

A Changing Landscape for Armenia-Russia Relations: A Colonial Legacy?

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November 18, 2025

Armenia-Russia relations have long been described in gendered terms — sometimes as a “happy marriage,” other times as that of a “devoted mistress,” or even a “civilized divorce,” depending on the geopolitical situation. I believe that the geopolitical context is a key element here. Historically, these relations have been shaped by Armenia’s geopolitical position at the frontier, surrounded by the great powers of the world — Persian, Ottoman, and Russian empires—and by Islamic states and alliances.

Ron Suny writes about Armenia’s constant choice of Russian protection, not so much out of goodwill, but by choosing the “lesser evil.” The narrative that Russia “saved the Armenians from the Turkish yatagan” after the 1915 genocide has been particularly manipulative, setting a patron-client, vassal-like tone. Many analysts view the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as intricately tied to the tragic events in the Ottoman Empire. In hindsight, looking at the situations in Moldova, Georgia, and other former Soviet republics, one can conclude that post-Soviet Russia has practically generated and “capitalized on” geopolitical conflicts to ensure its continued presence and influence (and hinder the process of decolonization and sovereignty) in regions from which it should have retreated.

Until 2020-2023, Armenia remained the epicenter of these relations, caught on the geopolitical “hook” of Nagorno-Karabakh, which was presented as a disputed territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In any case, Armenia has been trapped in Russia’s embrace since 1988, when the nationwide Karabakh movement began. Over this period, Armenia has endured an unrelenting blockade (since 1992 and continuing), wars, hybrid democracy leaning towards autocracy (until 2018), endemic corruption on a massive scale, and an unprecedented outflow of citizens, pushed out by the grim economic situation, extreme social injustice,

and violations of fundamental human rights. The global migration of Armenians has largely been directed towards Russia, which has repeatedly assumed the role of the savior from all of Armenia's hardships.

Throughout the entire post-Soviet period, thanks to the easily manipulable Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (the decolonization project was left in the hands of nationalist forces), Armenia became increasingly dependent on Russia in all spheres—whether military-strategic (security), economic (Armenia was almost forcibly pushed into the Customs/Eurasian Economic Union overnight, despite plans to sign a comprehensive and deep free trade agreement with the European Union), or cultural (the scale of migration was such that there was little need for “soft power,” in which Russia was already weak).

Launched in September 2024, the Yerevan Dialogue (hereafter the Dialogue) is a pivotal initiative for Armenia's regional geopolitical standing. Organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia in collaboration with the Observer Research Foundation, an Indian government-affiliated think tank, the Dialogue underscores the deepening partnership and growing diplomatic and military ties between India and Armenia.

Armenia's authorities did attempt to resist Russia's total control. Throughout the post-war years, the Armenian government spoke of a policy of complementarity, which would have meant a military-strategic alliance with Russia through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) — a similarly stillborn organization as the EEU — and economic integration into the European Union. This approach was criticized even within the EU, with many labeling it an attempt to “sit on two chairs.” The resolution came as quickly as it was harsh. The then-president, Serzh Sargsyan, was summoned to the Kremlin. The following morning, without receiving any explanation, Armenia rushed into the Customs Union, feeling trapped in Russia's suffocating embrace.

As is often the case with authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, it appeared that these relations would never end. Large road posters on the streets of Yerevan and throughout Armenia expressed this: against the backdrop of Putin and the Russian flag, the slogan read “With Russia forever.” However, the situation changed instantly and simply with the arrival of Nikol Pashinyan to power following the Velvet Revolution of 2018. The worst nightmare of any authoritarian leader, including Putin, materialized. The landscape of Armenia-Russia relations shifted dramatically.

Before we analyze this change, let us first try to examine the deep chains of dependence that Armenia had developed on Russia by 2018.

Economic Asymmetry in Russian-Armenian Relations

Despite the post-Soviet evolution of Russian and Armenian political thought beyond ideological constraints, a persistent asymmetry defines their economic relationship. Historically, Armenia has posed no strategic challenge to Russia in the Caucasus, resulting in a deep yet imbalanced alliance. Until 2020—

2023, Armenia was arguably Russia's most loyal non-Slavic partner, rivaled only by Kyrgyzstan. However, the terms of this cooperation reveal stark economic dependencies.

