

# The South Caucasus Factor of the United States-Russia-Iran Triangle

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

**Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan still have pro-Western democratic aspirations, so U.S. policymakers should continue engaging them on ways to reduce interference from Moscow and Tehran.**

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Events in the Middle East have long reverberated through the Caucasus, a region that sits at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East and borders the Black and Caspian Seas. In recent years, this has been especially true as the Caucasus has quietly emerged as an important arena within the broader U.S.-Russian competition, particularly as it relates to heightened U.S. tensions with Iran.

Moscow officially intervened in Syria in September 2015 to prevent “terrorists” from coming to Russia and staging attacks; in Moscow’s narrative, “[thousands \(https://russian.rt.com/article/120245\)](https://russian.rt.com/article/120245)” of fighters from Russia and the former Soviet Union had joined ISIS. Moscow’s stated worry in this regard [was \(https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/16/russian-speaking-jihadis-syria-pose-threat-moscow-report\)](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/16/russian-speaking-jihadis-syria-pose-threat-moscow-report) primarily the [restless North Caucasus \(https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/21/world/europe/for-russia-links-between-caucasus-and-isis-provoke-anxiety.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/21/world/europe/for-russia-links-between-caucasus-and-isis-provoke-anxiety.html).

What the Kremlin did not publicize after its Syria intervention was its [intensification of militarization \(https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2016/middle-east-conflict-risks-overspill-caucasus\)](https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2016/middle-east-conflict-risks-overspill-caucasus) in the South Caucasus, especially in Armenia, where Russia’s military and economic reach was already deep and multifaceted. Due to the [Armenian Velvet Revolution \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43948181\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43948181) of 2018, which worried the Kremlin, Moscow ostensibly moved closer to Azerbaijan, though its deep ties to Armenia remained

strong. Indeed, at the Kremlin's request (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/armenia-sends-combat-team-syria-russia-request-190209144531602.html>), in February and June of this year, the Armenian government sent (<https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-sends-another-group-of-sappers-medics-to-syria/29983442.html>) a team of demining experts to assist what Moscow called a “humanitarian” mission in Aleppo—a city which Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad had mercilessly razed to the ground with Moscow's military support.

Tehran has also been bolstering its ties with the South Caucasus republics, both economically and culturally (<https://www.eurasiareview.com/22062019-iran-expanding-economic-and-cultural-ties-with-republics-of-the-north-caucasus-oped/>), with an eye toward influence beyond this region. Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan each rely on Iran's natural gas (<https://eurasianet.org/iran-sanctions-herald-energy-trouble-for-caucasus-nations>) to one degree or another. Reports suggest Armenia-Iran trade has hit a record high in 2018 (<https://eurasianet.org/iran-sanctions-herald-energy-trouble-for-caucasus-nations>), and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan came to Tehran in February this year to negotiate a bilateral agreement (<https://eurasianet.org/iran-and-armenia-propose-gas-transit-to-georgia>) that could potentially create a transit route for Iranian gas to reach Georgia via Armenia.

In this context, Washington has turned its attention to the Caucasus. With all eyes on John Bolton's trip to Moscow (<https://www.apnews.com/f53b28bd7029416d8b1970c73980864d>) in October last year, few paid close attention to his tour of all three countries in the South Caucasus immediately afterwards. The tour suggested a growing U.S. interest in the South Caucasus due to the administration's efforts to isolate Iran. Of all the South Caucasus countries, Armenia is the most isolated and reliant on Iran. Not only is the country landlocked, but its borders are closed to two of its four neighbors, Turkey and Azerbaijan, and as one of Armenia's top five export partners (<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/ARM>) Iran provides a vital link to the global economy. During his trip, Bolton discussed (<https://www.rferl.org/a/u-s-national-security-adviser-bolton-vows-to-squeeze-iran-/29563540.html>) the importance of resolving the so-called “frozen conflict” over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Its resolution could open not just the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, but also the Turkish border, thus reducing Armenia's dependence on Iran.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which focuses on an ethnic Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan's territory, began in the final throes of the Soviet Union. Moscow helped fan the flames of violence to keep the region destabilized and dependent on the Kremlin for support. Like the current conflict in eastern Ukraine, as well as in other disputed areas such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia and Transnistria in Moldova, Nagorno-Karabakh exemplifies the way Russia uses frozen conflicts to maintain influence in neighboring countries and prevent them from leaving Russia's sphere of influence. Russia remains the main arms supplier to Armenia and is also a major supplier to Azerbaijan. Thus, Armenia's long-term military and economic dependence on Russia has precluded it from moving toward the United States despite Moscow's support for Azerbaijan. While ostensibly remaining part of the OSCE Minsk group tasked with resolving the conflict, Moscow has no interest in a genuine resolution, and there remains no end in sight to the conflict.

