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Brief

Trump-Brokered Azerbaijan-Armenia Deal

Breakthrough or Another Geopolitical Conundrum?

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The footage of US President Donald Trump linking the hands of Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan during their summit at the White House surprised many observers. After more than three decades of conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh—recaptured militarily by Azerbaijan in 2023—the two South Caucasus rivals appeared to be on the path to peace.

The White House hailed the event as a "historic peace deal," dubbing Trump the "President of Peace."[1] Both leaders flattered Trump and even promised to jointly nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize. Notably, Russia—long accustomed to exploiting its mediator role in the South Caucasus to cement geopolitical influence—was effectively sidelined.[2] However, whether Trump's peace deal proves to be a genuine milestone for regional peace and stability will depend on its implementation. Significant uncertainties remain, raising the risk of renewed geopolitical turmoil.

Peace Treaty Not Yet Signed

Importantly, what was signed at the White House was not a peace treaty but a trilateral joint declaration. The text of the "Agreement on Peace and Establishment of Interstate Relations" had already been agreed upon in March, with Armenia accepting Baku's proposals on the two previously unresolved articles.[3] Signing and ratifying the Agreement would normalise Armenia's relations not only with Azerbaijan but also with Türkiye, ending the three-decade blockade and helping the landlocked country to diversify trade routes and reduce its economic and energy dependency on Russia.[4]

Two days after the summit in Washington, DC, Armenia and Azerbaijan finally published the text initialled by their foreign ministers.[5] However, the most contentious issue likely remains: Azerbaijan's demand that Armenia amend its constitution, particularly the preamble, which Baku views as enshrining territorial claims against Azerbaijan. Article 12 of the Agreement stipulates that it will take precedence over internal legislation, i.e., Armenia's constitution, signalling Armenia's recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and lack of claims.[6] Yet, Aliyev still insists on constitutional amendments. Speaking to Azerbaijani media in Washington, the Azerbaijani leader stressed that the ball is in Armenia's court, and pressed Yerevan to complete its "homework," warning that delays would be disrespectful to President Trump.[7]

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Although Pashinyan himself called for constitutional amendments in February, Armenia is due to hold parliamentary elections in June 2026, making a referendum on constitutional changes—which may include the contentious preamble—likely only after the elections.[8]

Furthermore, Armenian experts criticised the published agreement for omitting key humanitarian and legal issues—such as the

treatment of Armenian POWs in Azerbaijan, refugee rights of return, and protection of Armenian cultural heritage. Critics argue that it legitimises Azerbaijan's past military actions while avoiding accountability for alleged ethnic cleansing.[9]

Thus, Moscow will likely fuel discontent among Armenia's religious and nationalist forces, disenchanted by the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and further concessions to Baku. Indeed, a Russia-linked Lazarev Club has already accused the secular Pashinyan administration of persecuting the Armenian Apostolic Church and surrendering Armenia to "Turan," meaning Türkiye and Azerbaijan.[10]

"Trump Route" Raises Regional Tensions?

The so-called Zangezur Corridor, which Baku has demanded to link its mainland with the exclave of Nakhchivan through southern Armenia, has been rebranded as "Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity" (TRIPP). The White House praised the initiative as a way to "unlock the potential of the South Caucasus region" in trade, transit, energy, infrastructure, and technology, while announcing that the US will hold exclusive development rights.[11]

Undertaken without sufficient consideration of broader geopolitical repercussions, it risks igniting new conflicts

While Baku's Zangezur Corridor initiative is regarded as undermining Armenia's sovereignty, the Trump Route envisages the "respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and jurisdiction of the States." Yet the trilateral declaration still promises "unimpeded connectivity" between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, leaving Baku room to demand access without Armenian passport and customs controls.[12]

The details of the Trump Route remain unclear, as the US-Armenian memorandum has not been published. Media reports suggest that negotiations will begin following the summit. The project is expected to be managed by an Armenian-American consortium, with nine operators already expressing interest.[13]

For Moscow, the Trump Route eliminates the prospect of deploying FSB border guards along the corridor, as is envisaged in the Russia-brokered 2020 trilateral statement. However, Russia's response was unexpectedly muted. The Russian foreign ministry reiterated that regional issues should be resolved by the South Caucasus countries themselves with support from their direct neighbours—Russia, Iran, and Türkiye—while stressing that the 2020 trilateral agreement remains valid.[14]

Moscow's restraint may stem from several factors. First, a reluctance to antagonise Trump, whose personal stance toward the war in Ukraine matters more to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Second, Russian border guards continue to patrol the Armenia-Iran border section, although they left the border checkpoint in January.[15] Third, Russia is still hoping to open its Consulate General in Kapan, southern Armenia, which has been discussed for over three years between the two countries' diplomatic services.[16] Even if the Trump Route rules out Russia's involvement in the corridor, Moscow will maintain its presence in Armenia's southernmost Syunik Province.

