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# Armenia's Election: Peace, Pressure, and What Comes Next

**MAY 28, 2026**

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Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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The Helsinki process, formally titled the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, traces its origin to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in Finland on August 1, 1975, by the leaders of 33 European countries, the United States and Canada. As of January 1, 1995, the Helsinki process was renamed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE].

The membership of the OSCE has expanded to 57 participating States, reflecting the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <www.osce.org>.

## ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is an independent U.S. Government commission created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <www.csce.gov>.

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# Armenia's Election: Peace, Pressure, and What Comes Next

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**May 28, 2026**

**Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**
**Washington, DC**

The briefing was held from 1:02 p.m. to 2:08 p.m., Room 2118, Rayburn House Office Building, Bakhti Nishanov, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Mr. NISHANOV: All right. It is a couple of minutes past 1:00, so we are going to get started. Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. Welcome to the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation congressional briefing on the upcoming elections in Armenia. Thank you so much for being here. It is a beautiful day outside, so I do not know what you are doing here. It means that it generated some interest.

When I woke up this morning, I was 100 percent sure that we would be the biggest source of Armenia election-related news in the city today. We were slightly upstaged. President Trump stole our thunder and endorsed Prime Minister Pashinyan in this upcoming election. Obviously, that is going to be a point of conversation in today's briefing.

Let me—I know that these things mostly go unsaid, but I think it is important to say it. This election is about Armenia and the Armenian people and their choice. The conversation that we are going to have today, I know that some people—not in this audience, because obviously this is a super-smart audience—but some outside of this room might interpret as this is the United States trying to sway the election one way or another. This is not about that. This conversation is about trying to understand what is happening and what is at stake in these elections in Armenia.

It is a cliché to say that, but every time there is an election, people say this is the most important election in the history of this country. I will try to make a case that in the case of Armenian elections, it is actually true. Because it is not only the fate of Armenia that Armenian voters are going to be deciding, but it is also regional security, regional cooperation, normalization with Turkey, peace process with Azerbaijan. This is a referendum on where Armenia and the region are going to be going for the next decade. At least, this is something that we are going to be hopefully talking about and trying to understand what is going on here.

I have to make it clear that the United States obviously has interests in the region. We are—we are interested in a stable, democratic, and sovereign Armenia. Armenia is,

at this point, the only democracy, with Georgia sliding, where it is right now today. The people of Armenia have repeatedly demonstrated their commitment to reform and democratic governance. Those gains are taking place under enormous external pressure. Russia, in particular, has long sought to exert influence in Armenia and across the region through political interference, disinformation, and economic and security leverage. We will talk about it today, so this is why this conversation matters today.

Thank you for being here today. We will try to—we will try to fit this within one hour. Just a couple of housekeeping items. This is a congressional briefing, which means members of the audience get to ask questions when we get to the Q&A session. You can come up to that podium. There is a button. You hit the button, introduce yourself, and then you are forever and ever in congressional records. We are going to make this slightly different. Instead of introducing everyone at once, I will introduce each panelist separately as their—when it is their turn to speak. That way, context is a little bit easier to understand, and what is happening.

First, we are going to have Laura Linderman. She is a senior fellow for Eurasia and director of Programs at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. Her research focuses on the South Caucasus, regional security, and foreign relations. She spent more than a decade at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center and has taught South Caucasus studies to U.S. foreign affairs professionals at the State Department's Foreign Service Institute.

I have asked Laura to focus on domestic dynamics: What is at stake domestically for Armenia? To be clear, I have also asked—these are professionals, these are the best of the best, créme de la crop—so they can obviously cover any of the topics, any of the things that they think are relevant to this conversation. Laura, you have about five minutes, maybe a little bit more. Please go ahead with your remarks.

Ms. LINDERMAN: Thank you so much, Bakhti. Thanks to the Commission for convening the briefing and for inviting me to speak.

The conversation we are having about Armenia today would have been unimaginable a few years ago. We are here talking about democratic elections, with the Russians and their proxies on the back foot, real prospects for peace with Azerbaijan, and for the normalization of relations with Turkey, an American development corridor linking the region's economies together, plugging them into a larger east-west corridor or trade route, and promises of European investment after the recent EU summit in Yerevan. Armenia's position has changed dramatically in a very short time. Everything I just described depends on decisions not yet made, votes not yet held, treaties and laws not yet signed, and ground not yet broken. None of it happens on its own. That is what I intend to spend my time on.

The most immediate piece of that unfinished business, and the one drawing the most attention, is the parliamentary election in June, which Bakhti asked me to talk about the political dynamics around that election. I will, but my main argument is that the election itself is the most predictable part of what lies ahead. The harder, more consequential work by the U.S., Europe, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia begins the day after, which I know Ambassador Carpenter will also speak about in more depth, and also Dr. Cecire.

Armenia's domestic politics are organized around a single question: The country's pivot away from Russia and toward the West. On one side is Prime Minister Pashinyan and his Civil Contract Party, who have tied their political futures to the ability to pull off that pivot. On the other is an opposition, including remnants of the former ruling

party, several wealthy oligarchs, senior figures in the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the exiled leadership of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Republic—all united only by their antagonism to that pivot. The opposition speaks to a real grief, which I will return to shortly, but it has not coalesced around a credible vision of what Armenia should do instead.

An opposition can run on grievance alone and still win, provided the voting public is angry enough and frightened enough. This seems not to be the case in Armenia, and the most likely outcome in June is a Pashinyan victory. The thing to watch, in my opinion, is not whether Pashinyan wins, but by how much. A narrow margin, revealing insufficient support for the government's more ambitious priorities, would change everything I am about to say.

