

Nagorno-Karabakh: The Transformation of the Over Thirty-Year-Long Armenia–Azerbaijan Conflict

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Abstract: The end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union marked a fundamental transformation in international politics. The South Caucasus, vacated by the Soviets, became one of the centers of international competition. Influenced by the diaspora, Armenia unilaterally declared the annexation of the Karabakh region, legally recognized as Azerbaijani territory, and altered the demographic structure of the region. A long period of violent conflict began in the region. Although ceasefires were established between the two countries, Armenia, supported by the West, sometimes violated these ceasefires. During this period, when the peoples of the world were becoming increasingly economically and socially interdependent and the importance of transnational organizations and institutions was growing, the conflict affected states in different ways. Armenia's limited economic resources and the increasing cost of continuing the struggle led to the deterioration of the country's economy and increased Russian influence. This stance resulted in

Armenia's exclusion from the East-West economic corridor. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War began in the early 2020s when Armenia, claiming the right to use force, conducted operations in Azerbaijani territories outside Karabakh. Ultimately, the war ended in favor of Azerbaijan, and Armenia responded favorably to Azerbaijan's ceasefire proposal, paving the way for a ceasefire agreement. This study evaluates the steps taken and the outcomes achieved in transforming the issue constructively toward peace after a long and destructive conflict. The importance of post-conflict transformation and its collaborative implementation is also examined.

Keywords: Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, Azerbaijan, ceasefire, conflict transformation.

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Introduction

Throughout history, the Caucasus, with its geopolitical importance, has been a battleground for regional powers. The region hosts important trade routes. These tensions have been further exacerbated by Armenians, who, with the support of Russia, have become a source of instability in the region. The occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenia has been a major factor shaping regional security in the South Caucasus since the 1990s. The conflict, which escalated into armed clashes after the collapse of the Soviet Union, made the Nagorno-Karabakh issue a significant element of global politics. The Karabakh problem evolved into a conflict affecting not only Azerbaijan and Armenia but the entire region. In this context, Armenia, due to its geopolitical position in the South Caucasus, became a battleground between Russia and Western powers. However, military, economic, and political shortcomings prevented Armenia from acting as an independent state. The country appears to have tied its future to assistance expected from the diaspora and Europe.

For many years, the Minsk Group was regarded as the sole platform for resolving the conflict, yet negotiations failed to yield results. From 1994 to 2020, intermittent clashes occurred between the parties. The consequences of these conflicts were multidimensional. Due to the Karabakh issue, Armenia became isolated in the South Caucasus. Two of its neighbors, Türkiye and Azerbaijan, suspended commercial and diplomatic ties. Armenia's policies led to embargoes and border closures by its neighbors. Its already struggling economy, further damaged by the occupation of Karabakh, led the country to fall under Russian economic, political, and military influence in exchange for loans received from Russia.

Armenia's attacks on Terter on September 27, 2020, constituted a serious violation of the ceasefire agreement, and Azerbaijan's response demonstrated that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue would now be resolved on the ground. The Pashinyan administration anticipated that Azerbaijan would not retaliate against Armenian attacks. However, this expectation was not met; Russia's focus shifted westward due to the war in Ukraine, and Armenia's rapprochement with the West created favorable conditions for Azerbaijan. Following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenia's acceptance of defeat and the liberation of a significant portion of the occupied territories marked the beginning of a new era between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The handshake between Aliyev and Pashinyan during the signing of the agreement strengthened their governments' and peoples' commitment to the agreements. It thus became possible to speak of a transformation of the conflict.

Conflict transformation is a reality that has existed throughout human history; however, as a field of practice, it emerged in the early 1990s. It focuses on large-scale, long-lasting, destructive conflicts and on how they can be transformed constructively (Kriesberg, 2011). Conflict transformation recognizes conflict as a normal and ongoing dynamic of human relations and seeks to expand opportunities for more peaceful and sustainable relationships between parties (Reimer & Thiessen, 2018). Many conditions can contribute to the transformation of a conflict. Even the seemingly intractable Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which lasted for nearly 30 years, can undergo

transformation. In the post-war period, the parties aim to reduce the underlying causes of the conflict and establish a lasting peaceful relationship. Third parties play an active role by helping to build bridges of understanding and facilitate dialogue. This process is not a unilateral imposition but a joint effort. The transformation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is likely to increase mutual interdependence and cooperation. In particular, the inclusion of Armenia in energy corridors and the expansion of commercial activities could make the peace environment sustainable. In this way, a period of development beneficial to both sides may emerge.

