

Crisis in Allied Relations Between Armenia and Russia

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The Second Karabakh War, which ended with Azerbaijan's military victory in 2020, changed the geopolitical landscape of the region, and the previous status quo was disrupted. Since the new regional order has not yet been formed, there are tensions and uncertainties. The trend in Armenian-Russian bilateral relations shows that the longstanding alliance between the two countries is weakening. The Armenian government's appeal to the European Union (EU) to launch a monitoring mission, with a civilian staff numbering approximately 100 in total for two years, is an important event and could be seen as a rather bold anti-Russian move for this small country, which has been known since its independence as a Russian outpost in the South Caucasus. Reactions from Moscow suggest that they are concerned about other potential developments in this direction. In this article, I explore what is happening between Armenia and Russia and what the EU wants to achieve by strengthening its presence in the region.

In my [article](#) posted on the last day of 2022, I wrote that "Moscow-Yerevan relations are destined to face turbulence in 2023," citing Armenian Primer Minister Nikol Pashinyan's veto of a draft declaration adopted at the November Summit of the CSTO in Armenia with Russian President Putin's participation, and the refusal of the Armenian side to participate in a tripartite meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia in Moscow on 23 December. Overall, I noted that the Russian-Armenian military alliance has actually become a formality and mutual trust has been lost. Events observed since the beginning of 2023 have confirmed this conclusion. On 23 January, the Council of the European Union agreed to establish a civilian European Union Mission in

Armenia (EUMA). “The objective of the Mission is to contribute to stability in the border areas of Armenia, building confidence on the ground, and ensuring an environment conducive to normalization efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan supported by the EU,” the Council said in a [statement](#). EUMA will have an initial mandate of two years and its Operational Headquarters will be in Armenia.

What does the European Union want to achieve?

Although the presence of an EU civilian mission in the region will not completely eliminate the possibility of a military confrontation at the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, this risk will be minimized. In particular, it should be noted that at the end of last year, no serious clashes were recorded during the EU’s short-term observation mission. Before that, in May and November 2021 and September 2022, there was fighting at the border. Monitoring by EU observers on the border also reduces the likelihood that Azerbaijan will implement the planned Zangezur Corridor by force. (There have been several statements by President Aliyev that if Armenia does not agree, the corridor will be taken by force.) EU monitoring will have the effect of stabilizing the position of the Pashinyan government in Armenia’s domestic politics. Previously, the situation at the border has allowed the opposition to push the narrative that Pashinyan’s inability to secure the country has weakened the country, thus creating a legitimacy problem for the prime minister. Thus, we can say that in addition to avoiding border clashes, the EU has an undeclared goal of preventing the collapse of the Pashinyan government.

The activity of the EU mission in the area is also important because of the possibility of Iranian military intervention in the region. The Iranian government considers the Zangezur Corridor as a change of borders in the region, and has repeatedly stated that it will not shy away from military intervention in this case. It has demonstrated its seriousness in this intention through military exercises. Undoubtedly, the

West is against such an intervention by Iran, so it should be emphasized that the EU mission also serves to deter Iran. Overall, the decision of 23 January 2023 shows the EU's determination to become a major player in the entire post-Soviet space, including the South Caucasus, and to increase its international weight under new leadership in Germany and France.

We should note that after the military clash on the Azerbaijan-Armenia border on 13 September 2022, which resulted in heavy losses on both sides, EU foreign ministers collectively decided on 17 October to send a 40-member civilian observer group to Armenia's border zone with Azerbaijan for a period of two months. The decision was made ten days before that date in a meeting between President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan, mediated by EU Council Chairman Charles Michel and French President Emmanuel Macron. At the end of the two-month period, an increase the civilian observer group's numbers and an extension of its term to a minimum of 2 years suddenly gave the short-term technical mission a geopolitical significance. As per the words of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, the transformation of the mission signifies opening a new stage in the Union's activity in the South Caucasus. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we have seen how the EU and the West in general have become emboldened in post-Soviet space and do not respect Russia's red lines in the region. With the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, and the prospect of Georgian membership, the South Caucasus also becomes one of the areas of rivalry between the European Union (the West in general) and Russia. Although the 44-day Second Karabakh War and its political consequences, which further strengthened Russia in the region, were unexpected for the West, thanks to four meetings held between Aliyev and Pashinyan in Brussels beginning in December 2021 under the mediation of Charles Michel (14 December 2021; 6 April, 22 May and 31 August 2022),

and with the organization of a quadrilateral meeting last October in Prague with the participation of the French president, as well as parallel steps taken by the US, the West soon came back into play. The achievement of this stage was the statement of the parties in Prague about the recognition of each other's territorial integrity on the basis of the UN Charter and the 1991 Almaty Declaration of the CIS.

