

# America as “Partner, Supporter, and Advocate” of the Peace Process

## Can the Biden Administration Maintain Its Constructive Role in Ongoing Armenia- Azerbaijan Negotiations?

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*“We are committed to Armenian-Azerbaijan peace and negotiations between the two countries. We believe direct dialogue is key to resolving issues and to reaching that lasting peace. [...] So, we’ll continue to engage over the next months to facilitate discussions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, bilaterally, with partners, and through multilateral organizations as well.”*

– Ned Price, State Department Spokesperson, 1 November 2022

*“The final steps toward peace are often the most difficult. But we believe peace is possible and necessary. And it is a prerequisite for building a secure and prosperous future in both nations. All the people of Azerbaijan and the wider region deserve to live in peace and security, and to have the opportunity to fulfill their God-given potential. The United States cannot resolve the conflicts in this region, but we can be a partner and a supporter and an advocate for those resolutions. The future of the Caucasus is in the hands of the people here.”*

– Hilary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State, Statement to the Press in Baku, 4 July 2010

U.S. policy towards the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan is well explained by the foregoing remark made by U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, uttered during the last visit by someone of her rank from Washington. Today, more than twelve years later—notwithstanding the outcome of the Second Karabakh War and the new geopolitical realities resulting from its outcome, as well as developments in other theaters in which America has interests—the United States continues to see

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itself as a “*partner, supporter, and advocate*” for a peaceful settlement between the two belligerent sides. Terminology here is important: Russia sees itself as a “*mediator*” while the European Union sees itself as a “*facilitator*.” Thus, Washington continues to portray itself in a distinct way from both Moscow and Brussels—to say nothing of the way the other two main external powers, namely Ankara and Tehran (respectively), see themselves.

This IDD Working Paper examines the role of the United States in the postwar peace negotiations process. Although both the United States and the EU were perceived as withdrawing from the region in the immediate wake of Second Karabakh War—with Russia gaining a seeming monopoly of influence over regional security issues (and Türkiye gaining a small but significant foothold)—they have increased their respective engagements in the South Caucasus in the past year or so. This is partly due to both the quality and scope of Moscow’s disengagement given its strategic distraction caused by the onset of Russia’s own war in the Ukraine theater.

While the European Union is a new actor in facilitating talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the United States has played a supporting role for more than 30 years. At the same time, public engagement by American officials has not always been consistent; it has even on occasion taken harmful or one-sided steps, as exemplified by Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Armenia and her long-held unhelpful posture towards Azerbaijan (but also, unhelpfully, by a recent statement made by a State Department official)—see below. Still, Washington’s overall role is and is likely to continue to be constructive, helpful, and useful. However, this may not be enough to get the parties to the finish line—my IDD colleague Damjan Krnjević Mišković recently cautioned that assessing that “peace appears closer than it has in decades” is not the same thing as concluding that an agreement will “actually be reached”—but it certainly indicates that both Washington and Baku and Yerevan generally see continuing American engagement as part of the solution, not as part of the problem.

## *The Second Karabakh War: Western Disengagement*

The West’s initial political response to both the conduct and outcome of the Second Karabakh War can be described as having been largely passive. While there have been official calls for de-escalation and tries for ceasefire negotiation, the considerable political and diplomatic machinery of the U.S. and the EU were not activated enough to bring about an end to the war and the underlying conflict over Karabakh. Although Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia signed the tripartite statement ending the Second Karabakh War on 10 November 2020, the U.S. Secretary of State commented officially on the cessation of hostilities in a press statement only a week later. The unusual time delay aside, the statement can best be described as having been “boilerplate.” It certainly did not give a convincing impression that America saw itself at that moment (i.e., in November 2020) as a leading, active player in a nascent peace process.

Among EU member states, France had been at the forefront of diplomatic activity during the Second Karabakh War—although hardly an impartial one: Paris was (and remains) the most vocal supporter of Armenia and the harshest critic of Azerbaijan (and its burgeoning alliance with Türkiye) amongst EU member states. In contrast, other EU member states remained by and large reluctant to engage actively in political developments involving Armenia and Azerbaijan—both during and after the 2020 war—withstanding their proximity to the European Union.

Initially, the EU itself stayed away from engaging in concrete and serious actions during this period, illustrating a lack of geopolitical ambition to involve itself in conflict resolution activities outside of regions containing prospective candidate countries (i.e., the Western Balkans). During and immediately after the end of the 2020 war, Brussels limited itself to a few statements that called for peaceful negotiations under the continued auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group-led peace process, which had achieved next to nothing in three decades. So, initially the EU remained passively neutral and distant from the South Caucasus' transformed power dynamics, thus leaving Moscow in a most favorable position.