This study aims to address the Karabakh issue from past to present within a comprehensive historical framework. It examines whether the primary source of the problem lies solely with the aforementioned parties and explores the role of other possible actors that may have triggered or influenced the conflict. The study also seeks to explain how the issue evolved over the years from a bilateral dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia into a regional problem that has occupied the global agenda. Following the introduction, the study examines the causes of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the emergence of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. It then discusses the internationalization of the problem and the reasons for its prolonged unresolved status. After the section on the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the withdrawal from Karabakh, and the permanent ceasefire agreement, the study analyzes the transformation process of the conflict, the steps taken by the parties toward peace, and their impact on the region, as well as their potential benefits. The conclusion provides a general evaluation of the conflict transformation process.

The Causes of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict and the Emergence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Issue

The causes of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict have deep historical roots. The two-century-long dispute between the parties is essentially an artificial problem made in the early 18th century in line with Russia's policies regarding the region. The Armenians were actively used to implement Russia's policy of reaching warm seas, which began during the reign of Peter the Great. The demographic structure of the region was disrupted, making it problematic (Dedeyev, 2008).

Following the Iran–Russia (1826–1828) war, the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828) divided Azerbaijan into two, with one part remaining in Iran and the Khanates of Yerevan and Nakhchivan being ceded to Russia. Tsarist Russia adopted a policy of settling Christian populations, particularly Armenians, from neighboring countries in the region in order to strengthen its control over Karabakh (Vaserman & Ginat, 1994; Aliyev, 2009).

The Armenian region within the Russian Tsardom became nominally independent for a short period following the collapse of the Tsarist regime. However, it was soon occupied by the Red Army. Similarly, Azerbaijan, which gained independence in June 1918 following the fall of the Tsardom, was occupied by the Red Army in 1920. In Azerbaijan, Armenians

were appointed to high-level administrative positions (Arif, 2004). Through Armenians, the Russians aimed to maintain the advantages gained during the Tsarist era in their South Caucasus policy (Jane, 2020).

Karabakh, which has been part of Azerbaijan's cultural and political unity throughout history, is the name given to the mountainous region between the Kura and Aras rivers and Lake Goycha, as well as the plains connected to this region. Its geographical location allows it to control both Armenia and Iran (Aslanlı, 2001; Yalçinkaya, 2006). Armenians, in order to realize their dream of a "Greater Armenia", sought the displacement of the local Turkic-Muslim population in Karabakh, Yerevan, Nakhchivan, and other Azerbaijani territories (Cömert, 2020). It is reported that between 1928 and 1930, 40,000 Armenians were migrated from Iran and 84,000 from Türkiye to the Caucasus. The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region was officially established within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1923. The fact that the Karabakh Autonomous Region was part of the Azerbaijan SSR was confirmed in Article 24 of the 1936 Soviet Constitution (Yalçinkaya, 2006). However, in Soviet Azerbaijan, which was under Moscow's control in the 1930s, most administrative positions, especially in intelligence and security, were held by Armenians. Armenians subsequently increased in population in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region and began the Armenization of Turkic place names (Piriyev, 2002).

As it became evident that the Soviet Union was collapsing, Armenians aimed to put pressure on Azerbaijan by altering the demographic structure and took action to gain control of Nagorno-Karabakh, an autonomous region within Azerbaijan (Uçarol, 2006). In 1987, claiming that they constituted the majority of the population in Karabakh, they requested from Moscow that Karabakh be annexed to Soviet Armenia. On February 20, 1988, the Nagorno-Karabakh Local Council (without the participation of Azerbaijani members) approved the region's secession from the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic and its annexation to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (Kurbanov, 1996). Due to tensions, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR rejected the decision to separate Karabakh from Azerbaijan and annex it to Armenia (Vaserman & Ginat, 1994; Yalçinkaya, 2006). However, citing ongoing conflicts in Karabakh as justification, the Soviet administration placed the region under direct Moscow control on January 12, 1989 (İşyar, 2004). On September 23, 1989, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR decided to return Karabakh to Azerbaijan, which had declared its independence. The Supreme Soviet of Armenia did not accept this decision and unilaterally decided to annex Karabakh to Armenia on December 1, 1989. As a result, Azerbaijanis living in Karabakh were forced to migrate.

Russia pursued policies showing support for Armenians during these events, and in response to Azerbaijan's protests, Moscow sent military units to Baku in 1990 (Aydın, 2013). Unwilling to lose control over Baku's oil fields, Russia occupied Baku in 1991, and its pressure policy forced Azerbaijan to join the Commonwealth of Independent States, regarded as the successor structure to the Soviet Union, in 1993 (Demir, 1999). The conflict took on a new dimension in 1992 when Armenia took up arms against Azerbaijan,

leading to armed conflict in the region (Yilmaz, 2010). Thanks to Moscow's tolerance, Armenia was able to establish a regular army, while Azerbaijan was unable to develop a national army (Gasimov, 1996). As a result of these events, the Karabakh issue emerged as a problem stemming from borders established in line with geopolitical objectives and artificial demographics. Because Russia did not want it to be resolved, it sometimes escalated into open conflict and at other times remained frozen.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus became open to intervention by regional and global powers. Rather than resolving the conflict, this situation contributed to greater polarization and instability in the region (Gürbüz, 2008). Due to the fact that most Armenian leaders were of Karabakh origin and because of pressure from the diaspora, the goal of annexing the Karabakh region became a central issue in the country's politics after 1990.

