

Returning Exclave and Border Villages

A Strategic Imperative to Unlock the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Process

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Armenia currently occupies eight Azerbaijani border and exclave villages, while Azerbaijan controls one Armenian village. This IDD Working Paper examines the strategic significance and implications of the mutual return of these villages within the context of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. The paper argues that the return of these villages should be looked at within the framework of the mutual recognition of territorial integrity, rather than ongoing border delimitation discussions. It then examines innovative solutions for addressing the return of these villages within the broader framework of enhancing regional cooperation and connectivity. Lastly, it underscores the urgency of reaching an agreement on the return of these villages to facilitate sustainable peace, end regional fragmentation in the South Caucasus, ensure the region's effective integration into the global trade system, and thus pave the way for economic prosperity.

Background: 8+1 Villages Have Immense Security and Economic Significance

Armenia currently occupies eight Azerbaijani villages, one in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and seven in the Gazakh district in northwestern Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan for its part controls one Armenian

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exclave village. In the context of this IDD Policy Brief, the reference to “8+1” denotes these villages.

Four of the eight Azerbaijani villages—i.e., Baghanis Ayrim, Kheyrimli, Gizilhajili, and Ashagi Askipara—are border villages, belonging to the Gazakh district. Four other villages are exclaves within Armenia. These include Karki in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and three villages of the Gazakh district located in two exclaves: the Sofulu exclave, consisting of two villages—i.e., Sofulu and Barkhudarli—and the Yukhari Askipara exclave.¹ (see Maps 1 and 2, below.)

It is not widely known that Armenia’s occupation of parts of Azerbaijan began not in Karabakh, but rather in the country’s more exposed and non-contiguous peripheries during the waning years of the Soviet Union. Karki was the first territory of Azerbaijan to be occupied by the Armenian militia on 19 January 1990. Its occupation at this early stage of the conflict was not coincidental: through the Karki exclave passes the strategic M2/E117 highway, connecting Yerevan with southern Armenia. After regaining its independence, the significance of this route further increased, as it came to serve as Armenia’s principal trade route with Iran. Through an offshoot of this road from Goris to Lachin, Yerevan also used to maintain a land connection with its installed separatist regime in then-occupied Karabakh.

Baghanis Ayrim was the second territory of Azerbaijan to be captured by the Armenian militia on 24 March 1990, and the logic was similar. The border village was on the way to another strategic road in Armenia, namely the M16/H26 highway from Yerevan to Tbilisi. During March–June 1992, with the outbreak of full-scale hostilities, Armenia occupied the border villages of Kheyrimli, Gizilhajili, and Ashagi Askipara and the exclave villages of Barkhudarli, Sofulu, and Yukhari Askipara. A common feature of these now defunct and depopulated villages is that they are situated along or near the M16/H26 highway, which crisscrosses de jure Azerbaijani territory five times.

Azerbaijan, for its part, took control of the Armenian exclave village of Artsvashen (called Bashkent by Azerbaijanis) in August 1992, while simultaneously liberating two Azerbaijani border villages—Mutudere and Gasimagali—captured by Armenian forces a few days earlier. Through Artsvashen passes a motorway connecting 26 Azerbaijani border villages in an area locally known as “Shinikh mahali” to the regional center of Gedabey and the rest of the country.² As such, control of the Armenian exclave allows Azerbaijan to ensure unimpeded access to these villages.

Despite effectively controlling their respective exclaves for over 30 years, neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan have made efforts to actively populate or incorporate these villages into their respective domestic legal systems.

Azerbaijan has mainly used Artsvashen as a military site, with no permanent settlement except for seasonal cattle herding and farming by villagers from nearby settlements during summertime. The eight Azerbaijani villages under Armenian control similarly remain largely uninhabited, except for Karki, which has been renamed to Tigranashen and where a few dozen Armenian families have settled.

In conclusion, the strategic significance of Azerbaijan's eight villages cannot be overstated. Most of Armenia's domestic and international passenger and freight transport is conducted via motorways that pass through or near these occupied villages, which raises the security and economic stakes for Armenia, complicating the negotiations over their return. Yet, Azerbaijan's claim on these villages also gives it significant leverage over future discussions concerning unlocking regional transport corridors. Such a combination of strategic significance and leverage can be counterproductive if the sides get locked into a cycle of violence and are unable to overcome their differences at the negotiation table. However, if properly handled, the return of these villages can serve as a catalyst for unlocking regional transport corridors and providing Armenia and Azerbaijan with a mutually beneficial, win-win solution that promotes stability and prosperity for both. In this vein, the next section looks at how the issue of the 8+1 villages has been dealt with in the negotiation process so far.