Azerbaijan's position

President Ilham Aliyev's refusal to attend the next meeting, scheduled for 7 December, raised doubts about the development of achievements in Prague. Aliyev justified his decision with the fact that the Armenian side, as in Prague, demands the participation of French president Macron in the meeting. [In Aliyev's opinion](#), France's position after the meeting in the Czech Republic shows that this country took sides, so France cannot be a part of a peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Baku is also dissatisfied with the EU's decision to send a monitoring mission to Armenia for two years. [According](#) to president Aliyev, this is a violation of the Prague agreements, since it was agreed there that the mission would be short-term and consist of 40 people: "On 19 December, that mission should have ended, and members should have returned. In other words, it means that we were deceived. How can we work with you? How can we discuss anything if you deceive us on such a small matter—it is not a very serious matter—less than two months later? What did they do after that? After that, they officially stopped the mission operation on 19 December. But on 20 December, they sent a new mission. This is just manipulation. According to our information, they will be sent there again in February with a large delegation. Again, without our agreement."

The main reason for Azerbaijan's discontent is that after winning the war, it pursued a policy of achieving results in

the peacebuilding process, accompanying its diplomacy with hard power. This policy was to dictate terms to the Armenian government, creating constant military pressure on the border. President Aliyev wasn't bluffing when he said: "If Armenia doesn't want the Zangezur Corridor, then we will forcefully implement it," and with his steps on the Azerbaijani-Armenian border, he indicated the seriousness of his intentions. Armenia's ally Russia didn't try to hinder Baku policy as it is in Russia's interests to see the tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia controlled, to open the Zangezur Corridor, which will be controlled by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), and to shake Pashinyan's support within Armenia as a result of his capitulation to Azerbaijan. For its part, the EU, by sending a group of 100 observers to the region for 2 years, seeks to neutralize Azerbaijan's efforts, which we can call *peace by force*, and to cement Armenia's position at the table.

It is also worth mentioning one overlooked point on this issue. Azerbaijan blames Armenia for the border clashes since the war, claiming that these events occurred as a result of provocations by the Armenian side, stressing that Azerbaijan only takes retaliatory measures. If we accept this as truth, we have to say that after the arrival of the EU observers the possibilities for Armenia to commit such provocations have also decreased or disappeared, which must be in the interest of Azerbaijan as well.

These topics were discussed during the 17 February 2023 meeting between President of the European Council Charles Michel and Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference. Aliyev's [statement](#) to affirm Azerbaijan's support for the Brussels peace process suggests that the EU mediation mission will continue.

Russia's reaction

Russia has never concealed and cannot conceal its concern

about attempts by the West to encroach on its sphere of influence. Following the European Union's announcement of a long-term monitoring mission to the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russian officials suddenly signaled their displeasure with the EU plans, claiming that in fact the CSTO mission was ready and that they could be deployed within one or two days. Although Pashinyan's government had each time appealed to the Kremlin and the CSTO to monitor border areas following a spike in tension there, these appeals had remained unanswered. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, at a 18 January 2023 press conference preceding the official EU decision, expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that despite its alliance with Russia and full readiness of the CSTO peacekeeping mission, Armenia prefers to deploy EU's long-term monitoring mission at the border with Azerbaijan. In his [statement](#), Lavrov made a veiled threat to Armenia of "additional irritants": "this is the border with Azerbaijan, so if this mission unfolds without the consent of Azerbaijan, it may simply be counterproductive. Instead of building trust at the border, it can create additional irritants." By contrast, Russian State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin was more outspoken about the threat. At a meeting with his Azerbaijani counterpart, (Milli Mejlis) Speaker Sahiba Gafarova on 13 February, he vaguely [said](#) that an acute issue or conflict in the region cannot be resolved with the help of the European Union. "Whoever wants peace, whoever wants to settle the situation, must not only stay away from these quasi-parliaments—the PACE and European Parliament—but also must clearly understand that their [EU] involvement will escalate the situation, will create more and more problems. And those who make statements in the direction of [seeking assistance from] European institutions, can simply lose the country," Volodin added.

It is noteworthy that in both Lavrov's and Volodin's statements one can clearly feel the intention to intimidate Armenia through Azerbaijan. The translation of their

statements into simple language is that if Russia allows—that is, does not impede Azerbaijan—Azerbaijan can destroy Armenia, and Europe will not be able to prevent this.

Emphasizing the geopolitical aspect of the issue, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova called the presence of Russian peacekeepers in the region and Armenia's membership in the CSTO the cornerstone of the regional security system, thus [pointing to](#) Brussels' intention to change the security system. Colonel General of the Russian Armed Forces Anatoly Sidorov, Head of the CSTO Joint Staff, also [said](#) Washington and Brussels have different viewpoints regarding the settlement of the post-conflict conflict and want to adopt their own security model, ignoring Armenia's membership in CSTO. Armenia explains the invitation of European observers to the country with the collapse of the CSTO security system. Secretary of the Security Council of Armenia Armen Grigoryan [told](#) reporters that the existing security guarantees, envisaging a bilateral military alliance with Russia and within the CSTO, do not work, and they therefore invited an EU civilian mission in order to create some security guarantees.