What comes next, though, is the part parliamentary majority cannot settle by itself. Peace on the terms presently dictated requires a change to Armenia's constitution, the removal of language dating to Armenia's independence that Azerbaijan reads as a territorial claim on Nagorno-Karabakh. A change of that kind cannot be made by Parliament alone. If insisted upon, it must be put to a national referendum. That is a hard question to put to Armenians. Armenia lost the 2020 war, and with it both land and soldiers. Then, three years later, within a week, more than 100,000 Armenians were displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh as Azerbaijan retook the territory.

Pashinyan's response was not only to pivot away from Russia, which had not defended Armenia, it was also to advance an argument about Armenia's future. That the country's security and prosperity lie in a State built within its recognized borders and at peace with its neighbors, not one embroiled in territorial claims it lacks the power to enforce. It is a logical argument, but making peace with neighbors on their terms means making peace with loss. The referendum asks Armenians to make that peace, finally. A great deal rests on this referendum—the peace process, the corridor, everything I described at the outset. All of it runs through a single vote on a single day on a question that touches on the rawest part of Armenia's recent past.

None of this is an argument against peace. It is an argument against staking everything on one fragile moment and treating the rest as settled. The prudent response to a narrow foundation like this is to widen it, and that is where the United States comes in. Indeed, though the agreement itself belongs to Armenia and Azerbaijan, whether it holds or fails depends on conditions Washington can help shape. First, that means seeing TRIPP through: A corridor that exists in a signed agreement but never breaks ground delivers none of what it promises—not the commerce, not the security, not the daily evidence to ordinate ordinary Armenians that peace pays.

Second, it means helping to replace what Armenia has lost in its pivot away from Russia, converting informal assurances into binding ones, the security commitments and institutional guarantees that can stand in for the frameworks Armenia gave up. Armenians are being asked to trade tangible, if imperfect, protections for the promise of better relationships. The more that promise is backed by something firm, the easier the vote becomes. Most importantly, it means letting the benefits of peace arrive before the hardest vote, not just after. The clearest place to start is the closed border between Turkey and Armenia. Opening that border ahead of the referendum, and independent of its outcome, would give Armenians something concrete—a visible early return on peace before they are asked to take the hardest vote.

American encouragement matters here. Taken together, this is what building peace looks like in practice, as opposed to declaring it and hoping it holds. Before I conclude, the Armenian people are not the only ones who need convincing. For this to work, Azerbaijanis, Turks, Europeans, and Americans all need to buy in. Here is the American case: First, this corridor multiplies the east-west routes connecting the U.S. to Central Asia that run through neither Russian nor Iranian territory. It is not the only such route, but every additional one matters strategically. It expands American access, political and commercial, and reduces the leverage Russia and Iran hold over how an entire region trades.

Second, this is a high-leverage opportunity with a short window. The window is open now in part because Iran is weakened and Russia is distracted. The cost of staying engaged is low, and the cost of letting the moment pass is not. Third, the largest reason and the one I want to end on: A peace built in this region without Moscow at the table erodes something Russia has long counted on, the assumption that the South Caucasus cannot be ordered except through Russia. A region that can settle its own affairs is a region less available for others to dominate, and that is an American interest in its own right. It is worth patience and sustained attention to secure.

Thank you.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Laura. This—I think—I can hear myself. Also, by the way, this is what you get—when you work at the Commission, you get a tiny water. Everybody gets a big water. Just be—I am just joking. It is a great place to work. Five out of five.

Next, we have Ambassador Mike Carpenter, who is a senior fellow for transatlantic affairs at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, where he leads research on U.S. foreign policy and transatlantic affairs. He is a veteran diplomat and national security official who previously served as U.S. Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and as senior director for Europe at the National Security Council. He has also held senior roles at the Pentagon and State Department focused on Russia, Ukraine, Eurasia, and European security. He has done so many things; if I had read everything, we would have—the entire briefing would have been that.

We are genuinely pleased and happy that you found time to be here, Ambassador. I have asked the Ambassador to talk about—expand on what Laura started talking about-which are regional dynamics. What is at stake beyond just Armenia and Armenia's future in these elections?

Mr. CARPENTER: Great. Thanks so much, Bakhti. Thanks, Laura, for setting the scene. It is great to be with both Michael and Laura here for this briefing.

Let me start with this: In fact, indeed, a pivotal election for Armenia. The United States has an enormous stake in the global competition between liberal democracy and illiberal autocracy. Armenia sits on the central fault line in this contest. Alongside Ukraine and Moldova, Armenia has taken decisive steps to break free of the entrenched system of kleptocratic authoritarianism by establishing a democratic State based on individual rights, free and fair elections, and the rule of law. In parallel, Yerevan has fundamentally realigned its foreign policy away from Russia and Iran and toward the United States and the European Union. For a small, landlocked, and vulnerable country, this represents a genuine historic shift in both governance and geopolitics.

Since 2023, the government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has made another bold move, pursuing a peace treaty with Azerbaijan and the normalization of relations with Türkiye. The geopolitical consequences are highly significant. The United States wisely took advantage of this opening, jettisoning the failed OSCE Minsk Group negotiating format, which, by the way, I was a part of a couple of decades ago, that had been hamstrung for decades by Russia. Instead, took direct ownership of the diplomacy. This started under the Biden administration with an intense diplomatic effort to bridge key differences over the text of a peace agreement, which then led to President Trump's historic summit on August 8, 2025, at the White House with Prime Minister Pashinyan and President Aliyev.

The peace agreement that was initialed on August 8 still needs to be signed and ratified to pave the way toward a future based on peace, commerce, connectivity, and prosperity. The Trump administration deserves real credit for pushing this agreement forward with a key new initiative, the Trump Road for International—[audio break]—TRIPP. A 43-kilometer transit route spanning southern Armenia and linking Azerbaijan with Türkiye. TRIPP envisions rail, road, fiber optic, natural gas, and electricity infrastructure, making it a key node in the Middle Corridor connecting Europe and Central Asia. Operating under a 99-year U.S. development mandate, the project positions the United States as a key strategic player in the region.

