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The Role of Foreign Actors in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict

Russia, Turkey, China, and India

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Abstract

This AIES Focus discusses the involvement of foreign actors in the Armenia-Azerbaijan. Russia and Turkey are actively engaged, while China and India play more implicit roles. The focus is on divergent and convergent perspectives among these actors, with attention to the Zangezur corridor and its significance. Russia's declining but still influential role, Turkey's active support for Azerbaijan, China's peace-making stance, and India's cautious engagement are analysed. Despite differing approaches, all recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, with implications for the region's geopolitics.

Introduction

This AIES Focus discusses the four major foreign actors in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan within the time frame of the last 12 to 18 months. While Russia and Turkey are active and directly involved, China and India are implicitly but not explicitly involved in the conflict. As a result, the author tries to present and highlight the divergent and convergent perspectives of the foreign actors in the conflict. One of the major focal points of the conflict relates to what the Azerbaijani call the Zangezur corridor and the Armenians perceive as a bone of contention. What is perhaps not least important to emphasise is that for Ilham Aliyev, the President of Azerbaijan, the corridor

has a crucial role in the transportation link between Turkey, Azerbaijan and the Turkic States. As for Armenia and Iran, its neighbouring country, the establishment of such corridor perceived as an existential threat to the established link to Georgia and further to the European Union (EU). The author thus assesses the position of these foreign actors in the conflict, before analysing the constellation Armenia faces as a result.

Russia

Russia occupies a contradictory position as the dominant arms supplier to both sides and the main provider of peacekeeping forces to the region. Although Russia has a military base in Armenia's city of Gyumri and Armenia is a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Russia has been turning its attention towards Azerbaijan – a major market for Russian arms exports (and less attention towards Armenia, its trustworthy ally). Russia accounted for about 94 percent and 60 percent of Armenia and Azerbaijan arms imports, respectively, from 2011 to 2020.¹ However, from 2021 until today the Russian arms exports to Armenia and Azerbaijan have been reduced to a trickle while Israeli and Turkish arms exports to Azerbaijan increased considerably and India, as will be discussed below, stepped in for Armenia.

Another example of Moscow's preference of Azerbaijan over Armenia is presented below. Since the failed European Union (EU) peace effort on 5 October 2023, Baku has been hardening its stance against Yerevan. Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry accused Nikol Pashinyan, the Armenian Prime Minister, of undermining the peace process with "aggressive rhetoric." Baku's harsh language comes after Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, invited Ilham Aliyev, the Azerbaijani President, to a regional summit in Kyrgyzstan on 12-13 October which was not attended by Pashinyan. Experts suspect Putin is using centuries-old Russian diplomatic tactics to maintain hegemony in the region which is no longer a Russia-alone sphere of influence.

According to Tatiana Mitrova, Russian expert and a Visiting Professor at the Paris School of International Affairs, "Russia was always playing on these contradictions and mutual dissatisfaction. It is a typical divide-and-rule policy starting from Czarist Russia before the Soviet Union, so it has exceptionally long historical roots. Moreover, I would say my impression is that these days Moscow would do everything to create instability everywhere"² including the South Caucasus, where historical grievances and unfinished territorial claims remain unresolved.

Moscow's long-time support for ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh failed to stop the September 2023 military offensive by Azerbaijan that ended Armenian control of the area. Before Azerbaijan acted, Nikol Pashinyan, the Armenian Prime Minister, said: "Even if it wishes so, the Russian Federation cannot meet Armenia's security needs. This example should demonstrate to us that dependence on just one partner in security matters is a strategic mistake"³ and the cost of such strategic mistake to Armenia is huge. At the same time, it needs to be emphasised that Moscow provided only tacit support for ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

In the Russian extended defence treaty with Armenia signed by Presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Serzh Sargsyan on 20 August 2010, analysts noted: The extended treaty only refers to defending Armenia, while Nagorno-Karabakh is legally part of Azerbaijan, and is therefore *not covered by the treaty*⁴ (the author's italics). Since the start of the Russian war against Ukraine in February 2022 the issue of defending Armenia against encroaching Azerbaijan is no longer on Moscow's agenda. And as the Russian proverb says: "Rescuing drowning people is the work of the drowning people themselves." However, the security situation around Armenia in 2024 is not the same as it was in 2010. But even then, analysts were doubtful of Moscow's binding defence assurances to Yerevan and wondered whether Moscow would come to the rescue of

Armenia if and when Azerbaijan initiates a military campaign against the latter. As a result, it can be said that in the eyes of Armenians Moscow was already seen as an unreliable ally while Armenia unequivocally supported Russia in its war against Ukraine in the international fora.

