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BEYOND THE FRONTLINES: EXAMINING THE FAILURE OF THE PEACE EFFORTS
BETWEEN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN

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INTRODUCTION

The origins of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan date back to the early twentieth century. Although the two countries co-existed mostly peacefully during their period within the Soviet Union, tensions re-erupted between them in the late 1980s as the Soviet Union started to fall apart. Seizing the momentum, Armenian nationalists sought to detach the Nagorno-Karabakh region from Azerbaijan and unify it with Soviet Armenia. Following the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, Armenia launched a full-scale military campaign from 1992 to 1994, resulting in the occupation of nearly 20% of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territory, including Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding districts.

In response, the UN Security Council passed four resolutions in 1993 – 822, 853, 874, and 884 – calling for the withdrawal of Armenian forces from these territories and reaffirming their status as part of Azerbaijan (Archive of the US Department of State 2011). As Armenia declined to implement these resolutions, the two countries entered into prolonged peace negotiations after the ceasefire agreement that was brokered by Russia in 1994. The peace process was started to be overseen by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), later known as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The Minsk Group, established by the OSCE, comprised eleven states and co-chaired by the United States, Russia, and France, was leading the conflict resolution efforts from the mid-1990s. At the OSCE Lisbon Summit in 1996, three key principles were established: territorial integrity of Armenia and Azerbaijan, a special legal status for Nagorno-Karabakh with high autonomy, and guarantees for security and compliance by all parties (OSCE, 3 December 1996).

In November 2007, the Minsk Group proposed the “Basic Principles” or “Madrid Principles,” suggesting that surrounding territories return to Azerbaijan, while Nagorno-Karabakh would receive interim status and self-governance, with its final status to be determined by a plebiscite (Garibov 2015: 79-80; Babayan 2014: 122-123). However, Armenia's refusal to implement these principles, coupled with the complete rejection of any withdrawal from the occupied territories, prevented progress and led to the outbreak of the Second Karabakh War, also known as the 44-Day War in September 2020.

The protracted conflict over the Karabakh region between Armenia and Azerbaijan presents a multilayered puzzle in the context of international peacebuilding efforts. Despite numerous attempts at resolution, facilitated by international players across various platforms, long-lasting peace remains elusive. The paradox at the heart of this issue is that, while both countries proclaim a desire for peace and security, it has not been possible to sign a peace treaty, normalize relations between the two countries and launch contacts in diplomatic, economic, humanitarian and other spheres. This lack of relations hampers effective communication, mutual trust, and the establishment of a sustainable peace agreement.

The role of the United States and the major powers of the European Union as mediators between the two countries has rarely produced positive outcomes that made impactful contribution to the peace process. Their peacebuilding activities, initiated at the very beginning of this conflict following the collapse of the Soviet Union, were predominantly based on the liberal convictions of promoting peace and prosperity and strongly affected by religious solidarity and the presence of strong Armenian diaspora in the key Western capitals (Shafiyev 2020; 2021; 2022: 103). Azerbaijan's views and concerns were demonstratively disregarded in this process, although it was Azerbaijan whose territories were under occupation and who had to accommodate up to a million internally displaced persons (from Karabakh) and refugees (from Armenia) (Shafiyev 2022: 103). The United States and France, along with Russia, were represented in the co-chairmanship of the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). They, however, did not take any measures to ensure the implementation of the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, which were adopted 1993 and called for the immediate withdrawal of the Armenian forces from the occupied territories of Azerbaijan.

Their mediating role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process continued and evolved after the Second Karabakh War (September 27 – November 10, 2020). After the war, the European Union (EU) replaced France as the leading mediator between the two South Caucasian countries and took up a mediating mission between the two countries for the first time in the history of the conflict (Huseynov, 6 January 2023). The EU was more successful in this role compared to France, the country that hosts significant and influential Armenian diaspora and has been often criticized by Baku for being pro-Armenian rather than acting as an unbiased honest broker.

Thanks to mediation by the European Union, Armenia and Azerbaijan recognized each other's territorial integrity on the sidelines of the first summit of the European Political Community (EPC) in October 2022 (Consilium.europa.eu, 7 October 2022). Yet, it has not been possible to finalize this process with a comprehensive peace treaty between the two countries.

For example, throughout 2023, officials from both countries expressed optimism about signing a peace treaty by the end of the year. This optimism peaked on December 7, 2023, when Baku and Yerevan reached a significant agreement: Armenia supported Azerbaijan's bid to host the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29), while Azerbaijan released a group of Armenian prisoners detained after the 2020 war. The bilateral nature of this agreement that was possible without third-party mediation further underscored its significance. In April 2024, another important breakthrough occurred when Armenia and Azerbaijan peacefully resolved a territorial dispute for the first time in their post-Soviet history (Azertag, 19 April 2024). This involved the peaceful return of four border villages, occupied by Armenia since the early 1990s, back to Azerbaijan, accompanied by the initiation of delimitation and demarcation of the state border between the two countries.

Despite these positive developments, Armenia and Azerbaijan continue to struggle with the aftermath of their conflict and appear far from achieving normalization of relations and reconciliation between their peoples. Many observers warn that even the signing of a peace treaty may not be decisive in this context. "History is replete with examples where painstakingly negotiated peace treaties failed to bring about lasting peace, often leading to the resumption of conflicts. It is crucial to thoroughly consider this aspect in the present peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. We need a peace treaty that addresses the underlying causes of the conflict, minimizes, if not eliminates, the chances for the resumption of hostilities, and, towards this end, includes monitoring mechanisms that should be established to ensure compliance and accountability from the parties," writes one Azerbaijani expert (Huseynov, June 29, 2023).

This study aims to explore the underlying reasons for the persistent hostility between the two countries. It will examine the origins of the conflict, which date back to the early twentieth century, with a primary focus on the post-Soviet period, as modern dynamics in the conflict and peace process are rooted in the conditions left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The study will pay particular attention to the mediating activities of the United States, the

European Union, and Russia and investigate why their mediation has yielded minimal results. In this context, the study employs classical realism to analyze the case. The analytical toolkit of this theory, in particular its emphasis on the role of external actors as well as domestic political dynamics in its analysis of international relations, will help to explore the reasons behind the prolongation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks and the failure of the international mediators in their perceived efforts to bring about lasting settlement to the conflict.

This research is oriented around the following research question: What are the main obstacles to establishing a peace treaty and normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan despite international mediation efforts? The following sub-questions have been explored in order to acquire a clear understanding of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process and the challenges that undermine the normalization efforts. It explores the challenges posed to the peace process by the local factors on the ground. In the second sub-question, the thesis explores the reasons behind the fact that the mediating efforts of the international actors delivered minimal results.

Thus, this study seeks contribute to the existing literature by providing an analysis of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations from the perspective of classical realism. The thesis is aimed to identify the main obstacles to establishing a peace treaty and normalizing relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan despite international mediation efforts. The study devotes a particular attention to the role of the international mediators (Russia, the European Union, and the United States) and looks into the reasons for their failure to bring about a lasting settlement to the conflict. The title of the research “Beyond the Frontlines: Examining the failure of the peace efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan” aims to make it clear that this thesis will strive to explore the dynamics in the peace process at the contemporary period, in particular, following the Second Karabakh War (2020).

1. Literature review

Like many territorial conflicts worldwide, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has been subject to diverse and often conflicting interpretations and representations. Scholarly debates on the issue have frequently been influenced by non-academic factors, such as the authors' nationalities, religious affiliations, or connections to the conflicting parties. These differences become more pronounced when examining academic and other works written by Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Hence, this thesis will try to focus specifically on works authored by non-Azerbaijanis and non-Armenians to explore the roots of the conflict, aiming to present as objective a background as possible. Additionally, attention will be given to resolutions and other documents issued by international organizations and courts. A long list of news media articles is used and referred to in this study, as the developments of the latest years, in particular the period ensuing the Second Karabakh War, have yet to be thoroughly studied in academic works. This situation further increases the value of this research as a contribution to scholarly debates on the recent period of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

One of the most authoritative works on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, which illuminates its background and escalation following the collapse of the Soviet Union, is *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War* (2003) by British journalist Thomas de Waal. De Waal notes that during the occupation of the Kalbajar region in the First Karabakh War (1992-1994), compelling evidence emerged for the first time showing that the armed forces of the Republic of Armenia had entered Azerbaijan. He further asserts that the majority of the forces responsible for the 1993 Kalbajar invasion, including the ethnic cleansing and mass killings of civilians, originated from Armenian territory (de Waal, 2003: 213). "The main thrust of the Armenian attack came from the west, from the Vardenis region of Armenia – although this was denied at the time for political reasons. A supporting offensive came from Karabakh," de Waal (2003: 213) explains. This book is significant because Armenian representatives had consistently denied the Republic of Armenia's role in occupying Azerbaijani territories, instead claiming that these areas were "liberated" by forces from the Armenian community of the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

In 2015, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) confirmed that it was hardly conceivable for Nagorno-Karabakh, an entity with a population of fewer than 150,000 ethnic Armenians, to launch a successful military operation against Azerbaijan, the country of approximately seven million people and conquer whole or major parts of seven Azerbaijani districts, along with the former NKAO, without substantial military support from Azerbaijan (ECHR 2015).

Although Armenia denied any involvement in the occupation of and subsequent illegal control over the Azerbaijani territories, the official representatives of this country took part in the internationally mediated peace negotiations with Azerbaijan from the very beginning of the process following the ceasefire agreement signed in 1994 (Broers 2019: 7). These negotiations failed to deliver any breakthrough and eventually led to the eruption of another war in 2020. The period between 1994 and 2020 have been extensively analyzed by academics, think-tank experts, and other observers.

One of the most known works about this period of the negotiations is “Armenia and Azerbaijan: (Anatomy of a Rivalry)” (2019) published by Laurence Broers, a British researcher, just one year before the start of the Second Karabakh War. The book offers a comprehensive analysis of the conflict, placing the dispute in a broader geopolitical and historical context. Broers, a well-regarded expert on the South Caucasus, looks into the roots of this rivalry, tracing its evolution from the early 20th century to the modern period. He examines the role of identity, state-building, and external actors in shaping the conflict. Importantly, the book distinguishes itself by focusing not just on the battlefield confrontations, but also on the underlying narratives, fears, and grievances that perpetuate the hostility. In 2019, unlike the mainstream representation of the conflict as “frozen”, Broers emphasizes that the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is not a frozen one but a dynamic and ever-evolving rivalry, driven by shifts in domestic politics, regional alignments, and international diplomacy. His analysis offers valuable insights into the complexities of conflict resolution, making the case for a nuanced understanding of the different layers of conflict, including issues of territoriality, memory, and national identity. The book is critical for understanding the entrenched nature of rivalry and offers a balanced framework for anyone seeking to explore pathways toward peace between the two countries.

The period since the Second Karabakh War is a relatively recent period and the materials that will be used in this thesis are mostly the products of think-tanks, experts, and research

centers. Towards this purpose, the author makes use of the works of observers from various countries, but also Armenian and Azerbaijani experts to understand the contemporary period of peace negotiations. The author looks into the works of Armenian experts, including Benjamin Poghosyan, Richard Giragosian, Sergei Melkonian. From the Azerbaijani side, the author has focused extensively on the works of Vasif Huseynov, Fuad Shahbazov, Farid Shafiyev, among others. The mentioned period of the peace negotiations continues to be analyzed by Thomas de Wall and Laurence Broers, whose works remain important to get a clear understanding of the present dynamics in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

One of the academic works that have covered the recent period of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks is “*The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives*” (2022), edited by M. Hakan Yavuz and Michael Gunter. This volume brings together a diverse range of scholars who offer historical, political, and legal perspectives on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The editors and contributors trace the origins of the conflict, rooted in the early 20th century, and examine its subsequent escalation following the collapse of the peace negotiations in 2020. The book highlights the significant geopolitical dimensions of the conflict, discussing the roles played by regional and international powers, such as Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, in shaping the course of events. It also emphasizes the impact of nationalism, ethnic identity, and territorial disputes, while critically analysing the failures of diplomacy and peace-building efforts. The volume is especially valuable for its interdisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis with contemporary political science, which makes it a crucial resource for understanding the deep-seated causes and potential resolutions of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study will employ the theory of classical realism to analyze the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and address the research questions. Classical realism, rooted in the works of thinkers like Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Morgenthau, emphasizes the anarchic nature of the international system and the perpetual struggle for power among states. The theory is built on three key provisions. First, international politics, just like all politics, is characterized as struggle for power (Morgenthau 1948: 13). Second, domestic and international politics are viewed as two sides of the same coin, each influenced by different moral, political, and social factors (Morgenthau 1948: 21); 3). Third, nation-states are analyzed as the main actors to focus on when trying to understand international politics (Morgenthau 1948: 73-75). This framework is particularly suited to understanding the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where power dynamics, security concerns, and the quest for national interests drive the actions of both states.

Classical realism posits that the international system is inherently anarchic, with no overarching authority to enforce rules or norms. In such a system, states are the primary actors, driven by their desire for power and survival. The theory argues that states act rationally, pursuing policies that maximize their power and security in an uncertain and competitive environment. In the context of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, classical realism provides a lens through which to examine the motivations behind each state's actions, particularly in terms of territorial disputes, military engagements, and alliance formations.

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, rooted in historical animosities and territorial disputes over the Karabakh region, exemplifies the classical realist view of international relations. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan are seen as rational actors seeking to enhance their security and territorial integrity in a highly volatile region. The classical realist framework allows us to understand how the balance of power between these two states and their respective alliances with external powers—such as Russia, Türkiye, and others—shapes the course of the conflict.

