

# Trump's Peacemaking Achievement in the South Caucasus

## Sovereignty and Strategic Transactionalism Take Center Stage

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Donald Trump's recent achievements in the Middle East, which came about in no small measure thanks to the efforts of Egypt, Qatar, Türkiye, and several other states, should not overshadow the strategic path laid forward during his successful [White House peace summit](#) with Armenia and Azerbaijan, held at the White House on 8 August 2025.

Trump and his counterparts from the South Caucasus, Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan, each left the building with more than they arrived with; all advanced their countries' national interests; all made commitments they can keep; and none gave away the store.

### *Taking Sovereignty Seriously: The Missing Ingredient*

Trump succeeded where all previous U.S. administrations and other outside players had failed—going back three decades—including Russia, a few EU member states, and, most recently, the EU itself. He and Steve Witkoff's team designed the deal to effectively combine conflict resolution, peacemaking, transport and energy connectivity, commercial opportunities, and respect for everyone's sovereignty. The latter was the secret ingredient Trump's diplomacy added—the piece that had

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always been missing in previous attempts by outsiders to broker peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Thus, one of the underappreciated takeaways from the White House peace summit is that Trump has shown that he can respect smaller states that take their own sovereignty as seriously as he takes America's. It also explains why others failed: a congenital incapability to accept that countries like Armenia and Azerbaijan reject the sublimation of their distinct state identities in the name of over-institutionalizing cooperation (or, even more unlikely, integration) with any other state.

For Aliyev and Pashinyan, as much as for Trump, borders are not mere lines on a map; they are sovereign markers of territorial integrity and statehood, and they represent an axiomatic basis of a country's identity and architectonic definition of itself. This core belief aligns with the logic of Trump's America First doctrine: what happens beyond a country's borders is less significant than what occurs within them.

This shared understanding of substantive sovereignty now binds Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the United States to one another as never before through a series of commitments and agreements. These will, if executed and followed up properly, recalibrate the strategic importance of the Middle Corridor in America's favor, whilst giving all due consideration to the sovereign roles of the South Caucasus and Central Asian states, as well as Türkiye, in ensuring that various elements of this connectivity mega-project are fully ready for primetime. There is no serious reason for the EU not to benefit from it, if it plays its cards right and tempers its normative ambitions. Lastly, this outcome is one that Iran and Russia—neighbors with skin in the game—are learning to accept, albeit unenthusiastically.

## *The Commercial Logic of TRIPP*

Critical to the route's long-term viability will be its role as a "neutral passage open for all sorts of commerce," as Nikolas K. Gvosdev [characterized](#) it. For this to work, no major power—Western or non-Western—may object to any company from any country using it. Washington seems to be able to live with this, partly because the tangible American contribution to Armenia-Azerbaijan peace—the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity ([TRIPP](#))—is not "a military or defense initiative," according to a [published report](#). This means that the United States is not "providing a 'hard security guarantee' or deploying forces to the route," the same source tells us, citing U.S. officials.

In other words, there will be no U.S. (or NATO) bases or garrisons popping up in Armenia, much less in Azerbaijan. Instead, U.S. involvement will be purely commercial, with Washington taking on the responsibility to ensure TRIPP "operates safely for all parties" through agreements with "top-class operators," according to the same report and various other sources.

A friend of mine involved in setting up the White House summit put it to me this way: “Think of our role as holding up the parasol and the umbrella, as needed, but we won’t be trying to change the weather.” As Nikolas Gvosdev writes in the Fall 2025 edition of *Baku Dialogues*, “What is striking about TRIPP is the extent to which the linchpin of Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization will be privatized. [...] Essentially, the U.S. government pledges only to use its powers, authorities, and tools of statecraft to midwife a private consortium upon whom responsibility for TRIPP will be bequeathed.” One can say that alongside a shared commitment to a substantive understanding of sovereignty, the other secret ingredient that Trump’s diplomacy added is the private-sector dimension. This, as Gvosdev emphasizes, is in line with a senior Trump Administration official’s [description](#) of his president’s assessment of “economics as the foundation and driving force behind international affairs.”

One unanswered question is the scope of the EU’s role. As things now stand, much of this will depend on two factors. One, its willingness to fork over cash for the development of other parts of the route that feed into TRIPP, including those in Azerbaijan’s Nakhchivan exclave. Two, its willingness to forgo normative conditionalities, including making demands of the three South Caucasus states that infringe on their sovereign prerogatives as they themselves understand them.

