

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 19, 2021

Hon. Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Hon. Lloyd Austin
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1300 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretaries Blinken and Austin:

As Members of Congress who are deeply engaged in the US-Armenia relationship and interested in strengthening it, we write to offer our congratulations on your recent confirmations and to share a list of bipartisan priorities we hope to work together on during the 117th Congress.

One of the most pressing issues for us and for the future of American foreign policy in the South Caucasus region is the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh). As you are aware, Azerbaijani and Turkish forces initiated an unprovoked attack on September 27, 2020, leading to six weeks of devastating fighting that killed an estimated 5,000 people and forced more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians to flee from the Karabakh region. Azerbaijani forces were able to make rapid advances into the region with the aid of Turkish-backed foreign mercenaries, many alleged to have ties to internationally recognized terrorist groups, Bayraktar drones that utilize American components and technology, and heavy weaponry including the illegal use of cluster and white phosphorus munitions.

With the rising risk of a mass atrocity against thousands of Armenian civilians, Armenia agreed to a peace agreement brokered by Russia on November 10. This agreement brought an end to the fierce combat, but it has done little to address the immediate and significant problems of feeding, sheltering, and ensuring the safety of thousands of displaced families during the COVID-19 pandemic. In violation of the ceasefire, Azerbaijan also refuses to free dozens of Armenian prisoners of war and apprehended civilians, which illustrates how this agreement fails to address the structural issues that have caused uncertainty and fueled the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict for decades. There remain several important issues that must be resolved and many critical questions that must be answered before a binding and durable peace settlement can be reached.

First, the terms laid out in the current ceasefire are untenable for Artsakh's long-term security and stability in the region. The United States cannot allow Russia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan to solely dictate and dominate the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. While we have seen some reengagement in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group process, we believe more must be done to pursue an enduring settlement based on the fundamental right to self-determination. We appreciate the response Secretary Blinken gave during his confirmation hearing to this end, stating that he will "reinvigorate U.S. engagement to find a permanent settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that protects the security of Nagorno-Karabakh and helps to ensure another war does not break out."

In negotiations, our diplomats must insist that any future settlement supported by the United States will provide the people of Artsakh with the ability to reconstruct their communities and rebuild their lives without fear of further bloodshed. This should include significant U.S. commitments to provide an urgently needed humanitarian aid and assistance package for the people of Artsakh. The international community, including the United States, also has an important role to play by finally recognizing the right to self-determination for the people of Artsakh and their role as a legitimate negotiating party in resolving this conflict. Absent this recognition, they will continue to face the threat of displacement by Azerbaijani and Turkish forces without any option for formal redress.

Another important component of ensuring lasting peace in the region is to hold destabilizing actors accountable. There is significant evidence that Azerbaijani and Turkish forces planned the invasion in the buildup to the September 27 assault on Nagorno-Karabakh. This evidence includes the stockpiling of armaments, including drones that killed many innocent civilians during the conflict, the July 2020 provocations by Azerbaijani troops in Armenia's Tavush province, and several instances of large-scale joint military exercises near the Armenian border that foreshadowed the coming attacks. The United States and other international actors failed to acknowledge these warning signs and take necessary steps to prevent the sharp and unprovoked escalation of violence.


Actions that could have been taken at the time to halt Azerbaijani and Turkish aggressions included threatening sanctions on high-ranking officials from those countries and withholding aid, including ending the waiver of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act and ceasing further military assistance through the Section 333 Building Partner Capacity program. We are also encouraged by Secretary Blinken's response during the confirmation process on this subject.

Similarly, the United States must reassess our policy toward Turkey. Turkish President Recep Erdogan's regime reaps the rewards of the chaos he has sown in the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya, the Middle East, and the South Caucasus. His deliberate destabilizing behavior, which includes the installation of Russian made anti-aircraft missiles over the threat of sanction by the United States, demands a swift and decisive correction. We must learn from the failures of an appeasement policy used by past administrations toward Turkey and use every available diplomatic and economic tool to penalize these bad actors for their aggressions and abhorrent human rights abuses. If we do not act, we risk the likelihood that the Erdogan regime will trigger an ever-expanding zone of conflict.

