Armenia and Azerbaijan Inch Closer to a Peace Deal

Publication: Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 20 Issue: 93

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June 8, 2023



(Source: armenpress.am)

On June 1, during the course of his visit to Chisinau, Moldova, to attend the second summit of the European Political Community (EPC), Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced that the next meeting of the foreign ministers from his country and Azerbaijan will take place in Washington on June 12 (Armenpress.am, June 1). Although it has been postponed since, the Azerbaijani side declared that the new date will be announced soon (Modern.az, June 8). If it indeed takes place, this will be the second meeting of the two ministers hosted by the United States, after their four-day peace talks in the US capital in early May 2023 (see EDM, May 8). Following this meeting, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the two South Caucasus republics were "within reach of an agreement" (State.gov, May 4). Indeed, multiple meetings have taken place since then between representatives of the two countries at various levels, resulting in some noteworthy advancements.

The European Union—mediated summit of Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders in Brussels on May 14 and the Russian-mediated foreign ministers' meeting in Moscow on May 19 (see <u>EDM</u>, May 23) had provided a good basis for subsequent talks between the two sides. Most importantly, the recognition of the

Karabakh region as part of Azerbaijan by Pashinyan, which has historically been a point of contention between both countries, was a remarkable impetus for the peace process (<u>Consilium.europa.eu</u>, May 14).

In the aftermath of these two meetings, the long-awaited trilateral summit of Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian leaders took place in Moscow on May 25. This trilateral gathering was organized on the sidelines of the summit of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), where Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev took part as a guest for the first time (<u>President.az</u>, May 25).

A few hours before the resumption of high-level peace talks in Moscow, which had not taken place since the summit in Sochi on October 31, 2022, Russian media announced that "at least two documents" would be signed. According to the Russian daily *Kommersant*, one of these documents was expected to be signed by the deputy prime ministers involved in a separate negotiation track, with a particular emphasis on reopening regional transportation connections as outlined in the trilateral statement issued on January 12, 2021, signed by Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia (Kommersant, May 25). The other document was anticipated to be another joint statement issued by the leaders of the three countries.

However, the trilateral meeting did not deliver any signed documents or yield any major breakthrough. Some Azerbaijani media reported that the Armenian side was not interested in the adoption of any document (Qafqazinfo, May 25). The verbal battle between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan at the EAEU summit received more attention from observers. Here, Aliyev and Pashinyan, in the presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin and other EAEU leaders, argued about the perception of "corridor," which is a debatable topic as Armenia rejects this term in relation to the transportation passage widely referred to as the "Zangezur Corridor." Aliyev reiterated to the Armenian leader that the use of this term does not contain any territorial claims against Armenia and that he uses this term in the same way when referring to the "North-South Corridor and East-West Corridor" (President.az, May 25).

That said, perhaps the most important outcome of the Moscow summit was the re-activation of the working group of both countries' deputy prime ministers to discuss transportation projects. Following the trilateral summit, Putin noted that the sides were close to a final deal on re-opening transportation links and that the remaining issues were "purely technical" (<u>President.az</u>, May 25). On June 3, the working group met for the 12th time and reported to have reached a "common understanding" concerning "the implementation of concrete steps for the restoration and organization of the railway connection on the Arazdeyan–Julfa–Mehri–Horadiz route" (<u>Apa.az</u>, June 3).

The group statement avoided using the term "Zangezur Corridor," which is widely used to refer to the aforementioned route. Both sides, nevertheless, reported "important progress" in talks about the "modality" of these transportation links without giving further details. Progress in this direction has also been observed in the increasing use of the Azerbaijani checkpoint on the Lachin road by Armenians traveling in and out of the Karabakh region (Azernews, June 3).

In another positive move, which was commended by the US, Aliyev promised amnesty to the Armenian separatists in the Karabakh region if they disband their illegal entities and abide by Azerbaijani laws (<u>Turan.az</u>, May 28; <u>Apa.az</u>, May 31). The two sides also appear to be closer to an agreement on the exchange of one another's exclaves that have remained in the territory of the other since the collapse of the Soviet Union (<u>News.am</u>, June 1).

In the meantime, on June 1, on the sidelines of the EPC summit, Aliyev and Pashinyan met again with the mediation of European Council President Charles Michel, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. This format is not entirely supported by Azerbaijan due to the participation of Macron, since the political establishment of his country has almost always been supportive of Armenia (News.az, June 2). Nevertheless, in an apparent demonstration of goodwill in the peace process, Aliyev agreed to join the meeting, which was held informally in a cafeteria. The major outcome of the gathering was the announcement of the next summit of Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders via the mediation of Michel in Brussels on July 21 (Consilium.europa.eu, June 1).

Thus, in the run-up to the next ministerial meeting in Washington, the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace talks have been marked by significant dynamism and progress. In addition to the aforementioned advancements, the attendance of Pashinyan at the inauguration ceremony of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on June 3 for the first time in history marked a highly symbolic occasion (Armenpress.am, June 3). Thus, the potential is growing that Baku and Yerevan could sign a peace treaty in the near future if they can overcome the remaining challenges on this path (see EDM, May 23) and preserve the positive atmosphere that comes under threat by frequent, albeit small-scale, military clashes along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan (Mod.gov.az, June 1, 2, 3).