Classical realism analyzes both systemic and domestic factors to explain state behavior in the international system. This framework is particularly useful for analyzing conflicts like the

one between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where external pressures and internal dynamics affect the foreign policies of the conflicting parties and the present peace process between them. Classical realism also emphasizes the role of human nature and the inherent desire for power as driving forces in international politics. Leaders in both Armenia and Azerbaijan are influenced by these factors as they navigate the complexities of the conflict (Gadimova-Akbulut & Petrosyan, 2024: 2-3). The decisions made by political leaders, often shaped by their perceptions of threats and opportunities, reflect the classical realist notion that power and security are paramount in an anarchic world.

It is important to note that a significant breakthrough in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan occurred only after the 2018 government change in Armenia. The new political leadership under Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan generated optimism for the peace talks. Unlike his predecessors, Pashinyan is not of Karabakh origin and came to power with a mandate to combat the corruption of the previous regime, which fueled this optimism. Although this change in government did eventually lead to a resolution of the conflict, it was not achieved through peaceful negotiations.

The period since the Second Karabakh War (2020) is again largely shaped by the perceptions of the political elite in Armenia and Azerbaijan. While the government of Prime Minister Pashinyan, again as opposed to his predecessors, seek to move his country closer to the West, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev remains committed to multivectorial policy course by cooperating with multiple players, including the West, China, Russia, and others. Azerbaijan's policy choice of seeking membership to BRICS and expanding cooperation with Russia and China further alienate Baku and Yerevan from each other. This difference between the two governments has unavoidable consequences for the peace process.

The analysis of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict demonstrates that the foreign policies of both countries are not solely determined by the anarchic international environment or the relative power between the external great powers. Instead, these policies are also shaped by the internal political landscape, the perceptions of political elites, and the historical narratives that influence national identity and public opinion. The international system exerts significant pressure on Armenia and Azerbaijan, influencing their foreign policy choices. Both countries operate within an international environment where major powers, such as Russia, Iran, Türkiye, the United States, and the European Union pursue their parochial interests. The geostrategic importance of the South Caucasus bolstered by its location at the crossroads of

the East and the West in the middle of the North-South International Transportation Corridor and the Trans-Caspian Transportation Corridor (also known as Middle Corridor) augments the region's value for these great powers. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan seem to be aware of this fact and, hence, are trying to benefit from the role of these external actors to their own ends in the conflict.

In the context of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, classical realist perspectives offer valuable insights. By focusing on the pursuit of power, security, and survival in an anarchic international system, classical realism offers insights into the motivations and actions of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. It also highlights the role of external actors in shaping the conflict dynamics and the prospects for peace. These powers, primarily, Russia, the EU, and the United States are seeking to ensure that their parochial interests will be protected in any scenario along which the conflict or its settlement would develop. Classical realism, by including domestic factors in its analysis of foreign policy, offers insights also into how deeply rooted identities, historical narratives, and perceptions of leaders shape the interactions and societal views between the two countries. The long-standing dispute over the Karabakh region is not merely a territorial issue but is also deeply intertwined with national identities and collective memories of past grievances and traumas (De Wall 2013; Broers 2019). Scholars argue that understanding this historical background is crucial for addressing the underlying causes of the conflict and for designing effective peacebuilding strategies (Değirmencioğlu 2019).

3. Methodology

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has been a center of attention for many scholars regarding the long period of conflicts and establishment of peace. Lamont (2022) underscores the necessity of understanding methodological worldviews that guide the in-depth analysis of conflicts in international relations. In effect, much of this work provides an essential tool to make the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict fit into a more comprehensive theoretical framework. This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a combination of case study analysis, historical analysis, and process tracing. These methods are chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, its historical roots, and the effectiveness of diplomatic engagement in peacebuilding efforts.

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Karabakh region is selected as the primary case, representative of protracted ethnopolitical disputes with remarkable lessons and consequences for regional stability and international attempts for peace. Marking the intensity of this conflict, its deep historical roots, and heated nationalistic fervor make it a relevant case for studying the effectiveness of diplomatic engagement as a peacebuilding strategy. The case study approach allows for an in-depth analysis of this conflict, identifying key events, turning points, and the impact of international mediation efforts (Robson 2002; Hartley 2004: 323).

The historical analysis will be used to explain adequately how the conflict developed and to cover the key happenings and turning points (Rowlinson 2004: 301-311). This approach is employed to trace the development of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, providing a detailed account of its origins and evolution. This method helps to uncover the historical narratives and socio-political identities that have shaped the conflict dynamics. By examining key historical events, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent wars, the study aims to understand how past grievances and traumas influence current perceptions and behaviors.

Process tracing is utilized to identify the causal mechanisms through which diplomatic engagement and peacebuilding efforts influence the conflict resolution process (Collier 2011: 824). This method involves a systematic examination of the sequence of events and the actions of key actors, both local and international. By tracing the processes and interactions that have taken place, the study seeks to understand how diplomatic initiatives have contributed to positive developments, such as the recognition of territorial integrity and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

4. Peacebuilding Efforts in the Karabakh Conflict

4.1. Origins of the Conflict

At the start of the 18th century, Russian ruler Peter the Great formulated a plan to conquer the South Caucasus, launching a military campaign in 1722 that resulted in the occupation of its eastern territories. Peter's vision shaped Imperial Russia's future policies in the region, including the relocation of populations to increase the number of Christians. As historian Vasiliy Potto (1887) noted, Peter was the first to view Armenians through a political lens, setting the stage for Russia's involvement in Armenian affairs. This marked the beginning of a strategic policy under Russian rulers concerning Armenia. Peter also instructed the utilization of local Christian populations, such as Armenians, to consolidate Russia's military control over the area. Historian Sergei Soloviev (1896: 687) commented that Peter saw increasing the Christian population and reducing the Muslim population as key to securing Russia's newly occupied territories, particularly through the support of Armenians. The religion factor played a critical role in Russia's vision concerning the South Caucasus in the later periods. Broers (2019: 127) notes that "Co-religionist identity fueled a tactical détente between the Russian imperial state and the Armenians of Transcaucasia for much (although not all) of the nineteenth century".

Under Catherine II, Russia further encouraged the settlement of foreigners in its vast lands, with Prince Potemkin particularly advocating for population transfers in border regions like the Caucasus. Potemkin's vision included the creation of three Christian client states in the Caucasus: Georgia, "Persian Armenia," and Albania. Between 1804 and 1829, following a series of wars with the Qajar and Ottoman Empires, Russia extended its control over much of the South Caucasus, including areas such as Erivan, Karabakh, Baku, Shirvan, Ganja, Sheki,

Derbent, the Talysh, and the Nakhchivan Khanates, located in present-day Azerbaijan and Armenia. Some of these khanates became Russian protectorates, as evidenced by the Treaty of Kurekchai, signed between the Khan of Karabakh, Ibrahim Khalil, and Russian general Tsitsianov.

It should be however made clear that Russia's interest in the South Caucasus during the 18th and 19th centuries extended beyond religious and demographic considerations (Keçeci 2016: 110-117). Strategic and economic factors played a crucial role in shaping its imperial policy in the region (ibid). The South Caucasus occupied a vital geographic position at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia, making it a key area for controlling major trade routes. Control over this region provided Russia with access to the Caspian Sea and the lucrative markets of Persia and the Ottoman Empire. The Caucasus also served as a buffer zone against potential threats from Russia's rivals, particularly the Ottoman and Persian Empires (Keçeci 2016: 82-110). By establishing a strong presence in the South Caucasus, Russia aimed to safeguard its southern borders and prevent these neighboring empires from expanding their influence northward (Keçeci 2016: 110-115). Moreover, the region's rich natural resources, including fertile lands and mineral wealth, made it an economically valuable addition to the Russian Empire (Keçeci 2016: 36-37). Thus, Russia's conquest and subsequent policies in the South Caucasus were driven not only by the desire to increase the Christian population but also by the ambition to control a strategically important region that could serve as a gateway to further expansion and enhance its economic power. This combination of strategic and economic motivations underscores the multi-faceted nature of Russian imperial interests in the South Caucasus.

Nevertheless, settlement of Armenians in the South Caucasus was part of Russia's strategy to solidify control over the region. Russia's approach to consolidating control over the South Caucasus involved a strategic effort to resettle Armenians in the region. As part of this plan, large-scale relocation campaigns were initiated, bringing Armenians from the Ottoman and Qajar empires into areas like Karabakh, Erivan, and Nakhichevan. General Ivan Paskevich underscored the necessity of increasing the Armenian presence in these regions to ensure Russian dominance (Mostashari 2006: 42). After the Treaty of Turkmenchay, which cemented Russia's control over the South Caucasus, Tsarist Russia formally established the "Armenian Oblast" on February 10, 1828, on the lands of the Erivan and Nakhichevan Khanates (Shavrov 1911). This was followed by a decree from Tsar Nicholas I on March 21 of the same year, officially creating the Armenian Province. Between 1828 and 1830, approximately

40,000 Armenians from the Qajar Empire and 84,000 from the Ottoman Empire were relocated to the South Caucasus, particularly to regions where Azerbaijanis had traditionally been the majority, including what is now Armenia and Karabakh. Despite this, Paskevich observed in 1828 that Muslims still accounted for three-quarters of the population in the newly formed Armenian Province (Potto: 1887: 736). Historian Sergei Glinka (1831: 93) and others noted that this broader strategy of increasing the Christian population was intended to create a buffer against neighboring Muslim powers, especially Turks, Persians, and local Highlanders.

Under the rule of the Russian Empire, Armenians experienced significant growth in both demographic prominence and economic influence within the South Caucasus. Benefiting from Russia's policies, Armenians assumed a variety of prominent positions in civil administration and commerce, surpassing other ethnic groups in their access to political and economic power. According to American historian Tadeusz Swietochowski, this advancement was largely facilitated by Russian protection, which allowed Armenians to flourish while other ethnic communities, such as Azerbaijanis, faced more limited opportunities for social and economic mobility (Swietochowski, 1985). This period of Armenian advancement, however, also saw the emergence of violent ethnic strife. As the Russian Empire faced revolutionary upheaval in 1905-1906, clashes broke out between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, marking the beginning of a long-standing ethnic conflict. These early confrontations were driven by competition for political power and influence in the South Caucasus, which had become increasingly unstable in the waning years of Russian rule.

Following the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 and the subsequent Russian Revolution, the South Caucasus entered a new era of national independence (Broers 2019: 22). In 1918, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia each declared independence, forming their own nation-states in the vacuum left by the departing Russian authorities. However, Armenia quickly asserted territorial claims over several Azerbaijani regions, including Karabakh, Nakhichevan, and Zangezur (Saparov 2012). These regions, which had been home to a significant Azerbaijani population for centuries, became the focal points of Armenian territorial ambitions and inter-ethnic conflict.

At this time, Karabakh and Zangezur were governed by Azerbaijani General Khosrov Sultanov, who had been appointed as the region's general governor by the newly established Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (Saparov 2012: 292). Sultanov's administration attempted

to maintain order in these contested areas amidst mounting Armenian resistance. In 1919, after a series of skirmishes and negotiations, the Armenians in Karabakh agreed to a temporary arrangement that placed them under Azerbaijani authority (Saparov 2012: 291). In exchange, the Azerbaijani government promised to respect the cultural and civil rights of the local Armenian population. The fragile nature of this agreement was indicative of the broader territorial and ethnic tensions in the South Caucasus. The provisional acceptance of Azerbaijani rule by Karabakh's Armenians did not quell their desire for self-determination, and the region would remain a flashpoint for conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the years to come.

In 1920, Soviet Russia extended its influence over both Azerbaijan and Armenia, bringing them under the control of the newly established Soviet regime (Broers 2019: 23). Some Armenian historians have asserted that Joseph Stalin was responsible for assigning Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhchivan to Azerbaijan, presenting it as a deliberate move to favor Azerbaijani interests (Saparov 2012: 82). However, a more nuanced analysis of the events between 1921 and 1923 reveals that Stalin's motivations were less about ethnic favoritism and more about consolidating Soviet power in the South Caucasus (Broers 2019: 25).

At this point in time, Stalin did not yet possess the unchecked authority he would later wield. His decisions regarding territorial disputes were shaped by the broader objectives of the Soviet leadership, which prioritized stability and control over local nationalist aspirations. The Bolsheviks, Stalin included, adopted a pragmatic approach to ethnic and territorial issues, seeking to accommodate different groups in a way that would secure Moscow's dominance over the region (Saparov 2012: 305-310). Rather than awarding territories based on favoritism, the Bolsheviks aimed to maintain a delicate balance of power. Stalin's role in these territorial decisions, while significant, was not unilateral (Saparov 2012: 311). He worked within a collective leadership structure where other key figures influenced outcomes (ibid). The primary goal was not to arbitrarily assign territories but to implement a strategy that would prevent ethnic conflicts from undermining Soviet authority. By accommodating the various ethnic groups and creating autonomous regions, the Soviets sought to maintain a degree of local self-governance while ensuring that Moscow retained ultimate control.