Finally, the United States should seek to strengthen our strategic relationship with Armenia, a young democracy that has been shaken by last year's events and the resulting uncertainty the conflict has caused. We urge you to identify ways we can provide additional economic assistance to Armenia to support its democracy and development as well as respond to the significant number of displaced people who have fled the conflict in Artsakh. We also request that your Administration identify ways in which our economic, cultural, and other ties to Armenia can be improved to benefit Armenia and the large Armenian American diaspora in the United States. Those steps should include the formal recognition of the Armenian Genocide by President Biden on April 24, following in the footsteps of both the House and Senate who passed resolutions recognizing the fact of the Genocide during the 116th Congress.


Thank you for attention to these important matters. We stand ready to work with you to craft a policy in the South Caucasus region that is consistent with U.S. national security, universal principles of human rights, and our democratic values. Our hope is to further discuss these issues with you and your teams at the earliest convenience.


Sincerely,


FRANK PALLONE, JR.
Member of Congress


GUS M. BILIRAKIS
Member of Congress


JACKIE SPEIER
Member of Congress


DAVID G. VALADAO
Member of Congress


ADAM B. SCHIFF
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
BRIAN FITZPATRICK
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
BRAD SHERMAN
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JAMES P. MCGOVERN
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
SHEILA JACKSON LEE
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
GRACE F. NAPOLITANO
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
CHRIS PAPPAS
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
DAVID N. CICILLINE
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JUAN VARGAS
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JOE NEGUSE
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JIM COSTA
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JULIA BROWNLEY
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
ALAN LOWENTHAL
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
PAUL D. TONKO
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
THOMAS R. SUOZZI
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
KATHERINE M. CLARK
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JIMMY GOMEZ
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
BRADLEY S. SCHNEIDER
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
ANDY LEVIN
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
TONY CÁRDENAS
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
ALBIO SIRES
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
DEVIN NUNES
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
DWIGHT EVANS
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JAKE AUCHINCLOSS
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JAMES R. LANGEVIN
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JOSH GOTTHEIMER
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
SUSIE LEE
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JOHN SARBANES
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
DINA TITUS
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
RO KHANNA
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
LINDA T. SÁNCHEZ
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JUDY CHU
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
GRACE MENG
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
ANNA G. ESHOO
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JAN SCHAKOWSKY
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
DAVID TRONE
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
VERONICA ESCOBAR
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
HALEY STEVENS
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
MARY GAY SCANLON
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
TED W. LIEU
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
PETER A. DEFAZIO
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
GLENN GROTHMAN
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
KAREN BASS
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
ZOE LOFGREN
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
CHRISSEY HOULAHAN
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
LORI TRAHAN
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
TED DEUTCH
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
MICHELLE PARK STEEL
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JIMMY PANETTA
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
STEPHEN F. LYNCH
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
CAROLYN B. MALONEY
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JASON CROW
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
DONALD NORCROSS
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JARED HUFFMAN
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JAMAAL BOWMAN, Ed.D.
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
ADRIANO ESPAILLAT
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
DAVID SCHWEIKERT
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
MIKE GARCIA
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
DOUG LAMALFA
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
TOM MCCLINTOCK
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
PETER WELCH
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JERROLD NADLER
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
BETTY MCCOLLUM
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
KATHLEEN M. RICE
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JOSH HARDER
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JOHN H. RUTHERFORD
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
MIKE DOYLE
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
LUCILLE ROYBAL-ALLARD
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
SEAN PATRICK MALONEY
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
MADELEINE DEAN
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
HENRY C. "HANK" JOHNSON, JR.
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
DARRELL ISSA
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
MIKE THOMPSON
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
BRENDA L. LAWRENCE
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
DAVID P. JOYCE
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
BRENDAN F. BOYLE
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
SALUD O. CARBAJAL
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JIM BANKS
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
BONNIE WATSON COLEMAN
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
RICHARD E. NEAL
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JOHN GARAMENDI
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
JESÚS G. "CHUY" GARCÍA
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
MAXINE WATERS
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
SUSAN WILD
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
YOUNG KIM
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
NANETTE DIAZ BARRAGÁN
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
ELISSA SLOTKIN
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
BRIAN MAST
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
DANIEL T. KILDEE
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
DON BEYER
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
RAJA KRISHNAMOORTHY
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
KEN CALVERT
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
NYDIA M. VELÁZQUEZ
Member of Congress

_____/s/_____
MIKE LEVIN
Member of Congress