

Unraveling the Nagorno-Karabakh conundrum: Deciphering Russia's Southern Caucasus strategy

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ABSTRACT

Following the Nagorno-Karabakh War, a ceasefire agreement was signed by Azerbaijan and Armenia. However, the path towards a comprehensive peace accord still needs to be solved with some challenges. The unresolved status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the fate of its Armenian inhabitants remain critical points of contention. Additionally, the difficulties of Armenian Prime Minister Nicol Pashinyan in executing provisions related to the proposed transportation corridors outlined in the Ceasefire Pact add another layer of discord. External actors further complicated this situation. Armenia's domestic opposition and Iran's strategic ambitions within the region played significant roles. Conversely, Russia has taken a central role in overseeing peace negotiations and advancing its interests in the Southern Caucasus. This article delves into the entrenched disputes between Azerbaijan and Armenia and examines the potential trajectory of their relations. Moreover, it provides insights into Russia's intricate agenda, which shapes the evolving dynamics of the Southern Caucasus region. In essence, this study analyzes the intricate web of challenges, interests, and influences that intersect in this geopolitical landscape, shedding light on the intricate interplay between internal and external factors.

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Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of the South Caucasus, three relatively small nations – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – strive to uphold their national sovereignty and foreign policy orientations while navigating the influence and pressures exerted by major global powers. These nations each possess distinct foreign policy outlooks: Georgia leans towards a pro-American stance, Armenia aligns more closely with Russia, and Azerbaijan maintains friendly ties with Turkey, adopting a more balanced approach among these great powers.

Russia, in particular, remains staunchly opposed to the involvement of external actors in the North Caucasus region, which it considers pivotal to its interests. However, Russia's role in the South Caucasus has evolved into a far more intricate and multifaceted dynamic since November 2020. The region now witnesses a competition for influence between Russia, Turkey, and Western powers within their sphere. A significant turning point transpired from September to November 2020, notably in Nagorno-Karabakh, when the six-week conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia led to a ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia. This accord marked a victory for Azerbaijan, yet it effectively paused hostilities rather than delivering a durable peace – a pattern reminiscent of situations like Cyprus and Korea.

After the 2020 conflict, Azerbaijan and Armenia pursued divergent paths under the European Union's and Russia's guidance, respectively. Azerbaijan aimed to secure lasting peace through negotiations that sought comprehensive solutions under favorable circumstances. Conversely,

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clashes emerged between the two parties around Nagorno-Karabakh and along the Azerbaijan-Armenia border in 2022. Approximately a year after the war, in September 2021, the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan convened for peace discussions. Then, in February 2022, Baku presented Yerevan with a five-point proposal centered on mutual recognition of territorial integrity. Armenia initially embraced this proposal, envisioning it as a means to stimulate developmental prospects.

However, two primary issues remained unresolved: the status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the fate of the Armenian population within the region. Additionally, despite the terms of the November 2020 ceasefire agreement, Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan needed to show more support for implementing planned transportation corridors. Within this intricate landscape, adverse influences from external actors, notably Iran, as well as domestic opposition within Armenia, have contributed to adverse developments. In this article, we delve into the impasses plaguing Azerbaijan-Armenia discussions, explore the potential trajectory of their relations, and elucidate Russia's distinct strategic blueprint for the South Caucasus region.

Intractable challenges in Nagorno-Karabakh

Deliberations over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh

Armenians initially looked to the Kosovo model as a potential framework for Nagorno-Karabakh. They aspired for the so-called Arsak (Nagorno-Karabakh) Republic to attain independence, but this parallel needed to be revised. Firstly, the UN General Assembly Resolution 62/243 in 2008 asserted that the region within the Azerbaijani territory was under Armenian occupation. Secondly, the region never held the status of an independent state; instead, the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the natural establishment of borders between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Thirdly, Armenia's pursuit of self-determination does not inherently warrant the partition of a minority group under international law. Although the inhabitants of Karabakh are ethnically Armenian, they are officially recognized as Azerbaijani citizens. Furthermore, international law does not endorse partial or conditional division (Makili-Aliyev, 2020). Notably, not the Armenian population but the Azerbaijani citizens were displaced from Karabakh.

Armenia's subsequent hope rested on the pre-2008 model of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where Russian influence loomed over Nagorno-Karabakh (Popescu, 2020). In fact, in 2019, Masis Mayilyan, the Foreign Affairs Minister of the Arsacid region, expressed a willingness to seek recognition from Russia in exchange for recognizing Russia's occupied areas in Ukraine. This endeavor even stirred unease in Georgia when Armenia contemplated visits to the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Russian leader Vladimir Putin articulated in November 2020, "The final status of Karabakh has not been determined. We agreed to maintain the existing status quo. The region's fate will be decided by future leaders who will engage in this process" (Kremlin, 2020).

The diplomatic resolution at the negotiating table will be shaped by the perspectives of key stakeholders both within and outside the region. The UN Security Council, comprising the USA, Russia, China, England, and France, acknowledged that the recent conflicts occurred within the sovereign borders of Azerbaijan and that Armenia was not a victim (Bodner, 2016). With its bases in Armenia and a collective agreement, Russia affirmed that the conflicts did not obligate its involvement. These developments underscore that the only legally consistent solution for Nagorno-Karabakh is to remain Azerbaijani territory.

