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The West should engage more in the South Caucasus

As Azerbaijan consolidates its control over Nagorno-Karabakh, its growing dependence on Russia raises concerns about regional stability

In 2022, there was a palpable optimism for direct Western involvement in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as multiple negotiations took place between Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders in various Western capitals, including Brussels, Prague and Washington. However, optimism turned into disappointment when Baku launched a military offensive in its breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region on 19 September.

After nearly 10 months of observing the West's response, which included orchestrating eco-protests, establishing a checkpoint along the Lachin Corridor (the only supply route connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia) and eventually blocking it entirely, Baku came to the conclusion that the West was unwilling to guarantee the security of Karabakh Armenians or commit to peacekeeping or military deployments. As a result, Baku reached an understanding with Ankara and Moscow, opting for what it called an 'anti-terrorist operation', despite negotiations seeming to tilt in its favour. From Azerbaijan's perspective, Russia and Türkiye now hold the keys to potential agreements rather than the Western powers.

A *carte blanche* to punish Armenia

As Azerbaijan consolidates its hold over Karabakh, it paradoxically finds itself increasingly reliant on Russia, thereby resembling Armenia's situation before the 2020 war. Moscow continues to maintain a military presence in Karabakh, and despite the Nagorno-Karabakh authority's decision to dissolve itself, Russian forces are unlikely to withdraw in the near future. This has transformed the primary parties involved in the conflict into Azerbaijan and Russia. In contrast, Armenia is actively distancing itself from direct involvement in the process.

Russia's *carte blanche* for Azerbaijan's assertive actions, coupled with

uncertainties about the future presence of Russian troops in Karabakh, raises questions about the nature of the current Baku-Moscow relationship and its potential ramifications. Last year, Azerbaijan signed a loyalty agreement together with Russia just two days before the latter invaded Ukraine, encompassing key foreign policy and security aspects such as 'holding the same or similar positions on topical international issues' and commitments to 'refrain from any actions that, in the opinion of one of the parties, damage the strategic partnership and allied relations of the two states'. While Azerbaijan might not become a 'second Belarus', concerns persist about the potential exchange of a degree of independence for territorial gains.

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Russia, effectively acting as the region's overlord, seems to take pleasure in using Azerbaijan as a means to punish Armenia's pro-Western government. Moscow appears to anticipate that Azerbaijan's victory will sow instability in Armenia, resulting in the Armenian society to seek security assistance and potentially leading to the overthrow of the Pashinyan government. But while Yerevan's decades-long ties with Moscow have encountered a significant rupture recently, a complete shift in allegiance still seems unlikely in the short term.

This rupture stems from a series of events, starting with the Collective Security Treaty Organisation's (Russia's equivalent of NATO) refusal to assist Armenia during the 2020 war and being exacerbated by Azerbaijan's offensive in September 2022. In response, Yerevan initiated a diversification of its foreign policy, moving away from its heavy reliance on Russia. Armenia cancelled military drills with Russia in January, and by May, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan hinted at reconsidering the alliance with Moscow if it did not yield tangible benefits. In June, he openly declared that Armenia was not Russia's ally in the Ukraine conflict and expressed a sense of being caught between Russia and the West. Pashinyan acknowledged the strategic mistake of relying solely on Russia for security, hosted joint military exercises with the United States in September and moved to join the Rome Statue of the International Criminal Court, subjecting Russian President Vladimir Putin to its arrest warrants if he were to visit. Meanwhile, Russia contends that Armenia's 'flirtation with the West', rather than close collaboration between Moscow and Baku, led to Azerbaijan's victory.

Keeping Russia in check

Moscow's ambitions extend beyond Karabakh and encompass the establishment of a transportation route under Russian control, known as the 'Zangezur Corridor', citing the trilateral agreement signed by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and his counterparts, Pashinyan and Putin, on 10 November 2020. The corridor aims to connect mainland Azerbaijan to its Nakhcivan exclave through Armenia's southernmost Syunik province. Despite violating the agreement by forcibly taking control of Nagorno-Karabakh, Baku insists on the opening of the corridor as a precondition for achieving peace with Armenia.

The crux of the matter revolves around the nature of this transportation link. Armenia is willing to provide a regular road to Azerbaijan, but Baku insists on an extraterritorial corridor not under Armenian jurisdiction, thereby infringing upon Armenia's territorial sovereignty. Baku justified its attacks on southern Armenia in September 2022 by accusing Yerevan of altering conditions and obstructing the process of opening communication and transport routes. It further claimed that an assault could not be proven since the border between the two countries has not been delimited or demarcated. President Aliyev has even issued threats that Azerbaijan would forcibly seize the land required for the corridor if Armenia did not comply. Recent repeated statements by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in support of Armenia's territorial integrity set off alarm bells about the potential for renewed military escalation in this context.

It is time for the West to take concrete actions to avert the risk of a new humanitarian crisis and the reshaping of the security architecture in the South Caucasus.

The harsh reality is that there is little that the United States and the European Union can do at this point to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Armenians, highlighting the failure of Western policy in the South Caucasus. However, ideally with the backing of the United Nations, they should explore options to extricate the trilateral agreement from Russian control and place it under a broader international umbrella. This would prevent the vital communication links from falling entirely under the Kremlin's influence. Another potential approach to conflict resolution might involve the Pashinyan government officially denouncing the 2020 agreement and engaging in direct negotiations with Azerbaijan and Türkiye to unblock regional transportation routes on fair terms, thereby sidelining Russia. Nevertheless, given

the multi-dimensional and high-level cooperation between Ankara and Moscow, this path appears challenging at present.

It is worth noting that on 19 September – the same day as Azerbaijan's military operation – Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu embarked on a visit to Tehran, aiming to secure Iran's green light for the corridor's opening, among other matters. However, Russia's efforts may have fallen short, as Iranian Ambassador Mehdi Sobhan reiterated Tehran's commitment to Armenia's territorial integrity during his meeting with Pashinyan on 25 September. In this complex situation, more involvement from the US and the EU is essential to counter Russia's expanding influence in the region. So far, only France, following Iran's lead, has decided to open a consulate in Armenia's Syunik Province, and the EU deployed a monitoring mission to Armenian settlements along the border with Azerbaijan, recognising the sensitivity of the situation on the ground.

A promising development is the United States' initiation of an international observer mission in Nagorno-Karabakh, aimed at replacing the Russian role. However, there remain significant challenges ahead. The Western collective must promptly move beyond misconceptions about energy security and transportation projects in its approach towards Baku. As Thomas de Waal has pointed out, Azerbaijan's role in ensuring Europe's energy security is often exaggerated. Baku is far from fulfilling its promises of delivering substantial gas supplies. Additionally, Armenia is equally important as Azerbaijan in facilitating connectivity between China and Europe through the Middle Corridor route, underscoring the importance of regional cooperation. To sum up, it is time for the West to take concrete actions to avert the risk of a new humanitarian crisis and the reshaping of the security architecture in the South Caucasus.



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