

From Neutrality to Negotiation: Examining Georgian's Mediation  
Role in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict  
Rondeli Foundation

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Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the oldest conflicts in the Caucasus. Rivalry within the Caucasus remains an important issue to be resolved. Georgia, the neighbor of the two countries involved, can play a key role in stabilizing the region. This article will therefore analyze Georgia's mediation efforts and identify the gains that Georgia could make from its role as mediator. In addition, it is essential to identify all the players involved in resolving the conflict, in order to understand how Georgia can intervene in the conflict, in an appropriate and complementary manner.

## **Georgian interests in mediation**

Before analyzing the gains that Georgia could achieve through mediation, it is necessary to look at Georgia's concrete efforts to resolve the conflict. Recently, and in view of the projects that the South Caucasus has with the European Union, Georgia has, on several occasions, presented itself as capable of mediating in relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, precisating that Georgia will remain impartial and neutral.<sup>1</sup> The country is ready to commit to a process<sup>2</sup>.

Firstly, since autumn 2020, Georgia has been taking part in the talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Tbilisi offered to facilitate negotiation between the two sides, but neither has considered this at that time. In 2021, more than ten official visits were made to Tbilisi, Yerevan and Baku, including seven by heads of state. In May 2022, Georgia's new Foreign Minister, Ilya Darchiachvili, decided almost immediately to make official visits to the two neighboring countries. This intensification of political activities is shaping Georgia's role as a reliable, active and equal partner for both countries. Georgia is clearly showing its support and determination to resolve the conflict<sup>3</sup>. The regional ties remain more than important.

In addition, Georgia, thanks to its cooperation with Washington, has already made progress in the conflict. In particular, Azerbaijan has handed over fifteen Armenian prisoners in exchange for a map detailing the location of 97,000 mines in Agdam.

Moreover, Georgia has several essential tools for effective mediation. Firstly, it can win the political confidence of both countries, all the more so because of the current war in Ukraine, and thanks to the economic links it is forging with its neighbors. Secondly, Georgia is not an international or regional power, unlike Turkey or Russia. Neighboring countries are therefore more inclined to regard it as an equal. Mutual trust is possible. Thirdly, Georgia's geographical proximity and neutrality facilitate bilateral and multilateral negotiations. The parties therefore have common motives. Moreover, the country has repeatedly emphasized its neutrality and impartiality, which should encourage the parties to accept mediation.<sup>4</sup> Finally, Georgia has the

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<sup>1</sup> "PM hails Georgia's 'successful role' as 'neutral negotiator' in Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict", Agenda Georgia. June 1, 2023.

<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/2148>

<sup>2</sup> "Georgia is again ready to be involved in mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan", First Channel News. July 1, 2023.

<https://www.1lurer.am/en/2023/07/01/Georgia-is-again-ready-to-be-involved-in-mediation-between-Armenia-and-Azerbaijan-Garibashvili/955939>

<sup>3</sup> "Georgia's Mediation Efforts in the Peace Talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the Post-conflict regional reality", Nino Samkharadze. Georgian Institute of Politics May 11, 2022.

<https://gip.ge/georgias-mediation-efforts-in-the-peace-talks-between-azerbaijan-and-armenia-and-the-post-conflict-regional-reality/>

<sup>4</sup> "Georgian PM: Georgia 'neutral, impartial' mediator between Azerbaijan, Armenia", Agenda Georgia. January 19, 2023.

<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/217>

political resources and experience of cooperation with the West to provide optimal mediation, as demonstrated by its mediation in collaboration with Washington.

Georgia can therefore take advantage of all these opportunities to promote mediation<sup>5</sup>. In the current context of war in Ukraine, Georgia appears to be neutral and better accepted internationally, unlike Putin's Russia. The war in Ukraine is perhaps an opportunity for the country to seize.

