

Between a Ceasefire and an Election:
An Analysis of the Second Karabakh War from a French Perspective

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CuriousGolden, *Map of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war*, Wikimedia Commons, December 19, 2020. Map.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan recently stated that he would be stepping down as prime minister in April to trigger elections in June to regain public confidence in his administration. In a [poll](#) in February, the Prime Minister received a 30% very favorable opinion from Armenians (while the army received a 50 % very favorable opinion- a troubling sign for a country with a recent history of protests by irredentists ready for more conflict). Considering that he has [purged](#) military officers displeased with his management of the Second Karabakh War in October 2020, that the main [opposition parties are divided and unpopular](#), Pashinyan's "My Step" coalition should cruise to victory if no unexpected events occur between now and June. However, hovering around 30%, Pashinyan's coalition will have to win back the hearts of Armenians on issues like unemployment and covid management if he wants to really win popular confidence. 50 % of Armenians who said they would not vote stated that they did not trust any political party.

The recent threats by military forces to Nikol Pashinyan's legitimacy as an elected leader and the upcoming June parliamentary election in Armenia add to current global concerns for democracy - but they also allow us to revisit the place of the Caucasus region in global

geopolitics, the role of France as an international actor, and most importantly, the tragic history of conflicts which ravaged Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Nagorno Karabakh region since 1988.

In October 2020, the outbreak of war between Azerbaijan and Armenia drew international attention to the Nagorno Karabakh region. Some social media users and news outlets tried to oversimplify the conflict in the Nagorno Karabakh region by [portraying](#) the recent conflict as a religious war between Muslim Azeris and Christian Armenians conflict or to obscure it by arguing that this decades-long ethnic conflict is “[too insignificant](#)” to analyse or something that westerners don't [make an effort](#) to understand. Such generalisations obscure real, in-depth discussions on the geo-political impacts that the conflict could play in the Caucasus region, and the role (if any) France should take in advocating for peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Now that the six-weeks long “Second Karabakh War” was concluded by a peace treaty on November 10th, Armenia's upcoming June elections provide room for reflection on the role of France and the international community in safeguarding democracy from military forces advocating the resignation of democratically elected Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan.

The following research note elucidates the situation summarising key points of the conflict, solutions proposed by international actors and French political figures, and finally, makes a clear and concise recommendation : that France should promote democracy in the Caucasus region *without* rushing towards interventionist military solutions.

A Brief overview of the situation in the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh

In 1920, the Soviet army invaded the Caucasus region, allowing for the creation of new socialist republics. The Karabakh region was integrated into the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, despite being over [90% Armenian](#) at the time. Regional conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan lay inactive during the Soviet period. [Ethnic tensions](#) between Armenians and Azeris broke out in 1988 during Gorbachev's Soviet reforms. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, unofficial [guerilla warfare](#) sponsored by Armenia eventually led to a fully-fledged war in 1992 between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Karabakh region. After Iranian and CSCE peace initiatives failed, Russia brokered a cease-fire in the region in 1994. In total, the “First Karabakh War” and violence since then till 2020 would claim [30.000 lives](#) from both sides and displace 700,000 Azeris from their homes in the Karabakh region. Ethnic tensions erupted in violence since then, leading to multiple deaths in the Mardakert Clashes of 2008 and about [350](#) deaths during the April “Four Day War” of 2016.

On the 27th of September, Azerbaijan bombed civilian targets in Karabakh towns including Stephanakert, starting the Second Karabakh War, which would last six weeks. A Russian cease-fire was brokered on October 10th and an American one on October 26th. Both of these cease-fires were violated, with both Armenia and Azerbaijan blaming each other for the violations. On November 8th, Azeri forces captured Susha, a high-elevation mountain town, perfect for stationing artillery weapons. In total, 2425 Armenian soldiers and 2783 Azeri soldiers are [reported](#) dead, while 100 are missing in action. At least 143 civilians were also killed from both sides. On November 9th, Russian president Vladimir Putin made Armenian Prime Minister

Nikol Pashinyan and Azeri president Ilham Aliyev sign a [cease-fire agreement](#) and terms for Russian peacekeeping.

[1960](#) Russian peacekeepers will monitor the border of the Nagorno Karabakh region and the Russian FSB will monitor transportation to and from the region. The peacekeepers will have a heavy presence in the strategic Latchin corridor, linking Armenia to the Nagorno Karabakh region. The Azeris will receive the entirety of the Nagorno Karabakh region and will station their troops in the strategic city of Shusha. According to statements by Ilham Aliyev, Turkish forces will be present in the region to maintain the peacekeeping operation.