The ongoing trends between Azerbaijan and Armenia can be summarized as follows:

- Armenia hesitates to fully implement the November 2020 ceasefire agreement, provoking frustration on the Azerbaijani side.

- Both nations are influenced by domestic public sentiment, which exerts pressure during negotiations.
- Armenia, while realigning with Russia post-November 2020, engages with the West tentatively, harboring reservations (Korybko, 2022).
- Azerbaijan maintains proximity to both Russia and Turkey.
- Furthermore, Azerbaijan upholds strong ties with the EU and the USA.

The most pressing point of contention between Azerbaijan and Armenia centers on their differing aims: Azerbaijan seeks recognition of the territorial integrity of both nations, while Armenia strives to keep the status of Karabakh on the negotiating table. Three critical issues persist (Shafiev & Huseynov, 2022): (1) Delimiting borders: Under Armenian control for three decades, the region lacks defined boundaries. (2) Facilitating transportation routes. (3) Addressing humanitarian concerns encompassing landmines, detainees, and missing individuals.

Azerbaijan has assembled a working group to address the terms of the peace agreement. Establishing an international commission for determining the Azerbaijan-Armenia border is under consideration. However, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia reintroduced the status of Karabakh into discussions, implying a departure from the notion of territorial integrity for Azerbaijan. Pashinyan also shifted his stance on railroad construction between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan (Zangezur Corridor). Resolving state borders and their mutual recognition are pivotal in bilateral relations (Konuralp, 2022).

Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Ceyhun Bayramov conveyed that Azerbaijan sent Armenia a document in March 2021 consisting of five articles outlining the normalization of relations. These articles encompass mutual recognition of sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability of international borders, and political independence. Both parties acknowledge the absence of territorial claims and commit to refrain from making such claims in the future (News, 2022a). Despite this, Yerevan contends that accepting these foundational principles is only meaningful with a consensus on Karabakh's status and borders. On the other hand, President Ilham Aliyev asserts that the Karabakh issue is no longer extant.

In November 2021, the European Union (EU) initiated mediation between the two nations. Communication channels were established between their defense ministries. Subsequently, Brussels hosted an inaugural summit between Armenia and Azerbaijan's leaders in December 2021. However, Russia's intervention in Ukraine in February 2022 temporarily halted diplomatic dialogue. Nevertheless, in April 2022, just two months after the Ukrainian conflict, Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders announced their intent to commence peace talks at a meeting facilitated by the EU. These talks proceeded swiftly. A summit organized by the EU in August 2022 resulted in an agreement for the foreign ministers of both nations to draft the text of a peace agreement within a month. The parties pledged to finalize an agreement by the end of 2022.

President Aliyev remarked that the peace process gained momentum, prompting working groups to convene and initiate the composition of a peace text. Simultaneously, Russia is not idle. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova revealed in October 2022 that Moscow had submitted peace proposals to Yerevan and Baku in September. Furthermore, President Putin hosted Pashinyan and Aliyev as part of an informal summit for the Commonwealth of Independent States on October 7, underscoring his role in the region.

In the Czech capital in October 2022, Azerbaijan, Armenia, France, the US and the European Council jointly agreed to recognize borders and territorial integrity as they stood in 1991. In response to Armenia's request, the US civilian observer mission will be stationed on the Armenian side of the border. Despite progress, several on-ground issues still need to be resolved as both parties navigate their unique approaches. An overarching sentiment suggests that Armenians aim to diminish Russian influence in the territories they control, with Yerevan's new pro-Western orientation seeking

tangible gains beyond paper agreements. These factors occasionally spur days of conflict. While President Ilham Aliyev typically maintains a measured stance, he becomes resolute when issues of corridors, like Lachin and Zangezur, are raised (Rozanskij, 2022).

The partnership between Aliyev and Erdogan is a barrier to the activation of the Minsk Group, proposed by the US and France. Baku and Ankara view past Minsk Group endeavors as maintaining the status quo, which favored Armenia.

The European Union, concerned about the evolving roles of Turkey and Russia since 2020, presented a new initiative during the Prague talks. A decision emerged from a four-way meeting between French President Emmanuel Macron, European Council President Charles Michel, President Aliyev, and Prime Minister Pashinyan (News, 2022b). The parties reaffirmed their commitment to the UN Charter and 1991 Alma Ata Declaration. Armenia and Azerbaijan mutually recognized territorial integrity and sovereignty. This affirmation serves as the foundation for demarcation commission efforts.



Figure 1. Current status in Nagorno-Karabakh region

Source: RFE/RL (2021)

During the European Political Community summit in Prague, a significant meeting transpired between Turkey and Armenia at the leadership level, marking the first such encounter in 13 years. Turkey's particular interest lies in the Zangezur corridor, connecting Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan, which offers a direct route bridging Central Asia and Anatolia. Although Pashinyan presented some proposals during the meeting, specifics remain undisclosed. Presumably, Pashinyan sought Erdogan's assistance in securing the release of the captured soldiers and delineating the border map. These topics will be addressed in forthcoming discussions involving foreign ministers and designated representatives. Pashinyan's proposal centers on adopting the Soviet map as the basis instead of the 1919-1920 map, which would result in Armenia losing territory. During the meeting,

Erdogan reiterated his call for the abandonment of international recognition of the Armenian genocide and the opening of the Zangezur corridor.