Georgia is also asserting itself in the resolution of the conflict. In 2021, it launched the Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative, with the aim of neutralizing the 3+3 format, in which Russia would play an important role. Thus, in July 2022<sup>6</sup>, the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan met in Tbilisi as part of the Peaceful Neighbourhood Initiative in the South Caucasus. In the past, the 3+3 initiative (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, Turkey and Iran) has been seen as an attempt to reduce Western involvement in conflict resolution. Georgia seems to be offering an alternative to this format. The country is first advocating a meeting of the neighbors, the three countries concerned, in order to neutralize Russia's involvement, since Georgia reserves the right to veto Russia's access. The arrival of other players is possible, but the priority remains the involvement of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Turkey has stated that if Georgia refuses the 3+3 format, a 3+2 format remains possible<sup>7</sup>. However, this in no way detracts from the fact that Georgia is asserting itself and aims to take the lead on this issue. This is all the more true given that Russia has been a source of division since the war in Ukraine, strengthening Georgia's legitimacy.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Georgia has much to gain from mediation. Indeed, it would have a particular interest in the stabilisation of the South Caucasus. A stabilised region favours integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. Without even going that far, given the projects with the European Union, such as the construction of the longest submarine cable under the Black Sea, linking Azerbaijan to the European Union via Georgia, it is necessary to have a secure region. The European Union needs to secure its interests. In view of Georgia's ambitions, it is necessary to project an image of security and peace. To strengthen its security and sovereignty, while continuing with Euro-Atlantic integration, Tbilisi therefore needs a stable neighbourhood, encouraging it to help build stability<sup>8</sup>. Through its mediation with Washington, Georgia has also strengthened its ties with the Euro-Atlantic community.

Moreover, Georgia is home to Azerbaijani and Armenian ethnic minorities who are sensitive to the development of the conflict. Despite Georgia's stated neutrality, this is nevertheless an issue that the government must address if it is to maintain its own internal stability in the long term. A war could also affect tourism in Georgia or put a brake on foreign investors and therefore harm the potential created by agreements such as the DCFTA or the FTA with China.

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<sup>5</sup> "A Positive Influence in the South Caucasus? Georgia's potential as a Regional Stabilizer", Le Grix Victor, Georgian Institute of Politics, Policy brief, Iss n°15. February 2019.

<https://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Policy-brief-15-GEOEUvalues.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> "Georgian PM vows regional peace mediator role at meeting with EU representative", Agenda Georgia. February 7, 2023.

<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/500>

<sup>7</sup> "Georgian Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative: New mark on the South Caucasus geopolitical map", The Armenian Weekly. October 20, 2021.

<https://armenianweekly.com/2021/10/20/georgian-peaceful-neighborhood-initiative-new-mark-on-the-south-caucasus-geopolitical-map/>

<sup>8</sup> "Georgia's Mediation Efforts in the Peace Talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the Post-conflict regional reality", Nino Samkharadze. Georgian Institute of Politics May 11, 2022.

<https://gip.ge/georgias-mediation-efforts-in-the-peace-talks-between-azerbaijan-and-armenia-and-the-post-conflict-regional-reality/>

Georgia also has an interest in good relations with its neighbors. In particular, this could strengthen Azerbaijan-Georgia cooperation to develop the productivity of the Middle Corridor. Freight turnover between the two countries has increased by 75% by rail and could be used to load five million tones. This corridor would also be central to reaching Europe and Central Asia. Stabilisation and cooperation in this area could therefore have a significant economic impact. The President of Azerbaijan also stressed the importance of regional diplomacy, economic cooperation and energy<sup>9</sup>. To meet its own internal and regional interests, mediation could be beneficial for the country.

Then, Georgia could establish itself as a leader in the region, capable of resolving long-standing conflicts. In this sense, Georgia would be sending a powerful message to the major regional powers, who are sometimes powerless or effete in this conflict. Its capabilities would be highlighted in the eyes of the international community. Its place in the South Caucasus and within the international community would change. It would also be a question of going against Putin in the Caucasus, almost breaking Russian interference in the region, a destabilizing factor. Georgia would thus become the only possible alternative in the region. Resolving the conflict is therefore a way of preventing Putin from dividing the South Caucasus and building up enmities in order to weaken it. The Caucasus needs a new stabilizer, and a Georgian stabiliser would serve interests vital to the stability of the region. The Georgian government gives priority to its relations with the West. The country is pursuing both NATO and EU membership. If conflicts persist in Armenia and Azerbaijan, the region will remain vulnerable to manipulation and pressure from Russia. Indeed, Moscow uses and promotes territorial disputes to inflict catastrophic results on its neighbors. Resolving these conflicts is therefore essential to put an end to the violence that persists, and to enable these countries, and Georgia in particular, to assert their sovereignty and pursue their own foreign policy.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, even if Tbilisi has to come to terms with the interests of both countries, the war in Ukraine represents an opportunity to be seized: Putin seems to be busy elsewhere, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict does not seem to be the most pressing problem facing Russia. Yet it is an urgent issue for the South Caucasus in general. Indeed, the desire to expand towards the European Union is justified, and a security issue for the Caucasus. For example, as we mentioned earlier, in the project to build a submarine cable, reconciliation between Armenia and Azerbaijan is almost essential. Azerbaijan must use the Zangezur corridor, which is still the subject of much debate. This has, de facto, an influence on Georgia's external affairs, particularly with regard to its desire to join the Euro-Atlantic area. The war in Ukraine could therefore be the door to open to encourage and accelerate attempts to find a peace agreement. This is all the more true given that neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan wants to offer Putin a victory. It would therefore seem that Georgia is the fairest alternative<sup>11</sup>. Garibashvili himself

