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The 2020 military offensive by Azerbaijan against Armenia and ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh significantly reshaped the configuration of power in the South Caucasus, leading to a pivotal alteration of the geopolitical landscape of the region.

The modern origins of this conflict, which dates back to 1990 and has claimed tens of thousands of lives on both sides, can be traced to the coercive tactics employed by the joint forces of Moscow and Baku at the twilight of the Soviet Union. Their actions, including hostilities and mass deportations, targeted the indigenous Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, instigating a fully fledged war between the newly independent Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In September 2023, the situation escalated when actions taken by Azerbaijan, compounded by the inaction of the Russian peacekeeping forces on the ground, effectively amounted to the ethnic cleansing of the entire Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh¹. This marked a significant deterioration of conditions and triggered a profound political and humanitarian crisis for Armenia².

US policymakers continue to advocate for a peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Through its efforts to broker such an agreement, the Biden administration envisages not only a reduction in Russian influence on the region but also an increase in its own, thereby transforming US engagement into a sustained strategic commitment.

If successful, American policies might help catalyze a dramatic realignment and position Washington as an important stakeholder in the regional agenda. Such an outcome would support the perpetuation of a democratic, liberal, rules-based order, and counter the proliferation of non-Western rules promulgated by Russia, China, Iran and Türkiye.

Conversely, failure to adeptly navigate the complex geopolitical and regional dynamics could transform the South Caucasus into a theater of imposed illiberal order. Such a scenario would enable anti-Western regimes that rely on the use of force to thrive, erode the post-Cold War democratic framework, significantly weaken US influence, and diminish the capacity of the West to serve as a stabilizing force for progress and cooperative engagement in the region and the broader Middle East.

This report examines the nuances of the US



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Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. AFP

engagement in the South Caucasus following the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict of 2020, and evaluates Washington's effectiveness in adjusting to changing regional dynamics and pursuing a strategy of meaningful engagement.

THE NEED FOR STRATEGIC THINKING IN US ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

The abrupt recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan³ by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan was a move that ran counter to Armenia's strategic interests⁴. Initially revealed by Russia's President Vladimir Putin⁵, the decision was subsequently reinforced by Azerbaijan, Russia and (under duress) Armenia through a tripartite declaration, reportedly authored by Putin⁶, on Nov. 9, 2020.

It not only sparked several fresh crises, including the forced exodus of the region's Armenian population in September 2023, but also altered the strategic calculations of regional and global powers.

In the shadow of the protracted war between Russia and Ukraine, the South Caucasus has emerged as a critical nexus. This geopolitical significance of the region offers the potential for the projection of power and exertion of

influence across the wider Eurasian landscape in various strategic directions.

Within this context, the actions of key regional players Russia, Turkiye, Iran and Azerbaijan are marked by a reliance on coercion and power, as they strive for a cooperative hegemony and shared strategic control in the region, with the aim of curtailing the abilities of the US and the wider West to exert a strong influence on Georgia and Armenia.

Considering that Russia's war on Ukraine could be diverting Moscow's attention from other crucial geostrategic concerns, such as those in the Caucasus, the US is redefining its engagement with the region. Despite hindrances arising from the ongoing convergence of Russian, Turkish, Iranian and Azerbaijani policies, the US is keen to promote its vision for the region and signal a renewed commitment to proactive involvement and the establishment of new politico-integrative frameworks.

This recalibration of Washington's policy on the post-Nagorno-Karabakh Caucasus is driven by its intentions to reduce Russia's preponderance, counterbalance Iran's influence, moderate Turkiye's role, and prevent the consolidation of authoritarian power among Russia, Turkiye, Iran and



Above: Armenian refugees leave villages of Azerbaijan following fights between Azeris and Armenians during the 1988 Nagorno-Karabakh War. After more than 30 years the region is still at the centre of disputes. AFP Next: Weapons, vehicles and other military equipment captured by Azerbaijani army from Armenian separatists is displayed for the press in the village of Signag in the territories of Nagorno-Karabakh. AFP

Azerbaijan, and their enforcement of illiberal, zero-sum rules.