After initial rhetorical objections, neighboring Iran and Russia also appear to be coming to terms with the emerging reality on the ground. This is partly because Armenia was able to provide credible assurances to its two traditional allies that TRIPP—whose infrastructure will be developed through what Trump said was an “exclusive partnership” with the U.S.—will operate in accordance with Armenian law, as Pashinyan has repeatedly made clear. The implications of this last should become clear by putting together Gvosdev’s assessment, which I quoted above, and the fact that Armenia (as well as Azerbaijan and Georgia) is not a part of the West’s unilateral sanctions and export restrictions regime against Iran and Russia.

## *An Indispensable Country*

Importantly, Baku has also taken steps to assuage Tehran’s concerns and, more recently, [repaired](#) its relationship with Moscow. Surely, its geoeconomic position, the uniqueness of which the Iranians and Russians appreciate in ways many Western analysts still do not fully grasp, played a role in this: not only does Azerbaijan straddle both ends of TRIPP, but the country is the place where the Middle Corridor seamlessly blends into the China-led Belt and Road Initiative. Azerbaijan is also where that unsanctioned east-west route optimally intersects with the International North-South Transport Corridor, a strategic connectivity project established at the turn of the century by India, Iran, and Russia.

Azerbaijan is, in a certain sense, the west to the east, the east to the west, the north to the south, and the south to the north. This lends weight to Zbigniew Brzezinski’s 1997

[assessment](#) that Baku is the “cork in the bottle containing the riches of the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia.” It also reinforces the point [I explain elsewhere](#) that Azerbaijan is the “indispensable country for the advancement of the strategic energy and connectivity ambitions of all major outside powers in the Silk Road region—Western and non-Western alike.” Lastly, it reinforces Vasif Huseynov’s recent [observation](#) that Baku is now a “neutral yet assertive power,” which has raised its standing, leverage, and influence among all the major powers.

Consider, in this context, that Azerbaijan is one of the few states in the world to have—or about to have—strategic partnerships with China, Israel, Russia, Türkiye, the United States, and the United Kingdom, as well as with, inter alia, various EU member states. It is also an official state partner to both NATO and the STO, and the immediate past chair of the Non-Aligned Movement. No wonder that Aliyev is the only national leader to attend all five of the world’s most important inter-state events that took place over the past month: the UN General Assembly’s high-level week in New York (22-27 September), the European Political Community summit in Copenhagen (2 October), the OTS summit in Gabala (7 October), the CIS summit in Dushanbe (10 October), and the Middle East Peace Summit in Sharm el-Sheikh (12 October). All this further reinforces my [contention](#) that Ilham Aliyev teaches a longstanding masterclass in statecraft—an accomplishment all the more impressive given that his classroom is located in one of the world’s toughest and most unforgiving neighborhoods.

## *Strategic Transactionalism: A Harbinger of What’s to Come*

While Baku and Yerevan approached their embrace of Trump’s America from quite different national political contexts—Armenia being smaller in size and population, yet also less stable, less powerful, less prosperous, and less endowed with natural resources (e.g., hydrocarbons) than Azerbaijan—their shared decision to engage with Washington and seek peace at the White House reflects a broader international trend.

Being pushed aside by the pretty much the entire international community is the combination of practices designed to advance a postmodernist, cosmopolitan, and globalist [vision](#) of “open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic community, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty, [and] the rule of law.” Together, these constituted the basic tenets of the “rules-based” liberal international order that emerged at the end of the Cold War. These are not being replaced by a different set of beliefs, however, but by a new foreign policy posture: *strategic transactionalism*. Embraced not only by the United States, but also by scores of countries like Armenia and Azerbaijan, “the preferred mathematical operations [of this [approach](#)] are addition and multiplication, not subtraction and division. Extract more from more.”

Strategic transactionalism is also being embraced by most non-G7 members of the G20, the world's [keystone states](#), and a plethora of small and medium-sized countries. This translates into receptivity towards all outsiders, including Western powers, although it does not constitute a license for any outsider to interfere, reform, transform, or impose. And it certainly does not mean accepting any claims of primacy, hegemony, or spheres of influence. Ultimately, this speaks to the restoration of “sovereign realism,” as Arta Moeini has [called](#) it, as a central operating principle of world order. For this, we can thank Donald Trump and emboldened, like-minded national leaders around the world. Heck, it might even be worth a Nobel Peace Prize next year.