

Armenia and Azerbaijan: Between war and peace

SUMMARY

Ever since the end of the Cold War, Armenia and Azerbaijan have been in conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, in the longest-running conflict in the post-Soviet space. Two bloody war episodes, in 1992 and in 2020, have alternated with periods of frozen conflict over three decades, amidst the inability of the international community to find a political settlement.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has further altered the power balance in the region, creating a dangerous security vacuum and intensifying the need for renewed international mediation towards a comprehensive political settlement. Violent clashes in September 2022, including an incursion by Azerbaijan into Armenian territory, prompted the EU to step up its presence in the region significantly. A new fully fledged civilian mission in Armenia (EUMA Armenia) was deployed in February 2023. The EU has meanwhile taken on a prominent mediation role in the negotiations.

Mediation talks, in various formats, have continued during 2022 and 2023, against a background of regular and increasingly violent clashes, with both sides attempting to improve their negotiating positions at the table. The blockade since December 2022 of the Lachin corridor by pro-Azerbaijani activists, followed by the establishment of a checkpoint by Azerbaijan in April 2023, have put additional pressure on Yerevan (and Stepanakert) to agree on a peace deal on Baku's terms.

Under EU mediation, complemented by US talks, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed on 14 May 2023 to a longer-term negotiation plan for a comprehensive peace agreement. The final statement included their unequivocal commitment to the 1991 Almaty Declaration and their 'respective territorial integrity'. Some experts see the details of the statement as a potential breakthrough in the peace talks, while others warn of the heavy price-tag for the population of Nagorno-Karabakh and the potential political costs for Armenia itself.



IN THIS BRIEFING

- Historical background
- Developments since the 2020 war
- Parallel strands of negotiations
- Web of regional alliances
- European Parliament position



Historical background

Ever since the end of the Cold War, [Armenia](#) and [Azerbaijan](#) have been in open [conflict](#) over [Nagorno-Karabakh](#), a mountainous region inhabited by ethnic Armenians but recognised under [international law](#) as belonging to Azerbaijan, in what is now the [longest-running](#) conflict in the post-Soviet space. Part of the Russian empire in the 19th century, Nagorno-Karabakh was [established](#) as an autonomous region ('oblast') within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1923, over-ruling a previous decision taken in 1921 that attributed this territory (as well as Nakhchivan) to Armenia.¹ Under Soviet rule, tensions were mostly [subdued](#), but as political repression eased under Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s, Karabakh Armenians became increasingly vocal and resentful of what they saw as forced 'Azerification' of the region. This led to protests and, in 1988, demands for unification with Armenia. Clashes between Karabakh Armenians and Azerbaijanis became increasingly [violent](#). In 1990, Armenia declared independence from the Soviet Union, followed by Azerbaijan one year later, amidst the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nagorno-Karabakh, in turn, declared its [secession](#) from Azerbaijan in 1992 after a [contested referendum](#). The ensuing bloody war lasted 2 years, killed between [20 000 and 30 000](#) people and displaced around one million more from their homes.

The 1994 Russian-brokered ceasefire – the [Bishkek Protocol](#) – put a temporary end to the hostilities, without addressing the root causes of the conflict, and left Armenia in de facto control not only of Nagorno-Karabakh, but also of seven adjoining regions, amounting to one sixth of Azerbaijani territory. For nearly 25 years the conflict remained more or less [frozen](#), with Nagorno-Karabakh (known as *Artsakh* by Armenians) ruled by de facto authorities based in Stepanakert (the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh) and [supported](#) economically and militarily by Armenia. The international community, including Armenia, has never recognised Nagorno-Karabakh's independence, however, and [continues](#) to consider it a region belonging to Azerbaijan.

The [Minsk Group](#) was set up by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 1992 to mediate between the two sides. It is co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States, and has been unable to find a political settlement. In 2007, it presented the six [Madrid Principles](#), revised in 2009, as a basis for negotiations.² Armenia and Azerbaijan were unable to agree on the interpretation and implementation of these principles, however, and small-scale border clashes continued to take place regularly.

Figure 1 – Map of the region, before and after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War



Graphic by Samy Chahri, EPRS, [October 2022](#).

