosyan had banned in December 1994 for what amounted to charges of sedition and planning acts of terror.

In Kocharyan's first term, his policy towards Türkiye was harsh and nationalistic, specifically focusing on having the events of 1915 that took place on the territory of the Ottoman Empire recognized as constituting "genocide." Kocharyan's "aggressive" posture towards Türkiye was made manifest in other fields, as well. For example, he was against holding an OSCE Summit in Istanbul. Since the OSCE is a consensus-based regional organization, Armenia's opposition produced a stalemate that was overcome only due to pressure from the great powers. The summit was ultimately held in Istanbul in November 1999.

On 5 June 1998, the first official meeting between Kocharyan and Demirel, now presidents of their respective countries, was held in Yalta thanks to the mediation

of President Leonid Kuchma of Ukraine. It took place on the margins of a BSEC summit that was taking place in that Crimean resort town. Demirel responded positively to Kocharyan's offer to meet through Kuchma. The two leaders held a 35-minute meeting, which started positively. Then Kocharyan brought up the topic of the events of 1915, stating that "there is a serious situation in our relations brought by history. We can only overcome this by discussing history." Demirel's response was as follows: "to bring out hostility from history creates a big problem. Let's look at the future, not the past. Armenia's well-being depends on good relations with Turkey."

Another subject of disagreement during the Demirel-Kocharyan meeting at Yalta was the relationship between Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Demirel firmly told Kocharyan that it would not be possible for Türkiye to normalize its relations with Yerevan unless Armenia ended its occupation of Karabakh (the former NKAO plus the seven surrounding regions of Azerbaijan). Kocharyan opposed this approach and demanded that Armenia-Türkiye relations be removed from the "mortgage of Azerbaijan," stating that he was ready to open mutual diplomatic representations and develop economic relations

with Ankara at any time. "You cannot expect Türkiye to change its position while the occupation continues," Demirel replied.

Although the meeting ended in a negative atmosphere, the leaders of both countries remained in contact, leaving the door open for dialogue. After the earthquake that took place in Türkiye in August 1999, causing the death of more than 17,000 people, Kocharyan sent a telegram to Demirel in which he indicated that Armenia would send a search and rescue team at Türkiye's request.

Demirel also sent a condolence letter to Kocharyan regarding the armed attack that took place in the Armenian parliament on 27 October 1999 that resulted in the murder of inter alia Prime Minister Vazgen Sargsyan and Parliament Speaker Karen Demirchyan.

TARC Hopes, Erdoğan Opportunities

The formation of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) was announced on 9 July 2001, following meetings held under the auspices of the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna. Its Armenian founding members

were former Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Arzumanyan, retired Ambassador David Hovhanissian, co-chair of the Armenian Assembly of America (AAA) Van Z. Krikorian, and prominent Russian-Armenian foreign policy analyst and advisor to Russian President Boris Yeltsin Andranik Migranian. The Turkish founding members were retired ambassador Gündüz Aktan, retired ambassador and TESEV director Özdem Sanberk, former foreign affairs officer İlder Türkmen, retired general Şadi Ergüvenç, Prof. Dr. Üstün Ergüder, and Prof. Dr. Vamık Volkan.

Basically a Track II initiative, TARC was established to promote mutual understanding and goodwill between the two countries. Welcomed by the U.S. and some other Western states, TARC was described at the time and subsequently as the most serious attempt at dialogue between the two countries. TARC, however, excluded discussions on two of the most contentious issues: the events of 1915 and the conflict over Karabakh, both of which we judged too difficult to reconcile. Even so, ten political parties in Armenia released a joint statement on 31 July 2001 that declared their opposition to TARC. Kocharyan also stated that relations should be discussed at the level of states.

TARC held its second meeting on 23-25 September 2001 in Istanbul, and its third meeting on 18-21 November the same year in New York—its last meeting before being dissolved. The three-day meetings focused mainly on reconciliation models.

The chairman of the meeting, mediator David L. Phillips, made a statement summarizing the results of the meeting without first discussing it with TARC's Turkish members. This caused tension between the Armenian and Turkish members, with the Armenian members releasing a joint statement in December 2001 announcing that they were leaving the commission. Thus, the attempt to craft an environment of dialogue between representatives of the two nations came to an end.

