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BAHCESEHIR UNIVERSITY
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SECOND KARABAKH WAR

MASTER'S THESIS
BAYLAR HAJIYEV

ISTANBUL 2024

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THESIS ADVISOR
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ISTANBUL 2024



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ABSTRACT

TITLE OF THE THESIS SECOND KARABAKH WAR

Baylar Hajiyev

Master's Program in Global Affairs

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This study examines how the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War affected Azerbaijan's relationships with neighboring countries in the South Caucasus. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, a long-standing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia emerged, with notable geopolitical consequences. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which took place from September 27 to November 10, 2020, was a pivotal moment that led to Azerbaijan reclaiming its territorial integrity and reshaping the regional security landscape.

The study systematically analyzes the diplomatic, military, and geopolitical developments following the war, focusing on Azerbaijan's relations with Turkey, Russia, Iran, and Georgia. It explores the new geopolitical realities that emerged, including the "3+3" regional cooperation format and the strategic significance of the Zangezur Corridor. The research highlights the challenges and opportunities in normalizing Azerbaijan-Armenia relations, examining the obstacles posed by Armenian military provocations and the diplomatic efforts mediated by international and regional actors.

The results of this research provide a clearer understanding of the changing geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus and offer perspectives on potential future peace and collaboration in the region.

Key Words: Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan-Armenia relations, Geopolitical dynamics, Zangezur Corridor, Peace treaty negotiations.



ÖZ

TEZ BAŞLIĞI İkinci Karabağ Savaşı

Baylar Hajiyev

Küresel Siyaset ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Yüksek Lisans Programı Yüksek Lisans
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Bu araştırma, İkinci Dağlık Karabağ Savaşı'nın Azerbaycan'ın Güney Kafkasya bölgesindeki komşu ülkeleriyle olan ilişkileri üzerindeki etkisini araştırmaktadır. Sovyetler Birliği'nin çöküşü ve ardından gelen Birinci Dağlık Karabağ Savaşı, Azerbaycan ile Ermenistan arasında önemli jeopolitik sonuçları olan uzun süreli bir çatışmaya yol açtı. 27 Eylül - 10 Kasım 2020 tarihleri arasında gerçekleşen İkinci Dağlık Karabağ Savaşı, Azerbaycan'ın toprak bütünlüğünü yeniden sağlaması ve bölgesel güvenlik mimarisini değiştirmesiyle sonuçlanan kritik bir dönüm noktası oldu.

Çalışma, savaştan sonraki diplomatik, askeri ve jeopolitik gelişmeleri sistematik olarak analiz ederek Azerbaycan'ın Türkiye, Rusya, İran ve Gürcistan ile olan ilişkilerine odaklanmaktadır. "3+3" bölgesel iş birliği formatı ve Zangezur Koridoru'nun stratejik önemi de dahil olmak üzere ortaya çıkan yeni jeopolitik gerçekleri araştırmaktadır. Araştırma, Ermenistan askeri provokasyonlarının ve uluslararası ve bölgesel aktörlerin aracılık ettiği diplomatik çabaların oluşturduğu engelleri inceleyerek Azerbaycan-Ermenistan ilişkilerinin normalleştirilmesindeki zorlukları ve fırsatları vurgulamaktadır.

Bu çalışmanın bulguları, Güney Kafkasya'daki gelişen jeopolitik manzaranın daha derin bir şekilde anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmakta ve bölgede barış ve iş birliğinin gelecekteki beklentilerine dair içgörüler sunmak.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İkinci Karabağ Savaşı, Azerbaycan-Ermenistan ilişkileri, Jeopolitik dinamikler, Zengezur Koridoru, Barış antlaşması müzakereleri.



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Chapter 1

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) led to a chaotic and uncertain geopolitical environment, which fueled Armenian separatism in Nagorno-Karabakh beginning in the 1980s and eventually resulted in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. Following the war, Armenia occupied Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding districts, accounting for 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territory. The conflict ended with a ceasefire on May 12, 1994. Despite Azerbaijan's significant diplomatic efforts and the adoption of four UN Security Council resolutions, these resolutions went unenforced for 28 years.

In the aftermath of the war, Azerbaijan engaged in negotiations to achieve peace with Armenia, but over the 26-year process, none of the conflict resolution proposals were accepted by Armenia due to various objections. During this occupation, Armenia destroyed Azerbaijani cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh and committed crimes such as war crimes, ecocide, and genocide to erase Azerbaijani identity from the region. Alongside diplomatic talks, Armenia continued military provocations and attacks on civilians. Although fundamental principles for resolving the conflict were agreed upon, Armenia's continuous introduction of new demands blocked any peaceful resolution. In a 1997 interview, National Leader Heydar Aliyev highlighted Armenia's efforts to secure independence for Nagorno-Karabakh, noting that this contradicted international legal norms and could not be permitted. Armenia's intransigence delayed negotiations, and even a change of government in Armenia in 2018 did not improve the peace process (Aslanlı, 2021).

During the ongoing talks, Armenia's new "revolutionary government" escalated tensions through political and military provocations against Azerbaijan, ultimately ending the OSCE Minsk Group-mediated negotiations. Rising tensions, Armenia's disregard for

Azerbaijani national values, aggressive rhetoric from Armenian officials, and increased military provocations led to the outbreak of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War from September 27 to November 10, 2020. This conflict fundamentally reshaped the South Caucasus' regional security dynamics. (Cafarov F., 2022)

Azerbaijan's restoration of its territorial integrity ushered in a new era for the region, offering opportunities for peace and development. The consequences of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War not only impacted Azerbaijan's relations with Armenia and Georgia but also created a new geopolitical reality in the South Caucasus. Sustaining this reality in a peaceful environment and fostering effective dialogue among regional countries became crucial. This dialogue would facilitate a new format for regional cooperation. The proposed "3+3" or "5+1" cooperation model—bringing together Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Georgia, and Armenia—aims to strengthen economic ties and investments, benefiting all member states and enhancing inter-state relations.

The Zangezur Corridor, which has recently been widely discussed, holds equal geopolitical and geoeconomic significance for these six states. The political-diplomatic symbol of the new geopolitical reality is the “3+3” (“5+1”) formula, initiated by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev. Concrete proposals have been made for the realization of this formula. (Aliyev N.A., 2023)

Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War has had a profound impact on its relationships with neighboring countries. These relationships are evolving in line with the new geopolitical realities following Azerbaijan's historic triumph. The Shusha Declaration, signed between Azerbaijan and Turkey, marks the first official document where both nations are recognized as allies. This declaration signals the beginning of a new chapter in post-war Azerbaijan-Turkey relations.

Similarly, Azerbaijan-Georgia relations have entered a new phase. Georgia has not only acted as a mediator between Azerbaijan and Armenia on various issues but has also partnered with Azerbaijan in the international "Green Energy Corridor" project. (Asgarova, N.S., 2021, pp. 108-115)

Azerbaijan-Russia relations have also progressed to a new level of cooperation, with Russia serving as a mediator during and after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Developments regarding the peacekeeping contingent in Karabakh, particularly during anti-terror operations and their early withdrawal, reflect the evolving nature of Azerbaijan-Russia relations in the post-war context.

This research is particularly relevant as it examines diplomatic interactions between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the post-war period, focusing on new challenges and the changing bilateral relations among other regional states. The study aims to explore how the war's outcomes have influenced Azerbaijan's relations with neighboring countries and reshaped inter-state dynamics in the post-war environment, particularly focusing on Azerbaijan's land-bordering neighbors.

International and regional actors, who seek to remain engaged in regional developments, have become increasingly involved, especially in peace talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Negotiations for the Azerbaijan-Armenia peace treaty, involving new mediators from outside the region, underscore the importance of this topic. Although Armenia has attempted to revive the Minsk Group format, Azerbaijan clarified its stance on the group during the war. A series of meetings mediated by both Europe and Russia have resulted in proposals for a peace treaty. President Ilham Aliyev remarked on the peace process: "Regarding the Armenia-Azerbaijan process, we believe that there are still a few open issues. One of them is the Armenian Constitution, which includes territorial claims against Azerbaijan. Secondly, Armenia's groundless territorial claims against Azerbaijan and Turkey must be terminated. We have already suggested to Armenia that Azerbaijan and Armenia jointly request the OSCE to dissolve the Minsk Group. We will not allow its functioning de facto. As for de jure, it should be dissolved, and this will show how sincere Armenia is". (president.az, October 04, 2020)

In conclusion, this thesis primarily covers the timeline from the late 1980s, when the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh began to escalate, through the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-1994), and up to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which took place from September 27 to November 10, 2020.

The focus is on the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which intensified territorial disputes, and spans key moments such as the 1994 ceasefire, failed peace negotiations, and continued tensions between the two nations. A significant portion of the thesis examines the diplomatic, military, and geopolitical developments leading to, during, and after the Second Karabakh War, particularly from 2020 to 2024. The post-war period from 2020 to 2024 is critically analyzed, emphasizing the new regional geopolitical dynamics, Azerbaijan's restored territorial integrity, and evolving relations with neighboring states such as Turkey, Russia, and Armenia.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which took place from September 27 to November 10, 2020, fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus. The conflict, stemming from the unresolved territorial dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding districts, ended in Azerbaijan's military victory and the restoration of its territorial integrity. However, the war's aftermath has raised critical questions about regional security, the durability of the peace agreement, and the future of Azerbaijan's relations with neighboring states such as Armenia, Turkey, Russia, Iran, and Georgia.

Despite Azerbaijan's successful reclamation of its occupied territories, the post-war period remains fraught with challenges. The presence of Russian peacekeepers, Armenia's resistance to fully embracing the new geopolitical realities, and ongoing tensions over border demarcation and the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian population pose significant obstacles to long-term peace. Additionally, the evolving alliances in the region, particularly Azerbaijan's deepening relationship with Turkey and the strategic significance of the proposed Zangezur Corridor, highlight the complexity of regional cooperation and competition.

This thesis seeks to address the problem of how Azerbaijan's military and diplomatic strategies during and after the war have reshaped its regional relationships and

what the broader implications are for lasting peace and stability in the South Caucasus. By examining the intersection of military success, international diplomacy, and regional power dynamics, this research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing Azerbaijan and its neighbors in the post-war environment.

1.2 Purpose and Tasks of the Research

The objectives and tasks of this research have been established with consideration of the topic's relevance and significance. The primary goal is to provide a systematic political analysis of efforts to secure peace in the South Caucasus during the post-conflict period, based on contemporary documents, state leaders' speeches, appeals, and existing literature. This analysis is aligned with the causes and outcomes of the Second Karabakh War and Azerbaijan's new geopolitical realities concerning regional states. To accomplish this, the research aims to:

- Analyze the causes, historical necessity, and ultimate consequences of the Second Karabakh War for both Azerbaijan and Armenia;
- Examine the positions of regional states on the war's onset and progression;
- Analyze mechanisms to counter Armenia's disinformation campaign against Azerbaijan during the war;
- Investigate new challenges for maintaining long-term peace in the region following the Second Karabakh War;
- Assess the military-political outcomes of the war and their impact on the region's geopolitical landscape;
- Study the political processes leading to a peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia, focusing on the principles proposed by both sides;
- Analyze the obstacles created by Armenia's leadership during post-war peacebuilding efforts;
- Investigate Azerbaijan's relations with neighboring countries (specifically land-bordering neighbors) in light of the war's results;

- Conduct a comparative analysis of pre- and post-war relations with neighboring states in the context of new geopolitical realities;
- Examine the South Caucasus geopolitical situation resulting from Azerbaijan's full restoration of territorial integrity and sovereignty.

1.3 Research Question

How have the outcomes of the Second Karabakh War influenced Azerbaijan's diplomatic and economic relations with its neighboring land-bordering countries, and what are the implications of these changes for regional stability and cooperation?

1.4 Theoretical and Practical Significance of the Research

The materials of this research can be used for:

- Writing textbooks, teaching aids, and monographs on international relations and foreign policy issues in Azerbaijan, as well as general scientific works on conflictology;
- The scientific insights and findings in the dissertation may be useful for determining directions for future research on this topic and for departments dealing with practical foreign policy issues and specialists working in this field.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The topic's relevance has led to research in this field both within Azerbaijan and abroad. During the writing of the dissertation, works, articles, and writings by politicians and field researchers have been collected, systematized, and studied.

The second volume of M. Qasymov's two-part book, *History of the Republic of Azerbaijan: 1991-2021*, focuses on the political history of Azerbaijan from 2003 to 2021. It covers key events such as Armenia's military provocations that led to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, political statements, and the rejection of core negotiation principles. Additionally, the book discusses post-war diplomatic efforts and trilateral agreements.

E. Ahmadov's work *Heydar Aliyev and Azerbaijan's State Policy Based on National Interests* delves into the state-building efforts led by National Leader Heydar Aliyev, the events surrounding Karabakh, and Azerbaijan's full restoration of sovereignty during and after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War.

N. Aliyev's *Restoration of Territorial Integrity and Sovereignty of Azerbaijan: Legal Aspects* provides an in-depth analysis of the legal dimensions concerning Armenian relocation to historical Azerbaijani lands, territorial claims, human rights violations during the war, and Azerbaijan's anti-terror actions to restore sovereignty.

I. Huseynova's monograph *Ilham Aliyev and the Glorious Pages of Our Victory History* offers a detailed account of the factors leading to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, its chronology, and post-war reconstruction efforts.

The book *The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and New Geopolitical Realities* by R. Sevdimaliev and E. Sevdimaliev analyzes the shifting geopolitical landscape after the

war, peace negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and Armenia's military-political provocations during the post-conflict period, as well as resistance to peace efforts in the South Caucasus.

E. Nasirov's article "The Leader Who Writes History and is Written into History" explores Armenian separatism in Karabakh, the path to victory in the Second Karabakh War, and its impact on Azerbaijan's post-war international relations.

Due to the Minsk Group's inaction since the First Karabakh War, the conflict's peaceful resolution, based on international legal norms, did not come to fruition. N. Aliyev's book *Victory of Azerbaijan in the Patriotic War* provides a geopolitical analysis of both the First and Second Karabakh Wars, focusing on the impact of shifting geopolitics on Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

In A. Aslanli's *History of the Patriotic War: The Factor of Personality*, the section "Victory of Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War and the New Geopolitical Situation in the Caucasus" analyzes post-war changes in the region, particularly the significance of the Shusha Declaration for Azerbaijan-Turkey relations.

This research also references Turkish scholars, such as A. Yucel, whose *Military Activities and Qualities of Armenia* explores Armenia's actions and the Second Karabakh War's resolution. A. Ali and G. Özpınar's article *The Great Offensive Leading Azerbaijan to Victory: Anatomy of the 44-Day War* investigates the war's course and factors leading to Azerbaijan's victory, while A. Keskin's *Zangezur Corridor and the Transformation of Geopolitical Competition in the Caucasus* addresses competition in the region. K. Hülya's article *The Strong Azerbaijan at the First Anniversary of the Victory in 44 Days: 2021* examines the results of the war and the victory's first anniversary.

The research also incorporates studies by English and Russian scholars. D. Baldwin's *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary* updates the debate between neoliberal institutionalism and neorealism, while R. Powell's *Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist-Neoliberal Debate* analyzes these two influential modern theories. P. Schoeder's article *Historical Reality vs. Neorealist Theory* examines

modern political issues, while K. Waltz's *Evaluating Theories* critiques the explanatory power of neorealism in international relations.

The research is based on statements, reports, and speeches made by heads of state and officials during mutual visits. References are made to statements and declarations issued by state institutions, as well as signed state documents and agreements. A special part of the source base includes various volumes of the collections of speeches, statements, and interviews of Azerbaijan's national leader Heydar Aliyev, compiled in the multi-volume works "Our Independence is Eternal," and President Ilham Aliyev, compiled in "Our Goal is Development." During the writing of the dissertation, extensive use was made of periodical press materials published both in Azerbaijan and abroad.

Additionally, the dissertation utilized periodical press materials published both in Azerbaijan and abroad, including "Azərbaycan," "Xalq qəzeti," "The Washington Times," "The Sunday Times," "The Wall Street Journal," "Financial Times," "American Wall Street Journal," "American Foreign Policy Journal," "Asahi Shimbun," "Agenzia Nova," "La Mond," and others.

Chapter 3

Methodology

During various stages of the research, economic-statistical, document study, comparative-analytical methods, content analysis, systematic approach, and statistical analysis methods were used to achieve these goals and ensure the reliability of the results. Due to the wealth of documents covering the period, the research process included extensive comparative political analysis, with a focus on chronological and problem-chronological methods.

3.1 Scientific Novelty of the Research

Due to the relevance and political importance of the topic, it is examined comprehensively and systematically for the first time. The scientific novelty of the dissertation includes:

- Analysis of the political-diplomatic relations towards the signing of a peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia, noting current advancements, and concluding that official documents and national symbols forming the legal basis for Armenia's current state structure, as well as the activities of existing chauvinistic extremist groups, pose a primary threat to the signing of a final peace treaty;
- Complex analysis of Azerbaijan's bilateral and multilateral relations with regional states during pre-war, war, and post-war periods in accordance with the changing geopolitical configuration;
- Examination of the dual policies often exhibited in relations between Western and Turkish civilizations. From this perspective, it is concluded that the dual stance of Western states in both the globally significant Armenian issue and

diplomatic mediation efforts after the Second Karabakh War stems from the clash between Western and Turkish civilizations;

- Forecast analysis of the potential benefits of ensuring peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia in both short-term and long-term perspectives, considering bilateral and multilateral aspects, as well as the formation of a favorable geo-economic environment resulting from the opening of transportation communication lines.



Chapter 4

II The Nagorno-Karabakh War: Military and Political Consequences

4.1 Theoretical Foundations of Relations with Regional States in Modern International Relations

The study object of international relations science is extremely complex, subject to internal laws that are not always straightforward, and its management and regulation are largely dependent on subjective factors. This encompasses the complex socio-political realities between various global actors, and the various levels of interactions conducted among states, human societies, organizations, and individuals participating in this process.

Like other sciences, international relations also has its own research subjects. The research subject of international relations arises from the general concept of this science. Researchers characterize international relations as a "joint aggregate of political, economic, ideological, legal, moral, diplomatic, and other interactions conducted in the international sphere between existing states, groups of states, classes, social, economic, and political powers, organizations, movements, nations, and individual human groups."(Jervis R. 1998)

The objects and subjects of international relations include:

- The material (economic, military, geopolitical, demographic, technical, etc.) and moral (ideological, legal, informational, ethical, etc.) factors of the world and their impact on intersubjective relations;
- Diplomatic, strategic, social, cultural, scientific, and other relations between actors; the moral-ethical, legal, social-cultural, and other norms forming the basis of these relations;
- Processes such as information, financial, communication, migration, etc., that affect global politics;
- Processes such as decision-making, cooperation, negotiations, conflicts, etc., in the international sphere;

- The state of relations between international actors and factors affecting them (transnational processes occurring globally and their impact on inter-state relations, global politics, etc.);
- Factors, events, norms, processes, and their connections affecting both domestic and international relations. (Jervis R. 1998)

Despite the extensive scope and the numerous actors involved in international relations, the core of these relations is still based on inter-state political and diplomatic interactions. This is because, regardless of the historical stage of its formation and how long it lasts, the state, its borders, and its citizens continue to play a role in distinguishing people from each other and providing a certain formal status to their relations. Even though recent years have seen the transnationalization of world politics and globalization make national borders and state internal affairs more transparent, thus reducing the monopoly of sovereign state rights to a single state and making them dependent on international processes and trends.(Kaplan M. 1966)

Researchers also note some characteristic features of international relations. According to them, unlike other research areas, international relations are characterized by anarchism, meaning the lack of a universally accepted regulatory higher instance and mandatory enforcement mechanisms for decisions. Thus, international relations are sometimes characterized as a "sovereignty pluralism," a risky decision-making area tailored to each participant's own thinking, power, and resources.(Nacafov E.A., 2005) Some of the notable characteristics of international relations include:

- The growing impact of behavioral and legal norms, which have evolved over centuries through the dynamics of international relations, is shaping the institutionalization of inter-state relations and influencing the actions of the participants involved;
- The contradictory nature of international relations (observations of completeness and fragmentation, historical continuity and randomness, cooperation and conflict, integration and centripetal tendencies, etc. simultaneously);

- The impact of globalization and global economic, political, financial, strategic, informational, and ecological processes on inter-state relations, the gradual loss of national borders and sovereignty, and the observation of national and transnational interest conflicts;
- The complexity of the composition of international relations, including the involvement of non-governmental organizations, transnational corporations, mass media, firms, banks, financial institutions, trade unions, destructive forces, ethnic elements, religious and national organizations, diasporas, etc.;
- The gradual erosion of sovereign rights held by nation-states, such as security, border control, and the protection of citizens, has been accompanied by the transnationalization of human rights, individual freedoms, and the principles of unrestricted personal exchange;
- The subjectivity of participants (actors) in international relations, their attempts to shape the international sphere according to their desires based on their thinking, worldview, power, and interests;
- The lack of specific spatial and temporal norms, internal stable laws, structural divisions, hierarchical arrangements, etc. in international relations.(Lapid Y. 1989)

All these distinctive traits highlight the complexity of studying international relations, making generalizations, drawing specific scientific conclusions, and offering practical recommendations based on its inherent laws. For nearly a century, philosophers, historians, legal scholars, sociologists, and political scientists worldwide have been striving to comprehend, explain, and describe the events and processes within the international arena and its system of relations, as well as to pinpoint their underlying causes and methods of prevention accurately.(Goodin, H.D., Yushngemann, 1999) However, no expert has yet succeeded in this.

