

# The Armenia Crisis

## India's Interests and Opportunities in the South Caucasus Region

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### INTRODUCTION

The dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh region began in the 1980s when the territory, predominantly ethnic Armenians, declared independence from Azerbaijan when the Soviet Union's dissolution was already geared. Before the Soviet collapse, the Nagorno-Karabakh region, known as Artsakh by the Armenians, was the autonomous administrative region that officially lies in the former Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). In 1988, the ethnic population of Nagorno-Karabakh, a minority in the Azerbaijan SSR, demanded its integration with the Armenia SSR, which the Azerbaijan SSR and the Soviet government did not accept. The rejection of their demands and the ethnic grudges inflaming led to the beginning of the first Nagorno-Karabakh War in 1988 within the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> With the Soviet disintegration in 1991, the dispute entered into a violent phase that continued till 1994, when a ceasefire was declared by the joint efforts of Russia and Minsk Group, an informal committee, to end the first Nagorno-Karabakh war.

After the Soviet disintegration in 1991, the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence and held several elections to administer

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its territory autonomously.<sup>2</sup> Efforts were also made to hold a referendum to establish its new constitution in 2006.<sup>3</sup> However, Azerbaijan opposed all its efforts and declared it illegal under international law. Ceasefire was constantly violated from both sides, and Armenia extended its full support to the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. Over the years, negotiations were conducted by both nations to resolve the conflict peacefully, but nothing met the expectations. In 2020, a breakdown in negotiations led to border clashes over a brief period in July. However, Russia intervened and conducted a unilateral military drill near the Caucasus to signal its support for Armenia. The move incited Turkey, which conducted a joint military exercise with Azerbaijan in response. In September 2020, circumstances worsened, and the two Caucasus nations entered into the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. Besides several traditional ground and aerial attacks, the war was remembered for its extensive application of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) or drones for pre-emptive strikes or offensive purposes. The ceasefire brokered by Russia in November 2020 led to Armenia relinquishing its military control over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.<sup>4</sup> Apart from the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, Azerbaijan's attempt to invade and modify Armenia's territory in the south to construct Zengezur Corridor to connect with Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan's autonomous region located between Turkey, Armenia and Iran, has added fuel to the fire.

### RUSSIAN CONUNDRUM AND ARMENIA'S QUEST FOR ASSISTANCE

Armenia and Azerbaijan are geopolitically located at the junction of West Asia, Central Asia and Europe, an extremely volatile region. Like Ukraine, Armenia and Azerbaijan were part of the former Soviet Union before its disintegration in 1991. Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russia-led military alliance of six former Soviet states—Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan—formed in 2002 to balance against the United States-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).<sup>5</sup> Russia, arguably the leader of the CSTO, had an obligation as an alliance partner to extend resources—both human and material—to its members to ensure their security. However, Russia's involvement in the war against Ukraine has restricted its capabilities to secure Armenia from Azerbaijan, which is supported by Turkey.

Another reason for Russia's reluctance to openly support Armenia could lie in the fact that it does not want to destroy its terms with Ankara and Baku, who are serious arms recipients of Moscow. Russia's compulsions have

led them to a double-edged sword situation where they could not explicitly support either of the disputants. Consequently, Russia chose to play a mediator's role between Armenia and Azerbaijan to balance its relations with both parties. However, Armenia seeks more commitment, security assistance and proactive involvement of Russia, in their favour against Azerbaijan, which is unthinkable for Moscow. Moreover, unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan shares a direct border with Russia and both of them are stakeholders in the Caspian Sea under the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea signed in 2018. In such circumstances, Azerbaijan is strategically and economically more important than Armenia, and a stable border and healthy relations between Baku and Moscow would benefit both of them in the long run.

Over the last few years, Russia's credibility has been declined for not fulfilling its promises and commitments to Armenia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine inherited the world's third largest nuclear weapons as most of the Soviet's arsenals were stationed in Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> In December 1994, Russia, with the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), signed the Budapest Memorandum with Ukraine to provide security assurances to Ukraine and also pledged to respect its international borders. In return, Ukraine agreed to return all the nuclear weapons to Russia for decommissioning and acceding to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear weapon state (NWS).<sup>7</sup> After two decades, the security assurances accorded to Ukraine under the Budapest Memorandum were compromised and Russia and Ukraine have contested two wars against each other in 2014 and 2022.<sup>8</sup>

In the Armenia–Azerbaijan context, Russia hesitated to timely intervene in the war between two of its former territories and secure Armenia, a CSTO member state and a trusted arms recipient. These events have signalled that Russia has not fulfilled its commitments, owing to its compulsions, and has been losing trust and grip over its allies and former Soviet territories. It is worth mentioning that Russia was also a major arms supplier to Azerbaijan.