However, since the Armenian economy was planned according to the needs of the Soviet Union and shaped in line with Russia's requirements (Mirzakhanyan, 2005), the country was unable to develop according to its own national priorities. Russia, in order to maintain its influence in the Caucasus, retained Armenia as a strategic instrument and supported the continuation of its isolation (Minassian, 2008). Türkiye's closure of its border with Armenia due to its conflict with Azerbaijan caused the country to become further isolated in the region. Furthermore, the international embargo on Iran made Georgia Armenia's only gateway to the world. However, the South Ossetia issue between Georgia and Russia jeopardized Armenia's trade with the outside world, as 80% of its foreign trade was conducted through Georgia (Özdemir Albayrak, 2015). In short, Armenia attempted to gain an advantage in Nagorno-Karabakh by aligning its positions with the regional interests of global powers. The international community, however, did not undertake the necessary political initiative to resolve the problem. Therefore, the United States and EU countries began to exert influence over Armenia, aiming to weaken Russia's influence in the region and ensure a secure energy supply from the Caspian basin to the West.

Internationalization of the Conflict

The collapse of the Soviet Union made the Caucasus vulnerable to intervention by regional and global powers (Gürbüz, 2008). Following the independence of Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1991, the Karabakh problem emerged not as a conflict between two independent states but rather as an Azerbaijani-Russian issue. The membership of Azerbaijan and Armenia in the United Nations (UN) after independence brought the issue to international platforms. Rather than facilitating a resolution, this situation contributed to increased polarization and instability in the region. The discovery of oil and natural gas on the Caspian coast of Azerbaijan made the country's political and social stability a matter of concern for Western countries (Leckie, 2005). The administration of Mutallibov, the Azerbaijani president after independence, was forced to appeal to Western institutions to stop Armenian advances. Western institutions closely monitoring

the region considered this request, and the UN and the then-named Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) initiated efforts.

First, the UN formed and sent an investigative team to Karabakh to assess the situation. The CSCE, which sent a representative to the UN investigative team, sought to play a more active role in resolving the issue. In this context, the issue was raised at the CSCE Foreign Ministers' meeting in Helsinki on March 24, 1992, and a decision was made to hold a conference in Minsk to address the problem. The Karabakh problem, previously largely unknown to the international public, was suddenly brought to the attention of the UN and, consequently, the world. In 1992, the Minsk Group was established within the CSCE. Leading European states also became involved in the issue within the framework of the CSCE.

The fact that the countries holding co-chair status in the Minsk Group (the United States, France, and Russia) approached the Karabakh issue in line with their own national interests both left the problem unresolved and led to the passivity of the Minsk Group (Abay, 2020). However, the active involvement of Western countries in the Karabakh issue disturbed Russia, prompting a new reconciliation initiative supported by Russia and proposed by Kazakhstan. However, when diplomatic talks among the parties failed to yield concrete results, Russia brought the sides together in Sochi on September 19, 1992. At this meeting, a document was signed regarding the establishment of a temporary ceasefire and the sending of observers to the region. However, Yerevan's renewed attacks on Karabakh and Nakhchivan rendered the talks inconclusive. Subsequently, a declaration was signed at the Bush–Yeltsin meeting, leaving the Karabakh issue to the initiative of the Minsk Group (Yilmaz, 2010).

The war spread to regions surrounding Karabakh as Armenians violated the ceasefire and attempted further advances. Azerbaijan brought the active participation of Russian troops in Armenian attacks to the attention of the UN (Goltz, 1993). Azerbaijan presented evidence to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) that Russian military technology was used during the occupation. The UN Security Council condemned the occupation in Resolution 822 and demanded that it be ended (UN Digital Library, Resolution 822, 1993). On July 31, 1993, the UNSC adopted Resolution 853 on the Karabakh issue. This resolution stated that Karabakh belonged to Azerbaijan and that Armenian forces should immediately withdraw from the occupied territories. Although international pressure was exerted through Resolutions 874 and 884, Yerevan did not back down. These decisions remained declaratory, and no sanctions were imposed to enforce them.