The potential returns, excuse me, are enormous. Central Asian energy and critical raw materials are flowing westward to European markets, and digital infrastructure is positioning the South Caucasus as a hub for global AI expansion. The announcement that NVIDIA chips will form the backbone of a $500 million datacenter in Armenia is a telling indicator of commercial stakeholders' confidence in this vision. With all this happening, Russia—[audio break]—South Caucasus. The Kremlin has not given up. Weakened and overextended in Ukraine, Moscow has turned to political warfare in Armenia to recover its lost leverage. The June 7 election is therefore an important test of Armenia's democratic resilience. It is also a referendum on the country's Western alignment.

The primary challengers to Pashinyan's leadership are three pro-Russian politicians. Samvel Karapetyan is a Russian-Armenian oligarch who has been accused of plotting a coup and is currently under house arrest. Gagik Tsarukyan, another wealthy oligarch, accuses the government of trying to stoke war with Russia, echoing the Georgian Dream Party's false claim against the United States, in Armenia's northern neighbor. Finally, former President Robert Korcharyan, who has long been aligned with Putin, remains deeply unpopular after a decade of autocratic rule. All three oppose the peace process and Armenia's turn toward the West.

They invoke Nagorno-Karabakh as their rallying cry but failed to note that it was Armenia's previous leadership that hollowed out its armed forces, while it was Russia's peacekeepers who stood idly by as the Armenian population was forcibly displaced in 2023. A pro-Russian electoral victory could derail the fragile peace process. Moscow and Tehran retain meaningful points of leverage. The Kremlin-owned company, Russian Railways, holds the concession for Armenia's national rail network, and Russia maintains a military base in the city of Gyumri. Iran, given its proximity to the TRIPP corridor, could use proxy actors to try to obstruct the project in the future.

These challenges will have to be dealt with skillfully. Armenia will likely need to continue balancing these regional powers for the time being, given the enormous power they wield. The focus right now should be on blunting Russia's coordinated influence cam-

paign—using dark money, information operations, and various proxies to try to pull Armenia back—sorry—on Russia's part, to try to pull Armenia back into the Kremlin's orbit. The United States must remain resolute and support its Armenian partners against this campaign of subterfuge. It must also use its strategic partnership with Armenia to strengthen bilateral economic and energy ties as a means of counterbalancing the economic pressures that Armenia is facing from its neighbors, particularly Russia.

Thank you. I will end with that and look forward to questions.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Ambassador. Now you see why I begged these three witnesses to be here, because this is a perfect flow and a perfect segue into what I have asked Dr. Michael Cecire, who is a defense security policy researcher at RAND, to talk about. Before joining RAND, he worked as the geoeconomics analyst for defense at Bloomberg Economics, and he also served as senior policy advisor at this very Commission. He was also a senior-level analyst at the Congressional Research Service and a policy advisor for the U.S. Department of Defense. He has worked and been affiliated with the Middle East Institute, New America, and the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He has also taught at Georgetown University. Some of you actually might have taken some of his classes.

I have asked Dr. Cecire to talk about Russia's influence, or what Russia might be up to in these elections. I think over the last couple of weeks, we have seen the intensifying effort by Russia to sway this election.

Dr. Cecire, please.

Dr. CECIRE: Good afternoon. Thank you. Thank you, Bakhti, to you and the honorable members of the Commission. It is always an honor and a pleasure to participate in and contribute to bipartisan, bicameral congressional efforts to uphold the Helsinki principles and secure long-term U.S. national security and foreign policy interests.

Today's discussion about Armenia, in the context of the upcoming June elections, is both timely and, I would say, a matter of strategic importance. Timely, not only because of the looming elections, but because the United States, across two administrations, has articulated clearly that this is a country and a region that matters. Earlier this week, Secretary of State Marco Rubio visited Yerevan, where he signed a strategic partnership charter and memorandum of understanding on critical minerals with his Armenian counterparts and finalized a framework for the Trump Route on International Peace and Prosperity, or TRIPP. His visit is the latest in an unbroken, steady procession of very senior U.S. Government leadership to meet and work closely with the Armenian government in recent years, including a visit by Vice President J.D. Vance a few months ago, among many others.

The timeliness of this briefing also describes the strategic value proposition that this rapidly expanding partnership with the Republic of Armenia represents. This administration understands, like the one before it, that a stable, secure, and democratic Armenia is in the U.S. national security interest. Why, some have asked, does a small, landlocked, and strategically vulnerable country in the South Caucasus occupy such a senior position in U.S. foreign policy thinking? The answer to that question brings us to the topic I have been asked to discuss today. Why do our adversaries in the region, one can ask, particularly Russia, seem to care so much about Armenia? A common response to that question is geography, which is certainly part of the story, but more of an enabling factor than an explanation.

Rather, many of the same attributes that expose Armenia to regional vulnerability are also its chief geopolitical asset, and make it a valuable partner to the United States and Europe, or a prized possession for Moscow. Like the other countries of the South Caucasus, Armenia sits at an interstitial zone where regions, continents, empires, and cultures meet and intermix. For Armenia, this has resulted in a history that has been regularly marked by violence and catastrophe, culminating, but hardly terminating, in the Armenian genocide in the early 20th century. Armenian strategic culture has, understandably, formed in the long shadow of these events, and the perceived proposition that their ancient civilization can be wiped out at any time.

However, Armenians over the millennia have also variously embraced their poly geographic position and identity. Armenia and Armenians have played major roles in the shaping of the history and fortunes of many of its neighbors. This was and is true throughout Europe, Iran, and throughout the Middle East, and even in the Ottoman Empire. Similarly, in Soviet and tsarist Russia, Armenians occupied senior levels in government and the military. Armenia itself was regarded as a geographic and cultural beachhead to the Levant, Middle East, and Eastern Mediterranean.