In Sochi on October 31, 2022, Putin convened with Aliyev and Pashinyan. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan proposed a demilitarized zone for Karabakh under international guarantees (RFE/RL, 2022). Presently, a 2,000-strong Russian peacekeeping contingent operates in Karabakh under the framework of the ceasefire agreement (Figure 1). Conversely, Aliyev stated that the Karabakh matter had been resolved two years ago: “We have nothing to discuss on this matter. However, the improvement of Azerbaijan-Armenia relations demands significant steps. We rely on your proactive personal role and Russia's contribution in achieving these goals” (Sözcü, 2022). Aliyev further emphasized, “Azerbaijan has previously put forward five fundamental principles. Normalizing the relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia should be based on these principles, which adhere to the fundamentals of international law. Upon these principles, relations can be enhanced” (Sözcü, 2022). Putin conveyed that while agreement was not reached on all matters, they had successfully concurred on fundamental aspects and endorsed a joint declaration (Sözcü, 2022).

A mutual commitment to refraining from the use of force and resolving issues based on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the recognition of inviolable borders has been reported between Azerbaijan and Armenia. On November 7, 2022, the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia convened in Washington, hosted by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Reports suggest that the USA encouraged both parties to take bold strides (Taştekin, 2022a).

While Azerbaijan's victory is acknowledged through the ceasefire agreement, Armenia may be accorded some degree of control within Karabakh. The unresolved issue within this context pertains to the future of Armenians residing in Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan asserts that Nagorno-Karabakh falls within its internationally recognized borders. Armenia has relinquished its longstanding opposition to this condition but seeks Baku's consent for special security measures and rights for Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians. Baku maintains that residents of Nagorno-Karabakh should have Azerbaijani citizenship rights without special status or privileges and has declined to incorporate this matter into bilateral talks.

Regarding Karabakh, President Aliyev affirms, “Armenians shall have neither status, nor independence, nor special privileges” (Taştekin, 2022a). Pashinyan is inclined toward deferring the status issue as a precondition, considering its resolution after the peace agreement. He might even contemplate minority status over autonomy.

Armenia will de facto oversee some of Nagorno-Karabakh, rendering it more reliant on Russia for on-ground peace assurance. Consequently, Armenia will adhere more closely to Russia's directives in domestic and foreign policy. As Russia reasserts its influence over Armenia, it will exert a more pronounced role over Azerbaijan regarding security and military aspects.

Another substantial issue revolves around the border dispute between the two nations. Disagreements persist regarding which maps to employ as the foundation for demarcating the border. While Azerbaijan advocates using various Soviet-era maps from different periods, Armenia contends that this approach would grant Azerbaijan considerable claims on its existing territory. Although both sides agreed to address this matter during a Russian-mediated meeting in November 2021, little progress has been made since then.

Advancements in corridors and transport networks

Following the Nagorno-Karabakh War in October-November 2020, one of the region's most significant subjects garnering attention revolves around intercontinental infrastructure and transportation initiatives linking Europe and Asia. However, despite these overarching aspirations, relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia remain tenuous post the Nagorno-Karabakh War.

A pivotal development post-2020 was the transfer of Lachin to Azerbaijan in October 2022, accompanied by the establishment of an alternative road as a substitute for the Lachin corridor connecting Karabakh to Armenia. Notably, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia concurred on reinstating transport links on January 11, 2021, in Moscow, with the mediation of Russian leader Vladimir Putin. Subsequently, on November 26, 2021, the matter was revisited during a trilateral meeting in Sochi.

The significance of opening transportation lines lies in Armenia's perspective: Azerbaijan can access Nakhichevan via Tavuş from the north or Zangezur from the south using existing infrastructure. Conversely, Armenia seeks to utilize the Yerevan-Tbilisi-Baku-Russia railway and the Yerevan-Nakhichevan-Julfa railway or highway to access Iran. Armenia prioritizes the condition of the routes rather than the route selection (Taştekin, 2022b). Previously, Pashinyan articulated, "Azerbaijan should access Nakhichevan through Armenia's sovereign territory, which we accept. Conversely, Armenia should also gain access to Russia and Iran via Azerbaijan's territory" (Taştekin, 2022b).

To realize their ambitions concerning highway, railway, and energy networks uniting the Caspian basin and Asia, Turkey proposed a series of six forums (3+3) involving Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, Russia, and Iran. The inaugural session of the 3+3 negotiations for the South Caucasus, intended to begin in 2020, occurred on December 10, 2020, in a 3+2 configuration due to Georgia's non-participation.

