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Values and Security in the South Caucasus

Speech

*By H.E. Serzh Sargsyan, the President of the Republic of Armenia
In the Chatham House British Royal Institute of International Affairs*

Thank you, Mr. Robertson.

It is my pleasure to visit with this reputable institution, the Chatham House, for the first time.

When I was invited to speak here, I was not aware that the discussion would be chaired by my old friend and “ally in arms,” Sir Robertson. Hence, it is more of a pleasure for me to participate in this discussion. Why ‘friends in arms’? Because we have travelled a long path with Lord Robertson; we have even agreed upon and organized the engagement of Armenian Military Units in the Kosovo Peace-Keeping Mission. I am glad to see you here, Mr. Robertson.

I would like to speak before the esteemed audience present here today on Armenia and the South Caucasus; peace and threats; the creative people that live in our region and security; the extent to which politicians, policy-makers, and opinion leaders are genuinely committed to the values they preach; and what should not be forgotten today in order to earn a better tomorrow.

Mark Twain was quite candid in admitting that preparing a good impromptu speech usually took him over three weeks. I have prepared a speech for today. In fact, I started preparing my speeches on security over 20 years ago in Mountainous Karabakh, when a whole people found themselves facing the threat of extermination only because of being Armenian and wanting to live free.

The security formula for the Caucasus, which I find acceptable, is to craft lasting peace on the basis of combining the existing interests and respecting the values professed by our peoples, including the right to live and to create, the preclusion of violence, and humanity.

Armenia is a firm believer in values such as freedom, peace, and cooperation. We believe that our shared vision of a peaceful and stable region can be achieved only through regional cooperation and dialogue. The South Caucasus is one of those

regions where there are ostensibly insurmountable divisions, the internationally-recognized political map of states differs from the reality, fragile peace is extremely vulnerable, and re-establishing peace demands enormous efforts.

Ladies and Gentlemen;

The newest history of Europe is one of overcoming differences through cooperation. Armenia has always been a proponent of this approach. It lies at the heart of our policies. It is also the way in which we are ready to move forward in resolving the Mountainous Karabakh issue, a vital cause for the Armenian people, a problem that has inflicted unspeakable pain and losses to my people.

We have witnessed a policy of the most brutal ethnic cleansing and displacement. The people of Mountainous Karabakh were forced to pay by blood to defend their right to live freely in a war that was imposed on them. We must find solutions the implementation of which will not lead to further displacement and ethnic cleansing. We have to realize that the people of Karabakh consider that they have managed, on the one hand, to restore historical justice distorted during Stalin's dictatorship, and, on the other, to safeguard the minimum conditions necessary for their physical survival. It is with this realization that we continue the talks with Azerbaijan and perceive the peace process and the efforts of the mediators.

The truth is that Karabakh was never a part of independent Azerbaijan. It was forced into Azerbaijan by a decision of the Soviet Union party authority, which, defiant of the League of Nations decision and the popular referendum as a means of determining the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, decided in its Caucasus Bureau session in 1921, under Stalin's direct pressure, and in violation of the procedure, to annex Mountainous Karabakh on the condition of forming a national autonomy on these Armenian territories within the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan. Throughout the Soviet period, the people of Karabakh never reconciled to this decision. I will not dwell upon details of Azerbaijan's state-level policy of cleansing Karabakh from Armenians and the periodic uprising of the Karabakhis during the Soviet period, as I believe you all are well-aware of them. However, I would like to reiterate that the Autonomous Province of Mountainous Karabakh seceded from the Soviet Union fully in line with the Soviet laws and all the applicable principles and rules of international law, exactly as the 15 Soviet Republics did. To sum up this part of my speech, I would like to reiterate that Mountainous Karabakh was never a part of independent Azerbaijan: it was annexed to Azerbaijan by a decision of the Soviet Union party body. The people of Karabakh never put up with this decision, and upon the first opportunity, seceded from the Soviet Union fully in line with the laws of the Soviet Union and the applicable international law.

The problem has many sensitive and delicate aspects. I urge everyone to exercise utmost caution when making public statements on the problem of Mountainous Karabakh, to take into account all the dimensions, possible consequences, and the perceptions of the sides, and always to rely on the positions of the organizations that are familiar with the details of the problem and specialize in its peaceful resolution: in this case, it would be the OSCE. The problem can only be resolved in the context of the international law principles of the self-determination of nations, territorial integrity, and the non-use of force. All the stakeholders now realize this truth. Whenever one refers to the Mountainous Karabakh conflict, the notion of territorial integrity should not be emphatically underlined, especially that even if that notion is perceived to be the only

one applying in the case of the Mountainous Karabakh conflict, it would not lead to its application in the form envisioned by Azerbaijan.

I would pose a rhetoric question to all who consider themselves advocates of territorial integrity. Where were they when the Soviet Union collapsed and the borders changed? Where were they when Yugoslavia was falling apart? Why do you think that Azerbaijan could secede from the USSR, but Mountainous Karabakh could not? Why do you think that large empires should disintegrate, but small ones should persevere? What is the basis? Instability? I cannot perceive it. I do not accept it. Because unfair decisions are the very cause of instability.