This policy could be built upon the 21st Century Peace through Strength Bill that was adopted by the US Congress in April 2024⁷. To succeed, it will require a new, effective strategy and policies adapted to address the realities on the ground in the South Caucasus, and a pronounced US presence, including military might.

Efforts to achieve these objectives are fraught with challenges, including the need for Washington's policy and decision-making apparatus to overcome stereotypical and generalized views of regional dynamics and a tendency toward reactive behavior. These issues are compounded by the potential for renewed Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia, and the reluctance of Georgia to align closely with the West during the conflict between Russia and Ukraine⁸.

This situation is further complicated by the Kremlin's evolving tactics of regional ascendancy through the use of political deception in the tradition of "maskirovka⁹," or "masking," previously defined as "surrogate influence¹⁰," while consolidating its anti-Western agenda in close cooperation with like-minded Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan¹¹. Collectively, these factors create substantial systemic, cognitive and political hurdles for proper and pertinent strategization of the US engagement in the region.

The constrained political and analytical efforts of American policymakers, coupled with challenges in formulating and implementing a coherent strategy without a substantial physical presence in the region, threaten Washington's aspirations to bolster its strategic influence in the Caucasus and beyond.

Additionally, the volatile nature of domestic US politics, in particular the possible reelection of Donald Trump as president in November, could further affect America's global position and its ability to influence the dynamics of the South Caucasus.

These factors raise important questions about the future direction and effectiveness of US regional involvement.

HISTORY OF US ENGAGEMENT IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS SINCE THE END OF THE COLD WAR

One of the earliest significant engagements by the US in the region toward the end of the Communist era was its empathetic support for Armenia in the struggle against the oppressive colonial policies of the Soviet Union, which had arbitrarily partitioned Armenia in the 1920s, notably incorporating the Armenian-populated region of Nagorno-Karabakh into Soviet Azerbaijan.

US support for Armenia was fueled by the



politically active Armenian diaspora in the US, which responded strongly to sociopolitical upheaval in Soviet Armenia. This upheaval stemmed from movements seeking the reunification of Nagorno-Karabakh, plus Soviet-era reforms in the late 1980s, which intensified the drive for independence and democracy.

Highlighting the depth of sociocultural relations between Armenia and the US, President George Bush in 1991 described Armenia as an "island of freedom" and affirmed Washington's "strong commitment" to its "welfare and independence¹²."

This sentiment was occasionally echoed by the US Congress, which praised the Armenian people for initiating mass protests against the repressive Communist regime, and for their efforts since 1988 to achieve reunification with Nagorno-Karabakh, thereby setting a "precedent for anti-Communist movements across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and leading to the liberation of millions¹³."

The US supported Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, initially by denouncing the military aggression by Moscow and Baku against the inhabitants of the region in 1990-1991 that was intended to forcefully suppress the freedom movement.

This stance was solidified by the Freedom Support Act, enacted by the US Congress in October 1992, section 907 of which was titled "Restriction on Assistance to Azerbaijan¹⁴." It imposed sanctions on Azerbaijan and demanded the leaders of the country "take

demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh¹⁵.”

In doing this, Congress acknowledged Nagorno-Karabakh as a political entity. Driven by this, and in its role as co-chair with Russia and France of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Minsk Group, which was leading the efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the US sanctioned the annual provision of financial aid for the administration in Nagorno-Karabakh, via Armenia, under the 1998 Foreign Aid Bill. This continued until Azerbaijan’s invasion and takeover in September 2023¹⁶.

However, there was regular presidential wavering on the application of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, as a result of evolving US policies, including the Silk Road Strategy Act of 1999¹⁷ and the global war on terror after 9/11. Such factors provided an opportunity for the leadership of Azerbaijan to enhance its strategic importance to the US and wider West by highlighting its geographic, political, economic and energy-infrastructure value, at the expense of Washington’s previously prevailing position on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

The Minsk Group’s framework for achieving a peaceful resolution to the conflict was predicated upon three fundamental principles, echoing those of the broader Helsinki Final Act of 1975: territorial integrity, the right to self-determination, and the non-use of force or, in other words, a commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe was itself a product of US unipolarity, the foundations of which in the Caucasus were dramatically undermined by Azerbaijan’s large-scale military offensive against Armenia and the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020, which violated the principles of the Helsinki Final Act. This offensive — supported by

Turkiye in subtle coordination with, and plausibly sanctioned by, Russia — represented a significant deviation from the previously established order.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2020 war, Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev declared the Nagorno-Karabakh issue “closed once and for all” through the use of military force, a position given political legitimacy by the tripartite declaration of Nov. 9, which the Azerbaijani president interpreted as “the capitulation of Armenia¹⁸.”

