

Discussing a South Caucasus Short of Russian Dominance

Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (Eds.)

Study Group Information



UNSER HEER



Study Group Information

Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (Eds.)

Discussing a South Caucasus Short of Russian Dominance

**25th Workshop of the PFP Consortium Study Group
“Regional Stability in the South Caucasus”**

17/2023

Vienna, November 2023

Imprint:

Copyright, Production, Publisher:

Republic of Austria / Federal Ministry of Defence
Rossauer Lände 1
1090 Vienna, Austria

Edited by:

National Defence Academy
Command
Stiftgasse 2a
1070 Vienna, Austria

In co-operation with:

PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes
Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

Study Group Information

Copyright

© Republic of Austria / Federal Ministry of Defence
All rights reserved

November 2023
ISBN 978-3-903359-80-2

Printing:

ReproZ W 23-5241
Stiftgasse 2a
1070 Wien

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	5
Abstract.....	7
Introduction <i>Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu</i>	9
PART I: The Likeliest Scenario(s) for Tomorrow’s Russia	13
The Likeliest Scenario(s) for Tomorrow’s Russia <i>Marat Terterov</i>	15
How the Ukraine War Has Become a Milestone for Azerbaijan-Russia Relations? <i>Fuad Shabbazov</i>	31
Projecting Russia’s Post-War Influence in the South Caucasus by Analysing the Russian-Turkish “Co-opetition” in Syria <i>Yeghia Tashjian</i>	41
Tomorrow’s Geography in the Black Sea Region <i>Daria Isachenko</i>	55
How the Russia-Ukraine War Changed the Prospects of Georgia and the South Caucasus Region <i>Nika Chitadze</i>	65
PART II: The Role of Multilateralism in a Changing Geopolitical Environment	87
Harsh Realities and Effectual Truths: Karabakh and the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Process <i>Damjan Krnjević Mišković</i>	89
The War in Ukraine as a Pandora Box for the South Caucasus Geopolitics <i>Fuad Chiragov</i>	105
Multilateralism vs. Regionalism in the South Caucasus <i>Vakhtang Maisaia</i>	119

PART III: South Caucasus Survival and Tomorrow’s Russia.....	125
The Geopolitical Choices of Armenia amidst the Transformation of the Post-Cold War Global Order <i>Benyamin Poghosyan</i>	127
Russian-Iranian Rapprochement in the Context of a New Geopolitical Reality <i>Boris Kuznetsov</i>	143
Domestic Challenges of Georgia in the Light of the Russian-Ukrainian War (2022) <i>David Matsaberidze</i>	149
Epilogue <i>Frederic Labarre</i>	159
PART V: Policy Recommendations.....	163
Policy Recommendations <i>Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group</i>	165
List of Abbreviations.....	173
List of Authors and Editors	175

Harsh Realities and Effectual Truths: Karabakh and the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Process

Damjan Krnjević Mišković

Civitas, cujus subditi, metu territi, arma non capiunt, potius dicenda est, quod sine bello sit, quam quod pacem habeat. Pax enim non belli privatio, sed virtus est, quae ex animi fortitudine oritur: est namque obsequium constans voluntas id exequendi, quod ex communi civitatis decreto fieri debet.

Spinoza, Tractatus Politicus V:4

Overview

The title of this panel is “The Role of Multilateralism in a Changing Geopolitical Environment.” I want to make three basic points in the time allotted to me by the moderator.

And I want to say upfront that I will speak of some harsh realities, informed by the unforgiving standard set forth by Machiavelli in one of the most important passages of *The Prince* (XV.1): “But since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it.”

The first basic point I wish to make today is that multilateralism has failed in the South Caucasus, particularly in the context of the conflict over Karabakh and the underlying failure to broker peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This, in turn, suggests that there is no serious room for meaningful and useful multilateral engagement given the new circumstances brought on by the Second Karabakh War and the conflict over Ukraine – I take it that the phrase “changing geopolitical environment” refers to at least these two transformational events.