Tbilisi's trust in the Kremlin has waned, with divergent paths emerging since 2008 due to the Abkhazia and South Ossetia issues. Analogous to Ukraine, Georgia seeks to balance with NATO against the perceived Russian threat. The Zangezur connection portends that Georgia will lose its privileged status once the borders between Turkey and Armenia open. Furthermore, Armenia turning to Turkish ports instead of Poti and Batumi ports for maritime transport might adversely impact Georgia. While opening the Caucasus highway to the Russian Federation through South Ossetia and the railway to Abkhazia could offer solace to Georgia, these initiatives are ensnared in the "separatism-independence" discourse. For the six-way partnership to materialize, Georgia must mend its frayed relations with Russia stemming from the decision to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the 2008 conflict.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia participated in the 3+2 meeting with the precondition that the Karabakh issue (already discussed at other levels) would not be on the agenda. Armenia's primary exports to Russia occur via the historical Georgian Military Road, which connects to Kazbek-Upper Lars in North Ossetia. Pashinyan emphasizes Armenia's interest in regional transportation lines, advocating the necessity for mutual agreement on formulas.

For the Turkey-proposed 3+3 forum to materialize, a comprehensive regional integration perspective encompassing the reestablishment of historical connections is essential. Reconnecting Iran-Russia, Armenia-Russia, Armenia-Iran, Turkey-Armenia, and Armenia-Azerbaijan through the Caucasus is imperative.

Pashinyan underscores that the working groups established in the context of road conditions encompass the Icevan-Kazah, Berd-Tovuz, Angeghakot-Biçenek, Horadiz-Yerask, and Horadiz-Megri-Ordubad-Yerask routes. When the objective is to overcome barriers across all regional transportation lines, the scope extends beyond Zangezur. Pashinyan emphasizes that the Yerask-Ordubad-Megri-Horadiz railway along the southern border line should also be reinstated (Figure 2).

In summary, a simplified table of train lines includes:

- The historical railway between Zangezur and Megri-Horadiz, connecting Nakhichevan to Azerbaijan.
- The Yerevan-Iran railway, situated at the Nakhichevan border.
- The Tbilisi-Sochi railway line on the Abkhazian side, with connections to Baku and Yerevan.

- The railway linking Yerevan to the Baku-Tbilisi train line toward Kazah.
- The Kars-Gyumri railway spans 60 kilometers and intersects the Armenia-Turkey border region while connecting to the main line between Yerevan and Tbilisi (Taştekin, 2022b).

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev warned that if Armenia does not acquiesce to the opening of the Zangezur Corridor, Azerbaijan will resort to force to reclaim the region taken from them a century ago.

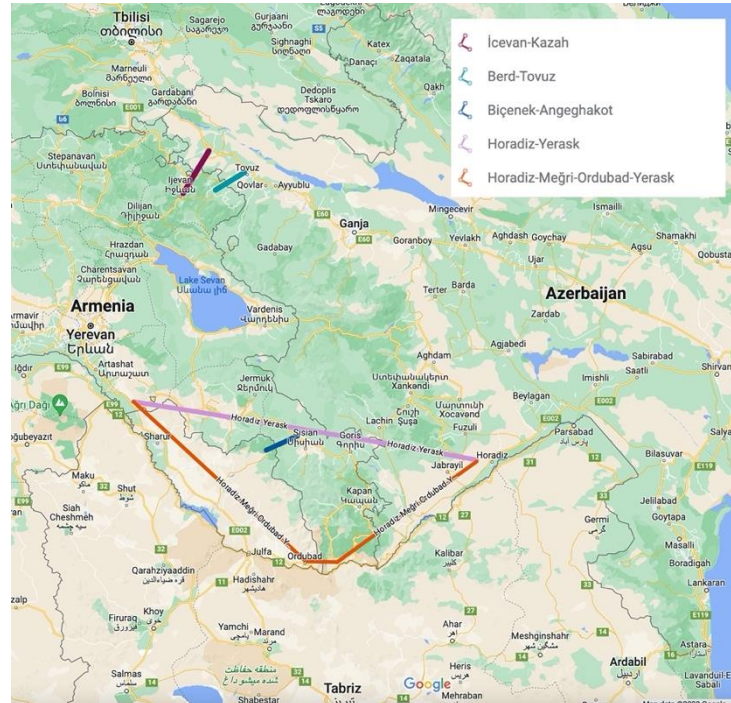


Figure 2. Possible routes between Azerbaijan and Armenia

Source: Created by the author using Google Maps

Notably, Armenia and Azerbaijan hold differing views on the scale of the route. Moreover, their perspectives diverge on matters of transit and customs controls. The responsibility for access management might be assigned to the Russians or, potentially, the Europeans. Azerbaijan tends to trust the Russians, whereas Armenia inclines towards the West. As China's trade routes extend into the region, the Caucasus is set to become a pivotal aspect of the broader global geopolitical arena.

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, conducted bilateral discussions with Azerbaijani and Armenian representatives in December 2021. He proposed a plan to grant each nation authority over specific portions of the corridor, aiming to forestall third-party involvement (Blank, 2022).

Significant strides have been taken to enhance the South Caucasus transportation networks in recent years. Among them is the Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan railway. Additionally, the Southern Gas Corridor pipeline intends to transport energy from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to Europe via Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea, despite challenges posed by Russia. The Zangezur Corridor holds promise as the shortest overland route between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans (Blank, 2022). This undertaking also holds considerable advantages for Armenia. For Armenia, whose aspirations lie with the West while its geopolitical reality is tethered to Russia, Zangezur represents a potential avenue for fostering healthier regional relations and integration into the global economy. Should Armenia seek to extricate itself from Russian influence in the medium to long term, the Zangezur Corridor could play a pivotal role in such an endeavor.