The declaration also sanctioned the establishment, long-sought by Moscow, of a “peacekeeping” presence in Nagorno-Karabakh¹⁹. Following this, Aliyev pronounced the Minsk Group to be obsolete and dysfunctional, eventually calling for it to be officially abolished²⁰ and thereby limiting American engagement in the region. He insisted that the future normalization phase adhere to the conditions set by the tripartite declaration, which entrenched zero-sum parameters conducive to “negative peace²¹” that favored Azerbaijan.

American policymakers were somehow misled by a narrative suggesting Russia’s influence in the region was diminishing, thereby creating a strategic vacuum that, in the aftermath of Azerbaijan’s conflict with Moscow’s ally Armenia, might be quickly filled by Turkiye, ostensibly benefiting the West, if the West endorsed the post-Karabakh-war configurations.

However, subsequent developments and the adherence of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan to the clauses of the Nov. 9 declaration revealed a contrary scenario that showcased Russia’s sustained, if not strengthened, strategic presence through Azerbaijan’s and Turkiye’s coordinated position, squeezing out Western influence on traditional regional issues^{22 23}.

Confronted with this situation, the US initially expressed its disapproval of the new realities forcibly imposed by Azerbaijan,



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Russia and Türkiye. Commenting on the 2020 trilateral declaration, James Gilmore, the US ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, said Washington maintained that there can be no military solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and “any final resolution must adhere to the principles enshrined in the Helsinki Act,” with the Minsk Group serving as the principal and legitimate platform for addressing this issue .

This stance was rejected by the Aliyev administration, which countered with a proposal for a so-called Armenia-Azerbaijan peace plan²⁴. This sought to treat the Nagorno-Karabakh issue separately from the broader normalization process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, a concept agreed upon during a trilateral meeting between Aliyev, Putin and Pashinyan in Sochi, in 2021²⁵.

Aliyev later admitted the notion of an Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal was designed to challenge the framework of the Minsk Group, thereby effectively altering the dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan²⁶. This aim of the maneuver was either to perplex the US State Department or compel Washington to yield to avoid exclusion from the diplomatic process.

Washington’s optimistic stance on the development, influenced by theoretical liberal ideals of lasting democratic peace and economic incentives, injected an emotional fervor and enthusiasm into the seemingly forthcoming prospect of an Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal, diverting American diplomatic attention away from Nagorno-Karabakh and consequent security challenges.

Above: Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev (R) and Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan (C) in Sochi to discuss normalization process. Getty Previous: Activists block a road from Stepanakert, the capital of self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh, to Azerbaijani Aghdam to demand the reopening of the blockaded Lachin Corridor and protest the crisis conditions in the region. AFP

This shift positioned the issue primarily within the purview of Russia and Azerbaijan, eventually enabling Baku to enforce, in December 2022, a full blockade of the Lachin corridor, a crucial lifeline between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, thereby instigating a severe humanitarian and food crisis for the Armenian population of the region.

Despite efforts by Washington, including the Congressional Armenian Protection Act of 2023²⁷, to counter what Putin and Aliyev termed the “implementation of our joint plan” for the Caucasus²⁸, the Biden administration has often seemed disconnected from the rapidly changing realities in the region. It has maintained wishful-thinking narratives of impending democratic peace in the Caucasus, while downplaying Russia’s influence despite mounting evidence to the contrary.

FAVORING PLEASANT NARRATIVES OVER REALITIES ON THE GROUND MIGHT LEAD TO STRATEGIC MISCALCULATIONS

The prevailing narrative, which prematurely predicted the waning strategic influence of Russia in the South Caucasus, has spurred many Western and US policymakers, alongside experts and scholars, to swiftly add some Western strategic salt to the South Caucasian salad.

