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A NEW ERA IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AFTER THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR

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Abstract. The South Caucasus region includes three countries: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia. In this historically conflict-ridden region, the interests of many countries have been clashing since the beginning of the 20th century. Two countries in the region – Azerbaijan and Armenia – have been suffering from a conflict situation for more than 30 years. The conflict, which began with Armenia's overt territorial claims to Azerbaijan's historical lands, provocations on ethnic grounds and acts of terror in the late 1980s, resulted in military aggression against Azerbaijan. As a result of Armenian aggression, 20% of Azerbaijani lands were occupied, and more than a million refugees were displaced from their homeland. The first United Nations resolution No. 822 on the occupation of Azerbaijani lands was adopted on April 30, 1993. Later, resolutions No. 853, 874, and 884 were adopted, respectively. (Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, 2025) Unfortunately, over the years, Armenia ignored UN resolutions and mechanisms established to resolve the conflict. Thus, for 30 years, the Armenia-Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remained unresolved and remained a frozen conflict until the Second Karabakh War.

Key words: conflict, war, peace, territorial integrity, communication.

Introduction. The Second Karabakh War is highly significant in the pursuit of ensuring the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Azerbaijan. The Patriotic War, which fundamentally reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus, also opened broad prospects for the long-needed peace, stability, and cooperative environment in the region. In other words, the Patriotic War and the resulting historic victory had an impact not only on Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus region, but also on global dynamics and the emerging world order as a whole. First of all, it should be noted that as a result of the Second Karabakh War, a part of the territories of Azerbaijan occupied by Armenia was liberated. On November 10, 2020, with the Joint Statement signed between Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia, Aghdam, Kalbajar, and Lachin were reintegrated into Azerbaijan. (Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation, 2020) Thus, new political and military realities emerged in the region. Despite being the victorious party in the war, Azerbaijan's decision to initiate a peace proposal was a pivotal step toward achieving lasting peace and stability in the South Caucasus. By doing so, Azerbaijan has paved the way for resolving the conflict that had remained frozen for many years. As a result, Azerbaijan has brought an end to the long-standing status quo in the region. It is no coincidence that, following the Patriotic War, during the meeting of the OSCE Minsk Group, attended by the co-chairs from France and the United States, President Ilham Aliyev specifically emphasized this: "We have shown that the status quo can be changed through force, and that we are right." (Ilham Aliyev received OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs from France and U.S., 2020) As a logical consequence of these developments, Azerbaijan's ability to influence regional affairs has increased. On the other hand, the liberation of the occupied territories has resolved the issue of refugees and internally displaced persons that has persisted since the 1990s. Citizens who were displaced from their homelands are now returning to their former places of residence within the framework of the Great Return program.

Discussion. The liberation of Azerbaijan's territories from occupation as a result of the Second Karabakh War also brought about fundamental changes in the geopolitical landscape of the region. It created opportunities for the opening of new communication lines. As a result of the restoration

of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, located at the junction of key transit routes, significant opportunities arose for the implementation of a number of international projects. In particular, the Zangezur Corridor project, initiated by official Baku and gaining relevance after the war, holds both regional and global importance. This corridor provides Azerbaijan with a direct land connection to Nakhchivan, and creates opportunities to expand and strengthen ties with Turkey and the Turkic world. It offers an opportunity for Armenia to overcome its economic blockade and integrate into a broader trade network connecting the Persian Gulf, the Black Sea, and the Eurasian corridors. This corridor will connect China and Central Asian countries with Turkey and Europe through Azerbaijan on a global scale. Against the backdrop of the growing importance of the Middle Corridor within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative, the Zangezur Corridor will become a crucial link in the Middle Corridor, officially known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. This, in essence, promises substantial economic dividends not only for the South Caucasus region but also for Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Europe. Thus, as one of the main transit countries of Eurasia, Azerbaijan stands at the center of East-West trade, energy, and transport and communication networks. This position continues to strengthen over time. It should be noted that the Zangezur Corridor project holds not only geo-economic but also significant geopolitical importance. The corridor project, which fosters new cooperation opportunities in the region, is also of great significance for normalization between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the post-conflict period. The presence of the occupation factor resulted in the blockade of Armenia and its isolation from regional cooperation platforms. In addition to hindering Armenia's economic development, it led to its dependence on certain foreign political circles. This, in turn, provided opportunities for foreign political circles to intervene in the region to varying degrees. This also posed serious threats to the already fragile security environment both within the region and in the broader regional context. On the other hand, Armenia's aggressive policy hindered regional economic cooperation, the opening of communications, and, as a result, the further development of a region located in such a favorable and important strategic position as the South Caucasus. It should be noted that relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia have been on an upward trajectory throughout history. In particular, energy projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, Baku-Supsa, along with transport projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Kars, jointly implemented by the two countries, contribute to the development of bilateral cooperation. Following the Patriotic War, it is planned to advance regional cooperation, open transport and communication lines, and implement the Zangezur Corridor project, which will further increase the geo-economic influence of the region. Both cooperation and reciprocal trade relations play crucial role in ensuring regional security. As noted in international relations theory, the likelihood of interstate conflict can be reduced by the emergence of a common interest in trade and economic cooperation among the countries of the region. It is no coincidence that following the First and Second World Wars, which resulted in the unprecedented disasters, destruction and loss of life, the former enemies, who came together in the European Coal and Steel Community in 1957, were able to bring permanent peace to the region through comprehensive cooperation. Historically, the South Caucasus has been a region marked by conflicting interests, particularly ethnopolitical and territorial conflicts. The conflict between the two states of the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Armenia, which lasted for more than 30 years was a negative factor for the security environment of the region. Today, however, broad opportunities have emerged for achieving stability in the region. The return of Baku and Yerevan to the negotiating table, along with the significant progress made towards achieving peace has had a positive impact on the regional security environment.

