

Pashinyan's historic visit to Turkey – a growing urgency for normalisation

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On 20 June, Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan visited Istanbul, where he met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The talks, which were followed by only brief statements, focused on bilateral relations, the situation in the South Caucasus and the Middle East, and the resolution of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. Pashinyan also met with representatives of the Armenian diaspora and the Armenian Apostolic Church. This was the first official visit by an Armenian leader to Turkey since the collapse of the USSR, making it a historic event (in 2023, Pashinyan attended Erdoğan's presidential inauguration in Ankara).

The Armenian prime minister is consistently pursuing the normalisation of relations with Turkey. Ankara is also interested in this, but its efforts are constrained by its commitments to Azerbaijan and its limited ability to influence Baku. The urgency with which the visit was arranged was strongly influenced by the dynamics of the conflict surrounding Iran. The inaccessibility of Middle Eastern transport routes, combined with constraints linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has significantly increased the strategic importance of routes through the Caucasus – particularly those through Georgia and Azerbaijan, but also those through Armenia. In this context, the potential opening of Armenia's land border with Turkey (and with Azerbaijan) after decades of closure depends primarily on a prior agreement between Yerevan and Baku and has gained considerable significance not only for the countries in the region but also for their partners in Europe and Asia.

Armenia's perspective – a difficult history of relations with Turkey

Armenia and Turkey did not establish diplomatic relations after the collapse of the USSR. Initially, this was due to Yerevan's demand that Ankara recognise the mass killing of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 as genocide. Subsequently Yerevan stopped making normalisation contingent on this recognition, but the post-Cold War Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh – where Ankara had supported Baku from the outset – prevented any progress towards normalising relations. Turkey closed its border with Armenia in July 1992 in an attempt to exert economic pressure and force concessions on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

Until the end of the 2000s, it seemed that the normalisation of Armenian-Turkish relations could begin to be treated as an issue separate from the Karabakh conflict and, more broadly from Yerevan's relations with Baku. Armenia sought to diversify its Russia-oriented foreign policy and was particularly interested in reopening the border, which would help revitalise its economy. A visit by then-Turkish President Abdullah Gül to Yerevan in September 2008,

during which he and his Armenian counterpart, Serzh Sargsyan, attended a football match between the national teams, marked the beginning of the intensification of relations between the two countries. In April 2009, the two sides adopted a so-called roadmap for normalisation, and in October that year, their foreign ministers signed two protocols in Zurich – one on the establishment of diplomatic relations, and the other on the development of bilateral ties. The documents were to come into force upon ratification by both parliaments, after which the border would be reopened. However, there would be no ratification due to domestic opposition in both countries and, above all, because of Azerbaijan's reaction. Baku feared that Armenian-Turkish reconciliation would undermine its efforts to regain control of Nagorno-Karabakh, and it threatened, among other measures, to withdraw about a dozen billion dollars in deposits from Turkish banks.

Prime Minister Pashinyan has repeatedly expressed his desire to normalise relations with Ankara since he came to power in 2018. This objective has also been supported by his promotion of the concept of a "real Armenia", which, he argues, must operate within the real situation of the present. He contrasts this with a "mythical Armenia", shaped by historical paradigms. Despite the lack of diplomatic relations, the two countries maintain economic ties, and have a direct air link. In February 2023, following the earthquake that struck Turkey, Armenia sent humanitarian aid, which crossed the border through a special land crossing opened for that purpose. Ankara, however, continues to insist that in order for bilateral relations to be normalised, there must first be a peace agreement between Yerevan and Baku. Since March this year, the Azerbaijani government has stated it will sign the already agreed document only after Armenia has amended its constitution. The preamble of the current Armenian constitution refers to the Declaration of Independence, which mentions Nagorno-Karabakh. Pashinyan supports this constitutional amendment, but the process is complicated by mistrust of Azerbaijan and concerns that President Ilham Aliyev may seek further pretexts to prolong the conflict with Armenia, as doing so helps him maintain domestic stability.