The established trade route between Turkey and Turkestan in Central Asia stands poised for transformation. The envisioned corridor in Armenia would notably curtail this traffic. Turkey's ambition to reach Azerbaijan and Central Asia via the Zangezur Corridor hinges on constructing a new railway linking Kars to Nakhichevan.

In conclusion, the ceasefire agreement from November 2020 faces a daunting implementation challenge. Differing interpretations and inferences about its provisions engender conflicting perspectives. While the agreement alludes to opening access routes, Azerbaijan envisions this as a corridor toward Nakhichevan via Zangezur. Conversely, Yerevan perceives the term “corridor” as tantamount to ceding sovereignty and isolating Armenian territory (Taştekin, 2022b), vehemently opposing such an outcome.

International reactions to corridor initiatives

The emergence of corridors and transportation routes in Azerbaijan-Nakhichevan raises significant concerns, with Iran taking a prominent role in this discourse. Over the past three decades, trade between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan has flowed through Iran, rendering Iran both politically influential over Azerbaijan and economically benefiting from the trade. Notably, Azerbaijan allocated a 15 percent gas commission to Iran to facilitate gas transit to Nakhichevan. However, the potential construction of a gas pipeline directly from Azerbaijan to Turkey through this corridor could lead to substantial gas losses for Iran.

The corridors and transportation lines expanding from Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan have stirred profound apprehension within Iran. Evidencing this concern, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Army executed an extensive exercise on October 17, 2022, along the Azerbaijan border, dubbed the “Strong Iran Exercise.” The exercise’s incorporation of bridge crossings over the Aras River hints at Iran’s strategic intentions. Iran, ever since 2020, has adamantly opposed the Zangezur Corridor, warning against its implementation as it could jeopardize Iran’s link with Armenia. Notably, this corridor results from a bilateral agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but Iran’s resistance is primarily driven by its interests.

Aliyev and Iranian President Ibrahim Reisi convened at the CICA (Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia) meeting in Astana shortly after the military exercise. During this meeting, Aliyev conveyed Azerbaijan’s resolve to pursue an independent foreign policy, signaling a shift in its geopolitical stance. Iran reacted by singularly opposing Azerbaijan’s presidency in the subsequent CICA summit. Further exacerbating tensions, Iranian officials visited Armenia for the ostensible inauguration of a new consulate on October 20, 2022. Following these discussions, Iran issued a statement asserting that Armenia’s security correlated with Iran’s security, emphasizing its aversion to geopolitical border alterations in the Caucasus (Huseynov, 2022).

This visit coincided with President Erdogan’s participation in the inauguration of the Zangilan airport in Karabakh, where Turkish and Azerbaijani leaders deliberated over fresh projects near the Iranian border. Based on its close partnership with Turkey, Azerbaijan perceives it as an essential safeguard against threats from Armenia and Iran. Iran and Armenia are attempting to ally against the Azerbaijan-Turkey axis and are actively seeking to bring India into their alliance. They hope to gain India’s support in countering the influence and cooperation between Azerbaijan and Turkey. Iran has endeavored to obstruct energy corridors from Turkic nations for years, often invoking the Caspian Sea’s status as a pretext. It previously hindered Turkmen gas transit across its territory. Presently, even in the absence of territorial occupation, Iran seeks to impede the establishment of a new transportation route between Azerbaijan and Armenia by utilizing threats.

The realization of the Zangezur Corridor could potentially render Iran circumvented by Azerbaijan and Turkey, evoking isolation concerns. Iran, traditionally aligned with Armenia, is positioned in stark contrast to Turkey in this equation. Iran’s principal apprehension centers on the Azerbaijani population within its borders rather than Turkey’s Central Asian connections. Behind Israel’s support for Azerbaijan lies a latent confrontation with Iran rather than purely arms sales or oil supply considerations. The significance of Iran’s pipeline to Armenia has waned. The US-backed Trans-Caspian pipeline project might resurface.

Iran's endeavor to influence Azerbaijan's foreign policy also manifests in its interactions with Israel. Following Azerbaijan's procurement of weaponry from Israel during the Second Karabakh War, Iran's leadership labeled Baku "Zionist." Israel's interest in Azerbaijan stems from its enmity towards Iran, transcending arms transactions and extending to oil procurement. The strengthening Azerbaijan-Israel rapport spells trouble for Iran. Turkey's strategic imperative prevents Armenia's alignment with Russia and Iran and fosters rational steps toward regional peace. The pipeline initiative, initially intended to span from Turkmenistan to Turkey via Iran, was halted in 2017 due to financial disputes. Presently, Turkmenistan can redirect this gas to Turkey through Azerbaijan.

At the close of 2022, a fresh crisis materialized along the Lachin corridor, connecting Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh, involving Russian peacekeepers. The Russian contingent denied Azerbaijani officials access to the Kızılbulak gold and copper-molybdenum deposits in Lachin, prompting public unrest. Azerbaijani environmental activists initiated protests along the Shusha-Lachin road, where Russian peacekeepers were stationed, disrupting transportation between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. While Western criticism targeted Azerbaijan over the Lachin road issue, Baku remained resolute, determined to regain full authority over the region.