During the period between 1988 and 1994, known as the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenia occupied 20% of Azerbaijani territory (Abdullahzade, 2014). In 1994, ceasefire negotiations began through the initiatives of the Inter-Parliamentary Council of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. Azerbaijan and Armenia reached an agreement through the Bishkek Protocol, agreeing on a ceasefire. This protocol stipulated that the parties would mutually observe the ceasefire and act in accordance

with the decisions of the Minsk Group and the UN Security Council (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994). During the signing of the protocol, the inclusion of an Armenian representative from Nagorno-Karabakh as a party was raised, but an Azerbaijani official objected and refused to sign the text. Later, through Russian intervention, it was decided that the protocol would be between Azerbaijan and Armenia, with representatives from Nagorno-Karabakh participating only as relevant parties, and the text was signed (Rasizade, 2011). The ceasefire between the two countries was intermittently violated. International efforts to resolve the issue peacefully yielded no results, and both the UN and the Minsk Group proved ineffective.

With the energy agreement signed in September 1994, major countries operating in this sector began to take a direct interest in the Karabakh problem. International companies investing in the region sought resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue to ensure regional stability. These countries, which were patrons of the relevant oil companies, began to take a closer interest in the Karabakh problem (Askerov, 2009). During this period, the US administration began issuing statements supporting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

At the CSCE summit held in Lisbon in 1996, a document addressing the Azerbaijan–Armenia issue included clauses demanding that Armenia recognize Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, ensure the security of the Nagorno-Karabakh population, and grant the region the right to “self-governance”. However, this document, accepted by all member states, was not accepted by Armenia. Furthermore, the UN resolution of March 14, 2008, concerning the status of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, and European Parliament Resolution 2216 of May 1, 2010, regarding the need to develop a strategy for the South Caucasus for the European Union (Yilmaz, 2010), were not effectively implemented. In 2016, the most intense clashes since 1994 were witnessed, and after four days of fighting, the parties announced a new ceasefire. In 2017, the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan met in Geneva under the auspices of the Minsk Group to begin a series of talks on a possible solution to the conflict. However, these talks again failed to yield concrete results.

Reasons for the Intractability of the Issue

Due to the pro-Armenian stance of Russia and the United States, which were influential in regional politics, and the Minsk Group's mediation efforts, which were far from a solution, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue has remained unresolved for many years. Although there were multiple reasons why the established mechanisms failed to produce results, the most significant factor was undoubtedly Russia's political approach. By freezing the issue, Russia continued to keep both Armenia and Azerbaijan under its influence, and its support for Armenia led to frequent small-scale clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The basis of Russian policy toward the Caucasus, which it considers a problematic region, was to leave the problems unresolved. On the other hand, internal political conflicts in Armenia also hindered a solution.

Russia legitimized its military presence in the region by supporting Armenians in the Azerbaijan-Armenia war (Brzezinski, 2005). However, Western states, the United States, and Azerbaijan opposed the deployment of Russian forces as peacekeepers in the region. The problem could not be resolved through diplomatic means due to Armenia's policies of intransigence. Ceasefire agreements between Armenia and Azerbaijan were repeatedly violated by Armenia. Russia's support for Armenia in the Karabakh conflict emboldened Armenian actions.

During this period, low-intensity clashes between the Armenian and Azerbaijani armies continued. From 2012 onward, the use of mortars escalated to longer-range and more destructive artillery, and eventually tanks became more prevalent (International Crisis Group, 2016). During this period, numerous civilians and soldiers lost their lives due to frequent ceasefire violations by Armenia. Although the effectiveness of the ceasefire was frequently questioned, it continued until September 2020. Politicians of Karabakh origin, who dominated Armenian political life, consistently kept the policy of annexing the Karabakh region—which they occupied with the military and political support of Russia—on the national agenda (Mouradian, 2012).

In summary, while appearing neutral, Russia controlled the conflicts by manipulating disagreements among the peoples of the region. Subsequently, by intervening in the events, it aimed to present itself as the only force capable of establishing peace in the region. On the other hand, Western states lacked lasting solutions to this problem. Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Bayramov stated on this matter: "They did not put any pressure on Armenia to end the occupation. They gave the same message to both the occupier and the victim of the occupation" (Rehimov & Kesinkılıç, 2025).

Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: Armenia's Forced Withdrawal from Karabakh and the Permanent Ceasefire Agreement

Despite the ceasefire between 1994 and 2020, intermittent conflicts demonstrated the constant risk of a renewed outbreak (International Crisis Group, 2022). During this period, a significant shift occurred in Ilham Aliyev's Karabakh policy. Aliyev began to emphasize the inevitability of war if the Karabakh problem dragged on, if the lack of a solution began to be perceived as a solution, and if the problem could not be resolved peacefully (Mammadyarov, 2009). He rapidly increased Azerbaijan's military capacity. These developments indicated that Azerbaijan had lost hope in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh problem through peaceful means and began to turn toward a military solution.