Second, I will make a succinct case that Azerbaijan is the indispensable country not only in the South Caucasus, but in Eurasia (or what I and others have called the “Silk Road region,” a definition of which is provided in the Editorial Statement of the journal *Baku Dialogues*). Now, in which sense is that

country indispensable? In the sense that Azerbaijan is indispensable to fulfilling Western strategic ambitions on connectivity in this part of the world, and this includes energy but goes far beyond energy. This is of particular significance in light of the “changing geopolitical environment,” one the one hand, and the fact that Armenia remains, for all intents and purposes, a vassal of Russia and an ally of Iran – to refer to Michael Doran’s formulation. Put together, this means that Azerbaijan is, so to speak, the strategic prize on offer for the West. The prize is not Armenia because, try as it might, that country simply cannot extricate itself from Moscow’s and Tehran’s sphere of influence for the foreseeable future – even with the unprecedented level of support by its Western friends. A failure to account for the strategic implications of this would constitute geopolitical and geo-economic malpractice.

My third and final point is that an overturning of the definitive result of the Second Karabakh War and the consequences deriving thereof is effectually impossible – whether by the diplomatic or even military means of a single foreign actor or a combination of foreign actors acting either in concert or multilaterally. Armenians and their supporters sometimes compare “Artsakh” to Abkhazia, Crimea, Donetsk, Lugansk, Kosovo, South Ossetia, or Transnistria. A much more accurate and sobering comparison would be Republika Srpska Krajina. The major difference between Croatia in 1995 and Azerbaijan in 2020 is that the latter won a clean victory, free of the commission of organized, large-scale atrocities like ethnic cleansing. This Armenian military and diplomatic loss has unavoidable implications, given our “changing geopolitical environment.”

Let me take you back, for a moment, to January 1995, when a multilateral “contact group” composed of UN officials and diplomats from Russia, the United States, and the EU presented the so-called Z-4 Plan to the Croatian president and a few hours later to the top officials of Republika Srpska Krajina. The former was displeased with its contents, which has been described as “more than autonomy, less than independence,” but accepted it as a basis for further negotiations, while the latter group rejected it. In fact, the maximalist position of the Krajina leadership was so entrenched and overconfident that they refused even to receive the proposal in its written form. Even mere physical contact with a document that did not fully legitimize their secessionist holdings was judged to be beyond the pale. The die had been irrevocably cast. Less than seven months later, Republika Srpska Krajina was

overrun by the Croatian army, which had been in the meantime trained by a private U.S. military contractor and the French Foreign Legion.

This narrative should sound hauntingly familiar to some of you around the table.

Coming to terms with the reality that “Artsakh” is finished obviously is difficult and painful for those who supported and may still latently or overtly support that secessionist project from the outside, much less for those who lived or still live within its self-proclaimed boundaries. But the “Artsakh” dream is gone for good: a majority of its inhabitants left during or immediately after the war of their own volition – this includes, of course, ethnic-Armenian colonists and settlers, but also men (and women) under illegal arms. Those civilians who remain will need to choose whether to stay as the Russian peacekeepers hand back administrative jurisdiction to Azerbaijan – whether this happens in late 2025, as is probable, or in late 2030. Now, in what was Republika Srpska Krajina, my wife’s family and hundreds of thousands of others made their respective choice. Those who ended up staying after August 1995 (or ended up returning) now live in a country that is more stable, more secure, and more prosperous than the two neighbouring ones to which most of those who left sought shelter from the atrocious Croatian storm.

