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# The Political, Economic, and Social Implications of the 2020 Patriotic War and the 2023 Anti-Terror Measures for the South Caucasus

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## **The Political, Economic, and Social Implications of the 2020 Patriotic War and the 2023 Anti-Terror Measures for the South Caucasus**

This article examines the political, economic, and social consequences of the Second Karabakh War and the 2023 anti-terror operation for the South Caucasus. By exploring economic transformations, including energy exports, infrastructure development, and connectivity initiatives such as the TRIPP corridor, it highlights their role in post-conflict integration. Social and humanitarian dimensions, particularly the resettlement of IDPs and demining, are assessed to understand recovery processes. The article also considers emerging peacebuilding dynamics and prospects for sustained stability, emphasizing the interplay of local, regional, and global actors, and provides a comprehensive perspective on the region's post-conflict challenges and opportunities.

**Key Words:** South Caucasus, political stability, economic integration, regional connectivity, IDPs, demining, post-conflict reconstruction.

## **A Brief Historical Overview of the Conflict**

To understand the dynamics and consequences of the conflict, it is essential to consider its historical background. The Second Karabakh War represented the latest escalation in a protracted dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories, internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan but occupied by Armenian forces since the early 1990s. While the roots of the conflict date to the early 20th century, large-scale hostilities began in 1988, when ethnic Armenians demanded Karabakh's transfer from Soviet Azerbaijan to Soviet Armenia. This led to a full-scale war in the early 1990s, resulting in the occupation of approximately 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territory, the displacement of nearly one million Azerbaijanis, widespread atrocities by Armenian armed forces, and the non-implementation of *UN Security Council resolutions 822, 853, 874, and 884* demanding withdrawal of occupying forces.<sup>1</sup> Over the following decades, negotiations under international frameworks, including the *OSCE Minsk Group*, failed to produce a settlement, with proposals such as the *2007 Madrid Principles* repeatedly rejected by Armenia.<sup>2</sup> Hostilities resumed on September 27, 2020, triggered by provocative actions from Armenian political-military leadership, culminating in Armenia's decisive defeat after 44 days of fighting. The war formally ended with the *Trilateral Statement* on November 10, 2020, signed by President Ilham Aliyev, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and President Vladimir Putin, setting the stage for post-war stabilization and reconstruction.

## **How Did the South Caucasus Political Landscape Change After the Second Karabakh War?**

Following the Second Karabakh War and the Trilateral Statement, multiple international actors engaged in efforts to facilitate a comprehensive peace settlement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Among them, the European Union sought to establish itself as an active mediator through the so-called *Brussels process*, launched in late 2021 under European Council President Charles Michel. Between 2022 and 2023, trilateral meetings with President Ilham Aliyev, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and EU representatives addressed border delimitation, regional connectivity, and long-term peace prospects. Despite frequent meetings and declarations, including commitments to mutual recognition of territorial integrity, the EU-led mediation yielded limited tangible results.<sup>3</sup> Key provisions of the Trilateral Statement, particularly Armenian withdrawal from Karabakh and the stabilization of the security environment, remained unimplemented. Without

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<sup>1</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz and Michael Gunter, *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives*, chap. 6, "The UN Security Council Resolutions on Nagorno-Karabakh," pp. 130–49 (2022).

<sup>2</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz and Michael Gunter, *The Karabakh Conflict Between Armenia and Azerbaijan* (2023), p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> Josep Errea, "EU Mediation during Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: Process and Mistakes," 2023, <https://top-center.org/en/analytcs/3589/eu-mediation-during-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-process-and-mistakes>

effective mechanisms for demilitarization and incident prevention, the diplomatic framework's impact weakened, negotiations stalled, and regional tensions and insecurity increased throughout 2023.

On September 19, the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan launched a local anti-terror operation in Karabakh to disarm illegal armed formations in response to escalating provocations, Armenia's territorial claims, and its support for separatism, which had created a fragile security environment. The immediate trigger was a landmine incident carried out by Armenian sabotage groups, causing civilian and law enforcement fatalities and highlighting persistent destabilization despite the Trilateral Statement, which had been repeatedly undermined. Azerbaijan's counter-terrorism measures lasted just under *24 hours (23 hours 43 minutes)* and aimed to enforce the agreement, end provocations, disarm and withdraw Armenian forces, dismantle their infrastructure, and restore Azerbaijan's sovereignty and constitutional order. The operation shifted conflict dynamics, as Armenian representatives agreed to meet Azerbaijani officials in Yevlakh, signaling direct dialogue without external mediation, while the resulting accord ensured withdrawal of Armenian forces and disarmament of the puppet regime.<sup>4</sup> Azerbaijan advanced reintegration through humanitarian and administrative measures, supplying essential goods, restoring electricity, and facilitating movement through the Lachin checkpoint with Russian peacekeepers and the International Committee of the Red Cross. In a broader effort to promote reconciliation, Baku offered amnesty to Armenian fighters who laid down their arms, introduced comprehensive reintegration measures, including the opportunity for displaced individuals to return and obtain Azerbaijani citizenship. These developments ultimately culminated in the full restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, later formalized as *State Sovereignty Day on September 20, 2024*, by President Ilham Aliyev.

