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New Troubles in Nagorno-Karabakh: Understanding the Lachin Corridor Crisis

As peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan continue, Baku has opened a checkpoint on the Lachin corridor, the sole road connecting Armenia to the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, raising fears of a new surge in fighting. In this Q&A, Crisis Group experts discuss the risks.

What is happening?

There is a growing risk of major violence in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, the mountainous enclave over which Armenia and Azerbaijan have fought two wars since the end of Soviet rule. On 23 April, Baku opened a checkpoint on the Lachin corridor, a highway traversing Azerbaijani territory that is the only road connecting Armenia to the ethnic Armenian-populated sections of Nagorno-Karabakh. Subsequent clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenian forces in May resulted in at least three fatalities. The clashes came two and a half years after a bloody six-week war pushed Armenian forces out of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions of Azerbaijan. Ethnic Armenian residents fled for Armenia or the part of Nagorno-Karabakh where Russian peacekeeping forces had deployed after the war, in accordance with a trilateral armistice signed by Baku, Yerevan and Moscow. Previously, the area had been under Armenian control for nearly three decades, following the two countries' previous full-scale war in the early 1990s.

Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan and in and around Nagorno-Karabakh escalated throughout 2022. The year saw three significant surges of violence specifically related to Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as a skirmish on Armenia's side of its state border with Azerbaijan. Then, starting in mid-December, Baku-backed activists set up a blockade along the Lachin corridor, disrupting regular traffic, initially on the pretext of protesting mining activity. (Subsequently, the Azerbaijanis added more issues, such as control of the corridor, to their list of concerns.) The blockade hindered Nagorno-Karabakh residents' access to basic necessities. The Russian peacekeeping mission escorted supplies through the blockade, while the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delivered aid and facilitated the movement of people in need of urgent medical help.

International efforts to mitigate the risk of another full-blown war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the past year have taken different forms. They include the dispatch of an unarmed European Union (EU) mission to the Armenian side of the state border to monitor the situation and encourage communication between the two sides. They also include a ruling by the International Court of Justice, which ordered Baku to "ensure unimpeded movement" in the Lachin corridor (to little avail, as Baku insists that transit was already unimpeded). On the diplomatic front, the EU, Russia and the United States have all facilitated parallel negotiations. Most recently, after significant preparatory effort, the U.S. hosted long-planned talks between the foreign ministers of Armenia

Azerbaijani soldiers at a newly established checkpoint on the Lachin Corridor, the only land link between the Armenian-populated enclave Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia on May 2, 2023. AFP / TOFIK BABAYEV

and Azerbaijan in early May. The EU also recently brought the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders together in Brussels and plans another meeting at the beginning of June. Russia, for its part, welcomed foreign ministry delegations from both Armenia and Azerbaijan to Moscow on 19 May. It is getting ready to host a summit between the two countries' leaders soon.

Before Baku set up the checkpoint, the parallel diplomatic efforts had generated two draft peace deals between the neighbours, one proposed by Russia and the other developed by Azerbaijan and Armenia under EU and U.S. auspices. Key issues in talks include how to protect the rights and safety of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, where Baku seeks to assert control. Yerevan, Moscow and Western capitals are pressing Baku – thus far, unsuccessfully – to offer security assurances to ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. In particular, they have called for guarantees that these residents will be safe if they remain in their home region. Baku has not wanted to discuss Nagorno-Karabakh residents' status in talks with Yerevan, saying they will have the same security assurances as all Azerbaijani citizens..

How has Baku changed the status quo?

On 23 April, Azerbaijan started moving military units toward the Russian peacekeepers' first observation point in Nagorno-Karabakh, at a spot just over the border with Armenia where the Lachin corridor begins. Over the next three days, Azerbaijani workers built a covered checkpoint facility for vehicles and individuals near the Russian outpost and hoisted a large Azerbaijani flag. For now, the Azerbaijani military personnel are living in tents, but they are constructing more permanent housing. The soldiers are checking individuals and vehicles entering and exiting the area. While travellers were already few due to the blockade, the ICRC reports that its ability to get people across has been curtailed, leaving only the Russian peacekeepers to facilitate trips to Armenia for medical care.

