



ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN PEACE PROCESS: *QUO VADIS?*

Toghrul Aliyev

DECEMBER 2022

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While offering a platform to start work between Armenia and Azerbaijan on a real peace and normalization of relations and trade between the two countries, the ceasefire Russia brokered to end the fighting in November 2020 has not been able to forestall renewed fighting. On September 13, [deadly clashes](#) broke out on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border that killed over 200 soldiers on both sides and left an unknown number of others wounded. Leading up to and following the latest skirmishes, several outside actors have attempted to increase their involvement in the conflict as mediators between the two sides. Namely, there are three main competing mediation tracks led by the United States, the European Union (EU), and Russia. Additionally, there are also regional actors contributing to the conflict's power dynamics – Türkiye, France, Iran, and Georgia. While these outside actors are competing to secure a seat at the negotiating table, the question then arises: do these powers' competing interests benefit the conflicting parties?

EU-Mediated Talks

Since [April 2022](#), the EU has increased its engagement to step in as a mediator between the two sides. Brussels hosted trilateral meetings between Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in April, May, and August. President of the European Council (EC) Charles Michel mediated these meetings that [centered](#) largely around issues such as border delimitation and demarcation, averting future clashes, and humanitarian concerns (including demining and prisoners of war), as well as connectivity issues like unblocking the transport links. On April 11, Azerbaijan and Armenia's Ministers of Foreign Affairs [held](#) their first publicly announced telephone call in over 30 years, which was considered a positive step towards the normalization process. Foreign Ministers of the two countries were also [tasked](#) by their respective leaders to start working on the draft text of a peace treaty.

Through the EU's mediation efforts, on October 7 Aliyev and Pashinyan [confirmed](#) their countries' commitment to the UN Charter and to the Declaration agreed in Alma-Ata on 21 December 1991, according to which both states recognize each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Moreover, the two leaders [agreed](#) to a civilian EU mission along the Azerbaijani-Armenian border. This agreement was reached when leaders of the two countries, as well as the French President Emmanuel Macron and EC President Michel, met in Prague on the sidelines of the first gathering of the European Political Community. In line with the agreement, the EU Council [deployed](#) up to 40 monitoring experts along the Armenian side of the international border with Azerbaijan with the objective of "monitoring, analyzing, and reporting on the situation in the region." Because of the temporary nature of the mission (two months maximum), the monitoring experts were [deployed](#) from the European Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia, which also [monitors](#) Georgia's administrative boundary lines with the two breakaway areas – Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Despite the recent success of the EU's mediation efforts, there are several concerns with the future involvement of other European parties such as France. On December 7, Azerbaijan [pulled out](#) of a planned summit meeting in Brussels over a dispute whether

President Macron, whom Baku accuses of harboring pro-Armenian bias, would be at the meeting. Because of France's close relations with Armenia and its large, politically active Armenian diaspora population, it appears that continuing the negotiations in a trilateral format with Michel would be the more viable option in the future.

U.S-Mediated Talks

The United States has played an important role in the Karabakh conflict since 1992 as a co-chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk Group. Despite Russia's and Türkiye's more active engagement in the dynamics of the conflict, the United States has noticeably [ramped up](#) its diplomatic engagement in the negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. On August 24, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken [appointed](#) Ambassador Philip T. Reeker as the U.S. Department of State's new Senior Advisor on negotiations in the Caucasus. Ambassador Reeker's appointment demonstrates the U.S. commitment to a long-term and sustainable political settlement to the Karabakh conflict. This commitment is also outlined in the latest U.S. National Security Strategy released in October 22, which asserts that the United States "will back diplomatic efforts to resolve conflict in the South Caucasus."