In September 2020, a full-blown war broke out once again, [killing](#) more than 6 000 troops. A Russian-brokered [ceasefire](#) put an end to 44 days of combat, during which Azerbaijan, [supported](#) by Türkiye, regained control of most of the seven districts that Armenia had kept under control for more than two decades, significantly strengthening the [authoritarian](#) regime of Ilham Aliyev. The 9 November 2020

[agreement](#) also provided for Russian Federation peacekeeping troops to remain in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone until 2025, with automatic extensions for subsequent 5-year periods 'unless one of the parties objected'. The agreement also established vague clauses regarding outstanding issues, such as the status of the corridor linking Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (the Lachin corridor) and the agreement to construct 'new transport communications' between Azerbaijan and its exclave region of [Nakhchivan](#). This new corridor is a contentious issue in the region, as it could compromise the [connecting](#) route between [Iran](#) and Armenia across their shared border.

Developments since the 2020 war

The fragility of the November 2020 agreement was soon put under test, with a lack of substantial progress in the negotiations towards a definitive political settlement, and the growing impatience of an emboldened Azerbaijan to cash-in on its military gains. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has further shaken the power balance in the region, creating a dangerous security vacuum and prompting the [need](#) for renewed international mediation. To avert a new (third) [outright war](#)³ experts highlight the urgent need to reach a [comprehensive](#) political settlement covering the main issues at stake: i) the status, rights and [protection](#) of the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh; ii) border demarcation; iii) development of a transport corridor between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan.

Mediation efforts continued in 2022, in parallel with regular and increasingly violent clashes, with both sides attempting to improve their negotiating positions at the table. After [smaller clashes](#) in late July and early August, September 2022 saw the worst hostilities since [2020](#), with nearly [300](#) soldiers (an estimated 200 Armenians and 80 Azerbaijanis) killed in an Azerbaijani [incursion](#) into Armenian territory – allowing Azerbaijani troops to take control of new positions deep inside Armenia – and at least 7 600 civilians displaced from the Armenian provinces.

The [blockade](#) since 12 December 2022 of the Lachin corridor – the only road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia – by a group of Azerbaijani pro-government activists is having severe [humanitarian](#) consequences for the 120 000 Armenians living in the enclave. With the inaction of Russian peace-keeping troops and the blessing of the Azerbaijan authorities, the blockade has put additional pressure on Yerevan (and Stepanakert) to agree on a peace deal on Baku's terms. On 23 April 2023 Azerbaijan authorities doubled down and established a [checkpoint](#) on the Lachin corridor, justifying the move by claiming that Armenians had been shipping military equipment on the road, and that the road passed through their territory and so they had a right to establish checkpoints on it. Armenia has called Azerbaijan's action 'a flagrant violation' of the Russian-backed ceasefire agreement of November 2020 and appealed to Russia, whose peacekeepers are supposed to be maintaining security on the road, to reverse the situation. Moscow's [response](#), 24 hours later, was a non-committal general condemnation of violations of the November 2020 agreement, while the [EU](#) and the [US](#) promptly expressed concerns that the move could jeopardise the peace negotiations.

Parallel strands of negotiations

Against this backdrop, international mediation efforts have been stepped up in 2022 and 2023, with Moscow's role as the primary [mediator](#) in the conflict being [gradually taken over](#) by the [EU](#), primarily, and also the [US](#), in an effort to avoid a security vacuum in the region. The Kremlin has reacted to this change on the diplomatic scene with open criticism, effectively ending its [participation](#) in the OSCE Minsk Group, and taking forward its own mediation process. The main landmarks of the parallel negotiations are summarised below.

In the margins of the first [European Political Community](#) (EPC) meeting, held in Prague on 6 October 2022, a [quadrilateral meeting](#) took place between the Azerbaijan President, Ilham Aliyev, the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, Charles Michel (President of the European Council) and Emmanuel Macron (President of France). The parties confirmed their commitment to the Charter of the United Nations and the [Alma Ata 1991 Declaration](#), through which each recognises the other's

territorial integrity and sovereignty as the basis for the work of the border delimitation commissions. Importantly, the meeting signalled the **political agreement** by Armenia to facilitate a civilian EU mission alongside the border with Azerbaijan, with the cryptic consent of Azerbaijan to cooperate with this mission 'as far as it is concerned'. The EU Monitoring Capacity in Armenia (EUMCAP), with a limited mandate, [completed](#) its mission on 19 December 2022, serving as the basis for the further establishment of a fully fledged civilian [European Union Mission in Armenia](#) (EUMA Armenia), a [decision](#) adopted by the Council on 23 January 2023 under the common security and defence policy (CSDP), and in response to an official Armenian request. The [EUMA](#) Armenia – swiftly [deployed](#), by 20 February 2023 – is composed of up to 100 unarmed staff, including experts and monitors, with the mandate to observe and report on the situation along Armenian borders with Azerbaijan, including the border with the Azerbaijani Nakhchivan exclave. The strategic objective of the EUMA is to contribute to decreasing the number of incidents in conflict-affected areas and reduce the level of risk for local populations. The EUMA should also help to enhance confidence-building measures between the Armenian and Azerbaijani populations and authorities and in this way support the EU's efforts to promote peace in the region.