I also want to say up front that I live and work in Azerbaijan. And on this basis, I ask you in all seriousness to listen carefully to what I’m going to tell you: there is no Azerbaijani storm – neither on the immediate horizon nor in the long-term forecast – for the Karabakh Armenians who remain there or may wish to return. But I can also confirm what some may fear, namely that there is no appetite in Baku to provide for anything that resembles a distinct set of provisions for the ethnic-Armenian minority objectively incompatible with the Azerbaijani constitution. Limited, time-bound concessions may perhaps be possible to obtain by special executive order, for the sake of reintegrating Karabakh Armenians into the Azerbaijani constitutional order during a transitional period, but this would be contingent on the successful completion of direct talks between Karabakh Armenians representatives and the Azerbaijani authorities. I hasten to add that, in my judgment, the window for this sort of endeavour will not remain open much beyond this year.

One final initial observation on this third general point, because I will not have time to develop it sufficiently later on: expecting outsiders to serve as international overseers or guarantors of what is agreed in the context of an “internationally visible” or “transparent” process – including the establishment of some sort of multilateral monitoring mission in Azerbaijan – is not realistic. This applies particularly to the context of Karabakh, but also in the event of an agreement on the roadmap to peace or, ultimately, a formal treaty being agreed between Baku and Yerevan. It seems quite likely that the terms of any definitive settlement will comply fully with and, indeed, not go limitlessly beyond, the five principles of peace set forth by the Azerbaijani side in spring 2022.

Failure of Multilateralism

I now turn to my first basic point: the failure of multilateralism. This most directly speaks to the role of the OSCE Minsk Group. Its co-chairs – France, Russia, and the United States – led the sole active multilateral process in which the two state parties to the conflict over Karabakh (Armenia and Azerbaijan) had agreed to participate. This process produced no serious breakthrough since the May 1994 ceasefire that stopped the First Karabakh War (it is noteworthy that this ceasefire was mediated solely by Russia, as was the cessation of hostilities in April 2016 and the terms that stopped the Second Karabakh War) – in the sense that the Armenian occupation had not come to an end, Azerbaijani refugees and internally displaced persons had been prevented from exercising their right of return, and so on. These and other such results would have accorded with the terms of the various UN Security Council resolutions, which in turn informed the mandate of the OSCE Minsk Group. Here it is also noteworthy to mention that all three co-chairs are permanent members of the UN Security Council.

In other words, for nearly three decades, the Minsk Group led negotiations whose objectives were clearly and unambiguously set down on paper. The foreign mediators, coming together in a multilateral framework whose terms were set by another multilateral framework to which these co-chairs belong, gave themselves the responsibility of leading a defined process to achieve a defined result, and yet the territorial conflict remained unresolved: prior to the onset of the Second Karabakh War, none of the Minsk Group’s defined objectives had been achieved – not even close.

Thus, their actions or inaction – whether by design or circumstance – resulted in the perpetuation of a *status quo* that was the opposite of the agreed objectives. This constitutes a manifest failure of multilateralism in conflict resolution in the case under discussion.

It is important to make two additional points in this context:

First, for much of the period between the end of the First Karabakh War in May 1994 and the onset of the Second Karabakh War in September 2020, Armenia did not deny in principle the core element of the Azerbaijani position, namely that both the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) and the surrounding regions of Azerbaijan occupied by Armenian forces do not belong to Armenia. This is evidenced by the fact that Yerevan neither formally recognized “Artsakh” as an independent, sovereign state nor did it formally annex the territory to Armenia. The lack of a demarcated and delineated border between the two states did bring some ambiguity in this position, but not fundamentally so.