The main components of the science of international relations include:

- The theory of international relations;
- The formation, development, and history of diplomacy;

- Sociological research on the international relations system and inter-state relations;
- Geopolitics;
- International relations and modern world politics. (Baylis, J., Smith, S., & Owens, P., 2017)

As seen, international relations consist of numerous events, facts, processes, meetings, negotiations, conflicts, behaviors, etc., occurring daily beyond the borders of national states. Individually, these factors are insufficient to understand the essence, causes, and trends of processes unfolding in the international realm. The theory of international relations studies the interconnections, overall relations, and regularities among these components, facts, and events. (Powell R. 1994)

Theoretical schools of international relations propose general concepts and categories without which it is impossible to determine the basis, causes, and effects of the activities of international actors and the nature and trends of events occurring in this realm. (Busse, S. Smith, 2005)

Like any science, the theory of international relations aims to analyze cause-and-effect relationships of events in the international sphere, the roles of internal and external factors in these events, and to generalize and derive conclusions from recurring and random cases. It also uses these analyses to forecast the laws, regularities, tendencies, and perspectives of the development of this science. Of course, unlike exact sciences, social sciences do not have precise axiomatic laws about "societal development," but rather generalized, frequently recurring, and trend-based conditional characteristics. (Schroeder P. 1994)

The theory of international relations, like other social sciences, is an attempt to interpret events in the international sphere through generalizations. (Jervis R., 1998)

Some researchers believe that the main distinguishing line in international relations theory is the methodology used by different researchers and, from this perspective, they

focus on the debate between representatives of "classical" and "scientific" methods in the analysis of international relations. (Cox, R. W., 1981)

Finally, another group of researchers, based on complex criteria (e.g., Canadian scholar Bagat Korani), builds typologies of international relations theories based on both the methods they use ("classical" and "modernist") and the conceptual views distinguished worldwide ("liberal-pluralist" and "materialist-structuralist").(Cox, R. W., 1981) They highlight various theoretical directions in international relations, such as political realism, represented by scholars like G. Morgenthau, R. Aron, and H. Bull; behaviorism, with figures like D. Singer and M. Kaplan; classical Marxism, led by K. Marx, F. Engels, and V. Lenin; and neo-Marxism or the "dependency" school, which includes I. Wallerstein, S. Amin, A. Frank, and F. Cardoso. Similarly, Daniel Colyar examines the "natural state" theory (or political realism), the "international system" theory (or political idealism), various Marxist ideological currents, Anglo-Saxon approaches, and the French school of international relations (Lapid, 1989). Marcel Meri identifies key directions in contemporary international relations studies as traditionalist approaches (e.g., Hans Morgenthau, Stanley Hoffman, Henry Kissinger), Anglo-Saxon behaviorism and functionalist sociological concepts (e.g., Robert Cox, David Singer, Morton Kaplan, David Easton), and Marxist and neo-Marxist theories (e.g., Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, Samir Amin).

While numerous classifications of modern international relations theories exist, a few key points stand out. First, these classifications are somewhat arbitrary and do not encompass all theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. Second, the presence of various theories does not imply that modern theories have completely moved away from the foundational theories mentioned earlier. Lastly, despite ongoing disagreements, there are indications of synthesis, mutual enrichment, and "compromise" among previously opposing theories. (Sanders, 1999)

The foundation of the theory of international relations was laid in the mid-20th century by English historian E. Carr, and American political scientists N. Morgenthau and R. Aron. They brought the concept of political realism to international relations theory,

demonstrating with solid evidence that international relations are characterized by instability due to the lack of a general regulatory mechanism, central management, and universally binding norms. (Schroeder P., 1994)

According to the political realism current, the main subjects of international relations, national states, struggle with other subjects in the international sphere to secure their national interests, and each subject ensures its specific interests according to its power [Baldwin D.A. 1996]. This is why inter-state conflicts and wars occur in international relations. Thus, political realists place the different national interests of states and the continuously ongoing conflicts based on these interests at the core of international relations and see the solution in the balance of power among major states (justifying the ideological-class confrontation and arms race between the USSR and the USA).

Certainly, as the first advanced theory of international relations, political realism remained the focus of both political circles and the global scientific community for a long time (1945-1980).(Jervis R., 1998)

In the early 1980s, a new alternative theory school begins to oppose political realism in the international realm. This theory, called "neorealism," was introduced to the academic literature by Kenneth Waltz with his book "Theory of International Politics." Waltz characterizes international relations as a unified organism—a system of inter-state relations.(Waltz K. 1997) The principles of this system's operation are constant, continuously improving, and regulated by mandatory legal norms for everyone. International power is distributed among the existing power balances in the world (referring to leading states), which maintains the equilibrium of forces. In such conditions, states are compelled to adhere to the rules of the international relations system, and their behavior is managed through internal and external influence mechanisms.(Powell R. 1994)

As can be seen, unlike the proponents of political realism who describe international relations as a constant and uncontrollable (anarchic) arena of conflict among states' national interests, "neorealists" are more optimistic and evaluate international relations as

a manageable system. Of course, in a multipolar world political context, this theory appeared more viable and, for this reason, has managed to maintain its leading position in global discourse for a long time.

In 1993, during a time when the world was discussing the collapse of the USSR and the socialist camp and the future perspectives of international relations, U.S. political scientist S. Huntington introduced a new theory known later as the "postclassical approach" – the version of the clash of civilizations, which became a subject of discussion among world political scientists.(Nacafov E.A., 2005)

According to S. Huntington, states, considered the main actors in international relations, are now handing over their roles to civilizations. From then on, international relations will depend on the inter-civilizational struggles characterized by different historical roots, languages, religions, and traditions, and world politics will be structured around this factor. He argues that while class distinctions and ideological directions among people can change, it is impossible to turn a Muslim into a Christian, an Hindu into a Catholic, a Japanese into an African, or a Latin American into a Slavic Orthodox. Thus, inter-religious (inter-civilizational) conflicts will continue, and the stronger will impose their civilization on others.(Schroeder P, 1994)

Besides the theories mentioned above, there are many other currents in international relations theory that have achieved global status and are discussed by political scientists. A few of them include:

- Liberal Idealism: Proponents of this perspective, including R. Cox, Kuper, and J. Nye, emphasize the role of state cooperation and integration in international relations. They argue that global management should be guided by mutual interests, with non-state actors playing a constructive role in fostering a cooperative international environment. According to liberal idealists, the primary regulator of international relations is the development and enforcement of advanced legal and moral norms.
- Postclassical Approach: Followers (including C. Rosenau, E. Schimel, C. Metz and others) argue that globalization has significantly impacted the nature and

functions of states, transforming them into transnational entities. States are increasingly handing over their roles to transnational corporations (TNCs) and non-state actors, paving the way for a broader international community with unified goals and interests. They believe that a unified norm, law, and global government are essential for humanity's future.

- Radicalism or Neomarxism: This current derives from Marxism and claims that exploitation, inequality, and class struggle underpin international relations. It suggests that international conflicts are driven not by states or TNCs, but by class interests. It asserts that once class distinctions are eliminated and the interests of the working class are prioritized globally, wars and conflicts will end. This current was later promoted under the name of Neomarxism in the works of I. Wallerstein, I. Galtung, and others in the 1960s and 1970s.

- Postmodernism: Proponents (including C. Derian, M. Wallerstein, R. Shapiro, and others) focus on real human thought and action as the foundation of international relations. They argue that people regulate their actions based on their understanding of the real world, themselves, their states, and humanity as a whole. As consciousness rises, international relations will be regulated accordingly. (Lapid Y, 1989)

Special mention is made of English and French sociologists who have created a complete research school by involving the international relations system in sociological studies. Among the sociological currents are constructivists (M. Weber, E. Durkheim), functionalists (also known as the British school), structuralists (M. Foucault), neoclassicists (C. Raggi, I. Adler), sociological institutionalists (L. Meyer, M. Finnemore), and postclassical French sociologists (B. Badi, D. Bigo, M. Smouts, etc.).

Another current in international relations theory noted by researchers is the International Political Economy current. Its supporters have conducted scientific discussions in the widely popular journal "World Politics and International Economy" since 1975, focusing on economic interests and their regulation mechanisms in international relations. Active representatives include J. Gramsci, R. Gilpin, S. Trengrove, and others. (Shiriyev Z. and Kakachia K, 2016)

International relations theory encompasses not only theoretical currents with global status but also specific theories. Some thematic international relations theories include:

- **Global International System Theory:** Proponents of this theory explain the international relations system through inter-state relations, hierarchical state structures (great, middle, and small states), and their interactions, claiming that world politics depends solely on relations among great (super) powers.

- **Balance of Threats Theory:** This theory holds that the main factor driving and directing world politics is state security. States enter relations, conflicts, alliances, and integrative unions to prevent threats and maintain balance.

- **Humanitarian Intervention Theory:** This theory asserts that only through the help of transnational organizations, preserving universal values, and international intervention (humanitarian intervention) in countries' internal affairs can conflicts and wars be managed. This intervention must have rules, conditions, and universally accepted norms. (Waltz K., 1997)

As can be seen, international relations theory, whether in currents or individual forms, comprehensively analyzes the realities of the international world, various aspects of inter-state relations, and the subjects and objects of international relations. Most of these theories are interrelated, repeating and complementing each other on various teachings. Of course, providing a detailed analysis of all currents, their similarities and differences, approaches to world politics, and the essence and criteria of these approaches is not within the scope of this textbook. Since international relations theory is taught as a separate subject, we limited ourselves to a brief overview of these theories. Without a general understanding of international relations theories, it is very difficult and almost impossible to delve into other areas of this science.

4.2 Connecting International Relations Theories with the Second Karabakh War: A Comprehensive Analysis

The theoretical foundations of relations with regional states in modern international relations provide a crucial lens through which we can analyze the Second Karabakh War and its far-reaching consequences. These theories, including realism, liberalism, constructivism, and regional cooperation frameworks, offer valuable perspectives on how states navigate conflicts, pursue national interests, and establish diplomatic and strategic alliances.(Nacafov, 2005) In the case of the Second Karabakh War, these foundational principles are directly applicable to the ways in which Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the broader international community responded to the conflict. By engaging with these theoretical concepts, we can better understand the strategies employed by Azerbaijan to restore its territorial integrity and how regional actors played key roles in shaping both the war and the post-war environment.

From the perspective of realism, one of the most dominant theories in international relations, the Second Karabakh War epitomizes a state's pursuit of its national interests through the use of military power. Realism emphasizes the anarchic nature of the international system, where states act in a self-help environment to maximize their security and power. Azerbaijan's decision to engage in the Second Karabakh War was rooted in the long-standing unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, an issue that directly challenged its sovereignty and territorial integrity. For nearly three decades, diplomatic efforts led by international mediators, such as the OSCE Minsk Group, failed to produce a meaningful solution.(Yılmaz, 2021, pp.161-177) Under these circumstances, Azerbaijan's realist strategy was to resort to military action to achieve its national objective of reclaiming occupied territories, which had been a fundamental component of its foreign policy since the 1994 ceasefire.

Azerbaijan's actions align with the realist principle that states will use force when necessary to secure their national interests, particularly when diplomatic avenues are exhausted or perceived to be ineffective. The country's military offensive, supported by strategic alliances with regional powers like Turkey, demonstrated the realist concept of

balancing power. Turkey's involvement, providing both military equipment and diplomatic backing, served to balance the influence of other regional actors, particularly Russia, which has traditionally held sway in the South Caucasus. This military success allowed Azerbaijan to shift the balance of power in the region, reasserting itself as a dominant player in the South Caucasus while simultaneously diminishing Armenia's strategic position.

However, international relations theory also highlights the limitations of power-based approaches. The war's aftermath shows the importance of liberal principles in rebuilding relations and ensuring long-term stability. Liberalism, which emphasizes the role of international institutions, diplomacy, and economic interdependence, offers a counterbalance to the realist emphasis on military power. (Tsygankov,2006) After achieving its military goals, Azerbaijan had to engage in diplomatic efforts to secure a ceasefire, brokered by Russia, and navigate the complex post-war political landscape. The November 2020 ceasefire agreement and subsequent diplomatic efforts reflect the liberal understanding that lasting peace requires cooperation, legal frameworks, and the involvement of external actors. Russia's role as a mediator and the deployment of peacekeeping forces underscore the necessity of international cooperation, even in a region traditionally characterized by great power rivalry.

The liberal framework is further evident in the post-war focus on regional cooperation and economic development, particularly through initiatives like the Zangezur Corridor. This project, aimed at connecting mainland Azerbaijan to its exclave of Nakhchivan, reflects liberalism's emphasis on the benefits of economic interdependence and infrastructure development as tools for peacebuilding. By fostering trade and connectivity between Azerbaijan, Turkey, and other regional players, the Zangezur Corridor has the potential to transform the economic landscape of the South Caucasus, promoting collaboration that could reduce the likelihood of future conflicts.(Keskin, 2021) This aligns with the liberal notion that economic ties and mutual interests can lead to more peaceful and stable relations between states, as economic cooperation reduces the incentives for conflict.

Moreover, constructivist theories, which focus on the role of identity, culture, and historical narratives, are essential for understanding the underlying drivers of the Second Karabakh War and its resolution. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has deep historical roots tied to national identity, cultural heritage, and competing historical narratives between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Constructivism explains how these historical and identity-based factors shaped both the outbreak of hostilities and the post-war political landscape. Azerbaijan's victory was not only framed as a restoration of territorial integrity but also as a reclamation of its cultural and historical heritage, particularly in the culturally significant city of Shusha. Constructivist analysis helps us understand the symbolic importance of such territorial reclamation and how it reinforces national identity and unity, which was a key aspect of Azerbaijan's domestic and foreign policy throughout and after the war. (Aliyev, N.A., 2023)

The regional cooperation framework, often discussed in terms of multilateralism and the creation of cooperative security mechanisms, is another theoretical lens that can be applied to the post-war South Caucasus. The evolving relationships between Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, and Iran following the war illustrate the complexities of regional multilateralism. The introduction of new regional cooperation formats, such as the proposed "3+3" initiative, which includes Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Russia, Turkey, and Iran, reflects an attempt to move towards a more collaborative regional security and economic structure. The "3+3" format, as an example of regionalism, underscores the importance of multilateral dialogue and cooperation in a post-war environment where unilateral actions alone cannot sustain long-term peace and development. (aztoday.az , December 12, 2021)

This regional cooperation model is particularly significant given the South Caucasus's role as a crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, and its importance in energy geopolitics. Theoretical insights from regionalism help explain how Azerbaijan's victory has opened new opportunities for economic development, including energy diplomacy and the strategic use of transportation corridors. The Zangezur Corridor

and the broader focus on regional infrastructure highlight the benefits of regionalism, where integrated economies and cooperative political frameworks can serve as deterrents to future conflicts. At the same time, regionalism theory reminds us that such cooperation is not guaranteed, as conflicting interests and external interventions from global powers like the United States and the European Union continue to shape the region's future.(Jervis R., 1998)

In summary, the theoretical foundations of international relations—realism, liberalism, constructivism, and regionalism—are integral to understanding both the causes and outcomes of the Second Karabakh War. Azerbaijan's military victory can be seen through the lens of realism, where state power and military force were central to achieving national goals. However, the post-war environment, characterized by diplomatic negotiations, regional cooperation, and economic reconstruction, reflects liberal and regional cooperation theories that emphasize the role of diplomacy, institutions, and economic interdependence in fostering peace and stability. Constructivism adds another dimension by exploring the role of historical narratives and national identity in shaping the conflict and its resolution. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the Second Karabakh War and its geopolitical implications, linking broader international relations theory with the specific events and outcomes of the conflict in the South Caucasus.