After the war, Azerbaijan's geostrategic position was further strengthened. As a key country in the region, Azerbaijan's political and economic influence also increased. The military operations launched by Russia in Ukraine in February 2022 once again brought to the forefront the European Union's energy dependence on Russia, particularly Russia's crucial role in natural gas supplies. From

the early days of the Russia-Ukraine war, the increase in energy prices and the risks of supply disruptions exposed the European Union to energy shortages, including gas supply. This course of events prompted the European Union to reconsider its current energy policy. Thus, new alternatives began to be explored in order to reduce the continent's dependence on Russian gas. It should be noted that natural gas accounts for about a quarter of the European Union's energy consumption and is used in the production of heat and electricity and in industry. The total demand for natural gas in the Union countries is approximately 400 billion cubic meters per year. It should be noted that Russia held the leading position among the countries from which natural gas was imported. Until the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, Russia annually supplied approximately 40% of the EU's natural gas needs. (Sariyya Bunyatova, Avropa İttifaqının növbəti enerji böhrəni: Rusiya-Ukrayna münaqişəsi fonunda İttifaqın qaz təchizatı və alternativ axtarışları, 2022) After the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan entered the European Union's gas market with the commissioning of the Trans-Adriatic Gas Pipeline, the final segment of the Southern Gas Corridor, in December 2020. As early as 2021, Azerbaijan's gas exports to Europe reached 8 billion cubic meters. In response to the increased demand for Azerbaijani gas following the Russia-Ukraine war, a new cooperation agreement on gas transportation was signed between Azerbaijan and the EU in 2022. In 2022 alone, Azerbaijan exported approximately 12 billion cubic meters of gas to European Union countries. The commissioning of the Greece-Bulgaria Gas Interconnector in October 2022 enabled Azerbaijan's natural gas to reach Eastern Europe. Thus, at a time when the energy map of Europe was being redrawn, Azerbaijan emerged as a strategic player by increasing its role in Europe's energy security. Consequently, Azerbaijan has established itself as a reliable energy supplier to Europe. Ultimately, this signifies the strengthening of the country both regionally and internationally. Azerbaijan has enhanced its international standing by establishing itself as a reliable partner and strengthening its national economic and financial position. Among the main factors that positively influence the growth of Azerbaijan's geopolitical importance and its relations with foreign countries, notably its strategic geographic location and its status as a source of natural resources play an important role. However, it is not sufficient merely to possess natural resources such as oil and gas or to be situated in a favorable geographic location. It is not an easy task to establish strong relations with the leading states and major global power centers, to build a positive international image, even when such factors are skillfully used. This requires strong leadership, a pragmatic and far-sighted outlook, diplomatic skills, and abilities. Today, Azerbaijan is expanding its export opportunities by supplying gas not only to Europe but also to Syria, and is recognized as a reliable partner in the Middle East. This policy, pursued after the Second Karabakh War, has not only increased Azerbaijan's geoeconomic significance, but also further strengthened the country's position in the international arena.

The failure of the Armenian political leadership to comply with the conditions arising from the provisions of the Joint Statement of November 10, 2020, necessitated the launch of local anti-terrorist operations three years after the end of the war. Unfortunately, despite the end of the war and the commitments undertaken by Armenia, approximately 10,000 personnel from the remnants of the Armenian Armed Forces remained stationed in Azerbaijani territories. The self-proclaimed regime maintained its presence in Azerbaijan and conducted illegitimate elections in the territories of Azerbaijan. (Ilham Aliyev addressed the nation, 2023) Despite all warnings, Yerevan, which maintained the illegal junta regime, continued to finance it. For this purpose, hundreds of millions of dollars were transferred to the budget of the so-called regime every year. This support provided by the Armenian government encompassed not only the financial sector but also the military, political, ideological, and other areas. Those actions were completely contrary to the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, its sovereignty and security. At the same time, the opposing side was planting mines, that were produced in 2021, after the war, in the territories of Azerbaijan. (Ilham Aliyev has raised the flag of Azerbaijan in the center of the city of Lachin, 2022) These circumstances necessitated the launch of local anti-terrorist