Although transformations often appear sudden, according to Robert Axelrod's analysis of reciprocal retaliation strategies, responding to one party's coercive stance with a similarly coercive response can generate further escalation (Kriesberg, 1999). In other words, conflict can be understood as both a factor and a result of change (Francis, 2002). Armenia's targeting of energy transit routes — specifically the Tovuz attack on pipelines

targeting the Azerbaijani economy between July 12 and July 17, 2020 — foreshadowed the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Energy pipelines passing through Azerbaijan to Türkiye (Habertürk, 2020), such as the Baku–Supsa, Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan, and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum natural gas pipelines, as well as the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project, are not only regional geostrategic developments but also projects that affect the global energy market. However, in the early hours of September 27, 2020, Armenia seriously violated the Ceasefire Agreement by launching attacks on Terter in Azerbaijan, crossing the border from the Karabakh region it had occupied for years. In response to these attacks, the Azerbaijani army retaliated, and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War began on September 27, 2020. The President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, emphasized that negotiations were not possible under these circumstances, drawing attention to the confrontational stance of Armenia’s Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan (TRT Haber, 2020).

Seeking to maintain its presence in the region by keeping tensions between the conflicting parties at a certain level, Russia began to lose ground with the war in Ukraine, which led to a decline in its influence in the region. On the other hand, due to Armenia’s policy of distancing itself from Russia and aligning with the West, Russia’s past military support for Armenia was absent during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (de Waal, 2021). It soon became evident that the sustainability of the Karabakh occupation depended on Russian support.



Figure 1: Anadolu Agency, 2020

During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Russia did not provide the expected support to the Armenians, as Armenia’s policies of distancing itself from Russia and aligning with

the West were not well received. Under the Collective Security Treaty, Armenia attempted to involve Russia in the process; however, Russia declared that the conflict was not taking place on Armenian territory, signaling its withdrawal from the process. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that developments in Ukraine and Georgia influenced Russia's stance (Popescu, n.d.).

During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Armenia used phosphorus bombs and carried out mining operations in many areas, targeting hospitals, schools, commercial areas, and administrative buildings. Numerous civilians, homes, and agricultural lands suffered significant damage. In the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the Armenian army, equipped by the Soviets in the 20th century, was defeated within 44 days by the Azerbaijani army, trained and equipped by Türkiye in the 21st century (Mehdiyev, 2020). From the first day of the conflict, Türkiye declared its support for Azerbaijan, demonstrating its involvement both in the war and in the resolution process. The Azerbaijani side repeatedly stated that Türkiye should be at the negotiating table. Ultimately, Armenia, having tested the possibility of changing political borders through military force, was forced to respect Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. As a result, the war had a heavy toll, with Armenia suffering approximately \$4 billion worth of weapons losses. These heavy losses soon forced Armenia to surrender (Mehdiyev, 2020).

Russia took the initiative at this stage, mediating between the two sides. A ceasefire agreement was signed between the parties on November 9, 2020, at an international meeting held via video conference. With this agreement, all military activities in Karabakh ceased, and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War ended (Institute of Strategic Thinking, 2020). Thus, with the victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, the status quo imposed in the Caucasus underwent a transformation that would not easily be reversed (Pirinççi, 2021). The ceasefire text of November 9, 2020, reflects the written consent of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2025).

Although the ceasefire process was jeopardized in its first weeks due to actions by certain Armenian forces, Azerbaijan did not opt to terminate the ceasefire. On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan completely cleared the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Armenian armed groups through an anti-terrorism operation, resolving the problems caused by these elements. As a result, the vast majority of Armenians living in the region migrated to Armenia. Despite these developments, the ceasefire agreement of November 9, 2020, remained in effect. Article 2 of the ceasefire agreement stipulated that Armenia would vacate the occupied territories, and Article 9 provided for the return of displaced civilians and refugees to Nagorno-Karabakh and neighboring areas under the supervision of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Türkiye İnsan Hakları ve Eşitlik Kurumu [TIHEK], 2021). These conditions were largely met.

Armenia's withdrawal from the occupied territories is a significant step toward lasting peace. For Azerbaijan, the acceptance of the return of Azerbaijani refugees to their homes is an important development in resolving the issue. However, the anti-personnel and

anti-tank mines laid by Armenia along the 300 km contact line between Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as in areas occupied during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War that have not yet been opened for settlement, constitute a major obstacle to the return of Azerbaijani refugees (TIHEK, 2021). To resolve this issue, Armenia must provide all minefield maps and clear the mines.