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<sup>9</sup> “Georgia and Azerbaijan Talk Greater Caucasus Cohesion”, Freund Josephine, in Caspian Policy Center. October 28, 2022.

<https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/georgia-and-azerbaijan-talk-greater-caucasus-cohesion>

<sup>10</sup> “Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia’s Balancing Act over Russia’s War in Ukraine- Russia’s role in ongoing conflicts in South Caucasus countries is a critical factor in their response”, Mary Glantz, in United States Institute of Peace, Making peace Possible. March 15, 2022.

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/armenia-azerbaijan-and-georgias-balancing-act-over-russias-war-ukraine>

<sup>11</sup> “Georgia’s mediation efforts in the Peace Talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the Post-conflict regional reality”, Samkharadze Nino, GIP. May 11, 2022.

<https://gip.ge/georgias-mediation-efforts-in-the-peace-talks-between-azerbaijan-and-armenia-and-the-post-conflict-regional-reality/>

explains the importance of Azerbaijani-Georgian cohesion in the face of Russian aggression in Ukraine. In his view, "peace and stability are the key conditions for the development" of the region and the "well-being" of the people in general.

There is, however, one point we can question. Georgia cannot become too deeply involved in the conflict. While the benefits would be undeniable, direct involvement could have an impact on its own internal situation, particularly with regard to the occupied territories. Georgia is calling for its territorial integrity to be respected, and the occupied regions could interpret its external actions.<sup>12</sup> The country must therefore remain cautious.

### **The other players involved in mediation**

Georgia is not the only player with a claim to mediation. It is therefore necessary to look at the perception and role of these other players, in order to grasp Georgia's chances of obtaining a place of choice in mediation. Russia also has an interest in appearing as "the savior of the Caucasus". Russia has played a role in managing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Firstly, Russia negotiated the ceasefire in 2020. Russia is positioning itself as the arbiter of balance in the South Caucasus. Moreover, Putin is ensuring its military presence on the ground, with interposition forces set up along sensitive areas. In this way, he has tried to limit the risks of regional destabilization, while marginalizing Western involvement.<sup>13</sup> Russia has also long been seen as the 'stabiliser' of the region (although it is undeniably also the destabilizer). In reality, Russia is one of the most important international players. Putin sees the South Caucasus as his sphere of influence, which explains his desire to intervene. Nevertheless, Putin's Russia has lost its appeal. Two days before the invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijan came to sign an agreement that seemed to guarantee its loyalty to Russia. Yet Azerbaijan remains an ally of Ukraine, notably by sending humanitarian resources<sup>14</sup>. Secondly, Russia is seen as inactive and ineffective in resolving the conflict. During the Russian-led summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Armenia criticized the Organisation's effectiveness in managing the conflict, and refused to sign the summit's final declaration. Armenia criticized the Organisation for failing to act during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, in which 6,500 Armenians lost their lives, or even in September 2022, when clashes claimed the lives of 300 Armenians. Of course, Russia remains a supporter of Armenia - which moreover seems to be siding with Russia over the war in Ukraine. Nonetheless, there are voices speaking out against Putin's handling of the conflict<sup>15</sup>. Armenia is beginning to regard Russia as unreliable. Obviously, this may also have an impact on Russia's strategy. Clearly, Armenia will not withdraw from the Organisation, but Yerevan is trying to negatively influence the dynamics of the group.<sup>16</sup> The Moscow-sponsored ceasefire

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<sup>12</sup> "A Positive Influence in the South Caucasus? Georgia's potential as a Regional Stabilizer", Le Grix Victor, Georgian Institute of Politics, Policy brief, Iss n°15. February 2019.