In late February, anti-government [protests](#) erupted after Armenia's defeat. Many of the protestors [were](#) pro-military irredentists. On February 24, the General Staff of the Armenian military, Onik Gasparyan, was relieved from duty after he [called on](#) democratically elected civilian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to step down due to Armenia's defeat in the recent conflict. Pashinyan perceived this as a coup attempt by the military and called on his supporters on Facebook to rally in Yerevan's largest square. 20,000 Armenians rallied in support of Pashinyan in the face of military intimidation. Since then, he has been reinstated

Evaluation of previous French policy initiatives undertaken with the OSCE

In 1992, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the organization formed after the 1975 Helsinki conference (eventually renamed the OSCE), [created](#) the Minsk Group. This organization included France, Russia, the United States, and 11 other countries who were tasked with writing a peace deal for Armenia and Azerbaijan. Some members of the Minsk Group advocated sending NATO peacekeeping forces to uphold ceasefire agreements and build lasting peace. Russia was opposed to this because of the proximity of the region to its borders.

In 1992, the CSCE "requested its participating states to impose an embargo on arms deliveries to forces engaged in combat in the Nagorno-Karabakh area." But because this was a "voluntary" multilateral arms embargo, the CSCE had no way to enforce penalties for member states that violated this arms embargo. Multiple CSCE participating states have sold weapons to Armenia and Azerbaijan since 1992, including France, which [granted](#) 14 weapons export licences to Azerbaijan totalling 909,511,784 euros in sales between 2014 and 2015 alone.

In 2007, the OSCE drafted the [Madrid Principles](#), which would support organizing a referendum for Karabakh if Armenia gives back its occupied territories to Azerbaijan to promote peace. In 2009, French president Nicolas Sarkozy, US president Barack Obama, and Russian president Dimitri Medvedev [reiterated](#) their support for this plan for Azerbaijan and Armenia. But since both sides had violated cease-fire terms of the Bishkek Protocol of 1994, the OSCE's proposals have failed to bear real fruit.

France's actions in the "Second Karabakh War" of 2020

Some in the Armenian diaspora (estimated to amount to a population of around [500,000](#)) in France [plead](#) for the French government to do more to support Armenia in the conflict. Franck Papazian, co president of the Committee of Armenian Organizations in France (CCAF), proclaimed that "We can't just let this massacre happen — we need peacekeepers in the region!" at a rally of Armenians in Paris. [Some](#) argue that the CCAF has a [controversial ties](#) to radical irredentist movements and that leaders of this movement have made [controversial statements](#) about the “necessity of [violence](#)” on behalf of Armenian resistance to Turkish oppression.

On October 4, 173 French political figures, including Anne Hidalgo and Laurent Wauquiez, signed a [tribune](#) calling on France to exit from its neutrality at the call of the CCAF. The tribune gives a summary of Azeri aggression leading up to the month of October and rightfully condemns the Grey Wolves, a far-right Turkish group which assaulted Armenians in France. It also critiques the ironic double role of Turkey as a member of the OSCE and a contributor to Azeri aggression against Armenia. Other than this, it calls for a reevaluation of France’s neutrality which “failed to create peace for decades.” This tribune states the obvious. Its vague call to “reevaluate France’s neutrality” strategically helps French politicians from the left, the ecologists, the center, and the right to appeal to voters who care about international human rights and diplomacy without outlining a concrete plan of action on how to act. This was left up to the imagination of the public. This failure to describe a plan led some National Assembly deputies to even suggest military intervention from France and its NATO allies.

In early October 2020, members of La République en Marche (LREM) Anne-Laurence Petel and Guillaume Kasbarian tried to push president Macron to support the Armenians in the Karabakh conflict to a greater extent, arguing that Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s support for Azerbaijan was a sign of its [geopolitical “imperialism”](#) and [recalling](#) how the NATO airstrikes in Yugoslavia “finally forced Yugoslavian president Slobodan Milosevic to back off” (an oversimplification which neglects the [failings](#) of the [illegal](#) NATO [intervention](#) in Kosovo) to cite precedence for a potential military intervention in the Caucasus.

On October 24, about a dozen French parliamentary deputies [visited](#) Armenia to testify to their commitment to a pacific and durable settlement of the conflict. On November 26th, 2020 an overwhelming majority of Senators from all parliamentary groups in the French Senate [voted](#) in favor of legally recognizing the Nagorno Karabakh region as its own country. Even Armenia does not recognize the region as its own independent country, in part because it sees this region as part of its pre-soviet territory. Although this is the case, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan welcomed the statement of the senators, calling their resolution “historic”. The very next day, the French Foreign Ministry [stated](#) that France does not recognize the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” and that “our responsibility as co-chairman of the OSCE Minsk Group is to work towards a negotiated solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in particular on the issue of the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the outcome of this negotiation cannot be determined beforehand and unilaterally.”