Turkey was another significant importer of Russian heavy military equipment worth billions of dollars, such as the contract for the S-400 air defence system valued at US\$ 2.5 billion signed in 2017.<sup>9</sup> Given Turkey's abundant defence market, Russia could not afford to annoy Ankara and its allies. Russia's reluctance to support Armenia could have drastic repercussions in the region. Russia's dilemma and hesitance towards Armenia has already provoked Yerevan to take steps that are unfriendly and provocative for Moscow. Armenia's ratification of the Rome Statute of the International

Criminal Court (ICC) could be seen as a move taken in dissatisfaction and revenge against Russia's silence and its void security assurances.<sup>10</sup>

Since 1991, Armenia has been the only nation with which Russia augmented its military ties and also operated its military base in Gyumri city since 1995.<sup>11</sup> Being a CSTO member, Armenia has been getting Russian arms at a discount for a long time. Additionally, Armenia was a satellite state significant for Russia to have a close eye on West Asia, Central Asia and Europe, while also checking Georgia and Moldova, which were drifting towards the West.

Armenia's ally-vacuum and Russian dilemma brought them to pursue India, which has emerged as a significant partner. However, Yerevan's relations with New Delhi would not worry Moscow. Moreover, the existing situation may cause Yerevan to leave CSTO and pursue the West following Moldova's path, which recently joined the European Union in 2022.<sup>12</sup> However, arms import from the US is less likely as Washington DC and Ankara are NATO members, and the US is the main ally of Israel, a major arms supplier of Azerbaijan. France could take advantage of the chance after being duped by Australia and the US during the AUKUS nuclear submarine contract.<sup>13</sup>

### INDIA'S INCLINATION TOWARDS THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Regions, where multiple powers are confronting to secure their interests, invite instability as well as opportunities. The Caucasus is one such region getting attention from an emerging power like India despite great distance between the two. For India, the importance of the Caucasus region lies in three crucial factors: (a) securing economic corridor networks, (b) balancing against the rising axis (Turkey, Azerbaijan and Pakistan) and (c) promoting arms sales to Armenia.

### SECURING ECONOMIC INTERESTS AND MAINTAIN REGIONAL STATUS QUO

The region is key for the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), an ambitious economic connectivity project joining India with Russia and the European countries via the Caspian Sea. In view of the instability and security uncertainty in the West Asia and adjoining regions, India can better utilise the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) as an alternative to the INSTC. In September 2023, a Memorandum of Undertaking (MoU) on IMEC was signed by eight G20

members at the G20 Leaders' Summit in New Delhi.<sup>14</sup> Both the projects—INSTC and IMEC—bypass Pakistan, which enjoys better connectivity with West Asia. The IMEC joins India with Greece via West Asia, Israel and the Mediterranean Sea and could also be extended to Africa. The IMEC project could also provide an alternative to the Suez Canal, potentially reducing the trade time between India and Europe by almost 40 per cent (10 days faster route) as compared to the trade via the Suez Canal.<sup>15</sup>

To ensure the safety and security of these two ambitious projects, India would seek greater support from India while also ensuring its presence in some form in the nearby Caucasus region. By enabling its presence in the region, India would not only safeguard its economic interests but would also be able to closely observe the entire region and regional powers. In such circumstances, Armenia has a pivotal role to play in India's determination. The successful materialisation of the two projects could also motivate New Delhi to collaborate with Yerevan on bilateral infrastructure and joint development projects in Armenia. It is worth mentioning that the entire geographical location from Azerbaijan to Turkey lies between the two trade routes of these two projects, which persuades New Delhi to ensure its attendance in the region.

India should also maintain the regional status quo to secure its trade and economic interests by denying any attempts at border amendments. For such an interest, India seeks support and commitment from Iran, a party to INSTC. Moreover, Iran too does not favour any changes in the status quo regarding the Armenia–Azerbaijan territorial disputes and the Zangezur corridor issue.<sup>16</sup> Iran and Turkey are two major players in West Asia and the adjoining regions, and the current geopolitical status and struggle for power in the area has raised the scope for confrontation between them as two swords cannot fit into one sheath. Turkey and Azerbaijan strive to forcefully establish the Zangezur corridor via Armenia's southern territory to link with the Nakhchivan autonomous region.<sup>17</sup>

The success of this project would allow a direct land connection between Baku and Ankara, and both countries will be able to access and utilise the Caspian Sea and Black Sea jointly. However, this project would cut Iran's border with Armenia and extend Azerbaijan's border with Tehran. The corridor could also block Iran's access to Armenia and further European land connectivity. Consequently, Iran has historically opposed and warned against any change in the Armenia–Azerbaijan borders. Iran has also signalled its stance to Russia and warned them against siding with Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute and the Zangezur corridor

project.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Turkey has blatantly accused Iran of making obstacles in the establishment of the Zangezur corridor.<sup>19</sup> India would also respect and support Iranians in safeguarding Tehran and New Delhi's interests in the South Caucasus.

