

Si Vis Pacem, Para Bellum? Armenia and Azerbaijan in Search of Regional Stability After the Nagorno-Karabakh War

Martin de La Garanderie

In the autumn of 2023, Azerbaijan's armed forces completed their reconquest of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, until then controlled by the self-proclaimed republic of Artsakh (its Armenian name). This military operation *a priori* settles the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which began in 1988 when Azerbaijan and Armenia were still Soviet socialist republics. The *casus belli* at the time was [inter-ethnic tensions](#) between Armenians and Azeris in the autonomous oblast of Nagorno-Karabakh, and more specifically the request to transfer the oblast to the Armenian SSR, followed by the suspension of this so-called autonomy by the Azerbaijan SSR. Armenia won the first war (1988-1994), allowing the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh to control this territory, as well as occupying some neighboring territories, which enabled the defense of this secessionist republic. In 1994, under the patronage of the Russian Federation, a ceasefire was brokered. The existence of the secessionist republic of Artsakh did not, however, lead to its recognition by other states, even Armenia.

In 2016, Azerbaijan, led by the son of former president Heydar Aliyev, Ilham, launched an offensive to reclaim the Armenian-controlled lands. After further offensives in 2020 and 2023, Azerbaijan [succeeded in regaining control of the entire territory](#). What might be perceived as a conflict between two states over a small province is in fact far from trivial. Firstly, unlike other post-Soviet conflicts, this one was characterized by the fragility of the peace during the conflict freeze. Secondly, this conflict was unusual in that it fell outside the framework of traditional alliances: here, NATO was not involved. Although the conflict pitted Azeris, who are predominantly Shiite Muslims, against Armenians, who are predominantly Christians, it was more a conflict of nationalism than religion. Moreover, Armenia was supported by Iran, which is Shiite Muslim as well. Finally, this conflict and its consequences are extremely important in today's geopolitical balance. This note looks at the geopolitical changes in 2024 for these two states: Armenia, which is making [a real diplomatic U-turn](#); and Azerbaijan, which [is multiplying its partnerships](#) and trying to emerge as a new regional player.

Armenia's pro-Western turn

Pashinyan's decisions

Nikol Pashinyan was elected Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia in 2018, following a movement known as the “Velvet Revolution.” This movement united part of the civil society [against Serzh Sargsyan](#), then President of the Republic, who was attempting to grant himself a term extension. Pashinyan emerged as the government’s [anti-corruption candidate](#), which had also been heavily influenced by the army since the 1990s. His liberal, progressive policies cut across traditional divides. On the geopolitical front, he tried to ease tensions with Azerbaijan, which was [a failure from the point of view of Armenian nationalists](#); Nagorno-Karabakh is now entirely dominated by Azerbaijan, which is more powerful than ever. He also sought appeasement after the war, ceding some land to Azerbaijan. Pashinyan has also sought rapprochement with Turkey, the other regional power in the Caucasus, as well as with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Finally, Nikol Pashinyan's foreign policy is characterized by his divorce from Moscow. The Yerevan government first announced the suspension of its participation (on February 23, 2024), then its withdrawal (on June 12) from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (or CSTO), a Kremlin-led military alliance of former Soviet republics (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan). The CSTO is supposed to defend the strategic interests of its members. From Yerevan's point of view, [the CSTO failed in its mission](#). Against this backdrop, Armenia has drawn closer to Western countries, notably France, Greece, and Cyprus, and to a lesser extent the United States, and has even raised the [possibility of applying for European Union membership](#).

The Russian reaction

For the Russians, Nikol Pashinyan's policies are to blame for the defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh. According to former Federation President [Dmitry Medvedev](#), relationships with the West are the reason for the deterioration in Russian-Armenian relations. This position is shared by the Moscow government, through the voice of its spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, who considered that [the West was behind Pashinyan's decision](#) to suspend his participation in CSTO meetings. Armenia's pro-Western turn seems to have been digested by Russian officials. Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, Russia fears the “[Ukrainization](#)” of Armenia, *i.e.*, the estrangement of a former Soviet Union from Russia. Indeed, Ukraine, through its cooperation with its Western partners, had also distanced itself from Russia over the past three decades. Until now, Armenia had been a pillar of Russia's “near abroad” made up of international organizations run by the Kremlin. In addition to the CSTO, which it has just left, Armenia is still a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States. By comparison with Azerbaijan and Georgia, Armenia still has many ties with Russia. Pashinyan's decision to leave the Russian fold and move closer to Europe is justified by the Russians' abandonment of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict but is not supported by everyone in Armenia.