On June 3, 1921, the Bolsheviks secretly transferred Zangezur to Armenia (Valiyev & Gafarova 169). On July 4, 1921, the Soviet Caucasian Bureau, including Stalin, convened in Tbilisi to decide the fate of mountainous Karabakh. Their initial decision was to incorporate

it into Armenia. However, following objections from Azerbaijani leader Nariman Narimanov, the Bureau reconsidered and reversed their decision the following day, opting to *retain* (not transfer) Karabakh within Azerbaijan. This decision implied that the region had previously belonged to Azerbaijan and was decided to retain so (Valiyev & Gafarova 169). In 1923, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region was officially created, with the term “Nagorno” (meaning “mountainous” in Russian) added to the administrative division of Karabakh. For Stalin, the Azerbaijani territories served as leverage in his broader strategy to quickly establish Soviet republics in the South Caucasus, which were eventually integrated into a unified Soviet state in 1924.

Following World War II, the Soviet Union extended its influence in Eastern and Central Europe, and Stalin sought territorial concessions from Türkiye. This created internal pressure within the USSR, leading to discussions about redrawing the boundaries of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Between 1946 and 1949, Stalin authorized the repatriation of Armenians from abroad and, to accommodate the new arrivals, ordered the resettlement of Azerbaijanis from Armenia, a process that continued until 1953 (Shafiyev 2019).

The modern phase of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over the Karabakh region began in February 1988, driven by Armenian nationalist calls for unification with Armenia, a movement known as “miatsum” in Armenian (Broers 2019: 96). However, tensions had already escalated by the fall of 1987, when some Armenian nationalists initiated attacks against and expelled Azerbaijanis from the Kafan region of Armenia – which marked the beginning of the latest and final stage of deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia (Broers 2019: 137).

The situation was being escalated in Karabakh as well. On February 13, 1988, Armenians in the region held their first significant protest, demanding the transfer of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast from Azerbaijan to Armenia (Valiyev & Gafarova 2020). This demand was formalized on February 20, 1988, when Armenian deputies in the National Council of Nagorno-Karabakh voted to unify the region with Armenia, in defiance of both Azerbaijani and Soviet laws. The conflict’s first casualties occurred on February 24, 1988, when two young Azerbaijanis were killed in Askeran town of the Karabakh region, during clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani demonstrators. The violence intensified between February 26 and 28, 1988, in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgayit, resulting in the deaths of 26 Armenians and 6 Azerbaijanis (Cornell 1999: 17).

On September 2, 1991, the local councils of Nagorno-Karabakh took a significant and controversial step by adopting a “Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh” (Cornell 1999: 26). This declaration, however, was declared null and void under both Azerbaijani and Soviet legal frameworks, which did not recognize the autonomy of Nagorno-Karabakh as a basis for secession. The situation continued to evolve in the context of the broader political changes in the region. On October 18, 1991, Azerbaijan formally enacted the Law on the Restoration of State Independence, which marked a pivotal moment in its emergence as a sovereign state following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

A critical and contentious development occurred on December 10, 1991, when the local separatist entity in Karabakh conducted an “illegal referendum” (Cornell 1999: 27). This referendum was held in defiance of the prevailing regulations and legislation of both the Soviet Union and the Azerbaijani Soviet Republic. The Armenian side contended that the referendum and the subsequent declaration of independence by Karabakh Armenians were in alignment with the Law of the USSR dated April 3, 1990, known as the “Law on the Procedures for Resolving Questions Related to the Secession of Union Republics from the USSR” (Huseynov, June 5, 2020). This law purportedly provided the framework for autonomous entities within the Soviet Union to make an independent decision regarding their status and potential secession.

Nevertheless, this argument is undermined by the fact that both Azerbaijan and Armenia, along with other Soviet republics, chose to leave the Soviet Union in accordance with the Belovezha Accords, which were signed on December 8, 1991. The Belovezha Accords marked the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union and established the legal basis for the independence of the former Soviet republics (Makili-Aliyev 2023). Consequently, the April 3, 1990, law regarding secession was not utilized by either Azerbaijan or Armenia as a legal basis for their departure from the Soviet Union (Makili-Aliyev 2023). The actions taken by the separatist entity in Karabakh were thus not recognized under international law or by the newly independent states, leading to increased tensions and conflict in the region.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Armenia embarked on a comprehensive military campaign against Azerbaijan, initiating a series of full-scale invasion. Armenian forces, capitalizing on the internal political turmoil within Azerbaijan, achieved a series of decisive victories in Karabakh. Subsequently, they extended their operations to occupy seven Azerbaijani regions situated outside the Karabakh region.

One of the most devastating episodes of this conflict occurred on February 25-26, 1992, when Armenian armed forces launched a brutal assault on the Azerbaijani town of Khojaly (Cornell 1999: 31). The attack resulted in the complete destruction of the town and the massacre of 613 Azerbaijani civilians, marking one of the most tragic and widely condemned incidents of the war.

In May 1992, Armenian forces seized control of Shusha, a strategically significant city in Karabakh that was predominantly populated by Azerbaijanis. This victory was followed by the capture of Lachin, further consolidating Armenian control over the region. Despite a brief period of Azerbaijani military gains during the summer of 1992, the Armenian forces regained the initiative in 1993 with the political and military support of Russia, leading to the occupation of additional Azerbaijani territories, including Kelbajar, Agdam, Fizuli, Jabrail, Qubadli, and Zangezur (Gafarli 2022). This occupation resulted in the displacements of more than 700,000 Azerbaijanis from their homeland and violent destruction of all the occupied territories of Azerbaijan.

The international community responded to the escalating conflict with increasing concern. In 1993, the United Nations Security Council adopted a series of four resolutions – 822, 853, 874, and 884 (Archive of the US Department of State, 2001; Gunter 2022). These resolutions called for the immediate withdrawal of Armenian troops from the occupied Azerbaijani territories and reaffirmed Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the Karabakh region. The resolutions highlighted the international recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and the need for a resolution to the ongoing conflict. The resolutions also called upon the sides to create necessary conditions for the return of the displaced people to their homes in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding districts of Azerbaijan. Efforts to bring about a cessation of hostilities culminated in May 1994, when Russia facilitated a cease-fire agreement in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. This agreement marked a temporary halt to the conflict, although the underlying issues and territorial disputes continued to simmer, setting the stage for future negotiations and ongoing tensions in the region.

4.2. The Failure of the Peace Talks prior to the Second Karabakh War

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Karabakh region has been one of the most protracted and complex disputes in the post-Soviet space. It has been marked by multiple episodes of violence, failed negotiations, and repeated international efforts at brokering peace. To understand the trajectory of peace negotiations between the two nations from 1994 to the mid-2020s, it is essential to explore the critical moments, key actors, and obstacles that have shaped the course of these efforts.

In 1993, as the Karabakh war, which is now recognized as the First Karabakh War, escalated, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed four crucial resolutions (822, 853, 874, and 884) demanding the immediate withdrawal of Armenian forces from the occupied territories of Azerbaijan (Archive of the US Department of State, 2011). These resolutions reaffirmed that Karabakh and the surrounding districts were part of Azerbaijan's sovereign territory and called for a cessation of hostilities. However, despite these efforts, the Armenian side refused to withdraw its troops from the Azerbaijani territories. Armenian forces consolidated their control over Karabakh and seven surrounding districts, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis from their homes (Cornell 1997).

The First Karabakh War persisted after the Bishkek ceasefire agreement which is often referred to as the Bishkek Protocol and was signed in May 1994 in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan (Peaceagreements.org, 5 May 1994). The agreement was brokered by Russia, with the involvement of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, two other former Soviet republics. The negotiations were facilitated by the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a regional organization formed after the dissolution of the Soviet

Union. The ceasefire was largely a pragmatic decision by both sides, who were exhausted from years of fighting and unable to achieve a decisive victory. The Armenian forces had succeeded in capturing most of Karabakh and the surrounding territories, but they were overextended and vulnerable to counterattacks (Cornell 1997). Azerbaijan, on the other hand, had suffered significant military losses and was under increasing internal pressure to halt the bloodshed.

According to the Bishkek Protocol, both sides agreed to an immediate cessation of hostilities. The ceasefire took effect on May 12, 1994, and ended large-scale fighting in the region. This ceasefire regime largely remained in force until the outbreak of Second Karabakh War in September 2020, despite sporadic escalations in the meantime (Peaceagreements.org, 5 May 1994). The agreement established a Line of Contact between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces, effectively freezing the frontlines where they stood at the time of the ceasefire. This Line of Contact would remain in place for decades, becoming one of the most heavily militarized zones in the world and eventually leading to the resumption of hostilities in 2020.

The protocol also called for the return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes (Peaceagreements.org, 5 May 1994). However, in practice, this provision was never implemented, as the Armenian side refused to allow the return of Azerbaijani IDPs to Karabakh and the surrounding territories. Around 700 thousand Azerbaijani IDPs were forced to live mostly in desperate conditions in other parts of Azerbaijan. The Bishkek Protocol called for continued negotiations under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group, which had been established in 1992 to mediate the conflict. The Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States, would become the primary mechanism for peace negotiations in the years to come.

Russia, as the former imperial power in the region and a key player in post-Soviet geopolitics, played a crucial role in mediating the ceasefire in 1994. Moscow had strategic interests in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia was a close ally, relying heavily on Russian military and economic support, while Azerbaijan's oil resources and geographical position were of great importance to Russian interests in the Caspian region (Gafarli 2022: 348). However, as Azerbaijan was being led by a nationalist and anti-Russian government in 1992-1993, Moscow sided with Armenia providing significant military and political support in its war against Azerbaijan (Gafarli 2022: 348).

The ceasefire mediated by Russia was nevertheless welcomed by the international community as a necessary first step toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict (Cornell 2017b: 196-197). The OSCE, the United Nations, and other international organizations praised the agreement for ending the immediate bloodshed and called on both sides to engage in serious negotiations for a comprehensive peace settlement.

In Armenia, the ceasefire was seen as a victory, as it allowed Armenian forces to retain control over Karabakh and the surrounding territories (Cornell 1997). The Armenian leadership, led by President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, was eager to consolidate these gains and hoped that the ceasefire would lead to a diplomatic solution that would recognize Karabakh's independence or its integration into Armenia (ibid).

In Azerbaijan, however, the ceasefire was viewed with deep frustration (Cornell 1997: 212). While it ended the immediate fighting, it left Armenian forces in control of large swathes of Azerbaijani territory. For Azerbaijan, the ceasefire was a temporary measure that did not address the core issue of its territorial integrity. President Heydar Aliyev, who had come to power in 1993, made it clear that Azerbaijan would never accept the permanent loss of Karabakh and the surrounding districts. The ceasefire, therefore, did little to resolve the underlying tensions, and Azerbaijan began to rebuild its military in preparation for a possible future conflict. The Azerbaijanis displaced from their homes in Karabakh were pressuring the government to take real actions. In 1997, Svante Cornell (1997: 212) observed that: "Recent reports from refugee camps in Azerbaijan speak of the danger of the refugees taking the matter in their own hands and marching on Karabakh unless something is done for them to return to their homes. As a leader of the refugees in the Saatli camp expresses the matter, it is not difficult to find 150.000 strong men among a million refugees".

Nevertheless, the Azerbaijani governments demonstrated strong commitment to the peaceful resolution of the conflict via the internationally mediated negotiations, although Baku never ruled out the military option. For instance, in 2009, President Ilham Aliyev made Azerbaijan's position clear before an international audience:

"Unfortunately, I cannot totally rule out a military solution, as we have the total right based on international laws to restore our territorial integrity, which no one can question... Today Azerbaijan has powerful and modern armed forces that are capable of restoring the country's territorial integrity" (Luchterhandt 2012: 211).

While the fighting had stopped in 1994, the political process to find a lasting peace remained stagnant. Armenia and Azerbaijan maintained irreconcilable positions: Armenia sought to legitimize its control over Karabakh, while Azerbaijan consistently demanded the return of its occupied territories and the right of displaced Azerbaijanis to return home.

The Minsk Group was established by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in 1992, a precursor to the OSCE, as a response to the escalating conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Cornell 1999: 123). The group's formation followed the Helsinki Additional Meeting of the CSCE Council, which took place in March 1992, where it was decided to convene a conference in Minsk, Belarus, to address the Karabakh conflict. Although the conference itself never occurred due to ongoing military hostilities, the Minsk Group became the primary diplomatic platform for peace negotiations up until the outbreak of the Second Karabakh War in 2020.

The Minsk Group was co-chaired by three major powers: Russia, France, and the United States. These countries were tasked with coordinating peace efforts and facilitating negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Cornell 1999: 107). The Group also included representatives from Belarus, Germany, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, and Türkiye. Its mandate focuses on promoting a peaceful resolution to the Karabakh conflict through dialogue, confidence-building measures, and proposals for a negotiated settlement.

One of the most important moments in the history of the OSCE's involvement in the conflict was the Lisbon Summit in December 1996 (Cornell 1999: 123). During this summit, the OSCE issued a declaration that included key principles intended to guide the peace process. Known as the Lisbon Summit Declaration, the document emphasized three core principles that were meant to form the basis of a peaceful settlement (OSCE, 3 December 1996). According to this document, the principle that the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan should be upheld, with international recognition of its sovereignty over Karabakh. In another provision, the document recognized the need to provide Karabakh with a high degree of self-rule or autonomy, while still preserving Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. The OSCE stressed the importance of providing guarantees for the security of the Nagorno-Karabakh population, particularly the ethnic Armenian community, to prevent future violence and instability.

Based on these principles, Azerbaijan offered the highest possible level of autonomy for the Armenian community in Karabakh (Askerov 2020). The Armenian side rejected the prospects of autonomy under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Azerbaijan and insisted on full

secession. Azerbaijan's offer of autonomy remained on the table until the 2020 war after which Baku took it off from the agenda and denied any special status to Armenians (President.az, November 10, 2020).

