

Armenia: between the West and the threat of war

Wojciech Górecki

On 5 April, an unprecedented Armenia-EU-US summit took place in Brussels, with the participation of Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. The Western leaders expressed their support for Armenia's European aspirations, pledged assistance for its reforms and economic development, and announced concrete financial support. However, even the gradual tightening of cooperation with the EU (formally, Armenia still participates in Russian-controlled integration formats) will not guarantee the country's security in the face of growing pressure from Azerbaijan. Moreover, this state of affairs is compounded by the fact that Russia has supported Azerbaijan's ambitions to control the transit routes that would run through Armenia in the future.

The summit took place against the backdrop of further escalations of tension in the region. Since late March there have been numerous armed incidents on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border (albeit with no fatalities); these were most likely initiated by Azerbaijan, which has also staged a military show of force in Nakhichevan. Both Azerbaijan and Russia have criticised the summit in very strong terms. Turkey also resents the growing Western presence in the South Caucasus. In the current situation, the likelihood is growing that Azerbaijan will launch another round of military aggression against Armenia, but this is not a foregone conclusion; in fact, in the near future it is more likely that further relatively small-scale border incidents will occur. By increasing its pressure on Armenia, Azerbaijan has been trying to force its neighbour into a peace agreement on its own terms.

Armenia's risky gambit

The summit marked a high point in Armenia's rapprochement with the West. The pro-Western turn in Armenia's policy began after it lost the Second Karabakh War in the autumn of 2020, although Prime Minister Pashinyan, who has been in power since the spring of 2018, had already distanced himself from Russia and the post-Soviet integration formats it controls in more remote past. After several days of fighting in September 2022, when Azerbaijan attacked targets inside Armenia and occupied 10 sq km of its territory (the border between the two countries has not been delimited), Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation failed to respond in any way, despite their commitments as Armenia's allies. At that point, Armenia decided to cooperate more closely with Western institutions and countries. This was accompanied by the involvement of the EU (and the US) in the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process, which offered hope for a lasting EU-brokered peace.

Given the scale of Armenia's dependence on Russia in the political, military and economic spheres, it did not formally declare a desire to join the EU. However, the situation changed after Azerbaijan seized the whole of Nagorno-Karabakh, bringing about the exodus of virtually the entire Armenian population in the autumn of 2023 (see '[Exodus of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh](#)'). This took place amid an impasse in peace talks with Azerbaijan as the government in Baku began to accuse the EU of bias. Armenia stepped up its military cooperation with France and India; in mid-March this year, its foreign minister Ararat Mirzoyan announced that Armenia was strongly considering the idea of applying to join the EU. A few days later, the European Parliament adopted a resolution in support of the country's European aspirations (in 2022–23, the EU deployed two observer missions to Armenia, close to its border with Azerbaijan; this gesture raised the political costs of a possible Azerbaijani attack and stabilised the situation for a year and a half).

It is almost certain that Armenia's European turn is a strategic choice rather than a tactical move, designed to expand the country's room for manoeuvre and strengthen its position vis-à-vis its traditional partners. This has been confirmed by the successive steps it has taken to downgrade its relations with Russia and the post-Soviet organisations (see '[A serious crisis in Armenian-Russian relations](#)'), including its most recent decision to withdraw Russian border troops (which are subordinate to the FSB) from Yerevan's airport. In Armenia's view, not only does Russia no longer guarantee its security, but it has actually become a hostile state. Russia has effectively supported Azerbaijan's efforts to open a transit road through Armenia's Zangezur to Nakhichevan, which would in practice act as an extraterritorial corridor protected by Russian border troops. This would guarantee Russia's continued presence and influence in the region, and help it circumvent sanctions by curtailing Armenia's sovereignty and restricting its access to Iran, a country which is sympathetic to it. Armenia has agreed in principle to open this road, but on condition that it retains full control over the transit traffic. With its territorial sovereignty under threat, Armenia's pro-Western calculations are based on the assumption that the EU will strengthen its presence in the region and broker an agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan (see '[The EU's ambivalent neighbours. Brussels on the South Caucasus](#)'). However, in light of the developments in recent months, the prospects for an EU-brokered peace treaty currently seem remote.

At the summit on 5 April, the EU and the US expressed their readiness to expand their cooperation with Armenia while endorsing its peace initiatives and its course towards political and economic reforms. The EU pledged to provide it with €270 million in support over the next four years and to invest in its energy sector, while the US announced \$65 million in funding for the Armenian economy. While the scale of Western assistance and the scope of cooperation outlined should be seen as extensive, it is still not entirely adequate in the face of the threat from Azerbaijan. The talks in Brussels did not cover any security commitments to Armenia; in fact this was not possible, as this sphere is outside the EU's remit. The situation is complicated by the fact that both the elections to the European Parliament and the presidential election in the US will take place in the coming months, which will temporarily draw attention away from the South Caucasus. The outcome of these elections may alter the balance within the European and US elites, and consequently lead to a shift in the policy of both the EU and the US towards this region.