Three Armenian members of TARC (Hovhanissian, Arzumanyan, and Migranian) stated that important results were obtained during this process. They indicated that the most important thing was that the International Court of Transitional Justice (ICTJ) was asked to investigate whether the 1948 UN Genocide Convention could be applied to the 1915 events.

Two years later, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan entered the Turkish parliament in a 9 March 2003 by-election. Just five days later, he became the new Prime Minister of Türkiye just days later, after his political ally (the sitting prime minister, Abdullah Gül) submitted his resignation.

Erdoğan had co-founded the Justice and Development Party (AKP) on 14 August 2001 and was promptly elected party chairman. AKP stood in the November 2002 general election and entered the government, with Gül at its head—he was universally understood as a placeholder for Erdoğan, whose count-ordered ban from politics was still in effect. Once this ban was lifted by parliamentary vote, Erdoğan took over the premiership and began taking steps to normalize relations with Armenia as well as strengthen good relations with Türkiye’s ethnic-Armenian community.

On 3 June 2003, the foreign ministers of Armenia and Türkiye, Abdullah Gül and Vardan Oskanian, met in Madrid during a NATO foreign ministerial summit. Later the same month, Turkish troops took part in a NATO military exercise in Armenia. Some Armenian groups voiced their concern at the prospect of Turkish soldiers arriving in

Armenia, even under the auspices of the Atlantic Alliance.

In June 2004, Erdoğan invited Kocharyan to attend a NATO Summit in Istanbul, which the latter refused. Just before the summit was to take place, Kocharyan stated that Armenia could develop without Türkiye, but that Armenia does want to establish diplomatic relations without any preconditions, while blaming Türkiye for the deadlock. “We do not want to sever our ties with Armenia, even if they are tied to a thin thread,” Erdoğan commented on Kocharyan’s rejection. “But if Armenia is running, we will not run after them long.”

Still, a trilateral meeting between the foreign ministers of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye did take place on that occasion, which was a promising development. Oskanian spoke positively about it, saying that in addition to the conflict over Karabakh, the development of Armenia-Türkiye trade relations was also discussed.

On 15 April 2005, Erdoğan sent a letter to Kocharyan in which he formally conveyed a proposal to establish a joint commission to examine the context of the 1915 events (as well as the events themselves). Erdoğan noted that an initiative in this direction

would not only shed light on a controversial historical chapter, but that it would also constitute a step that would serve to normalize relations between Armenia and Türkiye. If it was accepted, the letter indicated, Türkiye would be ready to discuss the details of any proposal.

Kocharyan rejected this offer, saying that the development of relations should not be left to historians as it “deflects from addressing the present and the future. It is the responsibility of governments to develop bilateral relations and we do not have the right to delegate that responsibility to historians. That is why we have proposed and propose again that, without pre-conditions, we establish normal relations between our two countries.”

Although Kocharyan had taken a tougher stance towards Türkiye than his predecessor, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, the small steps he took to improve relations demonstrated that he was also aware of the reality of Armenia’s geographic and geopolitical location. However, the lack of agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the conflict over Karabakh, Kocharyan’s close relations with the radical Armenian diaspora, who he believed would finance Armenia’s economic development to an extent that never

happened, and the Dashnaks (some of whom affiliated with the ARF-D) hindered normalization.

In Türkiye, both the AKP-led government and the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) responded to the normalization steps positively.

The Sargsyan Period

Serzh Sargsyan was appointed prime minister by Kocharyan on 4 April in 2007, following the sudden death of Andranik Margaryan. Sargsyan was elected chairman of the largest part in the governing coalition (the Republican Party), a post that had been vacated after Markaryan’s death. Thus, he became the strongest candidate for the presidential elections scheduled to be held on 19 February 2008.

The plan worked: Sargsyan was elected president, receiving more than double the votes of his nearest opponent, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, who had attempted a comeback. Supporters of Ter-Petrosyan, who described the results as “shameful,” protested. The demonstrations that followed were eventually and violently dispersed on 1 March 2008, with 10 people fatalities. Kocharyan declared a national state of emergency.