The reaction of the Armenian population

There are two opposing views within Armenian society on the reasons for the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh. For Nikol Pashinyan and his supporters, it was Russia that failed to play its role in maintaining peace in the region. For example, Russia abandoned the Lachin corridor, which served as a bridge between the territory of the Republic of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. For Pashinyan's

opponents, the divorce between Armenia and Russia predates the last war in Nagorno-Karabakh. Some even go so far as [to adopt Moscow's language](#) on rapprochement with the Europeans, who are unreliable in defending the Armenians. This vision is defended by the opposition to Nikol Pashinyan: firstly, by the partisan opposition, led by Gagik Tsarukyan, who is also one of the country's wealthiest individuals, and secondly by former presidents Serzh Sargsyan and Robert Kocharyan.

The last few months have also seen the rise of the “[Tavush for the Fatherland](#)” movement, which organizes demonstrations with thousands of people calling for the resignation of the government in the face of this defeat. The movement takes its name from the Tavush region in the north-east, close to the villages ceded to Azerbaijan last year as part of the normalization efforts. The movement is spearheaded by Tavush Archbishop [Bagrat Galstanyan](#) and is rallying crowds against Nikol Pashinyan. Recently, the Archbishop, who also holds Canadian nationality and is supported by the Armenian Apostolic clergy, even declared his intention to become Prime Minister and stepped down from his religious duties. The clergyman is also suspected by government MPs of being [a spy for Russia](#). Today, his popularity, his rhetoric and his status as a cleric represent a danger to the Pashinyan government.

Finally, the opposition is also symbolized by Artsakhi militants. Samvel Shahramanyan, the last president of the Republic of Artsakh, who today declares himself in exile in Armenia, decreed the dissolution of the republic after the defeat in September 2023, but then declared this dissolution “illegal” as [it bypassed the Artsakhi parliament](#). Today, he is one of the leading figures of irredentism and is opposed to Pashinyan's pacifist strategy. In this highly tense political context, there is no doubt that the parliamentary elections of 2026 will play a major role in Armenia's medium-term development.

Aliyev and Erdogan: a balancing act

The stability of the Ankara-Baku alliance

Since Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, Turkey has been its greatest ally, both as a trading partner and a geopolitical supporter. It is Turkey that has enabled Azerbaijan to develop its economy over the last thirty years, accompanying the construction of gas pipelines such as the South Caucasus Pipeline, which extracts gas from the Caspian Sea and distributes it to Turkey via Georgia, and avoids the Armenian route. Turkey supplied many weapons to Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh war, [including the Bayraktar drones](#), which were used extensively. Turkey was also the first nation to support Azerbaijan in its conquest of territories then under Armenian control, as in the Shusha Declaration, signed by Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Ilham Aliyev in a town just recaptured by Azerbaijani armed forces. The declaration confirms Turkey's support for Azerbaijan as [a single nation with two states](#). Indeed, Turkey and Azerbaijan are very much aligned when it comes to foreign relations, as witnessed by [the rapprochement between Azerbaijan and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus](#). Today, this alliance is highly consolidated and is justified by two main factors. In this highly tense political context, there is no doubt that the parliamentary elections of 2026 will play a major role in Armenia's medium-term development.

Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan has no incentive to forge alliances with either NATO or the CSTO and can trade with the European Union as well as with members of the Eurasian Economic Union. The second reason is more ideological: the [Erdogan](#) and [Aliyev](#) regimes have clear links with Pan-Turkism, *i.e.*, the rapprochement of the Turkic peoples from Istanbul to Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan. For example, since 2009, both countries have been members of the Organization of Turkic States, an important

regional organization in Central and Western Asia, which enables numerous cooperative ventures in the fields of education, culture, energy, the fight against religious fundamentalism and more.

Normalizing relations with Armenia?