However, beginning in early 2019, clear rhetorical indications began to surface that the government of Nikol Pashinyan was laying the groundwork for a shift in Armenia’s position (building upon his earlier statement, made during the Velvet Revolution and repeated thereafter that the “Nagorno Karabakh Republic [would become] an inseparable part of the Republic of Armenia”). Four examples can be cited as evidence. One, in March 2019, Armenia’s defence minister David Tonoyan called on the country to prepare for the pursuit of a “new war for new territories” literally hours after Pashinyan had held his first official meeting with Azerbaijan’s president, Ilham Aliyev, in Vienna. Two, in mid-May 2019, Pashinyan effectually repudiated the OSCE Madrid Principles, thereby publicly rejecting the existence of a documentary basis for resolving the conflict. Three, in mid-May 2020, Pashinyan attended the “inauguration” of the newly elected “president of Artsakh” in Shusha (earlier iterations of this event had been previously held in Khankendi, a city that the Armenians still call “Stepanakert,” a name imposed in 1923 by the Soviet authorities in homage to Bolshevik revolutionary Stepan Shaumian, an ethnic-Armenian nicknamed by his supporters the “Caucasian Lenin”). Four, in early August 2019, Pashinyan stated, in occupied Karabakh no less, that the former NKAO and the seven surrounding districts for Azerbaijan under occupation were a part of Armenia (“Artsakh

is Armenia, and that's it”), which Baku interpreted as being tantamount to a political declaration of Yerevan’s intent to formally annex Azerbaijan’s sovereign territories.

The fact that the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs took no discernible action in response to such, and similar statements speaks directly to my first overall point about the failure of multilateralism to resolve the conflict we are discussing.

The second additional point is that since the end of the Second Karabakh War, Pashinyan seems to have reverted to the official position held by successive Armenian governments between May 1994 to early 2019, as noted above. Speaking before his country’s parliament on 14 September 2022, the prime minister stated,

We want to sign a document because of which many people will criticize us, scold us, call us traitors, they may even decide to remove us from power, but we will be grateful if as a result Armenia will have lasting peace and security in an area of 29,800 square kilometres. I clearly state that I will sign a document that will ensure that. 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.¹

Pashinyan’s reference to “29,800 kilometres” is the key reference. It unmistakably excludes any territory that belonged to the former NKAO and surrounding regions that was seized by Armenian forces during the First Karabakh War and occupied by them until late 2020. It also excludes any territory that presently falls within the jurisdiction of the Russian peacekeeping zone established under the terms of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement that ended the Second Karabakh War.

The prime minister’s reference is thus rightly interpreted as explicitly ending both Yerevan’s political support for “Artsakh” and any illusions of its eventual annexation by Armenia. The rest of his statement can be interpreted as going beyond the official position held by successive Armenian governments between May 1994 to early 2019. Now, as it happens, this statement by Pashinyan is fully in line with an instructive distinction that Thomas Goltz makes at the beginning of his *Azerbaijan Diary* between Armenia in the sense of the

¹ https://arka.am/en/news/politics/pashinyan_says_he_is_ready_to_sign_document_that_would_make_people_call_him_traitor/.

“former Soviet republic by that name, and the Armenia of the mind, a state with far larger borders than the existing entity, and far more real for many Armenians, especially those in the diaspora.” In any event, in an interview on Armenian state television that was broadcast on 1 October 2022, Pashinyan went even further, in that he articulated two quite harsh and entirely accurate geopolitical realities: *“no one is ready to recognize the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, just as no one is ready to recognize Karabakh as part of Armenia. And we need to recognize this fact.”*²

It would be difficult to make a case that such and similar post-Second Karabakh War statements were the result of anything that could be described as multilateral success, unless, I suppose, one were to go back to some of the language found in the aforementioned UN Security Council resolutions, which were adopted during the First Karabakh War.

To come back to the main thread of my first general point: the failure of multilateralism is also reflected in the failures of Europe’s flagship multilateral institution – namely, the European Union – to capitalize on the “changing geopolitical environment.”

Let me explain. The period between the end of the Second Karabakh War (10 November 2020) and the onset of the present stage in the conflict over Ukraine (24 February 2022) saw three actors assume distinct yet complementary roles in various aspects of the peace process: Russia defined itself as the mediator, the EU as the facilitator, and the United States as the supporter. Even after the start of what the Russians call their “special military operation” saw a rapid, full-on deterioration in the level of trust between Moscow, on the one hand, and Brussels and Washington, on the other, with respect to each other’s intentions, initiatives, and actions in almost all other geopolitical theatres, they did not actively, directly, and certainly not decisively undermine each other’s efforts in the Armenia-Azerbaijan one. Perhaps even some behind-the-scenes coordination even continued to take place, at least for a time.

