

France and the South Caucasus: From the Minsk Group to Militarization of Armenia

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France's evolving engagement in the South Caucasus traces a path from neutral mediation to overt alignment. Once a co-chair of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, France now positions itself as Armenia's leading Western supporter following the Second Karabakh War in 2020. This article begins by assessing France's role in the Minsk Group framework and how its collapse reconfigured the region's diplomatic architecture. It then situates France's posture within broader historical patterns, from 19th-century rivalry with the British and Russian Empires to its involvement in the Armenian Question and protectorate diplomacy. Finally, it examines France's post-2020 militarization of its Armenian partnership, including arms transfers, defence agreements, and a departure from mediation toward open alignment. The analysis considers the strategic and normative stakes of this shift: France's pursuit of ostensible moral leadership, the risks of alienating Türkiye and Azerbaijan, tensions with EU and NATO partners, and the limits of its capacity to serve as a guarantor. France's wager in the South Caucasus reveals the friction between its diplomatic tradition and its emerging role as a security actor on a contested frontier.

Keywords: Armenia, France, Azerbaijan, Karabakh region, militarization, Minsk Group



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Introduction

France has long defined itself as a diplomatic power animated by universal values, strategic autonomy, and cultural affinity with the Francophone world. In the South Caucasus, this self-image found expression through decades of participation in multilateral diplomacy and cautious mediation. The aftermath of the Second Karabakh War in 2020, however, triggered a far-reaching shift.¹ France has moved toward a posture of open alignment with Armenia, stepping into a security vacuum left by Russia's retrenchment and the erosion of the OSCE framework. This evolution reveals more than a change in tactics. It reflects the friction between France's post-Gaullist aspiration to act independently on the world stage and the constraints of its alliance structures and regional credibility. France has chosen to supply Armenia with arms, champion Armenia in international forums, and openly question Azerbaijan's conduct.² This more partisan policy has altered France's relationship with Armenia and also redefined its profile in a region where it had long depended upon multilateral formats. The OSCE Minsk Group, once central to France's engagement, now stands as a marker of an earlier era, in which French neutrality was both a strategic principle and a constraint on action.

This article poses the research question: *How and why has France transformed its posture in the South Caucasus from neutral mediation under the OSCE Minsk Group to active militarization of its bilateral relationship with Armenia?* In reply, the article traces France's trajectory through institutional, historical, and strategic dimensions, assessing both motives and consequences. The analysis proceeds in four parts. First, it examines France's role in the Minsk Group and the collapse of that framework. Second, it situates France's evolving engagement within a longer arc of French diplomatic traditions in the region. Third, it investigates the post-2020 shift toward defence cooperation and its concrete manifestations. Finally, it evaluates the broader geopolitical implications of France's alignment with Armenia for regional stability and for France's own position within Western alliances.

1 Cutler, R.M., "The Minsk Group is Meaningless", *Foreign Policy*, July 23, 2021, Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/23/armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-osce-minsk-group-meaningless/> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

2 Eurasianet, *Armenia–Azerbaijan: Macron stirring things up in the Caucasus*, March 6, 2024, Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-azerbaijan-macron-stirring-things-up-in-the-caucasus> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

France and the OSCE Minsk Group

Origins and Structure of the Minsk Group

The Minsk Group was formed in 1992 by the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE, later OSCE) to mediate the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. It was initially conceived as a platform for negotiations, with a view to an eventual peace treaty to be signed in Minsk (Belarus). However, under the structure formalized between 1994 and 1997, it developed into a long-term forum dominated by the co-chairmanship of France, Russia, and the United States.

