

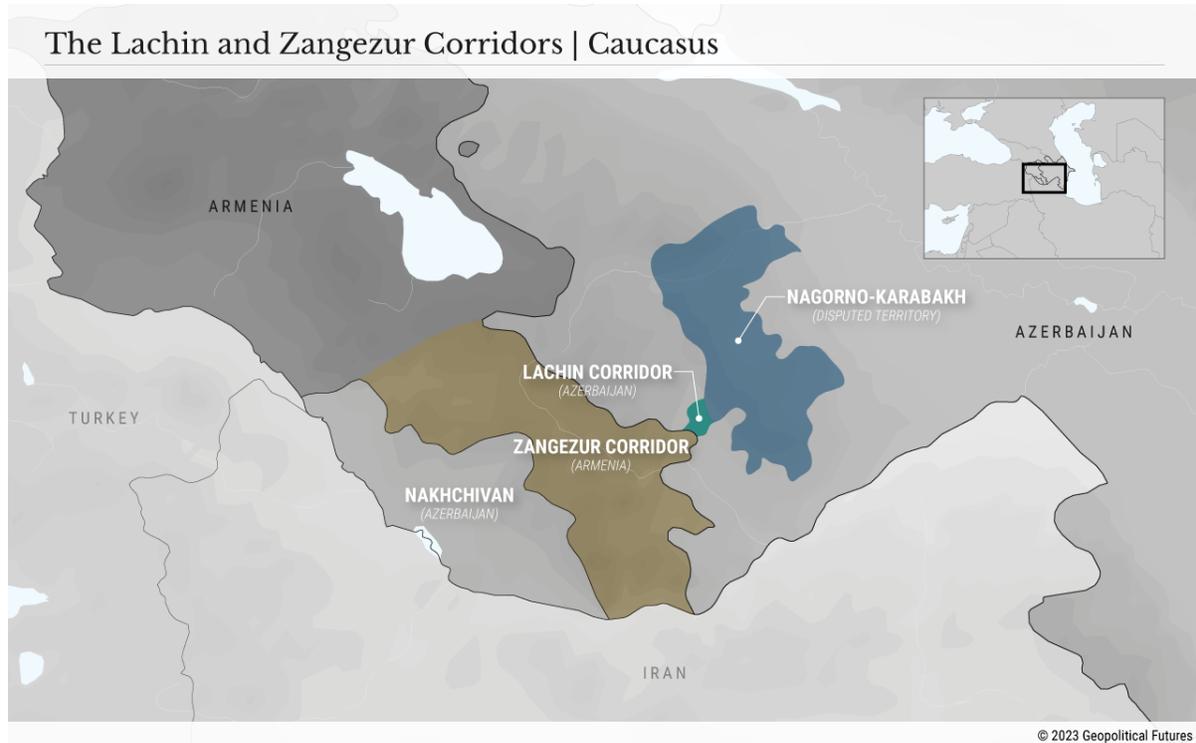
Tensions Escalate in Nagorno-Karabakh

by Ekaterina Zolotova - September 11, 2023

Azerbaijan has been massing troops along the line of contact with Nagorno-Karabakh and on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border for several days. Local media also report the presence of tanks, self-propelled artillery mounts, electronic warfare systems and other equipment. Armenian sources drew particular attention to an increased frequency of cargo flights from Azerbaijan to Israel, presumably for additional weapons. Both sides have accused the other of provocation, and both have warned that another war isn't out of the question.

It's not unusual for Azerbaijan and Armenia to level accusations at each other. The broader Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been going on for decades, and it's been only a few years since Azerbaijan prevailed in the second actual war over the territory. Skirmishes in the region are common, as are periodic drone operations from both sides. But the threat of a new war is another matter entirely. The Caucasus is a strategically important hotbed of geopolitical activity. Russia has long held a presence there, and its influence has only grown since the end of the war, when it sent troops to keep the tenuous peace. The war in Ukraine has also led to an influx of Russian immigrants and has goosed regional trade. Then there is Turkey. The government in Ankara wants to strengthen its role as a regional leader, drawing more attention from the European Union, which has intensified its efforts to mediate the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The United States, which ordinarily doesn't have as much at stake in the Caucasus, is waiting in the wings, ready to use whatever pressure points are available to hurt Russia.

To be sure, the possibility of war is real. Neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia has signed the treaty ending the last war (despite both insisting that they are committed to it). The only road connecting Armenia proper to the ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, a route known as the Lachin corridor, is still subject to a blockade. The breakaway area recently held elections, which the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry said violates the principles of international law. Armenians themselves are unhappy with the outcome of the last conflict; after losing, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan conceded that Nagorno-Karabakh belonged to Azerbaijan, inviting criticism from opposition parties and sparking protests among the public. Amid growing discontent and ongoing protests, Pashinyan may feel compelled to correct the situation, if not by returning losses then at least by improving his negotiating position.