A key factor is Armenia's reliance on Russian energy, particularly natural gas. Gazprom's monopolistic pricing has long placed economic strain on Armenia, drawing parallels to Russia's pre-2022 economic tactics toward Ukraine. Yet, unlike Ukraine, Armenia has largely tolerated these pressures, a stance shaped by geopolitical realities. Russia's role as Armenia's primary security guarantor — amid threats from Azerbaijan and Turkey — has tempered dissatisfaction with economic imbalances. Moscow's military presence and influence over regional security have reinforced Armenia's strategic dependence, even as the economic costs remain high.

This reliance has also shaped Armenia's domestic politics. Unlike Ukraine, which sought Western integration and energy diversification, Armenia has remained economically tethered to Russia. Historical and cultural ties further reinforce this alignment, often outweighing economic grievances.

In sum, Russian-Armenian relations remain defined by political and economic asymmetry. While Armenia endures unfavorable economic conditions, security concerns and historical loyalties sustain its strategic alignment with Russia — mirroring aspects of Moscow's other post-Soviet relationships, but with markedly different responses.

Energy Dependence and Environmental Challenges in Armenia

Armenia's environmental and economic policies have been shaped by natural disasters and geopolitical pressures, particularly after the 1988 earthquake. In 1989, Soviet authorities shut down the Hoktemberyan nuclear power plant for safety reasons, exacerbating an already dire situation. Combined with an economic blockade by Turkey and Azerbaijan, the closure triggered Armenia's "dark years," marked by severe energy shortages and economic collapse.

Relief came in 1995 when Russia provided uranium to restart the Hoktemberyan plant, stabilizing Armenia's energy supply and enabling electricity exports to Georgia. However, Armenia's inability to repay its growing debt to Russia resulted in Moscow acquiring half of its national electricity company, reinforcing Russian control over key infrastructure.

Russia's investment policy in Armenia is often described as "gas imperialism," as energy dependence continues to shape the bilateral relationship. A 60% gas price hike in 2021 sparked public debate, with critics arguing that Russia's pricing tactics deepen Armenia's economic subordination through a cycle of debt and dependency.

Beyond economic concerns, Armenia's energy reliance on Russia presents environmental risks. The aging Hoktemberyan plant raises safety concerns, while dependence on Russian uranium constrains energy security. In response, Armenia has begun exploring renewable energy alternatives, but progress remains slow due to investment and infrastructure challenges.

Looking ahead, Armenia must navigate its energy strategy carefully, balancing security needs with environmental sustainability and economic diversification to reduce its dependence on Russia.

Armenia and Russia: Between Salvation and Dependence

The perception of Russia as Armenia's "savior" dates back to the 17th century, when diplomat Israel Ori sought Western European support to liberate Armenia from Persian and Ottoman rule. After failing to secure aid from Germany and Austria, Ori turned to Moscow in 1701, marking a lasting shift in Armenian foreign policy. From then on, Armenian elites increasingly looked to Russia, rather than Europe, as their primary ally for survival and independence.

Despite Russia's geographic position to Armenia's north, it was often imagined as part of a broader "West" in Armenian political thought. This perception shaped Armenian support for Russian military campaigns, such as Peter the Great's Persian campaign and later efforts to integrate Eastern Armenia into the Russian Empire. By the early 19th century, Armenia had become part of the Russian imperial sphere, a development seen as the "lesser of two evils" given the geopolitical alternatives.

A key factor reinforcing Russian-Armenian ties has been Russia's historically distant stance from Turkey, Armenia's enduring adversary since the 1915 Armenian Genocide. The absence of direct Russian-Turkish alignment has strengthened Armenia's reliance on Russia, particularly in security matters. Moscow's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict further solidified this dynamic.

However, the post-Soviet era has complicated this relationship. While Russia remains Armenia's primary security partner, economic dependence—especially in the energy sector—has led to growing tensions. Gas price hikes and Russian control over key infrastructure have fueled debates on the true nature of the alliance.

