

## The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Engagements Beyond Europe and Eurasia

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As one of the most intractable and tendentious issues in post-Soviet affairs, the [enduring rivalry](#) between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh/ Artsakh subregion presents scholars of international relations with a certain challenge. It is widely recognized that the United States, Russia, and France – the current co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group – have been unsuccessful in either imposing a settlement or convincing either party to accept concessions to achieve a breakthrough. Although the outcome of the milestone March 2019 summit facilitated by the co-chairs in Vienna between President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan was outwardly “positive,” nothing new resulted from it.

Yet, the original concept of the Minsk process reflected the Helsinki/CSCE model of reaching consensus through extended dialogue, non-binding resolutions, and equal status of participating states comparable with non-Western or Asian-African approaches to international cooperation, only later becoming dominated by three major powers. At the same time, Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives have been increasingly active in cross-regional diplomacy – the pursuit of engagements with individual states and international organizations representing the former Third World or Global South in an effort to garner broader support for their positions in the dispute. Moreover, as a result of ideological affinities or shared threat perceptions among governments and interest groups, nascent or indirect linkages have formed between the Armenia-Azerbaijan rivalry and otherwise physically distant protracted conflicts in South Asia (Kashmir), the Southern Levant (Israel-Palestine), and South America (Falkland Islands/ Islas Malvinas). These developments have been largely overlooked due to the overwhelming preoccupation of observers with the role of Euro-Atlantic institutions (OSCE, EU, NATO, and PACE) in addressing security and conflict resolution in the South Caucasus. A closer look at strategic forays external to the Minsk process reveals that they have the potential to produce deeper dividing lines as much as they can open new avenues for cooperation.

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## **System Structure and Karabakh Diplomacy**

To account for these under-recognized foreign policy patterns, one might examine the relationship between international system structure, the institutional evolution of the Minsk Group (the primary institutional arrangement designated to implement the resolution process since December 1996), and Baku's and Yerevan's appraisal of the conflict management practices of the major powers since the cease-fire of May 1994. This draws upon the burgeoning research agenda on [hierarchy in international relations](#), which introduces a means of interpreting the recurrent tensions between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the influential states that govern the Minsk process. This framework is employed to examine how Armenian and Azerbaijani decision-makers evaluate the negotiation setting fostered by American, Russian, and European mediators, and their resultant engagements beyond Europe and Eurasia, often based upon shared experiences with unresolved intrastate and regional conflicts.

### **Azerbaijan: Bringing Karabakh to a New Frontier**

In recent years, Baku has become increasingly vocal in its dissatisfaction with the performance of the Minsk Group co-chairs, with periodic calls for [altering](#) the format or seeking to involve [additional](#) actors in the settlement process. Such doubts exhibit certain parallels with the classical "Third Worldist" critique of hierarchical global institutions such as the veto power reserved by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC). A frequently cited longitudinal [study](#) featuring interviews with 54 members of the Azerbaijani societal elite in 2001 and 2009 reflects this dual mistrust of the UN and OSCE, while a household public opinion [survey](#) on foreign policy in Azerbaijan conducted by the government-affiliated Center for Strategic Studies (SAM) in 2014 revealed that out of roughly 1,500 respondents, over 70 percent held a negative perception of the Minsk Group, while over 50 percent expressed the same view of the UNSC.

While criticism of Western conduct by Azerbaijani elites akin to "Third Worldist" ideology (most frequently manifested in the phrase "double standards") is [rarely](#) acknowledged in mainstream public discussion regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, such discourses have a lengthy presence within high-level diplomatic circles. This is particularly observed in interactions with Middle Eastern and South Asian states such as Kuwait, whose Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs and Committee of Asian Muslims have provided humanitarian aid to Karabakh refugees and IDPs since the 1990s, and Pakistan, which in tandem with Turkey (formalized with the first Trilateral Ministers Meeting held in November 2017), refuses recognition of Armenia while [asserting](#) commonality between the Karabakh and Kashmir conflicts, and has offered military assistance to Baku in the event of a return to war. Conversely, in previous years, Islamist and pan-Turkist groups in Azerbaijan have [linked](#) the Palestinian and Karabakh issues in opposition to the Aliyev government's advanced economic and defense cooperation with Israel. Yet, Baku's simultaneous recognition of an independent Palestinian state and

opening of a mission of Palestine in 2011 has more recently [allowed](#) Azerbaijan to advertise itself as a hypothetical arbiter in the Middle East peace process.