Based on a rather emotional understanding of the new configuration, some US institutions have viewed this as an unprecedented window of opportunity in the South Caucasus, where longstanding regional conflicts, failures of governance, corruption,



Above: An elderly Armenian woman walks past a tank on a street in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, during the conflict between the two former Soviet Republics in 1990. AFP Yuri Kim, Washington's acting assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs. AFP

nepotism, populist politics, failed internal transformations and reforms, along with other social and societal challenges, could potentially be remedied if only local governments sought Western support and aligned themselves against Russia.

Despite limited domestic reforms to bolster security and resilience, countries such as Armenia — which is still grappling with legitimate grievances related to the tragic outcome of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, societal polarization and collective psychological trauma — are expected to adopt a new approach to foreign policy and make a U-turn without a backup plan or security guarantees.

Yet it is an approach fueled by clear signals from the Armenian government, further legitimized by a growing number of experts from government-organized nongovernmental organizations who echo official narratives, including talk of a possible peace deal with oppressive Azerbaijan and a swift and painless drift away from Russia.

Pashinyan's government and these organizations are adept at appealing to US sensibilities — a belief in democracy, stability, peace, interconnectivity, open communications, a Russia-free environment, economic prosperity and so on — and therefore position themselves as strongly aligned with Western interests and values.

Against this backdrop, American decision-making has been marked by what might best be labeled “irrational exuberance,” wherein

government signals are prioritized over rational analysis of the situation and critical thinking, which are important cognitive tools that could detect pseudo-pragmatic and emotional approaches, and potentially help Armenia navigate a smooth transition away from Russia.

Instead, the exuberance often overlooks potential risks and the negative outcomes experienced in the past, hindering the learning of foreign policy lessons²⁹.

Such a modus operandi might cause American policymakers to disregard counterevidence that could help provide a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the situation on the ground and help the US avoid possible traps while developing better strategies for the South Caucasus.

A more contextual assessment that incorporates diverse perspectives and takes into account previous lessons learned is crucial to avoid the pitfalls of oversimplified narratives and ensure the adoption of a more informed approach to regional dynamics.

Despite Azerbaijan's consistent defiance of US demands and established red lines, the Biden administration has nonetheless maintained its accommodating stance on the outcomes of the Putin-Aliyev strategic rapprochement in the Caucasus. This approach was evident in the concerted calls by the US and wider West on Azerbaijan to lift its blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh immediately, which demonstratively were ignored by Baku. On Sept. 14, 2023, Yuri



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Kim, Washington's acting assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, stated unequivocally during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on the crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh: "The United States will not tolerate any action — short-term or long-term — to ethnically cleanse or commit any other atrocities against the Armenian people of Nagorno-Karabakh. The current humanitarian situation is not acceptable³⁰."

Despite clearly drawing red lines on the issue, a response by the Biden administration to Azerbaijan's military offensive and subsequent ethnic cleansing of local Armenians, which took place just nine days after Kim's declaration, was notable by its absence.

Furthermore, in response to the Aliyev administration's declared dissatisfaction with Washington's position, as demonstrated by the unilateral cancellation of reciprocal official visits, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken introduced precautionary measures designed to persuade Baku to remain open to dialogue with the US³¹.

Amid such inconsistent behavior, the State Department has faced challenges stemming from limited expertise and lack of in-depth, reliable knowledge of the situation on the ground. These factors have hampered strategic planning related to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and broader Caucasus affairs.

This issue was exemplified when, on Nov. 15, 2023, the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the US House of Representatives convened a hearing of its Subcommittee on Europe to discuss "The Future of Nagorno-Karabakh."

During the session, Thomas Howard Kean Jr., a Republican representative from New Jersey, emphasized the importance of achieving a comprehensive peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. He said such a deal would not only undermine the malign influence of Russia but also disrupt the emerging nexus of Moscow and Tehran, which seeks to exploit the South Caucasus region. He expressed his hopes for the region, envisioning a future characterized by genuine and lasting peace, free from the malign influence of Russia and Iran³².

