

A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN'S GROWING ENGAGEMENT IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS REGION

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Abstract

India and Pakistan have been taking sides with states in the South Caucasus region since the start of the Azerbaijan-Armenian war in 2020. Pakistan strongly supports Azerbaijan and does not recognise Armenia as a state; whereas India enjoys cordial relations with Armenia and supports it against Azerbaijan. In this background, this paper seeks to answer the following question: how does the involvement of India and Pakistan in the South Caucasus region impact its political situation? In conducting research for this paper, a close examination of daily news, official documents, books, and articles was made for an objective analysis. The study found that the animosity between India and Pakistan has become a considerable factor in shaping the geostrategic environment of the South Caucasus region, particularly after the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. Moreover, friendly relations between Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and Türkiye have become stronger, triggering significant Indian support for Armenia.

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Introduction

The South Caucasus region lies at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Its geography explains its significance and the interests of great powers in this area.¹ Notwithstanding the geographical contiguity and shared history, the three countries of this region, i.e., Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia have followed different trajectories of foreign policies after independence in 1991. The oil reserves in the area and the association of the region with transit, transport, and transfer make it important² for many states. Similarly, the South Caucasian states have been searching for stronger partners for new trade possibilities and security arrangements to meet their economic and security needs. However, the geopolitical tensions within the Caucasus have had ramifications for their ties to other states. Given the geopolitical tension and continuous border-war situation, De Waal called the South Caucasus a 'broken region'.³

In 2020, the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, also known as the 44-day war, changed the dynamics of power politics. Azerbaijan got control of the last remaining parts of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 that were still occupied by the Artsakh Armenian population.⁴ Certainly, the 44-day war has led to a new shift in the regional dynamics of the South Caucasus and shaped the new geopolitical environment. These regional changes have also been of great concern to policymakers in Islamabad and New Delhi due to their allies in the South Caucasus region. In the wake of the 44-day war, both India and Pakistan entered a new phase of relations with the South Caucasian states. Several push factors have triggered the interests of India and Pakistan in the South Caucasus region. Russian invasion of Ukraine, rising tensions between European states and Russia, and emerging blocs such as Türkiye and Azerbaijan have led Pakistan and India to recalibrate their positions in the South Caucasus region. India

appears to be an important stakeholder in the region, particularly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since the invasion, India has been trying to exploit its alliance with Armenia to reinforce its grip in the region in an attempt to materialise the concept of the North-South corridor via Iran and Armenia.

Azerbaijan's victory revealed the long-lasting amity between Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and Türkiye. The trio arranges joint military drills, supports educational exchange programmes, and engages in other joint trade ventures. This amity has aggravated Indian threat perception and to counter this strong alliance, India is growing its involvement in the region. In 2022, India and Armenia signed a deal to export anti-tank rockets and other ammunition to Armenia. They have also been cooperating in the education sector. Pakistan, on the other hand, has cemented its alliance with Azerbaijan and gave strong support to Azerbaijan in the 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh. Thereafter, a trilateral military exercise between Pakistan, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye named 'Three Brothers-2021' took place in Baku. The unexpected involvement and participation of India in the region raises questions about the Indian-Armenian partnership.

In this setting, the article tries to probe how the involvement of India and Pakistan in the South Caucasus region impacts the overall regional geopolitics. The article helps understand India and Pakistan's relations with South Caucasus states. It reveals that Azerbaijan's growing affinity toward Pakistan has begun frustrating India. As a result, both India and Pakistan had to recalibrate their positions in the region which has given birth to a new ambivalence. It also covers key analysis of the geopolitical changes in the South Caucasus region in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War.

Since this article presents updated reflections on the involvement of India and Pakistan in the region, a close examination of secondary literature in the form of documents, daily news (from Azerbaijan, Pakistan, India, and other countries), and articles were

made for an objective analysis. For an understanding of the background, books and scholarly articles have also been examined. This paper first observes India's security partnership with Armenia, then looks at Islamabad-Baku ties. The last section of the paper addresses the impact of the involvement of India and Pakistan on the political situation of the South Caucasus region.