Today, the Russian Federation regards Armenia within this strategic tradition, alongside its longstanding assertion of imperial predominance to the South Caucasus. For the Kremlin, Armenia is both a bulwark and an underbelly in its efforts to shape and control the destiny of the Eurasian landmass. In that sense, the very characteristics that make Armenia a target, as a crossroads State between competing civilizations, are regarded as intolerable outside of Russia's own hands. Armenia's value is also, not coincidentally, what this and the previous U.S. administrations have recognized clearly as force multipliers for U.S. strategy across regions and geographies.

In particular, Armenia is, by some estimations, the missing piece in a series of interconnectors, known collectively as the Middle Corridor, that provide an alternative overland route between the Indo-Pacific and Europe that neither relies on Russia nor is fraught by international seaborne shipping routes. TRIPP, in this architecture, facilitates a key route through Armenia that connects the Azerbaijani mainland to its exclave of Nakhchivan. Presumably, traffic from that interconnection alone will help make the broader trade route both more efficient and viable.

A future northern connector through Gyumri, however, would represent the absolute shortest distance of the Middle Corridor and connect a string of major cities from the South Caucasus to Turkey and beyond to Europe. That trade architecture, with TRIPP openly backed and implicitly guaranteed by the United States in collaboration with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Europe, and Turkey, is seen by Russia as an intolerable intrusion on its imperial position. As such, disrupting that process, despite Russia's severely constrained situation, has been a Kremlin strategic priority.

Armenia's situation is often compared with Moldova's. Like Moldova, Armenia is a democratic, landlocked State with a complicated regional geography, where Russian hybrid nonlinear operations seek to undermine a pro-Western government. However, while the two countries share certain similarities, they also have very different contexts. Last summer, I was privileged to testify in a joint congressional Helsinki Commission hearing where I spoke about Moldova. There, many of the structural factors—economic connectivity, neighborhood trends, and regional affinities—quite favor long-term European integration.

However, in the shorter term, at least, the sociopolitical terrain has been a mitigating factor. Russia-oriented political parties are better established in Moldova, and they have strong political organizations with complex financial mechanisms that are instrumentalized in Russian influence operations. By contrast, the environment is somewhat inverted in Armenia. In Armenia, Russia has significant institutional and structural advantages. Armenia is a chartered member of a variety of Russia-led regional political and economic organizations. Although Armenia suspended its participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization and has begun dismantling Russian border forces within the country, Russia maintains a residual border force and military garrison in Gyumri, near the Turkish border.

More consequentially, Armenia is part of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, which enables frictionless trade and capital flows through that economic space. As a consequence, Armenia is broadly dependent on the Russian economy, both directly and indirectly, and has limited mechanisms to monitor or control Russian and Russia-aligned gray and black financial flows into the country. By contrast, the sociopolitical terrain in Armenia has been, if anything, increasingly unfavorable to Russia since the 2020 war, and the widespread perception that Moscow abandoned Armenia, and even abetted Armenia's rivals in important respects.

While a baseline of popular sentiment exists that recognizes the outsized role that Russia plays in Armenia, it is contextualized by the fact that Russia had, before 2020, been regarded as the indispensable alliance, and a near-consensus issue in Armenian society and politics. That turnaround from indispensable to, according to IRI-commissioned polls released earlier this month, Armenia's third-biggest threat, after historical enemies Azerbaijan and Turkey, is a major reconfiguration of Armenian politics. Russia has sought to transmute its structural advantages into sociopolitical ones by enabling and supporting Russia-aligned opposition parties, while also reportedly exercising its considerable influence over the Armenian Apostolic Church.

While the church is itself fragmented internally, and some see the Armenian government's rivalry with the Catholicos as being a kind of entrapment by Russian narratives, it certainly serves as a vector for key Russian informational operations. Strong Armenia, a political movement founded by Russian-Armenian oligarch Samvel Karapetyan, is one of the clearest manifestations of such efforts. Civil society watchdogs in Armenia frequently note the danger posed by Karapetyan's movement to use his considerable and unfettered resources to mobilize apathetic and pro-Russia voters at home, or financially enable Russia's considerable Armenian diaspora to travel to Armenia to vote in the upcoming elections.

Similarly, former President Robert Kocharyan, who is widely seen as pro-Russian—as a pro-Russia figure-and represents the pre-revolutionary status quo ante of total Armenian integration in the Russian security architecture, also trades heavily in Russia-aligned rhetoric. Gagik Tsarukyan, an Armenian industrialist whose political party has a standing agreement with Putin's ruling United Russia Party, should also be regarded in this context.

Perhaps more than any party or individual, Russia's strengths in Armenia relate to two key rhetorical anchors. First, the implication is that Russia, and only Russia, can ensure and guarantee Armenian civilizational continuity in the face of Turkish and Azerbaijani ascendancy in the region. In this regard, it is a powerful narrative, but one that is chiefly undercut by Moscow's own actions given its unwillingness to support Armenia

during their conflicts and their apparent role in the Azerbaijani takeover of the disputed and formerly ethnic Armenian-majority region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Still, fears among ordinary Armenians that peace with Azerbaijan and normalization with Turkey represent danger rather than liberation are understandable and eagerly instrumentalized by Russia.

Second, and related to the first, is the notion that Russia is itself historically irrepressible, that Russia, by dint of geography and a large economy and military capacity, will eventually succeed. It is in this proposition that Russia can point to its economic influence, the garrison in Gyumri, and its history as an inescapable factor in the region since it is—since the tsarist period. However, Russia's faltering quagmire in Ukraine and the mounting likelihood that a war termination will not result in some kind of major victory for Moscow are a strong countervailing narrative.