Kocharyan claimed that some protestors had firearms and grenades and that they were planning a coup d'état. The opposition rejected these accusations and said police attacked peaceful demonstrators. The protests only stopped after a message by Ter-Petrosyan was read out in which he urged his supporters to return to their homes: "I do not want any victims and clashes between police and innocent people," he was quoted as saying.

Dozens of opposition figures were arrested while the current Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, then a key ally of Ter-Petrosyan, went into hiding until mid-2009 when he was eventually jailed. Three days after Sargsyan's election, Gül (having in the meantime become president) sent him a congratulatory message. It read thusly in part: "I hope your new position will permit the creation of the necessary environment for normalizing relations between the Turkish and Armenian peoples, who have proven over centuries they can live together in peace and concord."

This message was considered to be an important gesture to the new administration. Emphasizing that both peoples had lived together for centuries, Gül also called on Sargsyan to take steps towards the normalization of

bilateral relations. During his 2008 visit to Moscow, Sargsyan stated that he was willing to take the necessary steps to do so. He then invited Gül to visit Yerevan on the occasion of an Armenia-Türkiye World Cup qualifier football match. At the same time, Sargsyan stated that he was not against Türkiye's proposal to form a commission of Armenian and Turkish historians that would examine the 1915 events, but added that it should be formed only after Türkiye agrees unconditionally establish diplomatic relations and open its border with Armenia.

The Armenian National Congress (ANC), headed by Ter-Petrosyan, released a statement and said that Sargsyan has become the first president of Armenia to officially agree to Türkiye's proposal to question the "fact of the genocide." The ANC document condemned "this dangerous statement of Serzh Sargsyan, which will be undoubtedly responded by the people of Armenia and Armenians of the whole world."

Despite the reaction from both the opposition, and particularly the Dashnaks, and the diaspora, Sargsyan wrote an article in the *Wall Street Journal* that reaffirmed his determination to normalize relations with Türkiye. In this essay, Sargsyan complained that the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and

the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line bypassed Armenia and the railway line between Armenia and Türkiye remained inactive due to closed borders.

He proposed a new beginning and noted that the first world leader to congratulate him on his election had been Gül. Establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries, he added, would enable the formation of a commission that would allow for the discussion of all the complex issues affecting the two countries.

Gül accepted Sargsyan's invitation. His arrival on 6 September 2008 marked the first time a Turkish president had visited the country. Speaking at Ankara Esenboğa Airport upon his return, Gül said that the meeting had been constructive and sincere. It touched not only on Armenia-Türkiye relations but also regional issues such as the conflict over Karabakh. Gül added that he had invited Sargsyan to the Armenia-Türkiye football match to be held in Bursa the following year. Answering questions about Armenia's "claims regarding the 1915 events," Gül said, "they neither mentioned nor implied the so-called genocide during the talks."

Despite the apparent breakthrough, Gül's visit to Armenia was

criticized by Türkiye's opposition party leaders. CHP head Deniz Baykal told media that the government should refrain from any action that would harm Azerbaijan. His counterpart at the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Devlet Bahçeli, called the visit "historical heedlessness."

After Gül's visit to Armenia, the ARF-D issued a statement saying that the normalization of Armenia-Türkiye relations was predicated on a recognition of the Armenian genocide, the making of reparations, and the non-interference in the conflict over Karabakh.

Although the Azerbaijani government did not react negatively to the visit, neither was it welcomed by the media or the public at large. Four days after his visit to Yerevan, Gül traveled to Baku and met with Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev.

The reason why Armenia-Türkiye normalization was generally negatively received in Azerbaijan is that Armenia, whose isolation had deepened due to the conflict between Russia and Georgia, would reputedly benefit economically from this normalization, gain an important connection to Europe, and create more difficulties for Azerbaijan in the context of resolving the conflict

over Karabakh (and, eventually, a peace treaty with Armenia itself).

U.S. President Barack Obama paid a visit to Türkiye to attend the Second Global Forum of the UN Alliance of Civilizations, which was held in İstanbul on 6-7 April 2009. Shortly before Obama's visit, news appeared in the Turkish media that Armenia and Türkiye would normalize relations and open borders. This news was received negatively by Aliyev, who at the last moment refused to participate in the event.

