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So near, yet so far away from Peace

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This February marks the 18th anniversary of the start of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict in modern times. I emphasize "modern times" because the conflicts in this region did not start in 1991, at the end of the Soviet Union. If we take the last 200 years – 1813-1992 to be exact – there has been a political or military conflict or popular protest in Karabakh on average every 4 years (in Abkhazia on average every 4.3 years), similarly in other parts of this region considered the homeland of over three dozen national or ethnic groups.

Eighteen years ago, virtually all of us in this room had hardly heard about Nagorny Karabakh or could point it on the map of the Soviet Union. The 18 year old Karabakh Armenian soldier who was just drafted into the army was a new born enfant. The Azerbaijani refugee girl from Karabakh who just started her university studies was a newly born baby. Indeed, how our own lives have changed in these years, let alone the changes and transformations in the life span of a conflict such as Nagorno Karabakh.

Have the positions of the parties to the conflict changed? Are we nearer to or farther way from a peaceful resolution? Have we — those of us in this room who have followed this conflict from the beginning or at some point in the last 18 years — become wiser over the years? I believe the answer must be a qualified Yes and a qualified No – or somewhere in between. The launch of this Report tonight is for sure a testimony to the fact that we have learned a lot, not only about Karabakh, but also about the larger Caucasus and Caspian region in last 18 years. Yet, many questions remain unanswered, more challenges are ahead and more uncertainties in the path of peaceful resolution of the conflict.

As presented in the Report, there are issues, problems and processes that we have come to address, understand, analyse and suggest solutions. This evening I would like to highlight three issues which I believe are important for the discussion and ultimate resolution of the Karabakh conflict:

1. The problem of personalization of politics and government

In this region, as in other parts of former Soviet space, politics and governance are dependent on individual leaders rather than institutions. Whether it was Ter Petrossian, Aliyev or Shevardnadze or today Kocharian, Aliyev and Saakashvili, the stability and development of the three republics in the South Caucasus are too dependent on the personal charisma and political skills of the leaders heading these transitional countries and societies.

As examples around the world show, while individual leaders matter in shaping agreements, a peace treaty cannot be signed between leaders only, but it has to be among conflicting societies and stakeholders. The examples of Rabin and Arafat, Sharon and Abbas, Denktash and Cleridis and many others make it clear that an Aliyev-Kocharian agreement alone would not guarantee a peaceful resolution to this conflict, but only an agreement and understanding between two peoples. Indeed, leaders have the responsibility to enhance understanding among their people. Vision alone is not enough if there are no convinced followers or believers in the vision. It remains to be seen whether Aliyev and Kocharian would be able to take the peace process beyond the confines of their meeting rooms and to the minds and hearts of their people.

2. The problem of democratic infrastructure and capacity to deliver peace.

As case studies around the world have shown, states which are well endowed with popular mandates and substantive democracies are more likely to provide longer-term solutions to armed conflicts than those who suffer large deficiencies.

Resolving decades-long conflicts has proven to be complex and difficult for far more developed states and fully-fledged democracies such as Israel and Cyprus, let alone for developing states such as Armenia and Azerbaijan. The state restructuring process and the modernization of state and government from the remnants of the former system is still ongoing in the South Caucasus. One generalization that could be made is that statehood – or the determination of type of statehood – is still evolving. More than a decade after independence, the question whether

to have a presidential or parliamentary model of statehood is still actively debated in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Furthermore, the lingering question in both Azerbaijan and Armenia is whether a regime which is not tolerant of its own political opposition within the country is willing and ready to tolerate the perceived “enemy” outside its borders. The relationship between democracy and conflict resolution is crucial and cannot be underestimated by the international community.

3. The problem of conflict perceptions

What is the conflict? Is it a territorial dispute? Is it an inter-ethnic conflict? Is it ethno-territorial problem? Various models and analytical frameworks have been offered in the last 18 years. I would add my own suggestion: that the conflict is a problem of restructuring of minority-majority relations; it is the result of a radical restructuring process of old political, territorial and socio-cultural boundaries into a new, post-Soviet “order” – alas at a very high cost of human lives and material devastation.

In the Soviet system, minorities in autonomous republics were not regarded primarily as citizens of the majority’s state, but were defined by the majority as the ‘other’: the Armenians were ‘non-Azeris’, the Abkhaz were ‘non-Georgians’; they were considered ‘settlers’ or ‘latecomers’ in the majority’s state. With their declared independence, minorities now see themselves as having eliminated the ‘social control’ of the majority, the heavy burden of being the ‘other’.

If Cyprus and Palestine/Israel are any indication, the resolution of the conflicts in the South Caucasus in general and the Karabakh conflict in particular will take a very long time. Mediation and efforts to find solutions should not only look for political will and a sellable agreement, but an understanding of leadership and structural capacity, levels of democratic development and inter- and intra-society relations and discourses.

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