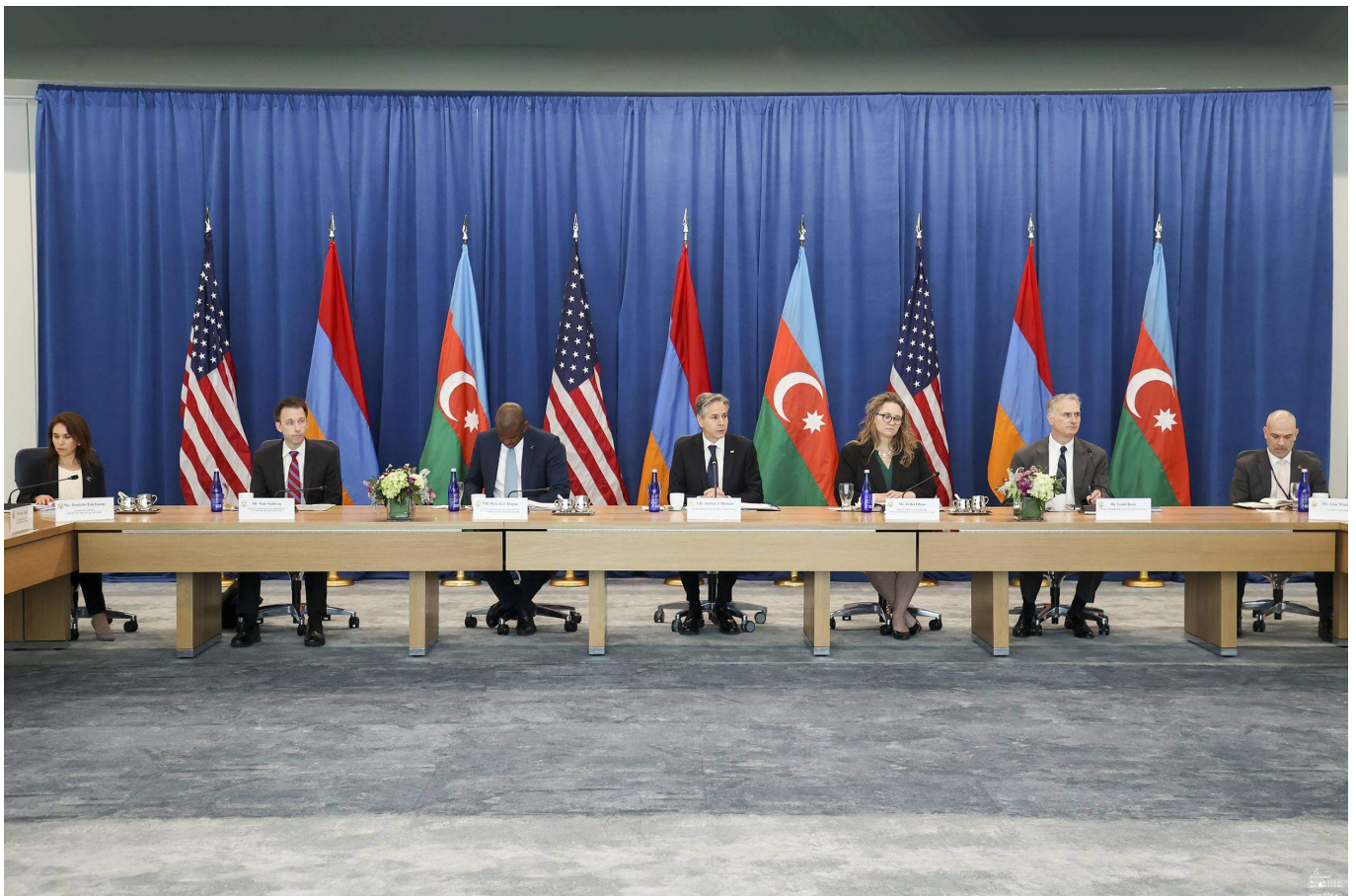




By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan - a permanent displacement of Russia from its strategic region



If the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan is "within sight, within reach", as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, it is the closest thing to permanent stabilisation.

