

# THE WEST AND THE CONFLICT IN NAGORNY KARABAKH

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The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict can be described as the most persistent and difficult to resolve among the post-Soviet conflicts. This is mainly explained by the geopolitical dilemma that becomes evident every time an attempt is made to settle it. I have in mind the conflict between geography and ideology, the two sides of geopolitics. The geographic side relates to geographic location, mineral riches, etc., while ideology is related to values, culture, world outlook, and history. A conflict can potentially be promptly settled if one of the sides obviously dominates in both respects; it may drag on and on if neither side predominates, or if one of them dominates geographically, while the other, ideologically. Any protracted conflict does not always mean protracted fighting. A conflict can be frozen, while the sides are left to their more or less peaceful existence. More often than

not this is described as a “neither war, nor peace” situation.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict differs from many other conflicts because the sides involved have different, yet mutually balanced, geopolitical advantages. Azerbaijan’s geographic location is obviously much more advantageous than that of Nagorny Karabakh (the former, found between Russia and Iran, serves as a bridge to Central Asia). On top of this, it is rich in oil and gas. Nagorny Karabakh dominates in the ideological respects, which balances out Azerbaijan’s geographic advantages.

This balance between the geographic and ideological components can be clearly detected in Western policies in the Southern Caucasus. To acquire a better understanding let us discuss the main imperatives of the key Western players in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement process.

## The U.S.

At all times, the Western powers have sought stronger positions in this strategically important region. They stepped up their activities in 1917-1920. The onslaught was stemmed in Soviet times and resumed as soon as the Soviet Union fell apart. Today the West is becoming entrenched in the Southern Caucasus under America’s lead. Compared with the old players, the United States is a younger and more

dynamic actor; it is the only superpower with global interests and its eye on the Southern Caucasus as a strategically important region.

To boost its global influence, the White House will inevitably increase its military and economic potential; it will concentrate on setting up mega-regions to bring together states with different military and economic potential, confessions, cultures and, most important, strategic interests. In so doing, Washington will address several key strategic tasks. It will do its best not to let the initiative slip away. Today, the European mega-region, the EU, has become a reality to a certain extent. It serves U.S. strategic interests well: its usefulness became obvious on the eve of the (at that time, possible) military action against Iraq when the EU approved of America's plans even though France and Germany refused to do so. The West looks at the Southern Caucasus as part of the European mega-region.

There are signs that an Indo-Central Asian mega-region will be set up next, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India being its main strategic links. This will allow Washington to address several key strategic tasks. First, by tying Central Asia to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, the United States will be able to create export routes for the region's natural riches (primarily Central Asian hydrocarbons) bypassing Russia, Iran, and China. We should always bear in mind that the total population of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan (about 1.2 billion) is a promising market for Central Asian products. Second, there is the opinion in the West that democratic India can be developed into the regional pole needed to keep China in check. In turn, India, which is experiencing increasing fuel problems, will need Central Asian oil.

Baku has an important role to play too. Today, the United States is laying its access route to Central Asia through Azerbaijan. There are several relevant facts here: in the south it is Iran that holds the keys to Central Asia. Indian-Pakistani relations remain strained; much time will be needed to teach the public on both sides to accept the idea that better relations between the two capitals are an absolute necessity. Afghanistan has not yet recovered. In the north, there is Russia; in the east, there is China. This makes Azerbaijan the only bridge the United States and the West can use to penetrate Central Asia. During his meeting with President of Azerbaijan Ilkham Aliev in November 2003, Zbigniew Brzezinski said, among other things: "Our choice of Azerbaijan as the main U.S. partner in the region was a deliberate one. We are fully aware of the fact that Azerbaijan is very important for us."<sup>1</sup>

Azerbaijan is just as important to the West in the energy sphere too. The West intends to use its territory to move Caspian hydrocarbon fuels to the world markets. According to certain sources, the Caspian seabed contains from 110 to 243 billion barrels of oil (totaling \$4 trillion). The combined reserves of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are assessed at 130 billion barrels, three times more than America's reserves.<sup>2</sup> Several oil giants (ExxonMobil, ChevronTexaco, and British Petroleum) have already invested over 30 billion in the Caspian oil and gas infrastructure. In the past five years Western companies have invested \$5.2 billion in the Azerbaijani economy.<sup>3</sup> The United States will use Caspian oil to diversify its oil imports and decrease its dependence on Middle Eastern oil.