Gül and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton each called Aliyev and tried to convince him to attend. Even though Clinton stated that Obama would be pleased to hold a bilateral meeting with him if he would make the trip to İstanbul, Aliyev did not back down from his decision.

Demirel, for his part, reminded the Turkish public that Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani lands was ongoing, and that Armenia should at least withdraw from the territory outside Karabakh. "When trying to solve one problem, you can create other problems," Demirel said, implying that a step taken without considering Azerbaijan's interests would harm relations.

One month later (on 13 May 2009), Erdoğan and five ministers paid a visit to Azerbaijan to put an end to all speculation in the media. "Even the pronouncement that Türkiye has given up on Karabakh is a great slander, and I reject this slander," Erdoğan proclaimed in the Azerbaijani parliament.

Holding a joint press conference with Aliyev, Erdoğan said that it was not possible to open the borders until the Armenian occupation ends. "The words of dear Prime Minister [Erdoğan], my dear brother, are the best answer to all questions," Aliyev responded. "I am grateful for what he said. There can be no clearer answer than this. There is no room for doubt."

The protocols aiming to start the normalization process between Armenia and Türkiye were signed in Zurich by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and Armenian Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandyan on 10 October 2009—that is to say, five months after Erdoğan's words were spoken in Baku. Hillary Clinton, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, Swiss Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey, and other high-ranking officials were present at the signing ceremony, which

took place three hours later than announced.

According to information published by the media, the reason for this was that references to the conflict over Karabakh were included in Davutoğlu's speech, to which the Armenian side objected. The Turkish side also found elements of Nalbadyan's speech problematic. The crisis was overcome by a decision not to make speeches.

Four days after the signing of the protocols, Sargsyan came to the Armenia-Türkiye football match in Bursa, as Gül's guest. This informal visit reinforced the positive atmosphere created by the signing of the protocols, whose ratification lingered in the Armenian and Turkish parliaments for years, as each side waited for the other to take the first step. While Armenia demanded the opening of the Alican Border Gate before the ratification process, Türkiye stated that relations could not be normalized until the Karabakh issue was resolved.

On 16 February 2015, Sargsyan announced that he was withdrawing the documents from parliamentary consideration; on 1 March 2018, the Armenian side announced that the Zurich Protocols had been canceled following a meeting of the Armenian National Security Council.

On 27 December 2021 (just a bit over a year following Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War), Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu commented on a new Armenia-Türkiye normalization process: "The [Zurich] Protocols have no meaning, the most important parts have been canceled by the Armenian Constitutional Court. These are now left behind. A new process has begun today."

After the Second Karabakh War

Following the Second Karabakh War, normalization steps were taken in Armenia-Türkiye relations. In August 2021, Nikol Pashinyan, having become Prime Minister of Armenia, stated that Yerevan was now ready to normalize relations with Türkiye.

Türkiye responded positively to these messages from Armenia and both countries decided to appoint special representatives to establish a direct dialogue. "We will appoint mutual special representatives for normalization steps, we will act together with Azerbaijan at every step," Çavuşoğlu declared. Serdar Kılıç, an experienced diplomat who previously served as Türkiye's Ambassador to Beirut, Tokyo, and

Washington, was appointed to that role.

Armenia, for its part, did not appoint an experienced diplomat. Instead, Pashinyan appointed a young 30-year-old politician, Ruben Rubinyan, who also served as Vice-President of the Armenian National Assembly. Although Rubinyan's appointment has been criticized by the Armenian opposition, Rubinyan is no stranger to Türkiye. Between 2017 and 2018, he had conducted academic research on the topic of the "impact of civil society organizations on the democratization process in Turkey" at Sabancı University Istanbul Policy Center as part of the Hrant Dink Foundation's Armenia-Türkiye Experience Exchange Project, residing in Türkiye during this time.

The first meeting of the special representatives took place on 14 January 2022 in Moscow. Political analysts interpreted its location as Russia's positive approach to the normalization process. Azerbaijan also continued to send positive messages regarding this new process. "We fully support brotherly Türkiye's efforts to normalize relations with Armenia," Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov declared. "We appreciate Türkiye's messages in this direction."

