

The Washington Declaration: moving closer to peace in the South Caucasus

Wojciech Górecki

On 8 August, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, and US President Donald Trump signed a peace declaration in Washington. The document stresses the need to continue efforts towards a future peace agreement aimed at normalising Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, and expresses the two sides' commitment to reopening transport routes, including the road linking Azerbaijan proper with its Nakhichevan exclave through Armenian territory. This road is expected to operate under a project named TRIPP – the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity. The terms of its use will be determined through cooperation between Armenia and the United States, with the possible participation of third parties.

The declaration was warmly welcomed by Turkey and the EU, both of which expressed their readiness to participate in regional transport initiatives. However, it received a more reserved response from Russia and Iran. Both countries acknowledged the document as a step towards peace in the region, but stressed that stability in the South Caucasus requires cooperation from its neighbours – Iran, Russia, and Turkey – and warned that the presence of other actors, implicitly the United States, could pose risks to regional security.

The tripartite Washington Declaration enhances trust between the parties to the conflict and brings the prospect of signing a peace agreement closer, although no specific date has yet been set. The planned involvement of a US entity as the operator of the route to Nakhichevan through Armenia (the so-called Zangezur corridor) could reconcile Azerbaijan's expectations with Armenia's interests, as transit rules have been among the most contentious issues in talks between the two countries. The document's adoption represents a symbolic setback for Russia, which for many years claimed to be – and was regarded as – the main mediator in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.

Commentary

- **The declaration does not constitute a peace agreement** that would end the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which has persisted since the late 1980s. Between 2020 and 2023, Azerbaijan regained control over the separatist region of Nagorno-Karabakh, effectively forcing the local Armenian population to emigrate. Today, the dispute concerns several issues, including the delimitation of the shared border and the rules for Azerbaijani transit to Nakhichevan. On 13 March, the parties announced they had completed work on the text of a peace agreement; its content was disclosed on 11

August (see Annex). The Washington Declaration confirms their desire to conclude it and brings that goal closer, with the foreign ministers of both countries having initialled the agreement in Washington. Azerbaijan has made its signing conditional on amending the preamble to Armenia's constitution with its reference to Nagorno-Karabakh, which Baku regards as a challenge to its territorial integrity. Armenia has not ruled out amendments to its constitution, but has noted that this would require time and compliance with relevant procedures, which provide for a referendum. Armenia and Azerbaijan have not established and do not maintain diplomatic relations.

- **The Washington Declaration reduces Russia's role in the region.** For many years, Moscow acted as the main mediator in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, co-chairing the OSCE Minsk Group established to resolve the dispute (before signing the document, both parties called on the OSCE to dissolve the group), while also pursuing independent initiatives in this field; it was under Russia's auspices that the Armenia–Azerbaijan war ended in the autumn of 2020. Regardless of Armenia's formal membership in Russia-controlled integration formats – the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, in which Armenia, in practice, no longer participates actively – the country is now positioning itself as being within the EU's orbit.
- **Labelling the project to develop the corridor between the main territory of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan exclave as the 'Trump Route' serves a propaganda purpose:** Aliyev and Pashinyan have announced their intention to nominate the US president for the Nobel Peace Prize. Nevertheless, the participation of an entity from a third country – the United States – in this project could reconcile Armenia's interests, namely retaining control over its territory and ensuring the inviolability of its borders, with Azerbaijan's expectations for the efficient transit of people and goods. In this context, the dissenting position of Russia and Iran is unsurprising – both have expressed support for the declaration, but stressed that lasting peace will not be possible without the involvement of neighbouring regional states. However, these reservations appear to be driven chiefly by ambition.

APPENDIX. The main points of the Armenia–Azerbaijan agreement (agreed in March and made public on 11 August)

The parties agreed to establish diplomatic relations and confirmed that the borders between the former Soviet republics became the international borders of the individual independent states, and have been recognised as such by the international community. They committed to respecting each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of international borders.

Armenia and Azerbaijan stated that they have no territorial claims against each other and will not make any in the future. They also pledged not to take any action aimed at undermining or violating, in whole or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of the other side, including planning, preparing, supporting, or encouraging such actions. They further agreed to begin negotiations on the delimitation and demarcation of their border, with the aim of concluding a formal agreement in the future.

In their bilateral relations, Azerbaijan and Armenia will refrain from interfering in each other's internal affairs, and from using or threatening to use force against the territorial integrity or

independence of the other side.