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Therefore, it can be said that with the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in September 2023, Russia, Turkey and Azerbaijan aligned their foreign and security policy against Armenia with the aim to exert pressure on and demand further concessions from Armenia. By aligning their foreign and security policy the trio also aims to keep Western countries' involvement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict minimal and contained, and the region to be isolated from attempts by external forces to provide military support to Armenia.

Despite the counter claims coming from the trio that they have no intention to pressure Armenia to give away control over what the Turkish and Azerbaijanis call the Zangezur corridor, the current reality supports the author's assertion. In other words, this is not a far-fetched but rather realistic and optimal scenario for Azerbaijan and Turkey to take the Zangezur corridor by force and this needs to be remembered since the international community's attention is diverted away

from the South Caucasus. As a result, Baku and Ankara's timing to seize the Zangezur corridor with the tacit support of Moscow is crucial for completing the military campaign that led to the dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Turkey

Turkey has firmly put its weight behind oil-rich Azerbaijan as a decade-old territorial dispute flared anew into an armed conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey, as a NATO member, has vowed to support long-time ally Azerbaijan "on the battlefield or the negotiating table," if needed.

Turkey's military has been training Azerbaijani officers for decades. In August 2020, its armed forces conducted large-scale military exercises in Azerbaijan. Turkey is also Azerbaijan's third-largest supplier of military equipment after Russia and Israel. According to Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, Ankara Director of the German Marshall Fund (GMF), Turkey may have sent military UAV operators to help Azerbaijan⁵ in the 44-day war against Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh. There is no doubt whatsoever that Turkish assistance proved decisive for Azerbaijan's military superiority over Armenia during the 44-day war, notably thanks to the use of Turkish Bayraktar TB-2 UAVs⁶ but not only.

According to David Tonoyan, former Armenian Defence Minister, "The air force of the Defence Army could have shot down Turkish F-16s during the 44-day

war, but this did not happen, because the Russian Federation urged us not to provoke the situation. Turkey's intervention was not indirect, but (rather) direct. F-16s were used, which revealed our entire air-defence system"⁷ and put Armenia in a tight spot. Therefore, it can be said that the brotherly relations between the two countries were and remain the fundament of their joint policy against Armenia. The relations were further elevated to a new status with the signature of the Shusha Declaration signed on 15 June 2021. The declaration is the first document signed between Ankara and Baku which includes the word "alliance." The parties in the declaration have pledged support for each other on significant issues at both international and regional levels.⁸ Consequently, Turkey will not sign a peace agreement with Armenia prior to a peace agreement signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

When for instance, Turkey explicitly sided with Azerbaijan and Russia secured a ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan after the 44-day war in 2020, China and India played a cautious role in the conflict. Their role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is discussed below.

China

Remarks by Geng Shuang, China's Ambassador at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Briefing, were loud and clear: "We call on Armenia and Azerbaijan to exercise restraint,

resolve problems and differences through political dialogue, and take measures to avoid further escalation of the situation."⁹ With the surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan in September 2023 the Chinese Foreign Ministry has made no comment on the issue¹⁰ but remained muted. Nevertheless, it is known that China recognised the fact that Nagorno-Karabakh was part of Azerbaijan. And in this respect China's position is not different from that of Russia.

At the same time, it is well-known that China has never shown interest in contesting Russia's security role in the former Soviet Union. For Beijing, better than tangling with Moscow over military matters would be to see the South Caucasus begin to resemble Central Asia: a region with traditional ties to Russia, yes, yet wide open to Chinese business¹¹ interests.

In other words, China's position is fairly clear and consistent; namely, political dialogue, non-military interference in the conflict in contrast to Russia and pursuit of its business interests. For instance, Fan Yong, Chinese Ambassador to Armenia, said on 8 December 2023: "The trade turnover between China and Armenia exceeded US\$1.5 billion for the first nine months of 2023."¹² In the first 11 months of 2023, Azerbaijan's imports from China increased by 47 percent and amounted to US\$2.5 billion.¹³ Thus, China is perceived by the two countries as the magnet economy despite the economic imbalance between Armenia and Azerbaijan with

China. What is perhaps not least important is that China refused to be drawn into the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict since it considers this conflict to be of no interest to China.