4.3 Factors Leading to the Start, Course, and Outcome of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

The outbreak of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was influenced by multiple factors. The introduction of "perestroika" and "glasnost" in the USSR was seen as an opportunity by Armenians. Armenia's territorial claims against Azerbaijan included historical assertions over Karabakh and Zangezur, as well as claims on southern Azerbaijani territories historically linked to Armenians. During this period, Armenia revived these claims and expressed its intention to annex the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) to Armenia, supported by the "miatsum" ideology (meaning unification in Armenian) from the late 1980s. The "Armenian miatsum" ideology also

encompassed claims on parts of Georgian territory, embodying a fascist ideology with territorial ambitions against neighboring South Caucasus states.(Qasimli, 2021)

The OSCE Minsk Group, tasked with resolving the conflict, achieved little success due to conflicting strategic interests among major powers. The strong Armenian lobby and diaspora in these countries, combined with their negative views toward Azerbaijan and Turkey, further threatened regional peace and security.(Yılmaz, 2021, pp. 161-177)

Negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, facilitated by the Minsk Group, commenced after the ceasefire agreement. Despite discussions on liberating Karabakh from Armenian occupation, no agreement was reached. In November 2007, the Minsk Group presented the “Madrid Principles” for a peaceful resolution, but Armenia’s obstructive stance prevented progress. The Madrid documents proposed a phased resolution involving Armenian withdrawal from occupied territories, the return of displaced persons, and the restoration of communication lines.(Ahmadov, 2021)

Armenia consistently rejected peace proposals, seeking to freeze the conflict. Key moments in the conflict resolution included the April 2-5, 2016 “four-day war,” the July 12-18, 2020 Tovuz clashes, and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War starting September 27, 2020.(Krivopalov, 2022)

On April 2, 2016, Armenian forces launched a major military provocation, the largest during the 22-year ceasefire. This followed a Nuclear Summit where President Ilham Aliyev and US Vice President Joe Biden discussed conflict resolution and US-Azerbaijan relations [Aliyev, 2023]. Armenian artillery strikes on Azerbaijani positions led to the liberation of several key locations by Azerbaijani forces and significant Armenian losses, including over 320 troops killed and substantial damage to military equipment.(Aslanlı, 2021, pp. 313-322)

The April battles ended the “frozen conflict” status, prompting shifts in policies among the conflict parties and interested states. The 2018 “velvet revolution” in Armenia initially raised hopes for peace, but the rhetoric and actions of Prime Minister Nikol

Pashinyan, including rejecting the Madrid Principles and advocating for new military strategies, closed the door to reconciliation.(Mehdiyev, 2023; Oxu.az, 2020)

Armenia's rejection of the Madrid Principles and aggressive rhetoric, including the announcement that Karabakh was part of Armenia, marked a shift away from peace efforts. By October 2019, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev criticized Armenian claims and reaffirmed Azerbaijan's stance on Karabakh.(president.az, 2020)

The conflict escalated with the 2020 military provocations and the declaration by Armenian leader Arayik Arutyunyan regarding Shusha, exacerbating tensions further [Yücel, 2020]. On September 27, 2020, Armenian attacks on Azerbaijani civilian settlements led to the beginning of the Second Karabakh War. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev addressed the nation, emphasizing Azerbaijan's determination to end the occupation and secure victory.(Cafarov, 2022)

The war, ignited by Armenian provocations and actions disregarding Azerbaijani values, began with significant military operations by Azerbaijan, including the liberation of strategic positions.(Asker & Özpınar, 2021, pp. 83-106)

The President, as the Supreme Commander, made eight addresses to the Azerbaijani people during the 44-day war. In his second address on October 4, 2020, President Ilham Aliyev informed the people of Azerbaijan about the liberation of the city of Jabrail and nine villages from occupation. During his address, the President touched upon the issue of a ceasefire and outlined the conditions for the cessation of military operations—"My condition is simple: they must withdraw from our lands, cease the confrontation, but not just in words, but in deeds. They must acknowledge Azerbaijan's territorial integrity as established in the basic principles. They must say they will withdraw their troops from the occupied territories, as established in the basic principles. They must apologize to the people of Azerbaijan and declare that Karabakh is not Armenia. The final condition is that they must provide a schedule, a timetable for the withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from the occupied territories. Only then will we restore the ceasefire regime.".(president.az , October 4, 2020)

The address by the Supreme Commander marked a significant moment in the Second Karabakh War. The matter of establishing a timetable mentioned in the address would be revisited at the conclusion of the 44-day conflict. However, this was only the seventh day of the war.(Nacafov, 2005)

Throughout the Second Karabakh War, the Supreme Commander's official Twitter (now "X") account regularly announced the names of liberated areas, bolstering public confidence in the prospect of victory. On October 9, 2020, President Ilham Aliyev addressed the nation, revealing the liberation of Hadrut and several villages, including Chayli, Yukarı Güzlek, Gorazilli, Qışlaq, Qaracallı, Əfəndilər, Süleymanlı, and Sur. During his speech, the President also commented on the status quo, stating, "There is no status quo. There is no contact line. We have broken through it. They spent 30 years building this contact line. And the terrain of that region is a natural fortification. We are advancing from below. And over 30 years, concrete fortifications were built there. We have breached them. No one can stop the Azerbaijani soldier".(president.az, September 29, 2020)

On October 9, 2020, a meeting was held in Moscow with the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia, leading to a ceasefire effective from October 10, 2020, at 12:00. This ceasefire was intended to facilitate the exchange of prisoners, detained individuals, and deceased bodies. However, Armenia did not adhere to the ceasefire, as Armenian forces shelled Azerbaijan's Aghdam and Tartar regions immediately after the ceasefire was announced. Furthermore, there were attempts to attack Hadrut and Jabrail. On October 11, Ganja, Azerbaijan's second-largest city, was targeted by rocket attacks from Armenian forces, resulting in 9 civilian deaths and 34 injuries. The Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs attributed the situation's escalation to the Armenian political-military leadership's failure to uphold the ceasefire.(Ataman & Pirinççi, 2021)

The Azerbaijani military continued its efforts to reclaim occupied territories, while Armenia persisted in targeting civilian areas with artillery and banned ballistic missiles, hitting cities such as Ganja multiple times. The Armenian attacks on civilian populations in Tartar, Beylagan, Aghjabadi, and Ganja were seen as part of Armenia's aggressive

policy towards Azerbaijan, driven by a deep-seated desire for revenge.(Kımk, 2021, pp. 54-74)

Looking at the chronology of events, it is clear that from the middle of October, the Armenian army had completely lost control over its troops and battle positions. Analyzing the speed and number of territories declared liberated by the President, it becomes evident that the number of areas announced as liberated increased daily. Instead of accepting defeat, the Armenian leadership used the term "tactical retreat." In reality, this "tactical retreat" was an attempt by the Armenian leadership to deceive its own people. Armenia, which had previously claimed a "new war for new territories," was now asserting that its ongoing political-military failures were part of a special "tactic."(yeniazerbaycan.com , May 17, 2022)

During this time, the Armenian leadership, having lost its grip and unable to continue deceiving its populace with falsehoods, acted in ways that violated international law. Notably, Armenia was using civilian aircraft to transport weapons under the guise of humanitarian aid. The Republic of Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement accusing Armenia of smuggling arms, including rocket systems, disguised as humanitarian aid through the Armenian Ministry of Emergency Situations. This practice contravened Article 4 of the International Civil Aviation Convention, established in Chicago in 1944, which prohibits the use of civilian aviation for military purposes.(mod.gov.az, 2020)

In addition to using civilian aviation for military purposes, Armenia continued to shell areas populated by Azerbaijani civilians with artillery and rockets. The differences between the Azerbaijani and Armenian armies were starkly evident during the war. The Azerbaijani army's success was enabled by its tactical principles of accurately targeting military objectives and avoiding civilian casualties. On the other hand, the Armenian army, which fled the battlefield without even taking time to withdraw its military equipment, sought to provoke Azerbaijan by attacking civilians. However, since the start of the war, Azerbaijani military units maintained their cautious and stable positions based on these principles.

On October 25, 2020, a new humanitarian ceasefire was declared based on a meeting in Washington with the participation of the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia and the President of Russia. However, on October 26, at 08:05, Armenian armed forces grossly violated the new humanitarian ceasefire by targeting Azerbaijani army positions in the Safiyan village of Lachin District with artillery fire. Subsequently, the city of Tartar and its surrounding villages came under intense fire from Armenian armed forces [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2020]. According to the Press Service of the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Azerbaijan, by October 26, 2020, Armenian armed forces had killed 65 civilians and injured 297. A total of 2,243 homes and 403 civilian objects were completely destroyed. Armenia continued to attempt to use the ceasefire for military purposes. Failing to achieve success on the battlefield, Armenia's target on the 30th day of the war was again the civilian population.(Mustafayev, 2023, p. 215-218)

The main target of the Azerbaijani army was the historic city of Shusha. Addressing questions about the liberation of Shusha during the war, President Ilham Aliyev stated, "Without Shusha, our mission would remain incomplete." The operation to liberate Shusha, a city with a highly strategic position and historical significance for the Azerbaijani people, continued successfully. From mid-October, after Azerbaijani army units had freed the town of Hadrut and surrounding villages from the occupiers, they began advancing north. The Armenian command anticipated resistance from Azerbaijani forces around the Red Bazaar. The second direction where the Armenian army expected an attack from Azerbaijani forces was the Lachin direction. However, the Azerbaijani command made an unprecedented decision with its scale, plan, and sequence, directing its forces through the dense Karabakh forests towards Shusha.(Sevdimaliyev, R.M. and Sevdimaliyev, 2023, p. 320)

On November 4, 2020, the Azerbaijani army reached the Lachin Corridor, cutting off the connection between Khankendi and Armenia. The likelihood of the entire route coming under Azerbaijani control created a supply problem for the Armenian army and further strengthened Azerbaijan's strategic advantage in the war. On November 6, 2020, positional battles began around Shusha. By November 7, fighting had moved into the city,

and the Azerbaijani army had gained the upper hand [mod.gov.az , November 6, 2020]. On November 7, 2020, around 09:00 Baku time, an Iskander missile was fired at Shusha by Armenia. Although Armenia denied this, on November 19, 2020, during a press conference in Armenia, the former head of the Armenian Ministry of Defense's military control service, General Colonel Movses Akopyan, confirmed this fact. Later, images of the missile launch were shared on social networks by Armenian media. Despite Armenia's use of Iskander missiles and the heavy bombardment of Shusha, the city was liberated from the enemy.(Movses Akopyan, 2020)

On November 8, 2020, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan, accompanied by First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva, visited the Alley of Honor and the Alley of Martyrs. After leaving the Alley of Martyrs, President Aliyev shared the news of victory with the Azerbaijani people, stating: "Today, I also visited the grave of the Great Leader Heydar Aliyev and paid my respects. I felt fulfilled knowing I had honored his legacy. We have liberated Shusha! This is a tremendous Victory! Our martyrs and the spirit of the Great Leader are celebrating today! Congratulations to Azerbaijan and to Azerbaijanis worldwide! Dear Shusha, you are free! Dear Shusha, we have returned! Dear Shusha, we will rebuild you!".(Mustafayev U., 2023, p. 80)

November 8 is etched in Azerbaijani history as Victory Day. November 8 - Victory Day has become a proud moment in our history. There are three heroes of that date: the Victorious Supreme Commander, the undefeated army he built, and the people who became an iron fist. In this reality, the words President + Army + People have become synonymous and symbols of historical Victory.(Nasirov, 2023)

On November 10, 2020, the Presidents of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia released a joint statement confirming the final agreement to halt hostilities, thereby ending the Second Karabakh War. Following the successful counteroffensive by the Azerbaijani Army, which began on September 27, 2020, by November 9, 2020, Azerbaijan had liberated five cities, four towns, and 286 villages from occupation. The 44-day conflict resulted in the deaths of 93 civilians and injuries to 454 others, with 13,360 residential and non-residential buildings damaged. Azerbaijan emerged as the victorious nation,

while Armenia, which signed the surrender agreement, was the defeated party.(mod.gov.az, November 10, 2020). Azerbaijan achieved a significant victory by ending a 30-year occupation in just 44 days.

4.4 Political-Diplomatic and Information Warfare and Its Implementation Mechanisms

In the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the struggle against Armenia was not conducted solely through military means on the battlefield. The Patriotic War was also ongoing on the information front. Since Armenia could not counter the successful military operations of the Azerbaijani army, it spread disinformation almost every day. Like in the past, Armenia implemented strategies using political, legal, and religious practices to influence the international community and turn global public opinion against Azerbaijan. Armenia also employed psychological warfare methods such as disinformation and propaganda. From the early days of the war, Armenia attempted to cover up its defeats on the battlefield with a series of baseless claims.

It should be noted that during the April battles, Armenia was already engaged in disinformation on media and social networks. Armenians began to claim that fighters from the terrorist group ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) had arrived in the conflict zone as Azerbaijani soldiers and were participating in the battles.(jamestown.org , September 23, 2020) By doing this, Armenia sought to use ISIS terrorism, which was on the global agenda, for propaganda purposes.

During the Patriotic War, Armenia also made numerous unfounded claims in the media. One such claim was about the presence of foreign mercenaries in the Azerbaijani army. Armenian media explicitly stated that military personnel from the Republic of Turkey, including jihadists from Syrian territories under Turkey's control, were brought to Nagorno-Karabakh to fight in the Azerbaijani army. Armenia aimed to achieve two main objectives with this disinformation. First, it sought to mask its battlefield failures by spreading the idea among its domestic audience that "the Azerbaijanis are not alone; the Armenian army is fighting not only against Azerbaijan but also against Turkish military personnel and jihadists brought from Syria." Second, it aimed to shift international public opinion in its favor by targeting Turkey. Armenians tried to leverage the fact that Turkey

had relatively cool relations with some Middle Eastern and European countries at that time. Naturally, countries not friendly with Turkey published this disinformation under various headlines.(Mammadov, 2024)

An example of such news published by foreign media is the article titled "Advisors, Mercenaries, and Weapons: Erdoğan and Putin's Proxy War," published by the Italian newspaper "La Stampa" one day after the start of the Patriotic War, on September 28, 2020. The article explicitly claims that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was ready to provide Azerbaijan with "all kinds of assistance" in the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. This assistance allegedly included sending mercenary fighters to Nagorno-Karabakh.(La Stampa, 2020)

During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenia aimed to garner support from the CSTO by spreading disinformation about Turkey's involvement. Despite the conflict occurring within Azerbaijan's borders, and thus not triggering CSTO support, Armenia sought to leverage fabricated claims of Turkish involvement as a pretext for appealing to the organization.(Hikmat Babaoğlu, 2023, p. 74)

The claims of mercenaries fighting for Azerbaijan, spread by Armenian media, were debunked by Azerbaijani sources, which demonstrated that the footage presented as evidence was staged.

Under the leadership of Supreme Commander Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan excelled in the information war. President Aliyev gave interviews to nearly 30 media outlets, clearly articulating the conflict's history, the failures of the negotiation process due to Armenia's actions, and the baselessness of Armenia's claims over Nagorno-Karabakh. He also highlighted that Azerbaijan's demands for halting military operations were consistent with international legal standards and relevant resolutions, countering Armenian smear campaigns.

On September 29, 2020, during an appearance on the "60 Minutes" program on "Rossiya-1," both Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and President Ilham Aliyev answered questions online. Addressing Turkey's role, Aliyev described it as stabilizing and supportive, countering Armenian claims of Turkish involvement as provocative and misleading. When asked about Syrian mercenaries, Aliyev firmly denied their presence, asserting that Armenian allegations were unfounded and part of propaganda efforts. He

emphasized Azerbaijan's self-sufficiency and readiness to defend itself, making it clear that the claims of mercenaries were false.(president.az, September 29, 2020)

During the conflict, the scale of Armenia's disinformation grew to the point where foreign leaders began contacting Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev for clarification. President Aliyev's proficiency in multiple languages, his ability to speak without translation, and his deep understanding of global politics and the conflict's history were pivotal in Azerbaijan's success in the information war. Foreign media often interviewed both the Armenian Prime Minister and the Azerbaijani President. Notably, in an interview with "Al-Arabiya" TV on October 4, 2020, President Aliyev addressed critical issues. When asked about claims of Syrian mercenaries, Aliyev firmly rejected these allegations, stating that no evidence supported them and highlighting that the French President had been unable to provide proof despite multiple requests. He assured that Azerbaijan's military forces, numbering nearly 100,000, were fully capable and well-prepared.(prezident.az, October 30, 2021)

As the war progressed and Azerbaijani forces liberated territories, Armenian circles spread new disinformation, alleging Turkish involvement and trying to involve international allies. An example of this was a statement by Enrico Aimi, an Italian senator known for his pro-Armenian stance, which falsely claimed that Turkey's military support endangered the so-called "Nagorno-Karabakh people." Concurrently, there were reports of an Armenian plane being allegedly shot down by a Turkish F-16, leading to global dissemination of false claims about Turkey supplying fighter jets to Azerbaijan.(Yücel, 2021, p. 271-29)

On October 1, 2020, the French newspaper "Le Monde" reported on the intensification of the conflict, alleging that a Turkish F-16 had downed an Armenian Su-25 and that Turkish fighters had supported Azerbaijani drones in bombing Armenian villages [Türkgün, 2020]. President Aliyev responded to these claims by stating that Turkish F-16s were not involved in combat, but rather were stationed for training and moral support.(oxu.az, October 04, 2020)

Turkey did provide Azerbaijan with advanced military technology, such as Bayraktar TB2 drones, which were crucial for precise strikes against Armenian positions. This support was part of a broader regional strategy to enhance Turkey's influence in the

South Caucasus, traditionally dominated by Russia. Turkey's support also included involvement in the reconstruction of liberated territories, further solidifying its economic and strategic ties with Azerbaijan.(Kımk, 2021)

Azerbaijan's military actions were directed solely at legitimate military targets, and the claims by Armenia that Azerbaijan had targeted historical monuments were unfounded. A specific disinformation claim alleged that an F-16 had struck a church in Shusha. However, investigations by Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense and statements from Azerbaijani officials confirmed that the incident had no connection to Azerbaijani operations and that the church was not damaged by Azerbaijani forces.(Shafiyev, 2023; dsx.gov.az, February 13, 2024)

President Aliyev, in interviews with various international media, refuted accusations of ethnic cleansing, emphasizing that Azerbaijan was liberating its own land and not engaging in retaliatory measures. He underscored that Azerbaijan's actions were justified and within the bounds of international law.(Asgarova, 2021, p. 108-115)

The 44-day war demonstrated Azerbaijan's effective military operations and principled foreign policy, culminating in the end of a 30-year occupation and achieving a historic victory.(Nasirov, 2021, p. 692)

Chapter 5

The Process and Characteristics of the Normalization of Azerbaijan-Armenia Relations

5.1. The Tripartite Statement of November 10, 2020: Implementation Process and Challenges

The Second Karabakh War, which occurred between September 27 and November 10, 2020, concluded with a tripartite agreement mediated by the Russian Federation (the full text of the statement is in the appendix). This agreement represented both a military and diplomatic triumph for Azerbaijan. Under the terms of the agreement, Azerbaijan retained all territories liberated during the 44-day conflict and secured the surrender of three additional significant regions—Kelbajar, Aghdam, and Lachin—from Armenia without further conflict. Importantly, the agreement did not address the Armenian Prime Minister's claims regarding the status and autonomy of Karabakh, which he had emphasized since 2019. The agreement affirmed Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan and mandated the removal of Armenian forces from the area designated for Russian peacekeepers.(shorturl.at, October 25, 2023)

Following the signing of the agreement, President Ilham Aliyev delivered his eighth and final address regarding the Second Karabakh War. In this address, he read out the statement and shared the news of Azerbaijan's historic victory. He emphasized the establishment of a monitoring center for ceasefire control, noting that it would include both Russian and Turkish military personnel. This indicated Turkey's official role in future conflict resolution and ceasefire monitoring. Despite not being explicitly mentioned in the agreement, Turkey's involvement in the monitoring center was a notable success for Azerbaijan, facilitated by President Aliyev's decisive leadership.(Yeşilot, O., Köksal, B. G., 2021)

In his address, President Aliyev stressed the need for Armenia to adhere strictly to the ceasefire. Despite the agreement, Armenian forces committed various provocations

and acts of terrorism, failing to uphold their obligations. On November 20, 2020, the Aghdam district was fully returned to Azerbaijan. During its nearly 30-year occupation, Armenia had destroyed much of Aghdam city and built numerous military fortifications, leaving the Aghdam Mosque as the only intact structure, which was used for surveillance. The city, often referred to as the "City of Ghosts" or the "Nagasaki of the Caucasus," was given significant attention for reconstruction. In October 2022, the Azerbaijan National Urban Forum was held in Aghdam to address post-conflict reconstruction, allowing international guests to witness the damage caused by Armenian actions.(Report.az, 2022)

The agreement outlined the scope and deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces. Despite their presence, Armenian troops remained in Karabakh, and their withdrawal was achieved through Azerbaijan's effective diplomacy and local anti-terror operations. The Turkey-Russia Joint Monitoring Center, established to oversee the ceasefire, began operations on January 30, 2021, in Aghdam. The center, manned by 60 Turkish and 60 Russian soldiers, marked a shift in the regional balance, acknowledging Turkey's role in the South Caucasus. The monitoring center ceased operations on April 26, 2024, following local anti-terror operations that led to the withdrawal of peacekeeping forces.(Official website of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021; mod.gov.az, April 27, 2024)

The agreement specified that Kelbajar would be returned to Azerbaijan by November 15, 2020, and Lachin by December 1, 2020, with the Lachin corridor being preserved. The return of Lachin and Kelbajar was a significant victory for Azerbaijan. These districts, critical for linking Karabakh with Armenia, were areas Armenia had no intention of relinquishing. Azerbaijan, demonstrating humanitarian concern, extended the deadline for Kelbajar to November 25, 2020. Lachin was returned on December 1, but Lachin city and nearby villages remained under Armenian control due to their strategic location. Azerbaijan quickly constructed an alternative road to the Lachin corridor and entered Lachin city on August 26, 2022.(Azerbaijan.az, December 10, 2020, p. 80)

On September 21, 2022, President Aliyev raised the Azerbaijani flag in Lachin and highlighted the issue of mine terrorism perpetrated by Armenians. He reported that over

1,400 new mines had been laid in Lachin after the war, resulting in casualties among Azerbaijani citizens. This underscored ongoing provocations by Armenia. A year later, Azerbaijani authorities conducted an anti-terror operation to end these provocations.(president.az, September 21, 2022)