The Lisbon principles reflected the international community's efforts to balance Azerbaijan's demand for territorial integrity with Armenia's insistence on the right to self-determination for Karabakh's Armenian population. However, the Lisbon Summit also highlighted the difficulty of achieving consensus. While the declaration was supported by 53 OSCE member states including Azerbaijan, Armenia opposed it, citing concerns that it did not sufficiently address Karabakh's right to self-determination. As a result, the Lisbon Declaration, while a notable attempt to set a framework for negotiations, did not lead to a breakthrough in the peace process. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan acknowledged after the Second Karabakh War that the Lisbon summit left no prospects to the independence of the Nagorno-Karabakh outside the jurisdiction of the Republic of Azerbaijan. "... [M]y conclusion is that after the 1996 OSCE Lisbon summit, the Nagorno Karabakh issue ceased to exist", he said in April 2024 (Primeminister.am, April 10, 2024).

4.2.1. Madrid Principles

One of the most notable initiatives put forth by the Minsk Group was the "Basic Principles," also known as the "Madrid Principles," presented in 2007. This proposal was seen as one of the most viable frameworks for resolving the conflict. These proposals were based on the major principles of the UN Security Council resolutions and the provisions of the Lisbon declaration. The Madrid Principles suggested a phased approach to peace. According to these Principles included (Garibov 2015: 79-80; Babayan 2014: 122-123), the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh were supposed to be returned to Azerbaijan, while interim status to be created for Nagorno-Karabakh with the provision of guarantees for security and self-governance. The principles envisaged the determination of Nagorno-Karabakh's final legal status through a plebiscite or referendum in the future stage. The Madrid Principles recognized also the right of all internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees to return to their homes. International security guarantees were also envisaged. Deployment of peacekeeping forces was mentioned as a potential instrument to provide security guarantees.

While the Madrid Principles seemed to offer a balanced solution, they were never fully implemented. Armenia was particularly resistant to the idea of relinquishing control over the occupied territories, fearing it would weaken its negotiating position (Broers 2019: 3). On the other hand, Azerbaijan was wary of any arrangement that could lead to the formal secession of the Karabakh region. Both sides' reluctance to compromise created an impasse that would persist for years (Gadimova-Akbulut & Petrosyan 2024: 1-2).

The Minsk Group's activities have been hampered by a variety of challenges, both internal and external. One of the key issues has been the divergent interests of the co-chair countries. While Russia, France, and the United States have all supported the peace process, their respective geopolitical interests in the South Caucasus have sometimes complicated their ability to present a united front. Russia, in particular, has been accused of using the conflict to maintain its influence over both Armenia and Azerbaijan, while the United States and France have been more focused on achieving a diplomatic solution that aligns with broader Western interests (Gafarli 2022).

Additionally, the Minsk Group faced criticism for its inability to pressure either Armenia or Azerbaijan into making meaningful concessions (Kucera July 7, 2020). The lack of enforceable mechanisms for implementing ceasefire agreements or punishing violations has allowed both sides to use the peace process as a tool to solidify their positions rather than genuinely engage in compromise.

Between 2008 and 2016, the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan concerning the conflict experienced a significant deterioration. Despite numerous attempts by mediators, particularly the OSCE Minsk Group, to push forward negotiations, the period was characterized by stalled discussions, rising tensions, and occasional outbreaks of violence (Kucera, July 7, 2020). During this time, there were several key meetings between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders, but these meetings failed to produce substantive progress. Armenia's strategy of prolonging and imitating negotiations while maintaining the status quo in Karabakh became increasingly apparent, further frustrating Azerbaijan and diminishing hopes for a peaceful resolution.

Tensions escalated further in 2016 when the conflict erupted into the most significant stage of violence since the 1994 ceasefire (Broers 2019: 1-3). The April 2016 clashes, often referred to as the "Four-Day War," saw heavy fighting along the Line of Contact between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces (Cornell 2017a: 10-12; Bayramov 2016). Azerbaijan made modest

territorial gains during the fighting, recapturing several strategic heights and villages (Broers 2019: 185). However, the violence underscored the fragility of the ceasefire and the urgent need for a renewed commitment to peace talks.

4.2.2. International Reactions

Throughout this period, various international actors attempted to mediate the conflict. Russia, in particular, played a dual role as both mediator and regional power with vested interests in maintaining influence over both Armenia and Azerbaijan. While Moscow had facilitated the 1994 ceasefire, its support for Armenia and its military presence in the region often led to accusations of partiality from Azerbaijan. Russia was largely seen as an external actor interested in the persistence of the conflict since Moscow was thought to be using this situation for its own interests. It is even argued that Russia orchestrated a deadly attack against the Armenian parliament in 1999 and killed the Armenian leaders amidst the tangible progress for an agreement between Baku and Yerevan (Azatutyun.am, May 4, 2005).

At the same time, the United States and France, as co-chairs of the Minsk Group, sought to maintain a neutral stance, but their efforts were frequently overshadowed by geopolitical considerations. The existence of strong Armenian diaspora in both countries affected their policies towards the conflict. France even demonstrated this bias during the UN Security Council discussions in 1993 and did not allow the Republic Armenia to be named as a party to the conflict. At France's insistence during these discussions, the forces that occupied the Azerbaijani territories were presented as "local Armenian forces" which is an ambiguous term. This biased intervention of France is confirmed by recently classified documents:

"Recently, the Clinton Presidential Library has published some declassified State Department cables concerning the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. From the cables, it becomes clear that at the behest of the French U.N. Ambassador Jean-Bernard Mérimée, the UNSC Statement on Kalbajar's invasion was substantially watered down. Opposing the language presented by U.S. Ambassador Madeleine Albright and other members of the U.N. Security Council and in an apparent attempt to exculpate Armenia for invasion, Amb. Mérimée insisted on the inclusion of the wording "local Armenian forces" as invaders of Kalbajar. He also insisted on treating the invasion of Kalbajar not under the Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter as an "act of aggression," but

under the weaker Chapter VI as a dispute that should be settled peacefully. French insistence worked and the UNSC passed the suggested, watered-down language” (Aghayev, 2020).

Türkiye, a staunch ally of Azerbaijan, also played a critical role in the conflict dynamics. Ankara consistently supported Azerbaijan’s position on Nagorno-Karabakh and called for the unconditional withdrawal of Armenian forces (Cornell 1998). Iran, sharing borders with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, adopted a more cautious approach, advocating for a peaceful resolution but refraining from taking sides overtly. In the early years of the conflict, Iran sought to play a mediating role between Baku and Yerevan, since Tehran considers the South Caucasus as part of Iran’s historical territories and believes that Iran should have an active role in this region. However, this attempt did not deliver any lasting results:

“In May 1992, Iran’s efforts, orchestrated by then president Rafsanjani, resulted in a provisional peace agreement between the then acting president of Azerbaijan, Yagub Mammadov and Levon Ter-Petrossian, Armenia’s first president of the independent republic. But, the conflicting interests of external parties in a territorial issue affecting Iran’s border zone—the occupation of Shusha by Armenians which occurred just a day after the parties had concluded the agreement in Tehran” (Mahammadi & Huseynov 2022: 384).

Thus, neither regional nor external actors succeeded in pushing for a peaceful settlement. By the mid-2000s, it became increasingly evident that Armenia’s primary strategy was to prolong the negotiations while solidifying its hold over Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding Azerbaijani territories (Huseynov 2024: 5-6). The Armenian government, under Presidents Robert Kocharyan and later Serzh Sargsyan, sought to maintain the military and political status quo. Armenia’s leadership viewed the ongoing negotiations as a way to buy time and avoid making concessions without guarantees on Nagorno-Karabakh’s status.

In the meantime, the peace process had become increasingly stagnant. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan had entrenched their positions, with Armenia consolidating its hold over Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan continuing to modernize its military (Huseynov 2024: 5-6). The failure of the Madrid Principles and other international efforts to produce a breakthrough led to growing frustration in Baku. President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan repeatedly stated that Azerbaijan reserved the right to reclaim its territories by force if diplomacy failed to deliver results. In contrast, Armenia's leaders, particularly under President Serzh Sargsyan, continued

to assert that Nagorno-Karabakh could never return to Azerbaijani control. This hardline stance further deepened the impasse, leaving little room for negotiation. The international community, while urging restraint, appeared unable to exert sufficient pressure on either side to make meaningful concessions.

4.3. The Second Karabakh War and the Post-War Peace Process

The 44-day war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which erupted on September 27, 2020, did not occur in a vacuum. It was the result of escalating tensions, failed negotiations, and military provocations that had accumulated over many years (Huseynov 2024: 7-8). Although the two countries had technically been in a state of conflict since the 1994 ceasefire following the First Karabakh War, the years leading up to the 2020 war saw increasing instability and rising frustration, particularly on the Azerbaijani side.

A major factor contributing to the outbreak of the war was the lack of progress in the peace process mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States (Shafiyev & Huseynov, 2020: 100-101). This group had been tasked with facilitating negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with the aim of reaching a peaceful resolution to the conflict over Karabakh and the seven surrounding districts. The Minsk Group's negotiations, however, had stagnated by the late 2000s and early 2010s. Multiple rounds of talks failed to produce any substantial agreements, and the core issues – Armenian withdrawal from the occupied territories, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the return of displaced Azerbaijanis to their homes – remained unresolved. Azerbaijan grew increasingly frustrated with the deadlock, as it saw no serious effort by the international community to compel Armenia to withdraw from the occupied regions (Broers 2019: 3; Shafiyev & Huseynov, 2020: 100-101).

Armenia's shifting position further contributed to the escalation. Following the 2018 election of Nikol Pashinyan as Armenia's prime minister, there were initial hopes that a fresh face in the Armenian leadership might lead to a breakthrough in negotiations (International Crisis Group 2019). However, Pashinyan's rhetoric soon took a hardline turn. His declaration that

“Karabakh is Armenia, period” in August 2019, as well as his participation in a ceremony in the Azerbaijani cultural city of Shusha, deepened Azerbaijan’s concerns about Armenia’s commitment to the peace process (Kucera, Aug 6, 2019). The statement also rejected the Madrid Principles, a long-standing framework for peace that envisioned the gradual return of the occupied districts to Azerbaijan and the potential for future discussions on Nagorno-Karabakh’s final status.

At the same time, internal political dynamics in both countries fueled a hardening of positions. In Armenia, Pashinyan faced growing pressure from nationalist groups opposed to any concessions on Nagorno-Karabakh. These groups advocated for a more aggressive stance, and Pashinyan’s government, amid domestic political challenges and a struggling economy, increasingly aligned itself with these forces. This stance was reflected in actions such as the promotion of a “new war for new territories” doctrine, which aimed to expand Armenian control beyond the existing lines, and the holding of official ceremonies in the occupied territories, signaling an intention to cement Armenia’s control (Iragir.am, March 30, 2019).

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev had consistently emphasized that Azerbaijan would not accept the status quo indefinitely. In various public speeches, Aliyev criticized the international community for its inaction and warned that Azerbaijan had the right to reclaim its territories by force if peaceful means failed. Azerbaijan had been rapidly modernizing its military with the help of countries such as Türkiye and Israel, acquiring advanced weaponry including drones and precision-guided munitions (Broers 2019: 1-2). While diplomatic negotiations were ongoing, it was becoming increasingly clear that Azerbaijan was prepared to use its military might to change the situation on the ground.

The situation took a significant turn in July 2020, when fighting erupted along the Armenia-Azerbaijan state border in the Tovuz region (BBC, July 14, 2020; Rzayev, *et al.* 2020). These clashes were notable for several reasons: they took place far from Nagorno-Karabakh, in an area that is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, and resulted in several casualties on both sides, including senior Azerbaijani military officers. The fighting in Tovuz marked a serious escalation and demonstrated the volatility of the situation. Although a temporary ceasefire was reached, the Tovuz clashes were seen as a harbinger of a larger conflict to come (BBC, July 14, 2020).

Following these skirmishes, both sides began preparing for the possibility of renewed war. In Armenia, the government's increasingly nationalistic rhetoric, coupled with reports of military mobilization and the procurement of new weapons systems, signaled that Yerevan was preparing for a potential escalation. Armenia's ties with Russia, particularly through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), were seen as a key security guarantee. The belief in the invincibility of Armenia's military, based on its successes in the First Karabakh War, further emboldened Armenian leaders (Rzayev, *et al.* 2020).

Azerbaijan, however, was also preparing. Following the Tovuz clashes, Baku intensified its military buildup, conducting large-scale exercises and increasing its military spending (Huseynov, August 14, 2020). Aliyev made it clear that while Azerbaijan remained committed to diplomacy, it was also ready to pursue military solutions if necessary. Azerbaijan's military preparations, including the procurement of Turkish-made drones that would later prove decisive in the 44-day war, demonstrated its readiness to act. Azerbaijan also strengthened its regional alliances, particularly with Türkiye, which publicly expressed support for Baku's position and became a key military and political ally (Kucera, September 2, 2020).

Diplomatically, the situation continued to deteriorate. Throughout the summer of 2020, there were no serious efforts to revive the peace process, and both sides accused each other of provocations along the Line of Contact in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Minsk Group, which had been the primary mediator for years, appeared increasingly ineffective (Kucera, July 7, 2020). Its inability to produce concrete results in the face of escalating tensions led many in Azerbaijan to question its neutrality and relevance. France, in particular, came under scrutiny from Baku for what it perceived as pro-Armenian bias, further complicating the diplomatic landscape.