Until recently, Armenia's ties with Russia remain shaped by a mix of gratitude, necessity, and geopolitical pragmatism. As Armenia navigates modern challenges, it continues to wrestle with the legacy of its historical alliance—one built on both salvation and dependence.

The Karabakh Movement: A Turning Point in Armenia's Political Awakening

The late Soviet period marked a pivotal moment in Armenia's political landscape, as the Karabakh movement emerged as a powerful challenge to Soviet authority. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the movement highlighted the suppression of personal freedoms and social protests under Soviet rule while demanding autonomy and national rights, particularly concerning the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

A key aspect of the movement was its alignment with broader Soviet dissident efforts, forging solidarity between Armenians and other oppressed groups within the USSR. Notably, Armenian activists found allies in figures like Andrei Sakharov and Galina Starovoitova, whose support brought international attention to the Karabakh cause. Starovoitova's 1988 speech at Yerevan's Opera Square, in which she dismissed the outdated notion of "the blessing of the Russian boot," resonated deeply with the Armenian public, earning her the affectionate title of "the Starovoitova of Armenia."

Amid Gorbachev's glasnost' (openness, free speech) and perestroika (restructuring), the movement gained momentum, with the Karabakh Committee and the All-National Armenian Movement pushing for

radical political change. The slogan, “There are no eternal friends and no eternal enemies,” encapsulated this shift in Armenia’s political thinking, emphasizing pragmatism over historical loyalties.

The protests of the late Soviet period not only reshaped Armenia’s relationship with Russia but also laid the groundwork for its post-Soviet geopolitical aspirations. While the collapse of the USSR in 1991 did not sever Armenia’s historical ties with Russia, it opened new possibilities for sovereignty and international engagement. The legacy of the Karabakh movement and figures like Starovoitova remains central to Armenia’s modern political identity.

2018-2020: Armenia seen by Russia as a “collateral damage”

All of these dependencies ultimately trace back to their root cause — the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. So 2018, a pivotal year after which, using these dependencies, Putin began dismantling Armenia's statehood following the successful loss of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan.

The critical moment came in September 2023, when Putin lost his main leverage over Armenia—Nagorno-Karabakh. By then, the illusion of Russia's sincerity and loyalty, which Armenia had heavily relied upon, had already been shattered in 2020. Until that year, Russia had been the sole arms supplier to Armenia, and the entire military doctrine of the Karabakh-Armenian army was based on Russian principles and equipment. However, in the short period between 2020 and 2023, many things became abundantly clear.

First and foremost, it became evident how dangerous it had been to “put all eggs in one basket” in matters of security and to rely entirely on Russia. The reality of Russia's military-industrial arsenal, sent to Karabakh, was starkly revealed — it was little more than a collection of Soviet-era artifacts, as outdated as the warfighting philosophy and engineering that came with them. In this sense,

Armenia has no one but itself to blame, as it willingly and “voluntarily” sacrificed its political sovereignty at the altar of Russia, hoping to preserve Armenian-controlled Karabakh.

By 2022, it became clear that Russia had begun to shape a new status for Armenia, one as a country with “disputed” and “illegitimate” borders. And of course, the maps of these borders were, and are, in Russia’s hands, which claims to be the only power capable of “resolving the issue” and “settling the problem.” In this sense, Azerbaijan has become a tool for Russia in its attempts at neo-colonial governance over Armenia. The interests of Russia and Azerbaijan have increasingly aligned with precision and synchronicity (one need only look at the alignment between Maria Zakharova’s statements and those of Ilham Aliyev in recent months). The masks have fully come off, with all three leaders — Putin, Erdogan, and Aliyev—speaking in unison. Today, all three are determined to force Armenia into a capitulatory status, collectively demanding the “Zangezur Corridor.” However, the handover of Karabakh by Russia to Azerbaijan could—and should—serve as the catalyst for Armenia’s liberation from suffocating obligations.