What possible actions could France take in light of the evolution of the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh?

Because Russia and Turkey are already administering a ceasefire, it is unreasonable for France to take military action at this time. Emmanuel Macron has even [said](#) that the Karabakh region is recognized by the UN as Azeri and that countries cannot invade others unless invited by their sovereign states to do so. The time for intervention, even if it were desirable, has long passed. This rules out unilateral intervention from France.

The political [discontent](#) with Nikol Pashinyan coupled with accusations of his “mismanagement of the war” and the popularity of the Armenian military could possibly allow for a subversion of the democratically elected, pro-Russian, centrist [My Step coalition](#) government. It is crucial that France use its political and diplomatic powers to call for free and fair elections to be held if there are no sanitary impediments posed by an extreme rise in Covid cases. The best initiative France could take would be to encourage French citizens to [participate](#) in the election monitoring of the [June 2021 Armenian elections](#) with the [Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights](#) (ODIHR), the OSCE’s international election observation bureau.

Combatting recruitment for war by the far-right in France

At the height of the conflict, France saw some of its own citizens travel to the Nagorno Karabakh region to fight alongside Armenians. Le Monde [confirmed](#) that there were “a hundred cases” of young Armenians going to the battlefield. Marc de Cacqueray-Valmenier, leader of a far-right group called Zouaves Paris (ZVP) [announced](#) to his followers on Instagram in late October that he went to fight Azeris, since “the future of our continent and our civilization is at stake in Nagorno-Karabakh.” He also stated his intentions to spearhead an effort to create international brigades of fighters to fuel the conflict. Such brazen actions by [far-right groups to recruit young people](#) in France to fight deserves to be met with challenges by republican justice and the dissolution of groups that show direct ties to recruitment of young people as fodder for foreign wars.

What framework for intervention should France use?

Multilateral intervention by peacekeeping forces from a body like the UN should not be recommended since Russia already arbitrates the respect of the peace treaty it negotiated with Armenia and Azerbaijan. The UN has a history of failing to implement enforcement mechanisms for its resolutions to achieve lasting peace. After the 2008 [Mardakert clashes](#), [Resolution 62/243](#) was adopted by the UN General Assembly. It demanded “the immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of all Armenian forces from the occupied territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan”. The leaders of the OSCE group and Armenia voted against the resolution, [stating](#) a vague concern that it would “propagate only certain of those principles to the exclusion of others.” There is also no military enforcement mechanism for UN General Assembly resolutions, since real peacekeeping and security powers are vested in the Security Council (of which France, the US, and Russia are members with veto power).

Having set the terms of the 1994 and 2020 cease-fire agreements, Russian forces and diplomats would not take kindly to more foreign interference into the Caucasus region on Russia's southern border. Lack of trust in the UN around the world is often the [result](#) of failed development and peacekeeping operations. Local populations have already observed the failure of the UN and the OSCE to enforce peace treaties in the Karabakh region in the past. Despite the past failings of the OSCE, France should continue to take a multilateral approach to promoting democracy *without* the use of military force by mobilizing observers for election monitoring through the ODIHR to monitor the Armenian elections in June and to promote vigilance against any attempted military coup. Alongside other OSCE partners, France could also demand the persistent monitoring of Russian peacekeeping initiatives using satellite imaging and committees of investigative experts to ensure a fair respect of agreed terms of the November cease-fire agreement. Russian-American historian Georgi Derluguian [supports](#) the idea of creating a "truth commission" to start to heal wounds and investigate the massive loss of lives of the Second Karabakh War. Such a proposal could be spear-headed by France to organize a balanced and unbiased commission of analysts, diaspora human rights activists from Armenian, Azeri, and non-Caucasus origins to start investigating war crimes.

On a more theoretical level, it is time that France's broader public pose a few crucial questions to their elected officials: why did the French senate vote overwhelmingly in favor of recognizing the Nagorno Karabakh region and support a "re-evaluation" of French neutrality? Do these officials really care about preventing stopping armed conflict? Or were these bold statements made just to score political points with voters? Is it the duty of France to intervene in the Caucasus region? Does this serve the interests of French citizens, who are supposed to be the ultimate arbiters of France's sovereign military power? Once we take a step back to ask these questions, we may observe that those calling for foreign intervention in the heat of the moment are at best, simply naïve and at worst, cynical opportunists.

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