In an attempt to pull Armenia away from Russian dominance, Bolton suggested (<https://www.rferl.org/a/u-s-national-security-adviser-bolton-vows-to-squeeze-iran-/29563540.html>) the possibility of selling American arms to Armenia without violating existing U.S. congressional restrictions. Moscow's predictable condemnation ([http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3384686?p\\_p\\_id=101\\_INSTANCE\\_cKNonkJE02Bw&\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_cKNonkJE02Bw\\_languageId=en\\_GB](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3384686?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB)) following Bolton's trip only confirmed the Kremlin's determination to retain influence in the region.

At least in the short term, the results of Washington's recent emphasis on the Caucasus are inconclusive. After Bolton's visit, Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan told (<https://www.rferl.org/a/pashinian-says-made->

[clear-to-us-bolton-armenia-will-maintain-ties-with-iran/29578365.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2018/06/29/clear-to-us-bolton-armenia-will-maintain-ties-with-iran/29578365.html)) the Armenian parliament, “I reaffirm the position that we should have special relations with Iran and Georgia that would be as far outside geopolitical influences as possible.” Baku has also appeared reluctant to join in U.S. efforts to contain Iran. While it prioritizes good relations with the United States, it does not want tensions with Tehran. To be sure, in June this year, Armenian and Azeri foreign ministers [came to Washington \(https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-armenia-respond-to-growing-us-engagement-in-south-caucasus/\)](https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-armenia-respond-to-growing-us-engagement-in-south-caucasus/) and met with Bolton, but the visit does not appear to have produced any tangible breakthroughs. Moreover, arms sales are conducted over the span of years, so any progress will only bear fruit down the line.

A genuine resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict would create real opportunities with regard to Washington’s priorities towards both Moscow and Tehran, but in practice it is difficult to be optimistic about a resolution at least in the short to medium-term. Armenia’s and Azerbaijan’s positions have ossified over time, and Moscow remains both part of the problem and a solution. Moscow will need to exert its influence to resolve the conflict, yet Armenia and Azerbaijan’s relative weakness and reliance on Russia serves the Kremlin’s strategic purpose.

Moscow’s overall resurgent aggressive authoritarian posture both domestically and internationally will remain the ongoing priority to the West. However, the South Caucasus retains pro-Western and democratic aspirations, and U.S. policymakers should continue to engage with this region and look for ways to reduce Moscow’s—and Tehran’s— influence there. In addition to promoting arms sales to Armenia and more active engagement to help resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as Bolton suggested, the United States could cooperate more with the EU on its [Eastern Partnership \(https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership\\_en\)](https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership_en), of which both Armenia and Georgia are members. Although [some in the West \(https://www.euractiv.com/section/armenia/news/council-of-europe-warns-armenia-over-plan-to-block-court-entrances/\)](https://www.euractiv.com/section/armenia/news/council-of-europe-warns-armenia-over-plan-to-block-court-entrances/) and Armenia [have criticized Pashinyan’s government for potentially undemocratic moves such as prosecuting former Armenian president Robert Kocharyan \(https://eurasianet.org/armenian-court-punts-kocharyan-case-to-europe\)](https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-pashinian-dirty-flag--firings-customs-l/29875462.html), Armenia’s Velvet Revolution’s emphasis on democratic reforms offers more opportunities for Armenia to cooperate with the European Union. Georgia, which has contributed to the NATO-led campaign in Afghanistan, [has been ready to join NATO for years. \(https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-03-27/nato-agreed-georgia-would-join-why-hasn-t-it-happened\)](https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-03-27/nato-agreed-georgia-would-join-why-hasn-t-it-happened) and remains an [aspirant country \(https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-ready-to-commit-to-joining-nato-today-president-says/29359846.html\)](https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-ready-to-commit-to-joining-nato-today-president-says/29359846.html). Armenia [Armenia \(https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_48893.htm\)](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48893.htm) and Azerbaijan [Azerbaijan \(https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49111.htm\)](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49111.htm) also cooperate with NATO. The US could conduct more military exercises with Georgia, as it did [earlier this year \(https://www.rferl.org/a/joint-nato-georgia-exercises-to-kick-ff-near-tbilisi/29826591.html\)](https://www.rferl.org/a/joint-nato-georgia-exercises-to-kick-ff-near-tbilisi/29826591.html), and increase NATO cooperation with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Finally, the United States could also increase engagement with pro-democratic civil society in the entire South Caucasus and step up government-to-government cooperation with this region. However, Western policymakers should have no illusions—they are in this game for the long haul.

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