Pan-Turkism is also symbolized by the Zangezur corridor that the two leaders want to build. This corridor would pass through the Syunik region of Armenia, even cutting the border between Armenia and Iran, while giving Azerbaijan's main territory direct access to the autonomous province of Nakhichevan, an exclave on the other side of Armenia, as well as to the border with Turkey. [Armenians see this project](#) as a threat to their territorial integrity. Today, Armenia has its back against the wall, forced to come to terms with its two neighbors, who are also its two greatest rivals. Indeed, Turkey does not recognize the Armenian genocide, making it an eternal thorn in the side for reconciliation between the two states. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan remains its foe because of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and the ultranationalism of Ilham Aliyev's discourse.

In fact, during meetings between Nikol Pashinyan and Ilham Aliyev, the latter demanded, as part of the normalization process between the two countries, the [cession of some border territories](#) in the Tavush region, but also to remove from [the preamble to the Constitution](#) of the Republic of Armenia the reference to the [Declaration of Independence](#), which refers to the genocide of Armenians in “Western Armenia” (*i.e.*, the eastern territory of present-day Turkey) and Artsakh (*i.e.*, Nagorno-Karabakh, now part of Azerbaijan). [References to Mount Ararat](#) in Armenia's national symbols are also negatively judged by Ilham Aliyev. Finally, the latter has referred to Armenia as “Western Azerbaijan”, which is awakening Armenian nationalism and plunging Yerevan into a dilemma: should it normalize relations with Baku to finally move closer to the West, or prepare for an invasion of the entire territory by the Azerbaijani army?

Russia is also trying to reappear in the diplomatic game between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Vladimir Putin recently paid a visit to Baku and is trying to bring his two counterparts together around a lasting peace agreement, which would restore Russia to a major role in the region.

NATO and Russia: a complicated game since the war in Ukraine and Gaza

The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army in February 2022 had an indirect effect on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, since Moscow, which had been the arbiter in the region, abandoned it and then pointed the finger at the irresponsibility of the Yerevan government. Now out of the picture in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, Russia has left the leadership to other regional powers, first and foremost Turkey. Turkey is a member of NATO but does not always share the positions of Western states in the Ukraine conflict and seeks to act as an intermediary between Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky, to no avail. The Ankara regime is regularly at odds with its European partners. Azerbaijan has long had a privileged relationship with Ukraine and is also a member of the Organization for Democracy and Development, a pro-European regional cooperation organization in the post-Soviet space that is supposed to counterbalance Russian influence and is also called GUAM, after the initials of its members: Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova. Azerbaijan has also been one of the European Union's privileged energy partners since the end of trade with Russia. [A gas agreement](#) between the European Commission and Azerbaijan was signed in 2022. However, Azerbaijan also has poor relations with some European countries, such as France, and is even suspected of interference [in independence movements](#) in New Caledonia, Martinique, Corsica, and French Polynesia. Both Turkey and Azerbaijan have succeeded in distancing themselves from Russia and

trading with the Europeans but are at odds with them [on certain issues](#). This independence, which could be described as strategic ambiguity, is only possible because Turkey has succeeded in building its own area of regional cooperation.

The war in Gaza also revealed the ambiguity of the Turkish and Azerbaijani regimes on the subject. Turkey has regularly denounced the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip, both in its [media relays](#) and at the [United Nations](#). Yet Turkey is one of Israel's main partners. [Azerbaijan is even more closely allied with Israel](#), considered a true strategic partner. Israel sold drone and missile systems to Azerbaijan, which were used in its war against Armenia in 2020. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute even quotes a figure of [69% for arms imports](#) of Israeli origin between 2016 and 2020. The reason for this rapprochement is certainly the presence of Iran, Israel's sworn enemy and Azerbaijan's great rival. On the other hand, Armenia has just recognized the State of Palestine.

Conclusion: Security risks in the region, issues that concern other powers

The South Caucasus is undergoing a major geopolitical transformation. The end of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh may have ended a thirty-five-year-old conflict, but the peace agreements between Armenia and Azerbaijan are too contentious to consider the rivalry between the two countries to be over. Efforts are being made at the diplomatic level, but domestic political interests are fuelling the possibility of a non-resolution of the conflict, or even an exacerbation of tensions. It is therefore important to consider the different agendas of the countries in the region.