Since the escalation of the conflict in September, the U.S. diplomatic engagement with Armenia and Azerbaijan has been mainly through facilitating bilateral and trilateral meetings among Ministers of Foreign Affairs and National Security Advisers. Following the recent flareup, Secretary Blinken [spoke](#) with both Aliyev and Pashinyan to call for an end to the fighting. Blinken then met with Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov in New York on September 19, [emphasizing](#) the need to avoid further hostilities and underscoring the importance of returning to the peace process. On September 27, U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan [hosted](#) a trilateral meeting at the White House with the Secretary of the Security Council of Armenia Armen Grigoryan and Foreign Policy Advisor to the President of Azerbaijan Hikmet Hajiyev. "We discussed the importance of avoiding further violence and pursuing time-bound and focused negotiations," Sullivan [wrote](#) on Twitter.

The latest round of talks between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan were [held](#) on November 7, hosted by Secretary Blinken in Washington, DC. "What we are seeing now are real steps and courageous steps by both countries to put the past behind and to work toward a durable peace," Blinken [said](#) at the opening of the meeting. Moreover, during his latest [visit](#) to the South Caucasus states on the week of November 28th, Ambassador Reeker met with Aliyev in Baku and Pashinyan in Yerevan. Following the visit, Reeker [released](#) a video message on December 2, re-affirming U.S. commitment towards a durable peace in the region: "We firmly believe that continued direct dialogue and diplomacy, not military action, is key to resolving issues and to reaching a comprehensive lasting peace and prosperity for all."

Russia-Mediated Talks

As the mediator of the 2020 trilateral ceasefire agreement, Russia clearly views itself as the dominant actor controlling the situation on the ground in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, Russia's inability to enforce compliance from both sides to certain points of the ceasefire agreement, paired with the increased mobilization of Russian troops and resources towards Ukraine, has increased the tensions, ultimately weakening Russia's central role in the conflict as the mediator.

Since the start of Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has [removed](#) hundreds of its experienced peacekeepers from Nagorno-Karabakh, redirecting them to fight in Ukraine. Russia has also reportedly [relocated](#) 1,200-2000 of its troops in Georgia to Ukraine. This has weakened Russia's military presence in the South Caucasus. Russian peacekeepers' withdrawal from the Armenian-populated Farukh village in Nagorno-Karabakh in March led to Azerbaijani forces taking over the territory and the Armenian population evacuating.

Perhaps the biggest blow to Russia's control of the situation in Nagorno Karabakh came on September 13, when Azerbaijani and Armenian forces clashed along their shared borders. The September skirmishes caught many by surprise, since they were not on the traditional line-of-contact in Nagorno-Karabakh. Following the clashes, the Azerbaijani army [claimed](#) that it took control of "a number of important strategic positions and heights," while the Armenian forces announced that the Azerbaijani forces "advanced 7.5 kilometers deep into Armenian territory near the resort town of Jermuk." The Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), of which Armenia is a member, was [criticized heavily](#) by Pashinyan due to its unwillingness to intervene in the situation.

A major point of contention contributing to the escalation has been the unblocking of transport links. According to the 2020 [ceasefire agreement](#), all economic and transport connections should be opened and ensured, including the Lachin Corridor linking Armenia with Nagorno Karabakh, as well as the construction of new transport communications to link the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic with the western regions of Azerbaijan. According to Baku, this means that the road from western Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan, which would run through the southern Armenian region of Syunik (referred to as "the Zangezur Corridor") should have the same status as the Lachin Corridor from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh. President Aliyev, backed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has repeatedly [expressed frustration](#) over the fact that the Lachin Corridor remains open while Yerevan refuses to give up the 35-kilometer Zangezur Corridor. Meanwhile, Yerevan interprets this as a threat to Armenia's sovereignty and [claims](#) that it's only obligated to open the border to traffic from Azerbaijan. Armenia's stance on the issue is also supported by Iran, which [has](#) its own transport links to Armenia passing through Syunik. Iran [opened](#) a consulate in Syunik in October, after which there have been [rising tensions](#) in relations between Iran and Azerbaijan.

In terms of negotiations, Russia has been holding high-level bilateral and trilateral meetings between the Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders since the 2020 ceasefire agreement. Following the September clashes, Russia tried to regain control amid growing mediation efforts from the Western countries. The 31 October trilateral meeting in Sochi between Aliyev, Pashinyan, and Putin did not achieve any “[breakthrough](#)”; there were no tangible results. Russia has also been attempting to downplay the role that the EU and the OSCE have played in terms of bringing parties to the negotiating table. Following the EU-mediated negotiations in April, Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson for Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, denounced the EU for seeking to “hijack” the peace process.