During the war, the United States also limited the use of its diplomatic toolkit by calling for a ceasefire and bringing Baku and Yerevan to the negotiating table—but only a month into the war. Thus, on 26 October 2020, a U.S.-brokered ceasefire came into effect, but the fighting resumed within literally hours, if not minutes.

Moreover, the official stance of the United States was that foreign powers should not get involved in the conflict but should limit their role to diplomatic calls for a ceasefire, which was reflected in U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement at the time: "We're discouraging internationalization of this. We think outsiders ought to stay out. We're urging a ceasefire." This posture had real, on-the-ground consequences for Azerbaijan during the war. I reproduce verbatim a passage from an article that appeared in the Winter 2021-2022 edition of *Baku Dialogues* by Michael Doran, a former Senior Director at the U.S. National Security Council and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense now at the Hudson Institute:

A senior official in the Israeli government, who had direct knowledge of the events in question, told me that, during the fighting, a very senior White House official called to request that the Israelis put the brakes on the resupply of the Azerbaijani military. Eager to broker a ceasefire, that American official apparently calculated that, because the Azerbaijanis held the upper hand on the battlefield, they were reluctant to accept a ceasefire. If, however, Israel would slow or stop the flow of weapons shipments, then Baku's calculus might change. The Israeli official politely refused the request, explaining to the American that allies don't abandon allies in the middle of a war. The White House official did not push the issue again.

The conclusion provided by Doran aptly summarizes the consequences of Washington's posture: "As a result of America's vanishing act, [President] Ilham Aliyev [of Azerbaijan] had no alternative than to work within structures created by [President] Vladimir Putin [of Russia] to secure Azerbaijan's interests."

There are opinions that this reaction was grounded in the U.S. domestic preoccupation with its presidential elections and its concurrent COVID-19 crisis management. But America's disengagement from the South Caucasus started long before Donald Trump's election in November 2016: Russia's 2008 military intervention in Georgia marked the start of the period of a cooling down of U.S. interest in the region.

This George W. Bush-era policy prepared the ground for a shift in the balance of power within the region, with Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and even China and India finding ways to become more interested in expanding their influence and championing their respective economic, connectivity, and infrastructure priorities, including the Belt and Road Initiative, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the International North-South Transport Corridor. The relative U.S. disengagement was also noticeable by its absence in regional security matters: Washington did not engage particularly actively in conflict resolution or peace negotiation processes in this part of the world for much of the twenty-first century (arguably, its last serious foray was in Key West in April 2001). Steadily, this Western attitude was interpreted as tacit acceptance of Russian hegemony over the region.

## *Supporting Peace Negotiations*

Two deadly wars in less than 30 years, regularly occurring skirmishes, and, indeed, the very nature of the conflict over Karabakh suggested that Armenia and Azerbaijan were unlikely to achieve enduring peace by themselves. Notwithstanding the definitive outcome of the 2020 war, the resulting peace process has proceeded in fits and starts, opening the way for outside state actors to step in to attempt to bridge the gap between Baku and Yerevan, effectually displacing the discredited OSCE Minsk Group. As noted above, Russia was the first to seize the opportunity provided by this vacancy: Moscow strengthened its position both as a peacekeeping force and by assuming what initially appeared to be a dominant, even monopolistic mediation posture in the peace process.

This Russian posture naturally derived from the terms of the 10 November 2022 tripartite statement that ended the Second Karabakh War and subsequent documents signed by the presidents of Russia and Azerbaijan and the prime minister of Armenia. Today, however, the situation is less clear-cut: the Kremlin is bogged down in an unsuccessful and damaging war in Ukraine, which has significantly weakened its leading role in the ongoing peace process. The resulting vacuum, which in some ways predates the war in Ukraine but has certainly been deepened by its consequences, was quickly filled by Brussels: EU Council president Charles Michel successfully presented himself as a neutral and trustworthy facilitator—and no stakeholder seemed to object. The arrival of Michel onto the scene had at least one distinct advantage: unlike other global and regional players (i.e., Russia, Türkiye, and the United States), the European Union had conspicuously avoided—in an actionable,

moving-the-needle kind of way—addressing the conflict over Karabakh and the state of belligerence between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It even went so far as to assert no linkage between these and the pursuit of its interests in the context of its flagship Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative.

Brussels represented, for all intents and purposes, the closest approximation to a clean slate. In the months following the end of the Second Karabakh War, Michel saw an opening and took it: he chose to leverage the EU's past passivity (and, hence, its perceived neutrality) into an assertion of constructive impartiality. In so doing, the European Union successfully emerged as the primary facilitator to the postwar peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan: Brussels became a major new travel destination for both Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia.

Of late, the EU's role has come into some tension with the role Russia sees for itself—for quite obvious reasons. And within the framework of this potentially unhelpful competition, the role of the United States began to crystalize. As much as it is possible for the world's leading power to conduct itself circumspectly—given geopolitical perceptions and realities and resulting rivalries—America *has* sincerely tried to carve out for itself a different position, one that is distinct from both Brussels and Moscow.