Growing Interests of India in the South Caucasus Region

Transcaucasia became the centre of attention for both India and Pakistan soon after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. India's interests in the South Caucasus especially in Armenia and Azerbaijan go beyond narrow regional dimensions. South Caucasus is important for India as its orientation affects its national security planning due to Pakistan and Azerbaijan's strong ties which are a constant concerning factor for India. Moreover, the geopolitical interests of India in the region are largely due to its desire to be connected with Eurasia. To bypass Pakistan, India has long been trying to connect the Chabahar Port with Eurasia through Armenia. Armenia is moving closer to India in the same vein as it seeks new trade allies to strengthen its economic position and security partnerships.

Yerevan has long been dependent on the Kremlin's political, economic, and military support which India is inclined to start for Armenia as Russia is busy in the Ukraine war. This emerging connection between India and Armenia is not worrying Russia because India has strong diplomatic relations with Russia in various aspects such as the longstanding Russia-India strategic partnership, membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS). India is also trying to weaken Pakistan's alliance by bringing the neighbours, i.e., Armenia, Georgia, and Iran, into its orbit of influence. Overall, India and Armenia's political, social, and military relations have been growing. New Delhi has always responded adequately to Yerevan's outreach to

India and received the Presidents of Armenia on state visits in different years.⁵

India and Armenia before 2020

India has been trying to strengthen its economic and political ties with Armenia since its independence. India's emerging market has become an important factor in getting close to the South Caucasus. The fast-growing Indian economy is also factoring in its close ties with Armenia. Moreover, historical links bind India with Armenia. Both have been enjoying friendly relations for centuries when many Armenians settled in Agra,⁶ Calcutta (Kolkata), Chennai, and many other cities of India. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Armenian colony grew in size, richness, and influence in India.⁷ The Armenian population was famous for printing work and gun-making. They expanded their influence through trade with the East India Company. Moreover, they developed the bonds of cultural and scientific interaction along with trade in India.

Notwithstanding historical and commercial linkages, Armenian-Indian relations remained limited due to the instability in the Caucasus region during the initial years of independence. In 2017, the liberalisation of the visa process for Indian residents in Armenia and new business opportunities in the medical and IT sectors resulted in a fresh wave of Indian migration, and an estimated 2,200 Indians work and live legally in Armenia.⁸ Now Armenia considers India its development cooperation partner.

India's engagement with Armenia is based on both countries' priorities and needs. They collaborate under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC), which provides partner countries with short- and mid-term training programmes. At least two distinct areas of collaboration between India and Armenia demand special attention, i.e., development partnership and cooperation through project implementation and capacity-building through education and training programmes. The two countries concentrated

on the IT industry for long-term collaboration in the first category, while in the second category, they taught numerous Armenian officials from government and semi-government departments in India through short- and mid-term training programmes. Additionally, many Indian students are pursuing costly medical education at Yerevan State Medical University.

Furthermore, Armenia and India conducted a cultural exchange programme for 2017-2020 and youth activities. The most interesting deal, however, is India's commitment to developing an Earth Observation Satellite (EOS) for Armenia.⁹ As a part of the agreement, New Delhi undertook to teach Armenian scientists how to utilise the system and handle and understand its data.

Post-2020 Situation

The post-November 2020 relations between Armenia and India are strategic as the rising partnership of Azerbaijan with Türkiye and Pakistan engendered fear in the minds of Indian policymakers. Türkiye's rising anti-Indian stance on Kashmir and the Pan-Turkic conception cultivated by some groups in Baku and Ankara have pushed the South Caucasus to the forefront of India's attention. The Associate Executive Editor of the *Economic Times*, PD Samanta emphasised that India should not ignore the longstanding alliance of Pakistan, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye. By building a relationship with Armenia, India is finding a way to cut through the strong alliance of Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Naturally, any strategic actions of India in the South Caucasus would influence Pakistan's geopolitical alignments with Azerbaijan.