The 2 former members of the USSR have been waiting for such a peace agreement since they became independent states.

The US Secretary of State continued a series of mediation talks with the leaders of the two Caucasus states with in Arlington, Virginia, last week. There was significant optimism.

Although still far from a definitive peace agreement for one of Europe's longest-running conflicts, there has been possibly decisive progress.

The participants are already talking positively about the future that awaits them after an agreement.

Reaching an agreement would be "not only historic but would be profoundly in the interests of the people of Azerbaijan and Armenia and would have very positive effects even beyond their two countries", said Mr. Blinken, after 4 days of negotiations with the heads of diplomacy of Armenia, Ararat Mirzoyan, and Azerbaijan, Jeyhun Bayramov.

The failure of all previous peace initiatives

Enmity between Azerbaijan and Armenia marked all the years after the collapse of the USSR and their national independence. The dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh region has resulted in tens of thousands of victims, widespread destruction, and refugees.

So far, no international mediation has brought

a long-term result, including the involvement of the OSCE, whose long-term blockage in making important decisions was a consequence of alack of consensus and Russia's opposition to the organisation's efforts to reach a solution.

Russia has always considered this conflict part of its "internal" zone of interest and claimed the right to resolve it.

Moscow's involvement was mainly limited to supplying weapons to conflicting parties and strategically keeping the area in a state of frozen conflict, which would be "unfrozen" if needed.

Ukraine has diverted Russia's focus from the Caucasus

The conflict in the Caucasus was only one in a series of crisis points that Russia wanted to remain in a state of permanent instability, in order to preserve its own dominant influence.

This is part of the strategy of Putin's Russia: to establish and preserve dominance in the territory of the former USSR through the concept of "Eurasian order".

However, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has drawn Moscow's focus, money, and influence away from those areas, demonstrating that Russia could not handle crises on multiple fronts.

This was best demonstrated by the absence of any reaction to the last major conflict in 2020, when Azerbaijan, with strong military assistance from Turkey, invaded Nagorno-Karabakh in an attempt to regain it after losing it in 1994.

Russia did not help Armenia, its partner in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the post-Soviet version of NATO, where Moscow is the most dominant member. Neither then nor 2 years later.

The invasion of Ukraine made the parties in the conflict in several areas in the Caucasus and Central Asia take matters into their own hands, and try to resolve the frozen conflicts in their favour, counting on the fact that Russia would not have the strength to intervene.

This was precisely Azerbaijan's motive to attack targets in Armenia again last September. At the same time, conflicts broke out on the border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, also CSTO members.

With the attack on Ukraine, Russia lost its capacity to be a guarantor of regional security, although security and resolution of all inherited conflicts were not its actual goal.

Last November, at the CSTO summit in Yerevan, capital of Armenia, in the presence of Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, openly asked what was the purpose of the organisation, whose most significant reach is for its secretary general to propose the formation of a working group.

Security vacuum

With its strategic delay in reaching lasting peace solutions in the crisis areas of the Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia has ended up in a situation where it has completely lost its influence on the areas it considers to be within its imperial borders.

This security vacuum has rapidly been filled by Western peace initiatives, such as the US one

in the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan. There are significant chances that the EU will soon join the US mediation discussions as the host of further talks between Yerevan and Baku.

The inclusion of the EU and the US in solving the crisis in the Caucasus would mean that the EU would appear as an agent of economic and institutional support for both countries in the period after the conclusion of the peace settlement, which the involvement of the US would previously have led to.

The EU can offer the Caucasus states different cooperation models, primarily in the economy and the visa regime, that could be a significant stimulus for the conflicting parties to reach a long-term compromise.

If the US, in cooperation with the EU, reaches stabilisation in the Caucasus region, it would also mean the permanent displacement of Russia's negative influence from this area.

Aggression against Ukraine will force Moscow to retreat from the region it traditionally considers its backyard, and a significant part of its imperial aspirations for dominance in the post-Soviet area.