Armenia in a security vacuum

Since the first years of independence, all incumbent governments in Armenia have viewed the alliance with Russia as the only reliable guarantee of security. Based on an agreement signed in 1992, Russian border guards began to protect Armenia's borders with Iran and Turkey. Under the intergovernmental agreement signed in 1995, the Russian 102nd Military Base was deployed in Armenia; in 2010, Russia and Armenia extended the term of the agreement on the deployment of the base until 2044; in 1997, the two countries inked the *Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance*; in 2000, they signed the *Declaration on Allied Cooperation*; and in 2016, an accord was signed to form a permanent joint Russian-Armenian ground force. Armenia has been a founding

member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) since its establishment in 1994.

That is, the military alliance between the two countries is based on a fairly deep treaty-legal basis. In parallel with meeting Armenia's security needs, Russia has taken control of the leading sectors of its economy. For the first 10 months of 2022, the bilateral trade increased in comparison with the same period in 2021 by 85% to \$3,8 billion, with Armenia's exports to Russia surging 2,5-fold to \$1,7 billion, while imports from Russia grew by 53% to [\\$2,1 billion](#). Armenia's trade volume with the Eurasian Economic Union in that same timeframe grew 90% to [\\$4,6 billion](#). Armenia has an energy dependence on Russia. *South Caucasus Railways* closed joint-stock company, which manages the Armenian railroad network, is a subsidiary of Russian Railways, the Russian fully state-owned vertically integrated railway company.

As a result of all this, Armenia became dependent on Russia in both the security and economic spheres, and its sovereignty was limited. Relying on its alliance with Russia, Armenia had kept Azerbaijan's territories under occupation for many years and was not inclined to compromise in peace negotiations. However, as a result of the 2020 Karabakh War and the subsequent change in Russia's traditional policy in the region—to support Armenia and ethnic Armenians—Armenia found itself in a security vacuum.

It is not easy to risk the sudden breakup of such close relations with such an aggressive partner like Russia. What is a difficult and risky, as well as time-consuming task for Armenia is to build a new security architecture, independent of Russia and contrary to its interests, to get out of dependence on Moscow in general, and to act as an independent regional player. When I say risky, I mean that Russia has a number of avenues through which to exert pressure on Armenia. For example, the [suspension](#) of natural gas supplies from Russia to Armenia in the past few days is most likely not for

technical reasons, but rather it is a political act and can be considered a warning signal for Pashinyan.

But despite these risks, we can see that Nikol Pashinyan is trying to do everything possible at this stage to gradually take Armenia away from Russia's sphere of influence. He has consistently conveyed to the Armenian public the opinion that Russia and other CSTO member-states are not fulfilling their allied obligations toward Armenia. For example, according to him, they [asked](#) "the CSTO to specify a CSTO zone of responsibility in Armenia as one of the most important issues. That is, to present to us your understanding of what the Republic of Armenia is? We have not received an answer to this question," he said. While Pashinyan knows Russia's position very well, every time there is tension on the border with Azerbaijan, the logical explanation for his official appeal to Moscow and the CSTO for military assistance is to demonstrate to the people the real position of the allies. All this strikes a blow to Russia's credibility in Armenia and creates fertile ground for the government's cautious pro-Western policy. At the same time, Pashinyan has thus disarmed the pro-Russian opposition in Armenia both ideologically and politically. Moscow, on the one hand, is trying to punish the Armenian government through Azerbaijan, and on the other hand, to explain to the Armenian people that it is a reliable ally, and that the problems stem from Pashinyan's policy.

Conclusion

Over the past 20 years of Armenian governments under Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, Armenia pursued deeper integration with Russia in all spheres. However, as a result of Russia's changing policy in the South Caucasus after the 2020 Karabakh War, the Armenian government has come to the opinion that relations with Russia are not equal, that this alliance serves the latter's geopolitical interests completely unilaterally, and has consequently started looking for different, alternative security guarantees. This is a long-

term process, requiring a consistent and targeted policy.

Although the EU monitoring mission does not provide credible security guarantees for Armenia, it is one of the temporary solutions in this field. Steps towards establishing relations with Türkiye are primarily aimed at improving the security environment for Armenia. It is too early to speak about a rift between Armenia and Russia, but even if the allied relations continue in a legal framework, they have actually entered a phase of crisis. Armenians have already begun to view Russia not as an ally, but as a [threat](#). Russia is losing its influence in Armenia, and this could have serious geostrategic consequences in the near future.