India is, however, playing a cautious but ambiguous role as presented below.

India

It is important to remember that given India's historical non-alignment policy, there was no expectation for India to side with Armenia against Azerbaijan with which India maintains equally strong bilateral relations. However, in the aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which recently resulted in the dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh, geopolitical complexities emerged – with implications for India-Armenia relations.

Armenia's accusations of "ethnic cleansing" by Azerbaijan in the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as India's continuing silence pose challenges for India-Armenia relations that could further strain relations.¹⁴ India's continuing silence in the aftermath of the dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh was seen by Armenia as a tacit approval of Azerbaijan's successful military operation in September 2023. And that is despite the recently concluded military procurement agreements between India and Armenia which are discussed below. India's contradictory role cannot be easily explained. On the one hand, India supplied weapon systems to Armenia between 2022 and 2023. However,

India sees this through a purely business lens. On the other hand, its continuing silence can be interpreted as an understanding that Nagorno-Karabakh was legally speaking a part of Azerbaijan. As a result, India is trying to maintain the middle ground.

A Milestone in India-Armenia Relations

In an interview with Gulshan Sachdeva, the Jean Monnet Chair and Coordinator of the Jean Monnet Centre for Excellence at the School of International Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi on 22 January 2024, the latter ascertained: “The visit of Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India’s Foreign Minister, in October 2021 was a turning point in India-Armenia relations. The visit was the first of its kind for independent Armenia, paving the way for an ever-deepening bilateral partnership with economic and national security dimensions. As India’s economic and military power is on the ascent, this partnership is becoming increasingly significant for Armenia.”¹⁵

It is well-documented that thus far India has concluded agreements with Armenia for the supply of the India manufactured weapon systems such as PINAKA multi-barrel rocket launchers (MBRLs),¹⁶ SWATHI weapon-locating radars,¹⁷ ZEN counter unmanned aerial vehicle (CUAV) system that includes both training solutions and the system,¹⁸ NAG anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs)¹⁹ and MARG 155mm wheeled self-propelled

howitzers (SPHs).²⁰ In other words, New Delhi sees Yerevan as an important customer (for the Indian aforementioned indigenous weapon systems) that can be weaned away from Russia. The latter, due to its war against Ukraine is unable to provide Armenia with modern weapon systems.

When it comes to Armenia’s military procurement from India, Russia may not be entirely happy, however, it puts a good face on the matter. Besides, India as a long-term customer and partner of Soviet and Russian manufactured weapons built a huge arsenal of those weapons and they can be supplied to Armenia. Armenia is also keen to learn how to modernise Soviet and Russian equipment in its inventory and integrate it with the Western system. As a result, India is a key partner for Armenia in this endeavour.

New Delhi sees Yerevan as an important customer that can be weaned away from Russia.

However, the dialogue with India is not just about military procurement but also about the construction of potential joint ventures for local assembly of equipment and training facilities for Armenian officers. Interestingly enough, Major General (retired) Ashok Kumar, proposed to establish an Indian Army Training Team (IATT) in Armenia if the Armenian side responds positively to such a proposal.²¹ Thus

far, Armenia has not responded to Kumar’s proposal. The open sources information about the potential Armenian-Indian joint weapons production remain scarce. Alternatively, it can be assumed that the two sides have not yet agreed on parameters of joint production or the information remains classified.

Conclusion

As presented above the role of foreign actors differs from country to country. Nevertheless, there is at least one common point between Russia, China and India. Legally speaking, the three countries recognise that the dissolved Nagorno-Karabakh was and remains part of Azerbaijan despite objections from Armenia. Another convergence brings Russia, Turkey and Azerbaijan into the equation, all of which, aligned their foreign and security policy against Armenia.

Russia’s role in the conflict, in general, and in the South Caucasus, in particular, has declined, but Russia tacitly agreed to share the region with Turkey and sees Armenia as a heavy burden that is not yet ready to abandon due to the economic, political and military interests. At the same time, Putin’s administration realised that Azerbaijan as the winner in the conflict is not judged. In other words, the main thing is to achieve victory, no matter which way. As a result, Russia aligned its foreign and security policy with Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Turkey played and continues to play an active role as a weapon systems provider to Azerbaijan, trainer of the Azerbaijani military and intelligence sharing with the country. At the same time, Turkey's company Baykar, manufacturer of the Bayraktar TB-2 UAV, did not agree to set up UAV manufacture in Azerbaijan under license and that is despite the fact that Azerbaijan is a country with which it has brotherly relations. It is evident that the aforementioned Shusha Declaration further cemented already strong Azerbaijan-Turkey relations and elevated these relations to the status of an alliance.