Russia's role in the South Caucasus underwent a notable transformation following the Second Karabakh War. In November 2020, Moscow acted as the principal mediator of the Trilateral Statement, ending active hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia and deploying a peacekeeping contingent to the Karabakh region. Later, Russia sought to preserve its role by hosting trilateral meetings, including the Sochi summits in 2021 and 2022, which focused on ceasefire implementation, transport connectivity, and border delimitation. However, its ability to sustain the role of primary security guarantor gradually weakened, largely due to its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which constrained its engagement across the South Caucasus. As a result, both Armenia and Azerbaijan began reassessing Russia's effectiveness as a mediator and security provider.

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<sup>4</sup> "The Anti-Terrorism Operation in Karabakh," Azerbaijan.az, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://azerbaijan.az/en/related-information/310>

Relations between Armenia and Russia deteriorated amid diverging expectations over security guarantees. As a CSTO member, Armenia expected tangible support against escalating tensions with Azerbaijan, yet delays in arms deliveries and lack of intervention eroded trust. The turning point came when Azerbaijan carried out a rapid anti-terror operation and restored control over the remaining territories of Karabakh. Despite Russian peacekeepers' presence, Moscow did not intervene, dissolving separatist structures and reinforcing Yerevan's perception that Russia could not fulfill its security role.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Armenia began distancing itself from Russian-led frameworks, diversifying partnerships with France, India, the EU, and the US, and freezing CSTO participation. The shift became more evident in 2024, when Russia and Azerbaijan agreed to terminate the peacekeeping mission early, completed on June 12, 2024, ending Russia's military presence in Karabakh. However, for Azerbaijan, a key moment came in December 2024 with the downing of Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 8243 over Russian airspace, attributed to a Russian air-defense system, prompting demands for apology, investigation, compensation, and accountability.<sup>6</sup> Tensions escalated further in June 2025, when Russian special forces raided Yekaterinburg targeting Azerbaijani diaspora members, resulting in deaths in custody and strong Baku reactions, including suspension of cultural initiatives and inter-parliamentary contacts. Frictions extended into the information sphere, where Azerbaijani authorities shut down the Baku office of Sputnik and detained staff over alleged illegal activities and links to Russian security services, prompting reciprocal diplomatic measures from Moscow. Although a meeting between Presidents Ilham Aliyev and Vladimir Putin in October 2025 temporarily de-escalated tensions, but these events underscored a broader shift: Russia's dominance has weakened, while South Caucasus states increasingly pursue diversified foreign policies and new geopolitical alignments.

In the evolving South Caucasus, Türkiye strengthened its role as a regional actor following the Second Karabakh War by deepening its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan through the *Shusha Declaration*, signed on June 15, 2021, by Presidents Ilham Aliyev and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Shusha. The declaration formalized cooperation across military, defense, energy, transport, and humanitarian sectors and emphasized mutual support in the event of threats to sovereignty, shaping a new regional alignment after the 2020 war.<sup>7</sup> The shifting geopolitical landscape also opened avenues for Türkiye-Armenia engagement, exemplified by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's visit to Türkiye on June 20, 2025, where he met with

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<sup>5</sup> Ebru Akgün, "Armenia's Geopolitical Pivot: Strategic Ambiguity and the Search for New Security Anchors," 2026, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13934-armenia%E2%80%99s-geopolitical-pivot-strategic-ambiguity-and-the-search-for-new-security-anchors.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Rusif Huseynov, "Azerbaijan-Russia Standoff over Airplane Crash," 2025, <https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3719/azerbaijan-russia-standoff-over-airplane-crash>

<sup>7</sup> Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey, Shusha, June 15, 2021.

