

The Era of Peace and Cooperation in the South Caucasus: The End of the Zangezur Disputes

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The South Caucasus is entering a historic new phase. The conflict and enmity between Azerbaijanis and Armenians – beginning in 1988 during the late Soviet period and further escalating in the years of independence—now appears to be approaching its formal conclusion. The meeting held in Washington on 8 August 2025 constitutes a landmark step in this trajectory. This article analyzes the official documents signed at the White House, with particular attention to the agreement concerning transport communications through Armenia’s Syunik province, the responses of key regional actors Russia and Iran, and the broader prospects for the peace process.

The Joint Declaration signed by Trump, Aliyev, and Pashinyan, with the US President as witness, functions as a pledge of commitment to peace and cooperation. Article 5 articulates this unambiguously:

We recognize the necessity of embarking upon the path toward a bright future free from the legacy of past conflict, in accordance with the UN Charter and the 1991 Almaty Declaration. Following a conflict that has inflicted profound human suffering, conditions have finally been created for our states to initiate neighborly relations on the basis of the inviolability of international borders and the inadmissibility of the use of force for territorial acquisition. This reality—no longer, and never again, a subject of revision—opens the way for closing the chapter of hostility between our states. We firmly reject and exclude any attempt at revenge, now and in the future.

The principal political outcome, however, is the formal resolution of disputes concerning the transport route through Armenia that will connect mainland Azerbaijan with the

Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (NAR). According to Articles 3 and 4 of the Declaration, this transit route will be designated the “Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity” (TRIPP). On the basis of respect for Armenia’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and jurisdiction, unobstructed connectivity will be ensured between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan.

In this way, the concept of an extraterritorial Zangezur corridor has been definitively set aside. It should be recalled that the tripartite Declaration of 10 November 2020, signed by Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia, stipulated that Armenia would guarantee the security of unhindered transport communication between Azerbaijan’s western regions and Nakhchivan, with monitoring entrusted to the Russian Border Service. Azerbaijan, citing Article 9, interpreted the phrase “unhindered transport communication” as equivalent to a corridor and demanded that Armenia implement this commitment. In the post–Second Karabakh War period, the establishment of the Zangezur corridor became one of Azerbaijan’s central political priorities. Military victory amplified both the leadership’s ambitions and the expectations of society, with irredentist perspectives increasingly dominating official rhetoric and public discourse. President Aliyev openly declared: “Whether Armenia agrees or not, we will establish the Zangezur corridor. If not, we will resolve it by force,” thus not excluding military action to achieve this objective. Following the 2020 war, three episodes of armed clashes occurred along the border—in November 2021, September 2022, and May 2023. The largest confrontation took place from 12-14 September 2022, resulting in the deaths of 80 Azerbaijani and 135 Armenian servicemen. The Armenian government reported that, as a consequence of these clashes, 127 square kilometers of its territory came under the control of the Azerbaijani army.

The notion of involving third-party operators in the management of communications through Armenia did not, in fact,

originate with the Trump administration. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan had proposed this idea to Azerbaijan as early as December 2021. Subsequently, in October 2023, at the Silk Road Conference in Tbilisi, Pashinyan presented the “Crossroads of Peace” initiative, which envisaged the construction, repair, and operation of regional highways, railways, pipelines, cables, and power lines. The signing in Washington of a Memorandum of Understanding between the United States and Armenia on partnership in developing the potential of the “Crossroads of Peace” initiative may be regarded as a diplomatic success for Pashinyan. Although the text of the Memorandum has not yet been published, its title suggests that the United States has aligned itself with Armenia’s vision for the development of regional transport infrastructure. The next stage will involve the designation of operators to manage the Trump Route. The seemingly contradictory provision of the Joint Declaration—granting Azerbaijan unhindered passage while preserving Armenia’s sovereignty and jurisdiction—will be clarified through the outcome of further US-Armenia negotiations.

Russia’s Response: Moscow Insists on the 10 November Declaration

The tripartite Declaration of 10 November, which concluded the Second Karabakh War, also envisaged the restoration of economic and transport links in the region. As noted earlier, the Azerbaijani government interpreted Article 9 of this Declaration—on “unhindered transport communication”—as the establishment of the Zangezur Corridor, and supported placing this corridor under the control of the Russian Border Service. This approach coincided with Russia’s position and interests. However, following the downing of an Azerbaijani passenger aircraft in Russian airspace in December 2024, a paradigm shift occurred in Azerbaijan’s foreign policy against the backdrop of heightened tensions between the two states. The Russia–Azerbaijan alliance, grounded in the 22 February 2022 Declaration signed by Presidents Putin and Aliyev, was

significantly damaged. In the meantime, Russia's alliance with Armenia has also lost its substantive meaning; it has been reduced to a mere formality on paper. Armenian officials, including Prime Minister Pashinyan, have repeatedly stressed that Russia has failed to fulfill its obligations toward Armenia. Armenia has already suspended its participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Moscow-led military bloc, and is preparing to withdraw entirely. In this context, the transfer of control over the Syunik transport artery to the United States undoubtedly represents a weakening of Russia's position in the South Caucasus.

Yet Moscow's initial reaction to the Washington agreements was notable not for the characteristically aggressive tone of Russian officials, but for its restraint and cautious rhetoric. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Overchuk even stated that they supported Armenia's role in establishing the Trump Route, albeit with some conditions concerning clarification of details. This mildness is linked to the constructive dialogue established between Russia and the Trump administration; Moscow is reluctant to cast a shadow over the positive atmosphere in bilateral relations. At the same time, Russia seeks to preserve the tripartite format institutionalized by the 10 November Declaration, reminding both Baku and Yerevan of their obligations. In its official commentary, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized that the current stage of Azerbaijan–Armenia normalization began precisely with that Declaration, which between 2020 and 2022 produced a roadmap covering all aspects—peace treaty negotiations, de-blockading of communications, border delimitation, and more. Moscow warns the parties that optimal solutions to the region's problems depend on cooperation between South Caucasus countries and their neighbors (Russia, Iran, Turkey), while the involvement of external actors may generate additional difficulties and new dividing lines.