Third-party involvement and the Russian strategy for Nagorno-Karabakh resolution

Armenia's potential pivot toward the United States

Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, is engaged in a multifaceted struggle that extends beyond his country's future and encompasses his political survival. Behind the street protests, notable individuals from the Karabakh conflict era—Robert Kacharian and Serge Sargsyan—are actively involved. However, these figures lack broad support from Armenians, as they are suspected of pursuing policies that could align Armenia more closely with Russia and Belarus. Pashinyan, despite his previous opposition to Russian influence, has adopted a pro-Russian foreign policy. His earlier commitment to improving relations with the West has taken a backseat. In May 2022, he signed the 30 Point Agreement with Russia, promising non-compliance with Western sanctions against Russia. His actions include sending reinforcements to Russian troops in Syria and consistently aligning with Russia's positions at the United Nations. In reality, street protests are being used as a mechanism to exert pressure on Pashinyan and influence his political decisions.

Armenia is grappling with a combination of economic and political challenges, and as a result, social polarization has become increasingly evident. The efforts by Prime Minister Pashinyan to implement economic investments and policy reforms have had mixed results, creating disparities in wealth and living standards among different segments of the population. These economic disparities have sowed discontent and division within society.

Furthermore, the return of strategically vital territories, including the Lachin corridor, Aghdam, and Kelbajar, to Azerbaijan under the November 10 Agreement has added to Armenia's challenges. This change in territorial control has disrupted livelihoods and economic activities, exacerbating economic hardships for some communities.

Kelbajar, in particular, has raised concerns as it previously fulfilled 85% of Armenia's water requirements. The potential loss of this vital water source has heightened fears of resource scarcity, including the risk of contamination affecting Lake Sevan, Armenia's sole remaining water source. Such concerns over essential resources have fueled tensions and social divisions.

Additionally, the political landscape in Armenia has been marked by deep divisions and rivalries among different political factions and ideologies. These political schisms have not only

shaped government policies but have also seeped into society, further contributing to social polarization as citizens align with different political leaders and parties.

In summary, social polarization in Armenia has been driven by a combination of economic disparities, territorial changes, resource concerns, and political divisions. These factors have collectively contributed to a fractured and polarized society facing significant challenges on multiple fronts.

A prospect of peace in the Caucasus could normalize relations between Armenia and Turkey. The United States supports the three South Caucasus republics building Western partnerships through Turkey as part of a strategy to encircle Russia. Pashinyan, who rose to power by opposing Russian influence, could opt for a normalization path to reduce Armenia's reliance on Russia. While his post-war electoral victory enhances his potential for peaceful leadership, Pashinyan may struggle to accommodate Aliyev's conditions for peace. Pashinyan's room for maneuver is limited as negotiations touch upon border demarcations, the Zangezur Corridor, and Karabakh's status. Pashinyan's efforts to remove all regional road obstacles, presented in Prague, were met with no positive response.

Pashinyan's reluctance to accept the summit statement at the end of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) meeting in Yerevan in November 2022 underscores Armenia's dissatisfaction with the agreement. The CSTO, often called Russian NATO, includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Armenia's dependency on Russia for security and economic stability, with 85% of natural gas and 99% of wheat imports from Russia, significantly affects its geopolitical stance (Korteweg, 2018).

Russia closely monitors Armenia's current U.S. policy. Although the United States unilaterally supports Armenia as part of its opposition to Turkey and Azerbaijan, such a stance could negatively impact its position in Central Asia. Armenia's pivot from Moscow to Washington seems improbable, as its options are limited. Potential options include remaining in the CSTO without receiving U.S. military aid, leaving the CSTO but remaining within the Russian sphere, exiting the Russian bloc altogether, or leaving the CSTO and offering a U.S. military base unilaterally.

Armenia's need for military support led it to Russia, as Central Asian countries were unfavorable partners due to strained relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Moreover, given the strained relations between Turkey and the West, the CSTO entering a conflict against Azerbaijan with NATO member Turkey in the region is unlikely. The West, particularly the United States, might foster unrealistic expectations in Armenia, leading to miscalculations.

In light of these dynamics, Armenia faces the challenge of charting a new course akin to its departure from the Soviet Union in 1988. The Russians, who have been actively influencing Armenia since 2018, aim to maintain their grip on Armenia by shaping its internal landscape. This Russian influence is geared towards shaping the security landscape of the entire South Caucasus, affecting both Armenia and Azerbaijan, echoing the situation in Ukraine. Armenia's internal opposition, backed by the Armenian diaspora, unwittingly contributes to Armenia's continued entanglement with Russia.

Despite Turkey's efforts to foster peaceful relations, there is a prevailing concern that opening borders within Armenia could lead to the absorption of the weak and uncompetitive Armenian economy by Turkey. This perspective considers the need for Turkey to adjust to increased competition and cheaper export products over time.

Azerbaijan's quest for independence from Russian influence

The deployment of Russian forces in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War concerns President Aliyev. He is keen on pursuing an independent foreign policy that minimizes reliance on Russia. Meanwhile, the Kremlin aims to maintain its regional presence and influence until at least 2025.