The checkpoint changes a status quo under which Russian peacekeeping forces regulated traffic along the Lachin corridor. This arrangement was in line with the 2020 ceasefire agreement – signed by Baku, Yerevan and Moscow – which stated that Russian peacekeepers would deploy along that road to control it. Baku has justified its actions by pointing to language in

the agreement declaring Azerbaijan responsible for the security of people, vehicles and cargo along the corridor. Its co-signatories Armenia and Russia disagree with this interpretation, arguing that the armistice clearly makes Russian peacekeepers responsible for the corridor, an interpretation Baku seemed to accept until recently, although it also alleged that the peacekeepers were not adequately fulfilling their duties. Since installing its checkpoint, Baku has emphasised that it will maintain conditions for "transparent, safe and regulated passage" of people, vehicles and cargo through the checkpoint and that it will coordinate with Russian peacekeepers who continue to patrol the corridor. It is not clear what Azerbaijan has done to date to establish such coordination.

Why did Baku set up the checkpoint?

Azerbaijan has long sought greater control of the road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. After years of hinting such a move was forthcoming, Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev declared his intention to follow through in a February speech. In response, Russia and Armenia made their opposition clear; Nagorno-Karabakh's de facto authorities in Stepanakert, moreover, warned that such a step would destabilise the situation on the ground. Armenia also rejected a February proposal from Baku that would have had both it and Azerbaijan establish border control points at the entrance to the Lachin corridor, each on its own side of the frontier. It viewed the proposal as part of an Azerbaijani effort to legitimise its control of the road and, in so doing, undermine the 2020 ceasefire agreement.

Baku appears to view the checkpoint as a way of asserting control of territory that legally belongs to Azerbaijan but remains out of its hands under the armistice terms, and which Baku now refers to as the "former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast". Indeed, a mid-level Azerbaijani official characterised the move to Crisis Group as a "reclamation of sovereignty". Another Azerbaijani official told Crisis Group that Baku will use the new checkpoint to "observe, control and influence" Nagorno-Karabakh. While Azerbaijan consented to the Russian peacekeepers' control of the corridor as part of the November 2020 agreement, it was clearly not happy with the arrangement, as Azerbaijani officials regularly expressed frustration about their lack of authority over the territory. Although the Russian troops share lists of the foreign citizens crossing into Nagorno-Karabakh with Baku, Azerbaijan wants itself to control who goes in and out – not least because it wants to make sure residents and de facto authorities cannot take up arms to resist its rule. A checkpoint will not deliver the full measure of influence that Azerbaijan seeks over the enclave. It is, however, a step in that direction.

Baku made a series of security-based arguments for establishing the checkpoint. First, it suggested that it needed to gain control in the aftermath of the disruptive late 2022 activist blockade (even though the activists had its backing). Then, it argued that Armenia was covertly sending soldiers and ammunition to Nagorno-Karabakh in violation of the 2020 agreement, including via a dirt road (now also accessible only through the new checkpoint) running north of the main corridor that had become a supply route in the wake of the blockade. Armenia said this claim was false. Moscow, for its part, offered to install X-ray scanners to check every vehicle that enters Nagorno-Karabakh – a move the de facto authorities said they would accept. Baku, however, has made clear that it wants its own people in charge.

By taking matters into its own hands and setting up a checkpoint, Baku appears to be continuing a pattern that first emerged in the 2020 war. Perhaps emboldened by Russia's

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full-scale war on Ukraine, with Moscow distracted and its military weakness revealed, Azerbaijan has taken a variety of steps, including through the use of force, to strengthen its military position on the ground, even as negotiations continue. Even before February 2022, Baku suspected that Russian peacekeepers could not and would not stop it from making these sorts of moves. Since then, Russia has been unwilling or unable to prevent the ensuing escalations (which did indeed buttress Azerbaijan's military advantage), the blockade and now Baku's establishment of a checkpoint.

Azerbaijan may also see the checkpoint as hastening the departure of the Russian mission, whose initial mandate in Nagorno-Karabakh expires in November 2025. According to the 2020 ceasefire agreement, either Armenia or Azerbaijan can veto its otherwise automatic renewal six months prior. Since Russia's full-scale invasion, Azerbaijani officials, including President Aliyev, have stated categorically that the Russian peacekeepers will be leaving in two years. One of the peacekeepers' functions is to patrol the Lachin corridor. By setting up the checkpoint, Baku could be signalling that the peacekeepers' services will no longer be needed as of 2025, and perhaps even earlier.

Why is this move worrying?