Nevertheless, Russia would hardly remain Russia if it confined

itself to diplomatic expressions of discontent. In recent weeks, the targeting of Azerbaijan's economic interests by the Russian military has marked an escalation unprecedented in bilateral relations. On 6 August, Russian drones struck a compressor station in Ukraine's Odesa region near the Romanian border, which supplied natural gas to Ukraine. Test volumes of Azerbaijani gas were being delivered to Ukraine through this station. Subsequently, on August 8 and 18, the Russian military launched drone strikes on SOCAR's oil terminal in Odesa, rendering the facility virtually inoperable. Russia's demonstration of hard power against Azerbaijan aims to compel Baku back into the framework of the 10 November Declaration, as well as the Declaration on Allied Interaction.

The communication established between Trump and Putin within the framework of peace initiatives in Ukraine could also create a basis for cooperation between these states in the South Caucasus. The current US President is known for approaching such matters less from a geopolitical perspective than from a commercial one. For this reason, it is still premature to conclude that Russia will be entirely pushed out of the South Caucasus at this stage. Yet, in any case, the entry of a global actor such as the United States into the South Caucasus must be regarded as a setback for Russia, which has been the dominant power in this area for more than two centuries. The strengthening of US influence in the post-Soviet space is, without question, contrary to Russia's strategic interests.

Iran's Contradictory Position

As for Iran's reaction, we observe once again the contradictions inherent in the country's dual political system. At the outset, Ali Akbar Velayati, senior advisor to the Supreme Leader, issued a sharply worded statement, declaring that the Trump Route would become a graveyard for "Trump's mercenaries" and asserting that Iran was prepared to defend the "security of the South Caucasus," whether in

coordination with Russia or independently. By recalling that the Iranian army conducted military exercises along Azerbaijan's borders when Turkey and Azerbaijan insisted on the opening of the Zangezur Corridor, Velayati's remarks also signaled that Iran might resort to military force to safeguard its interests.

By contrast, President Masoud Pezeshkian and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi adopted a softer and more conciliatory stance. Pezeshkian argued that Iran's interests had been taken into account in the TRIPP project—namely, the preservation of Armenia's territorial integrity; the protection of Iran's connectivity with Europe through Armenia and Georgia; and the maintenance of its northern route toward Russia. Araghchi, for his part, emphasized with satisfaction that the issue of the Zangezur Corridor had been entirely set aside. According to him, Iran's only concern is the involvement of US companies operating in the region.

It should also be noted that Iran and Russia maintain a common position regarding the discussion and resolution of regional issues within the framework of the so-called "3+3 format."

Why Is the Final Signing of the Peace Treaty Delayed?

One of the principal outcomes of the Washington meeting was the initialing of the text of a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan. *The Treaty on the Establishment of Peace and Interstate Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia* had been fully agreed upon in March 2025. On 11 August, the governments of both Armenia and Azerbaijan simultaneously published the initialed document. The text contains no unexpected or sensational provisions.

The treaty should be understood as an agreement between two equal parties. The sides have recognized the administrative borders that existed during the Soviet Union as their state borders, thereby settling disputes on this matter. Following the signing of the treaty, no third-party forces will be

stationed along their borders. This provision reflects Azerbaijan's demand, as it was concerned about the activities of the European Union Mission in Armenia. One of the most important aspects of the treaty is that the parties will withdraw or otherwise resolve, within one month of the treaty's entry into force, all existing interstate claims, complaints, and disputes. They pledge not to raise new claims against each other, nor to become party to claims or complaints advanced by third parties. Furthermore, the sides commit not to invoke their domestic legislation as justification for failing to implement the treaty in the future. Once the peace treaty is signed and ratified by the parliaments, diplomatic relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan will be formally established.

The act of initialing confirms, from a technical perspective, that the document has been fully agreed upon and that negotiations on its content have concluded. However, an initialed document does not carry legal force. In this sense, the process cannot yet be considered finalized.

The primary reason for the delay in signing the treaty lies in Azerbaijan's demand that amendments be made to Armenia's Constitution. President Aliyev reiterated this position in his remarks to the Azerbaijani media in Washington: "Armenia also has, so to speak, homework. As you know, the territorial claim against Azerbaijan enshrined in their Constitution did not allow the peace treaty to be signed today. But once these amendments are made, the peace treaty can be signed at any time."

Armenia does not object to this condition, yet constitutional reform is a complex political process. With parliamentary elections scheduled in Armenia for June 2026, the prospect of initiating such amendments beforehand appears unlikely. Doing so would expose Prime Minister Pashinyan to additional political risks, while simultaneously conducting both an election campaign and a constitutional referendum campaign

would be highly challenging. For this reason, the signing of the peace treaty will likely be delayed by at least another year. If Pashinyan's Civil Contract party secures a renewed victory and retains a parliamentary majority, the likelihood of holding a constitutional referendum in 2026 with a favorable outcome—and subsequently signing the peace treaty—will be high. However, should the opposite occur, with opposition parties, including pro-Russian forces, gaining a majority in parliament, a new and different political situation would likely emerge. In that case, the region could once again enter a phase of uncertainty.