President Erdoğan, signaling a cautious diplomatic thaw. Progress, however, remains limited by the Constitution of Armenia, which implies territorial claims on both Azerbaijan and Türkiye, constraining full normalization.<sup>8</sup> All things considered, Türkiye's partnership with Azerbaijan, combined with its measured outreach to Armenia, underscores its role as a stabilizing actor for regional reconciliation, cooperation, and economic integration.

The United States' growing role in the South Caucasus became particularly visible with the *Washington Summit on August 8, 2025* marking a pivotal stage in Azerbaijan–Armenia normalization. This followed the July 10, 2025 Abu Dhabi meeting, which helped advance negotiations, and was later reinforced by *the Zayed Award in February 2026* recognizing both leaders' efforts. The summit produced landmark outcomes, including the initialing of a draft peace agreement and the U.S.-brokered *Joint Declaration on Future Relations*, which reaffirmed mutual recognition of territorial integrity, formalized the commitment to refrain from the use of force, and outlined practical steps for border delimitation and humanitarian cooperation.<sup>9</sup> It also advanced the *Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP)*, a 20-mile strip through Armenia's Syunik region linking Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave and facilitating transit between Central Asia and Europe while bypassing Russia and Iran. Mechanisms were established to prevent border incidents, expand transport and economic connectivity, and phase out the OSCE Minsk Group, moving the peace process from rhetoric to actionable frameworks. Moreover, the suspension of *Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act*, which had long restricted U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan, a decision President Ilham Aliyev described as “*the restoration of justice after 33 years*,” was a landmark decision.<sup>10</sup>

This diplomatic engagement was consolidated during U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance's February 9-11 visit to Armenia and Azerbaijan. In Baku, Vance and President Ilham Aliyev signed a *Charter on Strategic Partnership*, institutionalizing cooperation across energy transit, digital infrastructure, connectivity projects, defense, regional security, and emerging sectors such as AI and data governance<sup>11</sup>. In Armenia, the visit launched U.S. support for nuclear energy, including small modular reactor technologies, and bolstered defense capabilities through drones, training, and

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<sup>8</sup> Sultan Zahidov, “*The Strategic Bond: Azerbaijan-Turkey Relations and Regional Security in the South Caucasus – OpEd*,” 2025, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/29062025-the-strategic-bond-azerbaijan-turkey-relations-and-regional-security-in-the-south-caucasus-oped/>

<sup>9</sup> Azerbaijan and Armenia, *Joint Declaration by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia on the Outcomes of Their Meeting in Washington, D.C., United States of America*, Washington, DC, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Matin Mammadli, “*US-Azerbaijan Relations in the Context of New Geopolitical Realities*,” 2026, <https://aircenter.az/en/single/us-azerbaijan-relations-in-the-context-of-new-geopolitical-realities-2001>

<sup>11</sup> Azerbaijan and the United States, *Charter on Strategic Partnership between the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Government of the United States of America*, Baku, 2026

surveillance systems.<sup>12</sup> At a broader level, these developments indicate that the U.S. is increasingly embedding the South Caucasus into its strategic, economic, and technological frameworks, thereby reshaping the region's geopolitical orientation.

Iran's position in the South Caucasus reflects sustained strategic caution and concern over shifting regional dynamics, particularly regarding Armenia and Azerbaijan. Specifically, Tehran has consistently framed the TRIPP corridor, leased to a U.S. consortium for up to 99 years, as a geopolitical threat rather than an economic initiative. Ali Akbar Velayati, senior adviser to the Supreme Leader, explicitly equated the corridor with the contested *Zangezur corridor* and warned that it could facilitate a NATO presence near Iran's northern border, thereby posing security risks to both Iran and southern Russia.<sup>13</sup> Although Armenian officials assert that TRIPP operates under Armenia's full sovereignty, Iranian skepticism persists, reflecting broader unease about U.S. involvement and the realignment of northern transit routes. Moreover, Tehran interprets Azerbaijan–Armenia peace talks as potentially strengthening Baku's ties with Western actors, including Israel, which could reduce Iran's leverage. Economically, the corridor threatens Iran's role as an indispensable transit route, undermining initiatives such as the International North–South Transport Corridor and electricity and gas swaps with Armenia, and signaling a potential erosion of Tehran's long-standing strategic influence in the region.