James O'Brien, the assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, responded that it was undesirable for Armenia and Azerbaijan to view Iran and Russia as the main forces in regional security³³.

He added that the use of force by Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh had eroded trust and raised doubts about Baku's commitment to a comprehensive peace agreement with Armenia. Given this new reality, he said, the State Department has made it clear to Azerbaijan that there cannot be "business as usual" between Washington and Baku³⁴, and the latter might face consequences.

Despite these warnings by the US that Azerbaijan must refrain from aggressive behavior toward Armenia and Armenians, Baku's subsequent actions have highlighted inconsistencies in American policy and, more importantly, might seriously undermine Washington's credibility as a civilizational actor.

The US approaches have not only failed to contain Azerbaijan's power politics and reduce Russia's influence in the region, they risk further consolidating the power of autocratic regimes in the South Caucasus.

In this context it is essential that US policymakers are reminded that despite suggestions by Armenia that it will freeze its membership in or leave the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a military alliance of six post-Soviet states, the country remains a full member and therefore Russia's strategic ally. It also maintains its memberships or participations in other Russia-led initiatives and projects, including the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Development Bank and the 3+3 initiative.

Armenia also continues to host a large Russian military base, with all its infrastructure including a strategic military airport. And despite a request by Armenia for Russia to withdraw its border guards from the country's main international airport³⁵ by Aug. 1, 2024, Russian Federal Security Service troops remain deployed along the



borders with Turkiye and Iran.

Armenia's continuing heavy reliance on Russia for essential resources and services, such as gas, oil, food, railway infrastructure and border protection, underscores its systemic, close ties with Moscow. With approximately 300 official bilateral state agreements signed, the depth of this alliance remains substantial and intact.

In an attempt to ensure the sustainability of the Armenian economy, while also maintaining the support of the electorate, the Pashinyan government continues to foster economic ties with Russia. This is evidenced by a significant increase in bilateral trade and a notable rise in cooperation across various sectors³⁶.

As for Iran's role in the region, significant evidence can be found of its growing ties with Armenia and Azerbaijan, including the implementation of joint projects. In particular, the construction by Iran and Azerbaijan of an "Araz corridor" linking Baku with its enclave of Nakhichevan stands as a tangible testament to this evolving relationship.

Despite the religious and ideological differences between Armenia and Iran, and what some might erroneously view as the absence of any clear strategic partnership, the relationship between the nations in fact epitomizes the kind of delicate balance between shared interests and calculated strategic moves one might expect from two countries with a shared border and trade relations.

The establishment of an Iranian consulate in southern Armenia in October 2022 added another layer to the relationship and is testament to the complex nature of collaborative endeavors and diplomatic engagement, mostly by the Iranians.

Another overt inconsistency in the US approach to this matter, which complicates its increasingly precarious position in the Caucasus, is Washington's shifting stance on official visits to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Against the backdrop of visits by Russian and Turkish ambassadors to the region in the aftermath of the 2020 war, the US and other Western diplomatic missions, including that of France, delicately but demonstratively refrained from participating in diplomatic visits to Nagorno-Karabakh organized by Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry.

However, even though Mark Libby, the US ambassador to Azerbaijan, said on May 3, 2024, that he would not visit the ethnically cleansed region because he did not want to "play a part in a propaganda show," three days later he unexpectedly traveled to Nagorno-Karabakh³⁷.

It was the first visit by a senior American diplomat since the 2020 war, and Azerbaijani authorities seized the chance to

capitalize on it as legitimization of their actions amid the systemic destruction of Armenian heritage in the region.

In describing what the US should be doing in the region, especially regarding reconciliation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, James O'Brien, the assistant secretary of state, advocated greater engagement by Washington.

"We need to find a more stable way for Armenia to have the Russian peacekeepers leave when their five-year term is up ... We can do this if we are deeply engaged in terms of the peace agreement. If we stay out, then Russia continues to control the border³⁸," he said.