### THE TRANS-REGIONAL CONNECTION: INDIA'S BALANCING AGAINST THE RISING AXIS

The transfer of arms from India to Armenia represents the opportunity for the Indian domestic arms industries to gain experience in arms manufacturing while promoting 'atmanirbharta' (self-reliance) to fulfil the demands of the Indian armed forces and other friendly foreign countries. However, India's arms export is a part of the great geopolitical game where India and Armenia are locking horns with the rising axis countries, namely Turkey, Pakistan and Azerbaijan. The rising axis is a great challenge for both India and Armenia, and the contest has brought the two regions—Caucasus and South Asia—face-to-face. Here, Turkey's intervention is the common factor in both Armenia–Azerbaijan and India–Pakistan territorial conflicts. Ankara's support to Baku and Islamabad has naturally positioned New Delhi to support Yerevan and up against the rising axis. In South Asia, both Turkey and Azerbaijan have positioned themselves along Pakistan and its quest for Kashmir,<sup>20</sup> an integral part of India, at several multilateral platforms, including the United Nations (UN). Turkey's military aid to both Pakistan and Azerbaijan has provoked India to adopt a similar policy of tit-for-tat in the Caucasus by arming Armenia to balance against the burgeoning Turkey, Pakistan and Azerbaijan axis. The cooperation amongst rising axis countries is not only limited to arms transfers, power aggrandisement, military cooperation and economy, but also involves the expansion of soft power by promoting culture, religion and various track diplomacies.

In 2017, Turkey, Pakistan and Azerbaijan signed a tripartite treaty for defence cooperation.<sup>21</sup> Turkey and Pakistan have been the recipients of both Russian and US arms. Turkey, a US-led NATO ally, has manufacturing arms in line with those manufactured in the US, and they had a successful experience in upgrading and enhancing the US arms. Turkey transferred armaments worth US\$ 155 million in 2008 to US\$ 352 million in 2017<sup>22</sup> and has been a frequent visitor to Pakistan's International Defence Exhibition and Seminar (IDEAS), which showcases its defence capability and inventory. After China, Turkey has become the second-largest arms import destination for Pakistan. Turkey's shipment of Bayraktar TB2 drones to Azerbaijan has

been the major cause of worry for the Armenian forces, which makes Russian tanks and artillery systems less effective.<sup>23</sup>

Pakistan is the only country that has never recognised Armenia as an independent state and fully supported Azerbaijan's position in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.<sup>24</sup> In response, Azerbaijan has also supported Pakistan's stand on Kashmir and the settlement of border disputes with the UN resolutions, a matter that India considers a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> Overall, Azerbaijan is in an advantageous position than the Armenians in both battlefield and geopolitics. Armenia is a landlocked country with less to offer its partners. Azerbaijan, a major exporter of oil and gas, has access to the resource-rich Caspian Sea shared among its bank states under the Caspian Sea Agreement in 2018.<sup>26</sup>

#### SCOPE FOR THE ARMS TRANSFERS TO ARMENIA

India has remained the largest arms importer since the 1990s, dependent on foreign suppliers for its armed forces requirements. Efforts were made to establish a domestic arms industry to reduce foreign dependence. In 2002, the Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP) was established to promote defence manufacturing and smoothening arms acquisition processes. Since then, several amendments have been made in the DPP but India retained its top position in arms imports, with some progress being made in developing domestic industry. However, India's success in arms export came in recent years when it gained 23<sup>rd</sup> position in the list of major suppliers, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute-2022 (SIPRI) report.<sup>27</sup> Armenia was the third largest importer of Indian arms, sharing 11 per cent of India's exports, standing behind Myanmar (50 per cent) and Sri Lanka (25 per cent).<sup>28</sup> Since 2020, India has been consistent in providing arms and equipment to fulfil the demands of the Armenian armed forces. Besides arms transfers, the relationship involves a major geopolitical equation, including India's arch-rival state Pakistan.

India has always adopted an approach of peaceful coexistence and opted not to interfere in any regional conflicts. However, the Armenia–Azerbaijan contest allowed India to flex its policy and intervene via arms transfer to secure its diplomatic interests coupled with the security of Armenia. India's relationship with Armenia started deepening since the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, and Russia's war against Ukraine has widened the opportunity for India and Armenia to engage in defence trade. Since 2020, India has registered a surge in its arms sales to Armenia.