At the same time, Azerbaijani representatives have intensified their Karabakh-oriented activities in international organizations related to Asian regionalism and South-South cooperation, including the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), International Conference of Asian Political Parties (ICAPP), and Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). All of these have produced multiple declarations and resolutions upholding Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and calling for peaceful settlement of the conflict in accordance with international law. In December 2014, National Assembly (*Milli Məclis*) MP Ganire Pashayeva, who has led Baku's global public relations campaign for recognition of the 1992 Khojaly massacre as a genocide, successfully lobbied for Azerbaijan's admission to the Tehran-based Asian Parliamentary Assembly (APA). In the weeks following the "Four Day War" escalation of April 2016, the OIC also established a Contact Group on Karabakh that has met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly that includes Turkey, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Malaysia, the Gambia, and Djibouti.

Most significant among these fora is the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which Baku entered as a full member in May 2011 after seventeen years of largely uninterested observer status. The unprecedented inclusion of paragraph 362 in the Final Document of the 16<sup>th</sup> Summit of Heads of State and Government in Tehran in May 2012 [refers directly](#) to "the territorial integrity, sovereignty and... [internationally] recognized borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan," thus for the first time essentially taking sides in a post-Soviet frozen conflict. In September 2017, Azerbaijan also [joined](#) the NAM Committee on Palestine alongside Algeria, Bangladesh, Colombia, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Senegal, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. As chair of the NAM Coordinating Bureau from 2019-2021, Baku enjoys significant potential to further utilize the organization as a platform for systemic maneuvering.

### **Armenia: Self-Determination at Home and Abroad**

As the military victor in the "hot phase" of the Karabakh conflict, Armenia has pursued a contrasting strategy of seeking legitimacy and support for its official negotiating position beyond the South Caucasus. This asserts the right of self-determination and national liberation for the present population of Nagorno-Karabakh as a prerequisite for a peaceful resolution, and invokes the principles pertaining to newly independent or post-colonial states in international law dating to the mid-twentieth century, despite considerable controversy regarding this analogy [among](#) legal scholars. This elite stance is accompanied by a discourse among intellectuals and activists both in Armenia and the diaspora that characterizes the "ancestral lands" of Artsakh (a reference to the medieval Kingdom of Armenia) as being subject to dual colonization by Tsarist Russia and Soviet Azerbaijan, as

well as neocolonialism in the form of contemporary Russia's hegemonic presence in the region.

Both observers and Armenian officials often assert their unequivocal support for the Minsk Group co-chairs due to political advantage—allowing the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh Republic the time and security necessary to develop its local economy and institutions. However, this stands in sharp contrast to its position in the late 1990s when it was the sole OSCE member state to reject the Lisbon Principles, the first Minsk Group settlement proposal with an insistence on returning to the original conference format. The basis for this reaction then and now lies in the [hierarchical imposition](#) of the norm of territorial integrity over the negotiations by the international community. Thus, in reality, Yerevan's acceptance of the mediators has fluctuated according to the extent to which they are regarded as having enabled or obstructed the above objectives.

