

# At the Crossroads of Strategic Pipeline Corridors: Settling the Dispute Over Nagorno Karabakh

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When compared to the other disputed former Soviet territories of Pridnestrovie (also referred to as Transnistria, Transdniestria, Transdnestr and Trans-Dniester), South Ossetia and Abkhazia – Nagorno Karabakh (which Armenians also refer to as Artsakh) often seems to get the least attention. This despite the latter being the bloodiest of these conflicts. Geographically, Nagorno-Karabakh is further away from the European Union nations and the United States than the other mentioned lands. As is true with a number of other conflicts, some find this contested former Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic territory to have murky conditions, in terms of determining which side (Armenian or Azeri) to fully support. Materialistically, fossil fuel rich Azerbaijan is the greater prize. There is also a degree of understandable sympathy for the tragic past of the Armenian people and some expressed apprehension with the human rights situations in Azerbaijan and (to an overall lesser extent) Armenia.

Since last August's war involving the Georgian government's armed attack on South Ossetia, there has been an increase in diplomatic activity among countries considered as key diplomatic parties in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. [In September](#), the president of Turkey (a country seen as sympathetic to Azerbaijan and historically at odds with Armenia) and his Armenian counterpart met in Yerevan. An optimistic overview was given of that occurrence. The presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia held a [November meeting](#) in Moscow, in what was described as upbeat. [In February](#), the Turkish president met his Russian counterpart in Russia. During his stay there, Turkey's president visited the predominately Muslim republic of Tatarstan. The Russo-Turkish meeting further encouraged the growing commercial ties between the two countries.

While differences still exist over Nagorno-Karabakh, a more peaceful climate serves to increase the possibility of a settlement. Azerbaijan remains unable to implement its authority in Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, no nation (including Armenia) formally recognizes Nagorno-Karabakh's independence. Although close to Armenia's border, Nagorno-Karabakh is landlocked within Azerbaijan.

With the idea of a compromise in mind, perhaps a unique situation can be arranged, where Nagorno-Karabakh is jointly recognized as a part of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conditions worked out under this hypothetical agreement would concern the return of refugees and the finer points on how Nagorno-Karabakh would be administered.

A referendum on Nagorno-Karabakh's status (discussed at the November meeting in Moscow) has different options. The one having only the participation of Nagorno-Karabakh's

residents is not preferred by Azerbaijan, because of the majority Armenian presence in that territory. The Armenians would still constitute a majority, even if verified refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh were permitted to vote (the 1989 Soviet census listed Armenians comprising [around 75%](#) of that territory's population). Armenians are not fond of a referendum that would include all of Azerbaijan. [Azerbaijan's population](#) is over twice that of [Armenia's](#) (roughly 8 million to 3 million), with the main ethnic group in each country (Armenian in Armenia and Azeri in Azerbaijan) making up over 90% of the population. This statistic includes Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan (the current population of Nagorno-Karabakh is said to be around 140,000).

By and large, Armenians do not appear keen on the idea of making Nagorno-Karabakh a loose autonomous republic in Azerbaijan. There is analysis noting Azerbaijan's increased military budget in comparison to the Armenians. This reality has been suggestively used against Nagorno-Karabakh's seeking a continued separation from Azerbaijan. Offsetting this view is the notion that a future war over Nagorno-Karabakh is likely to be too bloody of an experience for either side to consider. It is questionable whether a stronger Azeri armed forces would be enough to intimidate the Armenians into accepting a non-war diktat against them. Relative to this point, there is the possibility that a noticeably improved Azeri military might not prevail in an attempt to takeover Nagorno-Karabakh. Unlike Azerbaijan, Armenia is a member of the [Collective Security Treaty Organization](#) (its other members are Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). The American and Azeri governments have [discussed and implemented plans](#) to assist Azerbaijan's military capability.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have each shown geopolitical flexibility in their respective dealings with Russia and the West. Potentially, this aspect relates well to the desire of improving relations between Russia and the West.

Armenia is no doubt partly influenced by its close ties with the émigré Armenian population in the West. Armenia's non-recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh's independence seems to take into consideration how the international community at large views the boundaries of former Soviet republics (a non-independence recognition of separatist claims).

Awhile back, there was [commentary](#) saying that Russia received a diplomatic setback at a 2006 summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Moscow. This opinion noted the absence of the Ukrainian, Georgian, Turkmen and Armenian presidents at that gathering (the Armenian president was said to have been ill at the time). Omitted from this thought was the presence of the Moldovan and Azeri presidents. Along with Georgia and Ukraine – Azerbaijan and Moldova are members of GUAM; an organization that was created with the stated intent to promote economic and political development. Although officially denied, GUAM's creation is viewed by some as an attempt to limit Russian influence in the former Soviet Union. In the period since the 2006 CIS meeting, the popularity of the Ukrainian and Georgian presidents has waned (something that was in process beforehand), as Moldova and Azerbaijan appear to come a bit closer to Russia. Moldova and Azerbaijan have been unable to govern over disputed land within their Soviet drawn boundaries. Whether one likes it or not, Russia remains quite influential on some primary matters pertaining to other former Soviet republics.

[Of late](#), Azerbaijan is considering a gas deal with Russia that might undermine the Nabucco pipeline project (a Western initiative, undergone to diversify from the current dependence on Russian gas and its transit route through Ukraine).

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