² <https://jam-news.net/karabakh-may-not-be-mentioned-in-the-peace-agreement-with-azerbaijan-pashinyan/>.

This began to change in the last few months of 2022, and it coincided with two entirely self-inflicted wounds by Europeans. The first was the unnecessary demand by the French president to become what effectually amounted to a co-convenor of the until-then fruitful trilateral facilitation mechanism led by the President of the EU Council Charles Michel. Emmanuel Macron's insistence, which came to public light in late November, was a result of his understanding that his participation in a quadrilateral meeting on the margins of the inaugural summit of the European Political Community, which had taken place in early October in Prague, was not a one-off occurrence. Between those two dates, Macron and his Foreign Ministry took several steps that Azerbaijan construed as demonstrations of bias in favour of Armenia. These included comments by Macron on French television in mid-October to which Azerbaijan did not take kindly ("Russia has interfered without authorization [*immiscée*] in this conflict, it has manifestly played Azerbaijan's game with the complicity of Turkey, and it has returned there to weaken Armenia") and tabling a draft resolution at a Francophonie ministerial meeting in mid-November that was both linguistically and procedurally problematic for Baku. And, of course, also the adoption of an admittedly non-binding resolution in the French Senate on 15 November 2022 that *inter alia* reaffirmed "the necessity of recognizing the Nagorno Karabakh Republic and to make of this recognition an instrument of negotiation with a view to the establishment of a durable peace."³

The second self-inflicted wound by the Europeans was made at the Prague meeting with the announcement of the establishment of a two-month long European Union Monitoring Capacity (EUMCAP). Baku formally yet grudgingly accepted its deployment (it operated only on the Armenian side of the non-delineated border), agreeing "to cooperate with this mission as far as it is concerned." It seems likely that Azerbaijan had been presented with a *fait accompli* in Prague that had already been pre-cooked at the instigation of France and the formal request of Armenia. The wound became infected in December, again thanks to Franco-Armenian connivance, by an announcement that EUMCAP would be replaced by a European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA), which was also tasked with operating on the Armenian side of the non-delineated border. The second time around, Baku made it

³ <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-armenia-france-sanctions-karabakh/32133024.html>.

publicly clear that this had been done without prior consultation. Azerbaijan's negative reaction was echoed and amplified by Russia, albeit for distinct and in many ways opposite reasons.

Whatever the EU's intentions and however the first and second EU mission was sold to the other member states by the French and perhaps one or two others, two consequences resulted from the two self-inflicted wounds. First, for all intents and purposes, Charles Michel has lost the ability to oversee the dynamics of the trilateral process that he had established and led. Second, the European Union lost its reputation of trusted facilitator in the peace process. The primary reason the entire peace process did not revert to Russian dominion (aside from the fact that the Kremlin's attention is evidently focused on conducting its war in Ukraine) is that the Americans were deft enough to quickly pick up the ball the Europeans so unnecessarily dropped due to French interference.

Of course, Washington's motivation had nothing to do with any sort of commitment to multilateral success. Not for the first time in recent intra-Western dynamics, the United States found itself having to step in to clean up a mess caused by the European Union or one (or more) of its member states. And, of course, Washington did so in this case to prevent Moscow from reasserting control over a piece of real estate that, ironically, both the White House and the Kremlin acknowledge as traditionally falling within the purview of the Russian sphere of interest.

In his *Religion: A Dialogue and Other Essays*, Arthur Schopenhauer wrote, "it is only at the first encounter that a face makes its full impression on us." Decades later, an American expression commonly attributed to vaudevillian Will Rogers states, "you never get a second chance to make a first impression." The source does not matter. What does matter is that the EU was a newcomer to the political knot represented by the conflict over Karabakh and the underlying conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. And as a newcomer, the first impression it ultimately left on Baku was somewhere between weakness and duplicity.