Negotiations: 8+1 is a Matter of Territorial Integrity, Not Border Delimitation

In a much-quoted December 2023 interview with *Berliner Zeitung*, Hikmat Hajiyeu, foreign policy advisor to the Azerbaijani president, suggested that the signing of the peace treaty with Armenia should not be a hostage to a much longer border delimitation process, and the two should run in parallel but separate formats.³

Building on this premise, this section advocates for a policy proposition that the return of the 8+1 villages should be viewed as part and parcel of mutual recognition of territorial integrity and sovereignty. Accordingly, Baku should strive to detach this issue from the delimitation talks and ensure that this matter is viewed as an integral and imperative component of a prospective peace agreement with Yerevan. The failure to reflect the issue of mutual return of these villages in the peace agreement risks locking Armenia and Azerbaijan into a vicious circle of increased militarization of their de facto borders and consequently, a higher risk of border clashes, further derailing the peace process.

The issue of the return of occupied Azerbaijani border and exclave villages emerged immediately after the end of the Second Karabakh War. Although the official text of the 10 November 2020 armistice agreement published by the Kremlin contained no references to the imminent Armenian withdrawal from these villages,⁴ an earlier version of the agreement circulated in the Russian media suggested that the issue had been discussed.⁵

Since the end of the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan has insisted on the return of all eight villages.⁶ In an interview with local TV stations in January 2024, President Ilham Aliyev demanded the unconditional return of four non-exclave border villages and the establishment of a joint expert group to discuss the modalities for the return of the other four exclave villages.⁷ Aliyev also said the displaced residents of the exclaves should be allowed to return and suggested in broad terms that “necessary conditions” should be granted to these residents. Baku reiterated these demands during the recent session of the joint commission on border delimitation on 7 March 2024, as subsequently confirmed by both sides.⁸

In contrast, Armenia’s negotiation position on the 8+1 villages, as with the peace talks overall, can be characterized as a policy of deliberate ambiguity. This policy aims at buying time at the talks, through various deflection and delay tactics, hoping that the balance of power and geopolitical climate might change in Armenia’s favor over time. Armenia’s deliberate ambiguity policy has resulted in markedly inconsistent and sometimes confusing positions, ranging from complete denial to muted acknowledgment of the problem of these villages.

Thus, speaking at the Armenian parliament in May 2022, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan essentially claimed that there were no Azerbaijani enclaves within Armenia.⁹ A year later, speaking at a press conference in May 2023, he admitted that the enclave villages of Gazakh district and Nakhchivan’s Karki village are not part of Armenia, while reiterating Armenia’s claim on the enclave village of Artsvashen within Azerbaijan.¹⁰ In June 2023, when asked specifically about his position on the Karki village, Pashinyan reiterated that he may be prepared to consider its return to Azerbaijan.¹¹

This shift in position resulted from the evolution of the talks since mid-2022, when mutual recognition of territorial integrity and sovereignty became a central principle of the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process. Following the Prague meeting in October 2022, the negotiations took on a qualitatively new dynamic, as an Armenian leader recognized—for the first time—Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity and sovereignty based on international borders.¹²

Pashinyan’s U-turns illustrate that Yerevan does not reject outright the idea of a return of the eight villages to Azerbaijan. However, Armenia’s current position

seems to be the maintenance of the status quo, and, potentially, formalizing it through a land swap deal. In a campaign speech in June 2021, Pashinyan expressed his position as follows: “Our logic is that the [formerly Armenian] enclave should be exchanged for [three formerly Azerbaijani] enclaves.”¹³ A year later, in May 2022, Secretary of Armenia’s National Security Council Armen Grigoryan reiterated this position, indicating that it enjoyed broader support within the Armenian government: “Our hope is that the possible solution is that the exclave of Armenia is left to Azerbaijan, the exclaves of Azerbaijan, which are in the territory of Armenia, are left to Armenia.”¹⁴ In February 2024, Pashinyan suggested leaving the issue of the 8+1 villages “to the very last stage,”¹⁵ thus framing the issue of occupied border and exclave villages as merely a problem of border delimitation, rather than a continued unlawful occupation of undisputed territories of a neighboring country. He repeated this thesis in rather convoluted terms in his 12 March press conference, saying the process of delimitation will determine “what is Armenia is Armenia, what is not Armenia is not Armenia, what is Azerbaijan is Azerbaijan.”¹⁶ This framing not only goes contrary to the commitment to resolve the conflict based on the mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, but also makes it more difficult to reach an agreement, as Armenia has increasingly sought to conflate the issue of return of the 8+1 villages with a lengthy border delimitation process.