Since Baku's military success in 2020, ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh have feared that Azerbaijan would force their community, which numbers some 120,000 people, to leave the region. They worry that the checkpoint's imposition represents a form or muscle flexing that could be the precursor to ethnic cleansing. A checkpoint is well short of a pogrom, of course. But it is true (as both ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijani officials recognise) that Baku is reasserting control over Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh. This move unsettles the ethnic Armenians, who cite a violent history – in particular, Azerbaijani-orchestrated attacks on ethnic Armenians in the late 1980s – that leads them to equate Azerbaijani control with oppression. Indeed, both Azerbaijanis and Armenians harbour bitter memories of being forced to flee areas controlled by the other group in the wake of conflict and for fear of additional bloodshed.

The new checkpoint also puts the fragile peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia at risk. Baku's moves to reassert control call into question whether it has any intention of doing what European and U.S. diplomats continue to ask of it – ie, to engage with de facto authorities in Stepanakert. (That effort was already struggling: the parties could not even agree on a meeting location or agenda.) From an Armenian perspective, the checkpoint sends the message that Baku is not serious about compromise through negotiations and, instead, is prepared to secure its interests by creating facts on the ground. Baku might counter that Azerbaijan did participate in talks brokered by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken after the checkpoint was established. But Baku's unilateral actions drive fears that it sees negotiations purely as a vehicle to constrain Armenia and de facto authorities – not as a forum in which it will make meaningful concessions. Unless the two sides commit to talks as the means by which they will resolve disputes (and perhaps create a diplomatic channel for resolving volatile issues as they arise), the possibility of more violence both in Nagorno-Karabakh and along

the Armenian-Azerbaijani state border looms, as does the risk of a new, even bloodier war.

Finally, some observers are also nervous about what the Lachin situation may augur for other potential flashpoints in the bilateral relationship. One of Baku's priorities is to build a road crossing the Armenian Syunik region, which would connect mainland Azerbaijan with its exclave on the other side of Armenia, Nakhichevan. In the past, Baku has argued that this proposed corridor through Armenia should be regulated identically to how Lachin, which transits Azerbaijan, is supposed to be regulated – that is, with Russian control of the road. But now that Baku has upended the Lachin arrangement and shows increasing assertiveness in all its relations with Yerevan, some diplomats worry that it will shift to a different approach: to wit, that it might try to forcibly take control of Armenian territory in Syunik so that the road to Nakhichevan is in Azerbaijani hands as well. Azerbaijani officials have indicated that they have no such plans and, indeed, that the prospect of a road to Nakhichevan is, in their view, on hold for the time being. Now, in a subtle rhetorical shift, officials and experts in Baku have indicated to Crisis Group that Azerbaijan might accept Armenian control of the road, if the arrangements – such as customs regulations, security measures and other protocols – are guaranteed by impartial outside actors. This shift may indicate that Baku is not seeking an "extraterritorial corridor" that traverses Armenia, a concept Yerevan consistently rejects.

What has been the international reaction?

The U.S. and France have criticised Baku for creating the checkpoint. The U.S. said the checkpoint "undermines efforts to establish confidence in the peace process". The French foreign ministry adopted a similar line, warning that the checkpoint "jeopardises the negotiation process". Paris also urged Baku to take the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice in its 22 February order responding to the blockade. As noted above, the Court instructed Baku to "ensure unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles and cargo along the Lachin corridor in both directions". French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna paid a previously scheduled visit to Azerbaijan and Armenia days after the checkpoint was installed and discussed the matter with the leaderships of both countries. A diplomat said France is also considering bringing the checkpoint issue to the UN Security Council. U.S. officials have told Crisis Group that if relations deteriorate further, Washington is prepared to take a tougher line with Baku: if bloodshed rises beyond levels caused by the fighting to date, the U.S. might impose sanctions and visa bans.

The EU has also expressed concern. In Brussels, the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, described Azerbaijan's actions as "contrary to the EU's call to reduce tensions". Charles Michel, president of the European Council, discussed the evolving situation by telephone with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Several members of the European Parliament weighed in, characterising the checkpoint as a "clear violation of the 2020 ceasefire agreement" and "a sign of disrespect for the International Court of Justice ruling".

Russia's response to the Lachin corridor crisis has been muted. It could well be the Kremlin fears issuing threats it cannot act on; particularly in the aftermath of its disastrous invasion of Ukraine, drawing red lines it fails to uphold could make it look weak. In any case, in a carefully worded statement, Moscow voiced concerns about the checkpoint, which it said was a violation of the 2020 ceasefire agreement. The Russian defence ministry emphasised that the installation of the checkpoint was "unilateral" and not coordinated with Moscow. Russia removed the head of its peacekeeping mission – Major-General Andrey Volkov, on whose watch the checkpoint went up – and replaced him with Colonel-General Alexander Lentsov, an adviser to Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu.