China has no real interest in conflict intervention. As a result, it plays a role of a kind of peace maker which appeals to the warring parties to find reasonable solutions. The warring parties listen to China because they see in the country a magnet economy with which they strive to cooperate.

India due to its historical non-aligned policy, has kept away from the conflict, however, at the same time has maintained friendly bilateral relations with the warring parties. India's decision to export weapon systems to Armenia starting from 2022

can be seen as the country's business opportunity to partially replace Russia as the major arms exporter to Armenia.

About the Author

Dr. Eugene Kogan is an expert for military technology and the Caucasus as well as Black Sea region. He was visiting researcher at various renown European institutes, such as the DGAP and SWP in Berlin, the FOI in Stockholm, and defence and security expert at the defunct International Institute for Liberal Policy (IILP) in Vienna under directorship of Prof. Dr. Erich Reiter.

¹ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), A renewed Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: Reading between the front lines (2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/renewed-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-reading-between-front-lines> Hereafter cited as CSIS, A renewed Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In addition to the military base in Gyumri, Russia has also airbase in Erebuni, situated in the vicinity of Yerevan airport.

² French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), As Azerbaijan and Turkey join forces, fears of Armenia conflict grow (2023), <https://www.rfi.fr/en/podcasts/international-report/20231022-as-azerbaijan-and-turkey-join-forces-fears-of-conflict-with-armenia-grow> Hereafter cited as IFRI, As Azerbaijan and Turkey.

³ Strategic Comments, The first China-Central Asia Summit (2023), [China Central Asia Summit 2023.pdf](#) Nikol Pashinyan, Armenian Prime Minister, was very vocal when he said in January 2023: "The military presence of Russia not only does not guarantee the security of Armenia but, on the contrary, creates threats to Armenia's security." JAM News, "Russia's military presence does not guarantee the security of Armenia" – Pashinyan (2023), <https://jam-news.net/pashinyan-press-conference/>

See also Reuters, Armenia can no longer rely on Russia for military and defence needs – PM Pashinyan (2024), <https://www.yahoo.com/news/armenia-no-longer-rely-russia-071810876.html>

⁴ For the complete article and different opinions regarding Russian defence of Armenia, see Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Russia, Armenia sign extended defense pact (2010), https://www.rferl.org/a/Russian_President_Medvedev_To_Visit_Armenia/2131915.html

⁵ Associated Press (AP) News, AP Explains: What lies behind Turkish support for Azerbaijan (2020), <https://ap-news.com/article/turkey-territorial-disputes-azerbaijan-ankara-armenia-9a95d9690569623adedffe8c16f3588d> Their armed forces also hold a three days large-scale military exercises across Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, an Azeri enclave that borders Turkey, in October 2023. IFRI, As Azerbaijan and Turkey.

⁶ CSIS, A renewed Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. See also Middle East Monitor, Azerbaijan acknowledges use of Turkey drones in conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (2020), <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201006-azerbaijan-acknowledges-use-of-turkey-drones-in-conflict-over-nagorno-karabakh/> Aliyev visited several military facilities on 9 February 2024 and observed the flights of

new Turkish Akinci UAV recently accepted into the service by the Air Force. Mediamax, Aliyev observes flights of new Turkish Akinci drones (2024), <https://mediamax.am/en/news/world/53872/>

⁷ JAM News, "They could have shot down Turkish F-16s, but the Russian Federation didn't advice it" – former Armenian defence minister (2023), <https://jam-news.net/david-tonoyan-on-the-circumstances-of-the-2020-war/> In confirmation of Turkey using the F-16s in the 44-day war, see Panorama, Senator Rand Paul seeks to stop arms sales to Turkey (2024), <https://www.panorama.am/en/news/2024/02/08/Rand-Paul-Turkey/2962079>

⁸ Anadolu Agency (AA), Landmark Shusha Declaration between Turkiye, Azerbaijan turns year-old (2022), <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/landmark-shusha-declaration-between-turkiye-azerbaijan-turns-year-old/2614301>

⁹ For the complete speech, see Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, Remarks of Ambassador Geng Shuang at the UN Security Council Briefing on the Armenia-Azerbaijan Border Situation (2022), http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202209/t20220916_10766894.htm See also Armen Press,

China calls for mutual concessions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, diplomatic solutions (2023), <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1117524.html>