Although the Russian peacekeeping contingent was tasked with monitoring the Lachin-Khankendi road and ensuring safe passage, they failed to fulfill their mission. The International Committee of the Red Cross was also implicated in Armenian provocations, with their vehicles reportedly involved in smuggling.(president.az, December 12, 2020)

Following discussions about illegal resource exploitation in areas occupied by Russian peacekeepers, protests and demonstrations emerged due to the peacekeepers' inactivity. Armenia exploited these protests for propaganda, and the EU decided to send a new mission to Armenia. Meanwhile, false reports circulated about a blockade of the Lachin-Khankendi road. On April 28, 2023, after prolonged protests, Azerbaijani environmental activists temporarily halted their protest.(AzərTac, April 17, 2024)

The ninth clause of the agreement mentioned establishing a new communication route between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, referring to the Zangezur Corridor. Armenia initially tried to leverage the ambiguity surrounding the Zangezur Corridor for its own benefit. The Armenian Prime Minister highlighted the potential economic benefits of this corridor and its impact on Armenia's economy.(Shiraliyev M., 2022)

On the other hand, since the term “corridor” was understood by Armenians as a transfer of rights to Azerbaijan, it caused concern. While official Yerevan considered the term corridor as a violation of its sovereign rights, the statement clearly noted that the corridor would be under the control of Russian border forces. Armenia did not want the corridor to be controlled by Russian security forces.(Sarıkaya Y., Aslanlı A., 2021, p. 141-166)

Examining the features of the Zangezur Corridor, it is first of all apparent that this corridor is not new to the region. A significant portion of the railway lines within the corridor, which were operational before the occupation, was destroyed by Armenians

during the occupation period. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan has fully repaired the railway line from Baku to Horadiz in Fuzuli District, which was destroyed by Armenians. To complete the Zangezur Corridor, a line extending from Horadiz to Nakhchivan needs to be constructed. The line between Horadiz and Ordubad is approximately 166 km long, 43 km of which will pass through Western Zangezur, under Armenian control. The main issue being discussed between Azerbaijan and Armenia is the construction, status, and future of this 43 km section. The reality is that the ownership of railways in Armenia belongs to Russia. Therefore, Azerbaijan is negotiating with Russia regarding the construction of the 43 km section. The 158 km line from Ordubad to Vəlidag on the Turkish border in Nakhchivan will be repaired. The corridor will not consist only of railways. Additionally, work is ongoing on the Ahmadbeyli-Horadiz-Mincivan-Agbend highway project by Azerbaijan.(Shiraliyev M., 2022)

The Zangezur Corridor is set to link Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan with Turkey and Europe, offering the shortest route and significantly cutting transportation costs. Armenia will not be part of this direct route, which will eliminate any geopolitical or psychological advantages Armenia might have had. With the corridor's opening, Azerbaijan will no longer depend on Iran or Georgia for access to the West. Additionally, Azerbaijan will become a key regional hub, connecting with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, aligning with Turkey's diversified transportation strategy. The reconstruction of economic connections and the activation of the Zangezur Corridor will provide regional countries with improved economic prospects by reducing transportation times, lowering costs, and fostering economic growth in Nakhchivan and Azerbaijan.(Report.az, April 24, 2024)

In conclusion, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War shifted the power dynamics in the South Caucasus, creating a new geopolitical landscape. This shift disrupted existing balances, as Azerbaijan, which had previously faced occupation with Russian support, achieved a battlefield victory and ended the occupation. Following the war, Armenia, supported by Russia and Iran, had to concede and initiate normalization talks with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Iran's influence, which had been leveraged to support Armenia's regional ambitions, waned, while Azerbaijan emerged as a significant regional power. Turkey's

influence in the region also grew markedly, underscoring its role in Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia.(Mediatv.az, May 10, 2023)

5.2 Political-Diplomatic Steps and New Mediation Formats for Normalizing Bilateral Relations

Although the Karabakh conflict concept has been effectively dismissed, no formal peace treaty has been signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia, nor have the borders been demarcated. Post-war, issues such as the exchange of military prisoners and the provision of mine maps were addressed through short-term diplomatic efforts involving various mediators. The main long-term diplomatic goals between Azerbaijan and Armenia are:

1. The demarcation and delimitation of borders.
2. The signing of a comprehensive peace agreement.

Resolving these issues is crucial not only for peace between the two countries but also for long-term stability in the South Caucasus. Two primary mediators are involved: Russia, which played a direct role in ending the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and in brokering the initial statement, and the European Union, which has monitored regional processes despite its external position. Georgia also facilitated agreements on prisoner exchanges and mine maps, such as on July 12, 2021, when Armenia provided mine maps for Aghdam District in exchange for ten detained Armenian saboteurs.(Report.az, 2023, p. 227) Efforts by the U.S. to mediate a peace treaty have been hampered by Armenia's attempts to involve more mediators and new negotiation formats, which have been seen as impractical.

During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, President Ilham Aliyev criticized the OSCE Minsk Group, asserting its ineffectiveness and obsolescence. He noted that if the Minsk Group had functioned properly, the Karabakh conflict would have been resolved in accordance with international law without the need for war. The Minsk Group's inability to ensure justice based on Azerbaijan's legal position was evident over nearly 28 years. Additionally, internal contradictions among the co-chair countries, exacerbated by the Russia-Ukraine war and Western sanctions on Russia, rendered the group's activities

nearly impossible. France's overt pro-Armenian stance further demonstrated the group's partiality.

On December 12, 2020, President Aliyev directly addressed the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs, highlighting the group's failure to resolve the conflict. He remarked, “Azerbaijan resolved a conflict that had lasted nearly 30 years, achieving this through force and political means. I agree with President Putin that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has become history. Unfortunately, the Minsk Group did not play any role in resolving the conflict, despite having a mandate for 28 years”.(president.az, October 20, 2020)

Despite this, Armenia sought to continue political-diplomatic engagement through the Minsk Group, benefiting from France's support and using the group's framework to push for Karabakh's autonomy. President Aliyev dismissed these efforts, stating unequivocally, “There is no status... to hell with the status.”

In the current diplomatic landscape, the Minsk Group has not mediated recent steps towards peace. The first post-war meeting between Azerbaijan and Armenia leaders occurred with Russian mediation on January 11, 2021, in Moscow. This trilateral meeting with Presidents Ilham Aliyev, Nikol Pashinyan, and Vladimir Putin focused on peace-building, border issues, and Russian Peacekeeping Forces' work in Karabakh, leading to the four-point Moscow Statement.(mod.gov.az, January 11, 2022, p. 1-3) The Moscow meeting marked a significant event, with Russian mediation becoming a key reference for future negotiations.

On October 14, 2021, during the CIS Foreign Ministers Council in Minsk, a meeting between Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov and Armenia's Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan, facilitated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, focused on normalizing relations based on international law, including respecting sovereignty and border integrity.(The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021)

Russia remained active in Azerbaijan-Armenia relations throughout 2021. A trilateral meeting in Sochi on November 26, 2021, with the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia, addressed border issues, the implementation of previous statements,

and plans for 3+3 format discussions.(Official website of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022) The first 3+3 Advisory Regional Platform session was held in Moscow on December 10, 2021, focusing on regional trust, economic links, and a permanent mechanism, excluding Georgia due to its conflict with Russia.(Huseynova, 2021, p. 224)

The European Union also engaged in mediation efforts, with a December 12, 2021, meeting involving EU President Emmanuel Macron, President Ilham Aliyev, and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Macron's role as EU President was criticized for potential bias, and President Aliyev emphasized the need for international support for various humanitarian and reconstruction efforts.(Official website of the President of Azerbaijan, 2020)

In February 2022, President Aliyev proposed five principles for normalizing relations with Armenia:

1. Mutual recognition of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and international borders.
2. Confirmation of the absence of territorial claims and a legal commitment not to raise such claims.
3. Non-threat to each other's security and abstaining from actions inconsistent with the UN Charter.
4. Delimitation and demarcation of borders, and establishment of diplomatic relations.
5. Opening of transportation and communications, and cooperation in other areas of mutual interest.(Azerbaijanrealities.com, 2023)

The five principles proposed by Azerbaijan later became the foundation for diplomatic interactions between Azerbaijan and Armenia. These principles underscore Azerbaijan's commitment to international law and state sovereignty, aligning with the norms of international organizations.(Məlikova, 2021, p. 42)

Despite presenting these principles promptly, Azerbaijan faced delays from Armenia, which responded to the proposed principles on March 11, 2022, after a 20-day delay. Armenia acknowledged the importance of the five principles but argued they were "not fully covered," introducing six principles of its own. The first principle merely states, "Armenia responds to the letter dated February 21 handed over to the Armenian side on March 11".(yeniazerbaijan.az, May 17, 2022) This is more of a procedural note than a substantive principle. The second and third principles present contradictions: the second principle affirms Armenia's recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity based on the December 8, 1991, CIS agreement, ratified on February 18, 1992. In contrast, the third principle emphasizes securing the rights of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians and determining Nagorno-Karabakh's final status.(yeniazerbaijan.com, May 18, 2022) However, as of July 7, 2021, the administrative unit of Nagorno-Karabakh no longer exists within Azerbaijan's administrative structure.(Dsx.gov.az, 2024, p. 63) Reintroducing a matter settled in November 2020 as a principle reflects a lack of effective diplomacy and attempts to delay the peace process.

The claim that "Armenia has requested the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs to organize relevant negotiations" is inaccurate, as the OSCE Minsk Group has been inactive post-war.

Alongside these diplomatic efforts, a second trilateral meeting took place in Brussels on April 6, 2022, with EU Council President Charles Michel, President Ilham Aliyev, and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The meeting not only addressed general issues but also led to important decisions. The final statement indicated both leaders' intent to advance towards a peace agreement, instructing their Foreign Ministers to begin drafting it and addressing related matters. A Joint Border Commission was agreed upon to be established by the end of April 2022, per the November 26, 2021, Sochi Statement. The Commission's mandate includes:

1. Delimitation of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan,
2. Ensuring a stable security situation along the border and its surroundings.(mfa.gov.az, May 16, 2022)

The agreements reached at the second Brussels meeting were a diplomatic victory for Azerbaijan. Despite Western pressure and numerous attempts by Armenia, the agreement did not include any provisions related to "status" or "the rights of the Nagorno-Karabakh population," which were out of line with the geopolitical realities of the time.

Armenia continued to pursue ineffective and counterproductive actions that hindered peace efforts. On April 8, 2022, just two days after the Brussels meeting, Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan criticized the meeting for not addressing the status issue and suggested that peace treaty negotiations would be conducted under the OSCE Minsk Group framework. In response, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted uncertainty about the future of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs' "troika," revealing that the French and American partners had dismantled the "troika" and that the co-chairs would no longer engage in that format. (kavkaz-uzel.eu, April 10, 2022) This situation underscored the ineffectiveness of the Minsk Group, particularly due to the disagreements and limitations of the format, especially with Russia as one of the co-chair countries.

Armenia's reluctance to accept the real geopolitical situation and take corresponding actions was hindered by the support of two co-chair countries (both Russia and France) and the desire to benefit from the fragmented Minsk Group format. At the same time, Armenia attempted to delay resolving issues related to the agreements on border determination. Armenia used the pretext of undefined borders while also seeking France's involvement as a party in the meetings.

Despite this, diplomatic contacts between the parties continued even after the second Brussels meeting. Meetings for general discussions were held again during the CIS Foreign Ministers Council meeting in Dushanbe. However, no substantial results were achieved.

During this period, Armenia extended the issue by proposing "mirror principles" for border determination, which contradicted the Minsk Group negotiations. According to the mirror principle, both sides' troops should withdraw the same distance from the border, and a relevant commission would then start its work. Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister clarified that there were no preliminary requirements for border determination

and deemed this unacceptable. Interestingly, after the war ended, Yerevan officials actively supported and spoke positively about the idea of opening transportation routes between Armenia and Turkey. The re-election of Nikol Pashinyan in the snap elections in Armenia in the summer of 2021, following opposition demands, reflected the mood and new trends within Armenian society. Despite being geographically situated in a key location, Armenia had maintained its own blockade for 30 years by occupying Karabakh and surrounding areas. None of the international trade, transport, and logistics routes pass through this area. In reality, Armenia should be the most interested party in restoring communications in the South Caucasus. The sole requirement for restoring communications is the determination of the Azerbaijan-Armenia border.(Baghirov O., 2021)

On May 22, 2022, a third trilateral meeting took place in Brussels with European Council President Charles Michel, where it was announced that a final decision on border delineation had been made. It was agreed that the Azerbaijani and Armenian Foreign Ministers would meet within a month to draft the initial peace texts. Subsequently, on May 23, 2022, Azerbaijan and Armenia signed agreements to establish a border delimitation commission, highlighting that border issues were the primary focus of the Brussels meeting.(president.az, May 24, 2022)

The new border commissions are led by Armenian and Azerbaijani Deputy Prime Ministers Mher Grigoryan and Shahin Mustafayev, respectively. Azerbaijan's commission comprises heads and deputies from 22 state institutions, including nine district executive heads from regions bordering Armenia.(President.az, 2022) The first meeting of the border commissions occurred on May 24, 2022, at the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia, where it was agreed to schedule a follow-up meeting. Although subsequent meetings were held in Moscow on August 30, 2022, and in Brussels on November 3, 2022, they yielded no significant outcomes.

On October 6, 2022, a quadrilateral meeting took place in Prague during the "European Political Community" Summit with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, European Council President Charles Michel, French President Emmanuel Macron, and

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. This meeting represented a diplomatic success for Azerbaijan, as Armenia acknowledged Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Both countries confirmed recognition of each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty based on the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1991, which also implied Armenia's acceptance of Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan.(Azerbaijanrealities.com, 2023) This marked Armenia's formal abandonment of the Nagorno-Karabakh status issue, which had been a point of contention between 2021 and 2022. Although President Ilham Aliyev had already declared the status issue as "irrelevant," Armenia's formal acknowledgment occurred at the Prague meeting.

Following the Prague meeting, Armenia requested France's involvement in the negotiations, which Azerbaijan found unacceptable. Consequently, the planned meeting in Brussels on December 7, 2022, was postponed.(Azerbaijanrealities.com, 2023)

On October 31, 2022, another trilateral meeting was held in Sochi with Russian mediation. Before this meeting, a bilateral discussion between the Azerbaijani and Russian Presidents was significant. Russian President Vladimir Putin referred to the "Nagorno-Karabakh conflict" and noted positive developments in negotiations with Armenia. President Ilham Aliyev reiterated that the conflict was resolved and emphasized the need for a serious approach to normalization, while Armenia's proposal to extend the peacekeepers' mandate remained a topic for future discussion.(Rzayev, 2021, p. 55)

The fifth meeting took place in Brussels on May 14, 2023. European Council President Charles Michel reported that progress was made on border issues, and both leaders agreed to continue bilateral meetings on border delimitation. They reaffirmed their commitment to each other's territorial integrity as defined by the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration, with final border delimitation to be achieved through negotiations.(Azerbaijanrealities.com, May 14, 2023)

The sixth meeting occurred in Brussels on July 15, 2023, and again underscored the importance of territorial integrity and border determination. During this period, Armenia's claims about humanitarian aid delivery to Karabakh were addressed, with Azerbaijan

highlighting the readiness of aid vehicles. Charles Michel emphasized the need for humanitarian aid to be transported via both Aghdam and Lachin roads.(Report.az, 2023)

Russia expressed concern over the continued Western mediation in the peace process, with a statement on July 15, 2023, noting Armenia's recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity as closing the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh's status. Russia aimed to create internal discord in Armenia with this statement.(Report.az, 2023, p. 289-290) Despite the lack of mention in the trilateral statement, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had previously suggested that Nagorno-Karabakh's status would be addressed in the future. Azerbaijan's successful diplomacy, particularly through the Brussels format, resulted in the nullification of Armenia's status-related proposals.

Following the sixth Brussels meeting, Armenia again proposed French participation in the negotiations, but this was unacceptable to Azerbaijan. Consequently, Azerbaijan declined to attend the planned five-party meeting in Granada, Spain, on October 5, 2023.

In response to France's participation, Azerbaijan proposed the inclusion of the Republic of Turkey. However, due to strong objections from France and Germany, Turkey could not participate as a party in the peace negotiations in this format. The proposed five-party format (Armenia-Azerbaijan-France-Germany-European Union) was deemed contrary to Azerbaijan's interests given its anti-Azerbaijani atmosphere. The anti-Azerbaijani statements by French officials (such as the defense minister and foreign minister), the foreign minister's visit to Armenia, and the statements about military cooperation and arms supplies, coupled with European Council President Charles Michel's comments accusing Azerbaijan of anti-terrorism measures, led Azerbaijan to justifiably refuse participation in the five-party format.(Azerbaijanrealities.com, 2023) The planned Granada meeting was seen as a blatant attempt to create a peace negotiation format favorable to Armenia through an anti-Azerbaijani coalition.

Armenia had some opportunities to achieve its objectives on the Western platform. In particular, an environment formed against Azerbaijan with French support could have been quite beneficial for Armenia. The pro-Armenian policy of Western states was also evident in the European Council Parliamentary Assembly (PACE). For instance, during

the PACE winter session, the Azerbaijani delegation's credentials were not approved based on a proposal by German deputy Frank Schwabe. One of the reasons cited for this decision was that, following anti-terror measures, Armenians in Karabakh were forced to leave the area. This was yet another manifestation of Western double diplomacy. Despite the fact that no pressure was applied to Armenia during the 30-year Armenian occupation period by any institution recognizing Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, Azerbaijan's anti-terror measures within its own borders were presented as a violation of human rights. In reality, the safety of every Armenian in Karabakh was ensured by the relevant Azerbaijani authorities. Even during the anti-terror operations, civilians were repeatedly informed, and civilian objects were not targeted. As a result, no civilians were harmed during the anti-terror operations.(Azerbaijan State Information Agency, 2024)

This step taken by PACE was essentially part of a plan formed by anti-Azerbaijani forces before the Granada meeting. Azerbaijan was unable to halt the execution of this plan, even though it disrupted it. The issue of the acceptance of the Azerbaijani delegation's credentials was sent to the relevant committee in PACE. The delegation, without waiting for the committee's response, issued a statement on January 24, 2024 (the text of the statement is included in the appendix), announcing that it was suspending its activities indefinitely. The statement's wording – “No one in the world, including those sitting in this hall, can speak to Azerbaijan in the language of threats and blackmail.” (Azerbaijan State Information Agency, 2024) – was a clear message to both the PACE delegation and the forces shaping the anti-Azerbaijani environment.

5.3 Armenian Military Provocations as the Main Obstacle to the Peace Process

Military provocations by Armenia began in November 2020, despite its commitment, under the November 10, 2020 trilateral statement, to withdraw its troops from Karabakh. Armenian forces remained in the region, continuing to set up combat positions and engage in acts of terrorism. A joint statement by the State Security Service and the Ministry of Defense on November 26, 2020, reported that three Azerbaijani servicemen were killed and two injured in a surprise attack by Armenians in the Sur village of Khojavend district. Additionally, on December 8, a serviceman was killed and

an ‘Azercell’ employee was seriously injured while setting up communication equipment near Hadrut [Dtx.gov.az, 2020]. Consequently, the State Security Service carried out an anti-terror operation, neutralizing armed groups associated with the Armenian military.

The military provocations by Armenia, despite its significant military losses, signaled Armenian revanchism. President Ilham Aliyev repeatedly urged Armenians to abandon such ideas, yet provocations persisted. On December 27, 2020, a six-member Armenian armed group attacked Azerbaijani positions in Khojavend district, resulting in one Azerbaijani soldier being killed and another injured. Azerbaijani forces responded by eliminating all six members of the Armenian group.

Armenian officials addressed these provocations in two ways:

1. They claimed that the incidents occurring in the peacekeeping contingent's temporary responsibility zone in Karabakh were unrelated to the Armenian army and were instead attributed to armed groups from the so-called entity.