Since May 2021, Yerevan has begun to accuse Azerbaijan of occupying Armenian territory. This claim has become a central argument in Yerevan’s deflection tactics and has been used inter alia as a propaganda trick to devalue Azerbaijani claims on the eight villages. Thus, speaking at a Cabinet meeting in February 2024, Pashinyan claimed Azerbaijan occupied “vital territories of 31 non-enclave villages” of Armenia, juxtaposing this allegation to Azerbaijan’s claim over four Azerbaijani exclave villages.¹⁷ Armenian media and officials have cited vastly different figures for Armenian territory allegedly occupied by Azerbaijan since the end of the Second Karabakh War, ranging from “at least 215 square km” (April 2023 claim)¹⁸ to 170 square kilometers (early-March 2024 claim)¹⁹ to 83 square kilometers (mid-March 2024 claim).²⁰ These claims are dubious, since Yerevan appears to consider areas within a non-delineated mountainous border terrain—exposed to Azerbaijani forces’ visual observation and fire control—as being under occupation.

However, it should be noted that in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War, both Armenia and Azerbaijan rushed to capture commanding heights along their non-delineated borders, digging trenches and installing fortifications along the way. Both countries have captured patches of land just inside each other’s borders. In the absence of tangible progress in the peace talks, disputes

over factual delimitation of boundaries and border tensions escalated, leading to deadly border clashes, particularly in May 2021 and September 2022.

Armenia and Azerbaijan must avoid repeating the patterns of conflict behavior that existed before 2020, when both sides sought to expand and advance their military positions towards each other to gain tactical advantage, and periodically tested each other's strength in localized skirmishes and tit-for-tat attacks. Such deterioration may provoke Azerbaijan to resort to forceful methods, further derailing the peace process. The recent call in March 2024 by an Azerbaijani pro-government MP to liberate the eight villages through a military operation is a case in point.²¹

A principled agreement on the return of the 8+1 villages within the framework of unambiguous mutual recognition of territorial integrity would significantly contribute to diffusing border tensions. It is therefore imperative that this issue is reflected in the text of the prospective peace agreement. To make this a reality, however, Armenia and Azerbaijan need to find creative solutions that would address the underlying security and economic concerns of each side linked to the potential transfer of these villages back to their rightful owner and the resulting impact on regional connectivity.

The following section explores how the return of 8+1 villages could contribute to achieving an agreement on unblocking regional communications, which in turn could pave the way for signing a peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Creative Modalities: Interweaving Peace, Coexistence, and Regional Connectivity

In January 2021, Azerbaijan established checkpoints along the border with Armenia in the Zangilan and Gubadly districts to assert its sovereignty over its newly de-occupied territories. This move resulted in Azerbaijan gaining control over the Goris-Kapan motorway, a segment of Armenia's strategic M2 north-south highway at the time, as well as portions of the Kapan-Shikahogh-Meghri motorway.

What followed represented a pivotal yet underappreciated development in the Armenian-Azerbaijani normalization process after the Second Karabakh War. Azerbaijan introduced border and customs checks on foreign-plated vehicles, mostly Iranian cargo trucks, while permitting the unhindered passage for Armenian citizens and goods through what could be termed as the Eyvazli and Gazanchi transit corridors, named after the nearby Azerbaijani villages.²² This decision—echoing the free transit arrangements in the 'Lachin corridor' at the time—was as much a strategic calculation as it was an expression of Baku's

commitment to peace. Baku hoped to set a precedent for a similar arrangement linking mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave, as outlined in the 2020 armistice agreement. The unique transit arrangement through Eyvazli and Gazanchi existed until November 2021, when, frustrated by stalled negotiations, Azerbaijan extended border and customs regulations to all Armenian transit. Consequently, Armenia discontinued using the Goris-Kapan Road, diverting all its north-south traffic to a longer and less convenient internal bypass road through Tatev only to avoid reciprocal obligations to Azerbaijan.²³

The failure to agree on a reciprocal transit arrangement back in 2021 was a major missed opportunity in the peace process. After this, Azerbaijan felt the need to scale up pressure on Armenia to achieve parity on the application of the right of passage within its own sovereign territory. This disagreement was the underlying cause of an entire chain of events, leading to Azerbaijan establishing a border checkpoint in Lachin in April 2023 and, finally, launching a military operation in September 2023 that ended the Armenian-installed separatist regime that remained in de facto control of parts of the Karabakh region and prompted the peaceful yet tragic exodus of its ethnic Armenian residents.