Since the war of 2020, Armenia has been gathering its lost strength and trying hard not to be politically isolated. It has already missed the opportunity to be aligned with China and could not participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) largely due to its inadequate infrastructure. Hence, China preferred Baku over Yerevan for the partnership. India seized the opportunity and started investing

in Armenia's defence sector. Yerevan has also been struggling to establish relations with emerging Asian countries including India and China. Resultantly, the Armenian diaspora along with the government successfully redesigned the political partnership.¹⁰ New Delhi and Yerevan expanded their cooperation in the three sectors of agriculture, Information Technology (IT), and pharmaceuticals. However, bilateral trade is still insignificant due to the lack of land connectivity between the two countries.¹¹

Nevertheless, a multi-million-dollar arms agreement between Armenia and India to sell Indian-made weapons to Armenia is in place. The aforementioned deal reflects solidarity on the part of New Delhi and Yerevan and also signals a deepening defence cooperation. The cooperation in the defence sector has been extended as New Delhi realises that close association with Yerevan will benefit India economically too.

Trade and Economic Cooperation

India will significantly profit from economic cooperation with Armenia since it may serve as a way for India to compete for global trade in the Eurasian corridor via the Persian Gulf to Russia and Europe. The IT industry and pharmaceuticals are two prominent industries that stand out for further economic collaboration. Armenia has had a boom in IT during the previous decade, with an average annual growth rate of 25 per cent.¹² Meanwhile, Armenia has to make a substantial leap in expanding this industry to become a significant participant on the global IT map. India is one of the world's leading IT industries, with the experience and financial resources to help Armenians compete with their rival counterparts in achieving the next growth stage. Armenian companies have started entering the pharmaceutical sector by establishing small- and medium-scale production in Armenia.

Armenia can play a significant role in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), supported by India, and the Black Sea-Persian Gulf Transport Corridor, supported by Iran.¹³ Additionally,

by entering into trade and military treaties, Armenia might position itself as a strategically crucial partner for India. India may establish a commercial and defence hub for joint manufacturing and Indian exports overseas. India benefits from being located within Russia's area of influence. This partnership might be an ideal option for Armenia to join the INSTC and gain easier access to Indian markets and Indo-Armenian trade through Iran would significantly expand bilateral trade.

Education is viewed as another factor where excellent prospects exist for cooperation. Thousands of Indian students pick Armenia as a destination for higher studies, however, the demand is far greater. Indian students will increase if Armenian institutions offer more programmes with English as the medium of instruction in addition to suitable accommodations.

Defence Linkages

Armenia has been gradually shifting its reliance in terms of defence imports from Russia to other states, as Yerevan seeks suppliers able to supply modern weapons to counter Azerbaijan. Despite the peace agreement signed in 2020, Armenia seems reluctant to accept and implement the provisions of the agreement. It appears that Armenia intends to get back the territory that it lost in the war. In this context, it is moving from Russia, a traditional arms supplier of Armenia. There are multiple factors in Armenia's shift from the Russian supplies. First, Armenia's defence requirements have been increasing day-by-day due to a perpetual state of tensions with its neighbour since independence. Second, Russia's concentration is more on the Ukraine war and the fear of short stock has some bearing on its trade too. Third, Western-led sanctions are impacting Russia's defence sector too.

Besides, New Delhi has become Yerevan's reliable military partner as India vehemently opposes Azerbaijan. Even before the 2020 conflict, Armenia expressed its interest in Indian military weapons.

Yerevan signed a \$40 million arms agreement with India in 2020 to deliver four Swathi weapons locating radars to determine the position of weapons.¹⁴ The radar system is intended to detect incoming artillery rounds, mortars, and rockets, as well as identify enemy launchers and positions. These radars have been successfully placed along the borders of India and China. Armenia showed its interest in buying these radars in June 2022 and an Armenian defence team visited India to negotiate the purchase of weapons along with drones.