<https://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Policy-brief-15-GEOEUvalues.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> « Haut Karabakh. Une défaite européenne ? », Laetitia Spetschinsky in Europe.Russie.Débats. January 29, 2021.

<https://www.euoperussiedebats.org/haut-karabakh-une-defaite-europeenne/>

<sup>14</sup> « L'Azerbaïdjan est le meilleur allié de l'Ukraine dans le Caucase-sud contrairement à l'Arménie », Boussois Sébastien, in Euractiv. October 24, 2022.

<https://www.euractiv.fr/section/international/opinion/lazerbaïdjan-est-le-meilleur-allie-de-lukraine-dans-le-caucase-sud-contrement-a-larmenie/>

<sup>15</sup> « Haut-Karabakh. L'Arménie critique l'OTSC, l'alliance militaire chapeauté par Moscou », Courrier International. November 24, 2022.

<https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/haut-karabakh-l-armenie-critique-l-otsc-l-alliance-militaire-chapeautee-par-moscou>

<sup>16</sup> "The Threat of New wars in the Caucasus: a good case for U.S Restraint", Lieven Anatol, DerSimonian Artin in Quincy institute for responsible statecraft, Quincy brief n°36. December 8, 2022.

<https://quincyinst.org/report/the-threat-of-new-wars-in-the-caucasus-a-good-case-for-u-s-restraint/>

agreement in 2020 brought neither peace nor security<sup>17</sup>. Armenia was waiting for the members of the Organisation to put pressure on Azerbaijan, at least for a withdrawal from its territory. Russia is therefore increasingly perceived as ineffective. Actually, Russia itself faces a major dilemma in the conflict. The Solidarity Clause of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation has been activated for a second time. If Russia decides to come to Armenia's rescue, this means that it saves the Organisation, but chooses to distance itself from Azerbaijan - Kiev's ally - a key player in its efforts to circumvent European sanctions<sup>18</sup>. However, the weakening of the Armenian faith in the Russian alliance would probably lead to the opening of negotiations with Washington, a total rejection of Russia. Especially as Russia's position within the Organization can be contradictory. Despite Russia's treaty obligations towards Armenia, it was Russian arms sales to Azerbaijan that helped Azerbaijan successfully seize territory during the 2020 war<sup>19</sup>. After the war in 2022, Russia no longer has a monopoly on the process. Russia's presence in the Caucasus is weakening and has even diminished since the war in Ukraine (since almost half the troops stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh have been sent to Ukraine). Similarly, the agreement on the presence of Russian peacekeeping troops is valid until 2025. There is no guarantee that Azerbaijan will wish to renew this agreement. Russia is no longer omnipotent, and it fears the opening of a "second front with the West", one that would allow Western involvement in the affairs of the South Caucasus<sup>20</sup>. Nevertheless, the situation is more than complex, not least because Russia wishes to retain its place of choice. Armenia and Azerbaijan continue to travel to Moscow. It would appear that the countries are concentrating on restoring transport networks, a natural step according to the Armenian prime minister in the "normalization of relations". However, no agreement has been reached. Quite simply, Russia still wants to show that it retains its influence in the region and is restricting the West's maneuvers. Once again, neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan wants to give Putin a victory. In fact, despite Russia's initiatives, it would appear that the situation is locked in for the long term<sup>21</sup>.

Of course, Georgia's position remains difficult in view of its special relationship with Russia. This is reinforced by the idea that new fears about Russian actions are emerging. In particular, Russia is making increasing use of Iranian drones in the conflict in Ukraine. If Russian-Iranian cooperation becomes ever closer, there is nothing to rule out the possibility that it will influence the South Caucasus and help Putin to manage conflicts. In this sense, the Caucasus would, firstly, be in danger. Secondly, Georgia's position as mediator would be undermined. Georgia is unlikely to enter into a head-on confrontation with Russia over the question of Nagorno-

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<sup>17</sup> "The Ukraine War is reshaping the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict", Fults Alexa, Stronski Paul, in Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. April 25, 2022.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/04/25/ukraine-war-is-reshaping-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-pub-86994>

<sup>18</sup> « Recompositions géopolitiques dans l'espace post-soviétique : « l'étranger proche » à l'épreuve de la guerre en Ukraine ». Jankowski Tancrede, Bouvery Armel in Réseau d'analyse stratégique. February 3, 2023.