However, the so-called entity, which illegally persisted until the anti-terror operation, lacked military units, essential weapons, or ammunition. All combat capabilities had been either destroyed or captured during the 44-day conflict. Terrorist activities were directly managed by Armenia, which provided all necessary resources. The Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense stated on August 11, 2021, that Armenia continued to transport weapons, equipment, and personnel into Karabakh, with new posts established around Kelbajar, Lachin, and Shusha [Mehdiyev, 2023]. The Armenian leadership's pre-planned military provocations and illegal entry of arms and personnel into Azerbaijan's Karabakh area were evident. The Ministry of Defense also highlighted statements by Armenian Defense Minister Arshak Karapetyan, who issued provocative orders for the Armenian army. This followed the earlier provocative doctrine of Armenia's former Defense Minister David Tonoyan, known as “new wars, new territories”.(Mehdiyev, 2023) These facts indicate that the statements from Armenian officials did not reflect the actual situation.

2. Armenian officials sometimes shifted the responsibility for military provocations to the Azerbaijani army in their statements. There was even an attempt to present the Azerbaijani army to the international community as an occupier.

This second approach, in particular, became evident after the Azerbaijani army restored the state border in the direction of Karagol in May 2021. Since the signing of the trilateral statement occurred in November, it was impossible to reach the high snowy peaks during those months. In this context, due to the improvement in weather conditions in May 2021, Azerbaijani forces reached the heights along the Eastern Göyçə chain, thus taking visual control over both the heights around Karagol and Chinligol and the communication routes of the Armenian army. This was Azerbaijan's complete sovereign right as it provided full control over the western borders with Armenia after 30 years. (Report.az, 2023, p. 226) Armenia, however, tried to portray Azerbaijan's control over its own borders as an "occupation" of Armenian territory. Naturally, both the Armenian diaspora and the existing political leadership in Armenia worked hard to fully implement this mission, trying to expand anti-Azerbaijani propaganda through Western partners.

In 2021, the political scene was marked by a contrast between Armenian officials advocating for border inviolability and the commencement of delimitation, and the Armenian armed forces engaging in military provocations against Azerbaijani units. Notably, these provocations occurred not only within the temporary responsibility zone of Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh but also directly along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. Between May 24-26, 2021, Armenian forces intermittently targeted Azerbaijani positions in Kelbajar and Gadabay districts from Gegharkunik in Armenia. Despite these actions, Armenia falsely claimed that the attacks originated from Kelbajar and accused Azerbaijan of assaulting Armenian territory. The Ministry of Defense promptly issued a statement, effectively countering this disinformation. (Oxu.az, 2020)

On May 27, 2021, special reconnaissance diversion groups attempted to mine Azerbaijani territories near Kelbajar. Additionally, on May 31, there were attempts to

conduct reconnaissance flights with “Griffon-12” drones and deploy special equipment in the Kelbajar region. These provocations were thwarted by the Azerbaijani military. On June 11, 24, and 27, 2021, Armenian forces fired upon Azerbaijani positions in Kelbajar and Tovuz districts from Yuvan Shorca settlement in Vardenis district.

During the summer of 2021, military provocations and ceasefire violations also intensified. For instance, from July 7, 9, 14, 19, 23, 25, 26, and 28, Armenian armed forces units increased border tension by firing at our army units in Shusha, Tovuz, Kelbajar, and Nakhchivan directions.(Oxu.az, 2020, p. 331) One of the reasons for the intensification of provocations was the snap parliamentary elections held in Armenia in June 2021. Naturally, keeping the situation tense on the conditional border to win the elections was a common tactic observed in Armenian elections. N. Pashinyan used this method, particularly intensifying the situation on the border. At the same time, both before and after the elections, the Armenian leadership sought to keep the situation tense and propagate false reports of Azerbaijani army attacks on Armenia to the international community. This political maneuver had also been evident before the war during the Tovuz battles, where intense fighting was taking place not in Karabakh but directly on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. Considering that meetings aimed at signing a peace agreement were also held with Western mediation, such anti-Azerbaijani propaganda could be viewed as a move aimed at changing Western states’ attitudes towards Azerbaijan.

From September 2 to September 26, 2021, Armenia violated the ceasefire regime daily, particularly firing at Nakhchivan direction and other border districts. After the Karagol operation, the failure to achieve the desired results in anti-Azerbaijani propaganda and the Azerbaijani army’s acquisition of significant strategic military positions led to Armenia’s next military provocation around Karagol. On November 9, 2021, in the afternoon, Armenia deliberately attempted to create a military conflict by using metal structures to block the road between Azerbaijani army positions in this part of the border and strengthen the area.

As a result of the measures taken, around 60 Armenian soldiers were surrounded, their movements were restricted, and in the morning hours, the Azerbaijani army, considering Russia's request, allowed their return.(Mod.gov.az, 2021)

Armenia's ongoing military provocations, even as the peace treaty was being signed, exemplified its ineffective approach to achieving a lasting resolution between the two nations. Despite repeated warnings from Azerbaijan, Armenia continued its provocations. In August 2022, these provocations resulted in Azerbaijani casualties, prompting the launch of Operation “Revenge.” The Azerbaijani Defense Ministry described the operation, noting that “illegal Armenian armed groups attempted to capture the Qırxqız height in the Kalbajar and Lachin regions and establish new combat positions. The Azerbaijani Army’s 'Revenge' operation successfully secured Qırxqız height as well as Saribaba and other key strategic positions along the Karabakh range of the Lesser Caucasus mountains”.(Mod.gov.az, 2022) Gaining control over Qırxqız and Saribaba heights was both a military and political victory, providing the Azerbaijani army with a significant tactical edge in the crucial anti-terror operation conducted on September 19-20, 2023.

The “Revenge” military operation once again demonstrated the unprofessionalism of the Armenian army. Instead of resolving the issues within the framework of peaceful neighborly relations, starting the delimitation of borders, and normalizing relations, the Armenian political leadership began preparations for further provocations. Between September 12-14, 2022, Armenia launched another large-scale military provocation towards the Dashkasan, Kalbajar, Lachin, and Zangilan directions. On September 12, two civilians were injured as a result of Armenian provocations.(Cafarov, 2022, p. 4-5) Armenia aimed to achieve several objectives through these provocations. Firstly, by targeting civilians, Armenia sought to intimidate the population that had returned to its historic lands as part of the “Great Return” process, keeping them in a state of anxiety, and ultimately preventing their historical return. On the other hand, Armenia made false and unfounded claims of targeting Azerbaijani civilian objects and carried out anti-Azerbaijan propaganda on the international stage. The large-scale nature of the provocations can undoubtedly be seen as a political provocation aimed at changing the

Western stance towards Azerbaijan during the Brussels meetings. The timing of both large-scale military provocations coincided with the Brussels meetings, and the September provocation occurred approximately one month before the decisive Granada meeting, further proving that these events were preplanned by the Armenian military-political leadership. Another objective of the September provocations was to attempt to regain control of the heights lost in August of the same year. Due to the urgent measures taken by the Azerbaijani army, the military provocations were thwarted, and the army's positions were further fortified. During this period, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense held information meetings for military personnel and was able to prevent the expansion of the provocation's scale and the dissemination of misinformation by Armenia. The September 12-14 operations were unofficially named "Decisive Response" by the Azerbaijani public.(Dsx.gov.az, 2024)

Armenia's attempts to hinder the peace process by carrying out military provocations persisted into 2023. During the Brussels meetings in April and May, Armenia engaged in provocations at the state border and continued to transport weapons to Karabakh via the Russian peacekeeping zone. Additionally, on April 22, 2022, Armenia unilaterally set up a checkpoint at the entrance of the Lachin-Khankendi road, violating Azerbaijan's territorial sovereignty and the tripartite statement. In response, Azerbaijan established the "Lachin" Control-Inspection Point at the beginning of the road on April 23, 2023, restricting Armenia's military supplies to Karabakh.(Dsx.gov.az, 2024)

Despite this checkpoint, Armenia continued to use alternative routes for transporting weapons and military equipment to Karabakh. Humanitarian cargo was the only type allowed through the checkpoint. Armenia accused Azerbaijan of blocking the Lachin-Khankendi road while Armenia persisted in sending military supplies via illegal routes. These supplies were used to strengthen Armenian positions in Karabakh and conduct provocations against Azerbaijani forces and civilians. The Armenian armed groups also expanded their activities to include radio jamming, such as the incident on September 18, 2023, where GPS navigation systems on an Azerbaijani Airways flight were disrupted.(mod.gov.az, 2020)

The latest provocation occurred on September 19, 2023, with shelling in the Gadabay district and the placement of mines on the Ahmadbeyli-Fuzuli-Shusha highway by illegal Armenian formations. These actions caused civilian casualties and targeted vehicles carrying Azerbaijani Internal Troops, leading to anti-terror operations by Azerbaijan in Karabakh.(axar.az, 2020)

During these anti-terror operations, which lasted 23 hours and 43 minutes, Azerbaijani forces neutralized the remaining illegal Armenian armed groups. By September 20, 2023, at 13:00, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense announced the cessation of anti-terror measures under these conditions:

1. Armenian armed forces and illegal groups in Karabakh must disarm, leave their positions, and withdraw from Azerbaijani territory.
2. All weapons, ammunition, and heavy equipment must be surrendered.
3. These processes are coordinated with the Russian peacekeeping contingent.(mod.gov.az, September 20, 2023)

Thus, the disarmament of Armenian fighters began based on the terms of the agreements. Naturally, it was also necessary to arrest war criminals who had taken separatist positions against Azerbaijan, violated the republic's sovereignty, and formed a fictitious entity. The terrorists who declared themselves as presidents in Karabakh and the so-called "state ministers" of the fictitious regime were arrested and brought to Baku. On September 28, 2023, Ruben Vardanyan, who considered himself a "state minister," was arrested on October 3, 2023, along with Bako Saakyan and Arkadi Gukasyan, who led the "fictitious regime" and were among the organizers of the Khojaly genocide. On October 5, 2023, Arayik Harutyunyan, who played a significant role in the formation of Armenian separatism in Karabakh and directly led the bombing of Ganja city, and who called himself the "president," was arrested by the State Security Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan and held criminally responsible.(dtx.gov.az, 2023) As a result of the anti-terror operation, the sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan was fully restored.

On October 11, 2023, President Ilham Aliyev addressed the issue of local anti-terror operations during a meeting with participants of the 53rd Council of Heads of Security and Special Services of CIS member states. He stated, "Despite Azerbaijan's repeated appeals to cease provocative actions, these calls were ignored. The situation worsened when, on September 2 of this year, the Armenian Prime Minister sent a congratulatory letter celebrating the anniversary of the so-called 'Nagorno-Karabakh Republic,' crossing a red line that Azerbaijan could not accept. The situation further deteriorated on September 9 when the so-called 'Nagorno-Karabakh' authorities held 'elections,' completely disregarding existing realities. Consequently, Azerbaijan had no option but to launch anti-terror operations on September 19 to fully restore its sovereignty".(president.az, October 11, 2023)

October 15, 2023, was a historic day for Azerbaijan, marking the 20th anniversary of President Ilham Aliyev's leadership. On this day, the President raised the national flag of Azerbaijan in Khankendi, Khojaly, Khojavend, Agdara, and Asgaran, marking the first time the flag was displayed across the entire territory of the republic, particularly in areas previously affected by Armenian separatism.(president.az, October 15, 2023)

Although provocations in Karabakh ceased, tensions persisted along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. On February 12, 2024, the Zangilan district was shelled from Armenia's Qafan district, injuring a serviceman of the State Border Service. Notably, the injury resulted from fire by an Armenian sniper at the conditional state border, highlighting Armenia's military readiness amid ongoing provocations.(Aliyev, H.H., 2021) This incident occurred during the EU Mission in Armenia, suggesting that Armenia's actions might be influenced by EU and French support and reflect deliberate political maneuvering. In response, on February 13, 2024, Azerbaijani State Border Service units carried out Operation "Revenge" under Operation 2624, destroying an Armenian combat post near the Nerkin-And settlement in Armenia's Qafan district.(Aliyev, İ.H., 2003) These provocations indicate Armenia's tendency to use military actions to further its political objectives, affecting peace and stability in the region.

5.4. Future Prospects for Peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia

The Republic of Azerbaijan has consistently sought to promote peace and establish enduring relationships. The peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia is vital not only for bilateral ties but also for the overall stability of the South Caucasus. Despite its small size, the South Caucasus region has substantial geopolitical significance and has historically attracted neighboring states' interest. Following the Second Karabakh War, the opportunity for long-term peace in the South Caucasus and improved regional communication has emerged. In this context, Azerbaijan's proposed "3+3" platform, introduced by President Ilham Aliyev in 2021, is particularly noteworthy. This initiative includes Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, along with Turkey, Russia, and Iran, creating a six-nation format. Azerbaijan believes that this multilateral cooperation could significantly enhance regional collaboration and foster lasting peace.(Aqreqator.az, February 15, 2022)

The "3+3" platform could transform the South Caucasus from a conflict zone into a region of commercial and economic cooperation in the near term and a major Eurasian transport hub in the long term. The format offers substantial political, security, and economic potential. The combined economies of the "3+3" countries are close to \$3 trillion, making it the fifth largest economy globally after the USA, China, Japan, and Germany. With a population of 331 million, it ranks third worldwide, and offers extensive opportunities for mutual investment and cooperation in various sectors. The "3+3" format can boost regional trade and economic growth, with strengthened trade relations with Russia, Turkey, and Iran being a significant benefit for South Caucasus countries.(Aqreqator.az, February 15, 2022)

In the first three years after the war, although Armenia made gestures towards peace, it continued both political and military provocations. Despite Azerbaijan's strong opposition to efforts involving France as a mediator and attempts to delay the peace process, inappropriate actions were taken in early 2024. The Armenian Prime Minister's request for additional assurances from Azerbaijan regarding territorial claims was an attempt to create obstacles to peace.(president.az, October 10, 2023) President Ilham

Aliyev emphasized that Azerbaijan has no territorial claims against any state and argued that mediation is unnecessary for peace talks. The Armenian request for such guarantees was seen as an artificial barrier to peace.

On February 7, 2024, Azerbaijan held its first extraordinary presidential elections, with President Ilham Aliyev winning. In his inauguration speech on February 14, 2024, he reiterated Azerbaijan's commitment to the peace treaty and the principles it entails. He asserted that if Armenia adheres to international norms, the treaty will be signed; otherwise, Azerbaijan would remain unaffected by the delays.(president.az, 2024)

Following the elections, many international leaders congratulated President Aliyev, but Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan did not extend such congratulations. In line with President Aliyev's proposal, on February 17, 2024, a bilateral meeting was held in Munich between Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders, agreeing to further discussions on border delimitation.

In April 2024, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev visited both Azerbaijan and Armenia, proposing a goodwill mission to facilitate bilateral relations and conduct meetings. This initiative aims to show that peace can be achieved without Western or Russian mediation and is expected to positively influence Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan relations and regional transport corridors.(mfa.gov.az, May 11, 2024)

Following the meeting of foreign ministers in Kazakhstan on May 10-11, 2024, further discussions and border delimitation efforts accelerated. The first agreement on border delimitation was reached on May 15, 2024, beginning from Azerbaijan's Kazakh district and based on 1976 maps. This agreement signifies progress in the peace process and demonstrates the effectiveness of direct negotiations.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain, such as Armenia's constitution which reflects chauvinistic and nationalist elements that obstruct normalization with Turkey. Legal barriers related to historical territorial claims and references to alleged genocides complicate relations. Moreover, Armenia's continued military provocations

and the involvement of external supporters like India and France pose significant threats to regional stability.(president.az, April 2, 2024)

The return of the Western Azerbaijan community to their historical lands remains a contentious issue, reflecting broader challenges in achieving trust and peace. The Republic of Azerbaijan's anti-terror operations have restored sovereignty but ongoing provocations indicate Armenia's reluctance to fully embrace peace, often obstructing it through provocations and reliance on external support.



Chapter 6

Post-War Period: Relations with Regional Countries in New Geopolitical Realities

6.1. Azerbaijan-Turkey Relations: Strategic and Military Alliance

Diplomatic relations between the independent Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey were established immediately after Azerbaijan regained its independence. Over the past three decades, these relations have developed significantly across various domains including economic, political, social, cultural, military, and ideological spheres. Reflecting on the pre-war era, it is clear that major international projects and the deep historical bonds between the two nations have fortified their relationship, leading to a strategic partnership and alliance.

Cavid Vəliyev, the head of the Foreign Policy Department at the International Relations Analysis Center of Azerbaijan, attributes the ongoing enhancement of Azerbaijan-Turkey relations to several factors:

- A shared political-intellectual culture,
- The favorable influence of public opinion in both countries,
- Personal relationships between leaders,
- Common interests.

The historical ties between the Azerbaijan People's Republic, predating the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, and the Ottoman Empire, along with the migration of many Azerbaijani founders to Turkey after the USSR's formation, fostered a lasting affinity for Turkey among Azerbaijanis. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, Azerbaijan, upon regaining independence, began to forge bilateral ties with Turkey. Turkey has played a pivotal role in linking Azerbaijan with the West. Key international projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, and TANAP are essential for both nations, illustrating their strategic energy partnership and contributing to their energy security. Additionally, the utilization of energy resources in Karabakh highlights future cooperation prospects. (president.az, February 08, 2023)

The Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance Agreement signed in 2010 is a cornerstone of the Azerbaijan-Turkey strategic alliance. To enhance this relationship, the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was established at the presidential level in 2010. On October 13, 2013, during a council meeting in Ankara, strategic agreements such as the International Mixed Cargo Transportation Agreement and the Security Cooperation Agreement were signed.(president.az, June 15, 2021)

Before the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan-Turkey relations were already well-developed. The Second Karabakh War marked a new phase in their strategic partnership, with Turkey offering considerable support to Azerbaijan during and after the conflict. This support can be categorized as follows:

Political Support: Turkey consistently backed Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and peaceful resolution of the Karabakh issue through Armenia's withdrawal. Turkish officials made strong statements in support of Azerbaijan during the Tovuz attacks and defended Azerbaijan's stance on various international platforms. For example, at a UN Security Council meeting on August 16, 2023, Turkey reaffirmed its support for Azerbaijan, countering Armenian disinformation supported by France and the US. Turkish Permanent Representative to the UN, Sedat Önal, expressed concern over Armenia's politically motivated accusations.(president.az, August 17, 2023)

Notably, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's speech at the 78th UN General Assembly session on September 19, 2023, reaffirmed Turkey's support for Azerbaijan. He emphasized that Armenia should fulfill its promises, including opening the Zangezur corridor, and underscored that Karabakh is Azerbaijani territory, which will never be questioned.(mod.gov.az, September 20, 2023)

Military Cooperation: Azerbaijan and Turkey have substantial military cooperation, including the sale of advanced military equipment, joint training exercises, and logistical support. Azerbaijani military personnel frequently train with Turkish soldiers, enhancing their skills. This cooperation dates back to a military training agreement signed in 1992 and was further solidified by a 1996 memorandum.(kulakver.iletisim.gov.tr, 2022) The 2009 Zurich Protocols, mediated by the US, Russia, and France, aimed to normalize Turkey-Armenia relations but were seen as undermining Azerbaijan-Turkey ties and were not ratified by Turkey. This led to a

renewed partnership with the 2010 Agreement and the 2020 decision by Turkey's Grand National Assembly to deploy troops to Azerbaijan. The use of Turkish-made UAVs during the war provided Azerbaijan with significant military and psychological advantages.(kulakver.iletisim.gov.tr, 2022)

Beyond political and military support, Turkish citizens also demonstrated solidarity with Azerbaijan during the conflict. Turkish support included public displays of Azerbaijani flags and rallies against Armenia's actions, reflecting Turkey's genuine alliance with Azerbaijan and its role in South Caucasus peace efforts.(kulakver.iletisim.gov.tr, 2022) Azerbaijan reciprocates this sentiment, celebrating November 8 as Victory Day, honoring the liberation of Shusha and aligning with the Turkish commemoration of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's day.(mod.gov.az, 2020)