As bilateral talks between the special representatives commenced, it was decided to resume direct flights between Istanbul and Yerevan on 2 February 2022. The same month, Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan and Rubinyan were invited to the Second Antalya Diplomatic Forum. Mirzoyan announced that he would participate.

This step was also welcomed by the Turkish Foreign Ministry, and it announced that such mutual steps could be considered as confidence-building measures to increase dialogue between the two countries in line with the goal of achieving full normalization.

Çavuşoğlu and Mirzoyan met in Antalya on 12 March 2022 and held a joint press conference afterwards. Çavuşoğlu evaluated it as "a very productive and constructive meeting," adding that Azerbaijan was also satisfied. "We accepted the invitation positively. We said again that we will continue the process unconditionally to normalize it," Mirzoyan remarked. "We have a decision to strive for peace in our region."

More steps were to follow. For example, at a meeting in Vienna on 1 July 2022, Rubinyan and Kılıç reached an agreement to launch direct air cargo

transportation between the two countries and open the borders to citizens of third countries.

Although nearly a year has passed since this decision, neither part of the agreement has yet to be implemented. One of the reasons for this is the absence of an Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty.

Even so, during the European Political Community Summit meeting held in Prague on 6 October 2022, Erdoğan, Pashinyan, and Aliyev came together in the foyer and chatted for a while. They were accompanied by the foreign ministers of all three countries.

Later, a bilateral meeting was held between Erdoğan and Pashinyan. The special representatives of both countries were also present at the meeting. At a press conference held afterwards, Erdoğan said that the countries will achieve their shared goal of full normalization. Further steps towards this came about unexpectedly with the Kahramanmaraş earthquake.

In its immediate wake, Pashinyan and President Vahagn Khachaturyan each expressed their support for Türkiye on their respective social media accounts. Armenia quickly sent a 28-person

search and rescue team as well as more than 100 tons of humanitarian aid. The trucks passed through the Alican border gate, which has been closed for 30 years, on their way to the earthquake zone at Adıyaman.

On 15 February 2023, Mirzoyan made a surprise visit to Türkiye—a symbolic and significant step reminiscent of the time when Türkiye had sent humanitarian aid to Armenia following the 1988 earthquake in the Spitak region. The aid collected by the Turkish Red Crescent on that occasion had also been delivered to the earthquake zone through the Alican border gate.

During the visit, Mirzoyan was accompanied by Rubinyan and both Armenian officials were welcomed at Esenboğa Airport by Kılıç. After a short meeting of the two foreign ministers on 15 February 2023, a joint press conference was held during which Çavuşoğlu expressed gratitude for Armenia's support: "Armenia provided a hand of solidarity in our difficult time."

On 23 March 2023, Mirzoyan announced that the land border between the two countries will initially be opened only to diplomats and to the citizens of third countries by the beginning of the tourist season.

Although Armenia and Türkiye have decided to advance the normalization process without preconditions, the process appears to be clearly dependent on the Armenia and Azerbaijan peace process. Hopes that a peace treaty would be signed between Baku and Yerevan by the end of 2022 failed to see the light of day, especially after Aliyev stated in late November 2022 that he would not attend a meeting with Pashinyan facilitated by Charles Michel in Brussels due to the Armenian prime minister's last-minute, unexpected insistence that French President Emmanuel Macron would also need to be in attendance.

Although the Armenian government often says that it is ready to sign a peace treaty, Pashinyan cannot be said to be consistent in this direction. According to political analysts who closely follow the ongoing peace process, tensions could increase between the two countries at any moment. And the Armenia-Türkiye normalization process is unlikely to progress significantly unless there is similar

progress between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

It is also unclear how the situation will develop in light of the too-close-to-call presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in Türkiye in May 2023. Some

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Armenian and Western analysts speculate that if the opposition comes to power in Türkiye, its support for Azerbaijan will decrease and it will conduct the Armenia-Türkiye normalization process without linking it to the

Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. In some sense this was attempted in 2009, and we all remember how that turned out.