For the United States and our allies in Europe, Armenia is worth supporting. For the first time since regaining its independence, doing so cannot be perceived as being in contradiction with pursuing good relationships with Baku and Ankara. If anything, the geometry of the peace process and the TRIPP rubric means that the fates of the three states are as bound as ever. Right now, U.S. support for Armenia is high-level and based on an agenda that brings together, rather than divides, the South Caucasus. However, to continue that momentum and achieve longer-term gains, the completion of the peace process and the TRIPP architecture should be a priority. That will mean continued negotiations and ensuring that the tyranny of small details—financing, logistics, and constitutional nomenclature—does not hold the process hostage.

Similarly, the U.S. could facilitate public-private, regional investments and financing to allow the TRIPP route to flourish as it is intended. Part of that process will also mean providing macroeconomic assistance to Armenia to help its economy transition away from the Eurasian Economic Union and toward Europe and the international economy. Militarily, the U.S. already has a strong and growing military partnership with Armenia. An increased cadence of bilateral and regional exercises with the Armenian armed forces and opportunistic arms sales such as the recent drones deal can make a big difference.

Thank you for this opportunity. I look forward to any questions.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Dr. Cecire.

This has been a tour de force on Armenian history, Armenian importance, Armenian economy, opposition, and everything. It is going to be a must-watch for one of my kids, who—I am going to Armenia next week for elections, and I said I am going to Armenia. He very confidently—this kid is in an AP class. Very confidently said, oh, it is in South America, right? [LAUGHTER.] Yes, so I am going to—I am going to make him watch this, because this has been incredible.

Let me ask one round of questions. In the meantime, if anyone has any questions, please, please come up. This is a friendly environment, so feel free to ask any questions you might have, even if it is, is it in South America? Let me just—Laura, first question for you. You talked about security commitment, that we should have a more concrete security commitment. The question to you—so I am just going to ask all of you questions——and what it could look like. What does it look like? What do you think Armenian people and the Armenian government would see as a credible security commitment, especially in light of what Dr. Cecire was talking about? You know, Russia is perceived to be that security guarantor in the region.

The second question for you, Ambassador Carpenter—and it is a little bit broader, but I do think it is very important—why is—and you have talked about it—but why is Russia would not be interested in peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia? Why—and normalization of ties between Turkey? Because I think this is one of the things that people who watch the region, to them, it is very obvious, but for people who do not, it might seem like, well, it does not make any sense. That is a question for you.

Dr. Cecire, a question for you. It is also pretty broad, but I do think it's an important one because I do not think people are talking about it enough. Is it possible to overestimate—in light of what you said about Russia's role in the region and historic ties and economic ties that Armenia still has—is it possible to overestimate just how much of an important development it is that Armenia is pivoting toward the West and away from Russia? Especially in a context—in the geopolitical context that we have today? That round of questions, and—yes.

Laura.

Ms. LINDERMAN: Great. Thank you so much, Bakhti. On the concrete security commitment and what might be credible, what I think is really important to highlight here is that the Armenians are in a fragile place. They—and so the idea behind TRIPP, for instance, would be that economics can translate over a long period of time into security, because of the economic ties. That is something that takes a long time to happen. There is a long period of potential windows where things might—you know, the geopolitical situation could change.

This is something that needs to be really critically thought about, and really—I do not have, like, some great answer as far as particular policies—but there needs to be some real serious thinking about what can help both Armenia and Azerbaijan feel safe about the peace and the security, and that there is truly a third force here—whether it be European or American—that has got an interest in securing peace long term.

Thanks.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you.

Ambassador.

Mr. CARPENTER: Yes. Thanks. Just maybe picking up on this point. I think it is incumbent on the United States to tread very carefully, given the fact that Russia, as I mentioned, has a lot of levers in the country. We do not want to press those levers too hard right now. I think building up our economic stake in Armenia's future over time is going to be essential. Armenia itself will decide how quickly to roll back the Russian influence in the country. They have already taken giant strides by eliminating, for example, the FSB, the Russian internal security service, from monitoring the Yerevan airport, and also from Armenia's borders with all countries except Turkey, which is now underway. They still have the base in Gyumri.

I think it starts with economic stakes, and then eventually we transition to a political and military role for the United States. When I was at the Pentagon as DASD, deputy assistant secretary of defense, for the region, and I traveled to Armenia, it was amazing to see just how integrated the Russians were into everything that the Armenian military did. We have to proceed very cautiously here. We do not want to trip some sort of mechanism that will later come back to bite us.

On the question you asked me about why Russia is not interested in peace. I mean, I spent more than two years of my life working as an advisor to the OSCE Minsk Group,

which was co-chaired by France, the United States, and Russia. It was cited often by folks as a place where the United States and Russia actually cooperated very well. Well, we did on the surface. The diplomats who formed the Minsk Group were amiable people, and we were able to communicate well, and we had an agenda that was more or less coordinated. Behind the scenes, the Russians were never really interested in a resolution of the problem. The question is, why?

First of all, because they used it as a problem to control both Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Russians sold weapons to both countries. They made themselves the indispensable actor for both sides. They knew that as soon as the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is "solved," Azerbaijan will no longer see Russia as a key actor on which it depends geopolitically or diplomatically. Armenia, a little bit less so, because of the Russian military presence in the country. Again, as a CSTO ally, Russia knew that the conflict—that continued—the technical, formal continuation of a State of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan would allow it essentially to control the political levers in Yerevan. Which it did, all the way up until the Velvet Revolution of 2018.

Then, last, from a sort of geostrategic perspective, for Russia it was essential to control a sort of north-south corridor stretching from—they dreamed of establishing a railroad from Russia through the Russian-occupied Georgian region of Abkhazia, through western Georgia, into Armenia, and then accessing Iran, which was, in the Middle East, Russia's biggest strategic ally in the region. That was always the Russian dream. They were never able to realize it, but the U.S. and our European friends had a competing geostrategic vision, which was east-west. We wanted to build the Middle Corridor.

We wanted to connect Central Asia and points further to the east, and South Asia and East Asia, with markets in Türkiye and Europe. Now—I mean, we did not think of this so much a couple of decades ago—but now, especially with critical raw materials and rare earths, this east-west corridor becomes even more important. For all those reasons, Russia essentially opposed us over the years. They did it quietly, and they did it sub rosa using proxies and other tools. Now it is a little bit more out in the open.

