



# THE NEED FOR MORE ACTIVE U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE CAUCASUS

CASPIAN POLICY CENTER EDITORIAL BY AMBASSADOR  
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# ABOUT US

The Caspian Policy Center (CPC) is an independent, nonprofit research think tank based in Washington D.C. Economic, political, energy, and security issues of the Caspian region constitute the central research focus of the Center.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### **Ambassador (ret.) Robert Cekuta**

Ambassador (Ret.) Robert F. Cekuta Energy and Economy Program Chair Ambassador to the Republic of Azerbaijan (2015 - 2018), Bob Cekuta has long and extensive experience as a top-level U.S. diplomat. Ambassador Cekuta's positions in the State Department included Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Energy Resources as well as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Energy, Sanctions, and Commodities. His overseas postings included the U.S. Embassies in Berlin and Tokyo where he oversaw the full range of economic, commercial, nonproliferation, and scientific relations. In addition, Ambassador Cekuta was Deputy Chief of Mission in Albania and held positions in Vienna, Baghdad, Kabul, Johannesburg, and Sana'a, Yemen



### **Ambassador (ret.) Richard Hoagland**

Ambassador Richard E. Hoagland was U.S. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, October 2013–August 2015. Before returning to Washington in September 2013, he spent a decade in South and Central Asia. He was U.S. Deputy Ambassador to Pakistan (2011– 2013), U.S. Ambassador to Kazakhstan (2008–2011), and U.S. Ambassador to Tajikistan (2003–2006). He also served as U.S. Charge d'affaires to Turkmenistan (2007–2008). Prior to his diplomatic assignments in Central Asia, Ambassador Hoagland was Director of the Office of Caucasus and Central Asian Affairs in the Bureau of Europe and Eurasian Affairs, Department of State (2001–2003). In that position, he wrote and negotiated four of the key bilateral documents defining the Central Asian states' enhanced relationship with the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. His earlier foreign assignments included Russia where he was Press Spokesman for the U.S. Embassy (1995–1998).

## The Need for More Active U.S. Engagement in the Caucasus

The situation in the southern Caucasus calls for more U.S. engagement — especially more visible, high-level U.S. engagement. As we saw firsthand in a recent trip to the region, the cease-fire Russian President Vladimir Putin established between Armenia and Azerbaijan might have stopped last year's fighting in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, but the potential for further conflict remains. The United States, with its strategic interests in stability, prosperity, and peace in Europe and Eurasia and its concerns about Chinese, Iranian, and Russian intentions, cannot afford to be seen as just sitting back or treating the situation as another routine diplomatic problem. The shifting dynamics as U.S. and NATO troops pull out of Afghanistan and the resulting need for stronger ties with the Central Asian states further reinforce the reasons for more active U.S. engagement with the Caucasus countries. Doing so need not entail huge costs, given U.S. experience in peace-building, available resources, and eagerness in the region for increased American action.

Last year's fighting began in July with an Armenian incursion across the agreed international border into a sensitive region of Azerbaijan that is a corridor for hydrocarbon pipelines and ground transportation. And then in September, Azerbaijan began the fight to reclaim its Armenian-occupied territories and Nagorno-Karabakh itself. After three attempts at a cease-fire by the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs — Russia, France, and the United States — Russia stepped back in more decisively with the November 9 agreement. As a result, Azerbaijan regained control a good portion of Nagorno-Karabakh along with other territories Armenia had occupied since the early 1990s.

Russia is now perceived as calling the shots in the region, and, as we heard repeatedly during our trip there, the United States is perceived as absent or at least mostly silent. Russia inserted its personnel as peace-keepers and to oversee border crossings between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey also has a small monitoring mission that is supposed to watch what the Russians do, but its role is ill-defined. The Turkish presence on the ground might please its close ally, Azerbaijan, but there are no signs Armenians see it the same way. Russia is a treaty ally of Armenia, a member of the Moscow-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization or CSTO; Azerbaijan is not.

There are signs that Russia hopes to expand its role and to make its presence more permanent than the five years agreed to in the November cease-fire. Furthermore, recent border incidents between Armenia and Azerbaijan have raised fears of renewed conflict. Real problems with prisoner exchanges and urgent, necessary work on mine removal are also the subject of near-daily accusations and counteraccusations between the Armenian and Azerbaijani capitals.

More important, however, is the deep antagonism Armenians and Azerbaijanis now feel toward each. This strong animosity is the product of years of unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the pain of loss and the displacement of nearly one million Azerbaijanis for close to 30 years, and the insecurity and fear of attack by one side or the other. While Azerbaijanis and Armenians lived together peacefully in the cities and towns of the Caucasus in decades past, the generation growing up since the fighting in the early 1990s — about 2/3 of the population of the two countries were born in 1990 or later — have no such memories. Thus, despite the November cease-fire, it is a mistake to think the situation in the region is

stable, let alone settled.