Now, having gained full control over its entire territory (except for its eight villages that remain under Armenian occupation), Azerbaijan has achieved a strategic parity with Armenia that previously was non-existent. This provides a basis for cautious optimism regarding the potential for peace and regional connectivity.²⁴ This final section contends that reaching an agreement on the return of the 8+1 villages is the key to unblocking transport communications, which is arguably the biggest obstacle to the signing of a peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

As explained earlier, the strategic significance of eight Azerbaijani villages remaining under Armenian control is immense. Baku should prudently leverage this factor in its negotiations with Yerevan regarding the transit corridor connecting mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave, popularly dubbed the ‘Zangezur Corridor.’

The term “corridor” has been needlessly politicized in Armenia as a euphemism for the loss of sovereignty and granting Azerbaijan extraterritorial rights over a part of its territory. Azerbaijan has consistently stated it has no claims to Armenian territory through which the road would pass, insisting only on the absence of Armenian border and customs controls for the purpose of achieving the “unimpeded” movement of its citizens, vehicles, and goods

between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, as per its reading of the 10 November 2020 armistice agreement.

This document does indeed contain elements of extraterritoriality that now seem increasingly disconnected from the realities on the ground. For Azerbaijan, this took the form of the ‘Lachin corridor,’ to be guarded by the Russian peacekeepers until 2025. For Armenia, it was expressed in the form of a commitment to provide Azerbaijan with “unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles and cargo” between Nakhchivan and mainland Azerbaijan under the control of the Russian FSB border guards already stationed in Armenia.

Having regained full control over the entirety of Karabakh, Azerbaijan has rendered the extraterritoriality along the Lachin road practically meaningless. It is highly likely that the de facto end of the extraterritorial arrangement in Lachin in April-September 2023 will be formalized by November 2025 with the end of the Russian peacekeeping contingent’s term of deployment. On the other hand, in Armenia, the loss of Karabakh not only led to massive frustration with its patron Russia for failing to take its side, but also engendered a new sense of emancipation from Russia’s security shackles. Considering that, unlike in the case of the Lachin corridor, no time limit had been stipulated for Armenia’s own corridor commitment under the 2020 armistice agreement, it is unlikely that the Armenian leadership and its public will agree to give Russia a perpetual power to control a portion of its territory to secure Azerbaijan’s transit—notwithstanding its commitment to do so in the 2020 document. Azerbaijan would be well-advised to avoid insisting on a Russian FSB presence along the ‘Zangezur corridor’ as a prerequisite for agreement. Doing so risks making its own legitimate demand for unimpeded transit a hostage to unrelated problems between Armenia and Russia. Instead, Azerbaijan should work with Armenia on devising bilateral arrangements based on free passage rights, while respecting the principles of sovereignty, equality, and reciprocity—as promulgated by Yerevan.²⁵

There are signs of positive movement in this direction. Thus, speaking at a conference at ADA University in December 2023, President Aliyev, for the first time, publicly mentioned the “Kaliningrad model” for transit between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan.²⁶ Soon thereafter, the president’s foreign policy aide Hikmet Hajiyevev further elaborated on the proposal in his aforementioned interview with the *Berliner Zeitung*. This new proposal indicates that Azerbaijan seeks common ground with Armenia based on bilateral arrangements and without necessarily relying on perpetual guarantees from Russia or any other external actor.

The “Kaliningrad model” refers to a visa-free transit for Russian citizens and customs-free procedure for Russian goods moving between mainland

Russia and its Kaliningrad exclave via Lithuanian territory, while respecting Lithuania's sovereign control over the designated road and railway infrastructure. Azerbaijan's recent proposal is based on a nuanced distinction between domestic and international movement: Armenia agrees to waive physical border and customs checks for the movement of citizens, vehicles, and cargo between mainland Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan exclave, while exercising full regulatory control for all other categories of movements where the origin or destination is a third country. Although there would be no physical passport and border checks for domestic transit to/from Nakhchivan, Armenia and Azerbaijan would agree on simplified electronic border and customs clearance procedures, similar to the so-called "Facilitated Transit Document" and electronic customs clearance systems that exist between Lithuania and Russia concerning the transit to/from Kaliningrad.

