

*Original Paper*

# New Geopolitical Realities in the Armenian-Azerbaijani Confrontation and Prospects for the Development of Cooperation

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The formation of new sovereign states in the post-Soviet space took place under very difficult conditions of aggravation of ethnic conflicts, deterioration in welfare and a sharp drop in the standard of living of people. Under these conditions, ethnic conflicts began to act as the most destructive forces, the foundations of which were laid by the policy of tsarist Russia, and later continued by the leadership of the Russian state. So, over the past 200 years, the Russian leadership, in accordance with its geopolitical interests, has consistently and purposefully changed the ethno-confessional map of the Caucasus. For example, by settling Kuban Cossacks on the historical lands of Chechens, Ossetians on the lands of Ingush, Armenians on the lands of Azerbaijanis and Ubykhs, Georgians on the lands of Meskhetian Turks and Abkhazians, etc., Russian politicians have created “time bombs”, i.e., areas of potential ethnic conflicts.

The ethnopolitical map of the modern Caucasus was largely formed at the beginning of the twentieth century, as a consequence of the results of the military confrontations between Russia and Turkey. During this period, the Armenian Republic was established on the historical lands of Western Azerbaijan, with the support of tsarist Russia, which later expanded geographically at the expense of the new territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In 1923, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAO) was established on the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan, where Armenians mainly lived. The Autonomous Region had great privileges, the top officials in the leadership of state structures were predominantly Armenians. Azerbaijanis living in the NKAO, whose share in the population was 25%, held the positions of deputy leaders of Armenians. Despite the fact that Armenians lived mainly in mountainous areas in the NKAO, their standard of living was much higher than in the mountainous areas of other regions of Azerbaijan and Armenia itself.

Territorial claims of Armenians against Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia have deep historical roots. The historical myths invented by the Armenians themselves about “Great Armenia, from the sea to the sea”, did not give a rest to the nationalist Armenians. Armenian national chauvinists, fueled by the support of the Armenian Diaspora, repeatedly raised the issue of the annexation of the NKAO to Armenia over the past century. The collapse of the Union and the civil confrontation in Azerbaijan created conditions for the military aggression of Armenia and the subsequent occupation of the NKAO and 7 administrative districts around it, the area of which was 3 times larger than that of the territory of the region itself. Of course, Armenia would not have been able to occupy such a vast area on its own. In the confrontation with Azerbaijan, Russia provided direct military assistance to Armenia, not to mention the fact that the Russian military fought on the side of the Armenians. Iran also, due to its own geopolitical interests, provided direct economic and humanitarian assistance to Armenia. Without the help and support of Russia and Iran, the Armenian side would not have been able to annex 20% of the territory of Azerbaijan.

During the occupation of the Azerbaijani lands, Armenia fully used both the military and political support of Russia and other “geopolitical players”, who continued to use it as a puppet to solve their own problems. This situation remains unchanged to this day, as exemplified by the policies of Russia, France, Iran, and other Western countries in the region. It is important to find the reasons for the “coincidence” of the geopolitical interests of these countries in the region. The answer lies in the historical past of the region, where the interests of the collapsed Ottoman Empire collided with those of the above-mentioned group of countries. At the beginning of the twentieth century, these countries skillfully used Armenians as an instrument of internal counteraction to the Ottomans, which resulted in an inflated myth about the Armenian genocide. Historical facts show that mass violence and brutality on the part of Russians, Turks, Persians, Arabs, and other conquerors were experienced by almost all the peoples of the Caucasus. However, the Caucasian mentality did not allow them to tell the whole world about the long-suffering of their people. Only the Armenians shout to the whole world about their bitter fate, which once again confirms the fact that the Caucasus was not a place of residence of Armenians in the historical past. At the same time, a characteristic feature of the majority of Armenians is their aggression towards the Turkic peoples, as evidenced by the numerous terrorist acts carried out against statesmen, politicians, and diplomats of Turkey and Azerbaijan.