A significant development in post-conflict relations was the signing of the Shusha Declaration on June 15, 2021, marking a new phase in the strategic partnership. This declaration, named after the city of Shusha, recalls the Treaty of Kars of 1921, emphasizing historical ties and future cooperation. The Shusha Declaration solidifies the alliance, declaring that an attack on either Azerbaijan or Turkey will be seen as an attack on both, thereby reinforcing Azerbaijan's strategic role in the South Caucasus.(president.az, June 15, 2021)

In 2021, Azerbaijan proposed the creation of a "3+3" platform, supported by Turkish President Erdoğan. This platform, comprising Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, alongside Turkey, Russia, and Iran, aims to foster regional peace and cooperation. It could transform the South Caucasus into a hub for trade and economic growth while improving regional security.(Aqreqator.az, February 15, 2022)

The "3+3" platform offers significant political, security, and economic potential. With a combined economy approaching \$3 trillion and a population of 331 million, it presents vast opportunities for mutual investment and economic development. Strengthening trade relations with Russia, Turkey, and Iran, which are crucial markets for South Caucasus countries, is one of the key benefits of this format.(Aqreqator.az, February 15, 2022)

The Second Karabakh War has also elevated Azerbaijan-Turkey relations and expanded cooperation with other Turkic states. A notable meeting on December 14, 2022,

in Turkmenbashi, involved leaders from Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Turkmenistan, highlighting increased trade and investment flows and mutual trust [president.az, December 14, 2022]. Following the February 6, 2023, earthquake in Turkey, Azerbaijan promptly offered aid and condolences, further demonstrating the deep brotherhood between the two nations.(president.az, February 8, 2023)

Under the instruction of the head of state, all aid began to be managed from a single center. Between February 6 and March 15, 2023, the total amount of humanitarian and financial aid sent to Turkey amounted to 76 million 344 thousand 930 manat (44 million 908 thousand 783 USD). The 669 Azerbaijani rescuers actively participated in rescue operations in Hatay, Antakya, Kahramanmaraş, Adıyaman, and other cities.(Qafqazinfo, March 15, 2023)

On April 29, 2023, President Ilham Aliyev and First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva attended the "TEKNOFEST" aerospace and technology festival held in Istanbul, Turkey. In his opening speech at the festival, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that "My dear brother Ilham Aliyev never left us alone from the very beginning of the central Pazarlık earthquake. From the first moment, search and rescue teams were with us in Kahramanmaraş. He did not stop there; later, my brother Ilham promised that 1,000 houses would be built in Kahramanmaraş. Of course, he decided to build an Azerbaijani city there with a school, mosque, dormitory, and residential buildings." The Republic of Azerbaijan continued its support for Turkey in eliminating the consequences of the earthquake through recovery and reconstruction efforts. The aid provided by the Azerbaijani people and state in addressing the consequences of the earthquake in Turkey once again demonstrated the idea of National Leader Heydar Aliyev that "Turkey and Azerbaijan are one nation, two states" to the entire world. It should be noted that the "TEKNOFEST" festival was held outside Turkey for the first time in Azerbaijan from May 26 to 29, 2022.(president.az , April 29, 2023)

In 2023, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkey remained exceptionally positive. On June 3, 2023, President Ilham Aliyev and First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva attended the inauguration of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's new term. Following his election victory, Erdoğan visited both the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and Azerbaijan on June 13, 2023. During a joint press conference, Aliyev

highlighted the strengthening trade relations between the two countries, noting that trade turnover had approached \$6 billion and was expected to increase further due to ongoing joint projects, particularly in the energy sector. He also mentioned discussions about establishing the Turkey-Azerbaijan University.(qafqazinfo.az, March 15, 2023)

Throughout 2023, several Turkish officials visited Azerbaijan and met with President Aliyev. These included Binali Yıldırım, First Deputy Chairman of Turkey's Justice and Development Party, on June 14; Hakan Fidan, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, on July 5; Numan Kurtulmuş, Speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, on July 12; Fuat Oktay, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Grand National Assembly, on July 17; Yaşar Güler, Turkish Minister of National Defense, on August 27; and Metin Gürak, Chief of the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, on August 28. These meetings focused on expanding cooperation between the two nations.(qafqazinfo.az, March 15, 2023)

On September 25, 2023, Turkish President Erdoğan made an official visit to Azerbaijan, where he, along with President Aliyev, participated in the groundbreaking ceremony for the İğdir-Nakhchivan gas pipeline. This event marked a further strengthening of energy cooperation between the two countries.(president.az, September 25, 2023).

The İğdir-Nakhchivan gas pipeline aims to diversify Nakhchivan's gas supply and reduce its dependence on a single source. The project, agreed upon in a memorandum signed on December 15, 2020, and funded by a state budget allocation as per President Aliyev's order dated February 10, 2022, is a priority in the "State Program for Social and Economic Development of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic for 2023-2027".(president.az, September 25, 2023) Additionally, Azerbaijan and Turkey signed an agreement for constructing residential buildings, a primary school, a kindergarten, and a cultural center in Turkey's Kahramanmaraş province, which was affected by an earthquake. This agreement, signed on December 12, 2023, includes Azerbaijan's commitment to provide \$100 million in aid for construction and repair work, and plans to build 1,000 residential houses in Kahramanmaraş.(qafqazinfo, December 12, 2023)

The post-war period has seen Azerbaijan and Turkey emerging as significant winners following Armenia's defeat in November 2020. The Second Karabakh War

bolstered Turkey's position in the South Caucasus and underscored its role as a key regional actor. Developments such as the initiation of the İğdir-Nakhchivan pipeline and the signing of the Shusha Declaration represent new phases in their bilateral relationship. Azerbaijan's support in the wake of Turkey's earthquake further exemplifies the strong friendship and brotherhood between the two nations. Shared history, language, and culture continue to enhance their relations, with the Second Karabakh War reinforcing the unity and solidarity between the Turkish and Azerbaijani peoples. The close personal relations between the leaders of both countries have also significantly contributed to the development of their bilateral ties. Trade volume has been consistently increasing, exceeding \$6 billion in 2022, and infrastructure projects, particularly in Karabakh, further enhance economic cooperation potential.(aqreqator.az, February 15, 2022; Mammadov V., 2020)

6.2 Azerbaijan-Russia Relations in a New Stage: Development and Challenges

Prior to the Second Karabakh War, the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation engaged in extensive and multifaceted interactions. In 2018, they signed a strategic plan outlining key areas of cooperation until 2024, which included five "roadmaps" focusing on boosting trade and investment, enhancing transportation, establishing joint enterprises, sharing expertise in digitization and fiscal matters, and strengthening humanitarian ties.(president.az, October 31, 2022)

The implementation of this plan resulted in a stable and growing dynamic in Azerbaijan-Russia trade and economic relations. By 2023, trade turnover had more than doubled from 2017 levels, surpassing \$4.3 billion. Cargo transport between the two countries also saw significant growth, with an 87% increase from 2017, including a nearly fourfold rise in transit cargo. Additionally, transport through the North-South International Transport Corridor grew by over 44% compared to 2017.(preslib.az, n.d.)

The strategic partnership documents signed before the war expanded relations between Azerbaijan and Russia further. The outbreak of the war did not reverse these relations. Russia played a crucial role as a mediator seeking a long-term resolution to the conflict. During the war, Russia attempted to mediate a ceasefire using the "5+2 format,"

also known as the "Lavrov Plan," but this plan lost relevance after Azerbaijan had liberated four districts.(Reyting.az, October 30, 2020)

Post-war, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Russia remained broad and multifaceted. Russia, maintaining a neutral stance during the conflict, later mediated the trilateral statement that ended the war. Russia's neutral position was evident when President Vladimir Putin stated on October 7, 2020, that Russia was not involved in the conflict as no military operations were occurring within Armenia, and Armenia's efforts to involve other countries, particularly Russia, were unsuccessful.(president.az, September 29, 2020)

In the post-war phase, Russia's mediation efforts continued, focusing on facilitating a peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia and addressing border demarcation. The Republic of Azerbaijan aims to enhance its cooperation with Russia in the energy sector, including oil and gas exploration, resource transportation, and alternative energy sources.(president.az, May 23, 2022)

During President Aliyev's visit to Sochi on October 31, 2022, he participated in a trilateral meeting with the Armenian Prime Minister and Russian President Putin, and a bilateral meeting with Putin. Putin referred to the conflict as the "Karabakh conflict," while Aliyev emphasized that the conflict was resolved two years prior, affirming that the focus should now be on normalization of relations.(president.az, October 31, 2022)

With the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, Russia faced significant sanctions from the US and the EU, and an arrest warrant was issued for President Putin by the International Criminal Court. During this time, Armenia's Western-leaning policies, despite its alliance with Russia, contributed to strained Russia-Armenia relations. Armenia ratified the Rome Statute on October 3, 2023, becoming the 125th country to do so, and participated in joint military exercises with the US despite not hosting CSTO exercises on its territory.(president.az, September 22, 2020)

The strain in Russian-Armenian relations also affected Azerbaijan-Russia ties. Following an anti-terror operation on September 19, 2023, that lasted just one day and led to the surrender of Armenian armed groups in Karabakh, Azerbaijan restored its full sovereignty. The operation was conducted with prior notice to the Russian peacekeeping

contingent, reflecting Russia's stance on sovereignty restoration in Karabakh.(president.az, September 22, 2020)

Economic turnover between Azerbaijan and Russia continued to grow, with a 20% increase in 2023 compared to the same period in 2022. Despite some tensions, bilateral issues are being addressed within the framework of mutual cooperation.

6.3. Azerbaijan-Iran Relations and Their Characteristics

The relationship between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran has evolved through a complex history, segmented into six distinct phases over a 28-year period leading up to the Second Karabakh War:

Establishment of Relations (1991-1993);

Trust Issues (1994-2000);

Period of Tension (2001-2003);

Expanded Cooperation (2004-2010);

Sharp Deterioration (2011-2013);

Normalization and Rapid Development (2014-2019).(yeniazerbaycan.az, March 11, 2023)

These phases illustrate that Azerbaijani-Iranian relations have not been consistently stable. Throughout 1991 to 2019, there were multiple instances of heightened tension. For instance, on July 23, 2001, Iranian military aircraft began patrolling the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea and conducted maneuvers visible from Baku. This action was seen as a significant violation of Azerbaijani sovereignty. The situation was defused through the intervention of national leader Heydar Aliyev, supportive statements from Turkey, and the arrival of Turkish military aircraft in Baku. This incident was triggered by NATO Secretary-General C. Robertson's visit to Baku in January 2001, which Iran perceived as a threat due to the expansion of Azerbaijan-NATO relations.(Sapmaz A., 2022, p. 12-43)

The sources of tension in Azerbaijani-Iranian relations up to 2019 can be categorized into:

The South Azerbaijani Issue;

The Religious Factor;

Disagreements on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea.

The South Azerbaijani Issue pertains to the regions along the Iran-Azerbaijan border historically part of Azerbaijan. The Treaty of Gulistan and the Treaty of Turkmenchay divided Azerbaijan between Qajar Iran and Tsarist Russia, with the Aras River as a conditional border. Iran views the South Azerbaijani population as a threat, as evidenced by the lack of Azerbaijani language schools and media in Iran, unlike provisions for other ethnicities. This issue has periodically influenced relations between the two nations. For example, on February 11, 2019, during the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani criticized the Turkish Qajar dynasty for expelling northern Iranian territories 191 years ago, referencing the Treaty of Turkmenchay. His remarks hinted at the contentious view of the current Azerbaijani territory as part of the South Azerbaijani issue, reflecting the ongoing tension in relations.(yeniazerbaycan.com, March 11, 2023)

The religious factor holds particular importance in Azerbaijani-Iranian relations. The Iranian government always prioritizes religious factors. It is especially noteworthy that various periods saw religious extremists arrested in Azerbaijan who had studied in Iran and had connections with Iranian intelligence services. Azerbaijan is a tolerant and multicultural country. The separation of religion from the state has shaped a secular Azerbaijani society. Despite the special emphasis placed by Iran on the religious factor, strong relations have been established with Armenia.

The final issue, disagreements over the legal status of the Caspian Sea, has been a persistent point of contention since the onset of relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Azerbaijan's signing of the Caspian Sea agreement attracted numerous international companies to explore the sea's oil fields, which Iran opposed, particularly criticizing the involvement of Western firms. Disputes arose between Azerbaijan and Iran over how to determine the Caspian Sea's status: Azerbaijan supported dividing the sea into national sectors, while Iran argued that it should be considered a lake, with each of the five coastal countries receiving a 20% share. This long-standing issue was addressed in 2018. On August 12, 2018, during the V Summit of Caspian Sea Heads of State in Aktau, Kazakhstan, the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea was signed. The Convention established the Caspian Sea as a

water basin and outlined specific demarcations among the littoral states, rather than a uniform 20% allocation.(mfa.gov.az, May 11, 2024)

The Second Karabakh War, including its start, course, and final results, significantly impacted Azerbaijani-Iranian relations. Azerbaijan's liberation of Karabakh in 44 days changed the 30-year geopolitical landscape of the region. The liberation of the territories along the Iran border during the war was met with great enthusiasm in South Azerbaijan. Particularly, the successful military operations along the Aras River were closely followed by our compatriots in the south, and the advance of the Azerbaijani army was celebrated like a holiday. During this period, the arms transfer from Iran to Armenia continued. Naturally, the weapons sent by Iran during the active conflict were used by the Armenian government against the Azerbaijani army in Karabakh. This situation caused serious protests among South Azerbaijanis. On September 30, 2020, three days after the war began, weapons-laden trucks moving from Iran to Armenia were burned by our compatriots living in Iran. Subsequently, one of the main routes used by Iran to transport weapons to Armenia was blocked by South Azerbaijanis. The South Azerbaijani issue, which Iran is most cautious about in its relations with Azerbaijan, was inflamed due to the start of the Second Karabakh War and Iran's open support for Armenia. Even mass arrests in Iran did not intimidate the Azerbaijani population. During the course of the war, South Azerbaijanis continued to support Azerbaijan without fear of the Iranian authorities.

During the 44 days of the war, the statements made by Iranian officials changed with the progress of the Azerbaijani army. In the early days of the war, Iranian officials' statements were no different from those of OSCE officials, which did not contribute to the problem. Iranian state representatives emphasized the importance of resolving the problem through peaceful means. However, none of the statements about resolving the dispute peacefully addressed Armenia's destructive stance towards peace negotiations. Iranian media defended the occupying state, Armenia, and attempted to portray Azerbaijan as the side opposing peace. The successful military operations along the front gradually changed the overall content of the statements. On November 3, 2020, when Azerbaijan had a clear advantage in the war, Iranian Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei's statement that "Azerbaijan has the right to liberate its territories occupied for

thirty years” indicated that the official Tehran had to adapt to the new situation on its border.

During the 28 years of Azerbaijan’s territory being occupied by Armenia, and despite not conducting any military tactical exercises in the border areas with Iran, the mobilization of troops to the border region began during the 44-day war. Particularly, following the liberation of the Zangilan district and the Agbend settlement from occupation, Iran started concentrating military groups in this direction after the complete restoration of the Azerbaijan-Iran state border. At the end of October 2020, Iran began military exercises on the Azerbaijan border.(Mammadov V., 2020)

Despite the conclusion of the Second Karabakh War, tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran continued. On December 10, 2020, during the Victory Parade held in Baku, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used the phrase “They divided the Araz, they satisfied themselves with Lil” in a poem he recited [president.az, 2023]. The mention of the South Azerbaijan issue, which holds particular significance in Iran-Azerbaijan relations, during the Victory Parade caused considerable concern in Iran.

The following day, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif took to social media to clarify that President Erdoğan's remarks in Baku, which were seen as referring to the forced separation of territories north of the Araz River from Iran, were incorrect. Zarif emphasized, "Isn't it the Republic of Azerbaijan? NO ONE can speak against our beloved Azerbaijan".(EuroNews.com, 2020) In response, Iran summoned Turkey's ambassador in Tehran to the Foreign Ministry to emphasize that “territorial claims and expansionist empires belong to the past and no one can question Iran’s territorial integrity.” Turkey countered by summoning Iran’s ambassador in Ankara to the Foreign Ministry. Zarif's statement echoes the sentiments expressed by the Iranian president in 2019, with both officials rejecting the historical reality of South Azerbaijan and defending the outdated notion that Azerbaijan's separation from Iran resulted from the Treaty of Turkmenchay.

The 28 years of occupation of Karabakh by Armenia did not interfere with Armenia-Iran relations in any way. Unlike Turkey, Iran kept its state border open with the occupying country throughout the period of occupation. It thus becomes clear that the religious factor, which is cited as one of the reasons for the tension in Iran-Azerbaijan relations, did not pose any obstacle to Iran-Armenia relations despite the Armenians' Christian faith.

The religious factor in Iran's foreign policy is evidently directed against what it calls the West—European countries, the USA, and Israel. Despite the consistent emphasis on the religious factor in Iran's relations with Israel and the USA, Iran has maintained sufficiently high-level relations with Armenia. For example, between 2017 and 2020, trade turnover between Iran and Armenia increased each year. In 2021, this turnover reached 406 million dollars. For comparison, in 1997, trade turnover between the two countries was only 78.9 million dollars. The statistics from 2021 show that Iran-Armenia relations have developed significantly without considering the religious factor.(OEC, 2020)

Despite the high level of relations between Iran and non-Muslim Armenia, unfounded claims against Azerbaijan by circles close to the Iranian government continued. The Iranian media regularly voiced biased and unfounded opinions about Azerbaijan, with claims emerging about the presence of Israeli forces in the liberated territories. These claims are also related to the aforementioned religious factor. As explained, the religious factor in Iran's foreign policy forms the basis of its policy against Israel and the USA. The expansion of Azerbaijan-Israel relations could not remain without impact on Iran-Azerbaijan relations. A significant political response to all these unfounded claims was given by President Ilham Aliyev during his meeting with displaced persons in the liberated city of Jabrayil on October 5, 2021. During the meeting, President Aliyev said, “You know, recently a provincial cleric in Iran made some baseless accusations against Azerbaijan. I was informed and said not to pay attention. We should not give any significance to the words of some provincial cleric. Who is he?! Just ignore it. But later, unfortunately, official figures started making unfounded accusations against us. As if Azerbaijan has brought Israel to these regions. Let them open their eyes and see. Where did they see Israel here?! There is not a single person here. There is no building. Are there any proofs? No. If there are no proofs, everyone should be held accountable for their words. We cannot allow anyone to spread unfounded accusations against us”.(president.az, 2022)

Another reason for the tension in Azerbaijan-Iran relations was related to the tripartite statement signed on November 10, 2020, between Azerbaijan, Russia, and Armenia. Firstly, Iran was not involved in the preparation of this statement or the

negotiation process between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Moreover, Iran was not included in any of the mechanisms established by the tripartite statement.(Tutku, D., 2021) Iran, as a significant actor in the region with relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia, was essentially diplomatically unsuccessful by being left out of this process.

We have noted the reasons for the tension in Azerbaijan-Iran relations during the war and post-war periods—religious factors and the South Azerbaijan issue. In addition to these reasons, Iran was unwilling to accept the new geopolitical situation. There were various reasons for this. Firstly, it should be noted that the 400 km main road ensuring the connection between Iran and Armenia is a road directly leading from Iran's Norduz city to Yerevan (Erevan). Part of the road passes through Goris and Kapan. As a result of the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan fully controls the 20-kilometer segment of this main road that connects Iran with Armenia. Customs checks are carried out in the section under Azerbaijani control (Yilmaz,E., 2020, p.44). On September 12, 2021, during customs checks by Azerbaijani customs officers and law enforcement agencies, two truck drivers were detained after it was determined that the cargo transported from Iran to Armenia was illegal.