Azerbaijan's escalating demands

Azerbaijan has responded to the summit with strong criticism. Despite the telephone conversations that von der Leyen and Blinken held with President Ilham Aliyev, in which they stressed that the summit was not aimed against anyone, Azerbaijan saw the very format of the meeting as evidence that the West had sided with Armenia. In its official statements, Azerbaijan's government has insisted that Western activity hinders the efforts to stabilise the region. This leaves little room for the EU's initiatives to advance the peace process. Russia has been equally critical of the summit, claiming that such developments are exacerbating conflicts in the region, and that Armenia is a tool in the hands of Brussels and Washington. In this view, the region is yet another field of confrontation between the West and Russia. Turkey has also voiced its criticism of the summit.

Armed incidents (most likely provoked by Azerbaijan) have occurred, and continue to occur, along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border on the eve of, during and after the summit; at the same time, Azerbaijani forces have launched a large-scale military exercise in Nakhichevan. This has added to the tensions in the region, which have been growing for several weeks, largely as a result of the Azerbaijani side's escalating demands towards Armenia. President Aliyev has raised the issue of the enclaves belonging to Azerbaijan which Armenian forces occupied back in the early 1990s (Armenia had one enclave in Azerbaijan); more recently, in a manner resembling an ultimatum, he demanded that Armenia return four non-enclave villages that had belonged to Azerbaijan during Soviet times and had also been occupied by Armenian forces (access to them was only possible from the Armenian side; the main route linking Armenia and Georgia runs through this area). Armenia is aware of Azerbaijan's military superiority, and is thus prepared to make far-reaching compromises on these issues; but the climate for talks has now deteriorated considerably as Azerbaijan ratchets up its war-like rhetoric. This suggests that its goal is not to reach an agreement with its neighbour, but to impose peace on its own terms and cut Armenia off from independent links with the outside world. Ultimately, Azerbaijan is seeking to bring the regional system of transport routes under its control, in coordination with Turkey and under a formula that would be acceptable to Russia and Iran while marginalising the West in the region; the connection to Nakhichevan through Zangezur is of crucial importance here.

In this context, the incidents that coincided with the summit may have served as 'trial balloons' to test the West's resolve to defend Armenia. The EU's EUMA mission in this country no longer acts as a deterrent to the extent it did a few months earlier. Moreover, certain incidents have also occurred outside the area of its deployment, specifically along the northern part of the two countries' common border and on the border with Nakhichevan.

Anti-Russian sentiment among the Armenian public

The general public supports Armenia's pro-Western turn. According to a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in December 2023, 66% of respondents assessed Armenian-Russian relations as bad or very bad, while only 31% said they were very good or good. On the list of countries posing a political threat to Armenia, Russia ranked third after Azerbaijan and Turkey; among countries posing an economic risk to Armenia, Russia placed second after Turkey.

It appears that there is no internal threat to Pashinyan's position at the moment: the next elections are scheduled for 2026, and the opposition is currently unable to rally its supporters to take to the streets in a bid to force him to step down early. According to the

aforementioned survey, 17% of respondents trust Pashinyan: 15% mentioned him as their first choice while 2% named him as their second most trusted politician. Despite how low these figures may seem, he nevertheless tops the national trust rankings, far ahead of the foreign minister Mirzoyan, trusted by 5%; meanwhile the third person on this list, Aram Sargsyan, leader of one of the opposition parties from outside the parliament, is trusted by just 4% of those questioned. Meanwhile, up to 60% of respondents trust no one, which reflects the prevailing mood of apathy and resignation in society. 47% of respondents consider security issues to be the biggest problem facing Armenia, far ahead of unemployment (23%).

Possible future developments

In view of the stalemate in the peace process, the risk that Azerbaijan could resume its military operations in the near future should be considered as high. Given Azerbaijan's advantage and Armenia's isolation, any new war (over the 'Zangezur corridor') would have disastrous consequences for the latter's sovereignty and integrity; it would also derail both its pro-Western turn and the regional order which currently gives the West some room for manoeuvre.

However, further military aggression by Azerbaijan is not a foregone conclusion. Indeed, in such an event Azerbaijan would have to contend with a sharp deterioration of its political relations with the West and a real increase in Russia's influence, as Russian forces would then be deployed in the 'Zangezur corridor'. The threat of further border incidents as a means of pressure on Armenia, coupled with preparations for new rounds of talks with the involvement of an intermediary of Azerbaijan's choice, appears to be a more likely scenario.