Armenian diplomats have sought to elicit recognition of this perspective among traditional strategic partners and diaspora representatives in the Middle East and North Africa (Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt), as well as South Asia (India) and Latin America (Argentina and Uruguay). These enduring ties are accompanied by a longstanding interface with Palestinian nationalism dating to Yasser Arafat's Soviet-era visits to Yerevan, followed by sympathetic dialogues with the Palestinian National Authority in subsequent years. Since the mid-2000s, Armenia and India have [expressed](#) mutual support for each other's positions in the Karabakh and Kashmir conflicts as *quid pro quo* for backing New Delhi's campaign for UN structural reform and admission as a permanent member of the Security Council. Lastly, since the opening of an Azerbaijani embassy in Buenos Aires in 2010 and attempts by representatives to link the Karabakh and Falkland Islands disputes, the influential Argentine Armenian community has reinforced its prominent role in diplomacy with Yerevan by [fusing](#) patriotic sentiments regarding the "Malvinas question" with support for the independence of Artsakh.

At the multilateral level, Armenia holds observer status in the NAM since 1992 and the League of Arab States ([LAS](#)) since 2005, despite a lack of diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and has participated in ICAPP since 2010. Figures such as First Foreign Minister and Heritage Party Chairman Raffi Hovanissian, former Foreign Minister Vardan Oskanian, and former President Serzh Sargsyan have promoted the Karabakh/post-colonial nexus as well as vocally contested Azerbaijan's initiatives within each of these fora in recent years. There is possible evidence of a chess-like "flanking maneuver" strategy in these interactions, as seen in efforts to coopt the traditional solidarity between Azerbaijan and the Persian Gulf monarchies and OIC, as well as seeking rapprochement with Israel. This approach is unlikely to change in the wake of the Velvet Revolution, as the Pashinyan administration remains beholden to the traditional national security establishment regarding the future of Artsakh, despite displacing the influence of the "Karabaghtsi clan" over the central government in Yerevan.

## **Preliminary Findings**

The main observed effect thus far have been to create alternatives to the exclusivity of the co-chairs by multiplying the number of actors with an interest or stake in the Minsk Process. Further, these linkages serve as a springboard for increasing recognition of the Karabakh issue beyond the boundaries of the South Caucasus. Of particular relevance is the possibility that cross-regional solidarities might contribute to the perpetuation or even escalation of hostilities.

One such concern is the problematic track record of Global South institutions such as the NAM in regard to conflict resolution that historically has often amounted to [supporting](#) one side rather than serving as a forum for bringing both parties to the negotiating table. The presence of external patrons that serve as a “cheering section” for their preferred position in international fora—particularly when endowed with the capabilities or influence of a larger power—might encourage revanchism. Worse, it may generate incentives for local stakeholders to “dig in their heels” thereby reinforcing zero-sum or maximalist positions rather than tendencies toward reciprocal bargaining or accommodation. As has especially been observed in regard to the Minsk Group, such affinities may also serve to undermine the legitimacy of mediating institutions with shared narratives of bias or ineffectuality. As such, in November 2015 the co-chairs released a [statement](#) that while endorsements of their essential role by other international organizations were welcome, attempts to change the format or create parallel negotiating structures only disrupt the resolution process.

Yet conversely, in those instances where both elites and non-state actors involved in multi-track diplomacy are motivated by necessity to pursue pragmatic contacts with otherwise adversarial parties—such as Armenia and Azerbaijan’s mutual associations with Israel and Palestine—they may cut across dividing lines between rivals to engender a policy of “engagement with enemies,” with the potential to reduce the intensity or prevent exacerbation of existing conflicts.

## **Conclusion**

It remains to be seen whether Armenia and Azerbaijan are simply engaging in competitive balancing against the co-chairs by aggregating outside support for their respective preferred outcomes, or whether real innovations might be introduced through more direct and constructive involvement of states and institutions in the Global South in the resolution process. Following the Aliyev-Pashinyan meeting in Vienna, both sides pledged to continue discussions amidst positive statements, but with little substance and no new initiatives. It is apparent that the meeting was prompted by the emergence of new Armenian leadership rather than any new determinations by France, Russia, and the United States. Despite the optimism, the Minsk Group’s function foreshadows the maintenance of the status quo; it remains unable to impose a settlement or convince either

party to accept concessions. Thus, it is hoped that different perspectives on conflict management toward Nagorno-Karabakh/ Artsakh might contribute new insights beyond conventional assumptions in post-Soviet and European security studies.

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