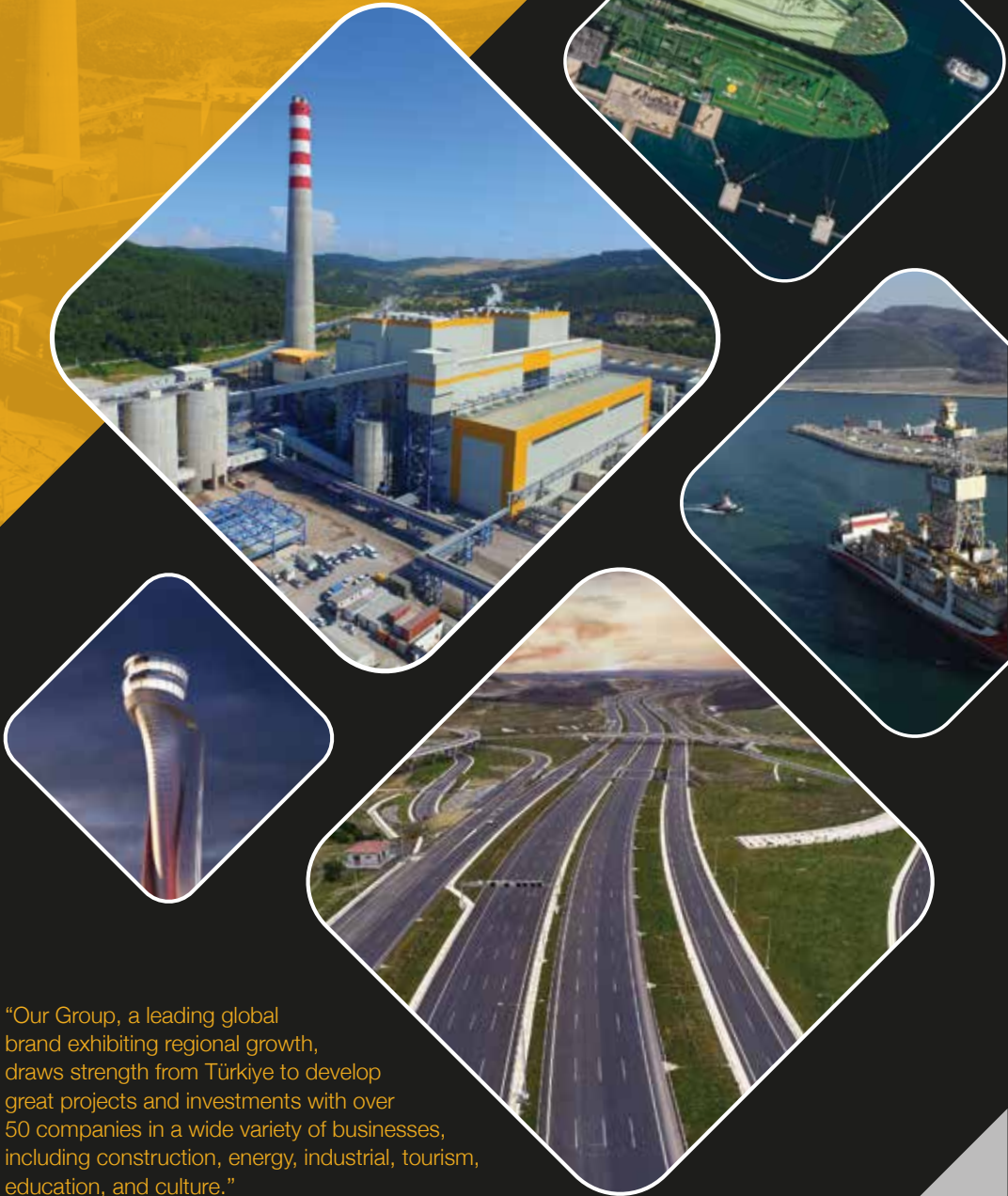
In short, if the Armenian government is serious about normalizing relations with Türkiye, then it should also take the development of its relations with Azerbaijan seriously and not delay signing a peace treaty with Baku any longer. To do so is arguably the only hope for Armenia to escape from its regional isolation and finally to develop amicable relations with its two largest neighbors—so close, but yet so far. **BD**

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