Each co-chair brought its own interests: France emphasized its European diplomatic profile and diaspora connections; the United States prioritized regional stability while navigating domestic lobbying; and Russia leveraged its defence ties to both parties in the conflict. Though various proposals emerged – including the 1997 ‘package deal’ and the Madrid Principles in the late 2000s – none produced agreement on status for the Karabakh region, force withdrawal, or the return of internally displaced persons.³

Besides the three co-chairs and the two principal parties of the conflict, the Minsk Group actually comprised six other states (Belarus, Finland, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Türkiye) plus the *troika* of the OSCE chairmanship (past, current, and incoming chairs). In practice, however, the broader Minsk Group’s role quickly diminished as its co-chairs monopolized the diplomacy. By 2020, the Minsk process was widely seen as stagnant. On the procedural level, it preserved dialogue but, reflecting the structural limitations of externally driven mediation, it had failed to deliver a political solution.

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France’s Engagement: Between Mediation and Partisanship

France presented itself, in the Minsk Group context, as a neutral co-chair alongside the United States and Russia. Its public posture, however, signalled increasing alignment with Armenia in practice. This evolution became explicit during and after the 2020 Second

³ Cutler, R.M., “The Minsk Group is Meaningless”, *op. cit.*

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Karabakh War. French parliamentary resolutions – by the Senate on November 25, 2020, and the National Assembly eight days later – endorsed recognition of the illegal regime established by Armenia in the formerly-occupied territories of Azerbaijan. France’s President, Emmanuel Macron, openly criticized Azerbaijan’s actions, warning against a “reconquest” and declaring that France would “play its role”. These statements, a decisive breach of co-chair neutrality, effectively sidelined France from any future Minsk-led mediation and also brought into question the very effectiveness of the Minsk Group co-chairmanship.⁴

The erosion of France’s credibility also reflected deeper political and societal currents. The Armenian cause has a long-standing resonance in French domestic politics, bolstered there by an influential diaspora and a public perception of Armenia as a ‘threatened democracy’. This cultural affinity has translated into political pressure across party lines, encouraging policymakers to take more assertive pro-Armenian stances.

Such dynamics undermined the Minsk Group’s premise of balanced mediation. France’s increasingly public support for Armenia drew criticism even from its European partners (particularly Germany, Hungary, and Italy), which were fearful of destabilization. France’s actions, however, were not merely symbolic. They foreshadowed a broader shift in French policy from mediation to strategic alignment with Armenia. This became especially clear as Russia’s influence in the South Caucasus waned and Western actors other than France began to readjust their roles in the region.

France’s trajectory within the Minsk Group framework shows the difficulty of maintaining diplomatic neutrality when domestic political narratives impose themselves on complex geopolitical conflicts. Institutionally, France remained a co-chair, but its evident partisanship rendered the position hollow. The post-2020 realignment, covered further below, was already latent in France’s rhetorical and political choices during the final years of the Minsk Group’s relevance.

4 Cutler, R.M., “The Second Karabakh War and Western Strategic Thinking”, *The Russia File*, January 5, 2021, Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/second-karabakh-war-and-western-strategic-thinking> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

The Minsk Group's Decline and the Emergence of Alternative Mediation Forums

Azerbaijan's victory in the 2020 Second Karabakh War was conditioned, *inter alia*, by the Minsk Group's ineffectiveness. Marginalizing the co-chair format, Russia unilaterally brokered the termination of the war between the belligerents and deployed peacekeeping forces to the Karabakh region without any OSCE involvement. Then, after the launch of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, France and the U.S. ceased contact with Russia in the Minsk Group framework. This effectively dissolved the mechanism *de facto*, although it still exists *de jure*. Indeed, Armenia's recognition of the Karabakh region as part of Azerbaijan, at the European Political Community summit in Chişinău (Moldova) on June 1, 2023, once again nullified the Minsk Group's founding premise. By 2024, Russia had formally acknowledged the Group's obsolescence.⁵

The resulting diplomatic vacuum enabled new mediation tracks. The erstwhile European Council President, Charles Michel, led Brussels-based negotiations in 2022, hosting back-to-back summits between Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. These efforts emphasized connectivity, border demarcation, and humanitarian issues, altogether avoiding any OSCE framework.⁶ The U.S. administration also intensified bilateral diplomacy, with then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken convening parallel talks. The Minsk Group's exclusion from all such efforts confirmed its irrelevance.⁷

France aligned with this shift but sought to retain an active role. In October 2022, President Emmanuel Macron joined Charles Michel in a four-party meeting in Prague, including Armenia and Azerbaijan, that produced a joint statement and facilitated the deployment of the EU's

5 Mid.ru, *Brifing ofitsialnogo predstavatelya MID Rossii M.V.Zakharovoy*, Moscow, December 25, 2024, Available at: https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1989140/#%D0%BE20 (Accessed: May 25, 2025).