<https://ras-nsa.ca/fr/recompositions-geopolitiques-dans-lespace-post-sovietique-letranger-proche-a-lepreuve-de-la-guerre-en-ukraine/>

<sup>19</sup> "Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia's Balancing Act Over Russia's War in Ukraine", Glants Mary, in United States Institute of Peace. March 15, 2022.

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/armenia-azerbaijan-and-georgias-balancing-act-over-russias-war-ukraine>

<sup>20</sup> « Conflit entre l'Arménie et l'Azerbaïdjan : l'Europe laisse-t-elle la place à Poutine ? », France culture. Podcast, 38min. Interview of Thorniké Goardadzé, Taline Ter Minassian, Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier. November 7, 2022.

<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/le-temps-du-debat/conflit-entre-l-armenie-et-l-azerbaïdjan-l-europe-laisse-t-elle-la-place-a-poutine-1249430>

<sup>21</sup> « Poutine s'affiche en médiateur entre l'Arménie et l'Azerbaïdjan », Vincent Faustine for Le Monde, International, conflit au Haut Karabakh. May 26, 2023.

[https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/05/26/poutine-s-affiche-en-mediateur-entre-l-armenie-et-l-azerbaïdjan\\_6174955\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/05/26/poutine-s-affiche-en-mediateur-entre-l-armenie-et-l-azerbaïdjan_6174955_3210.html)

Karabakh. For the time being, Russia appears to be weakened on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, but there is nothing to rule out a major change depending on the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

Secondly, the European Union's investment is considered by some to be too low. According to Nicu Popescu, these weaknesses of the European involvement in the conflict are due to two main reasons. Firstly, neither Yerevan nor Baku wants European involvement for the reason that the Karabakh issue is ambiguous. The European Union has an unclear position on the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and there is a lack of consensus in the European Union on the issue (see the Cypriot position on Azerbaijan). The involvement of certain Member States also remains tense. This is the case for France and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan refuses to accept France's involvement and the mediation that was to take place, based on the fact that France has closer ties with Armenia, according to Azerbaijan. In reality, even if Armenia wanted to reorientate itself towards France and the European Union, neither party was willing to give guarantees. France does not want unrest in the Caucasus, or even to propose a nuclear deterrent, as Russia has done.<sup>22</sup> So, having "lost the war", the European Union could "win the peace", by trying to find a "lasting settlement", and a solid one, in particular by helping to define the institutional contours. Whatever the case, when it comes to managing this conflict, the European Union values Georgia's position.<sup>23</sup> The European Union hopes that cooperation will increase and that the three countries will be able to work together in the common interest. It takes a particularly positive view of Georgia's involvement in mediation, highlighting the "logic of collaboration" between such close neighbors in terms of transport, the environment and energy. Having a Peace Agreement would have a positive impact for everyone<sup>24</sup>.

Finally, one of the key players in the conflict remains the Minsk Group. The Group's main objectives were to establish an appropriate framework for conflict resolution, to obtain an agreement between the parties on the cessation of armed conflict and to promote the peace process by deploying multinational peacekeeping forces. The aim of the group is, therefore, to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. It is co-chaired by France, the United States and the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, the group has been disavowed, since it did little to prevent the 2020 conflict, as Russia negotiated the ceasefire on its own. Recently, and since the war in Ukraine, Russia has refused to work with France and the United States<sup>25</sup>, believing that these countries are demonstrating "Russophobia". In fact, the international situation is having a direct impact on the Group: Russia's confrontation with the West is preventing fruitful cooperation. Of course, there are other reasons, but recent international developments are having an undeniable impact. Former co-chair Richard E. Hoagland himself admitted that "very little has been achieved". The parties to the conflict also deny the Group's existence, as in the case of Azerbaijan, which finds it ineffective or even useless. R. Mustafayev, Azerbaijan's ambassador to France, even asserts that the Group "should not deal" with the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, and that Azerbaijan itself would prevent the Minsk Group from doing any work at all.<sup>26</sup> Repeated

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<sup>22</sup> « Haut Karabakh. Une défaite européenne ? » Spetschinsky Laetitia, in Europe.Russie.Débats. January 29, 2021. <https://www.euoperussiedebats.org/haut-karabakh-une-defaite-europeenne/>