A very well-known Western scientist Erich Fromm in his work “The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness (1), trying to uncover the causes of human violence, identified different types of aggression, where a special place is given to the characteristic of destructive aggression. This type of human aggression is distinguished by the desire of a group of individuals to carry out destructive acts. It is enough to look at the numerous destructions of settlements, villages, cultural, historical and religious centers in the occupied regions of Azerbaijan to understand the degree of hatred of Armenians towards everything Azerbaijani. Moreover, almost all the destructive actions and mass looting of Armenians in the occupied areas were carried out after the cessation of fighting’s in the early 90s. This

behavior of Armenians is a consequence of many years (including the Soviet period) of anti-Turkish propaganda and education of young people in the spirit of hatred towards Turks and Azerbaijanis. Nowadays, hatred towards Azerbaijanis and Turks continues to be methodically instilled in Armenian children in families and schools. Such education, albeit in a hidden form, was also in Soviet times. Therefore, it seems difficult to expect any changes in building interethnic relations with Azerbaijanis in the near future.

No less interesting was the part of E. Fromm's work where group narcissism was considered. It is the Armenian ethnic group that can be characterized by group narcissism - this is something from the series "my nation (or religion) is the best!". With all this, Armenians have managed to present themselves for a century as a "long-suffering people" who were subjected to genocide by the Turks. Based on these postulates, the Armenian leadership built its foreign policy, which, of course, necessitated the development of adequate responses from the neighbors.

### **1. Liberation of Azerbaijani Lands from Armenian Occupation**

It is no secret that Russia has played a leading role in the ongoing military-political and socio-economic processes in the region over the past centuries. As a result, a modern geopolitical picture of the region was gradually formed. The basis of Russia's military-political doctrine in the post-Soviet space has been and remains unchanged - the provision of military and economic presence in each of the neighboring republics. In the new sovereign republics, such an approach in building interstate relations was not always welcomed. Among the republics of the South Caucasus, only Armenia has expressed its desire and support for the presence of a Russian military base on its territory. Time has shown that the invented "horror stories" about the military threat from Turkey turned out to be just a myth. Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, from the first days of the restoration of sovereignty, expressed unwillingness to see Russian military on their territory, which resulted in Russia's support for separatism in these republics.

The occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent regions of the republic by Armenia took place in conditions of continued civil confrontation in Azerbaijan. The military-political support of Russia, the economic support of Iran and the misinformation of the world community about the ongoing conflict by the pro-Armenian media of the West played a key role in the occupation of the historical lands of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan has been trying for 28 years, on the basis of international law, to peacefully settle the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Karabakh. However, Armenia sought to permanently preserve this issue, and to annex the occupied lands of Azerbaijan to its territory. This was evidenced by the statements of the Prime Minister of Armenia N. Pashinyan: "Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) is Armenia, and full stop" (2). Such a statement became the point of no return to any negotiations with Armenia regarding the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. In addition, the Armenian leadership, confident in its abilities, began to flirt with the West and pursue an anti-Russian policy. This created prerequisites for

conducting military operations to liberate the occupied lands from Azerbaijan. Thus, Azerbaijan began to independently solve the task of implementing the adopted 4 resolutions of the UN Security Council on the liberation of the occupied lands of the country. According to the results of the 44-day war, Armenia actually signed a surrender pact on November 10, 2020 and subsequently withdrew its troops from the rest of the occupied lands of Azerbaijan.

The appearance of the Azerbaijani army on the state borders with Armenia and the restoration of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan significantly changed the alignment of geopolitical forces in the region. The de-occupation of lands and the Russian-Turkish political and economic rapprochement affected the interests of Iran and a number of Western countries. Therefore, as the subsequent course of events showed, the subsequent elimination of disagreements and the achievement of a peace agreement between the conflicting parties became a difficult task. The current leadership of Armenia seeks to internationalize the post-conflict situation in the region and therefore seeks to ensure the presence of observers from the European Union. As a result, under the guise of European civilian observers, former employees of the French gendarmerie and German special forces appeared in the border zone of Azerbaijan. It is not difficult to guess that the Russian side was not happy with such behavior of the Armenian leadership, because Russia's geostrategic interests were touched upon here. Turkey was the only regional country that provided political and moral support to Azerbaijan. The historically fraternal relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan have played a positive role in the military operation to liberate the occupied lands from the Armenian occupation.