Of course, like Russia, the United States is not new to any of this. Like Moscow, Washington was a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group and bears some responsibility for the failure of this troika to engender tangible results (together, of course, with Paris). America's present position remains to some extent informed by its strategy within this failed grouping: direct involvement in conflict resolution without rising to the level of taking sufficiently proactive steps to help incentivize Baku and Yerevan to cross the finish line, as noted above. Again, the statements by Price and Clinton that serve as the epigraphs to this paper—statements made more than a decade apart—speak to this point.

But this should not be understood as being a negative assessment, especially given the novelty of present circumstances.

The onset of the postwar peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan coincided with the election of Joe Biden to the U.S. presidency and the rejection of the “America First” doctrine that characterized his predecessor's transactional outlook towards international relations. Tactical similarities aside as regards certain theaters and on certain issues (i.e., China), the strategic outlook of the Biden Administration is evidently dissimilar to that of its predecessor. Still, Washington's continuing preference for playing a supporting role is, in some sense, a policy of continuity: predicated, as it generally is, on a posture that neither advocates nor puts forward a specific and precise preferred U.S. solution to the conflict over Karabakh and the broader peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan (save, of course, for the usual enumeration of general principles within the framework of what the Biden Administration calls a “rules-based

international liberal order”). What *has* changed are the enveloping geopolitical realities of the Silk Road region (both the Russians and the Americans call this part of the world “Eurasia”). This, in turn, has affected the overall U.S. attitude towards the South Caucasus, which (regretfully) the Biden Administration continues to see implicitly as an object of great power rivalry more or less following the contours set by Zbigniew Brzezinski’s “grand chessboard” metaphor.

Another change is that the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan has assumed a higher place on crowded agenda of the U.S. Secretary of State (and senior White House officials), who has multiple times noted his readiness to both personally and institutionally support the process. In practical terms, Tony Blinken has brought the parties to the negotiation table by hosting meetings between Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov: the first direct talks since flare up of hostilities on 12-13 September 2022 took place in Washington, and they were followed by a 27 September 2022 meeting that brought together the Azerbaijani president’s chief foreign policy adviser, Hikmet Hajiyev, and the Secretary of the Armenian Security Council, Armen Grigoryan, who were hosted in Washington by their American counterpart Jake Sullivan.

In general, Blinken has offered constructive U.S. support and assistance in building peaceful ties between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The various readouts from Blinken’s regular calls with Aliyev and Pashinyan (as well as their respective foreign ministers) indicate a consistent approach to the process in general and to specific aspects of it, including support for the process of delimitation and demarcation of the inter-state border between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the unblocking of transportation and communication linkages. Blinken has also repeatedly expressed support for the negotiations, urging the leadership of both countries to continue “time-bound and measurable steps to support the peace process,” to quote a recent formulation used by the State Department. With very few exceptions (and none at a high level), no explicit preference with regards to the content or format has been articulated publicly. The American posture comes down to supporting ‘whatever works’ whilst taking measures to prevent any backsliding from commitments already made (this applies more to Yerevan than Baku and speaks most to Armenia’s conflicting internal dynamics).

An encapsulation of America’s understanding of its supportive role is found in a statement made by State Department Spokesperson Ned Price on 28 October 2022:

There is no greater supporter than the United States for the sovereignty and the independence of the countries of the South Caucasus, including Armenia and Azerbaijan. So, when we engage with Armenia and Azerbaijan, we are doing so with one purpose in mind and one purpose only, and that is to put an end to the violence and to put these countries on the path to a lasting and comprehensive peace. We have encouraged and been clear with these countries—Armenia and Azerbaijan—that they should meet in whatever format is most useful to them. We do believe in the utility of direct dialogue to resolving issues and to reaching that lasting peace. [...] And again, our only intent is to help these countries achieve for themselves an end to the violence and a lasting and a comprehensive peace that the people of Armenia and Azerbaijan so desperately want.

Another result of continued and constructive engagement in the peace process is that Blinken hosted the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Washington on 7 November 2022. Although the official statement following the meeting did not offer much in terms of content, many believe that the timing of it (i.e., a few days following the Putin-Aliyev-Pashinyan trilateral summit in Sochi) was important: it served the purpose of consolidating progress made during previous trilaterals involving Armenia, Azerbaijan, and their Western counterparts in various formats.

Strengthening its position of a peace “supporter” and gaining credibility in this role in the eyes of both parties also serves the purpose of increasing the likelihood that a peace treaty can be signed under the primary auspices of the West—the U.S. and the EU in particular. (This would, of course, weaken the position of Russia in the South Caucasus.) Such an analysis is also supported by a statement made on 16 November 2022 by Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Karen Donfried before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee: “supporting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan is both the right thing to do and in our national security interest,” noting that bilateral relations with both states have gained momentum—highlights include the launch of the flagship U.S.-Armenia Strategic Dialogue and Azerbaijan’s “growing support for European energy security.”