Russian officials say they will defend Armenia itself – per Moscow's treaty obligations – but they note that their responsibilities when it

"Russian officials say they will defend Armenia itself … but they note that their responsibilities when it comes to Nagorno-Karabakh are minimal."

comes to Nagorno-Karabakh are minimal and based only on the text of the 2020 agreement. Russia believes it has much to lose if there is a return to conflict. It very much fears being pushed out of the peace process and the South Caucasus as a whole if war resumes. In an effort to maintain Russia's role and presence, its officials have reiterated the need to look to the 2020 settlement it negotiated as the framework for future deals.

Thus far, Türkiye, Azerbaijan's strategic partner and ally, is alone in backing Baku. An adviser to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, İbrahim Kalin, described the decision to establish a checkpoint as an internal Azerbaijani matter, emphasising that "we are discussing the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, and introducing other interpretations will not aid the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia".

What actions could mitigate risks of escalation?

Mediated talks continue to defuse the immediate situation and keep momentum going toward a broader settlement. The recent flurry of meetings did not deliver concrete results, but both parties have reiterated their readiness to continue the process. More meetings, in the U.S., EU and Russia, are planned.

There are reasons for hope. That Baku and Yerevan are still talking in Washington, Brussels and Moscow indicates that they recognise the benefits of a negotiated deal and the costs of not reaching one. Azerbaijan is surely also aware that should fear and uncertainty lead to a mass exodus from Nagorno-Karabakh, Baku will face significant global blowback, which could hamper it in myriad ways. It might, for example, jeopardise Azerbaijan's reputation as a reliable trading partner, taking a toll on its economy, which is now riding high as Western countries look for energy exporters other than Russia amid the war in Ukraine. If Azerbaijan wisely heeds international calls to alleviate Armenian fears of ethnic cleansing by offering assurances to Nagorno-Karabakh's population, negotiations will flow more smoothly. One option to consider could include commitments from all sides, perhaps even as part of the formal agreement, not to pursue legally or otherwise those who fought them, politically or in combat, in the past. While Yerevan and Stepanakert will continue to reject the checkpoint as illegal, Baku could show good-will by committing to inspecting only those vehicles it identifies as suspicious by means of an X-ray or other scan, as well as by cooperating more visibly with the Russian peacekeepers.

For their part, Yerevan and Nagorno Karabakh's de facto authorities can also take steps to reduce tensions. They can accede to monitoring, so as to demonstrate that weapons are not in fact entering the territory, as Baku alleges. For example, if portal monitoring systems, including Russian-provided ones, were deployed on the Armenian side of the border, under Armenian control and perhaps with third-party nations participating in the peace talks observing, Yerevan would be in a position to offer evidence it is not violating the terms of the November 2020 deal. An EU diplomat told Crisis Group that Nagorno-Karabakh community leaders might consider "toning down the rhetoric" expressing opposition to integration with Azerbaijan, suggesting that they could thus "help move things forward. … At least it would offer hope for the possibility of coexistence and a mutually acceptable agreement". But this request may not be realistic prior to the commencement of real talks with Baku and progress

toward the above-referenced assurances – and of course, all involved would need to adapt their rhetoric eventually in order for such talks to bear fruit.

All parties can demonstrate their desire to work toward a comprehensive settlement by using the various diplomatic tracks to make progress on the many open items between Yerevan and Baku. One outstanding matter is the delimitation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, and another is transport links between the two countries. In a recent EU-mediated meeting, the two countries' leaders edged closer to agreement on reopening rail links to connect mainland Azerbaijan with the Nakhichevan exclave. Even with plans for new highway construction seemingly on indefinite hold, the Soviet-era rail project is being rejuvenated, with discussions proceeding under World Customs Organization auspices. Establishing the rail link could offer an early, confidence-building win and symbolise cooperation to advance shared interests, potentially laying the groundwork for further diplomatic and economic collaboration between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Unfortunately, the geostrategic standoff between Russia and the West over Ukraine will not make peace negotiations easier. Indeed, it could make direct coordination among Western mediators and Moscow about their work on parallel tracks nearly impossible. Still, the U.S., the EU and Russia would do well to respect one another's efforts and refrain from pushing the parties to choose one track over the others. The more successfully the mediators insulate their efforts in the South Caucasus from the conflict in Ukraine, the better chance they will have of making progress toward peace.

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