6 Cutler, R.M., "Breakthrough in Azerbaijani-Armenian Peace Negotiations?", *Eurasia Review*, December 11, 2023, Available at: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/11122023-breakthrough-in-azerbaijani-armenian-peace-negotiations-analysis/> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

7 Cutler, R.M., "The U.S. Role in International Mediation of the South Caucasus Peace Process", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, June 26, 2023, Available at: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13759-the-us-role-in-international-mediation-of-the-south-caucasus-peace-process.html> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

border monitoring mission to Armenia. France strongly advocated for this mission, but its leverage was constrained by tense relations with Azerbaijan, which attempted to exclude it from further mediation. Azerbaijan acquiesced in the deployment of the EU observer mission (for a period of two months only) but, citing perceived bias, it resisted a prominent French role there.⁸

Russia, meanwhile, hosted its own negotiations, framing itself as the indispensable power broker. The mediation space thus became bifurcated, with the EU and the U.S. on one track, and Russia on another. France, no longer anchored by the Minsk Group framework, operated through the EU and through bilateral diplomacy.

By late 2023, with the Minsk Group's disintegration finally becoming undeniable, France executed a strategic pivot. No longer confined to procedural mediation, France redirected its South Caucasus policy towards defence cooperation with Armenia. The historical and strategic foundations for this shift define France's re-entry, by other means, into the regional power equation.

France's Historical Diplomatic Patterns in the South Caucasus

France vs. Britain and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th Century

France's interest in the South Caucasus developed in the context of 19th-century great-power rivalry over Ottoman decline (particularly from the 1820s onward) and Tsarist Russian expansion (accelerating after the Russo-Persian wars and solidified by the 1860s). Lacking territorial holdings in the region, France nevertheless sought influence in adjacent Ottoman and Persian domains. There, its ambitions frequently collided with those of the British Empire. The Caucasus figured indirectly in the so-called 'Eastern Question', where consecutive French political regimes competed with the British Empire not only for religious patronage over Christian minorities – notably the Armenians – but also for broader strategic influence through access to commercial routes and imperial corridors.

8 Nersisyan, L., and Melkonian, S., "Escaping Russia's Backyard: Armenia's Strategic Defense Shift", *War on the Rocks*, November 5, 2024, Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2024/11/escaping-russias-backyard-armenias-strategic-defense-shift/> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

The Crimean War (1853–1856) temporarily aligned France and Great Britain against Russia. While the principal fighting occurred elsewhere than the Caucasus, both powers encouraged resistance amongst highland Caucasus peoples to divert Tsarist military forces and attention from the main theatres of war.⁹ This episode established the Caucasus as a symbolically charged, albeit secondary, theatre of imperial competition. The subsequent deterioration in Franco-British relations, exemplified by the Fashoda Incident (1898), reinforced France’s strategic instinct to oppose Britain’s influence globally. This tendency sometimes extended to the South Caucasus, where Britain’s early dominance in Azerbaijan’s oil sector prefigured its later investments in Azerbaijani energy infrastructure. France’s policymakers have occasionally interpreted engagement in Armenia as a corrective to this asymmetry.¹⁰

Both ideological and material elements shaped France’s relations with the Ottoman Empire. While the Franco-Ottoman Capitulations of 1535 officially recognized France as the protector of Catholic communities in the Ottoman Empire, France also extended informal cultural and educational patronage to Armenians, primarily of the Armenian Apostolic Church but also including Armenian Catholics. With this leverage, France deepened its influence in the Ottoman realm through investments, finance, and infrastructure. These patterns persisted across successive expansions of France’s colonial control in North Africa and the Levant (principally present-day Lebanon and Syria), often provoking British countermoves.