## **2. Why Were International Efforts to Resolve the Conflict Not Successful?**

In 1992, the OSCE Minsk Group was established to lead the search for a solution to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia, the USA and France were chosen as co-chairs of the Minsk Group. However, during the 28-year period of its "activity", it "failed" to solve the task. Despite the fact that in 1993 the UN Security Council adopted 4 resolutions on the "withdrawal of Armenian military formations from the occupied regions of Azerbaijan", the Minsk Group Co-Chairs did not make proper efforts to implement the adopted resolutions. Therefore, now the attempts of the Armenian side to reanimate this structure causes only a grin. An analysis of the course of geopolitical processes in the region allows us to conclude that none of the Minsk Group member countries was interested in a fair resolution of the conflict, namely, in the de-occupation of Azerbaijani lands. The current situation fully corresponded to the geopolitical interests of these countries. The Russian side sought in every way to ensure its presence and geopolitical influence in Azerbaijan, which was confirmed by the course of further events in the region. The Armenian Diaspora in these countries has always exerted great pressure on the American and French leadership, so it seemed unlikely that the issue would be resolved in favor of Azerbaijan. Based on this, practically no one in Azerbaijan took seriously the various meetings and vague "initiatives" of the Minsk Group co-chairs aimed at resolving the conflict. In the context of this, it is appropriate to recall a quote from Henry Kissinger's doctoral

dissertation. He argued that “legitimacy in international affairs is based on establishing a balance between powerful States, not on promoting justice.” It is not difficult to understand that if the geopolitical interests of a strong state with great influence in the region are not taken into account, it is difficult to ensure peace and harmony there.

Since the beginning of the 90s, the Iranian side has been conducting an ambiguous and hypocritical policy in the region. Iran, while verbally declaring support for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, has in fact always provided political and economic support to Armenia. At the same time, the facts of illegal exploitation of pastures and agricultural lands of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan by both Armenians and Iranian entrepreneurs were confirmed. During the military operations to liberate Azerbaijani lands, the Iranian side, under the pretext of advancing its peace initiatives, sought in every way to slow down the process of de-occupation and expulsion of Armenian military formations from the territory of Azerbaijan. After the victorious 44-day war of the Azerbaijani army and the liberation of the occupied territories, Iran began to openly conduct an anti-Azerbaijani policy in the region. The armed attack on the Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran, the murder and wounding of two employees, the illegal supply of fuel to Armenian separatists, the conclusion of an agreement with Armenia on the supply of weapons, official statements on opposition to the opening of the Zangezur corridor and other statements by Iran testify to Iran’s policy against Azerbaijan.

Armenia, in the face of real threats of losing its territorial integrity, was forced to sign an agreement on the cessation of military resistance. However, the question arises - how much can the Armenian side be trusted? The historical experience of relations with Armenians shows that trust in Armenians has always cost Azerbaijan dearly. So, after the bloody massacre of Azerbaijanis by Armenians in March 1918 in Baku, about 12 thousand of its inhabitants were killed within a few days. These and other numerous facts of massacres of residents of cities and villages of Azerbaijan (in Shamakhi, Guba, Lankaran, Ganja, etc., settlements) by Armenians were later practically erased from the memory of the people. On the one hand, the Soviet government forbade the discussion of these historical facts, and on the other hand, the Azerbaijani people have never been distinguished by their nature for cultivating hatred towards other peoples, which cannot be said about the Armenians. This can explain the overall concern about the current state of development of relations with Armenians. Having forgotten the treachery of the Armenians in recent history, our descendants may again face aggression from Armenia. Evidence of this is the relentless revanchist sentiments among a significant part of the Armenian society. Despite the official statements of the Armenian leadership about the desire to sign a peace treaty with Azerbaijan, it would be naive to believe in the truth of their intentions. It would be appropriate to recall the statement of N. Pashinyan, who in one of his speeches in 2022 openly said - the peace treaty is just a piece of paper for me.