The above suggests that Washington should have supported Baku in the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement. The U.S., however, is demonstrating a fairly balanced approach, probably because of the equilibrium between the geographic and ideological components mentioned above. I should say that top American officials and political analysts always emphasize that the balance between these two geopolitical components is prominent in the White House's treatment of international issues. In one of his program speeches on U.S. national security strategy, President George W. Bush pointed out that his country was resolved to support political and economic freedoms, peaceful relations with other states and to respect human dignity.<sup>4</sup> He added that these aims could be achieved only when human dignity was protected, alliances were strengthened, to be able to defeat international terrorism and prevent attacks against the U.S. and its allies, efforts were made to resolve regional conflicts, our enemies and the enemies of our

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<sup>1</sup> R. Gariboglu, "Ilkham Aliev pobedil, i eto glavnoe," *Zerkalo*, 8 November, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> See: L. Kleveman, "The New Great Game," *The Guardian*, 20 October, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> The Khabarliar Program, AzTV1, 17 May, 2001, 14:00.

<sup>4</sup> See: President Bush, West Point, New York, 1 June, 2002, The White House [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nssall.html>].

allies were prevented from using WMD against us, a new global era based on the free market was launched, and development frameworks were extended with the help of free society by building an infrastructure of democracy.

The program unveiled by the American president demonstrates that the balance among the main geopolitical components is the main factor, democratization and development of an open society being regarded as absolute priorities. This was true during Clinton's presidency too. At one time, Stephen Sestanovich, Special Adviser to the Secretary of State for the CIS, said: "The U.S. policy starts with strategic, rather than economic interests."<sup>5</sup> The same person confirmed on several occasions that Washington saw its main mission in supporting democratic political institutions.<sup>6</sup>

The above has made it abundantly clear that the White House regards democracy as one of the pivotal points of its geopolitical ideology. Nagorny Karabakh has outstripped Azerbaijan where democratic development is concerned—this is one of the key components of its ideological advantage. Political practices and statements made by international observers bear witness to Baku's mainly declarative and fictitious devotion to democracy. Elections at all levels (presidential, parliamentary, or to the bodies of local self-administration) are one of the best indicators of the state of democracy in any country. In Azerbaijan they are never free from violations and obvious cheating, which is invariably detected and commented on by foreign observers. Democratic principles are violated in many other ways too. The political elite, both in power and in the opposition, is united in its anti-Armenian stand. Here is what Ilkham Aliev said at a sitting of the Editorial Board of the *National Encyclopedia of Azerbaijan*: "I have discovered that the names of many prominent scientists and political figures present in the *Azerbaijanian Soviet Encyclopedia* I have in my office are absent from this edition. There are numerous Armenian names though. I should say that I was baffled: Arutiunian, Arutiunov, Gevorkian, Eremian, Martiros Sarian, Sasunlu David... Why, I ask you?! Why?! Are they the backbone of our national encyclopedia?! I was appalled... Azerbaijanis disappeared while Armenians took their place? Why?"<sup>7</sup>

Here is what Wafa Gulu-zadeh, former foreign policy adviser of President Heydar Aliev, had to say on the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement: "I have already said that an autonomy of Nagorny Karabakh would develop into independence... I insisted that Nagorny Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan should be refused any status. I mean to say that the Karabakh problem cannot be resolved by granting a status to the Armenians. I want everybody to bear in mind that it is a crime to grant Armenians Azerbaijanian citizenship. You all know that in the past there were scores of Armenians at our enterprises. Today, there is not a single one. When they receive citizenship they will no longer remain in Nagorny Karabakh. They will all come to Baku where they will acquire all the rights and shares. If we infringe on these rights they will rebel. Today we cannot cope with one woman, Arzu Abdullaeva (a prominent human rights activist.—*D.B.*), who defends the rights of Armenians in Azerbaijan. What shall we do with many such people?"<sup>8</sup> This and similar statements come from the so-called pro-Western politicians.