Rather than squandering time, Aliyev has opted for pragmatic cooperation with Erdogan, leveraging their longstanding partnership against Russia. However, Aliyev strives to tread cautiously, avoiding offending any party. To maintain a balance, he acknowledged the autonomy of Donbas, signaling alignment with Russia's direction. Still, his growing closeness to Turkey keeps Russian interests on high alert. This transition extends beyond the Caucasus, as Central Asian nations await the outcome of the Ukraine conflict before distancing themselves from Russian influence (Ottaviani, 2022). Presently, Turkey is maneuvering to fill the void left by Russia's diminishing role, with the potential for the Russian landscape to be reshaped following the Ukraine conflict.

The Susha Agreement on June 15, 2021, solidified Turkey and Azerbaijan as defense allies. While Baku and Yerevan engage with the EU and the USA in distinct ways, the West is poised opportunistically to fill the gaps created by Russia. While Russia may bolster its forces in Armenia to safeguard the CSTO, it could come at the expense of reserves needed for Ukraine.

In December 2021, the Azerbaijani leader invited NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to Brussels, where they met with ambassadors from 30 NATO member countries. Azerbaijan participated in the Worthy Partner 2022 exercise alongside the USA in Georgia, hosted at the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center in Vaziani.

The Azerbaijani Army's might has grown significantly following the war, gaining supremacy over the Armenian Army. Boosted by the oil and natural gas price surge, Azerbaijan's revenues have risen by about 40 percent since 2020. This financial windfall has enabled the establishment of new commando and special forces units (Ercan, 2023). The country has also fortified its arsenal with cutting-edge weaponry, including long-range surface-to-surface missiles, smart weapon systems, and drones produced in partnership with Turkey and Israel. Simultaneously, joint military exercises between the Turkish and Azerbaijani Armies persist.

In contrast, the Armenian Army has experienced relative and absolute weakening. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has diverted Russia's attention from Armenia, hampering its capacity as a security ally. Moreover, the 2020 war depleted Armenia's stockpiles of weapons and ammunition, leaving the nation struggling to source new supplies for its troops. Alongside these challenges, Armenia grapples with internal command structure issues and a demoralized military.

In addition to surpassing Armenia's military strength, Azerbaijan gained control over key territories in Armenia through conflicts in September 2022. Critical regions such as Jermuk, Vardenis, and Gegharkunik are now under the Azerbaijan Army's control. These positions enable operations towards Syunik, Kapan, and Nakhichevan, potentially isolating the Zangezur region in southern Armenia. Should hostilities resume, these captured positions could grant Azerbaijan a distinct advantage.

Russia, having bases in Armenia and a commitment to defense, is reluctant to choose between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Putin's approach toward implementing a peace agreement appears measured. Countries in a hurry include Turkey and Azerbaijan, envisioning the opening of energy and transportation corridors that expedite access to the Caspian and Central Asia. While Russia is preoccupied with the Ukraine conflict and embargoes, it is challenging to deter Aliyev's pursuit of alternative energy sources. In February 2022, the Azerbaijan-Russia Cooperation Agreement was signed.

Russia's ambitions in the South Caucasus

Within the context of the South Caucasus, different superpowers hold diverse aspirations. The West is aligned with the notion of routes traversing the region to circumvent Russia and Iran. This is motivated by several factors:

- Europe aims to secure access to gas from Central Asian countries via the Caspian Sea and Azerbaijan, thus diminishing reliance on Russian gas (Gasparyan & Sahiounie, 2022).

- The USA seeks to sell gas to Europe while curbing Iran's oil exports, thus weakening the cards held by Russia and Iran.

Historically, Azerbaijan played a pivotal role during World War II by supplying 80% of the oil that Soviet Russia required. This oil proved crucial for the Red Army's victory against Germany. Today, the US endeavors to safeguard Caspian Sea oil and gas reserves from Russian influence (Quinn, 2022). Russia and Kazakhstan jointly control most of the Caspian Sea reserves, distributed among the five coastal countries under the Caspian Sea Agreement.

Russia envisions establishing a sphere of strategic, security, military, political, and economic influence that spans Central Asia, Ukraine-Black Sea, and the Middle East. The South Caucasus, especially the region's weaker and more sensitive part, is integral to this vision. Comprising Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, the South Caucasus becomes a contested arena for Russia, Turkey, and Iran, each bordering at least one of these nations. Russia's military presence previously encompassed Armenia, which has now been extended with the Agdam base in Azerbaijan.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 has emerged as a significant challenge for the US-NATO alliance and a critical factor in the Ukraine conflict. While the US initially supported Pashinyan, the Russians have now reduced him to a subservient position. Capitalizing on nationalist sentiments in Russia, Putin has further solidified his rule by expanding Russian territory into eastern Ukraine and seizing coastal regions along the Black Sea in 2022, following the 2014 Crimean annexation.

Like Crimea's importance, the Kerch Strait and the port of Novorossiysk on the Russian coast hold vital significance. They established Russia's connection between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. In contrast, the US aims to ensure stability in Georgia and Azerbaijan and circumvent Russia by fostering routes through Turkey (such as transporting Azerbaijani oil to Ceyhan).

