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OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Likelihood of Military Action in the South Caucasus

October 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is provided by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) in response to a Congressional request for a report assessing the likelihood of a military conflict in the South Caucasus (including in Nagorno-Karabakh or any other disputed territories). ODNI's National Intelligence Council drafted this product, under the auspices of the National Intelligence Officer for Russia and Eurasia.

In the South Caucasus region, Azerbaijan is the country most likely to renew large-scale conflict in an effort to consolidate and expand the gains it won in its 2020 military action against Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the trend of constructive diplomatic engagement that we have seen emerge since April currently mitigates this risk.

Separately, we assess that Georgia and Russia are unlikely to initiate a military conflict with each other over the occupied Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in large part because Georgia's leaders fear Russian retaliation and Russia's forces are engaged in Ukraine.

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In the South Caucasus region, Azerbaijan is the country most likely to renew large-scale conflict in an effort to consolidate and expand the gains it won through military action against Armenia in 2020 over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan in mid-September 2022 initiated a widespread assault along the international border with Armenia, striking as far as 25 miles into Armenian territory. The ceasefire reached on 14 September is largely holding, but could easily fray as each side continues to accuse each other of firing heavy artillery. Despite the September violence, during which at least 207 Armenians and 80 Azerbaijani soldiers were killed, internationally brokered diplomatic engagement has resumed, which we assess helps to mitigate the risk of further escalation.

- Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Brussels met on 6 October through the mediation of European Union (EU) President Charles Michel and French President Emmanuel Macron and agreed to recognize each other within the borders established in 1991, allow an EU civilian mission access to the border region, and continue work on a peace treaty. The EU has played an important role in mediation efforts since late 2021, organizing four previous meetings between President Aliyev and Prime Minister Pashinyan and follow-up talks between the foreign ministers.

Armenia is less likely to initiate fighting because of the deteriorated state of its military in the aftermath of the 2020 conflict. The Armenian Armed Forces suffered heavy equipment and personnel losses during the conflict in 2020 and have been unable to reconstitute because of funding and procurement issues.

Separately, we assess that Georgia and Russia are unlikely to initiate a military conflict with each other over the occupied Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in large part because Georgia's leaders fear Russian retaliation and Russia's forces are engaged in Ukraine. Georgia's leaders limited their official support to Kyiv during Russia's invasion of

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Ukraine in part to avoid provoking Russia and have resisted some U.S. and EU sanctions against Russia. Russia's redeployment of some troops from Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Ukraine earlier this year probably reduces the likelihood of Russian military action in the region so long as the war in Ukraine continues.