Ankara's perspective – Azerbaijan first

The 2020 war over Nagorno-Karabakh, during which Turkey provided significant support to Azerbaijan, overturned the post-Cold War status quo in the South Caucasus. In doing so, Ankara challenged Russia's traditional position in the region and assumed the role of the key external actor shaping the security environment in this part of the world. Since then, it has sought to consolidate this role in pursuit of its strategic objectives – chiefly, long-term regional stabilisation (partly at the expense of Russian and Iranian influence) and greater oversight of the area to enable economic expansion and the development of transport corridors under Turkish control, including routes to Asian countries, with Turkey playing a pivotal role in trade between Europe and Asia.

Within this context, efforts to normalise relations with Armenia fit in with Ankara's broader regional policy. Following the second Karabakh war, at the end of 2021, Turkey launched initiatives to restore ties with its neighbour, appointing special envoys to conduct negotiations. These efforts led to the resumption of charter flights between Istanbul and Yerevan in 2022, as well as improvements in cargo transport between the two countries. Turkey has also welcomed Prime Minister Pashinyan's willingness to improve bilateral relations, perceiving it as a sign of strategic thinking on the part of Armenia's isolated

leadership. Pashinyan's declaration that Yerevan will not treat the international recognition of the Armenian genocide as a priority of its foreign policy has been an important factor.

The special bond between Ankara and Baku has to some extent thwarted efforts to normalise relations between the two countries (see '[The \(pan-\)Turkic Caucasus. The Baku-Ankara alliance and its regional importance](#)'). Growing military ties, Azerbaijan's strategic importance for Turkey's energy policy – through projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline and the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) – as well as close personal relations between Presidents Erdoğan and Aliyev, have all led Ankara to consistently signal to Yerevan that re-establishing relations will not occur unless the disputes with Baku are resolved. At the same time, Turkey has limited leverage over Azerbaijan. Its strong ties with Baku enhance its presence in the Caucasus and provide strategic benefits. Additionally, Azerbaijan's ability to influence Turkey's energy and economic landscape acts as a further constraint. As a result, Ankara avoids specifying the terms of a peace deal between Yerevan and Baku, deferring instead to the latter's position on what it considers sufficient for an agreement to be reached. Consequently, the 'Azerbaijan first' approach has remained the main reason why Turkish-Armenian normalisation has thus far been limited to technical arrangements.

Conclusions: Turkey's game over the South Caucasus?

The situation facing Armenia has recently become even more complicated due to Georgia's turn away from the West, which has disrupted the transit of Western military supplies destined for Yerevan. In recent weeks, Tbilisi has also caused difficulties with the transport of Armenian exports to Russia. Following Israel's strikes on Iran, Armenia now faces the threat of near-total isolation – in addition to its already closed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey, and the uncertain status of the Georgian route, there are now Israeli and American attacks on the territory of its fourth neighbour, Iran.

This reality is pushing Yerevan to pursue a settlement with Ankara with greater urgency and has reinforced Prime Minister Pashinyan's belief that, since Armenia lost control over Nagorno-Karabakh and the so-called occupied territories (2020–2023), and pivoted westward (see '[Armenia: between the West and the threat of war](#)'), which has effectively weakened its ties with Moscow (see '[Armenia: a non-binding pledge to leave the CSTO](#)'), Turkey may now be the only viable guarantor of the country's security.

The international context of Pashinyan's visit, including the topics discussed, suggests that one of Ankara's key motivations for organising it was concern over potential destabilisation in the South Caucasus due to the spillover of the Israel–Iran conflict. The timing of Azerbaijan's President Aliyev's visit to Turkey, which preceded the meeting, also appears far from coincidental. At a minimum, Ankara aims to prevent an escalation in Armenian-Azerbaijani tensions under such unfavourable international conditions. Baku has signalled its willingness to force Yerevan to open the so-called Zangezur Corridor to Nakhichevan, which could imply the threat of using military force. At most, Turkey would like to achieve a lasting peace between the two countries – one that it would itself guarantee. In practice, this could involve attempts to mediate the signing of the peace agreement that was already finalised in March.

The primary challenge remains Turkey's 'special bond' with Azerbaijan. Although Baku's close ties with Tel Aviv – including military ties – are a growing concern for Ankara, there is

still little indication that it is prepared to abandon its 'Azerbaijan first' approach in pursuing normalisation with Yerevan. However, Ankara may become more interested in rebuilding ties with Armenia, given the increasing strategic relevance of the South Caucasus transport routes amid prolonged instability in Iran and the ongoing war in Ukraine. These conditions could further enhance the economic benefits of normalisation.