Baku does not limit itself to anti-Armenian policies—other nationalities are also discriminated against. Isfendiakh Vagab-zadeh, who represents Azerbaijan in the U.N. Geneva Office, says that the problems his state has to cope with worldwide are created by sham Azerbaijanis who wormed their way into Azerbaijanian diplomacy. In an official letter to speaker Murtuz Aleskerov, he wrote that there were too many aliens among the diplomats. "It should not be tolerated," he wrote further, "because the diplomats born of Armenian, Jewish, or Russian mothers or even of mothers belonging to ethnic minorities will never serve Azerbaijan with dignity and loyalty."<sup>9</sup> The United States has to bear these

<sup>5</sup> "Statement of Stephen Sestanovich, Ambassador-at-Large, Special Adviser to the Secretary of State for the Newly Independent States, before the House International Relations Committee, 30 April, 1998," *Turkistan Newsletter*, 6 May, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> See, in particular: F.T. Csongos, "Central Asia: Official Outlines U.S. Policy," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newsline*, 18 March, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> For more detail, see: "Verbatim report of a sitting of the Editorial Board of the *National Encyclopedia of Azerbaijan*," *Day.Az* [<http://www.day.az/news/politics/6292.html>], 9 April 2004].

<sup>8</sup> Speech Wafa Gulu-Zadeh delivered at a sitting of the Milli Mejlis of Azerbaijan which discussed the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, *AzTV1*, 24 February, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example: A. Useynov, "Chuzhaia krov," *Vremia MN* (Baku), 5 June, 2001; Sh. Abbasov, "Otozvan polpred Azerbaijan v OON Eldar Guseynov," Internet newspaper *Ekho*, 5 June, 2001.

facts in mind and cannot support a superficially democratic state. Such a state cannot be a predictable or reliable partner. There are people in Azerbaijan who know this. For example, Khikmet Gadzhizadeh, a prominent political scientist, has pointed out: “Even if Azerbaijan is three times stronger than Armenia, the world will never allow a state that oppresses its own citizens to spread its inhuman power to the Armenian ethnic minority in the same way as it prevented Serbian dictatorship to restore its power in Bosnia or Kosovo.”<sup>10</sup>

The very process of nation-building in Nagorny Karabakh is very different from what goes on in Azerbaijan. Elections are free and transparent; and international observers invariably confirm that there are no gross violations of the election procedure. The recent elections to the local self-administration bodies held in August 2004 fully confirmed this. Even though the candidates nominated by the parties of power had strong support, independent candidates won in many places and in the capital. This kind of thing is impossible in Azerbaijan. This shows that Nagorny Karabakh is much closer to the democratic community made up, in particular, of all the major centers of power, at least in the Southern Caucasus. The democratic community, in turn, will profit from another democratic entity of international relations (albeit an unrecognized one) in the Southern Caucasus, a strategically important region. It is much more important than contacts with a state which has a very advantageous geographic location yet fails to side with the ideology supported by all the power centers.

The historical specifics of the Armenians are another feature of the ideological component. Their tragic fate scattered them all over the world. A considerable part of the nation is found outside their national states—Armenia and the Republic of Nagorny Karabakh. The nearly 10-million-strong nation lives in diasporas in different civilizations; they have preserved their national identity and imbibed the cultures and values of their new homelands. Such an ally cannot be overestimated; these people are a valuable ally because in all countries where they live Armenians are perceived as part of the main nation or, at least, as a loyal element. Ideologically, Armenians are a unique geopolitical component in the Southern Caucasus and outside it. It should be said that complementarity as Armenia’s key foreign policy doctrine is a natural choice rooted in the past. Armenia is a traditional partner of Russia, their ties go back many centuries. Armenia is maintaining close contacts with the United States, home of a multi-million Armenian diaspora. The United States is building its largest embassy in Erevan. This is another confirmation of Armenia’s ideological value for the West. Armenians have good relations with Iran. There are large Armenian diasporas in Central Asia and the Middle East. Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh’s ideological potential is much greater than that of its South Caucasian neighbors.

Normally Armenian diasporas are fairly influential in the countries they live in. This is especially true of the United States, where the Armenian lobby (along with the Jewish and Greek ones) is actively influencing Washington’s foreign policy. While Armenians account for about 0.5 percent of the total American population, the Armenian Support Group in the U.S. Congress has 136 members, or 25.4 percent of the total number of congressmen.<sup>11</sup> They obviously cannot be ignored: their role in domestic policies and during elections is immense. It is mainly thanks to Congress’ efforts that Armenia receives one of the world’s largest per capita shares of American aid. Every year, on 24 April (the day of the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire in 1915), the U.S. president addresses the Armenians in the United States. This practice is unique. In his speech the president never uses the word “genocide,” yet the meaning is clear. The American president says: “On this day, we pause in remembrance of one of the most horrible tragedies of the 20th century, the annihilation of as many as 1.5 million Armenians through forced exile and murder at the end of the Ottoman Empire.”<sup>12</sup> The president points out that his country is proud of its close ties with Armenia, which is building a democratic state and market economy. When talking about

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<sup>10</sup> Kh. Gadzhizadeh, “Vechnaia vojna ili vechny mir?” *Ekho*, 30 July, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> See: “136,” *Golos Armenii*, 31 August, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Armenian Remembrance Day, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 24 April, 2004 [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040424-1.html>].