Dr. CECIRE: Thanks, Bakhti. To your question, I mean, is it possible to overestimate the significance of Armenia's pivoting to the West? I think the answer to that is it is hard too, right? I mean, it is a stunning development by all accounts. I think—I cannot speak for my colleagues here—but I certainly feel, like, a sense of vertigo, almost. I was in Yerevan a few weeks ago. To be at this gathering at the Yerevan Dialogue, and to share a panel with both Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Yerevan, is—like, it is a revolution, right? It is really hard to overState the significance of that symbol and that reality, which, frankly, even a year ago seemed like a distant dream.

I think the peace process itself has made a lot of things possible, thanks to this and the previous administration's efforts in that regard. Also, the idea that Armenia would be looking to Europe and the United States for ballast in the way that it has, and getting it, is also, I think, a really major, major development. In the sense that Russia was—you know, as Ambassador Carpenter and as I have articulated—Russia was the indispensable power. It made itself the indispensable power.

Not that long ago, to be in Armenia was to see a country that was essentially a proxy of the Russian security architecture. I do not think I can—I do not think we can overState this too much-because they had a tightly interwoven and integrated military command structure, shared air defense structure, they had an integration treaty, they had a number

of legal and operational mechanisms that made Armenia a kind of appendage of the Russian security architecture itself.

At that point, the role of Russian troops and Russian border guards was kind of almost beside the point. I mean, it sort of, you know, put a bow on it, but it was—it was almost extraneous to the level by which Armenia was so integrated. The fact that Armenia has managed to achieve some level of escape velocity from that integration—is it perfect? No. I mean, do they have work to do? They would say yes. The fact that they have pivoted so hard and so substantially, I think, is a great testament to the evolution of this relationship. It is also very fragile. And Armenia and Armenians, I think, have a sense of long-term civilizational insecurity that is well justified by history. They are looking to the United States and looking to Europe for, you know, an opportunity to break that cycle. This is the chance to do it, but it takes work, and it takes attention to those finer details.

Mr. NISHANOV: Excellent. I think that, again, ties to what we started with, which is the importance of what is going to happen in Armenia, what Armenians are going to be voting on in just a few—just less than ten days. Any questions from the audience? Anyone has any—please. If you do not mind—yes, if you do not mind, just introduce yourself. There is a button; if you could just click on it, it would be awesome.

QUESTION: Hello. Awesome. My name is Waverly Adams. I am an intern for Representative Bobby Scott's office in Virginia.

You mentioned a lot about how pivotal this upcoming election is. I was just a little bit curious, given that the U.S. is currently maintaining its posture on Venezuela and Iran, and there is currently a lot of escalation in Cuba. I was just wondering how realistic and meaningful U.S. engagement is in Armenia? Especially, like, how much bandwidth the U.S. has in regard to their foreign affairs, and especially when political attention is finite. I am just wondering where you see, like, the U.S. playing a part in Armenia's politics.

Mr. NISHANOV: Excellent. Thank you. Who would like to take this question? Yes, please, Ambassador.

Mr. CARPENTER: I think it is a great question. I think you have to disaggregate the types of power that the United States projects. The operation in Venezuela, or the current war in Iran, is occupying U.S. military power. We will have to see how events in Cuba transpire, but it could be a combination of military power, it could be political, it could be economic coercion. We will have to see. With Armenia right now, we are not looking to project military power. The key for the United States is to show that we have a stake and that we are able to raise the funds for this TRIPP project that everybody here on stage has been talking about, because this is sort of the central linchpin in making good on the peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Which, in turn, then, unlocks the normalization of relations between Armenia and Turkey.

If we want to change fundamentally the geostrategy and the geopolitics of the region, we have to start with the details. We have to get this corridor right, because without the corridor, none of the rest of it falls into place. That is primarily leveraging financial resources, leveraging energy resources to be able to power—to build some of the pipelines that will be a part of this TRIPP project to lay the groundwork for the fiber optic cables and the rail and road connections that will make this a reality. That is where the U.S.—the Development Finance Corporation is sort of one of the key leading players that we

need to bring to bear. Export-Import Bank, all these sorts of tools that we have under our belt, but that are very different from the tools that we are using currently, either in Venezuela, in Iran, or potentially down the road in Cuba.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you.

Dr. CECIRE: I will just briefly say that U.S. engagement in Armenia has, I think, on two levels, been seen as being quite substantive. One is, you know, we see this kind of procession of very high-level officials to Armenia over two administrations, which is, I think, very meaningful, and sends a very powerful signal. It does not in itself mean that all the—all the I's are being dotted, and T's are being crossed. It just—kind of the logistics train and the gravity of a very senior official—as, you know, I'm sure Ambassador Carpenter can attest to, going to a place, you know, sort of obligates an entire machinery of the U.S. governmental apparatus. All these things kind of whir into motion.

In that regard, I mean, I have talked—I have been able to talk to Armenian and Azerbaijani officials. They have been quite pleased, not just with the political engagement, but with the substantive working-level engagement. There is this sense that there are champions in the executive branch, throughout, you know, the interagency, and in Congress as well, who want this to happen, who are working to make this happen, and are actually engaged. I am quite hopeful on that level. The question is, is there enough urgency? Is there—and how is that—how long is that window going to stay open?

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you. Anyone else? Any other questions? Please. Yes, yes, please, if you do not mind.

QUESTION: My name is Chris Ardunian [ph].

You guys made heavy reference to Russia's malign influence in the election. I was wondering, how do you assess the decade-long blockade from Turkey, and the peace commitments that Azerbaijan has made, even though they are still holding Christians hostage?

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you. Any takers?