Since early 2021, Iran has started constructing a new road to ensure direct connection with Armenia without Azerbaijan's participation. Although the 43 km Tatev-Aghvani road, proposed as an alternative to the Goris-Kapan road, was put into use towards the end of 2021, it proved inconvenient for the movement of cargo and trailer vehicles.(iranintl.com, 2021) The mountainous terrain along the Armenia-Iran border makes it impossible to construct an alternative road in a short time. The geopolitical situation resulting from the Second Karabakh War is unfavorable for Iran. The Goris-Kapan road under Azerbaijan's control provides Iran with access to Georgia and Russia through Armenia.

On the other hand, according to the ninth clause of the tripartite statement, the establishment of direct connectivity between Azerbaijan's western regions and Nakhchivan through Armenia, in other words, the opening of the Zangezur corridor, is at stake. This, in turn, does not align with Iran's existing political interests with Armenia and Azerbaijan. The opening of the Zangezur corridor would result in:

Iran losing its role as a transit country, which it has used at various times as a pressure tool against Azerbaijan, between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. Iran plays a significant role as a transit country in providing both land and air connectivity between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. An example of using the transit country factor as a pressure tool is Iran's closure of its airspace to Azerbaijani military aircraft sent to Nakhchivan in October 2021.(axar.az, 2020)

Iran losing its role as a transit country between Turkey-Azerbaijan and Central Asia-Turkey. Losing the role of a transit country would negatively impact Iran's economic benefits and its favorable geopolitical position used to influence the region, thus affecting its political gains.

The direct connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan through Armenia would increase Turkey's influence in Azerbaijan, especially in Central Asia. Given that a significant portion of the population in South Azerbaijan is of Turkish descent, the strengthening of the Turkish factor in the region is seen by Iran as a threat to its own political and social situation.

The opening of the Zangezur corridor is seen as a serious threat to the route presented by Iran as an alternative to the Middle Corridor, which includes the India-Iran-Armenia-Georgia-Black Sea-Europe route.(president.az, 2023, p.145) The risk that the Zangezur corridor along the Iran-Armenia border will ultimately result in the transfer of transportation links between Iran and Armenia to Azerbaijani control contributes to the tension in post-war Iran-Azerbaijan relations.

Thus, despite the resolution of the dispute over the legal status of the Caspian Sea, one of the issues causing tension between Azerbaijan and Iran before the war, the changing geopolitical situation in the post-war period created a new problem in Iran-Azerbaijan relations: "The Zangezur Corridor and regional communication issues." In any case, the historical victory in the Second Karabakh War necessitated the adaptation of Iran's political line to the changing geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus.

The tension between Azerbaijan and Iran continued throughout 2021. The year was particularly notable for the expansion of Iran-Armenia relations and the reaching of a strategic alliance. On January 24, 2021, the Armenian Minister of Economy, along with a delegation, visited Iran. During the visit, a cooperation memorandum was signed

following a meeting with Iran's Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade. This memorandum included important matters such as the establishment of a new transportation route between the two countries. Three days later, on January 27, 2021, the Iranian Foreign Minister visited Armenia. Despite this, Azerbaijan was more interested in stabilizing diplomatic contacts and relations with Iran rather than increasing tensions. Unlike Iran, Azerbaijan aimed to expand relations with its neighboring state, Iran, and adapt the relationship to the new geopolitical situation. In April 2021, during the President's visit to the Jabrayil and Zangilan districts, he stated: "The Azerbaijan-Iran border is a border of friendship. Preserving this border is of great importance for the development of Azerbaijan-Iran relations. We have another border with the Islamic Republic of Iran, and it is truly a border of friendship and cooperation." This indicated that Azerbaijan's stance towards Iran was more focused on friendship rather than tension.(president.az , April, 2021)

Despite the "coolness" observed in Azerbaijan-Iran relations during the post-war period, the proposal for the establishment of the "3+3" cooperation platform, initiated by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to ensure peace in the South Caucasus, demonstrated Azerbaijan's commitment to peace and mutual cooperation with neighboring states. The platform was supported by Iran. In the new geopolitical reality, the unification of the South Caucasus region and neighboring states on a common platform was beneficial for both the region and the participating countries. The support for the "3+3" platform did not deter Iran from pursuing the idea of creating an alternative corridor through Armenia. Iran's preference for relations with Armenia over Azerbaijan, along with the unfounded claims made regarding Azerbaijan, contributed to the maintenance of a tense relationship.

In an interview with Turkey's Anadolu Agency on September 28, 2021, President Ilham Aliyev addressed issues related to Iranian trucks illegally crossing into Armenia. A quote from the interview reads: "They tried to put Armenian plates on Iranian trucks. They committed such a forgery and tried to deceive us. An extremely unprofessional step was taken—on the truck, there was a cistern written in Persian and below it, Armenian plates.... Naturally, in this case, after a month, we officially issued a diplomatic note. The Iranian ambassador in Azerbaijan was invited to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, objections were raised, and a request was made to put an end to it..... From August 11 to September 11,

around 60 more trucks from Iran illegally moved to Karabakh. To prevent this, we have already taken practical steps. Our actions and steps are responsible and based on friendship relations. The first warning was verbal, the second was an official note, and the third involved posts—customs, border, police. Thus, we officially started monitoring the roads to Azerbaijan, and then the number of trucks going to Karabakh dropped to zero.”(mod.gov.az , September 11, 2021) It should be noted that no anti-terrorist operations were conducted in Karabakh in 2021. Trucks moving from Iran to Armenia were also heading to Karabakh from Armenia. Despite Iran's repeated statements on recognizing Azerbaijan's sovereignty and the inviolability of borders, its support for illegal shipments to Karabakh exacerbated the tension in relations. This act demonstrated Iran’s disrespect towards Azerbaijan’s state borders, which was unacceptable for Azerbaijan. Any transport of goods to Karabakh, an integral part of Azerbaijan, required coordination with Azerbaijan. The political tension eased somewhat during the 15th Summit Meeting of the Economic Cooperation Organization held in Ashgabat on November 28, 2021, where President Ilham Aliyev met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. During the meeting, discussions were held on the new realities between the two states and the necessity of further developing relations was emphasized. Additionally, a significant agreement was reached regarding Turkmenistan's gas being transferred to Iran and then to Azerbaijan, which was considered one of the most successful steps towards normalizing relations.

In 2021, relations between Iran and Armenia remained strong, leading to ongoing tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran despite various attempts to improve them. However, in early 2022, some stabilization in relations was noted. On March 11, 2022, the 15th meeting of the Azerbaijan-Iran Commission took place in Baku, where a Memorandum of Understanding was signed to develop new communication routes between Azerbaijan's Eastern Zangezur Economic Region and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic via Iran. The memorandum aimed to establish new railway and road links, along with communication and energy supply lines through Iranian territory. It specified the construction of four bridges over the Aras River—two for vehicular traffic and two for railways—along with the necessary infrastructure. Azerbaijan agreed to cover all costs for the vehicle bridge connecting Eastern Zangezur with Iran, while Iran would handle the

expenses for the documentation, construction, and oversight of the vehicle bridge linking Nakhchivan's Ordubad district with Iran.

Despite the signing of the memorandum, diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan and Iran worsened. In 2022, Iranian officials declared that changes to the borders of Iran's neighbors were a “red line” for the country. The term "red line" actually referred to Iran's strong objection to the opening of the Zangezur Corridor. As noted, Iran views the Zangezur Corridor as a serious obstacle and even a threat in its relations with Armenia. On October 21, 2022, Iran opened a consulate in Qafan, attempting to obstruct direct connectivity between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. On November 1, 2022, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan made an official visit to Iran, where the main topic of discussion was "neighborly politics." This term implies ensuring direct connections with Armenia without obstacles. The term "neighborly politics" was used in opposition to the Zangezur Corridor. During the visit, issues related to the Armenian population living in Iran were also discussed. It is evident that the post-war rapprochement between Iran and Armenia stemmed from both countries' opposition to the Zangezur Corridor. The "red line" policy essentially defends Iran's stance on preserving the status quo of the Azerbaijan-Armenia and Iran-Armenia borders, as any change in Zangezur, intersecting the interests of all three countries, could weaken Iran's geopolitical position in the South Caucasus.

The beginning of 2023 can be considered the highest point of tension in Azerbaijani-Iranian diplomatic relations. On January 11, 2023, by the decree of President Ilham Aliyev, Mukhtar Mammad oghlu Mammadov was appointed as the Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the State of Israel [Qasimli, 2021]. The establishment of an official embassy in Israel was naturally met with disapproval from Iran. As previously mentioned, one of the factors that contributed to the tension in Iran-Azerbaijan relations was the religious factor, which Iran particularly used against Azerbaijan's relations with Israel. With Azerbaijan opening an embassy in Israel, relations between Iran and Azerbaijan entered their most tense period from the beginning of 2023.

On January 27, 2023, around 8:30 AM Baku time, the Azerbaijani Embassy in Iran was attacked with firearms. The Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a

statement accusing Iran, as the host country, of failing to uphold its responsibilities under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations to protect the embassy and ensure the safety of its personnel. Consequently, urgent measures were taken to evacuate embassy staff and their families, with the entire staff being evacuated by January 30, 2023. This led to the cessation of the embassy's operations in Iran.(mfa.gov.az, January 27, 2023)

In addition to the strained diplomatic relations, Iran had previously demonstrated "power" in its dealings with Azerbaijan. Notably, in early November 2022, the Iranian military conducted two large-scale exercises near the Azerbaijan border. In response, Azerbaijan and Turkey conducted joint military drills in Baku and various districts, countering Iran's show of force.(Qafqazinfo, 2022) Despite the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the two countries, relations remained complex throughout 2022.

The tension peaked in early 2023. On January 11, 2023, President Ilham Aliyev appointed Mukhtar Mammad oghlu Mammadov as Azerbaijan's Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador to Israel.(Qasimli, 2021) This move was met with disapproval from Iran, which had previously used religious factors to criticize Azerbaijan's relations with Israel. As a result, Azerbaijan-Iran relations entered a notably tense period.

On March 28, 2023, a terrorist attack targeted Fazil Mustafayev, a member of the Azerbaijani National Assembly. This led to an investigation and the arrest of individuals linked to Iranian intelligence agencies, highlighting the ongoing religious and political tensions between the two nations.(Aliyev, N.A., 2023, p. 125)

However, from mid-2023, changes in Iran's foreign policy emerged, largely due to its dissatisfaction with Armenia's European-oriented policies. This shift was evident in a July 5, 2023, meeting between President Aliyev and Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, where they discussed enhancing economic and commercial ties and the development of the North-South Transport Corridor.(president.az, October 15, 2023)

Further progress was made in July 2023 with a meeting in Astara between Azerbaijani and Iranian officials, leading to agreements on accelerating infrastructure projects, including the construction of a new bridge.(president.az, October 6, 2023)

In October 2023, Khalf Khalfov, Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan, visited Iran and met with Ali Akbar Ahmadian, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council. The meeting underscored the importance of cooperation and dialogue for peace and stability and reaffirmed Iran's support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.(president.az, 2021)

The most significant development occurred on November 9, 2023, during the 16th Summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in Tashkent. President Aliyev and Iranian President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi discussed the reconstruction of Karabakh and the advancement of transportation links between the two countries.(president.az, November 9, 2023)

In summary, Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War, which began in September 2020, conflicted with Iran's regional interests. Azerbaijan restored control over areas of its border with Iran that had been under Armenian occupation since 1994, reducing the Iran-Armenia border length to 40 kilometers.

6.4. Azerbaijan-Georgian Relations: Strategic Partnership and Its Main Characteristics

Before the Second Karabakh War, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Georgia was characterized by high levels of cooperation and partnership. The strategic partnership between the two countries can be seen as a result of the geopolitical situation that emerged in the 1990s. As a result of the First Karabakh War, Armenia occupied 20% of Azerbaijani territory, including the former Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions. The occupation led to all diplomatic interactions between Armenia and Azerbaijan being mediated by third parties and confined to negotiations aimed solely at ending the occupation. The impossibility of establishing any form of cooperation between Azerbaijan and Armenia without ending the occupation resulted in Azerbaijan viewing Georgia as a reliable partner for its access to Europe and energy diplomacy. Whether through the Contract of the Century or other international projects initiated or partnered by Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan had to ensure the sale and sometimes delivery of various goods and services to the West. Given the geopolitical situation of the region surrounding Azerbaijan, its southern neighbor, Iran, could not be considered a reliable partner in this

regard. At the same time, Western sanctions on Iran made any form of energy supplies and transport through Iran impossible. Azerbaijan's northern neighbor, Russia, was involved in implementing large-scale projects through the Northern Corridor. On the other hand, executing large-scale projects through Russia was not in the interests of either the West or Azerbaijan. Europe was interested in reducing both transit and energy dependence on Russia. Azerbaijan's dependence on Russia for Western access could lead to a dependency issue for both the West and Azerbaijan as a transit country. The border with Turkey only concerns the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. Azerbaijan's lack of a land connection with Nakhchivan (existing communications are through Iran) hindered direct connection with Turkey. Despite the lack of a direct land border, Azerbaijan was interested in ensuring access to Europe through Turkey. Another aspect of the issue was the revival of the Silk Road. Ensuring access through the Silk Road was quite important for the formation and expansion of the Central Corridor we are discussing today. Thus, the dissolution of the USSR, the occupation of Karabakh by Armenia, and the geopolitical situation of Azerbaijan at that time played a significant role in the formation of Azerbaijan-Georgia relations. Naturally, another factor affecting Azerbaijan-Georgian relations is the presence of Azerbaijanis living in Georgia. Unlike Iran, the presence of Azerbaijanis in Georgia is seen not as a point of contention but as an argument for closer relations. The presence of Azerbaijani schools, media, and non-governmental organizations in Georgia is a positive aspect for bilateral relations.

The analysis of Azerbaijan-Georgia relations allows for the assessment of the relationship between the two states as a political alliance. Both countries cooperate extensively in areas such as energy, culture, and economy. Additionally, in terms of foreign policy, both countries have balanced policies towards Russia. Just as Azerbaijan has a partnership with Russia, it also has cooperative relations with European states. This trend is also observed in Georgia's foreign policy. After the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia replaced its foreign policy with a pro-European (or pro-Western) orientation. Issues such as EU membership were raised. Although there was a deviation from the balancing discourse in relations with Russia, Azerbaijan-Georgia relations continued in a cooperative and partnership format. The South Ossetia and Abkhazia issue, which began

in 2008 and is still ongoing, significantly weakened Georgia-Russia relations but did not cause any conflicts in Azerbaijan-Georgia and Azerbaijan-Russia relations.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan-Georgia relations can also be evaluated as a mutually dependent alliance. Looking at Georgia's geopolitical situation, it is clear that Azerbaijan is a supplier of energy resources and an economic stabilizer for Georgia's connection with Central Asia. Considering Azerbaijan's geopolitical situation, Georgia is a main transit route to Europe, a guarantor of Azerbaijan's access to Europe without dependency, and a reliable partner against potential threats from the north.

The listed factors imply that the relationship between the two countries encompasses a mutually allied format.

Another aspect of analyzing Azerbaijan-Georgian relations involves examining Georgia-Armenia ties. Georgia maintains cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. These high-level interactions are noteworthy. Regarding Azerbaijan-Armenia relations, Georgia adopts a neutral stance. Notably, the dynamics of Georgia-Armenia relations shifted after 2018. The issues surrounding Abkhazia and South Ossetia have led to a near-freeze in Georgia-Russia relations, with Georgia opting out of projects involving Russia. The previously pro-Russian Armenian government had also influenced Georgia-Armenia relations. However, the ascent of Nikol Pashinyan in 2018, known for his pro-Western stance, ushered in a new phase in these relations, highlighted by the Armenian Prime Minister's first foreign visit to Georgia in 2019, which was seen as a significant development for Georgia-Armenia relations.

Nevertheless, despite developments in Georgia-Armenia relations, Azerbaijan-Georgian relations remain at the level of strategic cooperation. Georgia is interested in expanding bilateral relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Even during the war period, Georgia supported Azerbaijan with its "neutrality." As mentioned, Georgia is the main guarantor of Armenia's connections with Russia and the West. Immediately after the start of the Second Karabakh War, Georgia closed its airspace to military cargo destined for Armenia. This had a very positive impact on Georgia-Azerbaijan relations.

Azerbaijan has consistently supported Georgia regarding the issues of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which has led to a cooling of relations with Russia. Despite maintaining a

strategic alliance with Russia, Azerbaijan has continually affirmed its recognition of Georgia's territorial integrity. Notably, during the UN General Assembly sessions on September 3, 2020, June 17, 2021, and June 8, 2022, Azerbaijan endorsed resolutions addressing "The Situation of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees from Abkhazia (Georgia) and South Ossetia (Georgia)".(Azerbaijani Newspaper, 2021)

In this context, the foreign policies of Azerbaijan and Georgia in the post-conflict period reveal certain commonalities. Azerbaijan fosters close relations with both Georgia and Russia, while Georgia maintains strategic partnerships with both Azerbaijan and Armenia. This balancing act is crucial for the development of cooperation between the two countries. Noteworthy diplomatic engagements have taken place in the post-conflict period. For instance, on May 5, 2021, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili met in Baku, where President Aliyev highlighted Azerbaijan's significant investments in Georgia's economy, reflecting a positive investment climate created by Georgian reforms. Garibashvili also expressed satisfaction with the robust bilateral relations. The ongoing investments underscore the importance Georgia places on its cooperation with Azerbaijan post-war.

The strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Georgia has continued to strengthen, unaffected by Georgia's closer ties with Armenia. Major collaborative projects, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and initiatives under the EU-supported Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor and China-supported Belt and Road Initiative, have bolstered this relationship. The steady rise in their relations is evident from a meeting on October 24, 2022, in Mtskheta, where President Aliyev noted that their strategic partnership had nearly evolved into an alliance. He emphasized their mutual support in international organizations and the significance of joint projects for the region and Europe, with mutual trade turnover approaching one billion dollars.(Azerbaijani Newspaper, October 24, 2022, p. 2-3)

Energy cooperation has been a crucial aspect of the Azerbaijan-Georgia relationship. On December 17, 2022, a "Strategic Partnership Agreement on the Development and Transmission of Green Energy" was signed in Bucharest between Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, and Hungary, aiming to enhance energy collaboration between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Europe.(president.az, 2023) Subsequent meetings,

including the latest on November 11, 2023, in Budapest, discussed the realization of renewable energy potential and the status of the "Caspian-Black Sea-European Green Energy Corridor" project. A Memorandum of Understanding on Green Energy Cooperation was signed, establishing a "green energy platform".(Azerbaijan State Information Agency, 2023) This agreement highlights that the energy policy between Azerbaijan and Georgia extends beyond oil and gas, encompassing significant international green energy projects. In 2022, the trade turnover between the two countries reached 771 million USD.(mod.gov.az, 2024)

The year 2023 was particularly significant for Azerbaijan-Georgian relations, marked by three meetings between President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili. At a press conference following their April 7, 2023, meeting in Gabala, President Aliyev emphasized the ongoing work on new energy cooperation directions and the importance of the European Union's involvement in the green energy project.(president.az, April 7, 2023)

On October 8, 2023, another meeting was held in Tbilisi between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili. In the joint statement made to the press after the meeting, both the Georgian Prime Minister and the Azerbaijani President expressed their confidence that mutual economic turnover and joint projects arising from energy diplomacy between the two countries would increase. In his speech, the Georgian Prime Minister touched upon Azerbaijan-Georgian relations and stated, "We support Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty. We also thank Azerbaijan for always supporting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia".(president.az, 2020) The Prime Minister also touched upon the peace talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia, noting that "We have always had an impartial position here in Georgia, and we are still ready to contribute to this matter. We want to mediate in this matter and are ready to offer any form of friendship. Our future should be peaceful and stable, and all three countries of the South Caucasus should resolve regional issues themselves".(president.az, 2020) These two quotes reflect two issues of significant importance for Azerbaijan-Georgian relations. Firstly, the meeting in October 2023 coincided with the period after Azerbaijan's anti-terror operation in Karabakh. The

specific mention of supporting territorial integrity expresses Georgia's support for Azerbaijan in all steps taken regarding Karabakh.(jamestown.org , September 20, 2023)

On the other hand, in 2023, President Aliyev unequivocally rejected France's attempts to mediate peace talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia and declined a meeting in Granada on October 5, 2023. The Georgian Prime Minister's statement that "all three countries of the South Caucasus should resolve regional issues themselves" demonstrated support for President Aliyev's position of rejecting French intervention and resolving issues between Azerbaijan and Armenia through direct contacts. The declaration of the "Year of Solidarity for a Green World" by the country's President in 2024 indicates that work in this field will continue on a larger scale. The expansion of the scope of projects arising from energy policies between Azerbaijan and Georgia is expected in 2024. On January 26, 2024, a memorandum on strategic partnership was signed between Georgia and Armenia. The memorandum includes the expansion of relations between Georgia and Armenia in many areas. During the meeting between the Prime Ministers of Georgia and Armenia, the issue of border delimitation was addressed. The Armenian side stated that it was ready to finalize this issue quickly. Nevertheless, the Georgian Prime Minister reiterated that Georgia supports regional peace and expressed that Georgia's position on the Abkhazia and South Ossetia issues remained the same. As noted earlier, Georgia is interested in expanding relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia. In addition to high-level cooperation in energy diplomacy with Azerbaijan, the signing of the strategic cooperation memorandum with Armenia stems from Georgia's balancing policy. On January 29, 2024, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili resigned.(eurasianet.org, 2023)

Relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia have expanded into a new phase with new cooperation agreements during the post-war period. This is an important basis for the future joint implementation of highly profitable projects for both Azerbaijan and Georgia. The strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Georgia is crucial for the geopolitical situation in Central Asia and the Caucasus, as well as for Western access to Central Asia. In this regard, it is important to note that it increasingly matters for the East-West continental trade route connecting Europe and Asia.(cacianalyst.org, 2023) Georgia's support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty plays a special role in the

relationship. Similarly, Azerbaijan has always supported Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, especially concerning Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Successful regional cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia, including large-scale global energy and transport-communication projects (such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, and Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway), contributes to regional peace and stability.(mod.gov.az, 2024)

This section of the dissertation analyzes the strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and Georgia, emphasizing its evolution and main characteristics. The analysis traces the origins of this partnership back to the geopolitical shifts of the 1990s, including the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the First Karabakh War, which led to Azerbaijan seeking reliable partners for energy diplomacy and access to Europe, given the limited and unreliable options in the region (i.e., Iran and Russia). Georgia emerged as a key partner due to its strategic location and shared interests.

