

Armenia-Azerbaijan Border Delimitation

Ensuring Regional Security, Stability, and Development

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One of the key features of national sovereignty is the existence of a defined state territory and borders. A defined state border is not only one of the fundamental factors for a country's security, but it is also important for developing good relations with its neighbors by increasing trust and encouraging cooperation.

Therefore, the agreement reached during the eighth meeting of the Armenia-Azerbaijan [border commission](#) at the Qazakh-Ijevan border crossing area represents a significant milestone for both countries as they embark on the border delimitation/demarcation process. This agreement involves the [return](#) of parts of four non-enclave villages of the Qazakh district to Azerbaijan, which were occupied by Armenian armed forces between 1990 and 1992.

Thus, at the first stage of the border delimitation process, the two state parties preliminary agreed on the crossing of the border in the sections between the villages of Baghanis (Armenia)-Baghanis Ayrym (Azerbaijan), Voskepar (Armenia)-AshagiAskipara (Azerbaijan), Kirants (Armenia)-Kheyrimli (Azerbaijan), Berkaber (Armenia)-Gizilhajili (Azerbaijan).

Baku and Yerevan agreed that the border determination process should be based on the [Alma Ata Declaration](#), signed just as the Soviet Union was imploding—i.e., on 21 December 1991—and agreed to deploy their respective state border service officers simultaneously and in parallel on the agreed sections of the border.

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During the ninth meeting of the Azerbaijani and Armenian border commissions on 15 May 2024, a [protocol](#) was signed to demarcate the Qazakh-Tavush section of the border between the two countries. The parties announced that this delimitation was based on the 1976 maps of the General Staff of the USSR armed forces (one reason for doing so is that these maps held de jure legal status at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse). During a subsequent cabinet meeting, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan [called](#) the protocol signed between the border commissions a great success. He also noted that Armenia has an officially delimited border for the first time since it regained its independence, and that this will significantly increase the level of security and stability along the entire Armenia-Azerbaijan border.

The border commission, led by Azerbaijani Deputy Prime Minister Shahin Mustafayev and Armenian Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigoryan, produced constructive results, increasing hopes in both countries and beyond that the parties will be able to solve their problems through bilateral negotiations.

During a recent [conference](#) at ADA University, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the crucial role played by the constructive approach of the Armenian side during the negotiation process in reaching the decision: “With respect to the border delimitation, Azerbaijan and Armenia behave in a very constructive way. What is seen is only a part. It is a result, but this result is based on regular contacts and positive dynamics.”

The agreement reached between the parties was evaluated as a positive step towards the normalization of Azerbaijan-Armenia relations by both international organizations and countries such as the U.S., several EU member states, and Türkiye. This is particularly significant because some political commentators in Armenia have opposed the return of these four villages, which had been occupied by Armenia during the First Karabakh War. They have labeled Azerbaijan's rightful demand as a ‘land grab’ and [suggested](#) that Armenia should appeal to various countries and international bodies such as the UN, OSCE, Russia, Iran, the U.S., EU member states, and India, asserting that Azerbaijan's actions are contrary to international law.

Following the agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia regarding the return of four villages, protests that began in the Tavush region's Voskepar, Noyamberyan, and Kirants villages [spread](#) to the capital, Yerevan. Archbishop Bagrat (Galstanyan) of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the primate of the Diocese of Tavush, organized a large rally on 9 May 2024 in Republic Square, Yerevan, which was attended by nearly 30,000 people.

Participation in the protests, also supported by some elements of the Armenian opposition, was significantly lower on other days. This decline was attributed to the lack of a specific agenda and concrete solutions to address the situation that had caused public discontent. As a result, the protests seem likely to fade away. Some analysts rightly [consider](#) the 9 May 2024 protest as the largest demonstration against Pashinyan since he

came to power in 2018 and emphasize that the situation may become difficult for him if a leader with whom the public can sympathize [emerges](#).

Russian Peacekeepers Withdraw from Karabakh

Another recent development was the 17 April 2024 agreement between Azerbaijan and Russia for the latter's peacekeeping troops—deployed in parts of Karabakh after the Second Karabakh War—to withdraw completely from the territory ahead of the 10 November 2025 deadline. This agreement between the leaders of Russia and Azerbaijan had a surprising impact on both Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as on international actors.

Following the agreement, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov [said](#) in an interview with the Russian state channel that there was no need for Russian peacekeepers to stay in Karabakh in an environment where geopolitical realities in the region have changed.

After this development, the official [closing](#) ceremony of the Turkish-Russian Joint Monitoring Center took place in Aghdam on 26 April 2024. The Russian peacekeepers' departure was [ceremonially completed](#) on 15 May 2024.