This is all the more regrettable because of the EU's genuinely prudent appreciation of the unique role Azerbaijan can play in the fulfilment of its strategic ambitions in what some people still like to call Eurasia. This constitutes the second general point I will make today:

Indispensable Country

The trend of strategically deepening EU-Azerbaijan engagement is one consequence of the choices the EU made in terms of its response to the onset of the present stage in the conflict over Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022.

Namely, sanctions have not just geo-economic but geopolitical implications, some of which may be unforeseen or unintended. This becomes patently obvious when one looks at a map of the Silk Road region.

And this leads to the following assessment: Azerbaijan is now the indispensable country for the strategic ambitions of the EU and NATO in the Silk Road region – certainly in terms of connectivity. Try as you might, you just cannot go around Azerbaijan anymore, because to its North is Russia and to its South is Iran. And the EU and NATO are committed to enforcing their sanctions and export restrictions regime against both of these countries. And barring some fundamental reversal in Moscow and Tehran, like, say, regime change, this will not change for the foreseeable future.

And this means – or at least should mean – that the EU, in particular, needs to make itself more attractive to Azerbaijan – more so than the other way around.

If the EU fails to attract Azerbaijan, its strategic foothold in what I and others have taken to calling the Silk Road region will not be sustainable. And that would surely constitute a missed strategic opportunity. More than that, it would constitute geopolitical and geo-economic malpractice by the European Union.

Now, connectivity in this context has two interdependent aspects. The first is energy security (oil, gas, and renewables), and the second is land-based transportation corridors between the EU and Asia: Global Gateway, Middle

Corridor, and so on. This in turn extends into domains like digital infrastructure security, food supplies, access to critical raw materials, and so on.

I do not want to get into all the details of the Trans-Caspian connectivity aspect for reasons of time. But I do want to underline that in 2022, Azerbaijan supplied 6.9 percent of Europe's gas needs. In a few years' time, that number is almost certainly going to be in the double digits, because doubling the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor by 2027 is in the works. And because of the way the global gas market is structured – if one takes Russian gas out of the equation as far as the EU is concerned – then without this Azeri gas, the EU does not have enough. Certainly not without driving spot market prices through the roof. And even then, Azeri gas will be indispensable. Azerbaijan's supply of electricity from renewable sources like wind and solar (and hydro) will also become increasingly important in the years to come, with a game-changing deal being worked out to build a cable under the Black Sea to transmit what is produced in Azerbaijan (and Georgia) directly into some EU markets.

So, without going into the trans-Caspian details, let me reiterate that all EU connectivity with Central Asia is predicated on the EU's successful strategic engagement with Baku. Azerbaijan is the indispensable predicate. It is the indispensable country. Azerbaijan is the strategic prize for the European Union.

I do, however, want to speak to the role that what Baku calls the Zangezur Corridor can play in the context of strategically deepening EU-Azerbaijan engagement.

Article 9 of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement that ended the Second Karabakh War states reads as follows, in my translation from the original Russian:

Unblocked [Разблокируются] are all economic and transport connections [связи] in the region. The Republic of Armenia shall guarantee the security [OR safety, безопасность] of transport connections [OR communications, сообщения] between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to organize the unobstructed [OR unimpeded OR unhindered, беспрепятственного] movement of persons, vehicles, and cargo in both directions. Control over transport connections shall be carried out by the organs of the Border Guard Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB) of Russia. By agreement of the Parties [По согласованию Сторон], the construction of new transport

communications shall be provided linking the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic with the western regions of Azerbaijan.

As an aside, I note that the equivalent formulations regarding the Lachin Corridor (Article 6 of the same document) do not contain the word ‘беспрепятственного’ or anything similar.