In parallel, in a mediation process led by European Council President Charles Michel, complemented by [US talks](#) led by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan have [agreed](#) to a **longer-term negotiation plan** for a comprehensive peace agreement. During the [trilateral meeting](#) held in Brussels on 14 May 2023 the leaders confirmed their unequivocal commitment to 'the respective territorial integrity of Armenia (29 800 km²) and Azerbaijan (86 600 km²)', and agreed that the 'ultimate delimitation of the border will be agreed through negotiations', which both parties agreed to resume. The statement also mentions that positions on the reopening of the railway connections to and via Nakhchivan 'have now come very close', and underlines 'progress on 'unblocking transport and economic links in the region', with no specific mention of the situation around the Lachin corridor.

The explicit commitment to circumscribe the territorial claims by Armenia to the territory of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic at the time of independence in 1991 – i.e. without Nagorno-Karabakh – was previously made clear by Pashinyan during an [address](#) to the Armenian National Assembly on 18 April 2023 as the only way to make 'peace possible in all our international relations'. Some analysts believe that this shift in Armenia's negotiating position, now [focused](#) on the 'security and rights' of the inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh, and no longer on the 'status' of the region, may represent a [breakthrough](#) in the negotiations and open the way to a sustainable political settlement of the conflict. Experts have also warned, however, that this comes at a heavy price for the inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh,⁴ and with a political cost for Pashinyan, whose [ambitious](#) reform agenda has been already seriously [hampered](#) by the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict.

Trilateral negotiations will follow in July, as well as on the margins of EPC summits,⁵ on 1 June 2023 in Chisinau, Moldova, and scheduled in October 2023 in Granada, Spain. The leaders have also agreed to continue to meet trilaterally in Brussels 'as frequently as necessary' to address ongoing developments on the ground and standing agenda items of the Brussels meetings.

The Kremlin has meanwhile continued to call for [trilateral meetings](#), in an attempt to retain [Russia's role](#) in the region, with [limited success](#) and in the midst of open [accusations](#) by the Armenian government of its failure to provide [security guarantees](#).

Web of regional alliances

Armenia, a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization ([CSTO](#)),⁶ and the Eurasian Economic Union ([EAEU](#)), has started to [question](#) the role of Russia as a security provider in the region, after [triggering](#), without success, the treaty's mutual defence mechanism in September 2022, on the basis that internationally recognised Armenian territory was under attack (and not only Nagorno-Karabakh). Iran has [attended](#) events held by the CSTO Parliamentary

Assembly, announcing at the last meeting on 5 December 2022 its interest in developing friendly relations with CSTO Members.

Armenia and Türkiye have recently taken timid steps to [restore diplomatic relations](#), severed since 1993, and the border between them re-opened [temporarily](#) in February 2023, to allow [humanitarian assistance](#) to be provided for earthquake victims in Türkiye.

Türkiye is traditionally an ally of Azerbaijan, and in 2010 they signed an [agreement](#) on strategic partnership and mutual support, including a clause on common defence in the event of an armed attack or military infringement against either of the countries.

In [February 2022](#), Azerbaijan [signed](#) a '[declaration on allied interaction](#)' with Russia, just 2 days before the full-scale invasion – including military cooperation and the possibility of 'providing each other with military assistance'.