Geopolitics and Post-Socialist Coloniality

The invasion of Ukraine has had severe repercussions for the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, a project that has been faltering since its inception. Certainly, a crucial factor in the accelerating unraveling

of Armenia's perceptions of Russia, particularly its increasingly clear anti-Armenian stance, has been Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2024 and the subsequent sanctions imposed on Russia.

Putin and his inner circle (his security officials) have two well-established, recurring strategies for advancing the idea of a "Soviet 2.0" and re-colonizing former Soviet republics. These strategies involve sabotaging and undermining the democratic institutions of these countries through: 1. the (Orthodox) Church 2. Ethnic business networks and 3. Imposing its Foreign Agent Law. In Armenia and Georgia, this has manifested as attempts to install pro-Kremlin oligarchs who made their fortunes in Russia. In Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili embodied this; in Armenia though this effort was less successful.

These strategies reflect a broader effort by Russia to consolidate its influence in the post-Soviet space, using both political and economic leverage to reassert control over its neighbors, while undermining their sovereignty and democratic integrity. The consequences of this approach are becoming ever more apparent, especially as these former Soviet republics grapple with their relationship to a Russia increasingly seen as a destabilizing force.

The question of whether Russia or the United States will lead the Global South has gained prominence in recent political discourse. Russian authorities have framed Russia as the symbol and leader of the Global South, positioning the country as a stronghold against neocolonialism. This narrative aligns with Russia's geopolitical strategy of countering Western influence and asserting its presence on the global stage.

At the same time, Russian political figures, such as Vladislav Surkov, have introduced the concept of a "parade of imperialisms," suggesting that Russia has opened a new chapter in global imperial politics. This idea links Russia's imperial ambitions with other states such as Israel, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and even the U.S. (notably in Greenland), each of which is seen as pursuing its own form of imperialist policies in the contemporary world. While Russia's positioning as a leader of the Global South is heavily debated, it reflects an ongoing strategic narrative that challenges Western dominance. Researchers like Alexander Dugin and political analysts have explored these themes in the context of Eurasianism and the revival of empire, noting that Russia's global rhetoric and policies aim to disrupt Western-led liberal hegemony (Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory*, 2009). Additionally, studies on neocolonialism highlight how countries, such as Russia, frame their geopolitical ambitions as a pushback against the colonial legacy of Western powers (Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 2011). Azerbaijan and its activity in New Caledonia against France is another fragment.

The notion of "imperialism" in this context has been critiqued and analyzed in various ways, suggesting a fluid and multifaceted relationship between modern powers, with global South countries often acting as both victims of and participants in imperialist practices (Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 2000). The debate remains open: will Russia successfully redefine itself as a leader of the Global South, or will it continue to play a complex role within a broader network of power struggles that transcend simple binaries of imperialism and resistance?

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Russia as imagined leader of South East (all authoritarian regimes just adore this idea, including

Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan - [https://www.google.com/search?](https://www.google.com/search?q=%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F+%D0%B8+%D0%93%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9+%D0%AE%D0%B3+&sca_esv=1f7d421d0a8742ec&udm=7&biw=1536&bih=730&sxsrf=AHTn8zoaTcdozC-SDv_o6OZjhHI9lhZKZQ%3A1739701430539&ei=tryxZ_W8IMOO7NYPdj58Ag&ved=0ahUKewj176Du_MeLAXVDB9sEHUlsHo4Q4dUDCBA&uact=5&oq=%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F+%D0%B8+%D0%93%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9+%D0%AE%D0%B3+&gs_lp=EhZnd3Mtd2l6LW1vZGVsZXNzLXZpZGVvIirQoNC-0YHRgdC40Y8g0Lgg0JPQu9C-0LHQsNC70YzQvdGL0Lkg0K7QsyAyBhAAGBYHjIGEAAyFhgeMggQABiABBiiBDIIIEAAyGAQYogQyCBAAGKIEGIkFMggQABiABBiiBEiuCVAABwAHgAkAEAmAGbAaABmwGqAQMWLjG4AQPIAQD4AQGYAgGgAqQBmAMakgcDMC4xoAflAw&sclient=gws-wiz-modeless-video#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:2a90aee3,vid:54ieiPyXho4,st:0)

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