In 2020, India brokered a US\$ 40 million deal for four Swathi weapon-locating radar systems to track and locate the enemy's artillery gun positions.<sup>29</sup> Jointly developed by Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) and the Defence Research Development Organisation (DRDO), the radar system is a significant counter-battery equipment to track and alert one's counterforce against incoming artillery and rockets. In 2022, India transferred US\$ 250 million worth of arms to Armenia, including indigenously manufactured Pinaka Multi-Barrel Rocket Launchers (MBRL) system, rockets and anti-tank missiles.<sup>30</sup> Pinaka MBRL is a heavy weapon system capable of firing 12 rockets in 44 seconds with an effective range of 40 km extending up to 120 km in a modified version. Pinaka MBRL is a truck-based mobile artillery system that provides the capability of shooting and scooting, making it difficult for the enemy's counter forces to track and neutralise the rocket system. In August 2023, Armenia purchased India's indigenous developed Advanced Towed Artillery Gun System (ATAGS) in a US\$ 155.5 million contract.<sup>31</sup> Both nations are negotiating to sign a deal worth Rs 6,000 crores for the Akash missile defence system manufactured by Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL). Akash missile defence system is a short-range Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) indigenously designed and developed with 82 per cent indigenous contents.<sup>32</sup>

India is an emerging defence exporter and its arms fit well into the Armenian armoury. Indian arms are suitable for Armenia as both have been accustomed to the Russian or Soviet Union's arms for decades. India has not only used Russian arms but has also manufactured them via technology transfer and licenced production. Indian arms have a similar capability to those of Russia, which makes it a better and low-cost option for the countries using Russian-made arms and equipment. In the coming years, India would expect more big-ticket arms contracts from Armenia and other countries. Due to the application of advanced Bayraktar drones by the Azerbaijani forces, imported from Turkey, and India's experience in countering or neutralising the rogue drone activities in the Indian territories from Pakistan, New Delhi could sign a contract for the indigenously developed anti-drone system with Armenian forces. It is even speculated that India has recently signed a US\$ 41.5 million contract for the Hyderabad-based Zen Anti-Drone System (ADS), a Counter Unmanned Aerial System, to Armenia.<sup>33</sup> These limited successes will further encourage Indian domestic industries to invest and collaborate for developing a Military Industrial Complex. Brahmos cruise missile, Akash Surface-to-Air missile system, HAL Tejas combat aircraft, HAL Prachand light attack helicopter, and such are other indigenously



developed and manufactured weapon systems that New Delhi will strive to sell in the coming years.

Among other reasons why Indian arms fit best for Armenia is that Indian arms are mainly short- and medium-range, manufactured keeping into consideration Pakistan and China. India's short-range weapons could give Armenia more teeth against its neighbour Azerbaijan. In any case, the Armenia–Azerbaijan war could be the best testing ground for the Indian arms and its success in the battlefield would mean a lot for New Delhi. As the Indian arms sector is still in a nascent stage, a low-cost weapon system with operational capability could boost India's arms manufacturing sector. Also, nations in discussion with the Indian arms industry would closely observe the performance of the Indian arms in the Armenia–Azerbaijan war.

### CONCLUSION

The Nagorno-Karabakh dispute offered certain opportunities for multiple players. Russia's reluctance to intervene and establish peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan raises questions over its thinking and hold on to its former territories. Not only has it allowed other nations to look for opportunities in the Caucasus region, but it also pushed the two disputants towards the West. For India, the Nagorno-Karabakh contest came as an occasion to balance against the overwhelming triad of Turkey, Pakistan and Azerbaijan. Turkey and Pakistan have always extended unconditional support to Pakistan's quest for Kashmir at UN and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meetings. Moreover, Turkey has supplied many sophisticated arms, such as drones to Pakistan and Azerbaijan, both engaged in a territorial dispute with its neighbour. Supporting Armenia would ensure New Delhi's tit-for-tat stance against the rising axis.

The success in arms sales to Armenia would encourage Indian domestic manufacturers to transition from mere mechanical equipment to technologically advanced weapons. Before criticising India for interfering and transferring arms to Armenia, Azerbaijan mocked and questioned the lethality and capability of Indian arms. India has done well in arms manufacturing and exports in the recent past. The sale of BrahMos missiles, Pinaka MBRL, Dornier-228 aircraft, armoured vehicles and naval equipment are a testament to India's might in defence manufacturing. However, India needs to observe and carefully rectify specific issues such as technological innovation, bureaucratic red tape, resources and investments, and manufacturing capacity to deliver on time. India's arms transfers to Armenia would strengthen the

latter's capability and also provide New Delhi an opportunity to closely observe the potential of its weapons to make further improvements. India's development in manufacturing armed drones and anti-drone systems could enhance the chances of their sale and co-development with the recipient states.

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