In response to a question posed during the aforementioned conference at ADA University, Aliyev indicated that during the negotiations that ended the Second Karabakh War, one of the aspects that posed the greatest challenge for Baku was related to the presence of Russian peacekeepers. In Aliyev's [words](#): “The item regarding Russian peacekeepers was presented, and Armenia's position was that there should be no time limit for them. In other words, they should stay forever. We could not agree with that. We insisted that there should be a time limit. That was one of the most difficult parts where both sides could not agree. For us, it was one of the most principal parts of the statement and our position was that if we do not agree on that, there'll be no statement and the war would continue. [...] So, a five-year term with the possibility of extension if neither side objects was actually the starting point of the withdrawal of [the Russian] troops.”

When Russian peacekeepers were deployed in Karabakh, some political commentators were confident that the Russian army would not leave the region. Some of them even wrongfully [opined](#) that Russia would turn Karabakh into South Ossetia, without taking into account the physical geography of the region, the changing dynamics in the region, and Türkiye's influence.

The agreement reached between Russia and Azerbaijan without military opposition and political crisis stands as a successful demonstration of the country's foreign policy.

Furthermore, this marks the first time since the establishment of the Republic of Azerbaijan that, as Vasif Huseynov [has written](#), the country “enjoys complete

sovereignty over all its territories without any foreign troops present” (it also represents the “first time that Russian armed units have ever left the territory of a post-Soviet state voluntarily and prematurely”).

Border Demarcation and State Security: The Central Asian Experience

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the political map of Europe and Asia changed significantly, and one of the main issues faced by the 15 countries that gained (or, in some cases, regained) independence was to resolve territorial problems with their neighbors and draw borders.

The most important difficulties in the process of establishing official state borders were the ethnic conflicts that emerged in post-Soviet countries. Similar problems were experienced between the Central Asian countries, which became the center of attention of the great powers. The increasing importance of the region has revealed the necessity of these countries to determine their borders, ensure their security and, in turn, develop their respective economies.

Although the issue of determining borders in these countries was negotiated (in principle) in the early 1990s (the 21 December 1991 [Alma-Ata Declaration](#)), the practical process started, for the most part, in the early 2000s. The increasing Taliban threat, the emergence of religious extremist groups in some Central Asian countries, the location of the region close to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and drug smuggling through the borders have underscored the critical importance of ensuring border security.

The process of delimitation of the [Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan](#) border started in the early 2000s, and by 2001, 96 percent of the state borders had been defined. Yet three sections remained controversial: Bagyzh village in Kazakhstan’s Turkistan region, the former Arnasai village, and the Uzbek village of Nsan along with their surrounding areas. Although border delimitation was finalized in September 2002, it wasn’t until an [agreement](#) was signed in 2022 that these unresolved issues were ultimately settled. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which successfully carried out the delimitation and demarcation works, finally [completed](#) this process in 2023, after 19 years of work and more than 100 meetings between the border commissions.

The [Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan](#) border is considered one of the most problematic in the post-Soviet space. On 26 February 2001, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan adopted a memorandum on the legal regulation of delimitation of their mutual state borders, but it was not ratified. The ongoing territorial disputes between the parties, border tensions, and the use of different maps in the border determination process have [complicated](#) the task of establishing agreed state borders.

Additionally, Uzbekistan started laying mines along its border with both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2000, citing concerns about the infiltration of religious extremists from the Tajik and Kyrgyz mountains. This posed a significant threat to the lives of border residents and those engaged in animal husbandry, resulting in numerous [casualties](#), including children. Then, at a meeting of the OSCE held in Vienna in June 2004, Uzbekistan [announced](#) its readiness to clear the mines along its borders. In 2005, the clearing of mines on the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border was [completed](#).

After Shavkat Mirziyoyev was elected President of Uzbekistan in December 2016, he affirmed the importance of border security and open borders in ensuring the full realization of the country's trade and industrial potential. Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations improved and both parties showed a constructive attitude to solve the border problems. Thus, in September 2017, a border [agreement](#) was reached between the parties, delineating a significant portion of the border. By November 2022, Bishkek and Tashkent had both [ratified](#) a definitive treaty on this aspect of the bilateral relationship, and in May 2023, they [approved](#) the border demarcations.

Such positive developments have, of course, positively reflected on the bilateral trade relations of these countries, leading to an increase in trade volumes. In 2020, Kazakhstan became Uzbekistan's [third](#) largest trading partner after Russia and China. This [remains](#) the case at present.

Economic and cultural ties between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are also strengthening. On 3 May 2024, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan held the [latest meeting](#) of their Joint Intergovernmental Commission on Bilateral Cooperation, aiming to enhance political dialogue, which aims to further intensify trade and economic relations whilst advancing major joint projects across various sectors.