Revanchism and fear of actions resulting from this revanchism is strong. Russia, which has a history of using protracted conflicts in the Caucasus, Moldova, and more recently Ukraine to maintain its strong influence in the former Soviet space, now has troops for the first time in decades stationed in all three countries of the southern Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. At the same time, the region, the only route across Eurasia that avoids Russian and Iranian territory, is important for the production and transit of oil and natural gas; perhaps as much as 40% of Israel's oil comes from Azerbaijan, and the recently completed, U.S. government-backed Southern Gas Corridor pipeline is an important tool in undercutting Russia's ability to use its gas supplies to put pressure on NATO and other European governments.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan have each directly telephoned the two countries' leaders to urge them to work towards peacefully addressing their disputes. President Biden, in his recent national-day message to Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, urged using the OSCE's Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, the Russian Federation, and the United States, as a mechanism for doing so. However, the way the Co-Chairs were sidelined last fall has raised questions about its influence and even about its future. Meanwhile, Armenians are going into a snap parliamentary election June 20, angry and fearful as a result of last year's defeat. Azerbaijanis, happy over last year's wins and apprehensive over Russia's expanded presence, also wonder about the region's future.

The United States needs to act, building on the recent high-level telephone calls, to show a determined, revitalized engagement in the southern Caucasus designed to break the cycle of conflict and help Armenians and Azerbaijanis start laying the foundation for a sustainable peace. While a peace agreement between the two countries has to be the goal towards which American diplomacy works, it will not be something quickly achieved. Nevertheless, there are a number of things the U.S. government can do to move the sides towards peace, and thus improve the stability, prosperity, and security of the region as a whole.

One is to use repeated, high-level engagements with the region's leaders to hear their concerns, to demonstrate real, continued interest in not allowing the Armenia/Azerbaijan conflict to fray the overall trans-Atlantic peace and security arrangements, and to push the sides to concrete, visible steps towards a new, peaceful relationship. High-level visits to the region would be ideal, but even on-going, top-level phone calls would be an improvement and advance U.S. interests. Russian President Putin, Foreign Minister Lavrov, Defense Minister Shoygu, and other top figures in the Russian establishment are constant visitors and telephone interlocutors with Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders. Washington needs to be visible engaging the governments and publics of both countries, a move that will also strengthen the hand of the U.S. Co-Chair and the Minsk Group process as a whole as a mechanism for lowering tensions and building peace.

The United States should also use its offices to push towards establishment of diplomatic relations – or at least open, official exchanges – among Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey. Azerbaijan's recovery of control over its territories removes a key reason why Turkey, after recognizing Armenia's existence, has not opened diplomatic exchanges. Turkish officials have



said Ankara is ready to open an embassy in Yerevan, and there is no reason why Washington should not encourage it to do so. But if Armenia and Azerbaijan establishing full embassies in each other's capital is a step too far at the moment, then at least establishing official interest sections is an interim step worth pursuing. It is in larger U.S. national security interests for Washington to play a visible role toward this goal.

The United States could also play a role on the ground to help with demining. The United States long supported the Halo Trust's efforts to remove mines in the Armenian-controlled areas on the their side of the pre-November 2020 line of contact. That effort could be expanded to cover areas now once again under Azerbaijan's control.

A critical fourth area where the United States can play a useful role is in developing – and pushing both governments to bless – people-to-people contacts between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Again, decades of conflict, of inflammatory language, and of outright hatred mean sizable portions of the populations of both countries do not know each other, let alone trust each other. This situation limits the two governments' ability to move towards a lasting peace agreement and eventual reconciliation. Whether in university or other U.S. government-backed training programs or through new Track II dialogues that bring Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and, as appropriate, others together to examine specific issues and chart possible ways to address them, such efforts are essential for reducing tensions and building the conditions for a lasting peace.

Finally, the United States should engage on the opening of new transportation corridors in the region. Currently, this is a subject of trilateral discussions among Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, but there is no reason why the United States, which played such an active leadership role 20 years ago in building oil and gas pipelines across the Caucasus, should be content to sit on the sidelines and let Russia take the lead. Moreover, integrating Armenia into the region's transportation and communications network will help stimulate that country's economic growth and prosperity as well as diminish some of its dependence on Iran that has grown over the years.

Not all of this can happen right away. Armenia is in the run-up to its June 20 elections for a new parliament and government, and it is unrealistic to think at this moment there can be any talk of a peace agreement and steps forward during the political campaign. However, the United States should be taking initial steps to engage the winner of the Armenian election and Azerbaijan's President Aliyev as soon as possible.

The reality is that the United States has considerable expertise and capability to help countries move towards peace. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan want good relations with the United States. A constant refrain heard in the region is a desire for more visible, active American engagement. Things are settling on the ground, but not in ways Washington likes now or will like in the future, especially as Russia asserts its dominance in the region.

It is time to use our capabilities, to use our experience to help Azerbaijan and Armenia put aside three decades of protracted conflict. The United States can help them move towards a peace that would provide both sides with security and greater prosperity. It is in our strategic national interest to do so.

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