In the weeks leading up to the war, the atmosphere grew more tense, with both sides engaging in military posturing and increasingly inflammatory rhetoric. Azerbaijan made it clear that it was losing patience with the diplomatic stalemate, and President Aliyev reiterated that military action remained an option if Armenia refused to negotiate in good faith. Armenia, meanwhile, appeared confident that its military and its alliances, particularly with Russia, would deter any Azerbaijani offensive (Kucera, July 7, 2020).

Thus, by late September 2020, the conditions for war had been set. A combination of failed diplomacy, hardening political positions, and military provocations had pushed the two

countries closer to conflict. When large-scale fighting broke out on September 27, it was not an unexpected event, but rather the culmination of years of tension and frustration. The ensuing 44-day war would not only redraw the map of the conflict but also shift the balance of power in the South Caucasus, with far-reaching consequences for the region's future stability.

In the next section, I will explore the key developments and military strategies of the 44-day war itself, analyzing how Azerbaijan was able to achieve a decisive victory and the implications of the war's outcome for both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

4.3.1. The 44-day War

The 44-Day War, also known as the Second Karabakh War, commenced on September 27, 2020, following months of increasing tensions and military provocations along the Armenia-Azerbaijan line of contact. Unlike earlier skirmishes, which typically resulted in brief exchanges of fire and diplomatic interventions, this conflict rapidly escalated into a full-scale war involving heavy artillery, drone strikes, and ground assaults. Both sides engaged in intense military operations, but it was Azerbaijan that made significant territorial gains, leveraging a mix of advanced technology, strategic planning, and extensive military preparation (Ibrahimov, & Oztarsu 2022: 595-596).

On the first day of the war, Azerbaijan launched coordinated military operations aimed at reclaiming territories that had been under Armenian control since the First Karabakh War in the early 1990s. The war began with heavy artillery and missile strikes, followed by air assaults targeting Armenian military positions in and around Karabakh. Azerbaijan's primary objective was the liberation of seven surrounding districts and the strategic retaking of key cities, notably Fuzuli, Jabrayil, and Shusha (Iskandarov & Gawliczek 2021a: 92-99).

The Azerbaijani military used a combination of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones and Israeli-supplied loitering munitions to neutralize Armenian defenses, particularly targeting Armenia's air defense systems and fortifications (Iskandarov & Gawliczek 2021a: 92-99). This tactical shift from traditional ground warfare to technologically sophisticated drone

warfare gave Azerbaijan a distinct advantage in the early days of the conflict, allowing its forces to minimize casualties while maximizing damage to Armenian positions (ibid). In contrast, the Armenian military was largely dependent on conventional warfare instruments and struggled to counter Azerbaijan's superior air capabilities.

As the war progressed, Azerbaijan opened several new fronts along the southern and northern sections of Karabakh. The southern front, in particular, became a key focus due to its strategic importance. Azerbaijan aimed to reclaim the southern districts of Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Zangilan, and Gubadli, which provided access to the Iranian border and were critical for cutting off supply lines between Armenia and the separatist regime in Karabakh (Huseynov 2024: 20).

By mid-October, Azerbaijani forces had made substantial progress along this front, capturing several key towns and villages, and effectively controlling the road that connected Armenia to Karabakh. These advances put enormous pressure on Armenian forces, which were increasingly forced to retreat to defensive positions within the mountainous regions of Nagorno-Karabakh (ibid).

Perhaps the most decisive moment in the war came in early November with the capture of Shusha, a historic and strategically significant city located just 10 kilometers from the regional center of the separatist regime, Khankendi. Shusha, with its elevation and proximity to key supply routes, had long been considered the "fortress" of Karabakh. Its loss would essentially signal the collapse of Armenian defenses in the region (Iskandarov & Gawliczek 2021b: 35-40).

Azerbaijani forces launched a daring operation to take Shusha, engaging in close combat in mountainous terrain under difficult weather conditions. The fighting in and around Shusha was intense, with both sides sustaining heavy casualties. However, on November 8, 2020, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev announced that Shusha had been liberated. This marked a turning point in the war, as Armenian forces began to crumble under the weight of Azerbaijan's momentum (Iskandarov & Gawliczek 2021b: 35-40).

The loss of Shusha not only had a symbolic impact on Armenia but also led to significant practical consequences. The city's strategic location meant that Azerbaijan now had direct access to Khankendi, and Armenian forces were effectively cut off from further reinforcements (Iskandarov & Gawliczek 2021b: 35-40). The fall of Shusha, combined with continued Azerbaijani advances along other fronts, brought the war to its final stages.

Throughout the 44 days of conflict, international actors such as Russia, the United States, France, and the Minsk Group attempted to mediate ceasefire agreements, but these efforts consistently broke down (Kucera, July 7, 2020). Azerbaijan remained resolute in its demand that Armenian forces withdraw from the occupied territories, while Armenia sought to preserve the status quo in Karabakh. Despite three separate ceasefire agreements brokered with international mediation, hostilities continued unabated.

Russia played a particularly active role during the war, positioning itself as a mediator and calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities. While Armenia appealed to Russia for direct military assistance, citing the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Moscow made it clear that its security obligations did not extend to the fighting in Karabakh, as it was internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan (Azertag, 7 October 2020). However, Russia remained deeply involved in the diplomatic process, facilitating talks between the warring parties.

As the war neared its conclusion in early November, Russian President Vladimir Putin increasingly called for a diplomatic resolution, warning that the conflict was spiraling into a wider regional war. Türkiye also played a significant role in supporting Azerbaijan throughout the conflict, offering political backing in international forums (Kuzio, 2020). This Türkiye-Azerbaijan cooperation was a critical factor in Azerbaijan's ability to sustain its military campaign.

By early November, with Azerbaijan having captured Shusha and advancing rapidly on other fronts, Armenia's position became untenable. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan faced immense domestic pressure as it became clear that Armenian forces could no longer hold the line (Huseynov 2024: 20). With the military situation deteriorating and the prospect of further territorial losses looming, Pashinyan was left with little choice but to seek an end to the conflict.

The 44-day war came to a sudden end with the signing of the tripartite ceasefire declaration on November 10, 2020, brokered by Russia (President.az, 10 November 2020). This agreement effectively ended hostilities and solidified Azerbaijan's territorial gains. Armenia was forced to withdraw from the remaining districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, including Aghdam, Lachin, and Kalbajar. The war resulted in significant territorial changes, with Azerbaijan reclaiming large portions of its internationally recognized territory that had been occupied by Armenian forces for nearly three decades.

The war resulted in the deaths of thousands of soldiers and civilians on both sides, significant destruction of infrastructure, and the displacement of many families (Conciliation Resources, 2020). Although Azerbaijan regained control over significant portions of its occupied territories, the war left deep scars in both Armenian and Azerbaijani societies, with long-lasting political, social, and economic ramifications.

The aftermath of the war saw profound shifts in the political and social landscapes of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. In Armenia, the defeat triggered a wave of political instability, protests, and calls for Pashinyan's resignation. Many Armenians felt betrayed by their leadership, accusing them of mishandling the conflict and misleading the public about the reality of the situation on the ground. In Azerbaijan, the victory was celebrated as a historic achievement and a restoration of the country's territorial integrity.

The 44-day war demonstrated the changing dynamics of warfare, where advanced technologies like drones and precision strikes can decisively alter the course of a conflict. It also underscored the limitations of international mediation efforts and the fragility of the ceasefire agreements that had previously maintained the status quo. As the region moved into a post-war phase, new challenges and opportunities for peace emerged, setting the stage for further diplomatic negotiations and regional realignments.

4.3.2. Trilateral Statement and Implications of the War for the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Process

The signing of the Trilateral Statement on November 10, 2020, marked a significant turning point in the long-standing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (President.az, November 10, 2020). This statement was the culmination of the 44-day war that had erupted on September 27, 2020, and its implications reverberated through the region, influencing not only the immediate post-war environment but also the broader peace process between the two nations.

The agreement was signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia, and it aimed to establish a ceasefire, halt military actions, and lay the groundwork for a new framework of relations in the South Caucasus. This section will analyze the key components of the Trilateral Statement and its implications for the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, highlighting the challenges and opportunities that arose in its aftermath.

The Trilateral Statement included several critical provisions, each reflecting the priorities and interests of the signatory parties. One of the foremost elements was the cessation of hostilities and the establishment of a ceasefire regime, which was essential to halt the bloodshed that had characterized the conflict since its resurgence in September. This immediate goal was crucial for both countries, as each sought to consolidate its gains and minimize further losses.

Another significant aspect of the agreement involved the withdrawal of Armenian troops from the territories surrounding the Karabakh region, specifically the areas that had been under Armenian control since the early 1990s. The statement stipulated that these territories would be returned to Azerbaijan, marking a critical shift in the region's geopolitical landscape. This territorial concession was particularly momentous for Azerbaijan, as it signified the restoration of its sovereignty over lands that had been occupied for decades.

The Trilateral Statement also outlined the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the region. Their primary role was to monitor the ceasefire and facilitate the return of displaced persons to their homes, thereby creating an environment conducive to stability. The presence of Russian peacekeepers underscored Moscow's pivotal role in the South Caucasus, reinforcing its status as a key player in regional security dynamics (Socor, March 18, 2021).

Furthermore, the agreement addressed the reopening of transportation and economic links between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, a landlocked exclave of Azerbaijan bordered by Armenia. This provision aimed to enhance regional connectivity, promoting economic cooperation and integration in the South Caucasus. However, the specifics of how these transportation routes would be established remained a point of contention and negotiation.

The Trilateral Statement elicited varied reactions from the international community, reflecting the complex geopolitical landscape of the region. Russia, having brokered the agreement, positioned itself as a dominant mediator, reaffirming its influence over both Armenia and Azerbaijan (Socor, March 18, 2021). This development raised questions about the effectiveness of other international mediators, such as the OSCE Minsk Group, which had been involved in the peace process for years. The failure of the Minsk Group to prevent the escalation of conflict and its diminished role in post-war negotiations prompted discussions about its future efficacy (Socor, March 18, 2021).

Türkiye, a key ally of Azerbaijan, expressed strong support for the agreement. Ankara's backing was rooted in its historical and political ties with Baku, which were further solidified during the war (Shahbazov, June 23, 2021). The prospect of a stronger Turkish-Azerbaijani

partnership emerged, particularly regarding military cooperation and regional energy projects. This shifting balance of power underscored the potential for Türkiye to play a more prominent role in the South Caucasus, as it sought to assert its influence in a region traditionally dominated by Russian interests.

Conversely, Armenia faced a domestic political crisis following the signing of the Trilateral Statement. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government faced widespread criticism and protests, as many in Armenia viewed the agreement as a capitulation (Azatutyun.am, November 25, 2020). The perception that the Armenian leadership had failed to protect the country's territorial integrity led to calls for accountability and reform. This internal turmoil complicated Armenia's ability to engage constructively in post-war negotiations and presented a significant challenge to the peace process.

While the Trilateral Statement laid the foundation for a new phase in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, significant challenges emerged in its implementation. One of the most pressing issues was the question of returning displaced persons. Both countries faced the daunting task of facilitating the return of hundreds of thousands of people who had been uprooted from their homes during the conflict. The complexities involved in this process, including property rights and security concerns, made it a sensitive and contentious topic.

Additionally, the delineation of borders and the demarcation of new territorial boundaries became critical issues. Disputes over specific territories, particularly in and around the Karabakh region, continued to pose risks of renewed tensions. The lack of a clear and mutually accepted framework for border demarcation heightened uncertainties, as both sides navigated the delicate post-war landscape.

Furthermore, the role of Russian peacekeepers, while initially viewed as a stabilizing force, was met with skepticism by both Armenian and Azerbaijani communities (Socor, March 18, 2021). Questions about the effectiveness and impartiality of the peacekeeping mission arose, particularly as incidents of violence persisted in the region. Ensuring the safety and security of local populations remained a paramount concern, and the ability of Russian forces to fulfill this mandate came under scrutiny.

4.3.3. The Peace Process after the Second Karabakh War

Despite the challenges, the Trilateral Statement offered a historic opportunity for a renewed peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Huseynov 2024: 25). The ceasefire and territorial concessions created an environment in which diplomatic engagement could occur. The prospect of reopening transportation links and fostering regional cooperation emerged as vital components of any sustainable peace framework.

Both nations had the chance to pursue dialogue and negotiations aimed at establishing a long-term peace treaty. Building on the momentum of the Trilateral Statement, Armenia and Azerbaijan could explore avenues for cooperation, including economic initiatives and cultural exchanges, that would facilitate mutual understanding and reconciliation (Geneva Centre for Security Policy, September 22, 2023).

However, achieving lasting peace would require addressing the underlying grievances and historical narratives that had fueled animosity between the two nations. The reconciliation process would necessitate acknowledging the pain and suffering experienced by both sides during the conflict, fostering a dialogue that prioritizes empathy and understanding.

Following the conclusion of the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Azerbaijan extended an offer for a peace agreement to Armenia. In early March 2022, Azerbaijan offered a proposal outlining core principles for establishing normal relations between the two countries (Mfa.gov.az, March 15, 2022). The proposal primarily emphasized the recognition of each nation's territorial sovereignty and a shared commitment to renounce any further territorial disputes between them (Mfa.gov.az, March 15, 2022).