Azerbaijan has exhausted the resources of trust in terms of autonomous status for minorities within its boundaries. It was not and is not capable of providing guarantees of even internal security to such autonomies. There was once another Armenian autonomy in Azerbaijan: Nakhijevan. What happened to it? Not a single Armenian is left in Nakhijevan. Can such guarantees be taken for granted? You might say Azerbaijan was different then, and is different now. During the last 18 years of that "difference" more Armenian and Christian monuments were destroyed than in the preceding 70 years. The international organizations tasked with protection of the cultural heritage were unable to do anything: Azerbaijan did not even permit them to visit and see the obliterated Armenian monuments.

In the meantime, a full-blown race of arms continues in the South Caucasus. It is extremely dangerous. It is dangerous not only for the South Caucasus peoples, but also for Europe and the powers that have a stake in the region, the corporations that have invested in the Caucasus, and everyone else. Azerbaijan has not faced any substantial confrontation for having exceeded all the possible caps on conventional arms. Even if not used in a war against Karabakh, the weapons Azerbaijan is stockpiling today will shoot somewhere. The only question is where and when. While spending large sums on purchases of oil, the advanced states, in my opinion, cannot remain indifferent to how their moneys are being spent. The fact is that these very proceeds can become a source of threats, something that has happened elsewhere in the past.

Armenia and Karabakh have never unleashed and never will unleash a war. We despise war, as our generation was forced to look death straight in the eyes, and has seen and lost more than can be imagined. However, we realize that we must be ready for war in case others wish to fight. We cannot turn a blind eye to recurrent belligerent threats coming from a neighbouring state, whose President's New Year address to his people sounded no different from the speech of an army commander motivating his units for a battle. The war rhetoric is intensifying in the Caucasus. Armenia predominantly refrains from responding to the threats. Quoting John Kennedy, we do not need to utter threats to prove that we are firm. However, it does not solve the problem. Threats also amount to violence, and violence usually begets violence.

The irony is that Azeri propaganda, spending hundreds of millions of dollars, does not miss any opportunity to label Karabakh as an aggressor, despite the fact that the people of Karabakh had to take on arms literally to avoid extermination. This conduct reminds the French saying: "This creature is fierce: it will defend immediately after you attack it." The reality is that the people that live in Karabakh are and will always be ready to defend their right to survive, their values, churches, and cross-stones.

The Republic of Mountainous Karabakh is a well-established state with its institutions, army, and most importantly, citizens that exercise control of their fate.

Today we, as well as the international community, witness Artsakh as a contemporary state that is implementing the ideals of freedom, sovereignty, and democracy; in spite of natural and manmade difficulties and grave challenges, it is progressing, strengthening its democratic institutions, government, economy, and culture, and defending peace. In its “Freedom in the World” Report, a reputable human rights watchdog, the Freedom House has ranked the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh among partially free democratic states, while ranking Azerbaijan as a non-free state. No further comments are needed here.

The obvious conclusion is that the times of colonizing a people living on its own soil have long passed. Our belief is that the settlement of the Karabakh conflict should be based on human rights and the will of the Karabakh people as an expression of their collective identity. It is the only way to achieve lasting, feasible, and peaceful settlement. The alternative to this settlement is the forcing of the Karabakh people back into Azerbaijan, which will inevitably lead to attempts of new ethnic cleansing of Armenians in Karabakh. There is no alternative here, especially given that Azerbaijan has labelled the vast majority of the Karabakh population as “criminals” over the last two decades. Hence, in view of the consequences of this alternative, we clearly rule out any pressure-driven concessions in the Karabakh process that would threaten the Artsakh people’s physical existence, security, and right to live in dignity.

Dear Colleagues:

I am confident that you are also interested in the ongoing dialogue between Armenia and Turkey and its current stage. I have noticed that experts everywhere are rigorously following and analyzing this process. Let me remind you that my initiative to invite President Gül to Armenia and to launch dialogue between Armenia and Turkey was first expressed in a similar meeting with experts in Moscow; and it then received a wide acclamation in a matter of just minutes.

During the last year, we have made significant progress towards the normalization of relations with Turkey without any preconditions. We regard the Armenia-Turkey relationship in a much broader regional and international context. I am confident that the time of closed borders and ultimatums has passed. The palette of the modern world is much more diverse than just black and white. We all must realize it and create possibilities for natural relations, cooperation, and dialogue. It must be done not only because Armenia and Turkey will benefit from it, but also because it will do good for the whole region, and therefore, Europe.

We have indeed approached a milestone at which we can achieve a breakthrough. It is the path of cooperation without preconditions, without making bilateral relations contingent upon issues related to third party states. At this time, we have the signed protocols on the establishment of diplomatic relations and the development of bilateral relations between Armenia and Turkey, which are awaiting ratification by the parliaments of our two states.