Be that as it may, Article 9 forms the basis of Baku’s argument that Yerevan has an obligation to provide unimpeded road and rail access between the two parts of Azerbaijan running along the riverbank of the Aras at the southern tip of the Armenian province of Syunik. Restoring this transportation corridor, which was dismantled by Armenia in the early 1990s, would enable Yerevan to hold a geopolitical and geo-economic stake in a flagship regional connectivity project that advances the EU’s ambitions in the Silk Road region. Yerevan has gone back and forth on the strategic prudence of this project, on some occasions acknowledging its potential benefits (with caveats) while on others emphasizing its risks.

A red herring is the supposed threat posed by Turkey: Ankara’s geo-economic ambitions can be fulfilled just as easily by recourse to the existing road and rail corridor that connects the country (and, by extension, the EU) with Azerbaijan through Georgia. No, I think that for Armenia, the most important foreign policy issue is Iran, which has voiced the loudest objections to the establishment of the Zangezur Corridor (in some ways, Tehran has been more vocally against it than Yerevan). These Iranian objections have two basic components. The first is economic, and it is not spurious: the existing Iranian route between mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave would essentially become redundant, resulting in a loss of revenue. This is of foreign policy concern to Armenia only when the second objection is brought to the surface: Iran sees Azerbaijan as something between a competitor and a rival. Hence its decades-long alliance with Armenia. Iran simply seems not to want to make life easier for Azerbaijan by voicing no objection to the reestablishment of a direct land route between “mainland” Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave. In this context, the argument that Tehran (and Yerevan) fears the presence of the FSB on its border with Armenia is spurious: they are already there. The same can be said regarding the claim that the arrangements governing passage across the Zangezur Corridor would somehow amount to an extraterritorial arrangement with Azerbaijan. This is

simply false: I have heard no Azerbaijani senior official putting forward an interpretation of Article 9 that involves any sort of transfer of sovereignty from Armenia to Azerbaijan over the route. The limitation of Armenia's sovereign control over its borders is an issue, but this involves Russia. And this lack of full control goes far beyond Armenia's narrow border with Iran: Russian FSB troops control Armenia's land borders, Russian officers control all of Armenia's airspace, Russia garrisons thousands of troops in at least three military bases located in Armenia, and Russian capital maintains economic dominance over Armenia. All this is a little reminiscent of the Brezhnev Doctrine. Thus, the issue goes far beyond the Zangezur Corridor, but it has nothing to do with Azerbaijan. At bottom, it is a bilateral one between Moscow and Yerevan. And there is absolutely nothing that Armenia can do about this without perhaps existential consequences. Hence the veracity of Doran's aforementioned formulation.

For Brussels, the question to ask Yerevan in this context is a geopolitical one: do you want to build a nascent relationship with Azerbaijan, a component of which is the establishment of the Zangezur Corridor, or do you prefer to maintain your alliance with Iran? In other words, do you, Armenia, wish to be the EU's partner in furthering its strategic interests in the Silk Road region, or do you choose to side with a power against which the EU has repeatedly imposed sanctions? No answer to this question has any chance of lessening the weight of the Russian variable in this equation in anything resembling a predictable relevant timeframe. This is simply a cold, hard fact.

A good thought experiment would involve figuring out under what conditions would Armenia agree not to serve as an important sanctions-busting conduit for Russia (and Iran). There is a line from a famous movie everyone should recognize saying that just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in. Armenia has been, and will remain an object of great power competition, not a subject of international order. This sums up the sempiternal tragedy of the Armenian predicament, which it is not possible to overcome with "more" multilateralism. Certainly not in our "changing geopolitical environment." Azerbaijan, on the other hand, is a keystone state of the Silk Road region, together with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Yesterday, I completed a week-long Ludovika Scholar program at the University of Public Service in Budapest, where I gave a public lecture on this topic. For reasons of time, I will not get into the details of this today.