The two countries again signed a defence deal of \$155 million between Yerevan and New Delhi for supplying 155mm artillery systems to the former over the next three years, continuing New Delhi's deepening defence cooperation with Armenia.¹⁵

Indian and Armenian Diaspora

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Armenian population in India played an important role in strengthening relations between the two countries. Cooperation between India and Armenia is also on the rise as its people-to-people contact is strong. India enjoys the world's most extensive diaspora and its businessmen are popular in Armenia. In contrast, Armenians were present in every central town and city in India.¹⁶ According to data, almost 28,741 Indians arrived in Armenia and 29,345 left.¹⁷ Although the Indian community in Armenia is small, Indian students go to Armenia for education, some of whom stay there for work.

India's ties with Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan and India have had close relations and have cooperated on various issues. Baku has been New Delhi's leading economic partner in the South Caucasus for several years. The website of the Indian embassy in Azerbaijan shows that India and Azerbaijan are also tied in civilisational links claiming that the 'Ateshgah', fire temple, in Baku reflects historical links between India and Azerbaijan. It further says that the inscription, in Devanagari and Gurmukhi scripts, is

surviving evidence of the trade relations and hospitality experienced by Indian merchants on the Silk Road to Europe in Azerbaijan.

However, both states could not establish further ties due to their differences on the issue of the Nagorno-Karabakh and Kashmir dispute. Both Azerbaijan and India are different in many ways. Their different approaches to the oppressed are disconnecting them. Azerbaijan has publicly supported Pakistan's position on the Jammu and Kashmir dispute and Pakistan in the same manner has backed Azerbaijan's stance on Nagorno-Karabakh.

The fluctuation of relations between Azerbaijan and India can be examined through the pre and post-war 2020 period.

Phase-I: Pre-2020

Several Indian pharmaceutical businesses are represented in Azerbaijan, which have already made significant progress. The mechanism of the India-Azerbaijan Intergovernmental Commission (IGC) on Trade, Economic, Scientific, and Technical Cooperation, founded in 2007, has considerably expanded bilateral trade between the two countries. Another significant feature of the India-Azerbaijan cooperation is the establishment of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) which will link Indian ports to Azerbaijan and Russia via Iran.¹⁸

On the other hand, India chose to be more vocal in its support for Armenia and maintain its 'principled approach' to the Karabakh conflict. During a fresh wave of border conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan on September 13-14, 2022, India's foreign ministry urged Azerbaijan to halt hostilities immediately. Leyla Abdullayeva, spokesperson of Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that Azerbaijan was ready for dialogue and welcomed any effort seeking to re-establish ties between the two sides.¹⁹ She further said that if India came to help or made a proposal, Azerbaijan was always willing to participate. The statement showed readiness on the part of Azerbaijan to work for peace and stability in the region.

Hydrocarbons have dominated bilateral trade between the two countries. Azerbaijan is attempting to diversify its economy and decrease its reliance on hydrocarbons. Food processing, pharmaceuticals, and technology are three areas with significant potential for bilateral trade. In this context, India can play a crucial role in facilitating such a collaboration.

Ironically, even though the two sides are seemingly not happy with each other, their trade volume has been rising since the last decade. For instance, bilateral trade between India and Azerbaijan has shot up almost ten times from 2005 to 2017, from about \$50 million to nearly half a billion US dollars. The bilateral trade further rose to \$1.093 billion in 2019 and \$1.184 billion in 2022.²⁰ The surge in trade was the result of old agreements before the war. However, the strained relations are limiting their interaction in the aftermath of war. For instance, India refrained from inviting Azerbaijan to the BRICS summit and the Indian Ministry of External Affairs called Azerbaijan an 'aggressor'.

Given the continuous rise in imports and exports, India has become Azerbaijan's fourth-largest trading partner. India mainly imports crude oil from Azerbaijan, while its exports include grains, telephones, medications, granite, stones, and tiles. Moreover, the position of Azerbaijan on INSTC makes it indispensable for all the stakeholders of Transcaucasia. INSTC is a 7,200-kilometre-long network that provides its members with the shortest route to connect with remote areas. The corridor offers enormous potential to improve regional trade and economic exchange which will significantly decrease the transit time between India and Azerbaijan. Notwithstanding the disagreements over Karabakh, the continuous collaboration between the two states in various industries such as agriculture, technology, health, and tourism does not reflect a negative picture. Furthermore, agrarian cooperation, such as agricultural machinery, plant breeding, and the interchange of

agricultural specialists, has already gained ground. As part of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Plan (E-ITEC), India also trains Azerbaijan's groups.

