FOREWORD

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Congratulations are due to the editors and contributing authors of this book, which performs a great service to students of international politics. We now have in one volume a set of comprehensive analyses of the main dimensions of the Second Karabakh War. By producing sharp, judicious, and readable accounts, the authors, who are all internationally recognized experts in their fields, have ensured that this volume will become the standard account of the conflict.

Until now, the Second Karabakh War has attracted much less scholarly attention than it deserves. Together with the Syrian civil war, the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan in 2021, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the war that Hamas initiated against Israel, the war belongs on the list of key events and conflicts that have shaped the contours of the contemporary international system. But the other items on the above list have received far more attention, partially because regional experts are scarce, and partially because the impact of the war was not felt immediately, at least not in the United

States and Europe. Seen from Washington and EU capitals, the Second Karabakh War strikes the eye as a remote and localized conflict—one that is of little importance to the world beyond the South Caucasus.

In fact, the Second Karabakh War is a turning point in a long and complex process of great importance to the world, namely, the re-shaping of the post-Soviet world due to the decline of Russia. For almost two hundred years, Moscow has regarded the South Caucasus as its sole preserve. Since the Russo-Persian War of 1826-1828, which ended with the Treaty of Turkmenchay, Moscow has jealously guarded its primacy in the region. With the defeat of Armenia, Russia's longstanding ally, Azerbaijan announced its unambiguous rise, its arrival as a wholly independent actor strongly allied, in matters of defense, with Israel and, especially, Türkiye.

The consequences of that fact are significant. For example, the coercive techniques to which Moscow routinely resorts to force Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova to its will are no longer available to it with respect to Azerbaijan. Under the leadership of President Ilham Aliyev, Baku has managed to raise its military to the standard of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization by developing military-to-military relationships with Türkiye and Israel. Save for the three Baltic states, how many other former Soviet states have developed their military power outside of the Collective Security Treaty Organization? How many have done so, moreover, on the watch of Russian President Vladimir Putin?

But even as he led Azerbaijan to a victory that weakened Moscow's grip on the South Caucasus, Aliyev succeeded (in sharp contrast, for example, to Georgia) in preserving cordial relations

with the Russian leader. Indeed, in the Second Karabakh War, Aliyev maintained better relations with Putin than did Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan—and this despite Yerevan's status as Moscow's treaty ally. Yerevan, the party to the conflict over Karabakh that has the most to gain from preserving Russian influence in the South Caucasus, has less influence over Putin than Baku. On this count, several insightful chapters shed great light on the complex crosscurrents in Armenian politics and Armenian-Russian (and Armenian-Iranian) relations that made Pashinyan's challenge all but impossible—and that, incidentally, convinced Armenian voters to reelect him instead of punishing him for the defeat.

When the Second Karabakh War ended in November 2020, Putin attempted to safeguard Russia's status as the holder of the balance between Baku and Yerevan. He cleverly focused his aspirations on retaining control of the Lachin Corridor. The Russian peacekeepers stationed there assured, it was thought, that Moscow would be indispensable in any future negotiation over the status of the ethnic Armenians of Karabakh. Yerevan and Baku both depended on Moscow for their territorial connection to Karabakh.

Or so it seemed. The Azerbaijani military retook Karabakh by force in a matter of hours on 19-20 September 2023, thereby erasing the rationale for stationing Russian peacekeepers on Azerbaijani soil. Thereafter, Putin had no realistic option but to withdraw the troops. If the rise of Azerbaijani military power alone was all that restrained Putin, he might have been tempted to demand, for example, that Russian forces remain in the Lachin Corridor as guarantors of a special status for the ethnic Arme-

nians of Karabakh. If he even contemplated such a move, he no doubt dismissed the idea for fear of permanently alienating Azerbaijan—a country whose geostrategic importance in the past few years has further risen in the eyes of all the major powers with ambitions in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

But behind Azerbaijan also stood the power of the Turkish military. Indeed, the Second Karabakh War announced the undeniable arrival of Türkiye as a major player in the South Caucasus. Nothing less than a tectonic shift in international politics—that is, the sudden rise of the Azerbaijani-Turkish alliance—makes it highly unlikely that Russia, regardless of its aspirations, will ever regain military primacy in the region. Seven months after the defeat of Armenia in 2020, Baku and Ankara signed the Shusha Declaration, a mutual defense treaty that implicitly warns Moscow to accord Baku a level of respect that it refuses to accord to any other post-Soviet state.

The implications of the Declaration extend well beyond the South Caucasus. Indeed, the text expresses, explicitly and implicitly, shared aspirations of Baku and Ankara that have the potential to alter the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia (alternatively, the Silk Road region). Five of them—three explicit and two implicit—deserve particular attention as we follow events.

First, the Shusha Declaration explicitly announces the intention of both Ankara and Baku to enlarge the Middle Corridor, the trade route between China and the European Union which runs through Central Asia, Azerbaijan, and on to Türkiye.