In summary, the signed ceasefire agreement paved the way for lasting peace. Azerbaijan and Armenia, which had been in conflict in the South Caucasus for over 30 years, came closer to peace than ever before. For a climate of trust to be established, both sides must accept each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Pashinyan administration, which seeks to advance integration with the Western world, realized that continuing the war with Azerbaijan leaves Armenia dependent on Russia. Through this war, the Armenian government effectively showed its people that they cannot succeed in a war against Azerbaijan and that their presence in the region is threatened without lasting peace. Azerbaijan's ending of the occupation through war made Armenians understand that their claims regarding Karabakh are unrealistic (İsmayilov, 2024). After the war, Armenia's orientation began to change. Having suffered defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh and believing that Russia had failed to fulfill its security commitments, Armenia began to distance itself politically and economically from Russia. The EU and the United States, viewed as alternatives, responded positively to Armenia's initiatives for closer security and economic relations. Thus, the United States was able to expand and deepen its contacts with Armenia (Avetisyan, 2024). The ceasefire agreement signed after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War includes the opening of the Zangezur corridor. This corridor will connect the western regions of Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan (Institute of Strategic Thinking, 2020). Another important aspect of Zangezur is that it will connect Central Asia to Europe via Türkiye.

The Transformation Process of Conflict: Contacts for Peacebuilding Between the Parties

Conflict transformation can be achieved if the parties establish a new, acceptable relationship in which they will not resort to violence again (Kriesberg, 2011). The agreement that ended the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War began to reshape the geopolitics of the region (The Guardian, 2020). The process initiated toward the normalization of post-war relations was not a unilateral imposition but a joint process (Kriesberg, 1999). The aim was to end the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with a final peace agreement. However, despite both leaders' repeated declarations of commitment to peace, significant challenges remain to be overcome.

In protracted conflicts, reconciliation between parties tends to develop through a gradual transition and transformation, marked by agreements on specific contentious issues. Open agreements are useful in resolving certain contentious issues, fostering mutual understanding, commitment, and trust, and reducing fear and hostility among constituents

on both sides. Agreements aimed at providing assurances that one side will not undertake a surprise military action against the other are particularly important (Kriesberg, 1999). In the case of Karabakh, the foreign ministers of both countries pledged on several occasions that they would not resort to war.

In 2021, Azerbaijan proposed closing the chapter of hostility with Armenia and presented five fundamental principles for a peace agreement (Rehimov & Keskinliç, 2025). On the Armenian side, the public's desire for peace was demonstrated by Pashinyan's victory in the 2021 elections (BBC News Turkish, 2021). In April 2022, Pashinyan stated, "Today, the international community clearly tells us that being the only country in the world that does not recognize the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, an ally of Türkiye, poses a great danger for Armenia. Therefore, opening a period of peaceful development for our country and region has been adopted as a state strategy. We need new ways of thinking. And we must steer our ship to a safe harbor in this turbulent geopolitical ocean" (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2022).

One of the fundamental elements in the transformation of a prolonged and destructive conflict is mutual recognition and assurance, which often requires multiple steps. Mediation efforts or direct talks at the personal level between leaders of opposing sides who begin to see each other as human beings are crucial (Kriesberg, 1999). Despite long-standing prejudices, Armenia's Minister of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport, Zhanna Andreasyan, stated in 2023 that approximately 400 schools in Armenia were interested in teaching Turkish and Azerbaijani languages. The minister noted that schools showed the greatest interest in Turkish, but also mentioned the difficulty of finding teachers (Arka News Agency, 2023). Although Turkish has begun to be taught as an elective language in Armenia, the words "Turkish" and "Turk" represent openness to the world for some Armenians, while for others they remain a source of hostility.

The opening of the Zangezur Corridor, which will provide a land connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, is of significant importance. While this project will provide economic benefits to Armenia, pro-Russian elements in Armenia oppose it on the grounds that it will harm sovereignty (Ismayilov, 2024). However, negotiations continued, and representatives from both sides participated in the Antalya Diplomacy Forum 2024 held in Türkiye. At the session on Peace, Development, and Connectivity in the South Caucasus, the parties discussed recent developments in the region and once again emphasized the necessity of opening borders, establishing diplomatic relations, and increasing contacts between the two societies (Deveci Bozkuş, 2024).

