

Prospects for Peace After Geneva

Moving Closer to Fruition

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This IDD analytic policy brief seeks to provide informed guidance to those wishing to assess the likelihood of Armenia accepting the peace dividend on offer by Azerbaijan in the time ahead. It is published within the context of the second anniversary of the waging of the Second Karabakh War, a fortnight after brief yet deadly military clashes along the as-yet non-delineated state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and in the immediate aftermath of a meeting in Geneva between the foreign ministers of the two states that is portrayed, rightly, as the start of substantive negotiations on an omnibus peace treaty.

Background

There was no expectation that the 2 October 2022 meeting in Geneva would produce a breakthrough. The talks appear to have gone well enough, however, as evidenced by the agreement reached between the sides to continue negotiations on a peace treaty and related issues whose reverberations will surely be felt beyond the immediate political orbit occupied by Armenia and Azerbaijan. In this context, one can note that both the readouts and the outcomes of the meeting indicate that the parties are still very much in the midst of a complex peace process of difficult-to-forecast duration. An important reason is the fact that there are a lot of intricately moving parts: aspects of this overall endeavor are concurrently being *mediated* by the President of Russia, *facilitated* by the President of the European Council, and *supported* by the U.S. Secretary of State and the U.S. National Security Advisor (and, to some extent, the presidents of France and Türkiye) and their respective staffs.

Each of these foreign players portray themselves as honest brokers and both Baku and Yerevan seem to trust sufficiently their various approaches. Although Moscow and the

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Western actors do not trust each other's intentions, initiatives, and actions in (almost) all other geopolitical theaters, there is scant verifiable evidence (as of this writing) that any of them have sought to actively undermine each other's efforts in this one. Perhaps some behind-the-scenes coordination is still taking place. Perhaps, also, peacemaking efforts have regained a sense of urgency, as indicated by a tweet posted by the U.S. National Security Advisor at the conclusion of a meeting between his Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts that he hosted at the White House on 28 September 2022 in which emphasis was placed on the importance of "pursuing time-bound and focused negotiations."

Most accounts by proponents and opponents alike concur that peace appears closer than it has in decades, raising hopes (or fears) that it is within reach. This is due to a number of factors. Two revolving around Armenia can be singled out at the onset. *First*, since war's end, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan seems to be personally dedicated to ending the underlying territorial conflict with Azerbaijan. *Second*, the peace dividend for Armenia that would result from a comprehensive treaty with Azerbaijan would almost certainly be extended in short order to one with Türkiye; the achievement of the latter is clearly dependent on that of the former—this is the message that has been conveyed by Ankara and is fully understood in Yerevan.

On this basis and others, one can assert that Pashinyan has made the following prudential determination on behalf of the citizens of Armenia: the sticker price of peace is worth paying. This, in turn, suggests that the prime minister has made a determined judgment that Armenia's sustainable political and economic future is predicated on rejecting a national allegiance to a halcyon past that has fallen to the wayside and has no realistic chance whatsoever of making a comeback.

Unviable Alternatives, Weighty Challenges

Unfortunately, the evident advantages for Armenia of making peace with Azerbaijan and Türkiye remains unconvincing for some. Its revanchist opponents champion the pursuit of a course of action 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 and execute successfully.

Indeed, unlike his opponents, Pashinyan evidently understands that it would truly be foolhardy for his country henceforth to advocate, much less 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.

But this sort of prudential reasoning has not sufficiently cleared the political deck in Yerevan—not to mention in competing centers of influence in the Armenian world. Regrettably, a central challenge remains Pashinyan's seeming inability to bring under his full control the state's monopoly of the legitimate use of force—one of the fundamental

characteristics of a functional, sovereign country. Indeed, recent events suggest that elements of Armenia's armed forces, police, and security services may be operating beyond his authority: Pashinyan seems to lack sufficient political power to bring them fully to heel (although this may be in the process of changing).

Furthermore, there is credible speculation that such and similar elements receive support from at least three categories of actors: *first*, some opposition party leaders, whose irredentism was decidedly rejected at the ballot box by the citizens of Armenia in June 2021; *second*, various well-funded and influential diaspora organizations (including ones that advocate violence) operating for the most part beyond the borders of Armenia with impunity; and *third*, perhaps even elements in foreign decisionmaking centers whose interests, as they themselves understand them, would be deleteriously affected by peace between Armenia, on the one hand, and Azerbaijan and Türkiye, on the other hand.

It is with this in mind that we can turn to an examination of some of the threads that the ongoing peace process is designed to weave closer together within a framework of legal and political sempiternity.

Clinical Examination

The territorial conflict over Karabakh came to an end on 10 November 2020 with the signing of a tripartite statement between the Prime Minister of Armenia, the President of Azerbaijan, and the President of Russia that concluded the Second Karabakh War. Through a sophisticated combination of strategic foresight, limited war objectives, operational artistry, active diplomacy, and impeccable geopolitical timing, Azerbaijan accomplished a feat that no other state anywhere in the world has been able to achieve since the end of the Cold War: the restoration of its territorial integrity executed effectually without the organized commission of grievous atrocities or similar defilements.