Iran, by contrast, reacted fiercely. Tehran has opposed the Zangezur Corridor for fear of losing its strategically important northern trade route via Armenia. In September 2024, Iranian officials publicly criticised Moscow's support for Baku's Zangezur Corridor.[17] Tehran, therefore, immediately condemned the Trump Route as well, while the Iranian Foreign Ministry cautiously welcomed the peace process itself.[18] Ali Akbar Velayati, top adviser to Iran's supreme leader, threatened that the Trump Route would become a "graveyard for Trump's mercenaries." Iran opened its Consulate General in Kapan in 2022, with its companies participating in road construction of the Meghri-Kajaran section of the so-called "North-South corridor."[19]

Despite Pashinyan's efforts to reassure Putin and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian of the Trump Route's potential benefits for Moscow and Tehran, scepticism persists.[20] If the initiative

proves to be just another of Trump's transactional ventures—akin to his "minerals deal" with Ukraine—undertaken without sufficient consideration of broader geopolitical repercussions, it risks igniting new conflicts involving South Caucasus neighbours.

Baku: From Putin's Russia to Trump's America

Another factor enabling the Washington summit—aside from Trump's eagerness for headline-grabbing peace deals—was the sharp deterioration of relations between Baku and Moscow, once hailed as "allied cooperation" in 2022. After Russia's downing of an Azerbaijani passenger airliner in late 2024, there were initial signs of de-escalation and a search for a political solution to preserve their strategic alignment to challenge the collective west.[21] Yet, tensions continued to grow in 2025. In January, Azerbaijani media accused Russia of using the Russian House in Baku, a vehicle of Russian "soft power," for espionage.[22] The following month, Azerbaijani authorities shut it down along with USAID, condemning foreign interference in the country's internal affairs.[23] Baku also declared Russian MP Nikolai Valuev persona non grata for offensive remarks,[24] while local media accused former presidential administration chief Ramiz Mehdiyev of collaborating with Russian intelligence.[25]

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Mutual accusations escalated further in June, when Russian authorities in Yekaterinburg detained members of the Azerbaijani diaspora for murders committed between 2001 and 2011. Two Azerbaijanis were killed during the Russian security force operation. In retaliation, Azerbaijani authorities raided the Baku office of Sputnik Azerbaijan and arrested several employees.[26] Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's parliament's commission accused Russia of carrying out a February cyberattack on Azerbaijani media,[27] and President Aliyev publicly expressed dissatisfaction with Moscow's handling of the airliner incident, implying that Baku was preparing to sue Russia at an international court.[28]

Meanwhile, Baku began leaning rhetorically toward Trump's illiberal America. After Azerbaijan's military recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, which forced over 100 000 Armenians to flee, relations with the Biden Administration deteriorated sharply, exacerbated by Azerbaijan's crackdown on civil society and independent media. Well before the 2024 US presidential election, Aliyev praised Trump, endorsing his claim that the US launched no wars under his first administration and his emphasis on traditional family values. Aliyev also echoed Trump's rhetoric by dismissing The Washington Post and the New York Times as "fake news" portraying Azerbaijan as a dictatorship.[29] During the US election campaign, Aliyev openly rooted for Trump's victory, even though Trump sought to court Armenian-American voters by citing the 2023 Karabakh Armenian exodus.[30]

Trump's disregard for democratic values and human rights, combined with the closure of USAID and Voice of America, made it easier for Aliyev to approach the new US administration. During the summit at the White House, the US and Azerbaijan established a Strategic Working Group to prepare a Charter on Strategic Partnership, and Trump symbolically signed a waiver to Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, which had suspended assistance to Azerbaijan after its September 2023 attack on Nagorno-Karabakh.[31]

Iran's fierce opposition and Moscow's cautious manoeuvring underscore the risk of renewed instability

Conclusion

Trump's peace deal effectively sidelined Moscow, placing Washington at the centre of geopolitics in the South Caucasus. It may reshape the region's geopolitical landscape, but it

remains uncertain whether this will prove to be a genuine breakthrough or yet another geopolitical conundrum. Key uncertainties include Azerbaijan's continued demand for constitutional amendments in Armenia—likely tied to the 2026 parliamentary elections—and the ambiguities surrounding the Trump Route. Iran's fierce opposition and Moscow's cautious manoeuvring further underscore the risk of renewed instability.

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