Amid global disruptions in energy, food, and trade routes due to the Ukraine War, the prospective Zangezur Strait, traversing Nagorno-Karabakh, could emerge as a crucial alternative. Zangezur represents a pivotal juncture for the global trade route between East and West and is paramount to Russia. This corridor not only evades Russian control but also undermines its bargaining power over energy and trade routes for Turkic states. Russia seeks to construct a new Black Sea energy geography centered around Novorossiysk, thereby necessitating its command over the Southern Caucasus geography and the prevention of alternative routes bypassing it.

Before the onset of the Ukraine War on February 24, 2022, Putin and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed a comprehensive agreement. Adjacent to the primary oil pipeline between Novorossiysk and Baku, the accord encompasses the nexus of natural gas lines originating from Russia, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Turkmenistan and connecting to China (Figure 3).

The Kerch Strait is located near two significant port cities, Novorossiysk and Sochi. Novorossiysk, which is the largest Russian commercial port on the Black Sea, is strategically positioned at the crossroads of major oil and gas pipelines connecting the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea. Additionally, Russia's control of the Azov Sea has facilitated a vital link between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, which in turn connects to the Baltic Sea and the Northern Sea Route. However, recent developments in the northern region have raised concerns.



Figure 3. Major Caspian oil and gas export routes

Source: US Energy Information Administration (2015)

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is intertwined with Putin's strategic ambitions for the Caucasus (Papian, 2022). Just two days before the outbreak of the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia on September 27, 2020, Russia and Azerbaijan inked a strategic cooperation agreement. This accord, alongside red lines drawn by the Kremlin in Karabakh, positioned Russia to assert control over Azerbaijan's actions. Pashinyan, influenced by the West, faced pressure against making peace with Azerbaijan. Subsequently, Russia has had a firm grip on Pashinyan, leveraging the prospect of replacing him with opponents like Kocharian or Sarkisian.

Concurrently, a dedicated communication line exists between Russia and Turkey concerning the South Caucasus. While this partnership coerced Armenia into a ceasefire agreement, it invariably placed Russia in control of the situation. This dynamic aligns with Russia's overarching plan for the Caucasus.

The November 10 Agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia represents a realignment in Russia's sphere of influence. Putin redefines the regional landscape and assumes the role of a sole arbiter instead of employing direct force. While Turkey's influence might appear to expand, it operates within the parameters established by Russia. Given the divergent strategic interests of Russia and Turkey, this newly established equilibrium may not be sustainable over the long term. Putin seeks to establish a novel model of relations encompassing Turkey, Iran, and to some extent, China. This model will foster reciprocal exchanges of interests.

Conclusion

The Nagorno-Karabakh issue has posed the greatest obstacle to the South Caucasus' development and stability for nearly three decades. The enduring status quo has perpetuated a drain on Armenia's resources, both human and material. As Azerbaijan reclaims its regained territories, the conflicts remain frozen under the ceasefire agreement. Nevertheless, Turkey could potentially serve as the pivotal force that alleviates Russian pressure on Armenia and the Turkic World States, facilitating their integration into the modern world and democracy. To realize this vision, Armenia must first overcome its biases regarding Turks. However, Armenia's resistance to opening the Zangezur corridor connecting Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan has complicated matters.

Amid these challenges, mediation efforts by both Russia and the EU proceeded on separate tracks. However, by the end of 2022, talks on both channels stopped. The year's end marked the deadline for reaching a comprehensive agreement, which ultimately went unfulfilled. The future trajectory of diplomatic efforts remains to be determined, with existing conflicts and disagreements posing significant hurdles to an imminent peace agreement.

In light of the conflict in September 2022 and the subsequent blockade of the Lachin Corridor, the shadow cast over negotiations has grown larger, augmenting the likelihood of renewed hostilities. Despite the mediators' persistent endeavors to broker a comprehensive peace agreement throughout 2022, the September conflict underscored a trajectory moving away from peace. Approximately two years after the conclusion of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan suggest an impending third conflict, making 2023 an arduous year for the region. The ongoing uncertainty in the Russia-Ukraine conflict could spawn fresh conflicts in the South Caucasus. While the specifics of future conflicts in the region are hard to predict, a new clash between Baku and Yerevan appears increasingly probable.

In October 2022, Russia managed to convene the leaders of both countries in Sochi to discuss a peace agreement. However, the talks failed to convince either party to make the concessions necessary for a peaceful resolution. Notably, recent press conferences by Prime Minister Pashinyan on January 11, 2023, and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev on January 12, 2023, have heightened concerns. Pashinyan voiced concerns over the Russian peacekeepers' lack of action on the Lachin road incidents, jeopardizing Armenia's security rather than guaranteeing it. Meanwhile, President Aliyev hinted that 2023 marks the final year for peace negotiations and stated, "We do not need (negotiations) if they (Armenians) are not interested." These statements underscore the inevitability of a new armed conflict in Karabakh in 2023.

The EU has announced plans to deploy a new surveillance mission to 11 Azerbaijan-Armenia border regions to deter renewed hostilities on January 23, 2023. This mission could serve as a vital means to prevent further conflict and maintain stability. However, the road to a lasting peace process for Nagorno-Karabakh may be long and extend over decades as Russia takes the lead in shaping the initiative.

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