Nagorny Karabakh, the president does not mention Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and points out that his country supports a peaceful settlement.

The very fact that Stephen Mann, the present cochairman of the OSCE Minsk Group, occupies two posts—the U.S. State Department's Special Negotiator for Eurasian Conflicts and Senior Adviser to the Secretary of State on Caspian Basin Energy Diplomacy—indicates that there is a balance between the two geopolitical components in the approach to the Nagorny Karabakh settlement. The energy-related projects take into account the strategic, or geographical, component, while the post of U.S. State Department's Special Navigator for Eurasian Conflicts makes it possible to concentrate on the ideological side.

## Europe

European approaches also stem from the balance between these two components. As former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana stated, Europe could not feel itself completely protected if the Caucasus were left outside the European security system.<sup>13</sup> In this context, Europe is growing increasingly concerned with its own energy security; this adds more importance to the oil and gas of the Caspian. European oil companies are working actively in the region; all their projects concentrate on Azerbaijan as the bridge between the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia and, consequently between Europe and Asia, bypassing Russia and Iran. Geographically, Baku is much more important than Stepanakert and Erevan, yet Europe is not siding with Azerbaijan when it comes to the Karabakh settlement. Documents of the OSCE summits bear witness to this. The final documents of the 1994 Budapest Summit do not mention the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan; the largest part of the summit declaration (717 words) deals with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The subject is discussed under the title "Intensification of CSCE Action in Relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," while the Abkhazian, South Ossetian and Trans-Dniester conflicts are discussed in the sections entitled "Georgia" and "Moldova." The Europeans are obviously concerned about the territorial integrity of these two states.<sup>14</sup> The declarations of the Lisbon (December 1996) and Istanbul (November 1999) summits were worded similarly.<sup>15</sup>

This graphically demonstrates that the geographic and ideological geopolitical components in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict are balanced. At the same time, Europe and America exercise different approaches to Nagorny Karabakh's ideological pre-eminence over Azerbaijan. I have already written that it is important for the U.S. that Nagorny Karabakh's ideological pre-eminence is based on its faster democratic development than Azerbaijan's and also on a strong and politically well-organized Armenian diaspora in the United States. Europe mostly proceeds from democratic changes when assessing the ideological component. There are two reasons for this: first, the European Armenian diaspora is not as formidable as the American one. There is a well-organized diaspora in France, yet Europe is obviously much larger than France. Second, and most important, Europe looks at the Southern Caucasus as part of Europe and does not conceal its intention to incorporate it into Europe. The local leaders have repeatedly stated that this is what they want.

Integration is not limited to political or administrative integration—it calls for shared values. Even if the region becomes part of Europe administratively, it will take a long time for it to become a spiritual part of Europe as well. It is very important to grasp the philosophy and spirit of democracy, otherwise

<sup>13</sup> See: G.E. Howard, "NATO & the Caucasus: The Caspian Axis," *NATO After Enlargement: New Challenges, New Missions, New Forces*, ed. by Blank Stephen, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1998, p. 152.

<sup>14</sup> Budapest Summit Declaration [<http://www.osce.org/docs/english/1990-1999/summits/buda94e.htm#Anchor-BUDAPEST-37580>], 5-6 December, 1994.

<sup>15</sup> See: Lisbon Summit Declaration, DOC.S/1/96 [<http://www.osce.org/docs/english/1990-1999/summits/lisbo96e.htm#Anchor-LISBO-3409>], 3 December, 1996; Istanbul Summit Declaration, SUM.DOC/2/99 [<http://www.osce.org/docs/english/1990-1999/summits/istadec199e.htm>], 19 November, 1999.

conflict settlement and European membership will never become a reality. To become part of Europe, the local nations will have to change their psychological make-up; they will have to learn to tolerate the opinions of others and respect human rights, the cornerstone of European civilization. This alone will allow the Southern Caucasus to become an equal participant in the European processes. So for Europe, the conflicts in our region are a sort of litmus test of democracy.

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