<sup>23</sup> "Haut Karabakh. Une défaite européenne ?" Spetschinsky Laetitia, in Europe.Russie.Débats. January 29, 2021. <https://www.euoperussiedebats.org/haut-karabakh-une-defaite-europeenne/>

<sup>24</sup> "EU Representative: Georgia's role as « bridge » between Armenia, Azerbaijan "very important"", Agenda Georgia. February 8, 2023. <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/522>

<sup>25</sup> "What Will the Abolition of the OSCE Minsk Group Bring to the South Caucasus?", Eka Javakhishvili for Rondeli Foundation. April 28, 2022. <https://gfsis.org.ge/blog/view/1426>

<sup>26</sup> « Le Groupe de Minsk n'a pas réussi à résoudre le conflit du Haut-Karabakh », Rigoulet-Roze David, for IRIS. July 19, 2022.

attempts by the Minsk Group to resolve the conflict also failed because Armenia could not accept any solution that would place the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh under the control of Azerbaijani security forces. On the other hand, Azerbaijan cannot accept a solution that leaves Nagorno-Karabakh to the Armenians.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the conflicts within the Minsk Group leave Georgia room to act. Those who were supposed to be the "pillars" of conflict resolution are disowned and divided. For the reasons given above, Georgia would therefore have every opportunity to act.

The failure of the Minsk Group does, however, give the United States the opportunity to become more involved. Firstly, Nancy Pelosi made several visits to Armenia, and in particular took a stance by "strongly condemned" the "illegal and deadly attacks by Azerbaijan". She also announced her support for Armenian "security and democracy" against the Azerbaijani attacks. The Biden administration is also active in resolving the conflict. In May 2023, the United States, the European Union and Russia hosted Peace Talks. The US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, organized four days of talks with the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers, which led to steps being taken towards normalization and peace. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, actions by countries other than Russia have come into the conflict.<sup>28</sup> On May 1, 2023, the United States promises to support the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Clearly, the failure of the Minsk Group, combined with Russia's growing isolation on the international stage, meant that the United States could play a key role in the peace process.<sup>29</sup> Despite the fact that Armenia belongs to the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Biden administration has set up several meetings between the two parties. The American fear is based on the idea that if Russia does not intervene in the Caucasus, Turkey and Iran will have free rein. Georgia must therefore take its place among the key players in resolving the conflict. Once again, Georgia offers the possibility of a more equal and regional negotiation. Obviously, Georgia is using American support and is not seeking to eclipse the American position. The country has also worked with the United States to achieve progress towards peace. But Georgia offers other advantages that the United States cannot. Georgia is adapting and offering a complementary role.

## Conclusion

Georgia possesses a number of important tools that justify its role as a valuable mediator in conflict management. In particular, the country has the capacity to make effective social, humanitarian and political contributions to restoring stability. This was demonstrated by Georgia's activation of the Pacific Neighbourhood Initiative in 2021. The chessboard is changing. According to Tornike Sharashenidze, Armenia has realized that Russia is not protecting them (especially as Russia has other interests with Azerbaijan). A peace agreement can therefore be drawn up. Moreover, Azerbaijan realizes that a war could lead to Russian intervention, potentially with Iranian tools.

Georgia also has a particular advantage in acting as mediator, having maintained its neutral status during the war, maintaining friendly relations with both sides and having no direct

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<https://www.iris-france.org/169232-le-groupe-de-minsk-na-pas-reussi-a-resoudre-le-conflit-du-haut-karabakh/>

<sup>27</sup> "The Threat of New Wars in the Caucasus: A Good Case for U.S Restraint", Lieven Anatol, DerSimonian Artin, Quincy Institute for responsible statecraft, Quincy brief n°36. December 8, 2022.

<https://quincyinst.org/report/the-threat-of-new-wars-in-the-caucasus-a-good-case-for-u-s-restraint/>

<sup>28</sup> "The U.S. Might Be the Surprising Determining Factor in the Future of Armenia", Time. October 6, 2022.

<https://time.com/6219263/armenia-azerbaijan-us-involvement/>

<sup>29</sup> "Washington promet de soutenir le processus de paix entre l'Arménie et l'Azerbaïdjan », Le Figaro. May 2, 2023.