No Do-Overs

My third and final point is that an overturning of the definitive result of the Second Karabakh War and the consequences deriving thereof is effectually impossible – whether by diplomatic or military means of a single foreign actor or a combination of foreign actors acting either in concert or multilaterally. The most important consequence is the renewed emphasis by multilateral institutions in general (recent UN General Assembly resolutions speak to this point, however symbolic such documents may be) and the Western powers (the U.S. and the EU) in particular on the inviolability of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of UN member states. If Russian forces are occupiers in the Donbass or Crimea, then Armenian forces are occupiers in Karabakh. There is no realistic way to avoid this parallel – at least not anymore, given our “changing geopolitical environment.”

But even setting this proposition aside, here is what would be required in practice to overturn the definitive result of the Second Karabakh War and the consequences deriving thereof. First, the sudden discovery of massive hydrocarbon deposits in Armenia or the country’s rapid transformation into the Singapore of the Silk Road region. Second, the aptitude to push Turkey back out safely and forever from the South Caucasus. Third, the ability to incentivize leading actors from the West, including France, to engage on the side of Armenia more decidedly and one-sidedly than has been the case at any time in the past. And fourth, the wherewithal to entice Russia to support Armenia’s maximalist position actively and exclusively by any means necessary – up to and including a readiness to engage in an offensive military campaign against Azerbaijan (and almost certainly Turkey) for the sake of land that Moscow has consistently recognized as being Azerbaijan’s sovereign territory – and in political and economic conditions that are, shall we say, suboptimal for the Kremlin.

I cannot leave it unsaid that a necessary prerequisite to the successful instauration of these novel circumstances on the part of Armenia would be the wholesale political isolation, economic constriction, and martial disassembly of Azerbaijan taking place more or less synchronously with the foregoing. The bottom line is that Armenian revanchist success would be predicated on the instauration of novel geopolitical and geo-economic circumstances that Yerevan simply does not have the capability to engender, much less set in

motion. Yet there are those who still champion Armenian maximalism and thus not only believe the opposite but champion its pursuit.

This is, of course, effectually impossible. But one could hypothesize that this is not impossible *per se*. As a brief thought experiment, one could say that making possible the scenario I laid out a moment ago would require the embrace of a belief in the sort of divine intercession that so far has been limited primarily to the works and days of Moses and David: the founder and re-founder of a nation whose uniqueness is unbreakably tied to its covenantal status as *'am 'Olam* – the eternal nation. The logical progression of such a truly heretical position would, thus, require embracing a belief in the categorical substitution of Jerusalem by Etchmiadzin – or, even more radically, of Christ by Gregory – as the eschatological focal point of humanity. That would indubitably constitute the paradigmatic definition of both theological absurdity and ethnic hubris in the absence, of course, of a new divine revelation that I very much doubt is imminent, if I can put it euphemistically. A detailed consideration of such a hypothesis is evidently beyond the scope of what I want to get across today. But I do want to add what should be obvious: there is no indication whatsoever that Pashinyan is inclined to embrace such or similar beliefs.

I think that on the whole – and unlike his opponents – Pashinyan understands that it would be truly foolhardy for his country henceforth to pursue policies that burden another generation of its citizens with the perpetuation of what amount to eschatological illusions and the realities of poverty and insecurity. As Gerald Libaridian so aptly phrased it in February 2021, “it takes a particular kind of impudence to prescribe again the cure to the disease that incapacitated the patient and brought him close to death.”⁴

Conclusion

This brings me back full circle to my first general point: the manifest failure of multilateralism. And to my second: Azerbaijan is the indispensable country for the fulfilment of Western strategic ambitions in the Silk Road region. A failure to grasp the fundamental implications of this assessment would, as

⁴ <https://mirrorspectator.com/2021/02/07/jirair-libaridians-response-to-vahan-zanoyan/>.

I have argued, constitute geopolitical and geo-economic malpractice. For Yerevan, obviously; but also, for Brussels, and the other foreign capitals whose interests, as they each understand them, have driven their respective ambitions and postures towards a part of the world whose global importance today is greater than it has been in centuries.