### **Post-War Economic Initiatives and Regional Connectivity in the South Caucasus**

One of the most significant economic implications of the post-conflict period in the South Caucasus has been the growing role of Azerbaijan as a strategic energy supplier to Europe. Azerbaijan has prioritized expanding natural gas exports, gaining momentum after the July 2022 *Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy with the European Union*, aimed at expanding the Southern Gas Corridor and delivering at least 20 bcm annually by 2027. By 2025, Azerbaijan exported around 25 bcm, generating \$8.8 billion in revenue. As President Ilham Aliyev noted, “*We already export natural gas to 16 countries, 10 of which are members of the European Union,*”<sup>14</sup> highlighting Baku's growing contribution to Europe's energy diversification away from Russian supplies. In early 2026, exports reached Germany and Austria for the first time via the Trans Adriatic Pipeline, marking a major milestone in corridor development. Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2026, President Aliyev emphasized that further expansion will depend on long-term demand commitments and investment to scale production and pipeline capacity.

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<sup>12</sup> Vasif Huseynov, “*After the Visit of US Vice President JD Vance, the South Caucasus Is Being Rewired,*” 2026, <https://www.commonspace.eu/opinion/opinion-after-visit-us-vice-president-jd-vance-south-caucasus-being-rewired>

<sup>13</sup> Mehmet Fatih Oztarsu, “*Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace: What Is Iran Really Afraid Of?*,” Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 2025, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13889-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-what-is-iran-really-afraid-of?.html>

<sup>14</sup> Ilham Aliyev, interview by Euronews TV, Davos, January 18, 2026.

Beyond natural gas, Azerbaijan is increasingly focusing on electricity connectivity and renewable energy. A flagship project is the *Black Sea Submarine Cable*, developed with Georgia, Romania, and Hungary, capable of transmitting up to 1,300 MW of renewable electricity; its designation by the EU as a “Project of Mutual Interest” in December 2025 strengthened financing and regulatory support. Renewable energy expansion is also evident in the *Garadagh Solar Power Plant*, developed with Masdar in October 2023, and the *Khizi Absheron Wind Power Plant*, inaugurated in January 2026.<sup>15</sup> Azerbaijan also aims to increase renewables to roughly 30 percent of total capacity by 2030 through large-scale solar and wind projects in Karabakh and East Zangezur and exploring offshore wind potential in the Caspian Sea.

At the same time, regional energy connectivity is increasingly shaped by the Zangezur corridor within the broader TRIPP, which, although initially conceived as a transport initiative, is now evolving into a multi-dimensional corridor with significant energy and geopolitical implications. In this context, the construction of the *Zangezur high-voltage transmission line*, launched on January 29, 2026, aims to integrate the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic into Azerbaijan’s unified electricity system and the wider Azerbaijan–Türkiye–Europe electricity corridor, reinforcing the energy dimension of regional integration.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, this transformation occurs amid shifting geopolitical conditions, as disruptions affecting routes linking China and Central Asia with European markets have intensified due to the conflict in Ukraine, maritime security challenges in the Red Sea, and heightened Iran–Israel tensions, increasing demand for alternative corridors. Projects such as TRIPP aim to transform former conflict lines into functional economic corridors, enabling more efficient movement of goods, energy, and services. Early signs of Azerbaijan–Armenia economic ties include *the transport of Kazakh grain through Azerbaijan* in October 2025, *the start of petroleum product supplies of AI-95 and AI-92 gasoline and diesel* in December 2025, and *shipments of Russian grain* in March 2026, with the emergence of a limited energy-trade channel and reopened transit routes demonstrating gradual restoration of economic interaction.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, transported by rail through Georgia, these shipments illustrate the benefits of renewed connectivity and lifted transit restrictions, with border regions previously affected by economic decline and depopulation likely to benefit. Within this evolving framework, Azerbaijan is consolidating its role as a regional hub for energy and logistics, while Armenia may benefit from diversified energy supplies, reduced isolation, and a growing transit role.

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<sup>15</sup> Vasif Huseynov, “*Azerbaijan Energy Sector in 2025 Has Been Innovative and Dynamic*,” Commonsplace.eu, 2026, <https://www.commonspace.eu/node/13575>

<sup>16</sup> Vasif Huseynov, “*TRIPP and the Rise of a Trans-Regional Energy Corridor in the South Caucasus*,” Saratoga Foundation, 2026, <https://www.saratoga-foundation.org/p/tripp-and-the-rise-of-a-trans-regional>

<sup>17</sup> Akbar Novruz, “*Russian Wheat Heads to Armenia via Azerbaijan in Continued Transit Shipments*,” AzerNews, 2026, <https://www.azernews.az/karabakh/256155.html>

Against this backdrop, TRIPP is also positioned to restore and secure regional connections by offering a stable transit framework, particularly for landlocked countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan seeking reliable access to Europe. As part of the *Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor)*, it supports Eurasian connectivity by enabling efficient flows of goods, energy, and services. Implementation, however, faces challenges, including infrastructure gaps, regulatory and political risks, competing regional interests, and US engagement shaped by domestic politics and the initiative's personalized nature, while its long-term success depends on a coordinated multilateral framework balancing economic efficiency with geopolitical stability. Taken together, these developments illustrate that the end of conflict is not only reshaping political relations but also laying the foundation for a more interconnected South Caucasus, where integrated infrastructure and economic interdependence support long-term stability and sustainable growth.