operations. The anti-terrorist operations, conducted on September 19–20, 2023 and lasted only one day, resulted in the Armenian separatists raising the white flag and surrendering. Thus, anti-terrorist operations were suspended. According to the agreement reached, the units of the Armenian armed forces stationed in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, as well as illegal Armenian armed groups were required to lay down their weapons, withdraw from combat positions and military posts, and be fully disarmed. This process was successfully carried out. The Armenian army, illegally stationed on the territory of Azerbaijan were fully disarmed and withdrew from the country. (Azerbaijan-Armenia normalization process, 2024) The illegal junta regime in Karabakh was dismantled, and the principal leaders of the separatist movement were arrested. Thus, Azerbaijan fully restored its sovereignty across all its territories. As a result, the geopolitical landscape of the region has radically changed. The resolution of the 30-year-long and frozen conflict in Azerbaijan through the Second Karabakh War and local anti-terrorist operations has set an example for the ongoing and unresolved conflicts in other regions. Azerbaijan has demonstrated that it is possible to resolve a conflict through the combination of military and political means grounded in international law. The victory achieved in Karabakh has shown that even in long-standing conflicts, a peaceful resolution is achievable through diplomacy and negotiation. Although each conflict has its own unique features, in general, the peaceful resolution of the former Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict can serve as a source of hope for other conflicts. Achieving peace in the South Caucasus can contribute to peace in surrounding regions.

As ironic as it may seem, the Second Karabakh War brought the peace that the region had long needed. It resolved the conflict and opened new horizons for reconciliation, cooperation, and development. The peace negotiations, initiated by Azerbaijan in 2021, are now nearing completion. Azerbaijan and Armenia have already reached an agreement on the text of the peace treaty. On August 8 of this year, during a meeting in Washington attended by the presidents of Azerbaijan and the US and the prime minister of Armenia, the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia initialed the text of the peace treaty. (Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia initial peace agreement draft and sign joint appeal to OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, 2025) It was a considerably challenging task to achieve this in the South Caucasus region marked by a complex geography and long-standing conflicts. The presence of the U.S. President as a witness to the official document signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia, along with Donald Trump's direct involvement in the peace process holds great importance. On the fifth anniversary of the Patriotic War, we are closer than ever to achieving peace. Now, the only remaining obstacle on the path to signing a peace treaty and achieving lasting peace and stability in the region is the removal of territorial claims against Azerbaijan from the Constitution of Armenia. Peace in the region is of paramount importance. Achieving peace means ending the loss of life, sparing the country and the region from further hardships. To achieve this, the political leadership of Armenia must demonstrate political will and promptly undertake the necessary constitutional reforms.

Conclusion. As a result of the Second Karabakh War and subsequent local anti-terrorist operations, the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Azerbaijan have been fully restored. On the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, for the first time, the norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity enshrined in the Constitution have been fully upheld across the entire national territory.

The Second Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia had a significant impact on Azerbaijan's foreign policy orientation and its relations with neighboring states. Azerbaijan, which achieved a complete victory in the war on its own strength, put an end to the occupation and the conflict itself, managed to gain international recognition for the new regional realities it established through successful diplomacy. The outcomes of the Second Karabakh War also had a positive impact on the directions of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. In the 21st century, with growing disagreements between global and regional powers, ongoing tensions in the system of international relations, including interference in the sovereignty and internal affairs of states, and double standards to the norms and principles of

international law, Azerbaijan is developing comprehensively and dynamically, pursuing an independent, multifaceted and national interests-based foreign policy. All this ensures that Azerbaijan remains the most developed country in the South Caucasus region. On the one hand, Azerbaijan is taking consistent and systematic steps to ensure regional security by pursuing a well-considered foreign policy based on national interests. As noted above, the energy projects implemented by Azerbaijan and cooperation formats serving regional integration play a key role in ensuring stability in the South Caucasus. On the other hand, Azerbaijan actively participates in the peacemaking process not only in the South Caucasus, but also globally. Thanks to a foreign policy guided by national interests, Azerbaijan has established effective and mutually beneficial cooperation in both bilateral relations and within international organizations. It is no coincidence that Baku maintains high-level relations with major global powers, such as the United States of America and the People's Republic of China.

As a result, Azerbaijan, with its multi-vector and balanced foreign policy strategy, plays a central role in regional and global cooperation, in both of bilateral and multilateral context. This policy, while aligning with the country's national interests, also confirms the level of sovereignty of Azerbaijan and its independence from any external state or organization.

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