With the start of the Ukraine-Russia war, the importance of the countries that make up the core [Silk Road region](#) has increased in terms of (1) ensuring the energy security of the EU and its member states, as well as the countries of the Western Balkans and Türkiye and (2) contributing to the diversification of international transportation connectivity. Therefore, both from the perspective of the countries of the region and the external powers with geopolitical and geoeconomic interests therein, it is more significant than ever to secure borders, eliminate existing border problems with neighbors, and reduce risks in this regard.

Border Demarcation and State Security: The Georgian Experience

Georgia is taking steps in this direction too. Thus, during his visit to Armenia, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze [emphasized](#) that the Georgia-Armenia border delimitation work should be restarted. (The Georgian-Armenian Border Determination Commission was established in 1994 but became operational in 1996. Despite this, the work of the border commission is progressing slowly.)

Nikoloz Samkharadze, an assistant professor at Tbilisi State University's Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, noted in his [academic article](#) that Georgia's lack of seriousness regarding border demarcation has had an impact. Georgia's core strategic documents like the National Security Concept, the Foreign Policy Strategy, and the Threat Assessment do not highlight the importance of border delimitation. The absence of this issue in the country's most important strategic documents suggests that border delimitation is not considered a priority by the state.

Only the 2008 Georgian Border Management Strategy emphasizes the vital importance of the foregoing; indeed, not only does it indicate the negative effects of the foregoing on border management, but it also puts it in the context of both the countries' and the region's political, economic, and social stability.

According to Samkharadze's interviews with the border commission in the same article, one of the reasons why the border delimitation process of the two countries has been slow is that Armenia has demanded compensation for Armenian territory that had been transferred to Georgia between 1929 and 1935.

Smuggling problems may sometimes arise on the Armenia-Georgia border, too. At the same time, various reports show that illegal immigrants use Georgia as a corridor. Such and similar [reports](#) also emphasize that the Georgian border police do not provide detailed information to the public, and that although there are many real illegal immigrants, the numbers shared publicly are much less.

Border Demarcation as a Confidence-Building Measure

Border demarcation can play a constructive role in the development of bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia and as a confidence-building mechanism through cooperation between the parties. In this process, tensions should not be particularly high, and the language used by the parties should be aimed at relieving the concerns of people living in border regions.

Azerbaijan and Armenia can benefit from the experience of Central Asian countries in facilitating the border demarcation process, creating confidence-building mechanisms, and encouraging trade between people living on the border. The two-day [meeting](#) of the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia in Almaty on 10-11 May 2024 can be important for advancing relations within the Silk Road region and can also be helpful with advancing the border demarcation process.

The Importance of Reviving Past Experiences for Framing Future Relationships

During the Soviet years, the people of the Qazakh and Tavush regions had frequent trade relations. In fact, in order to solve the water problem of the residents of Tavush's Berkaber and Qazakh's Mazam villages, which are located very close to each other, in the

1970's the authorities built the [Joghaz](#) water reservoir. In the construction of this water reservoir, which solved the water problem of nearly 30 villages and made a significant contribution to agriculture, Azerbaijanis and Armenians worked together. However, the war destroyed the potential of this reservoir.

Before the Second Karabakh War, the tension at the border was higher; whereas now, the residents of Berkaber say that there are no shootings and some of the residents even say that safety would [improve](#) if Azerbaijanis return to the (abandoned) Gizilhajili village (as noted above, this village in Azerbaijan had been occupied by Armenia until a few days ago).

During the decades-long conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, tensions have been high on the Qazakh-Tavush border, now with the delimitation of the border in this geography and the anticipated return of the Azerbaijani population, there is a chance to improve relations between both peoples with joint efforts. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has [emphasized](#) that there is a chance to work in this direction: "Our idea is that you should not say, 'Wow, Azerbaijan is 50 meters away,' but say, 'Wow, it's good that Azerbaijan is 50 meters away, we will trade there, we will build an economy there. We can even build a checkpoint, let cars come and go, [and] pay the Republic of Armenia.'"

However, there are concerns among Azerbaijanis from these villages. During my research, I met displaced persons from seven villages in Qazakh. They emphasized that their trade and personal relations with people in neighboring Armenian villages had been good before the First Karabakh War. Cooperation between the border villages of the two countries has contributed to the development of agriculture and animal husbandry in both localities. Although many people I talked to are looking forward to the day when they will return to their villages, they may encounter problems from the other side at the border in terms of security. Those who say they will never trust the other side again believe that relations can never return to how they were before the war.

In this respect, British journalist and analyst Onnik James Krikorian [emphasizes](#) that it is important that civil society support the border delimitation process, for it is a sad reality that some individuals and organizations self-identified as belonging to Armenia's civil society ignore recent positive developments and do not seem to want to welcome the likely peace agreement. This is being [noticed](#); and it should not be forgotten.

After decades of conflict, every contribution to building trust is invaluable, and people should strive to facilitate rather than hinder this historic progress.