Mr. CARPENTER: I have thoughts, but maybe someone else wants to go first. Can you hear me? Yes. I think Turkey has a lot of work to do. They have withheld a lot of the benefits of normalization that they have talked about for a long time because, I think, there is an implicit understanding between Ankara and Baku that the Armenia-Azerbaijan process will play out first, and then Turkey will pursue its own normalization. I personally wish that the Turks would sort of frontload some of the benefits of normalization, so that Armenia sees that there is light at the end of the tunnel with Turkey, which they regard historically as a foe—a strategic foe. In order to transform that relationship, I think it would be good for Ankara to start making more moves now, but they have the agreement that they have with Baku, even if it is not written down on paper.

When it comes to Azerbaijan, I mean, you are right to refer to some of the Armenians who are being detained in Azerbaijan. I, too, would like to see Baku move more expediently on releasing some of these detainees in order to help create more goodwill as a sort of confidence-building measure between the two countries. Again, Baku is sort of withholding that as leverage. Generally, I will say, this whole question of changing the constitution to preclude the language or to somehow erase the language that is found in Armenia's declaration of independence that refers to the unity of Armenia proper with Nagorno-Karabakh, I find a little bit far-fetched, frankly, because that declaration of independence exists and will never be retracted. Armenia can do 10 new constitutions, but

in a sense, it will not erase the language that was adopted in 1988 or 1989. I forget the exact year that the declaration was adopted.

I understand as well from Baku that they want to make sure that there are no territorial claims in Armenia. Now, I personally, again, think that the best way to do that is to pursue the peace process and sign the treaty and ratify it immediately. I think that will create a stakeholder community in Armenia for peace. The longer that Azerbaijan withholds that benefit, the more they drum up thoughts about whether maybe it was a mistake, perhaps, not to challenge Azerbaijan's actions in Nagorno-Karabakh. I would like to see both Turkey and Azerbaijan move a little bit more forcefully.

First, we have to get through this election on January—excuse me—on June 7, which I think is also foremost in the minds of these two regional neighbors. They want to see that Pashinyan will continue, because if it is a different leader, then it is a whole new ballgame. Once we get through that, then I think hopefully U.S. diplomacy will also energize these two—you know, Turkey, a NATO ally, and Azerbaijan, a very, very close strategic partner, to move expeditiously.

Ms. LINDERMAN: I would just add to what Ambassador Carpenter said that I think that the U.S., after the election, should—[audio break]—and how Dr. Cecire spoke about the way in which the apparatuses and multiple layers of the U.S. Government can operate to—even the bureaucracy—to influence and help support Armenia and Azerbaijan, and with some urgency. Which I think means there needs to be a push specifically, quietly, with Turkey to just help them move forward, maybe independently where possible, on progress toward opening or loosening the border situation with Armenia to really show on the ground real economic benefits to the people living at that border, so they can really see that peace has a tangible result and it means economic benefits for them. Which will keep the momentum going.

Thanks.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you. Any other questions? Anyone else in the audience? I have—if anyone—just, like, you know, just I have a couple of questions. If anyone at any point—and we only have, I think, time for one more round. If anyone—oh, please. There you go. This is—this is what I do. I pressure people into asking questions. [LAUGHTER.] Good job.

QUESTION: Hi. [Off mic]—from Representative Maloy's office.

We have seen the extent that Russia is willing to go when their sphere of influence over a region shrinks. We have seen this in Ukraine and Georgia as two examples. Is Armenia prepared for the potential outcomes that would come from pivoting toward the West and the EU? How would that affect regional stability?

Mr. NISHANOV: I am sure it is a question that occupies a lot of folks' minds in Yerevan. Dr. Cecire, please.

Dr. CECIRE: Yes. That is a great question. I think that is something that the Armenian government thinks about most of all, the idea that, you know, if they are going to facilitate this pivot, or this rebalancing, or this diversification of their foreign policy portfolio to the West, that what are the—what are the levers that Russia could activate and operationalize, or, you know, to what extent is a target being made of them? This is something they are thinking about quite a lot. To the extent that the United States is engaged with Armenian partners, I mean, that conversation comes up a lot.

A few things I think are inescapably true. One is that Russia, you know, does have a small garrison in Gyumri. It does not have a contiguous overland border with Armenia in the way that it did with Georgia, or does with—or does with Georgia, or does with Ukraine. The geometry of the threat is a little bit different. The other thing is that Russia, I think, quite clearly, is well occupied in Ukraine. To an extent, I think we are at a point where I think we can somewhat confidently say that Ukraine is in a stronger military position there than it has been since perhaps the end of 2022.

Now, you know, no one, I think, is writing checks on that account, but to the extent that we can look at, you know, Russia's ability to project power in the region, it is severely—it is severely curtailed. It is very much dependent on their ability to marshal resources that, frankly, they cannot even muster to effect adequately in Ukraine, which they have clearly prioritized as their chief geopolitical goal. Yes, Russia has options. I think Russia has a number of nonlinear, hybrid options.

Its control over various elements of the Armenian economy, or at least the Armenian dependency on the Russian economy, is a big one. Its use of information warfare and other influence operations is something that concerns a lot of people. It also is, in some ways, a—these are tools from a position of weakness. The fact that Russia is investing so much in these nonlinear tools in advance of these elections, and potentially beyond, is sort of an expression of the fact that they lack some of these other instruments of power that, in the past, they may have had more directly.

That is not a hand-wave away to say that everything is fine but is to say that Russia's options are constrained. That also makes it incumbent on the Armenian government, as well as the United States and our European allies, to be patient and to take good care in how Armenia facilitates that transition.

Ms. LINDERMAN: I just like to add and underscore what Dr. Cecire said and maybe add another point. Underscoring the window of opportunity, and the point that Ambassador Carpenter made, that is why this moment is so urgent, because it is very unclear how long the opportunity and the window of opportunity will stay open. On the point about Russia, I think the thing that we—if you look historically, and when you think about Russia—and I agree with the point that it is from—it is operating from a position of strategic weakness. Like a cornered or trapped animal, sometimes that is also the moment that it quite—it lashes out quite strongly. That is really what we need to pay attention to as well, and not take for granted that Russia is distracted, and this is the moment to act.