- For Nikol Pashinyan's government, the priority is to re-establish relations with its Azerbaijani and Turkish neighbors, in order to guarantee the sovereignty of the Republic of Armenia over its territory. Secondly, the Prime Minister's objective is to pursue rapprochement with the West. For him, the loss of Artsakh is certainly a tragedy for the Armenian people, but it is also an opportunity to no longer depend on the Kremlin's political orientations: withdrawal from the CSTO, end of Russian missions around Nagorno-Karabakh, alliances with European countries, application for membership of the European Union. He faces two challenges: the mistrust of an increasingly nationalistic section of the population, likely to want to re-establish the Russian security umbrella; and the extremely hard-line positions of the regime in Baku, which are not conducive to appeasement, and which, at least in terms of rhetoric, mock Nikol Pashinyan's pacifist ambitions.
- For Ilham Aliyev, the agenda is harder to decipher. The re-conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh was a quasi-constitutive principle in the formation of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and the end of this war marks a new chapter for him. Azerbaijan aims to develop along the lines of the Arab Gulf states. Indeed, its economic model is based on energy exports, in this case gas, managed by the national company SOCAR. Anxious to present a modern image of his country, Ilham Aliyev was awarded the COP29. His next major objective is to implement the Zangezur corridor project. While Azerbaijan can count on a very good relationship with Turkey, its relations with its European partners have seriously deteriorated in recent months. The war waged to restore its sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh, where several NGOs have reported human rights violations and war crimes, has earned it criticism from the European Commission and the Council of Europe. France and Azerbaijan now share an appalling relationship, against a backdrop of cyberwarfare, interference in internal affairs and propaganda.
- Turkey, for its part, is seeking to deepen integration with Azerbaijan, and supports the Zangezur corridor project. At the same time, there has been a slight rapprochement with the

government in Yerevan. Turkey's aim is to establish itself as a regional player and a key interlocutor for the great powers. This strategy is similar to that pursued in the Middle East (Syria), Africa (Libya, Somalia) and the Western Balkans (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo).

- Russia has clearly lost out in the geostrategic developments of recent years. Militarily, Russia has disappeared from the South Caucasus, except in the breakaway republics of Georgia. However, in parallel with its desire to exhaust Ukrainian resistance and Western support, Russia is trying to reposition itself in the South Caucasus: as it seeks to regain control in Georgia, it can also push a section of the Armenian population to sanction Nikol Pashinyan's government and install a more favorable regime in Yerevan, playing on ethnic tensions and the thirst for revenge among the Artsakhis. At the same time, Vladimir Putin is seeking a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In short, the Kremlin has a vested interest in asserting itself in the Caucasus, given the dramatic situation in its northern part, particularly in Dagestan, where Islamist and pro-independence tendencies are on the increase.
- For the Islamic Republic of Iran, the main objective is the failure of the Zangezur corridor, which would deprive it of a real border with Armenia, an economic partner in the Caucasus. Relations with Azerbaijan have always been cold, ever since the latter's independence. Azerbaijani President Abulfaz Elchibey (1992-1993) called for the unification of all Azeris, including those living in Iran, who represent one of the country's largest minorities. This irredentist movement led Iran to take up Armenia's cause, on the principle that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. Baku's ongoing support for Israel reinforces this rivalry, and the death in a helicopter crash of President Ebrahim Raisi on his return from a visit to Azerbaijan has not helped bilateral relations.
- Finally, the position of Western states remains ambiguous. While there are obviously nuances in the positions of the various states and institutions, there is one overriding trend: the United States, France and the European Union are attempting to counter the influence of other regional powers in the Caucasus. But the delicate question of their position in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict has come to the fore: on several occasions, these countries have expressed their support for the Armenians, while trying to promote negotiations between Yerevan and Baku. The Western position was criticized by both sides: for the Armenians, it ignored the geopolitical imbalance and the violence; for Azerbaijan, mediation was inaudible, given its support for Nagorno-Karabakh. Now that the war is over, the West can resume its role as guarantor of regional security, particularly with a view to countering Russian ambitions.