Armenia is still trying to use all the opportunities of its diaspora (informational, political, financial, etc.) in foreign countries to solve its own nationalist plans for the alienation of Azerbaijani lands. In accordance with this, the current leadership of Armenia is striving in every possible way to

internationalize the post-conflict situation and attract more “observers” from foreign countries. Another proof of this is the organization, at the request of the Armenian side, of another observer mission consisting of 100 people from among the former military and police sent by the EU to the border areas with Azerbaijan. The purpose of this activity is already long-term (within 2 years). The mission is to monitor the military-political situation in the border areas. It is not difficult to guess that former employees of law enforcement agencies (French gendarmerie and German special forces) will mainly collect the necessary data for the relevant departments of their countries. It should be noted that before that, the European mission, which consisted of only forty observers, was in the conflict zone at the end of last year, and their presence was limited to two months of presence in the border zone.

The EU’s desire to support Armenia’s initiatives is largely due to the growing pro-Western sentiment in the country. The penetration of the Armenian lobby into practically the structures of the Russian leadership (informational, political, military, financial, scientific and technical, etc.) has significantly complicated relations with Azerbaijan. Russia played a decisive role in the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent regions of Azerbaijan. After a 30-year policy of supporting Armenia, Russia finally began to realize the importance of its own national interests and therefore changed its policy towards Azerbaijan. The subsequent change in Russia’s policy and its “non-interference” in conducting operations to liberate Azerbaijani lands clearly reflected Armenia’s real place in the military-political map of the region.

The official authorities of Russia declare that they want peace in the Caucasus, but, with the provision of their own geostrategic interests. At this stage, Russia’s main task is to maintain the presence of its military bases and “peacekeeping forces” in the region. To achieve this goal, all levers of military-political and socio-economic influence on the leadership of the republics are used.

The course of the Georgian-Russian armed conflict in 2008 and the current military operations in Ukraine revealed the essence of the ongoing geopolitics of the West in the post-Soviet space. The Western world is concerned about the development of Russia and the desire to maintain its dominant presence in the post-Soviet republics. The use of military force on the part of Russia, in solving its strategic tasks, has practically nullified political relations with Western countries.

However, in the formation of the current geopolitical picture of the post-Soviet space, great political miscalculations of the leaders of Western countries played a role. The Western world, providing huge dividends from doing business with Russia, did not pay due attention to the growing tension in its relations with some neighboring republics (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan). In all these republics, separatism was supported by Russia. Attempts by the West to create some parallel structures (GUAM, the EU Eastern Partnership project, etc.) to support the newly formed republics were not able to solve their pressing political problems. The Western world reacted very cautiously to the military invasion of Georgia by Russian forces, which became one of the factors that led to the possibility of a large-scale war in Ukraine.

The main miscalculations of Western strategists regarding the vision of the geopolitical situation in the

post-Soviet space are the insufficiently deep study of the mentality of the peoples living in this region. The policy pursued by Western countries towards the post-Soviet republics shows that underestimating the uniqueness of the current economy, the peculiarities and traditions of local peoples, the nature of relations with neighboring countries does not give the desired results. The use of double standards in the political decisions of Western countries has led to a fading interest in assessing the values of “democracy” countries. Therefore, most of the new sovereign republics are in search of a new way (not a Western model) of their future development.

The use of double standards by the West was clearly manifested in the process of the growing Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Thus, after the occupation of Azerbaijani lands, about 4,000 residents were killed, captured and reported missing, and after the cessation of hostilities, hundreds of historical and cultural monuments were purposefully destroyed by Armenians. Despite the repeated appeals of the Azerbaijani side to international organizations and to the leaders of leading Western countries with a request to facilitate the release of the captives and clarify the issue of the fate of the missing, practically nothing has been done in this direction. However, we saw a different attitude of the West after the liberation of the occupied lands. Thus, the hysterical appeals of Armenians to the West to put pressure on the Azerbaijani side in order to release prisoners of war who illegally entered the territory of Azerbaijan after the surrender of Armenia were immediately heard by them (suffice it to recall the resolution of the European Parliament of May 20, 2021, calling on Azerbaijan to release Armenian prisoners of war and other detained persons). At the same time, the liberated Azerbaijani territories were stuffed with hundreds of thousands of mines purposefully left by the Armenian occupiers. And despite the repeated appeals of the Azerbaijani side to the leaders of Western countries to provide mine maps from Armenia, the issue has not been resolved for a long time. Azerbaijan, in exchange for Armenian prisoners of war, received 1/5 of the maps of minefields. At the same time, international organizations, groups of scientists and politicians of the West began to raise universal noise about the “genocide” of Armenians, about the destruction of “the most ancient” cultural monuments. It’s amazing, but where were these government officials, politicians, cultural figures when the Armenians destroyed nature, culture, ancient monuments, religious centers in the occupied Azerbaijani lands? There are many examples of such a policy of double standards that reflect the true core of modern Western democracy.