But there is a wrinkle: at the same event, Philip Reeker, the State Department’s Senior Adviser for Caucasus Negotiations, stated the following:

While the resolution of contentious issues remains the responsibility of Armenia and Azerbaijan, I have made it clear the international community has a specific responsibility to ensure that the rights and security of ethnic Armenians are addressed credibly and in line with a peace settlement. To that end, I have repeatedly encouraged the leaders in both countries to consider an international mechanism to ensure, monitor, and report on any agreement involving Nagorno-Karabakh.

Regretfully, this part of Reeker’s statement discords with the explicit position of Azerbaijan, as articulated clearly countless times by Baku since the end of the Second Karabakh War. Here is a representative quote by Aliyev: “The Armenians of Karabakh are our citizens. Communication with them is our internal affair, which we are not going to discuss with a third country.” It thus remains to be seen whether Reeker’s statement represents a departure from America’s posture of supporting the peace process between two sovereign states as an honest and trusted broker divorced from any considerations of future internal arrangements concerning the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and its ethnic-Armenian inhabitants—or whether Reeker’s statement was an attempt by the State Department and, by extension, the Biden Administration, to “throw a bone” to congressional leaders like Pelosi and Robert Menendez, the Chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and his Armenian-American supporters.

## *The Armenian Lobby: America’s Domestic Dilemma*

Another wrinkle in the approach of the Biden Administration is the outsized influence of the Armenian-American diaspora on the U.S. Congress (and, judging by Reeker’s

aforementioned statement, perhaps beyond the U.S. Congress). For reasons having to do with the particularities of the complex system of constitutional “checks and balances” between the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government, successive administrations have been constricted in their ability to formulate and execute American foreign policy without taking into account the priorities of powerful representatives and senators beholden to special interest groups in one way or another.

Paradigmatic examples remain Pelosi and Menendez. Both have long been associated with Armenian-American diaspora organizations and are widely perceived to be supportive of their policy preferences. As a general rule, this sort of influence is understood to be legitimate in the American domestic context, but its effects have served to reinforce a perceived bias in favor of Armenia in successive U.S. administrations, beginning in the early 1990s and continuing into the present.

Both Pelosi’s mid-September 2022 visit to Yerevan (and the statements she made there) and Menendez’s opening statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s hearings on the South Caucasus on 16 November 2022 are indicative of this sort of distortive activity. In different circumstances, such instances could have done a disservice to the Biden Administration’s *bona fides* and its ongoing efforts to help Baku and Yerevan in their shared quest for peace.

To its great credit, however, the Biden Administration has, *by and large*, genuinely tried to minimize—in both speech and deed—the influence of such legislative heavyweights on its neutral, constructive, and supportive role towards the peace process (the aforementioned Reeker statement appears, for now, to be an exception that, hopefully, proves the rule). One reason seems to be the fact that it has been able to properly differentiate the policy preferences of the Armenian-American diaspora organizations, as represented by the actions of Pelosi and Menendez, and those of the government of Armenia. Wisely, the Biden Administration has opted to give much greater weight to the extension of support to official Yerevan. This has been well-received by Baku and is one of the most important reasons why both countries have retained confidence in America’s ability to serve impartially in the role it has designated for itself.

## Summary

Overall, compared to both the EU and Russia, the U.S. role in the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been abstemious. This helpful posture has been welcomed by both sides.

To retain the confidence of both countries as they continue to negotiate in assorted formats and under the auspices of various outside actors, the senior members of the Biden Administration should continue to distance themselves from dissonant voices within both the Washington establishment (including some of their direct subordinates)

and the special interests that influence these (i.e., Armenian-American diaspora organizations). This means continuing to be driven—as much as possible—by U.S. foreign policy considerations and preferences applied to the specific geopolitical circumstances of the South Caucasus. This in turn means avoiding—again, as much as possible—projecting both the posture and cascading effects of the ongoing confrontation between the West and Russia to the context of the conflict over Ukraine onto the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process.

In this consists the recipe for ongoing American success (and continuing relevance) on this issue.. So far, the Biden Administration has been generally clear-headed about the stakes at issue, cognizant of the fact that regional powers like Iran, Russia, and Türkiye lie in wait to take advantage of any American slip-ups. A failure by the United States to maintain its supportive role—which is predicated on an even-handed and unbiased approach to the negotiations—would directly and negatively affect the ambitions of the European Union to continue serving as a primary facilitator in the ongoing Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. Surely, such an unfortunate development would not be in the American national interest.