The text highlights the multifaceted nature of Azerbaijan-Georgia relations, encompassing energy, culture, economy, and foreign policy. It portrays this relationship as a political and economic alliance, with both countries benefiting from mutual support and cooperation. The dissertation points out that despite Georgia's balanced approach to its relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia, its ties with Azerbaijan have remained strong, particularly in the context of energy projects and regional stability.

Moreover, the text underscores the importance of the post-conflict period (after the Second Karabakh War) in solidifying the alliance, with significant diplomatic engagements and expanding energy cooperation, including green energy initiatives. The strategic partnership is presented as crucial for the geopolitical dynamics of the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as for the East-West trade route.

The section asserts that Azerbaijan-Georgia relations have grown into a strategic alliance that plays a vital role in regional stability, energy security, and geopolitical connectivity, with both countries continuing to support each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty.



ANALYSIS

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which took place from September to November 2020, not only marked the military and political victory of Azerbaijan but also significantly altered the geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus. The conflict unfolded as Azerbaijan reclaimed its territories that had been under Armenian occupation for nearly three decades, reshaping regional alliances, power structures, and diplomatic relations. This analysis delves deeply into the military, diplomatic, and geopolitical consequences of the war, highlighting how these elements have redefined Azerbaijan's relations with its neighbors and impacted the broader international context.

1. Military Strategy and Technological Superiority

One of the defining characteristics of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was the significant disparity in military strategies and technological capabilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The Azerbaijani Armed Forces employed a modern, technologically advanced military strategy, in stark contrast to Armenia's more traditional and outdated tactics. Azerbaijan's use of drone technology, particularly the Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones and Israeli-made Harop loitering munitions, proved decisive in the outcome of the war. These drones were employed with remarkable precision, allowing Azerbaijan to neutralize Armenian air defenses, armored vehicles, and artillery systems with minimal casualties.

The use of drones in this conflict is widely considered a turning point in modern warfare, as they provided Azerbaijan with an unprecedented advantage in reconnaissance and targeting, allowing for real-time adjustments on the battlefield. The success of drone warfare has set a new standard for military operations, and it is likely that other nations will adopt similar strategies in future conflicts. The role of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in Azerbaijan's military victory cannot be overstated, as they played a critical role in the rapid and effective liberation of occupied territories, particularly in the mountainous terrain of Karabakh where traditional ground operations would have been far more challenging and costly.

Additionally, Azerbaijan's military doctrine was highly flexible, adapting to the changing dynamics of the battlefield. The strategic liberation of key cities such as

Shusha—a city of immense historical, cultural, and strategic importance—was a turning point in the conflict. The recapture of Shusha, achieved through a daring and unexpected ground operation, dealt a psychological blow to the Armenian forces and effectively sealed the outcome of the war. This operation demonstrated the tactical ingenuity of the Azerbaijani military, which, rather than relying solely on aerial superiority, was able to carry out complex ground maneuvers that caught Armenian forces off-guard.

In contrast, the Armenian military was largely unprepared for the high-tech, asymmetric warfare employed by Azerbaijan. Armenia's reliance on traditional warfare tactics, combined with outdated Soviet-era equipment, made it difficult for Armenian forces to mount an effective defense. Furthermore, Armenia's lack of air defense systems capable of countering Azerbaijan's drone fleet left its military infrastructure highly vulnerable to precise strikes. The Armenian military's failure to adapt to the realities of modern warfare was one of the primary reasons for its rapid defeat, as its forces were repeatedly outmaneuvered and overwhelmed by Azerbaijan's superior technology and tactics.

2. Diplomatic Consequences and Regional Realignments

The conclusion of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, with the signing of the November 10, 2020, ceasefire agreement, marked a significant diplomatic victory for Azerbaijan. The trilateral statement, brokered by Russia, effectively ended hostilities and solidified Azerbaijan's territorial gains. Under the terms of the agreement, Armenia agreed to withdraw from the remaining occupied districts of Kelbajar, Aghdam, and Lachin without further conflict, further cementing Azerbaijan's victory.

The ceasefire agreement also introduced Russian peacekeeping forces into Nagorno-Karabakh for the first time, signaling a shift in the regional balance of power. While Russia played a key role in brokering the ceasefire, its position in the South Caucasus became more complex as Turkey's influence in Azerbaijan grew. The introduction of Russian peacekeepers highlights Moscow's desire to maintain a foothold in the region and assert itself as the dominant mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, the growing strategic alliance between Azerbaijan and Turkey, underscored by the Shusha Declaration, has introduced a new dynamic into the region.

Turkey's role in Azerbaijan's victory was not limited to military support; Ankara's diplomatic backing of Baku was instrumental in shaping the post-war geopolitical landscape. The Shusha Declaration, signed in June 2021, formalized the military and political alliance between Azerbaijan and Turkey, signaling the deepening of their strategic partnership. This alliance has implications for the broader regional power structure, as it positions Turkey as a key player in the South Caucasus, traditionally a region dominated by Russian influence. The growing cooperation between Azerbaijan and Turkey also raises questions about the future of Armenia's relationship with both countries and whether Yerevan will seek to balance its ties with Russia by engaging with Turkey and Azerbaijan in the post-war period.

Russia's role in the ceasefire agreement, while significant, has also exposed the limitations of its influence. The deployment of Russian peacekeepers has not resolved the underlying tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, particularly concerning the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the demarcation of borders. Moreover, Armenia's reliance on Russia during the war and its subsequent military defeat have led to growing disillusionment with Moscow's role as a security guarantor. The perception that Russia did not intervene decisively on Armenia's behalf during the war has strained relations between Yerevan and Moscow, potentially opening the door for Armenia to explore alternative security arrangements, including closer ties with Western powers or regional actors like Iran.

3. The Zangezur Corridor and Regional Economic Opportunities

One of the most significant geopolitical outcomes of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War is the proposed Zangezur Corridor, a transportation route that would connect mainland Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhchivan and further to Turkey. The opening of this corridor, as outlined in the November 10 ceasefire agreement, has the potential to transform regional trade and transportation networks, offering Azerbaijan direct access to Turkey and Europe while bypassing Armenia. The strategic significance of the Zangezur Corridor cannot be overstated, as it would reduce Azerbaijan's dependency on routes through Georgia and Iran, while also enhancing its role as a regional energy and transportation hub.

The Zangezur Corridor represents a rare opportunity for regional economic integration, benefiting not only Azerbaijan and Turkey but also Armenia, should it choose to participate. Armenia's economy, which has been weakened by the war and decades of isolation, could potentially benefit from the opening of new trade routes and the restoration of transportation links. However, the corridor remains a contentious issue, with Armenian political and military leaders expressing concerns about its impact on Armenia's sovereignty and security. The successful implementation of the Zangezur Corridor will require careful negotiation and diplomatic efforts to ensure that all parties' interests are respected.

In addition to the Zangezur Corridor, the war's outcome has opened new opportunities for Azerbaijan to solidify its role as a key player in regional energy diplomacy. Azerbaijan's vast oil and gas reserves, coupled with its strategic location along major transportation routes, make it a vital energy supplier to Europe. The victory in the war has strengthened Azerbaijan's hand in negotiating new energy deals, particularly with the European Union, which is seeking to diversify its energy sources away from Russia. The restoration of territories and infrastructure in Karabakh will further enhance Azerbaijan's ability to develop its energy sector and attract foreign investment.

4. Obstacles to Peace and the Challenges of Normalization

Despite the clear military and diplomatic gains achieved by Azerbaijan in the aftermath of the war, several challenges remain in achieving a lasting peace. One of the most pressing issues is the demarcation and delimitation of the Azerbaijan-Armenia border, which has become a point of contention between the two countries. While Azerbaijan has emphasized the need for a clear and internationally recognized border, Armenia has resisted, citing security concerns and the unresolved status of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia's reluctance to fully embrace the post-war realities has manifested in sporadic military provocations along the border, complicating efforts to stabilize the region. The ongoing presence of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, while ensuring a fragile ceasefire, has not addressed the root causes of the conflict. Armenia's leadership, under Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, has faced internal pressure from

opposition groups who view any concession to Azerbaijan as a betrayal of national interests. This internal political instability has hindered Armenia's ability to engage in meaningful peace negotiations, further delaying the normalization of relations.

Moreover, the question of the rights and status of the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh remains unresolved. While Azerbaijan has offered assurances regarding the protection of minority rights within its borders, Armenia continues to push for international guarantees and the recognition of a special status for Karabakh Armenians. This issue has the potential to derail future peace talks if not addressed through careful and inclusive diplomacy.

The international community, particularly the European Union and the United States, has expressed a willingness to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but their involvement has introduced additional complexities into the peace process. The involvement of multiple external actors, each with their own interests, has made it difficult to establish a unified approach to conflict resolution. Additionally, the legacy of the OSCE Minsk Group, which had failed to resolve the conflict over three decades, has left both Azerbaijan and Armenia skeptical of international mediation efforts.

5. The Path Forward: Opportunities and Risks

As Azerbaijan moves forward from its military victory, it faces the dual challenge of securing a lasting peace with Armenia while ensuring the successful reconstruction of the liberated territories. The scale of destruction in Karabakh, particularly in cities like Aghdam and Fuzuli, will require significant investment in infrastructure, housing, and public services. Azerbaijan has already committed to ambitious reconstruction projects, with a focus on turning the liberated territories into hubs for economic development and tourism.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which took place from September 27 to November 10, 2020, not only marked a decisive military victory for Azerbaijan but also brought about profound political, diplomatic, and geopolitical transformations in the South Caucasus region. This war, unlike the protracted ceasefire that followed the First Nagorno-Karabakh War in the 1990s, resulted in a clear outcome: the restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, which had been violated for nearly three decades. The conflict also reshaped the region's power dynamics, influenced international diplomacy, and opened up new avenues for economic and strategic cooperation, while posing significant challenges for sustainable peace and stability.

At its core, the Second Karabakh War was a struggle for territorial sovereignty, an issue that Azerbaijan had relentlessly pursued since the 1994 ceasefire. For 26 years, diplomacy through international mediators, such as the OSCE Minsk Group, failed to produce a resolution to the conflict. Azerbaijan's patience with the negotiation process was stretched thin as Armenian provocations and occupation policies persisted, erasing any hope for a peaceful solution. The Second Karabakh War thus emerged as a last-resort effort to reclaim Azerbaijan's territories under occupation, particularly the seven surrounding districts and Nagorno-Karabakh, which had been internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. The successful military campaign, culminating in the capture of the strategically significant city of Shusha, solidified Azerbaijan's military victory and restored its sovereignty over these regions.

Azerbaijan's victory was not just a military triumph but also a significant moral and psychological one. The war evoked strong nationalistic sentiments among the Azerbaijani population, many of whom had either been displaced by the Armenian occupation or had lived with the knowledge that their ancestral lands were under foreign control. The liberation of territories, including culturally significant cities like Shusha, where Azerbaijan's rich historical and cultural heritage was intertwined, was seen as a moment of justice. It was not only the restoration of Azerbaijan's borders but also a reclamation

of its historical and cultural identity that had been systematically erased during the years of occupation.

The war's military success was largely due to Azerbaijan's adoption of modern warfare tactics and technological superiority. In particular, the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), such as Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones and Israeli Harop drones, was a game-changer. Azerbaijan's reliance on precise, high-tech military equipment allowed it to conduct an efficient and effective campaign that minimized its own casualties while maximizing damage to Armenian forces. The employment of drone warfare also set a new precedent for conflicts in mountainous terrains like Nagorno-Karabakh, where traditional military operations would have been far more challenging. This technological edge helped neutralize the Armenian forces' defensive positions and led to the rapid liberation of territories that had been occupied for decades.

Conversely, Armenia's military strategy was marked by several critical shortcomings. Its reliance on outdated Soviet-era military equipment and tactics proved ineffective against Azerbaijan's technologically superior forces. Armenia's military, unprepared for the type of warfare Azerbaijan employed, suffered significant losses early in the conflict, leading to the breakdown of its defensive lines. The loss of Shusha, in particular, was a turning point in the war, as it symbolized the collapse of Armenian defenses and signaled the inevitable conclusion of the conflict. The capture of Shusha was not only a military victory for Azerbaijan but also a psychological blow to Armenia, as the city had been viewed by both sides as the key to controlling Nagorno-Karabakh.

While the military victory was decisive, the diplomatic aftermath of the war has been equally significant. The ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia on November 10, 2020, formalized Azerbaijan's territorial gains and outlined the withdrawal of Armenian forces from the remaining occupied territories, such as the Kelbajar, Aghdam, and Lachin regions. This agreement was hailed as a triumph for Azerbaijan, as it achieved through military means what had been unattainable through decades of diplomacy. The ceasefire also marked the entry of Russian peacekeepers into the region, tasked with monitoring the implementation of the agreement and ensuring the stability of the post-war environment.

The presence of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, however, introduced a new dimension to the region's geopolitical landscape. While Russia's role in brokering the ceasefire and maintaining peace was critical, it also solidified Moscow's influence in the South Caucasus. Russia's decision to deploy peacekeepers was a strategic move to maintain its leverage over both Armenia and Azerbaijan. For Armenia, Russia remains a critical security partner, as evidenced by its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, the outcome of the war has strained Armenia's relationship with Russia, as many in Yerevan felt that Moscow's response during the conflict was insufficient to protect Armenian interests. This has led to a reevaluation of Armenia's reliance on Russia as a security guarantor, potentially pushing Yerevan to seek alternative alliances in the future.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan's relationship with Russia has been more pragmatic. While Russia's role as a mediator was instrumental in ending the war, Azerbaijan has increasingly looked to diversify its diplomatic and military alliances. The most notable example of this is Azerbaijan's deepening partnership with Turkey. The military and diplomatic support provided by Turkey during the war was crucial to Azerbaijan's success. Turkey's backing not only helped to strengthen Azerbaijan's military capabilities but also signaled the emergence of a new power dynamic in the region. The Shusha Declaration, signed between Azerbaijan and Turkey in June 2021, formalized their alliance and marked a shift in the balance of power in the South Caucasus. Turkey's growing influence in Azerbaijan, and by extension in the region, represents a counterbalance to Russia's traditional dominance and signals Ankara's long-term strategic interest in the South Caucasus.

The Shusha Declaration and the strengthening of the Azerbaijan-Turkey alliance have broader implications for the region. The conflict has underscored the shifting geopolitical alignments in the South Caucasus, with Turkey emerging as a key player in regional security and diplomacy. This partnership, built on mutual interests and cultural ties, has provided Azerbaijan with an additional layer of strategic depth, allowing it to navigate the complex post-war environment more confidently. The Azerbaijan-Turkey alliance has also raised concerns in Armenia, which views the growing influence of

Turkey in the region as a potential threat to its security. As Turkey continues to solidify its presence in Azerbaijan through military cooperation and economic investments, it is clear that the region's geopolitical dynamics are evolving in ways that were unimaginable before the war.

Another significant outcome of the Second Karabakh War is the proposed Zangezur Corridor, which is intended to connect mainland Azerbaijan to its exclave of Nakhchivan through Armenian territory. This corridor, once realized, would provide Azerbaijan with a direct route to Turkey, bypassing the need for transit through either Georgia or Iran. The Zangezur Corridor is a critical component of Azerbaijan's post-war economic strategy, as it offers new opportunities for trade and transportation, not only between Azerbaijan and Turkey but also between Europe and Asia. The development of this corridor has the potential to transform the regional economy by facilitating the movement of goods and people across borders, enhancing Azerbaijan's position as a regional hub for trade and logistics.

However, the Zangezur Corridor remains a contentious issue, particularly for Armenia, which views it as a potential infringement on its sovereignty. Armenia's reluctance to fully embrace the corridor reflects the deep-seated mistrust between Yerevan and Baku, even in the aftermath of the ceasefire agreement. The successful implementation of the Zangezur Corridor will require careful diplomacy and the resolution of outstanding issues related to border demarcation and security guarantees. If successfully implemented, the corridor could serve as a catalyst for economic cooperation in the region, potentially easing tensions and fostering greater interdependence between Azerbaijan, Armenia, and their neighbors.

Despite the significant progress made in the post-war period, several challenges remain in achieving a lasting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The most pressing issue is the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the rights of its Armenian population. While Azerbaijan has made clear its position that Nagorno-Karabakh is an integral part of its territory, Armenia continues to advocate for the protection of the rights of the Karabakh Armenians, raising concerns about their security and cultural autonomy. This

issue remains a significant obstacle to the full normalization of relations between the two countries, as any perceived concession on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh could be politically damaging for both governments.

Furthermore, the demarcation and delimitation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, particularly in the areas surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, remain unresolved. Sporadic clashes along the border, even after the signing of the ceasefire agreement, have underscored the fragility of the peace process and the need for a comprehensive and legally binding peace treaty. While Azerbaijan has expressed its readiness to engage in dialogue on these issues, Armenia's internal political instability and its reluctance to fully accept the new geopolitical realities have delayed progress. The involvement of international actors, such as the European Union and the United States, in mediating the peace process has introduced additional complexities, as external powers have their own strategic interests in the region.

In conclusion, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War has not only restored Azerbaijan's territorial integrity but has also redefined the region's geopolitical landscape. The war's outcomes have reshaped Azerbaijan's relationships with its neighbors, particularly Turkey and Russia, while also posing new challenges for Armenia. The post-war environment is marked by both opportunities and risks: opportunities for economic development through projects like the Zangezur Corridor and regional cooperation through the "3+3" framework, but also risks related to unresolved political and security issues. Azerbaijan's ability to navigate these challenges will be crucial in shaping the future of the South Caucasus, ensuring that the military victory translates into a lasting and sustainable peace for the region.

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