The government of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan initially accepted Azerbaijan's proposals but emphasized that they failed to address all critical aspects of the Armenia-Azerbaijan relationship (Armenpress.am, April 7, 2022). Yerevan's response highlighted the need for the peace agreement to also include "security guarantees for the people of Nagorno-Karabakh, the protection of their rights and freedoms, as well as a determination of Nagorno-Karabakh's final status" (ibid). This situation complicated peace negotiations, with Baku insisting that Yerevan formally recognize Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan and that Karabakh Armenians become citizens of Azerbaijan. In an interview with Azerbaijani television on August 13, 2022, President Aliyev asserted that "Armenians in Karabakh will have no special status, independence, or privileges. They will live as equal citizens of Azerbaijan, with their rights safeguarded like those of all Azerbaijani citizens" (Azertag.az, August 13, 2022).

There was, however, a potential for an agreement between the sides. Particularly because there was a verbal recognition of each other's territorial integrity by the two sides. Prime Minister Pashinyan repeatedly acknowledged that international documents recognize Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan (News.am, December 25, 2021). This position of the Armenian government was positively affected by the involvement of the European Union (EU) in the peace negotiations. Since the early 2022, the EU started to organize multiple rounds of negotiations between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Following the EU-mediated trilateral summit in Brussels in April 2022, the Armenian leader addressed the parliament, revealing that the global community was urging Armenia to "soften its stance on Nagorno-Karabakh's status" – indicating a shift away from pursuing independence for the so-called "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" (1lurer.am, April 13, 2022).

In the following months, Pashinyan made it clear that his government is planning to sign a peace agreement that would recognize Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan in return of Azerbaijan's recognition of Armenia's territorial integrity within its 29,800 square kilometres. In one of his addresses to the parliament in 2022, the Armenian Prime Minister stated that "I clearly state that I will sign a document that will ensure [this]," the Armenian premier confidently stated. According to him, "Many people will criticize us, scold us, call us traitors, they may even decide to remove us from power. ... I am not interested in what will happen to me, I am interested in what will happen to Armenia. I am ready to make tough decisions for the sake of peace. (Arka.am, September 14, 2022).

Despite these positive messages, his government refused to implement some provisions of the Trilateral Statement. In particular, those provisions concerning Armenia's withdrawal of its troops from the territories of Azerbaijan and the opening of a transportation passage along the Syunik region of Armenia, known as Zangezur corridor, remained unimplemented. This happened so despite the fact that the Armenian government promised in July 2022 that Yerevan would pull out its military personnel from the Azerbaijani territories (News.am, July 19, 2022). This outraged the Azerbaijani side as it was posing national security threats to the country. Referring to the respective article of the Trilateral Statement which stated that "The peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation shall be deployed in parallel with the withdrawal of the Armenian Armed Forces", President Aliyev, in July 2022, asserted that "This [obligation] has not been fulfilled [by the Armenian side] so far. We have repeatedly raised this issue, but Armenia is procrastinating" (President.az, July 15, 2022).

This and other disputes were on the agenda of the peace negotiations until September 2023, when Azerbaijan launched an anti-terror operation against the Armenia-backed separatist regime in Karabakh. However, in the period preceding this operation, Baku and Yerevan verbally agreed on the recognition of each other's territorial integrity with Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. The most historic development in this context took place on October 6, 2022, on the sidelines of the first summit of the European Political Community (EPC) in Prague. Facilitated by European Council President Charles Michel and French President Emmanuel Macron, the meeting between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan marked significant progress in advancing peace and resolving the conflict between the two South Caucasian countries. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan officially pledged to acknowledge each other's territorial integrity (Consilium.europa.eu, October 7, 2022). The announcements affirmed that "Armenia and Azerbaijan reaffirmed their commitment to the UN Charter and the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration, through which they mutually recognize territorial integrity and sovereignty." The Alma-Ata Declaration, signed by former Soviet republics, formalized the dissolution of the Soviet Union and confirmed mutual respect for each state's territorial boundaries and sovereignty.

This positive development, however, failed to produce substantial breakthrough in the negotiations over the peace treaty and opening of the regional transportation links. In particular, the Zangezur corridor, that gradually transformed into a geopolitical issue due to conflicting positions of the United States and Russia, remains to be opened. While Azerbaijan has almost completed its own section of the corridor, Armenia has yet to start building the highway and railway in its section.

In a similar way, the disagreements over the status of the Karabakh region persisted even after the Prague summit, as Azerbaijan refused to give any special status to the Armenian community in the region inviting them to obtain Azerbaijani citizenship and live under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Armenia was seeking an international mechanism to guarantee the security and rights of the Armenian minority in Karabakh, but Azerbaijan maintained that this issue is an internal matter and rejected any external involvement (Huseynov, July 7, 2023).

This confrontation between the sides resulted in the collapse of the peace talks and outbreak of another military confrontation in September 2023. On September 19, Azerbaijan's Defence Ministry launched, what the ministry called, an "anti-terror operation" aimed at dismantling

“unlawful armed groups” within the Karabakh region (Huseynov, September 20, 2023). The decision came upon the heels of the murder of four Azerbaijani military personnel and two civilians who were killed by landmines planted by the illegal Armenian military groups in the area. The anti-terror measures of the Azerbaijani side lasted less than 24 hours and resulted in the collapse of the separatist regime.

In an effort to prevent further escalation during the clashes on September 19 and 20, the Armenian government opted not to intervene militarily. After a ceasefire was reached, negotiations between the two sides began on September 21 (Huseynov, September 28, 2023). Representatives of the Armenian community in Karabakh met with Azerbaijani officials in Yevlakh city of Azerbaijan. The meeting led to agreements on disarming and dissolving the separatist forces. The agreement specified “the [full] withdrawal of the remaining units and servicemen of the Armed Forces of Armenia” and “the disbandment and complete disarmament” of the separatist regime, including the removal of heavy weaponry from Karabakh (News.am, September 21, 2023). Following the Yevlakh meeting, Russian peacekeepers confirmed that the separatist regime had begun handing over its weapons (News.am, September 22, 2023). Both Azerbaijani and Armenian governments made efforts to reassure Armenians to remain in Karabakh. Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan in his address to the Armenians in Karabakh specifically noted that “At this moment, there is no direct danger” to Armenians in Karabakh, insisting they can “live in safety and dignity” there (Armenpress.am, September 21, 2023). However, in the wake of the collapse of the separatist regime, almost all the Armenians living in the Karabakh region decided to leave for Armenia, refusing to live under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

A new chapter started in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process after the collapse of the separatist regime and Azerbaijan’s full restoration of its sovereignty over all the internationally recognized territories of the country. However, over the past one year since the September 2023 operations, Baku and Yerevan have made little progress towards signing of a peace treaty and opening of transportation links in the region. The next chapter will look into details of the peace process in contemporary period (more specifically, since September 2023) and examine the challenges and opportunities in this process through the lens of classical realism.

5. Discussion

5.1. Present challenges to the peace treaty efforts

The restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and collapse of the separatist regime established by Armenia in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan offered a historic opportunity to end all hostilities between the two countries. After the September 2023 operations, Baku and Yerevan found themselves in a stage where the root of their decades-long conflict remained in the past. This situation was further emboldened by the fact that Russia agreed to withdraw its peacekeeping forces from the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan in April 2024. It marked a historic moment for Azerbaijan, as it was the first time over the past 200 years that there were no foreign troops on the Azerbaijani soil. However, due to local challenges and transformation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process into another area of the West-Russia confrontation, Baku and Yerevan have yet to sign a peace treaty and launch diplomatic relations. The existing situation in this process offers a relevant case to be analyzed from the perspective of classical realism. This section will look into the details of the local and

externally posed challenges to the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty efforts. The subsequent section will discuss the case integrating it into the classical realist framework.

5.1.1. Local challenges to the peace efforts

The peace negotiations following the September 2023 operations had in fact started with notable optimism. On December 7, Armenia and Azerbaijan reached a bilateral agreement on a prisoner swap and Armenia's support to Azerbaijan's bid to host the 29th Conference of Parties (COP29) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. According to this agreement, the two sides agreed to exchange people detained at various times since the conclusion of the Second Karabakh War in November 2020 (Turan.az, December 13, 2023). The joint declaration released by the two governments characterized this deal as a confidence-building measure aimed at normalizing relations and advancing a peace agreement (Azertag, December 7, 2023). As part of the deal, Azerbaijan freed 32 Armenian soldiers, while Armenia released two Azerbaijani servicemen.

This breakthrough was widely praised by international actors, including the United States and the European Union, who expressed their support for the ongoing peace efforts (US Department of State, December 7, 2023). However, it is important to note that this deal was achieved with no mediation from external actors. It was a critical accomplishment, because it demonstrated that the two countries have the potential to find joint solutions to their bilateral problems.

During the period since then, there have been some other significant positive developments in the relations between the two countries. Most importantly, in April 2024, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed on the return of four border villages from Armenia to Azerbaijan. These villages, along with four other enclave villages that are still under the control of Armenia, belonged to Azerbaijan during the Soviet period. The deal on the return of these villages marked the first time in the relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan that the two countries resolved a territorial dispute in a peaceful manner (Caspiannews.com, May 25, 2024). The deal marked also the official start of the delimitation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan state border.

On August 30, 2024, in a move further towards normalization of their interstate relations, Armenia and Azerbaijan formalized an agreement outlining joint efforts between their

respective State Commissions for delimiting their state border (Azertag, August 30, 2024). This agreement holds considerable significance. During the United Nations General Assembly, Pashinyan emphasized that it represents the first formal legal agreement between the two nations. Even more crucially, both sides committed to using the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration as the foundational framework for their border delimitation process (Primeminister.am, September 26).

In parallel, Baku and Yerevan have been trying to work out the specifics of a potential peace agreement. Key unresolved issues include territorial and sovereignty guarantees, the return of ethnic Armenians to Karabakh, the return of Azerbaijanis deported from Armenia prior to the First Karabakh War to their homes in Armenia, the reopening of transportation routes, and the status of each country's exclaves on the other's territory. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev emphasized the need for solid assurances that Armenia would not engage in any future acts of aggression or "revanchism" on December 6, 2023 (President.az, December 6, 2023). President Aliyev specifically refers to the fact that the constitution of the Republic of Armenia cites the country's Declaration of Independence as the foundational document of the Armenian statehood. This document explicitly calls for the unification of the Karabakh region with the Republic of Armenia as the national objective of Armenia. The Azerbaijani side is concerned that revanchist forces in Armenia in the future will restart territorial claims against Azerbaijan by referring to the constitution. Thus, there are more than one issue between the two countries to be addressed before they can sign a peace treaty.

Above all, their positions remain at loggerheads in the matter of the return of refugees. Armenia, in particularly the political opposition and the remnants of the former separatist regime in Karabakh, call for the return of Armenians to Karabakh and insist on the international guarantees for their safety and security (Kalfayan, September 17, 2024). President Aliyev underscores Azerbaijan's willingness to allow Armenians to return, promising that their property and cultural heritage would be safeguarded. Baku, however, rejects any international guarantees and insists that the Armenian people will be protected by the Azerbaijani state in the same way as other Azerbaijani citizens. Azerbaijan also calls on Armenia to reciprocate by allowing the return of Azerbaijanis to their homes in Armenia. While Armenia raises the issue of the return of Armenians to Karabakh, the Armenian government refuses to negotiate the return of Azerbaijanis to Armenia.

The European Union has supported Azerbaijan's role in ensuring the security of returning Armenians. In December 2023, European Council President Charles Michel stated that the safety of Armenians returning to Karabakh should be guaranteed under Azerbaijan's constitution (Azatutyun.am, December 13, 2023). This was an explicit rejection of the proposal of the Armenian side for some international guarantees. In the following months, the government of Armenia stopped raising the issue for international guarantees for the Karabakh Armenians at the official level. Nevertheless, this issue remains on the agenda of the Armenian expert groups and political circles within the Armenian diaspora.

Negotiations over the reopening of transportation links, particularly the Zangezur Corridor, remain contentious. Armenia's refusal to open the corridor in line with the 2020 trilateral statement has complicated discussions, while Azerbaijan insists on its provisions being upheld. The 9th article of the Trilateral Statement states:

“All economic and transport links in the region shall be restored. The Republic of Armenia guarantees the safety of transport links between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to organize an unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions. Control over transport shall be exercised by the bodies of the Border Guard Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB) of Russia” (President.az, November 10, 2020).

In line with the provisions of this article, Azerbaijan expects Armenia to allow the free movement of goods and people without customs or border checks (President.az, January 10, 2024). Baku also expects Armenia to agree with the deployment of Russia's Border Service to the Zangezur corridor in order to ensure the safety of the Azerbaijani passengers and cargo travelling along the corridor. This is completely rejected by the Armenian government. This contradiction between the two governments is being further complicated by the intervention of the external powers (i.e., Iran, Russia, the United States, the EU, etc.). The negotiations over the Zangezur corridor over the past four years have failed to produce any meaningful breakthrough. This prevents the opening of the transportation links blocked after the First Karabakh War and leaves Armenia's borders with Azerbaijan and Türkiye closed. It is important to note that Türkiye closed its land borders with Armenia in 1993 in protest to the occupation of the Azerbaijani territories. The complications over the Zangezur corridor has become a critical obstacle to the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In an attempt to avoid the opening of the Zangezur corridor and deployment of Russia's Border Service, the Armenian government proposed an alternative project named "Crossroads for Peace". In a speech at the Fourth Silk Road Forum in Tbilisi on October 26, 2023, Armenia's Prime Minister unveiled a proposal aimed at establishing new transportation routes through Armenia, positioning the country as a key regional transit hub. This initiative, titled "Crossroads for Peace," seeks to connect Azerbaijan and Türkiye via Armenian territory and integrate these links into the Middle Corridor's east-west trade network (Hetq.am, October 26, 2023). Neither Azerbaijan nor Türkiye has supported this project. Quite the contrary, Azerbaijan finds its provisions as an attempt to derail the talks on the Zangezur corridor (President.az, January 10, 2024).