Phase-II: Post-2020

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions that followed opened new avenues of dialogue once again with India. In the first half of 2022, India became Azerbaijan's fourth-largest export partner. Azerbaijan's exports to India surged 107 per cent over the same time the previous year, reaching \$896 million.²¹ Likewise, as global food markets became more volatile, India emerged as a significant supplier of rice and cereals for Azerbaijan. These events once again highlighted the relevance of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) for Baku and New Delhi. This also demonstrates that India has the potential to restore relations with states through economic cooperation.

Owing to Azerbaijan's growing economy in the world, it has the potential to become a full-fledged member of the BRICS as the organisation itself is a group of fast-growing economies. However, India prevented Azerbaijan from attending the BRICS Summit in 2022.²² Certainly, there is a growing chasm between the two because of diplomatic affinities in the Nagorno-Karabakh and Kashmir crises.

However, bilateral trade between India and Azerbaijan is different from political differences. Azerbaijan has become a key player for India as a supplier of crude oil. In addition, the two countries have effectively broadened their collaboration in trade, business, and energy. In September 2022, Azerbaijan hosted an exhibition, in which more than 60 Indian companies showcased some products as well as services such as rice, spices, tea, handicrafts, textiles, and cosmetics.²³ The interaction of relevant industries with traders from Azerbaijan opens up an avenue of economic cooperation.

Garment exports from India to Azerbaijan fell by around 70 per cent to \$0.357 million in 2020 due to the Covid pandemic, however,

they increased somewhat in 2021 to \$0.516 million, and \$0.436 million in the first ten months of 2022.²⁴

According to Indian sources, 1,481 Indians are living in Azerbaijan and are linked with international companies such as the oil and gas sectors. Some businessmen are engaged in trading, catering and restaurant, and some construction workers are living on short-term contracts.²⁵

Azerbaijan-Pakistan Relations

Pakistan and Azerbaijan have been enjoying cordial relations since 1991. The close affinity between Pakistan and Azerbaijan can be gauged from the fact that Pakistan did not recognise Armenia. The relations between the two states are based on religion, history, tradition, culture, and politics. The old bonds between the two countries are engendering societal-level association and bolstering bilateralism. The leadership of both states is up for full collaboration in politics, security, and economics.

Diplomatic Relations

Azerbaijan and Pakistan's close cultural and religious proximity with Türkiye has shown common interest in the promotion of solidarity among like-minded states. Pakistan, just like Türkiye, recognised Azerbaijan and supported the stance of Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, Pakistan does not recognise Armenia and wants Yerevan to accept the right of Azerbaijan over the occupied territory. Furthermore, Pakistan has always raised its voice against the Armenian aggression inside Nagorno-Karabakh and supported Azerbaijan's stance since its inception. Having Pakistan's support on the Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan has openly backed Pakistan's position on the Kashmir issue for many years.

Both states' leaders paid a visit to each other many times. The first presidential visit was paid by President Farooq Leghari in 1995. Correspondingly, the then-president of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev visited Pakistan in 1996. In 2000 and 2002, the two states' presidents

again met at the summit of the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) in Iran and Türkiye, respectively. Later, President İlham Aliyev also visited Pakistan in 2005. After the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 by the Chinese president in Kazakhstan, geopolitical changes began to surface. Regional connectivity appears as a necessity of the regions to boost their trade and the overall movement of people and goods from one area to another area. While recalibrating their positions, many bordering countries entered into a state of tension once again and border conflicts resurfaced. The border clash between Armenia and Azerbaijan once again started on 27 July 2014. Pakistan's then President Mamnoon Hussain went to Baku in early 2015 and assured Pakistan's support for Azerbaijan. Another visit to Azerbaijan was made by then Prime Minister of Pakistan Mian Nawaz Sharif where he reiterated Pakistan's stance on Nagorno Karabakh.