Sustaining the transformation process requires the thoughtful and determined efforts of many actors. Subjectively, emotions and beliefs also tend to change. Thus, enemies become more accepting of each other and may even develop mutual respect (Kriesberg, 1999). In this regard, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated repeatedly at a press conference on July 16, 2025, that Armenia is determined to establish peace and that every effort is being made to ensure long-term stability. On August 8, 2025, the leaders of

Azerbaijan and Armenia, Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan, signed a peace declaration in Washington through the mediation of U.S. President Donald Trump. In his statement after the agreement, Aliyev noted that they had only “initialed” the agreement and were ready to sign a peace treaty at any time if Armenia amended its constitution. This is because the Armenian constitution includes provisions regarding a “Greater Armenia,” which includes parts of Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Ankara and Baku rightfully demand that Yerevan first accept the UN-recognized borders of the state. The agreement is poised to alter not only the Caucasus but also the political and economic balance in Central Asia and the Middle East. In particular, the two sides’ pledge of a ceasefire and their simultaneous withdrawal from the Minsk Group, which has stalled an agreement for years, demonstrates their commitment to resolving the issue politically between themselves. The Zangezur Corridor, or the Trump International Peace and Prosperity Route as it was named after the declaration signed in the United States, connecting mainland Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan, is a road and rail project under U.S. guarantee. Trump stated that this route would end the conflict between the two countries, initiate trade and diplomatic relations, and lift sanctions against Azerbaijan. Aliyev stated that territorial claims against Azerbaijan in the Armenian constitution prevent the signing of a peace agreement, but that once the necessary amendments are made, the treaty could be signed at any time (BBC News Turkish, 2025).

These two neighboring countries are taking steps to improve relations after years of conflict. Azerbaijan announced in October 2025 that it would lift restrictions on the transit of goods from its territory to Armenia (News.Az, 22 October 2025). At the annual World Economic Forum held in Davos in January 2026, Aliyev stated that following the establishment of peace, Azerbaijan initiated economic cooperation and exports with Armenia. Azerbaijan announced that it had lifted all restrictions on cargo transportation from Kazakhstan and Russia to Armenia, stating that transportation currently passes through Georgia but may one day pass through Armenia (Teslova & Eruygur, 2026). Pashinyan also emphasized that progress would not be rapid, as narratives shaped by years of conflict continue to influence public discourse in both countries (Aydin & Demir, 2026). The key point is that economic interdependence can soften public attitudes over time and reduce resistance to political compromise. A successful normalization process depends on a longer-term societal roadmap, including potential reforms in education and public discourse. In this context, future agreements may need to address textbooks, joint commissions, and other cultural instruments that shape generational narratives (Kilic, 2025). The parties’ efforts were also recognized internationally. Aliyev and Pashinyan were presented with the 2026 Zayed Award for Human Fraternity on February 4, 2026, in Abu Dhabi for their contributions to the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Aliyev stated that peace is possible even after a long conflict and that peace with Armenia is vital for the entire region. Pashinyan, in turn, remarked that the true recipients of the award were the citizens of both countries, emphasizing that the past should remain behind them and that peace is necessary for everyone.

Although progress was made in negotiations following the ceasefire agreement, peace has not yet been achieved. For Armenia to achieve peace, it needs to amend the articles in its constitution that contain territorial claims. This is because the Armenian constitution includes a declaration of independence that calls for the unification of the Karabakh region with Armenia. While Azerbaijan demands a change to this article, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has signaled willingness to respond positively and indicated that a referendum will be held. It should be understood that normalization between Azerbaijan and Armenia is impossible if the Karabakh claim remains in the Armenian constitution (Kucera, 2024). In this regard, Armenian Minister of Justice Grigor Minasian stated that a possible referendum on a new Armenian constitution would take place in 2027 (Azatutyun, 2024). However, Armenian opposition leaders argue that Azerbaijan has no intention of making peace without obtaining more comprehensive concessions from Armenia (Galstian, 2024). It should be noted that conflict transformation does not occur smoothly or at the same pace for all parties. One side may move more easily than the other. While some groups on both sides may be hesitant and insecure, waiting for a better arrangement, other groups may be willing to move toward mutual compromise. Therefore, conflict transformation is always multifaceted and occurs to varying degrees among all relevant groups (Kriesberg, 2011). The transformation in the Karabakh issue also confirms this.

Benefits of Conflict Transformation for the Parties and the Region

With the ceasefire reached between the parties, significant changes began in the dynamics and balance of the region. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 strengthened Azerbaijan's geostrategic position in the region. In addition, both the support of relevant states, primarily Türkiye, in resolving this issue, and the new status of Nagorno-Karabakh will accelerate the development of economic relations among the countries of the region.

Aliyev and Pashinyan held talks in Abu Dhabi, UAE. Accordingly, they agreed on opportunities to expand bilateral trade and economic cooperation (Erurygur, 2026). In fact, Nikol Pashinyan is a politician who argues that his country cannot move forward by clinging to historical complexes and that Armenians should focus on developing "real Armenia" within its current internationally recognized borders (Yetkin, 2025). This is because the most significant obstacle to the development of the Armenian economy stems from the country's geopolitical location and economic isolation. Due to this political isolation, Armenia has been excluded from regional energy projects. Pashinyan emphasizes that reconciliation is essential for achieving genuine development.