Other Mediation Efforts

Georgia has been another regional actor attempting to provide a platform for normalization of relations between its two South Caucasian neighbors. In September 2021, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili [announced](#) the launch of the Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative to promote stability in South Caucasus. Garibashvili stated that through the micro-level tripartite discussion platform, Georgia “will facilitate dialogue and confidence-building, and lead to the implementation of practical solutions to regional issues of common interest with our U.S. and EU partners.” During President Aliyev’s official visit to Georgia in October 2022, PM Garibashvili [re-emphasized](#) the importance of current peace initiatives between Azerbaijan and Armenia and reassured them of Georgia’s readiness to continue and facilitate peaceful negotiations with its neighbors. Garibashvili also [underlined](#) the need for the two South Caucasus countries to have input throughout the peace process, so that it’s not only tailored by foreign parties.

Azerbaijan and Armenia have also continued their bilateral engagements. In February 2022, Baku submitted a proposal containing [five basic principles](#) to Yerevan, highlighting the key issues regarding the normalization process between the two sides, including the mutual recognition of each other’s territorial integrity and delimitation and demarcation of the states’ borders. The border commissions from the two countries [held meetings](#) in May and August 2022 to negotiate the process of delimitation. Despite bilateral engagements having stalled following the September 13 skirmishes, the five principles have re-emerged throughout the agenda of the mediation dialogues led by the outside actors. During his meeting with Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov on December 5, Bayramov [announced](#) that the third package of explanation of the Azerbaijani side on the peace agreement had been provided to Armenia. Despite the possibility of holding the third round of peace agreement negotiations before the end of 2022, Bayramov made cynical comments on the limited progress achieved, especially on the issues of opening communications and border delimitation.

Conclusion

With the increased involvement of outside powers in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it seems that there's a lot more at stake than achieving lasting peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Rather than competing for the respect of interests of big powers, conflicting parties and their interests at stake should be complementing. Ideally speaking, the terms of any peace agreement should benefit the conflicting parties first.

The prolongation of the status quo of the Karabakh conflict undoubtedly benefits Russia, because it continues to maintain its strategic leverage over the domestic and foreign affairs of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia has been seen as the [“traditional powerbroker”](#) in the region and the guarantor of Armenia's security; and at a time when it's becoming more engaged in its “special operation” in Ukraine, any attempts by conflicting and outside parties to peacefully resolve the conflict is expected to be met with resistance from the Russian side. At the same time, Russia's war with Ukraine has left the space open for the EU and the United States to step up their mediator roles. Although Russia might appear to be increasingly involved in Ukraine, one should not disregard Moscow's ability to sabotage a possible EU-mediated peace deal between Baku and Yerevan, especially given that it still has a large presence of peacekeepers on the ground.

The negotiations have stalled to a certain degree, and despite earlier predictions that a peace agreement would be signed by the end of the year, both sides have since prioritized their demands and played down the chances of a breakthrough. While Azerbaijan demands complete withdrawal of the remaining Armenian armed forces from Nagorno Karabakh and unblocking the Zangezur Corridor per the 2020 tripartite ceasefire agreement, Armenia has been emphasizing the rights of the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh. Despite both Aliyev and Bayramov having [assured](#) citizenship rights to Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, there seems to be an unwaning lack of trust between the two sides that prevents any further breakthrough in the peace talks. Regional powers such as Russia certainly have their own reasons and interests to mediate the conflict, but any lasting success can be achieved through bilateral engagement of Armenia and Azerbaijan themselves through the facilitation and confidence-building measures from the United States and EU.

1015 15th ST NW, SUITE 380
WASHINGTON, DC 20005
202.864.6958
INFO@CASPIANPOLICY.ORG
CASPIANPOLICY.ORG

CPC



CASPIAN
POLICY
CENTER