The Prime Minister of Azerbaijan met the Prime Minister of Pakistan in Kazakhstan in October 2022 on the sidelines of the sixth summit of the Conference for Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) where both leaders showed their interest in promoting trade and connectivity.²⁶

Since Pakistan calls Azerbaijan a friendly state, Pakistan's officials reiterated many times that it would not accord recognition to Armenia. The parliament of Pakistan has a consensus on the issue and even the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations approved a resolution condemning the Khojaly genocide of Azeri Muslims and the illegal occupation of internationally recognised Azerbaijani land by the Armenian forces. In this regard, the Committee also called for the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) on the withdrawal of the Armenian army from Azerbaijan's territory.²⁷

Economic Relations

For Azerbaijan, Pakistan could be an attractive buyer of oil and gas, while Pakistan sees a good buyer of agricultural commodities and sports goods in Azerbaijan. However, history does not present a satisfactory picture as both states could not sign any agreement for economic cooperation except one in 1995. There has been a complete disconnect between political and economic relations. Moreover, no particular attention was paid to trade and businesses. A positive trend was discernible after 2010, as trade volume grew from \$10.33 million in 2011-12 to \$37.45 million in 2013-14. Later, a sharp decline was seen in the bilateral trade between Azerbaijan and Pakistan in 2018. However, the year 2020 showed some positive trends.

As per the data available on the website of OEC, Pakistan exported goods and commodities worth \$11.6 million to Azerbaijan in 2020. The top products exported from Pakistan to Azerbaijan were soap (\$2.17 million), synthetic filament yarn woven fabric (\$1.17 million), and rice (\$1.03 million). During the last 24 years, Pakistan's exports to Azerbaijan have shown an increase at an annual growth rate of 11.1 per cent, from \$932 thousand in 1996 to \$11.6 million in 2020.

In 2020, Azerbaijan's exports to Pakistan were worth \$2.5 million to Pakistan. The main products exported from Azerbaijan to Pakistan were petroleum gas (\$1.23 million), non-retail pure cotton yarn (\$1.22 million), and refined petroleum (\$23.8 thousand). During the last 24 years, Azerbaijan's exports to Pakistan have shown an increase, at an annual growth rate of 20.8 per cent, from \$26.6 thousand in 1996 to \$2.5 million in 2020.²⁸ Another source shows the appreciation in commercial activities contending that from 2020 to 2021 Pakistan's exports to Azerbaijan have dropped whereas the imports from Azerbaijan improved in this period.²⁹ So, in 2020, the total amount of trade was \$13.2 million, in which exports were US \$1.6 million and imports were US 11.6 million.³⁰ Moreover, both states have

shown their interest in signing a preferential trade agreement (PTA) to boost their economic relations. It also appears that both states have shown their interest in collaborating in the sectors of information technology (IT), education, and food businesses.

Military Cooperation

The 1992 genocide of the Muslims of Azerbaijan by Armenians pushed Pakistan to extend help to Azerbaijan and support its stance internationally. During the 1990s, Pakistan got the status of a nuclear weapon state (NWS) followed by appreciation as well as severe criticism from different states. Nevertheless, Pakistan's military industry became an attraction for many countries and its armed forces were more advanced in comparison to Azerbaijan. Thus, the defence sector factored into Pakistan-Azerbaijan relations which were improving daily. Azerbaijan tends to further expand military cooperation and wishes to initiate joint production of defence products.³¹ Moreover, in 2003, both countries signed an agreement which allowed the armed forces of Azerbaijan to take part in military drills together with the Pakistani military. Azerbaijani military personnel receive training from Pakistani military experts. Azerbaijan's naval forces attended the naval exercise, for instance, the Aman Exercise in 2013 hosted by Pakistan.