The impact of this aspiration on the states of Central Asia is profound. When viewed from Moscow, Azerbaijan is, in the

words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, "the cork in the bottle of Central Asia." By forcing Moscow to recognize the rise of Azerbaijan, the Second Karabakh War has removed the cork. Azerbaijan now offers the Central Asian states a gateway to Europe that is controlled by neither Russia nor Iran, whose value as hosts of alternative trade routes has in any case been severely curtailed by Western sanctions. The Middle Corridor, if it indeed develops as Ankara and Baku hope, will offer Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan a lifeline to Europe that will help both to behave toward Moscow with something approaching the self-confidence and independence that now characterizes Azerbaijani policies. Indeed, as one of the book's co-editors put it in one of his contributions, Azerbaijan has become an "indispensable country for the advancement of the strategic energy and connectivity ambitions of all major outside powers in the Silk Road region—Western and non-Western alike."

Second, the Shusha Declaration also expresses the aspiration of Ankara and Baku to open what they call the Zangezur Corridor, a trade and transport passageway that, as a branch of the Middle Corridor, will connect Baku, through Armenia, to the Azerbaijani exclave of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and, on from there, to Türkiye. The Turkish and Azerbaijani plans for the Zangezur Corridor alarm and provoke debates in Moscow, Yerevan, and Tehran, where the question is whether to try to block it or to shape it in ways that benefit all parties. Some Armenians and Iranians, in particular, fear that the free movement of people and goods across sovereign Armenian territory will become the first chapter in an Azerbaijani and Turkish plot to

annex the southern part of Armenia to Azerbaijan. Alternatively, if Ankara and Baku succeed in assuaging these fears and completing the corridor, the resulting integration between Armenia and its neighbors could offer attractive economic benefits that hitherto would have been unthinkable. This will require agreements on customs and border control arrangements that are as efficient as possible.

Third, the Declaration applauds the intensification of pan-Turkic sentiment in Central Asia, represented, most notably, by the rise of the Organization of Turkic States. Throughout Central Asia, Turkic peoples are shedding their Soviet skins: discarding the Cyrillic alphabet, rediscovering their pre-Soviet cultural identities, and exploring the potential for some sort of heightened cooperation with their fellow Turkic peoples. The Second Karabakh War, not to mention the Azerbaijani-Turkish relationship that helped to win it, spurred on this process. Meanwhile, China, Russia, and Iran—all of whom rule over Turkic minorities who are excited by the growing bonds of affinity with their fellow Turks—are following this development with (varying degrees of) trepidation. Whether the Turkic bond will prove strong enough to shape the relations among the Central Asian states and between them and the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance remains to be seen. But for the first time in over a century, pan-Turkism has once again emerged as a factor in the politics of the core Silk Road region.

Fourth, the Shusha Declaration lays some of the groundwork for normalization of relations between Armenia, on the one hand, and, on the other, Türkiye and Azerbaijan. To be sure, the Declaration does not call explicitly for normalized relations,

but it does envision a future of "peace, friendship and good neighborliness through stability and prosperity on a regional and international scale." With Karabakh having been returned fully to Azerbaijanis sovereignty, the worst impediment to such a future has disappeared, and new vistas have emerged.

Finally, the Declaration also implicitly suggests that Türkiye, or, perhaps more accurately, the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance, will be the main motor of the four aspirations enumerated above. Throughout the history of the Soviet Union, the suppression of pan-Turkism had been a major theme running through Moscow's policy like a bright red cord. The Kremlin saw the support of Armenian nationalism as a major tool in ensuring that Türkiye could not pursue closer political, economic, and security arrangements with its Eastern Turkic brethren. If we are asked to issue a preliminary judgment on the Second Karabakh War, we might say that it appears to be the moment when Russian policy decisively shifted. From now on, Russia, a declining power, will attempt to shape pan-Turkism rather than to fight it directly.

Russian policy may be less hostile, but it is by no means friendly to the worldview expressed in the Shusha Declaration. Nor will the Turks and the Azerbaijanis find strong support from the Chinese or the Iranians. The success of Ankara and Baku in turning their aspirations into reality, therefore, will hinge on the answers to three questions. First, will Ankara and Baku remain as strong, united, and diplomatically skillful in the coming decades as they have been over the last ten years? Second, will pan-Turkic sentiment in the relevant Central Asian states become a serious and lasting element in their international politics? And finally,

whither the West? When examining American and European policy over the past decade, it is difficult if not impossible to discern a coherent Western vision of Eurasia's future and the place of the Turkish-Azerbaijani motor in it.

The success of the Turkish-Azerbaijani project, therefore, is by no means guaranteed. Many years will pass before we will be able to determine with any certainty the balance, in the Shusha Declaration, between pious aspiration and practical politics. Even as mere aspiration, however, this document, which nears the level of a formal treaty, is already influencing the direction of events. Anyone interested in understanding that direction has no place better to start their effort than by reading this book.