Armenia's project calls for new highways and railways on its territories that would connect neighboring countries. However, although the Zangezur corridor was supposed to include both highway and railway along the Syunik region of Armenia, the "Crossroads for Peace" proposes alternate paths for highways, which Azerbaijan opposes (Turan.az, January 5, 2024). Azerbaijan has nearly completed its section of the highway and insists that without the Zangezur route, it will not open any borders with Armenia. President Aliyev made it clear that Azerbaijan is not planning to open its border with Armenia elsewhere, unless Armenia opens the Zangezur corridor.

A key sticking point is the control of the corridor. Azerbaijan expects Armenia to allow Russia's FSB personnel to manage transport through the corridor, as outlined in the 2020 agreement. Armenia, however, contends that these provisions are no longer applicable. Another point of contention is regarding the regulations to be applied to the passage. Azerbaijan demands unimpeded movement through the Zangezur Corridor, akin to Russia's Kaliningrad model, while Armenia's proposal includes border and customs checks, which Azerbaijan rejects. The ongoing disagreements have stalled progress on transportation links between the two countries (Turan.az, January 5, 2024).

Last but not least, the territorial claims against Azerbaijan in Armenia's constitution constitute another impediment to peace treaty. President Ilham Aliyev has unequivocally stated that Azerbaijan will not sign a peace treaty unless Armenia changes its constitution and removes the reference to the Declaration of Independence that calls for unification of the Karabakh region with Armenia. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has indeed acknowledged the need to eliminate any potential for future territorial disputes between the

two countries (President.az, February 14, 2024). During a January 2023 meeting with his political party, Pashinyan emphasized that both Armenia and Azerbaijan must ensure their diplomatic documents do not leave room for territorial conflicts. He called for a new Armenian constitution, arguing that it would make Armenia more competitive and stable in the evolving regional landscape (Azatutyun.am, January 19, 2024).

However, Armenia's approach to this issue has since shifted. As of now, the Armenian government rejects Azerbaijan's calls for a constitutional change. The Armenian Foreign Ministry labels this demand as an unwarranted intervention in the country's internal affairs (Krikorian 2024). The Azerbaijani side retorts that any constitution containing territorial claims against another state can no longer be considered solely a domestic matter, as it poses a potential legal basis for conflict (President.az, February 14, 2024).

Azerbaijan has remained firm in its stance. Baku insists that no peace treaty will be signed as long as Armenia's constitution continues to assert claims on Azerbaijani territories. According to the expert estimations, it is unlikely for Armenia to be able to change the country's constitution before 2027 (Krikorian 2024). Considering that such a constitutional change is not possible without a popular vote, it is not certain whether the Armenian people would endorse this initiative that is made under external pressure.

President Aliyev and Prime Minister Pashinyan have announced on multiple times that more than 80 percent of the peace treaty is ready. For example, Nikol Pashinyan optimistically stated on September 26 at the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) that "Today... peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan is not only possible but within reach," said (Primeminister.am, September 26, 2024). While Armenia proposes to sign the peace treaty on the basis of already agreed provisions, Azerbaijan insists that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. Therefore, Baku rejects an incomplete peace treaty and expects an agreement on the remaining provisions (Mfa.gov.az, September 28, 2024).

In conclusion, the ongoing peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan are marked by both significant progress and persistent challenges. Notable milestones, such as the prisoner swap and the return of border villages, demonstrate the potential for peaceful resolution of disputes. These agreements, especially achieved without external mediation, highlight the capacity of both countries to address their issues bilaterally. However, key contentious issues, notably the Zangezur Corridor and constitutional territorial claims, remain. Therefore, as one Azerbaijani expert aptly noted, the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace

treaty is “within reach” but, at least for now, “out of grasp” (Huseynov, October 1, 2024). The following section will examine the challenges posed by external powers that further complicate the peace process.

5.1.2. External challenges to the peace efforts

The ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is deeply rooted in more than just their bilateral relations; it has attracted the attention of regional and global powers eager to further their strategic ambitions. Since the early years of the conflict in the 1990s, the conflict was subject to the geopolitical rivalries between Russia and the West. Little has changed over the past 30 years. Quite the contrary, the confrontation between the global powers has markedly intensified. In the context of Russia-Ukraine war, the significance of the South Caucasus has further augmented. This does not go without affecting the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. As noted in the first chapter, the South Caucasus is located at the crossroads of critical transportation corridors from Europe to China and from India to Russia. This geostrategic importance of the region draws the attention of external powers which try to ensure their interests protected in any peace treaty and geopolitical configuration in this region.

The crucial post-war effort to restore regional transportation and communication networks is increasingly fraught with complications. Today, the disruptive influence of external players poses a significant barrier to normalizing relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan and realizing regional transport initiatives. One major indication of this was observed in October 2023, when the next EU-mediated summit between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders on the sidelines of the European Political Community summit in Granada, Spain was not possible due to the intervention of the French President Emmanuel Macron and France’s decision to start supplying Armenia with military equipment. This was a major blow to the EU’s role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. Over the past year since this failed summit, Brussels has not been able to bring the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan together. This has been a major setback in the process, as the EU had been quite successful in its mediation. Most notably, it was thanks to the EU mediation that Armenia and Azerbaijan recognized each other’s internationally recognized territorial integrity for the first time in October 2022.

The collapse of the EU role in the process was thus caused by France's pro-Armenian bias and Paris's view of the South Caucasus as another area where it can retaliate against Russia's anti-French moves in Africa (Doran & Rough, December 1, 2020). By allying with Armenia in the South Caucasus, France hopes to secure a geopolitical standpoint in the South Caucasus, a region that is traditionally seen as Russia's backyard. On October 3, 2023, a couple of days before the long-awaited Granada summit of the EU-mediated Armenian-Azerbaijani leaders, France's Foreign Minister paid a visit to Armenia and announced France's decision to start supplying Armenia with weapons and other military equipment for the first time (France.24, October 3, 2023). France also insisted to participate at the Granada summit of the Armenia-Azerbaijani leaders along with the EU's Charles Michel. This outraged the Azerbaijani government who proposed the participation of Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as a compromise solution which was not supported by Armenia. In its aftermath, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev canceled its participation (Apa.az, October 4, 2023). Due to these complications, the EU's hitherto quite constructive and important mediation in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process came to an end.

In the following months, tensions in the region further escalated as France mounted its military support to Armenia. In June 2024, a deal between the two sides was struck for Caesar self-propelled 155-millimeter, 52-caliber howitzers, capable of firing over 50 kilometers (30 miles) with advanced ammunition. The agreement reportedly involves the sale of 36 units within 15 months, with French Defense Minister Sebastien Lecornu hailing it as a "significant milestone" in military collaboration between the two countries (Azatutyun.am, June 25, 2024). This came upon the heels of the initial transfer of 24 Bastion armored personnel carriers (APCs), part of a larger 50-vehicle deal from October (Azatutyun.am, December 4, 2023). Alongside the APCs, Armenia and France also concluded agreements for a Mistral short-range air defense system and GM200 radars manufactured by Thales Group, which can track aircraft, drones, and rockets up to 250 kilometers (155 miles) away. Media outlets revealed that during the first-ever visit by a French defense minister to Armenia in February 2024, three GM200 radars and night-vision gear were delivered (Azatutyun.am, February 22, 2024). This demonstrated that the South Caucasus is gradually transforming into another battlefield between the West and Russia.

This situation affects also domestic political dynamics in Armenia, where revanchist political groups reject the peace treaty initiatives with Azerbaijan. These groups are determined to recover lost lands and get emboldened by military aid provided by nations such as France,

India, and Iran. Their agenda is reinforced by political opposition, religious bodies, and experts, all of whom are further emboldened by the growing flow of weapons from external supporters. Armenian revanchists openly voice their aspirations, anticipating a shift in the geopolitical environment that could allow them to reignite conflict with Azerbaijan. They hope that, the same way as during First Karabakh War (1992-1994), when Russian political and military assistance enabled Armenia to challenge Azerbaijan, despite the latter's larger population, Armenia can again prevail over Azerbaijan with external support (Huseynov, August 6, 2024). Now, as ties between Armenia and Moscow weaken, Armenia has sought military support from France and India, whose own geopolitical interests may drive them to leverage Armenia against Azerbaijan, adding more complexity to the peace process.

In this context, the growing military supplies by India to Armenia is another factor that undermine the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. India, in a way similar to that of France, views Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in the context of New Delhi's larger geopolitical agenda. The fact that Pakistan, India's archenemy, deepens military partnership with Türkiye, encourages New Delhi to militarily strengthen Armenia against Azerbaijan and Türkiye (Orfonline.org, October 15, 2024). According to the Indian Finance Ministry, Armenia is now India's largest defense customer, having recently secured a deal for Pinaka multiple-launch rocket systems and Akash anti-aircraft systems (Azatutyun.am, July 24, 2024). Indian media has reported that by the start of fiscal year 2024–25, Armenia's total arms purchase from India had reached \$600 million (News.am, July 24, 2024). Since September 2022, various sources have noted that Armenia has continued to order additional military hardware from India, including rocket launchers, anti-tank missiles, mobile radar systems, and advanced towed artillery guns.

The negative impact of foreign involvement is particularly evident in attempts to reestablish regional transport routes. At the heart of this debate lies the proposed Zangezur corridor, a transport route intended to link Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave via southern Armenia. Under a trilateral deal signed in November 2020 by Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, the management of transport control along this corridor is designated to Russia's Border Guard Service (President.az, November 10, 2020). This initiative has sparked significant controversy amid the ongoing competition among major global powers. Many international actors have stakes in the corridor, and their objectives are becoming increasingly clear. For Russia, the corridor offers a strategic remedy to the disruptions of its transport routes caused by Western sanctions and provides an opportunity to extend its influence in the

South Caucasus through a bolstered military presence. On the other hand, U.S. officials have expressed that they view the corridor as a way to reduce Central Asian countries' dependence on Russia and China for access to global markets, making Russia's involvement in the corridor unwelcome from Washington's standpoint (Panorama.am, July 31, 2024).

Another challenge to the opening of the Zangezur corridor is posed by Iran. Iran views the Zangezur corridor project as a geopolitical threat that could sever its border with Armenia, disrupting key trade routes to Europe and Central Asia (Apa.az, September 3, 2024). Tehran has expressed strong opposition to the corridor, with officials warning of "heavy consequences" for Russia and Azerbaijan if their plan concerning the Zangezur corridor proceeds. Some Iranian analysts even suggest a possible military response (Iranpress.com, September 7, 2024). Despite closer ties between Iran and Russia, Tehran remains sceptical of assurances that the corridor won't harm its interests. The alternative Aras corridor project, running parallel to Zangezur through Iran and proposed by Azerbaijan, has not eased Iran's concerns. Experts argue the Aras corridor's importance could diminish if Armenia and Azerbaijan reach a peace deal and normalize relations with Türkiye (Kaleji 2024). Meanwhile, Azerbaijan is determined to establish the Zangezur corridor, and President Ilham Aliyev has made it clear that Azerbaijan won't open its other borders with Armenia unless this happens (Azertag.az, January 10, 2024). Armenia, however, opposes Russian border guards in the area and suggests using international security firms instead.

These geopolitical rivalries over the Zangezur corridor and instrumentalization of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict by external actors for their own geopolitical visions dramatically complicate the peace process between Baku and Yerevan. The countries of the region, primarily, amongst Azerbaijan, Russia, Iran, and Türkiye, agree that the intervention of the Western actors should be countered (Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 23, 2023). This consensus is based the promotion of the idea of "regional solutions to regional problems" in the South Caucasus. On October 4, in its news article about the cancellation of Azerbaijan's participation at the Granada summit, Azerbaijan Press Agency reported that "Baku does not see the need to discuss the problems of the region with countries far from the region. Baku believes that these issues can be discussed and resolved in a regional framework" (Apa.az, October 4, 2023). This approach was strongly supported by the above-mentioned countries in the Tehran summit of the 3+3 cooperation platform on October 23, 2023. This framework was proposed by Azerbaijan and Türkiye after the Second Karabakh War and called for the establishment of a cooperation platform of the three countries of the

South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) “plus” Russia, Türkiye, and Iran (Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 23, 2023). While Georgia still refuses to join this club, other participatory countries, excluding Armenia, agree that the problems of the South Caucasus should be out of the intervention of extra-regional actors, including the EU and the United States. “Our perspective on the South Caucasus is also based on a sense of regional ownership. We believe that the states of the region know the regional problems best and are capable of solving them,” said Fidan in his opening speech at the meeting”, said Türkiye’s Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan during his opening speech at the third meeting of 3+3 in Istanbul on October 18 (Dailysabah.com, October 18, 2024).