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In this context, Armenia’s attempts to attract the attention of the international community – and, if possible, its assistance – have become clear. For example, Armenia announced joint military exercises with the U.S. from Sept. 11 to Sept. 20, ostensibly to train peacekeeping forces. Pashinyan also spoke by phone with French President Emmanuel Macron to discuss the situation, and he recently criticized his erstwhile ally in Moscow, expressing dissatisfaction with Russian peacekeepers’ inactivity.

Importantly, Yerevan’s actions in this regard can also be interpreted as an attempt to attract the attention of Russia and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization rather than an outright rejection of Moscow. Armenia is known to balance between the West and Russia. Before becoming prime minister, Pashinyan himself advocated for Armenia’s exit from the Eurasian Economic Union. In August, he expressed hope that trade turnover between Armenia and Russia this year would exceed \$5 billion. Armenia’s Security Council was recently conducting concurrent negotiations with NATO, citing insufficient benefits from its membership in the CSTO, and with Moscow over strengthening bilateral military and political cooperation. Moreover, Yerevan and Moscow both understand that Armenia is economically dependent on Russia, and their economic ties, especially through the EAEU, have only grown stronger in recent years. In the wake of Western

sanctions, Armenia became the largest beneficiary of the EAEU, its economy growing by 12.6 percent in 2022 thanks to the expansion of the services, construction and trade sectors facilitated by the bloc. In 2022, trade turnover between Russia and Armenia doubled after most European cargo carriers refused to cooperate directly with Russia.

Azerbaijan, meanwhile, has its own reasons to rattle the saber. Armenia has still not signed a treaty officially renouncing its claims to Nagorno-Karabakh. In addition, Azerbaijan is still cut off from Nakhchivan, which is part of Azerbaijan but separated from the country by Armenian territory. But as important, critical trade and transportation routes are emerging in the region, and Azerbaijan wants to position itself to capitalize off them accordingly. The demand for new routes in the wake of the Ukraine war is high basically everywhere, but Turkey, which is struggling with myriad economic problems, is especially interested in creating new, unencumbered routes now that Black Sea traffic has taken a dip. (Doing so, of course, would also spread its political influence throughout the region, hence talks this summer on a new railway.) Enter the Zangezur corridor, which is meant primarily to link the government in Baku to Nakhchivan but would have added benefits for other interested parties. According to various forecasts, Zangezur could add an additional 5 million to 8 million tons of cargo transportation to the Middle Corridor, a loosely defined trade route from Europe to East Asia that passes through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus. Armenia was supposed to ensure free access from Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan so that the Zangezur-affiliated Horadiz-Aghband-Meghri-Julfa-Arazdeyan railway could be restored, but Baku has accused Yerevan of dragging its feet. Azerbaijan has gone so far as to say that Zangezur will be completed by 2024 with or without Armenia's participation. It's possible, then, that Azerbaijan would want to proactively secure the area.

But Azerbaijan and Armenia are not the only competitors in a region as famously unstable as the Caucasus. Turkey is concerned that other countries will try to undermine its position by implementing the Middle Corridor on their own. China's ambassador to Georgia recently **said** Beijing is interested in such infrastructure projects, particularly the one at the deep water port of Anaklia. China has also stressed the importance of the Middle Corridor for logistics with Europe, and that collaboration with the EU would be an important venue for relations between Brussels and Beijing. In other words, Azerbaijan and Turkey are highly motivated to finish the project as soon as possible.

None of the majors – the U.S., Russia and the EU – are interested in a full-blown military conflict. The U.S. and the EU simply don't have much at stake here, and Russia needs the region to be stable. However, each could, in theory, benefit from a minor skirmish. Western powers may believe that if the conflict worsens, it could require Russian intervention and thus distract Moscow from its war in Ukraine. (Russia may believe similarly – that open conflict in the Caucasus could distract the

West from Ukraine.) If Pashinyan falls, Moscow would get rid of the ever-balancing leader in Armenia and Russia would likely strengthen its relationship with Azerbaijan, with which it is building a transport project. Another notable mention is Iran, which like many of its neighbors has begun to benefit from its position along the North-South Corridor. Despite its poor relations with Azerbaijan, Tehran doesn't want a war to break out either. On Sept. 9, the Azerbaijani defense minister met with an Iranian delegation to discuss the situation and military cooperation.

Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh will very likely break out, given the unresolved territorial disputes and the nature of the conflict. The question is when it will happen and how severe it will be. Meanwhile, the geopolitical game in the region will remain unchanged: Russia isn't going, the United States is ready to irritate Moscow with periodic appearances, and Turkey will further advance its interests.

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