In truth, a sober, dispassionate examination of the circumstances that led to the Second Karabakh War as well as its outcome leads to the conclusion that there was nothing politically or legally (or, for that matter, morally) wrong with Azerbaijan's chosen course of action in 2020.

The resulting clean victory on both the battlefield and the negotiating table represents the culmination of Azerbaijan's foreign policy posture, which can be understood thusly: in continuing to reach out to the world, Azerbaijan will not allow itself to become dependent on any single line of access to the outside world. The country will strategically harness the fact that most of the world's great powers look at the South Caucasus and conclude that they have variously important national security and economic interests. And it will take advantage of the fact that there is tension between those same great powers in terms of how they each define their respective interests in this part of the world by managing

relations between them in such a way as to ensure that Azerbaijan becomes a subject of the international system instead of a mere object of great power rivalry.

From such considerations there emerged a bedrock principle of the statecraft of Azerbaijan: to formulate and execute a strategy that ensures it becomes sovereign and strong enough so that it—and it alone—may determine the time and manner of the restoration of its territorial integrity (given the fruitlessness of negotiations). This principle (and the foreign policy posture outlined above) is fully in line with the reasoning and conduct of a middle power or what I and others have defined in various places as a “keystone state.”

Grasping the strength of Azerbaijan’s position in the wake of Armenia’s defeat in the Second Karabakh War, Pashinyan undertook a clinical examination of what his country *could not* achieve—beginning to do so seriously after having secured his reelection in June 2021. The outcomes of this clinical examination continues to represent the Armenian hinge upon which peace with Azerbaijan (and Türkiye) remains possible. It is illustrated by a statement Pashinyan made in the Armenian parliament on 14 September 2022:

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 kilometers. 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.

The prime minister’s reference to “29,800 kilometers” is key. It unmistakably excludes any territory that belonged to the Soviet-era Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and surrounding regions that was seized by Armenian forces during the First Karabakh War and occupied by them until recently. It also excludes any territory that presently falls within the purview of the Russian peacekeeping zone established under the terms of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement that ended the Second Karabakh War (Baku claims, credibly, that some Armenian forces remain in this pocket of sovereign Azerbaijani territory). The prime minister’s reference is thus rightly interpreted as ending Yerevan’s political support for the secessionist aspirations of what its proponents call ‘Artsakh.’ In an interview on Armenian state television that was broadcast the day before the Geneva meeting, Pashinyan went even further: “*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.*” *The Armenian Foreign Ministry’s official readout of the Geneva meeting should be interpreted in light of these and similar statements. The relevant portion of this readout is the following: “the sides exchanged views on the peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan, ensuring the rights and security guarantees for the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, including through the establishment of a discussion mechanism between Stepanakert [sic] and Baku.”* Such and similar statements represent Yerevan’s acknowledgement that, as far as it’s concerned, the territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh has indeed come to an end.

Azerbaijan's Terms of Peace

Strictly speaking, the territorial conflict over Karabakh came to an end on 10 November 2020. But the underlying conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan continues to be unsettled and thus unresolved: the interstate border between Armenia and Azerbaijan has not yet been delineated and peaceful relations between these two sovereign states has not yet been established. The quest to end this underlying conflict is what is primarily at issue. At present, peace remains elusive, but by no means illusive.

Since the end of the Second Karabakh War, the quest for peace has been pursued by victor and vanquished alike. Baku and Yerevan may not be fully on the same page quite yet, but they seem to be reading from the same book written in a language they both understand. President Ilham Aliyev obviously has the advantage and has not been circumspect in pressing it home on more than one occasion, including a fortnight ago.

Still, Aliyev has shown signs of fully understanding that it is in Azerbaijan's national interest to conduct its speech and execute its deeds in such a manner as to provide support for the unfinished work to which Pashinyan now seems to have committed himself and the country he leads but whose institutions he does not appear yet to fully control.

This work by Pashinyan and his Azerbaijani counterpart will be understood to have been finished with the advent of an omnibus treaty being agreed, signed, and ratified.

Such a document, should it see the light of day, will almost certainly be based in large part on the five principles first laid out publicly on 14 March 2022 at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum by Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov. I here reproduce verbatim the formulations of what are reportedly contained in a single-page document as stated to the press by the Foreign Ministry's spokesperson, Leyla Abdullayeva, in the immediate aftermath of Bayramov's address on that occasion: *one*, the mutual recognition of respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and inviolability of internationally recognized borders and political independence of each other; *two*, the mutual confirmation of the absence of territorial claims against each other and the acceptance of legally-binding obligations not to raise such a claim in future; *three*, the obligation to refrain in their inter-state relations from undermining the security of each other, from the threat or use of force both against political independence and territorial integrity, and in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the UN Charter; *four*, the delimitation and demarcation of the state border and the establishment of diplomatic relations; and *five*, the unblocking of transportation and other communications, building other communications as appropriate, and the establishment of cooperation in other fields of mutual interest.