In return, Azerbaijan offers to open its borders with Armenia, granting Armenia access to all its road and rail infrastructure and based on the reciprocity principle, applying similar transit regulations for Armenia's international transit through Azerbaijan as Armenia would apply for Azerbaijan's international transit through Armenia. It should also be noted that the opening of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border would lead to the opening of Armenia's borders with Türkiye, Azerbaijan's closest ally, thus ending Armenia's three-decade-long isolation from regional connectivity and economic initiatives.

Thus, the opening of borders with Azerbaijan and Türkiye would enable Armenia to participate in the Middle Corridor (see Map 3, below) and thus play a role in facilitating the movement of goods between Europe and China. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has raised the significance of the Middle Corridor, as many European operators opted not to receive or send goods across Russian territory.²⁷ The shutdown of the Suez Canal in March 2021 due to a container ship running aground and, more recently, the Houthi attacks on (largely) Western ships in the Red Sea since February 2024 further highlight the growing strategic significance and economic promise of the Middle Corridor.²⁸ This is a historic opportunity for Armenia to become part of a strategic regional transport and trade system that Yerevan cannot afford to miss.

Bilateral normalization will also help both Armenia and Azerbaijan to play larger and complementary roles in the further development of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which aims to connect India and Iran with Russia and European markets. Recently, Yerevan has placed greater emphasis on this corridor, viewing it as part of a strategy of rapprochement with both Delhi and Tehran.²⁹ However, it is important to note that segments of Armenia's strategic M2 and M16/H26 highways—which Armenia wants to see as integral parts of the INSTC—pass through Azerbaijan's de jure territory. As such,

the long-term security and commercial viability of the Armenian branch of this corridor depends on Armenia's good neighborly relations with Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan could adopt a proactive approach by using the return of the eight villages as both leverage and an incentive for moving forward with the peace talks and unblocking regional communications. Thus, in return for an agreement based on a "Kaliningrad model," Baku could offer Armenia a perpetual, free, and unimpeded transit through segments of Armenia's M2 and M16/H26 highways that traverse its de jure territory. This gesture would help alleviate Armenia's concerns over relinquishing control of these Azerbaijani villages and the potential adverse impacts on its domestic and international transport communications. Armenia could reciprocate by giving similar transit rights to Azerbaijani citizens, vehicles, and cargo passing through Armenia's Artsvashen exclave, thus ensuring a continued connection with Azerbaijan's border villages in the Gedabey district (the so-called "Shinikh mahali"). Such a quid pro quo deal would bind the economic interests of Armenia and Azerbaijan, improve the lives of their border communities, and, thus, help bring about a lasting and sustainable peace between the two neighboring states.

In conclusion, this section underscores that achieving peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan relies on reaching an agreement to unblock regional communications, which, in turn, is contingent upon the return of the 8+1 villages and the establishment of reciprocal mechanisms ensuring fair and unimpeded transit rights. Such an agreement would not only signify a commitment to peaceful coexistence but also lay the groundwork for enhanced political, security, and economic cooperation between the two countries. Armenia and Azerbaijan must seize this opportunity to sign a peace agreement based on mutual recognition of their territorial integrity and sovereignty, the return of 8+1 villages, and unblocking regional communications.

Map 1: Occupied exclave and border villages in the Gazakh district.



Source: Tabib Huseynov

Map 2: The exclave of Karki and Armenia's key motorways in Syunik (Zangezur)



Source: Tabib Huseynov

Map 3: The Middle Corridor among trade corridors connecting Europe and Asia



Source: World Bank (2023). “Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030”. Washington, DC: World Bank.

ENDNOTES

¹ The border village of Günnüt in Nakhchivan can also be considered as being partly occupied, as it lies within the “grey zone” between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. In a bloodless operation in May 2018, Azerbaijan advanced its positions forward, regaining control over some of the village’s territory. For further details, see: “Azerbaijan ‘Makes Territorial Gains’ in Nakhchivan,” *OC Media*, 12 June 2018, <https://oc-media.org/azerbaijan-makes-territorial-gains-in-nakhchivan>.

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