#### **4. Post-Conflict Situation and the Feasibility of Signing a Peace Agreement**

With the end of the hostilities in Karabakh, the possibility of reviving the liberated lands arose, in particular, reconstruction work on the construction of transport infrastructure, housing and social facilities. Thus, it was necessary to create the necessary conditions for the return of refugees to their native lands. For this purpose, the Government of Azerbaijan allocated funds in the amount of \$6.6 billion from the republic’s budget for the period 2021-2023.

In a short period, a huge amount of construction work was carried out. While the Azerbaijani side

directed its main forces and resources to the revival of the liberated territories, Armenia, with the tacit support of the Russian “peacekeeping forces”, transported armed detachments and ammunition to the zone of compact residence of Armenians in Karabakh. At the same time, the illegal export of mineral resources from the Karabakh mining fields to Armenia continued. The open “plunder” of Azerbaijan’s natural resources, the illegal passage of Armenian militants into Karabakh and the intensification of its militarization contradicted the interests of Azerbaijan, therefore, such an escalation of the situation in the region could not last long. Despite the repeated official appeals of the Azerbaijani side to the leadership of the “peacekeeping forces” and the Russian authorities, practically no changes have occurred. In this regard, the leadership of Azerbaijan has openly stated the need to create checkpoints on the border with Armenia.

In accordance with this, on April 23, units of the State Border Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SBS of the Republic of Azerbaijan) established a border checkpoint on the sovereign territories of our country, on the border with Armenia, at the beginning of the Lachin-Khankendi road. According to the statement of the State Border Service of the Republic of Armenia, the border checkpoint was established “in order to prevent the transfer of manpower, ammunition, mines, as well as other military equipment from Armenia to illegal Armenian armed formations on the territory of Azerbaijan.” At the same time, the creation of the checkpoint is a response to the establishment by Armenia of a border checkpoint at the entrance to the Lachin road on the border with Azerbaijan. It is hoped that with the beginning of ensuring control over the movement of cargo and residents of neighboring areas, a barrier will be established for the supply of weapons to the Karabakh area where Armenians live, and the illegal crossing of the border by militants from Armenia will also be prevented.

Along with carrying out measures to restore the economy and administrative management in the liberated lands, negotiations on the establishment of peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia were held at various levels. The main mediators in these negotiations were the EU, Russia and the United States. As before, the mediators of these negotiations, generally wishing to establish peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia, at the same time seek to ensure their own geopolitical interests in the region. Based on this, in 2022, the West and Russia separately offered the parties different options for a peace agreement. In the variant proposed by Russia, the issue of the “status of Karabakh” should have been preserved for future generations, which corresponded to the interests of Armenia, but in no way to the interests of Azerbaijan. Thus, the Russian side once again demonstrated its desire to ensure its military presence in the region. The inclusion of this issue in the protocol of the agreement practically meant laying a “time bomb” in the continuation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict for future generations of the region. The past century-long period of cultivating hatred of Armenians towards Azerbaijanis and the results of opinion polls conducted in Armenia by international organizations show that revanchist sentiments in the republic and the intensity of separatism among Armenians in Karabakh still remain the dominant component. In this regard, the words of former Armenian President Kocharyan are indicative, who openly stated that “Azerbaijanis and Armenians cannot live together.”



The West's proposal to finally sign a peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia without including the Karabakh issue was very constructive. Resolving this issue on the basis of compliance with international legal norms can help reduce the intensity of tensions between the conflicting parties. In this regard, the statements of President I. Aliyev and Armenian Leader N. Pashinyan on mutual recognition of the republics within the borders of 1991 seem important. Thus, favorable conditions have developed for the final signing of a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which may be prevented by the "emergence" of another round of conflict of interests of the main geopolitical players in the region.

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