Mr. NISHANOV: Any other questions? If no questions, may I indulge in just one, super quick? It could be yes or no. I am not going to be upset if you just say no, this is absolutely wrong, and just do not talk anymore. Very quickly—very quickly, this is probably going to be the most controversial round, too.

Laura, just because you follow Georgia so closely, you worked in the South Caucasus, what is the—and this is—again, it is up to Armenians to decide who they vote for. What is the danger of oligarchs coming to power in countries like Georgia and Armenia? Where it is a relatively smaller economy and smaller population, where, you know, a billion dollars goes a long, long, long way, and what it could mean for Armenia's democratic future or economic status?

Then the second question, just, again, quickly, just to pivot off the gentleman's question, Ambassador, do you think—and just a broad—it is a broad question. Do you think

the Armenia-Azerbaijan war is a religious war? Is it a war that is defined primarily by religious beliefs? What is the—what is the driving force behind this conflict that has been ongoing for quite a few decades?

Dr. Cecire, last question for you, probably one of the more controversial ones again: What is the disconnect between the Armenian diaspora in the United States and Armenians, and the interests of Armenians in Armenia? You do not—you can answer that question: Is there a disconnect? Let me put it that way. You can say, no, there is no disconnect. Everybody's on the same page. I would probably think that is probably not necessarily the case. I would appreciate, kind of—you know, again, feel free to just yes or no this—but any expansion is majorly appreciated. Laura, do you want to?

Ms. LINDERMAN: Well, thank you, Bakhti. I feel like I got off easy, so I appreciate it. [LAUGHTER.]

I would say that the risk of oligarchs or concentrated economic wealth in small amounts of individuals remains a major problem for the South Caucasus, but also for many places in the world. Something to pay attention to and figure out ways in which that, as it relates to governmental systems, can be protected against, and what are the guardrails we could use to help that not be an outcome across the world.

Thank you.

Mr. CARPENTER: On the nature of the war, I mean, this was a classic ethnic conflict, like what we saw in the Balkans. Now, there was a difference of religion between the two sides, so that was an overlay on this ethnic conflict. I think the important point to make is that prior to the late 1980's, especially in Nagorno-Karabakh, you had Armenians and Azeris living side by side. You know, they would go to each other's houses for barbecues, and they had a very codependent sort of existence in that one region. There were also a number of Azeris who lived in Yerevan, and there were Armenians who lived in Sumgait and other parts of Azerbaijan, but peacefully.

Much like the Balkans, when political entrepreneurs started to pursue some of these ethnic grievances that they started to foist upon the population, that is when the conflict started to become real. In a sense, the challenge right now is that you do not have Armenians or Azeris who are really old enough to remember that period where they—where they lived together, and where their lives were sort of intertwined. They have been growing up over the last generation or two in a system where it has all just been hatred spewed from each side at the other. Hopefully, we are going to round that corner now, but it is going to take a lot of work.

Dr. CECIRE: Thank you, Bakhti, for that question. [LAUGHTER.] I think the best way to answer this is that it is—a diaspora is a—is a term that we use as an umbrella term for a lot of different types of people, right? I think most people would say, if they—if they were talking about the Armenian diaspora in the United States—that it is actually quite fragmented and quite diverse, as all communities are and as all diasporas are. I think that is probably kind of the first principle to operate from.

The second one is that I think there is clearly a sense that there is a disconnect, that there is even some level of misunderstanding between elements of the U.S.-based Armenian diaspora and the Republic of Armenia. You know, that is, I think, a function of a few things. One is kind of the historical nature of the waves of migration that came to the United States, in which, you know, people have different conceptions of their homeland. You know, from being in a diaspora compared to being in the Republic of Armenia

itself. That naturally engenders kind of differences of perspective, and sometimes even differences of political opinion.

I think to that—to that extent, when we think about, you know, that perceived disconnect, it is really an opportunity for, I think, both sides, for people in the diaspora as well as in the republic, to be able to kind of learn a little bit more about why, you know, these perceptions have hardened in the ways that they have. Certainly, there are some political aspects to it. There is going to be an inescapable, you know, subset of people who are going to look at this purely as a political function. You know, perhaps those things cannot be quite so easily dealt with.

I think on sort of the people-to-people basis, on matters of identity, on civilization and kind of shared provenance, those are areas where I have encountered Armenians from the republic and Armenians in the diaspora finding a great deal of very interesting things about each other, things that they shared, but also things that are different. Think, you know, you have a diaspora that was largely—not entirely, but largely—based in what is now Anatolia, in Turkey. Their traditions, their foodways, their cultural celebrations, even, you know, and linked through linguistic differences, you know, were quite—were quite distinct from that of Eastern Armenia.

You know, that process of discovery has actually been something that I would say—at least in, you know, some of the places that I have seen—has been an area of great connection between the diaspora and the republic. I think once a peace treaty is signed, it allows the republic to achieve a kind of normalization of self. Not to get too metaphysical here, but this—the idea that Armenia can act more like a regular country, and not like a garrison State. I think that provides an opportunity, not just for the people of Armenia itself, which is incredibly important, but also for the diaspora to experience Armenia not as sort of a lost land but as a place that is—can operate as a normal country in the international community. I think that is a great opportunity.

Mr. NISHANOV: That is a great way to land that plane. I think we know now what the entire audience is going to be doing on June 7, which is very closely watching the Armenian elections. Thank you so much for being here. Please join me in thanking our incredible witnesses for sharing their expertise and knowledge. [Applause.] Thank you. Now the briefing—this briefing is closed.

Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 2:08 p.m., the briefing ended.]

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