¹⁰ The China Project, Azerbaijan and China have many mutual interests, but Baku is not completely aligned with Beijing (2023), <https://thechinaproject.com/2023/09/27/azerbaijan-and-china-have-many-mutual-interests-but-baku-isnt-completely-aligned-with-beijing/>

¹¹ Eurasianet, Perspectives| How China gains from Armenia-Azerbaijan war (2020), <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-how-china-gains-from-armenia-azerbaijan-war>

¹² Caucasus Watch, China emerges as Armenia's second –largest trade partner [after Russia] with US\$1.5 billion turnover (2023), [https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/china-emerges-as-armenias-second-largest-trade-partner-with-15-billion-turnover.html#:~:text=At%20the%205th%20conference%2C%20%22Eurasian,for%20nine%20months%20of%202023. According to Alexey Overchuk, Russian Deputy Prime Minister, trade turnover between Armenia and Russia for the first 9 months of 2023 increased by 43.5 percent to US\\$4.4 billion. Russian News Agency TASS, Volume of Russia-Armenia trade reaches US4.4 billion over 9 months \(2023\), https://tass.com/economy/1721765](https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/china-emerges-as-armenias-second-largest-trade-partner-with-15-billion-turnover.html#:~:text=At%20the%205th%20conference%2C%20%22Eurasian,for%20nine%20months%20of%202023. According to Alexey Overchuk, Russian Deputy Prime Minister, trade turnover between Armenia and Russia for the first 9 months of 2023 increased by 43.5 percent to US$4.4 billion. Russian News Agency TASS, Volume of Russia-Armenia trade reaches US4.4 billion over 9 months (2023), https://tass.com/economy/1721765)

¹³ For the complete article, see Azer News, New era in rise of Azerbaijan-China trade relations [Commentary]

(2023), <https://www.azernews.az/analysis/217840.html> See also Azer News, Trade turnover between China, Azerbaijan is expected to increase by 40 percent (2023), <https://www.azernews.az/business/214387.html>

¹⁴ South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF), India-Armenia relationship: from cultural ties to strategic partnership – WP 36 (2023), <https://www.sadf.eu/india-armenia-relationship-from-cultural-ties-to-strategic-partnership-wp-36/>

¹⁵ Caucasus Watch, Gulshan Sachdeva: What's 'Strategic' about New Delhi's partnership with Yerevan? (2024), <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/interviews/gulshan-sachdeva-whats-strategic-about-new-delhis-partnership-with-yerevan.html>

¹⁶ The Eurasian Times, At par with HIMARS! Why Indian PINAKA MBRLs for Armenia is giving sleepless nights to Azerbaijan (2023), <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/at-par-with-himars-why-indian-pinaka-mbrls-for-armenia/>. For confirmation of Armenia's recent procurement of some weapons systems from India, see RFE/RL, Armenia's New Indian Weaponry (2023), <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-india-weapons-anti-drone/32679654.html>

¹⁷ Ponars Eurasia, Armenia's new SWATHI radars and defence imports from India: Eurasian geostrategy or technology interface? (2022), <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/armenias-new-swathi-radar-and-defense-imports-from-india-urasian-geostrategy-or-technology-interface/>

¹⁸ The Eurasian Times, After PINAKA rockets, Armenia buys Indian anti-drone system to fight Azerbaijan's kamikaze UAVs (2023), <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/after-pinaka-rockets-armenia-buys-indian-anti-drone-system/>.

¹⁹ Armenian Weekly, Armenia-India relations: From politics to arms trade (2022), <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/10/05/armenia-india-relations-from-politics-to-arms-trade/>

²⁰ Armen Press, Armenia to receive MArG 155mm wheeled self-propelled howitzers from India (2023), <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1124495.html#:~:text=Armenia%20is%20acquiring%20the%20India,mobility%2C%E2%80%9D%20according%20to%20IDRW.>

²¹ For the complete article, see First Post, Beyond Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: How India can help Armenia with military training (2023), <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/beyond-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-how-india-can-help-armenia-with-military-training-13334832.html> Another article on the potential modernisation of four Armenian Air Force Su-30s and training of Armenian pilots by India was published in The Eurasian Times, India could upgrade Armenia's Su-30 Flankers and train its fighter pilots as it battles nexus of Azerbaijan, Turkey and Pakistan – Reports (2023), <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/india-could-upgrade-armenias-su-30-flankers-train-its-fighter-pilots/>