5.2. Realist analysis and the way forward in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict

This study of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and the ongoing peace process aligns closely with the analysis and expectations of classical realism. Notably, the outbreak of the conflict in the early 1990s was a direct consequence of the Soviet Union’s collapse. While the Soviet Union was an imperial project designed by Moscow to maintain control over its member states, it also functioned as a “central authority” – or Leviathan, in realist terminology. This Leviathan served as a key deterrent to the eruption of violent conflicts among member states, as its presence created a political environment that counteracted anarchy. Once the Leviathan (i.e., the Soviet Union) disintegrated, violent territorial disputes, such as the one between Armenia and Azerbaijan, quickly emerged as the South Caucasus became another arena for international relations dominated by anarchy. Classical realism posits that the international system is intrinsically anarchic, characterized by the absence of a central authority capable of enforcing rules or standards. In this paradigm, states are recognized as the principal actors, driven by the imperatives of power acquisition and self-preservation. The theory contends that nations engage in strategic behavior, formulating policies that aim to augment their power and safeguard their security within an uncertain and competitive environment.

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, deeply entrenched in a complex dynamic of historical grievances and territorial disputes serves as a compelling illustration of classical realism in international relations. In this context, both Armenia and Azerbaijan can be analyzed as rational actors, each motivated by a fundamental need to bolster their security and preserve their territorial integrity amidst a highly volatile geopolitical landscape. In the absence of

anarchy created by the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia sought to seize the opportunity and expand its territory at the expense of Azerbaijan by benefiting from the presence of Armenian community on the latter's territory.

From a classical realist perspective, the actions of these states are informed by their strategic interests and the imperative to navigate the challenges posed by an anarchic international system. This factor has been playing a critical role from the very beginning of the conflict. Given the small size of both Armenia and Azerbaijan and the geostrategic importance of their location, both countries as well as the conflict between them created further challenges to their security. In this context, the conflict that was caused by the occupation of the Azerbaijani territories by Armenia made both countries more vulnerable to the larger geopolitical rivalries, since external powers rushed to instrumentalize this conflict for their own interests.

The classical realist framework elucidates the critical role of the balance of power, which is influenced by the interplay of regional dynamics and the involvement of external actors. In the early 1990s, Russia was much more active in this area given the unchallenged dominance it had over the South Caucasus since the early 19th century. Moscow sought to manipulate the conflict and use it as a leverage in its relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. This resulted in costs for both countries. Armenia lost its de-facto independence by joining the Russia-led regional integration projects, including the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). It gained little in return. Armenia failed to annex the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. The international community refused to recognize the independence of the separatist entity, so-called "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" Armenia established in the territories of Azerbaijan. All the financial and other resources, along with the life of thousands of military servicemen went in vain. During and after the Second Karabakh War (2020) Armenia had to leave the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Armenians did not get the support they expected from Russia whose President Vladimir Putin unequivocally stated that the Karabakh region falls out of the mandate of the CSTO, as it is not internationally recognized territory of Armenia. Thus, the alliance Armenia built with Russia for the past 30 years turned out to be useless for Armenia in the most critical test it faced.

By examining the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict through the lens of classical realism, we gain valuable insights into how the strategic interactions between these states, along with their

respective alliances, contribute to the ongoing tensions and hostilities. This perspective underscores the necessity for both states to continuously reassess their strategies in light of shifting power dynamics, as they navigate the intricacies of a protracted and multifaceted conflict. The analysis of the role of external actors and how their rivalries reflect in the South Caucasus demonstrated that the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process suffers from these interventions.

Since the 1990s, global powers such as Russia, the EU, and the United States have sought to influence the course of the conflict to advance their own strategic interests, creating a broader geopolitical competition in the South Caucasus. This study revealed that the intensifying confrontation between Russia and the West, exacerbated by events such as the Russia-Ukraine war, has not only escalated tensions but also augmented the South Caucasus's strategic importance. This external involvement, particularly through military supplies and diplomatic interventions, distorts the internal balance of power, which, from a realist perspective, prevents Armenia and Azerbaijan from achieving a self-sustaining equilibrium. The influence of external actors makes it difficult for either state to independently adjust to shifting power dynamics and engage in direct peace efforts.

Additionally, the disruption of EU mediation efforts, due to France's pro-Armenian stance, further undermines the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan. France's decision to supply Armenia with military equipment in 2023 has been a major blow to the EU's role as an impartial mediator. From a realist standpoint, this exemplifies how external actors prioritize their own geopolitical agendas over the issues they deem "secondary". By militarily supporting Armenia, France seeks to strengthen its position against Russia, reflecting the broader East-West rivalry in the region. This external interference has significantly hampered the efforts to normalize relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, demonstrating how global power competition perpetuates conflict in the South Caucasus, rather than facilitating a resolution.

The Zangezur corridor project is another area where external powers, such as Russia, the United States, and Iran, have clashed over their geopolitical interests. The corridor, intended to reconnect Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave, is being viewed by these actors through the lens of their parochial geopolitical interests, rather than the interests of local countries of the South Caucasus. As expected by realism, this competition among external actors over

strategic infrastructure in the region – such as the Zangezur corridor – further destabilizes the conflict, making a resolution more difficult to achieve.

Classical realism provides a comprehensive approach to understanding state behavior by considering both systemic and domestic factors. In the case of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, this theoretical framework becomes particularly useful as it helps explain how both external pressures and internal political dynamics shape the foreign policies of these states. This interaction between the global and local spheres creates a volatile environment where strategic calculations are constantly evolving. The examination of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict reveals that the foreign policies of both nations are influenced by more than just the anarchic nature of the international system or the balance of power among global powers. Instead, these policies are also shaped by domestic political factors, the viewpoints of political leaders, and the historical narratives that form national identity and public sentiment. The existence of revanchist forces in Armenia who reject the peace treaty initiative and hope for another chance to reignite the conflict and reclaim the lost territories is a major impediment to the peace efforts between the two countries. Azerbaijan, therefore, insists that Armenia should change its constitution and remove the territorial claims against Azerbaijan, before the two countries sign a peace treaty. This demand is particularly driven by the fact that Azerbaijan fears that the revanchist forces in Armenia will use the constitutional facts as the legal basis to launch another war against Azerbaijan. This situation is clearly expected by classical realism that stresses the impact of human nature as a formative element of the countries' foreign policy. The power-seeking and greedy human nature can be characterized as the foundational reason why Armenia sought to expand its territory at the expense of its neighbor through a violent invasion and ethnic cleansing.

Given all these factors related with the disrupting role of external powers, the complicated intricacies of the present peace efforts, and the existence of revanchist forces in Armenia who dream of another chance to reclaim the Azerbaijani territories, the future of the Armenia-Azerbaijan relations look not so bright. The study of the present situation demonstrates that faraway countries like India and France seek to enter the security space of the South Caucasus to pursue their own geopolitical ambitions. On the one hand, it creates serious threats to the regional peace and security, as the South Caucasus is facing a threat of becoming another battlefield of great powers. On the other hand, this complicates the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process.

This study demonstrates that Baku and Yerevan may overcome other challenges that are exclusively a matter of their bilateral relationship, including the presence of constitutionally delineated territorial claims of Armenia against Azerbaijan. The fact that the two countries recognized each other's territorial integrity in October 2022, just two years after the Second Karabakh war, underscores this potential for peace between them. The two countries can also reach an agreement on the opening of the regional transportation channels as they agreed in trilateral [Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan] trilateral statement of November 10, 2020, as both sides would benefit from unblocking of regional transportation links. However, the challenges posed by the external powers undermine this potential for peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This study demonstrated that the external powers, like the United States and Iran, openly express their own interests concerning the projects in the South Caucasus and, as in the case of Iran, even threaten with "heavy consequences" if their interests are ignored. This shows that the way forward in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process is likely to be as challenging as it has been over the past thirty years, but hopefully not violent and destructive.

Conclusion

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, with its deep historical roots and geopolitical dimensions, has emerged as a significant case study for understanding the complexities of international relations, state behavior, and the dynamics of peace processes. This thesis examined the persistent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, focusing on the post-Soviet period, with an emphasis on the failed peacebuilding efforts by international actors, including the United States and the European Union. The study highlighted the protracted nature of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, rooted in Armenia's ambitions to annex the Karabakh region of

Azerbaijan. The historical grievances and entrenched distrust between the sides continue to hinder the establishment of a lasting peace treaty and the normalization of relations between the two countries.

This research has been oriented around the following research question: What are the main obstacles to establishing a peace treaty and normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan despite international mediation efforts? The following sub-questions have been explored in order to acquire a clear understanding of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process and the challenges that undermine the normalization efforts. It explored the challenges posed to the peace process by the local factors on the ground. In the second sub-question, the thesis explored the reasons behind the fact that the mediating efforts of the international actors delivered minimal results.

Through an analysis based on the classical realist perspectives, this research aimed to uncover the underlying reasons for the minimal success of international mediation efforts and the ongoing hostility between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Classical realism posits that the international system is inherently anarchic, with no overarching authority to enforce rules or norms. In such a system, states are the primary actors, driven by their desire for power and survival. The theory argues that states act rationally, pursuing policies that maximize their power and security in an uncertain and competitive environment. In the context of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, classical realism provides a lens through which to examine the motivations behind each state's actions, particularly in terms of territorial disputes, military engagements, and alliance formations.

This research employed a qualitative approach, utilizing a combination of case study analysis, historical analysis, and process tracing. These methods were chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, its historical roots, and the effectiveness of diplomatic engagement in peacebuilding efforts. Historical analysis traces the conflict's evolution, focusing on events like the Soviet Union's collapse and subsequently Armenia's attack against Azerbaijan. Process tracing further identifies how diplomatic actions impact conflict resolution, examining causal mechanisms and interactions among local and international actors. By exploring the role of local factors and the parochial interests of external actors, the study sought to address the root causes of the conflict and the consistent failure of the peace efforts, even after the de-occupation of Azerbaijan's Karabakh region.

The study affirms that the historical context of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is crucial for understanding its current state. The study briefly analyzed the origins of the conflict. It concluded that the collapse of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of an anarchic environment in the South Caucasus, where the absence of a central authority coupled with expansionist ambitions of Armenia led to territorial disputes and violent confrontations between this country and Azerbaijan.

The findings indicate the historical context often served as an immutable barrier to peace between the two countries. However, the developments in the wake of the Second Karabakh War in 2020 raise hope that the two countries can overcome these challenges. The recognition of each other's territorial integrity by Armenia and Azerbaijan in October 2022 represents a significant step toward re-framing the narrative from one of hostility to one of potential partnership. The fact that the Armenian leaders have become brave enough to confront the violent history and express the realities is significantly promising. For instance, on October 22, 2024, Armenia's parliamentary speaker Alen Simonyan countered the radical and revanchist opposition in the parliamentary debates by stating that "the fact remains that the territory we are talking about (i.e., Karabagh) was an internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan, and it still is" (Panorama.am, October 22, 2024).

In an interview with Radio Liberty, Simonyan clearly acknowledged that Armenia had never had legitimacy to maintain control over and eventually annex the Azerbaijani territories. He expressed his disappointment regarding the response of the international community to the Second Karabakh War in 2020, noting that Armenia's lack of legitimacy influenced that response. He elaborated that Azerbaijan conducted the military operations in Karabakh with the backing of at least three or four UN Security Council resolutions (Azatutyun.am, October 22, 2024).

Alen Simonyan uttered these words amidst still strong revanchist sentiments in his country and strong objections from the opposition who blame the government on state treason. The influence of domestic political dynamics has indeed emerged as a significant factor shaping the peace process. In Armenia, the presence of revanchist forces seeking to reclaim lost territories complicates the government's ability to pursue peace. This study illustrates how internal political pressures can stymie negotiations.

Conversely, Azerbaijan's government has maintained a pragmatic approach, seeking to leverage its military gains while navigating the complexities of revanchist sentiment within

Armenia. The insistence of Azerbaijan on constitutional amendments in Armenia and thereby removal of territorial claims against Azerbaijan from the constitution as a precondition for peace underscores the lack of trust of the Azerbaijani people in Armenia's future actions.

The study has highlighted the multifaceted role of external actors in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, revealing how their interests often complicate the peace process. External powers like Russia, the United States, and the European Union have sought to influence the conflict to advance their geopolitical agendas, creating a complex landscape that is often at odds with regional stability. The military support provided to Armenia by France and the growing ties between India and Armenia exemplify how external interests can distort the internal balance of power.

The outcomes of this intervention from outside demonstrate that while external actors can play a crucial role in facilitating peace, their involvement must be balanced and neutral to avoid exacerbating tensions. The failure of the EU's mediation efforts, particularly the biased stance of France, illustrates the detrimental impact that unbalanced external involvement can have on the peace process. A significant finding of this study is the necessity for external actors to adopt a more constructive approach that prioritizes regional stability over short-term geopolitical gains.

As expected by classical realism, the findings indicate that both Armenia and Azerbaijan have engaged in strategic calculations that reflect their respective security concerns and national interests. The analysis illustrates how classical realism provides valuable insights into the motivations behind state behavior, particularly in contexts marked by historical grievances and territorial disputes. The reliance on military solutions, driven by the imperatives of power acquisition and self-preservation, has characterized the actions of both countries. The realist analysis about the great power rivalries and their impact on the international security provided a useful toolkit to understand the role of external interventions in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. These interventions are observed in almost every aspect of the peace process, but in particular, in the issues that have larger geopolitical implications. Hence, the fact that the Zangezur corridor is of geostrategic significance draws the attention of major powers which complicate the process and undermine the efforts of Armenia and Azerbaijan to unblock the regional transportation links.

Hence, the outcomes of this study point toward several potential pathways for achieving a sustainable resolution to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. The recognition of each other's

territorial integrity presents an opportunity for constructive engagement, signaling a willingness to move beyond entrenched positions. Additionally, the reopening of transport routes as envisioned by the Trilateral Statement of November 10, 2020, would offer a framework for cooperation that can benefit both countries economically and politically.

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