It should be emphasized that it is not Russian peacekeepers that are deployed in Armenia but Moscow's Federal Security Service troops and they are not bound by any time limit. The peace deal process between Armenia and Azerbaijan after the 2020 war, and the "Zangezur corridor" project, an alternative to the "Araz corridor," remain predominantly Russian initiatives that allow Moscow to exert full "control over transport communication (that) shall be exercised by the Border Guard Service bodies of the FSS of Russia," according to the declaration of Nov. 9, 2020³⁹.

US lawmakers and policymakers promote democratic values as main guiding principles that can best enhance regional initiatives and help Armenia and Azerbaijan reach a dignified peace agreement. However, though their styles and methods of governance differ, neither country is considered a full-fledged democracy; Azerbaijan is not even close and Armenia is categorized as a transitional or hybrid regime⁴⁰.

Indeed, genuine developments and commitments toward democracy could be an effective answer to, and firewall against, the like-minded regimes of Azerbaijan, Russia and Iran, possibly leading to peace. However, the US faces institutional limitations in pursuing this goal, since both Armenia⁴¹ and Azerbaijan, along with Iran and Turkiye, favor a policy of "regionalization," which essentially serves as a euphemism for the exclusion of Western influence and an end to reliance on the West as financiers or trade partners.

Moreover, US policymakers often point to claims by the Armenian government of reforms and a desire to build diverse relationships with the transatlantic community. Some in Washington might sincerely believe that the head of the Armenian government, who proudly chaired the Collective Security Treaty Organization's security council and made the decision to deploy CSTO peacekeeping forces to Kazakhstan in January 2022, to halt external interference there⁴², can abruptly



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transition into a flag-bearer for pro-Western liberal values. But this reductionist and predominantly euphoric approach might have a negative effect on US strategic projections in the mid and long terms, particularly with regard to the reduction of the malign influences of Russia and Iran.

Diversification of foreign policy should not result in further chaos. Strategic miscalculations and contextual misperceptions might inadvertently engender outcomes contrary to those intended.

CONCLUSION:

A glaring truth remains: Without a firm grasp of realities on the ground, neither the US nor any other democratic nation can hope to enact policies that are measurable, effective and conducive to tangible results.

Reliance mostly on government declarations or “trendy expert analysis” for information and risk assessment is insufficient; alternative, unbiased sources of information must also be considered.

The real political world is not defined by “catchy headlines” or “TikTok stories.” In the present-day political landscape, characterized in some places by populism, the free flow of distorted information, propaganda, strategic narratives (or lies) and other tools of hybrid warfare, a nuanced understanding of “quantum politics,” in which even the smallest action can yield significant consequences, is essential.

The challenge lies in ensuring that decision-making and policies are grounded in evidence-based information that is carefully assessed through critical analysis, rather than a sense

Previous: Mark Libby, the US ambassador to Azerbaijan. AFP
Above: Former Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian (C-L) and Armenian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ararat Mirzoyan (C-R) attend the opening ceremony of the Iranian Consulate General in Kapan, Armenia, in 2022. Getty

of pseudo-optimism driven by emotions. The best grounds for optimism rely on realism and the ability to critically assess any complex situation to find appropriate solutions. This approach can help prevent a recurrence of the fallacies of the past.

Through a wide range of programs, projects and initiatives, the US undoubtedly plays a pivotal role, and should play an even greater one, in the South Caucasus and beyond. To transform its presence in the region into a more strategic engagement, Washington should prioritize support for genuine democratic processes and strong nation-building efforts, as well as effective, rather than illusory or imitative, domestic reforms, promote a diversified foreign policy and economic developments, and directly participate in regional security initiatives.

By adopting a comprehensive, inclusive approach, based on analytical data, the US can more effectively address the region’s complex challenges and contribute to its long-term stability and prosperity. If it fails to take the right steps, Washington risks exclusion from the region, or a secondary role in its future.

It is also important to pay attention to political deliberations that are not said in English but in local languages, if the US intends to be fully informed about the internal dynamics of a country and its society.

As Russia continues to adjust its tactical and strategic approaches in Ukraine and elsewhere, including the South Caucasus, the US should also adapt its strategies. Adaptability and contextualization should be pivotal considerations when developing policy, as the main war is not yet over.

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