<https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/washington-promet-de-soutenir-le-processus-de-paix-entre-l-armenie-et-l-azerbaïdjan-20230501>



interest in the conflict. According to Sharashenidze, if an agreement were to be signed, it would firstly underline the fact that Russia's role has weakened, and secondly, that Georgia's role is growing<sup>30</sup>. The war in Ukraine offered and legitimized the opportunity for a trio dialogue. The West has a real interest in seeing the Georgian role strengthened.

However, Georgia cannot compete with the major regional players on its own. Tbilisi therefore needs to be accompanied by powers such as the European Union and the United States, and for them to become Georgia's main strategic partners, since they have an interest in seeing the country as a facilitator<sup>31</sup>. Indeed, the Prague negotiations at the end of 2022 were held under the aegis of the United States<sup>32</sup>, but Georgia's role was underlined<sup>33</sup>. This is reinforced by the fact that Aliyev visited Tbilisi immediately after the negotiations, further proof of Georgia's key role. Russia wants to increase its influence in the region in order to retain control, and peacebuilding is not in its interests. Although Russia could put pressure on Georgia by using its territory and airspace as a transit corridor to deploy forces in Armenia, its role seems to have weakened in the management of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Georgia's diplomatic balances and bottom-up approach could well prove effective<sup>34</sup>. Indeed, although there is more trade between Georgia and Azerbaijan than between Armenia and Georgia, it is nonetheless essential for Georgia to stabilize the region, for its own interests. Georgia should therefore continue its mediation efforts, particularly in view of the many benefits it can exploit, notably European integration (positioning itself as a stabiliser in the region), and in its economic and energy interests, while positioning itself against Putin. Georgia could thus take the lead, and even deny Putin access to the trio negotiations.

There's, therefore, no doubt that Georgia favors mediation. Nevertheless, Georgia could go further, by also promoting links at a lower level, between the population, in order to encourage lasting peace. Similarly, regional mechanisms will be essential if a peace agreement is reached, to encourage further dialogue.

Resolving the conflict is not always easy, since conflicts always break out, showing how deep the resentments are, and the need to intervene. Azerbaijan continues to violate the ceasefire, despite the great risks involved.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, despite the risk of Russian intervention, Azerbaijan also knows that the Russian setbacks offer it a strategic opportunity to renege on the peace agreements signed previously in order to obtain more concessions from Yerevan.<sup>36</sup> A blockade on food supplies is still in place in Nagorno Karabakh. Despite all the talks for peace, a

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<sup>30</sup> "Armenia and Azerbaijan peace treaty in Tbilisi: is it possible?", Jam News. November 9, 2022.

<https://jam-news.net/armenia-and-azerbaijan-peace-treaty-in-tbilisi-is-it-possible/>

<sup>31</sup> "Georgia's mediation efforts in the Peace Talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the Post-conflict regional reality", Samkharadze Nino, GIP. May 11, 2022.

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<sup>32</sup> « L'Arménie et l'Azerbaïdjan progressent vers un accord de paix, selon Washington », Ouest France. May 5, 2023.

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<sup>33</sup> "Armenia and Azerbaijan peace treaty in Tbilisi: is it possible?", Jam News. November 9, 2022.

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<sup>34</sup> "Georgia's mediation efforts in the Peace Talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the Post-conflict regional reality", Samkharadze Nino, GIP. May 11, 2022.

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<sup>35</sup> "Deadly clash erupts in Nagorno-Karabakh amid Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks", Eurasianet. June 28, 2023.

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<sup>36</sup> « Recompositions géopolitiques dans l'espace post-soviétique : « l'étranger proche » à l'épreuve de la guerre en Ukraine », Jankowski Tancrede, Bouvery Arnel. February 3, 2023.

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humanitarian crisis is ongoing in the region. On 11 July 2023, Azerbaijan temporarily closed the only road linking Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, accusing the Red Cross of smuggling<sup>37</sup>. The work is still long and difficult, since recent developments have highlighted the difficulties of this mediation.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, to ensure lasting peace and security, it is almost essential to have guarantees from major international powers, neutral peacekeepers. Georgia can probably help mediate and move the situation forward, but the guarantee of a long-term resolution to the conflict will probably rely on wider international forces. To optimize the peace process, Georgia can rely on American involvement in the conflict, while continuing to appear as a more equal and neutral player.

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<sup>37</sup> “Azerbaijan closes vital road link to breakaway Karabakh”, The Defense Post. July 11, 2023.  
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<sup>38</sup> « La solitude des Arméniens du Haut Karabakh », Le Devoir. January 21, 2023  
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