European Parliament position

On 15 March 2023 the European Parliament adopted resolutions on [EU-Armenia relations](#) and on [EU-Azerbaijan relations](#). Parliament welcomed recent progress in EU-Armenia bilateral relations, urging Armenia and Azerbaijan to implement in full the November 2020 ceasefire agreement. Parliament strongly condemned the large-scale military aggression by Azerbaijan in September 2022 against multiple targets in the sovereign territory of Armenia, which constituted 'a serious breach of the November 2020 ceasefire statement and contradicted earlier commitments, including those made in the framework of EU-mediated talks', as well as the military incursions made across the non-delimited border since May 2021. Stressing the need to advance talks on the future peace treaty to address root causes of the conflict, Parliament urged Azerbaijan to allow free movement along the Lachin corridor and insisted that the parties find a viable solution to link the Nakhchivan region with the rest of Azerbaijan. It also called on Azerbaijan to allow EU monitors on its side of the border. Parliament highlighted Azerbaijan's poor record on [upholding human rights](#) and fundamental freedoms, and stressed the need to make further EU–Azerbaijan cooperation conditional on the country's effective and tangible progress towards respect for international standards and commitments. MEPs also highlighted the multiple challenges for Armenia following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and condemned Türkiye's expansionist and destabilising role in the South Caucasus.

In previous resolutions, the Parliament had [deplored](#) the humanitarian consequences of the blockade of the Lachin corridor and the inaction of the Russian 'peacekeepers', and called for a UN and OSCE fact-finding mission to be deployed. It [denounced](#) the destruction of cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh, and [called](#) for the release of all remaining prisoners of war. In 2021, Parliament [regretted](#) that changes to the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh had been made 'through military force, rather than peaceful negotiations'.

EU-Azerbaijan bilateral relations

The EU–Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement ([PCA](#)), in force since 1999, is the framework for bilateral relations, and [negotiations](#) on a new comprehensive agreement were launched in 2017. The most recent [meeting](#) of the EU-Azerbaijan Cooperation Council took place on 19 July 2022. A day earlier, the two parties signed a memorandum of understanding ([MoU](#)) on a strategic energy partnership, aimed at increasing Azerbaijani gas deliveries to the EU through the [Southern Gas Corridor](#) to at least 20 billion cubic metres per year by 2027 (from 8.1 billion in 2021).

The MoU, seen as part of the [EU strategy](#) of decoupling from energy dependence on Russia, has been criticised as [disregarding](#) the human rights situation and the role of Azerbaijan in the conflict.

EU-Armenia bilateral relations

[Bilateral](#) relations between the EU and Armenia are based on the EU–Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement ([CEPA](#)), which was signed in 2017 and entered into force in March 2021. Armenia participates in the EU [Eastern Partnership](#). The most recent [meeting](#) of the EU–Armenia Partnership Council took place in May 2022. The EU is the largest development [cooperation](#) donor in Armenia, and one of Armenia's main [trading](#) partners.

On 25 April 2023, the Chair of the Delegation for relations with the South Caucasus, Marina Kaljurand (S&D, Estonia), and the European Parliament's Standing Rapporteurs on Armenia and Azerbaijan, Andrey Kovatchev (EPP, Bulgaria) and Željana Zovko (EPP, Croatia), issued a [joint statement](#) on 'the blatant disrespect by Azerbaijan of its international obligations regarding the Lachin Corridor'. They expressed their strong concern in relation to the installation by Azerbaijan of a checkpoint on the Lachin Corridor on 23 April 2023, in a clear violation of the ceasefire statement of 9 November 2020, and in disrespect of the [binding ruling](#) of the International Court of Justice of 22 February 2023 – which ordered Azerbaijan to 'take all measures at its disposal to ensure unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles and cargo along the Lachin Corridor in both directions'.

MAIN REFERENCES

International Crisis Group, [Averting a New War between Armenia and Azerbaijan](#), January 2023.

Krivosheev K., [Armenia is ready to relinquish Nagorno-Karabakh: What next?](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2023.

Ghazaryan N., ['The EU and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: The Forty-Four-Day and Its Aftermath'](#), *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 28(1), 2023, pp. 53-71.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ E. Souleimanov, 'The Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh', in Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2004, 2005*, pp. 203-220.
- ² The main elements of these principles were: a guaranteed interim status for the region, pending a legally binding referendum on its final status; the return of all occupied territories outside Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control, with the exception of a corridor connecting to Armenia; and the right of all displaced persons to return to their former places of residence.
- ³ [Averting a New War between Armenia and Azerbaijan](#), International crisis group, January 2023.
- ⁴ For a more in depth-analysis, see [Armenia is ready to relinquish Nagorno-Karabakh: What next?](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2023.
- ⁵ Side EPC meetings will include the leaders of France and Germany, in addition to the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the European Council President.
- ⁶ Leaders from the CSTO countries (Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) attended Victory Day celebrations in Moscow on 9 May 2023.

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