These five principles continue to serve as the foundation of Azerbaijan's peace offer as presented at the Geneva meeting of foreign ministers on 2 October 2022.

Aliyev Keeps His Word and Does Not Bluff

Speaking on 22 April 2022 in Shusha during the Fifth Congress of World Azerbaijanis, Aliyev reiterated that in the event negotiations do not result in a treaty based on the five principles reproduced above, Baku will respond forcefully: “If they refuse,” he said, “we will not recognize the territorial integrity of Armenia either and will officially declare that.”

As of this writing, no treaty has been produced; but at the same time, Baku has not made any such or similar declaration. After Geneva, the prospects of the former have seemingly increased whilst the likelihood of the latter appears to have lessened. However, one should be mindful of the fact that in mid-September 2022 Azerbaijan *did* respond forcefully to shelling by Armenian forces into undisputed Azerbaijani territory and new attempts by Armenian forces to mine under the cover of darkness the as-yet non-delineated state border between the two states, including supply roads linking Azerbaijani army forward positions in in the liberated Lachin, Kalbajar, and Dashkasan districts. In its immediate aftermath, Pashinyan reportedly called the Azerbaijani narrative a “lie,” although an examination of the context of this and similar speeches and deeds raises the question of whether Pashinyan knew in advance that such acts of belligerence was being prepared for execution by what may effectually be rogue elements not entirely under his control. The answer, of course, matters greatly; but in the present context, it needs to be put alongside a hopeful yet sobering political reality: Aliyev keeps his word and Aliyev does not bluff.

Aliyev particularly keeps his word and does not bluff in matters having to do with war and peace, for the Azerbaijani president’s statecraft is congruent with the strategic logic contained in the precept first put forward by the Roman thinker Vegetius: “*Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum*”—therefore let him who desires peace prepare for war.

Hence the deadly seriousness with which Aliyev’s warning, pronounced in Shusha during the same speech quoted above, should be taken—both by Pashinyan’s proponents and opponents: “given the consequences of the Second Karabakh War, the Armenian side should understand what this might lead to.” The opponents to peace do not appear to have done so; perhaps the territorial outcome to the recent deadly clashes will provide a corrective to such miscalculations.

Or perhaps it will not: to affirm that peace appears closer than it has in decades, as I have done, is not the same thing as to affirm that a comprehensive settlement will actually be reached. Opportunity and outcome are not yet aligned sufficiently, much less fully. We are still in a moment of what social scientists call “high variance.” Both great reward and great calamity are still possible.

Clear-Headed Deliberations

Still, the outcome of the Geneva meeting and the renewed political momentum that preceded it (and ought to follow from it) suggests that a payout of the peace dividend may take place in the time ahead. Certainly, it would be prudent for Yerevan to weigh the question of vacillating levels of trust in the intentionality of the other side against the virtually certain consequences of its pursuit of a course of action resulting in the wholesale renewal of armed hostilities. Again, Aliyev keeps his word and Aliyev does not bluff.

Clear-headed deliberations ought to involve Armenian proponents and opponents to peace alike taking another very close look at the delineated line on the maps they and their adversaries have reportedly accepted as the basis of the delimitation and demarcation process of the state border between the two countries. It should be underlined that not only the mediator, but both the facilitator and supporters of the endeavor are likely aware of this commitment yet, in the case of the latter two, perhaps not of its content (i.e., the exact trace of the delineation).

In this context, I note that the next meeting of a bilateral commission on this critical issue was supposed to take place in Brussels in November 2022, but that during the Geneva meeting the Azerbaijani delegation proposed moving up the timing of the meeting to later in October 2022 due to the “recent tension on the undelimited border.” (It is worth noting that the announcement of work to establish this commission is contained in the trilateral statement signed in Sochi on 26 November 2021 by the President of Russia, the President of Azerbaijan, and the Prime Minister of Armenia, and that this document refers to the scope of this body’s work as the “delimitation of the state border between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia with its subsequent demarcation with the consultative assistance of the Russian Federation at the request of the parties.” The first meeting of this bilateral commission was held on 24 May 2022, two days after the President of the European Council stated in Brussels that the President of Azerbaijan and the Prime Minister of Armenia had agreed it would take place.)

The Bottom Line

Pashinyan does not want another war; he is fully aware of the paucity of realistic alternatives to forging a comprehensive peace agreement, the pursuit of which he has committed himself and his government despite the opposition he faces from various quarters and the possibility that all elements of the Armenian state are not under his full control.

Aliyev, too, does not want another war; he is genuinely desirous of peace on terms he feels befit a country that, as he said in Lachin on 21 September 2022, is “proud” to

have “liberated our lands by force.” And it is precisely the sincere desire for such a peace that drives this statesman to strengthen preparations for martial deeds that may still be required to achieve it.

When their vital interests are in play, the leaders of responsible, strategically conscious, and geopolitically literate keystone states like Azerbaijan do not bluff; they keep their word, too. Taking seriously this sort of reasoning ought to drive the quest for peace to its successful conclusion.