In Armenia, the ratification process is progressing in accordance with the regular procedure, without any undue delays, as proven by the decision of the Constitutional Court of Armenia issued over a month before the statutory deadline for its adoption. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the Constitutional Court made the decision unanimously, without any dissenting opinions: this fact in itself is telling. The Constitutional Court of Armenia found that the Protocols do not contain any provision that could be interpreted as contravening the requirements of the Armenian

Constitution. The decision is now in the Office of the President, and the whole package of documents is ready for submission to the Parliament. **Immediately after today's meeting here at the Chatham House, I am going to instruct my staff to submit the Armenia-Turkey protocols to the Armenian National Assembly for the ratification process to be initiated.**

Speaking at this esteemed institution today, I reiterate the commitment of the Republic of Armenia to this process. As the political leader of the political majority of the Armenian Parliament, I reiterate that I rule out any possibility of the Armenian Parliament failing to ratify the protocols in case Turkey ratifies the protocols without preconditions, as agreed.

Senior Turkish officials repeatedly assert the political independence of their parliament and the unpredictability of its decision. Moreover, they try to obtain non-partisan ratification by securing the potential support of opposition parties, as well. It is understandable. However, they ought to remember that in case of Armenia they deal with a country, which persevered throughout the process and did not stop even in spite of losing a key ally in the ruling coalition. I am confident that President Gül and Prime Minister Erdogan will, subject to the demonstration of political will, find sufficient support within their party that holds the majority of seats in the Turkish Parliament.

We are confident that the normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations can become the greatest input of the recent decades in achieving peace and stability in the South Caucasus. With this vision, we have agreed to move forward without any preconditions, not making our relations contingent upon Turkey's recognition of the Armenian Genocide. However, if, as many suspect, it is proven that Turkey's goal is to protract, rather than to normalize relations, we will have to discontinue the process.

I would not claim that the process has so far been easy. It is common knowledge that Turkey repeatedly attempted to voice preconditions related to the resolution of the Mountainous Karabakh issue. It is, however, obvious that attempts to link these two processes will undermine both the normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations and the talks around the Karabakh issue. I, however, believe that the rapid normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations can set an example of a proactive problem-solving attitude that will positively stimulate and set an example the resolution of the Karabakh conflict.

I would like to take one step further and inform you that I am going to invite President Aliyev to the potential opening ceremony of the Armenian-Turkish border. I believe it can serve as an essential and in some ways exemplary measure for the region, which will clearly demonstrate how existing problems should be solved and that every conflict, even the stalest one, can be resolved by means of negotiations and the ability to look truth in the eye. I am sure that the best way to facilitate the resolution of the Karabakh issue is setting the example of one's own country being able to resolve issues for the benefit of the whole region.

Ladies and Gentlemen;

Armenians, as a people that have survived the Genocide, have a moral duty towards mankind and history in the prevention of genocides. We have done and will continue to do our best to support the persistent implementation of the Genocide Convention. Genocide cannot concern only one people, because it is a crime against humanity.

Yesterday, I was inquired about how one should present facts related to the Armenian Genocide to Great Britain, and whether Great Britain, by recognizing the Armenian Genocide, would not harm security in the Caucasus. I responded that there are numerous countries that do not need these facts to be presented to them, because they have vast archives of their own regarding the Armenian Genocide. What is needed here is other work.

Armenian-British relations did not start after the collapse of the USSR. They date back to centuries. Exceptional and genuine interest has been demonstrated by British society in respect of the tragedies that befell the Armenian people at different times in history and their fate, as best illustrated by the powerful humanitarian movement that started in Britain in support of Armenians and the amazing philanthropic activities of the British people that were the first to reach out with protest in support of the Armenian people surviving the Genocide. The British people learnt about the Armenian Genocide from the well-known works and statements of James Bryce, Arnold Toynbee, William Gladstone, and Lloyd George.

The Mayor of London and the Archbishop of Canterbury, together with many other famous British people, established the Armenian Refugees (Lord Mayor's) Fund in the aftermath of the Genocide to alleviate the suffering of the displaced Armenians. This list of names could be continued much longer.

Finally, Great Britain, Russia, and France were the co-authors of a joint statement issued in May 1915 that labelled the massacres and atrocities against Armenians as "crimes against humanity and civilization."

As to my interlocutor's concern about Genocide recognition undermining security, I said to him that it would be analogous to suggesting a choice between security and a system of values. I believe that lasting security is possible in our region only if it is built on a deeply-understood system of values.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Armenia appears before the world as a stable, predictable, and reliable partner from positions that are understood and appreciated. Key international actors and power centres treat my country respectfully as one that has proven its credibility in both regional and international bilateral and multilateral dimensions. Our foreign policy is based on mutual trust and interests, as well as commitments and shared responsibility for creating an environment of political stability, security, cohesion, and economic development in the region. We are open to building and strengthening relations with all states in this manner.

At the end, I would like to quote the great Byron, a true symbol of Armenian-British friendship: "It would be difficult, perhaps, to find the annals of a nation less stained than that of Armenians ... But whatever may have been their destiny, and it has been bitter, whatever it may be in future, their country must ever be one of the most interesting in the world."

We believe in our future. We believe that, with stability, prosperity, and peace, we will remain one of the most interesting countries in the world in the 21st century, as well.

Thank you for your attention.