Defence cooperation increased after the 44-day war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Thus, diplomatic relations of Azerbaijan with Pakistan and Türkiye grew stronger and all three states took many defence-related initiatives thereafter. On several occasions, the leadership of Pakistan and Türkiye explicitly urged Armenia to stop aggression. Furthermore, the parliamentarians from Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Pakistan signed the Istanbul Declaration in July 2022,³² in which Ankara and Baku reaffirmed their support for the people of Kashmir and emphasised the need to resolve the conflict as prescribed under the provisions of the UN resolutions.

Analysis

The South Caucasus region acts as a link between Central Asia, West Asia, Russia, China, and Europe and also has great strategic significance for all these regions. The geopolitical importance of the region has made it imperative for South Asian states to connect with the South Caucasus states. The scenario of the South Caucasus region has been changing since the outbreak of the Armenian-Azerbaijani war of 2020 as the formation of alliances has had a cascade impact on the extra-regional powers and their responses equally impacted the regional dynamics of the South Caucasus. In this milieu, a clear change has been observed in the changing policies of India, particularly towards this region. Although India made substantial economic inroads, its political involvement in the region was low in the past. Soon after realising that Pakistan's open support for Azerbaijan has been growing constantly during peace and war times, India focused on Armenia's support against Azerbaijan. With this move, both India and Pakistan have also entered a new phase of relations with the South Caucasian states.

Certainly, Pakistan and Azerbaijan have concerns about the support of New Delhi to Yerevan during years of war. India has been extending its economic and military support significantly to Armenia since November 2020. India exported military hardware including the PINAKA Multi Barrel Rocket Launchers (MBRL) to Armenia.³³ The defence supply agreements and deals between the two countries proved as a headway in their growing relationship.

Interestingly, India is also trying to establish a rail link to go from northwestern Iran, across the southern Caucasus to the Black Sea. In this respect, India has two choices: one via the Caspian coast through Azerbaijan, and the other through Armenia's southern Syunik province. India has decided to choose the second option so far. However, it has already been proven that its decision to arm Armenia against Azerbaijan was wrong and had serious implications.

Nevertheless, India has to figure out the right option as Azerbaijan has defeated Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia has already been isolated and any wrong decision on the part of India could trigger a conflict in the region as the former's working with Iran and Armenia to access the Black Sea would be concerning for Azerbaijan and Türkiye who are definite allies of Pakistan. In this setting, Pakistan needs to wisely comprehend the growing influence of India in the South Caucasus region to form an effective Eurasian policy to move ahead.

Conclusion

Historically, the South Caucasus region has played a relatively lesser role in Pakistan and India's relations. However, due to the diplomatic and ideological affinities of Pakistan and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh and Kashmir conflicts, New Delhi decided to improve its ties with Yerevan. Although Baku tried to keep India-Armenia relations from spilling over into its diplomatic and economic relations with New Delhi, India's continuous support to Armenia in the Second Karabakh War in 2020 revealed its strong attachment to Armenia.

In response to India's planning for the South Caucasus region, Pakistan showed consistency in its relations with Azerbaijan. Both states are showing solidarity against the unlawful actions of states against their territories. It is believed that being prominent states in their respective regions, Pakistan and Azerbaijan have the potential to build regional and extra-regional organisations, to conduct joint conferences to gather the support of the world community on critical security issues such as the human rights violations in Kashmir and the Armenian aggression. The situation is causing a disturbance in India's diplomatic circle and an explicit reaction of India against Azerbaijan is discernible. Pakistan's defence cooperation with Azerbaijan has been growing and empowering Pakistan, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan's regional alliance.

Pakistan should seize the opportunity to consolidate its trade with these states. Strengthening defence relations with Azerbaijan is not enough rather both countries need to work for the promotion of trade and economic linkages. The increased volume of trade between Pakistan and Azerbaijan will lead to a harmony of interests. Furthermore, instead of worrying over the growing defence ties between India and Armenia, Pakistan needs to work more on the educational linkages and cooperation in the IT sector with Azerbaijan.

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