In an interview with state television on February 10, 2026, Pashinyan stated that the United States would implement an investment program in Armenia lasting at least 99 years, demonstrating that Armenia would remain a peaceful, independent, and sovereign state for 99 years, with a normal investment environment. Regarding border demarcation with Azerbaijan, he explained that the process would be lengthy and would not disrupt peace.

He stated that where there is peace, there is prosperity, freedom, and happiness, and that while Armenia cannot become a center by distancing the periphery from the center, it can become a global center through regional integration (The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 2026).

In line with this, U.S. interest in the region appears to be increasing. U.S. Vice President JD Vance's visit to Armenia and Azerbaijan demonstrates U.S. efforts to promote trade, investment, and infrastructure in the region through the Trump International Route for Peace and Prosperity. The initiative aims to facilitate trade, energy transit, logistics, and digital connectivity, with the potential to open a new East-West route between Central Asia and Europe. These new transportation routes could diversify European supply chains and increase access to emerging markets (EuroNews, 2026a). This route is a project that could bypass Russia and Iran at a time when the West is seeking to diversify energy and trade routes due to the Ukraine war (EuroNews, 2026b).

Pashinyan confirmed that Armenia is ready to provide unimpeded transportation links between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan within the agreed framework and stated that there is clear political will to move forward (Aydın & Demir, 2026). However, the Russia factor should not be overlooked. A 30-year concession agreement was signed in 2008, providing for the transfer of the Armenian railway system to the South Caucasus Railway company established by Russian Railways. In an interview on this subject, Pashinyan stated that Armenia could take back control of its railways from Russia to maintain its competitive advantages and establish an international route through the country (Agos, 2026).

Conclusion

Karabakh, the central point of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border dispute, has been a long-standing problem. Although Russia appeared to oppose Armenia's annexation ambitions regarding Karabakh, its implicit support for Armenia's position contributed to the prolongation of the issue into the twenty-first century. Whenever high-level negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia came onto the agenda, ceasefire violations tended to intensify. While Armenia regarded the ceasefire as an opportunity to legitimize its gains, Azerbaijan interpreted the situation as a chance to build up its military capacity and wait for an opportune moment.

With Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Russia's policy toward Armenia, seen as a tool for controlling the Caucasus, became ineffective. This defeat revealed Armenia's inadequate economic, political, and military capacity. Armenia needs to assess, in a rational and objective manner, how its inability to improve economic conditions has affected demographic trends. The impact of population dynamics on meeting Armenia's labor force needs, particularly its demand for trained military personnel, requires more comprehensive analysis. Developing peaceful relations with its neighbors will support Armenia's development policies. An Armenia that has resolved its conflicts

will not be excluded from targeted economic projects in the region and will benefit from international trade routes. Armenia's adoption of realistic and constructive policies will provide mutual benefits to itself and its neighbors. Azerbaijan's victory caused a shift in the region's geopolitics and in the strategies of world powers toward the South Caucasus. If the ceasefire agreement between the two countries is transformed into a peace treaty and signed, it will have profound implications for the South Caucasus, Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and Europe.

It appears that the two societies have now ceased ignoring each other. It is important for Armenia to focus on its internal affairs instead of making demands on its neighbors — Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. It should begin pursuing more peaceful policies to improve the living standards of its people and address its economic problems. The dissolution of the Minsk Group is a significant development in that it demonstrates the parties' decision to resolve their problems themselves. In an era where states can use hard power to pursue their interests and international norms are often disregarded, it is important that the parties are taking decisive steps toward achieving lasting peace. However, political tendencies influenced by diaspora interests may emerge as a significant obstacle to peace.

The Zangezur Corridor, which significantly shortens routes within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, enables global trade to be conducted more efficiently in terms of both time and cost. It is clear that the region will gain greater strategic importance with the completion of transportation networks along the Zangezur Corridor. This corridor is also likely to create new opportunities for energy supply to global markets. It is anticipated that new energy lines will provide alternative natural gas supply routes from Russia and Iran.

In conclusion, as a natural consequence of its geopolitical position, Armenia must also develop its relations with Türkiye, which advocates dialogue in resolving regional problems. The Armenia-Azerbaijan tension directly affects Türkiye-Armenia relations. An Armenia that approaches problems with a solution-oriented perspective, taking into account its own realities and capacities, will also benefit regional peace and development. In this way, it will be able to secure its borders. The most effective way to ensure the inviolability of borders depends on achieving economic development. The most important method for achieving this is ensuring integration in the South Caucasus. Thus, the South Caucasus will transform into a common economic area, and political cooperation will be strengthened to overcome existing conflicts and differences of opinion.

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