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# The conflict in the Caucasus has a chance of resolution, but only following significant political changes



The armies of the US and Armenia will hold joint military exercises today in the vicinity of the Armenian capital, Yerevan, in a situation where the host country is closer to a new war against neighbouring Azerbaijan than peace.

The joint exercises with the US are only the most recent in a series of steps Armenia has taken to distance itself from its traditional ally, Russia. Armenia has long been unable to count on security and economic cooperation guarantees.

Even though small in terms of the number of participants (85 American and 175 Armenian) and lasting 10 days, these exercises might be a factor that would reduce tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The 2 states have previously clashed twice over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, but tensions have reached a climax in recent weeks and threaten to flare up again.

The first signs of easing tensions have already appeared in reports stating that an agreement has been reached to unblock transport corridors connecting Armenia with the Karabakh region, including the main Lachin corridor, which Azerbaijan has been obstructing for a long time.

This agreement was first confirmed by Azerbaijan officials and the local authorities of Karabakh, predominantly populated by Armenians but within Azerbaijan's international borders. However, later came denials that a deal had been reached.

## Unblocking the corridor is the first step

However, an agreement to unblock the

corridor between Armenia and the Karabakh region appears to be a matter of time and details. This would mark a significant humanitarian relief for the approximately 150,000 residents of the disputed region.

They have been denied regular supplies since last December, as Azerbaijan, which controls the crossings, has restricted the flow of goods, accusing Armenia of using them to supply arms to separatists in Karabakh.

The blockade escalated over the summer when Azerbaijani border guards stopped humanitarian deliveries from the Red Cross. This blockade and the intolerable conditions in which the isolated inhabitants of Karabakh lived led to the assessment that there had even been genocide against the Armenian population.

The humanitarian escalation was accompanied by the alleged build-up of Azerbaijani troops around the disputed area, which the Baku authorities denied. However, the climate is reminiscent of the conflicts of the 1990s and 2020, when two countries were engaged in an open war.

Opening transport corridors and easing the humanitarian crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh would greatly ease tensions in the Caucasus and distance the parties from a new conflict. But this would be only the first step for the long-term pacification of the region.

## Intertwined interests of regional actors

Through Armenia and Azerbaijan and their frozen conflict, the interests and influences of many countries, not only those in the closest region, have been developing in the background of the situation in Ukraine.

Recently, Armenia has made several strong moves, distancing itself from the traditional Russian influence that it has been under since gaining independence after the collapse of the USSR, of which it was a part.

At the beginning of September, the parliament in Yerevan ratified the decisions on Armenia's accession to the Rome Statute, the founding treaty of the International Criminal Court.

This decision was received in Moscow as "absolutely unacceptable" because it is directly related to the indictment and arrest warrant against Russian leader Vladimir Putin before that court. On that occasion, Moscow handed an official protest to the ambassador of Armenia, describing the move as "unfriendly".

Armenia is angry with Russia because its peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh has failed to keep transport corridors open. Armenia has been slipping out of the Russian-led military alliance - the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

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The fact that the Armenian public is deeply disappointed and continues to be disappointed by the Collective Security Treaty Organisation's actions is obvious", said Nikol Pashinyan, Prime Minister of Armenia, recently.

## Armenia faces new concessions

The prime minister has been increasingly seeking Western support, primarily in an effort to defuse tensions with neighbouring Azerbaijan. Distancing from Moscow is a particularly noticeable and significant part of that shift, including the joint military exercises with the US.

However, Armenia will be forced to make new compromises and concessions in the process since important regional allies such as Turkey, Ukraine and particularly Israel stand by Azerbaijan.

Yerevan would have to reassess its close ties with neighbouring Iran if it wants to move towards a compromise that would bring a more lasting peace with Azerbaijan.

Armenia considers Iran a significant economic and military partner because of its traditionally tense relations with Azerbaijan.

However, that alliance is becoming unsustainable, given that the war in Ukraine has raised the partnership between Russia and Iran to the highest level. Armenia could not expect success in such a coalition regarding its own interests.

In such circumstances, there is scope for US and EU diplomats to step up their mediation efforts and bring Armenia and Azerbaijan closer to the long-awaited compromise.

Last Saturday, US State Secretary Antony Blinken called for the immediate opening of transport corridors between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Karabakh) and resolving disputes through direct talks.

Even though long away from the most significant global events, the conflict resolution in the South Caucasus appears as an important step in reducing Russian influence in a region where it has strategic interests.