### **Resettlement, Reconstruction, and Landmine Clearance in the South Caucasus**

The Azerbaijani government has long promoted return to Karabakh as the main solution to displacement caused by the 1988–1994 conflict, which forced nearly one million Azerbaijanis from their homes. By the end of 2023, around 658,000 remained registered as internally displaced persons (IDPs), about 6.6% of the population, receiving social protections since 1998. Although state support, including housing, financial aid, and education, has been extensive, IDP status has been treated as temporary, with return as the ultimate goal. Following the restoration of territorial control in 2020 and 2023, the “*Great Return*” program was launched in late 2022, aiming to resettle 140,000 people by 2026 through 34,500 housing units. The 2023 state budget allocated 5.26 billion AZN, with total investments projected at 30 billion AZN by 2030; by September 2024, about 2,000 families (8,000 individuals) had returned.<sup>18</sup>

However, safe and sustainable resettlement faces major obstacles, including large-scale infrastructure damage and extensive landmine contamination. Around 11,667 square kilometres, over 13% of Azerbaijan, remain affected, with an estimated 1.5 million landmines causing civilian casualties and slowing reconstruction.<sup>19</sup> To address these risks, the *Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA)*, supported by the Defense and Emergency Ministries, leads demining operations, technical clearance, training, and public awareness initiatives - efforts essential for enabling the long-term return and reintegration of displaced populations in Karabakh and Eastern Zangazur.

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<sup>18</sup> Farid Guliyev, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 140 (January 2025), “*Durable Solutions and Return of IDPs in Azerbaijan*,” pp. 13, 15,

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388503520\\_Durable\\_Solutions\\_and\\_Return\\_of\\_IDPs\\_in\\_Azerbaijan](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388503520_Durable_Solutions_and_Return_of_IDPs_in_Azerbaijan)

<sup>19</sup> Farid Shafiyev, speech at the briefing at the UN Headquarters, New York, 2025, “FULL SPEECH: AIR Center's Chairman of the Board, Farid Shafiyev, addressed the briefing at the UNHQ,” <https://aircenter.az/en/post/full-speech-air-centers-chairman-of-the-board-farid-shafiyev-addressed-the-briefing-at-the-unhq-1692>

## **Conclusion: Consolidating Peace and Stability in the South Caucasus**

The post-2020 Second Karabakh War and the 2023 anti-terror operation have fundamentally reshaped the South Caucasus, thus creating new opportunities for political stabilization, economic integration, and social recovery. Azerbaijan's restoration of full sovereignty, alongside Armenia's willingness to engage in direct negotiations without external mediation, has generated positive momentum in the peace process, departing from decades in which the conflict was seen as irreconcilable and managed through ineffective mechanisms rather than genuine peacebuilding. High-level bilateral engagement, including meetings in Abu Dhabi and Washington, where a draft peace treaty was initialed and a Joint Declaration adopted, further highlights the growing role of political will in advancing a sustainable peace agenda. At the same time, economic and humanitarian initiatives are reinforcing stability and regional interdependence. Energy exports, renewable projects, and transport corridors such as TRIPP enhance connectivity and trade between Central Asia and Europe, while programs like the "Great Return" and demining efforts address the legacy of displacement and enable sustainable resettlement. Moreover, reciprocal civil society engagement, alongside humanitarian gestures, strengthens trust and contributes to rebuilding relationships and confidence between communities.

However, significant challenges remain, particularly constitutional provisions in Armenia perceived as territorial claims, the influence of revanchist forces, and domestic political dynamics that risk politicizing the peace agenda and undermining trust. The sustainability of peace will depend not only on compromise, legal reforms, and continued dialogue, but also on broad domestic political consensus. At the same time, the emergence of a de facto peace environment creates a window of opportunity that, if preserved and institutionalized through a formal agreement, could mark a historic turning point, enabling the South Caucasus to transition from a region of conflict into one of stability, regional cooperation, and long-term economic development.

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