Although the 1904 Entente Cordiale (a series of agreements signed between Britain and France) nominally resolved colonial tensions, strategic instincts remained intact. France’s military support for Armenian auxiliary volunteer military forces under French command – often referred to as the Armenian Legion – in Kilikya (Cilicia) after World War I, while short-lived, illustrated a continuing effort to convert patronage into geopolitical influence. The legacy of such policies is evident in France’s present-day approach to the broader Turco-Caucasian region.

9 Yalanuzyan, M., “The 1853–1856 Crimean War and Deep Contradictions in the International Order”, *EVN Report*, July 18, 2022, Available at: <https://evnreport.com/raw-unfiltered/the-1853-1856-crimean-war-and-deep-contradictions-in-the-international-order/> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

10 Cutler, R.M., “What are France’s Motives in the South Caucasus?”, *Geopolitical Monitor*, December 5, 2023, Available at: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/what-are-frances-motives-in-the-south-caucasus/> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

France–Russia Alignment and the Armenian Question

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the interests of France and Russia converged on the diplomatic debate over the protection and rights of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, sometimes called the Armenian Question. Although the two of them had mutually distinct motives, the Franco-Russian Alliance (1894) reinforced their shared opposition to Ottoman hegemony. The French press and civil society decried, on humanitarian grounds, purported violence against Armenians, while Russia leveraged its geographic proximity and its own imperial ambitions to pressure the then Sultans – Abdul Hamid II (1876–1909) and his successor Mehmed V (1909–1918). While both powers demanded reform, Russia sought strategic leverage in Eastern Anatolia, whereas France, lacking territorial ambitions, responded to the imperatives of its own public opinion.

France’s influence on Armenian political culture was substantial. French republican ideals and revolutionary thought informed the Armenian intelligentsia, many of whom studied in Paris or attended French-supported schools in the cities of the late Ottoman Empire. The cultural diffusion of French ideas deepened mutual Franco-Armenian sympathies and fostered expectations of protection and alliance.

Although France joined Great Britain and Russia in diplomatic protests during the 1890s, its material capacity to intervene was limited. Its humanitarian engagement increased in the years leading up to World War I and peaked during the war. France evacuated civilians from Musa Dagh (in the Hatay Province of Türkiye) and organized the Armenian Legion to fight under French command. France’s postwar occupation of Kilikya, and its initial support for Armenian autonomy there, briefly raised hopes for a protected Armenian entity. However, France’s geopolitical accommodation with Türkiye ended this initiative by 1921, triggering a complex legacy of gratitude and betrayal.¹¹

France’s symbolic solidarity, paired nevertheless with strategic constraint, has shaped French-Armenian relations and still informs perceptions in Armenia. France remains a cultural and diplomatic ally, moderated by the need to coordinate with Russia.

11 Yegavian, T., “French-Armenian Relations: Past and Present”, *EVN Report*, November 30, 2021, Available at: <https://evnreport.com/politics/french-armenian-relations-past-and-present/> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

Post-Colonial Strategy and France's Diplomatic Playbook

France's approach to the South Caucasus reflects its broader post-colonial strategy. This strategy combines influence through soft power, selective hard power, moral positioning, and finely tuned engagement with small states. Though the South Caucasus was never part of the French Empire, France applies the same diplomatic tools there that it uses in West Africa, the Levant, and the rest of the Francophone world.

The anchor of this model is cultural diplomacy. France promotes the French language and institutions in Armenia, including the Francophone University and the Lycée Français Anatole France, and extensive cultural outreach. Armenia is, moreover, a member of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie. The cultivation of the elite of Armenia, ties with the diaspora, and shared historical sympathies reinforce a civil-society-based influence model consistent with France's approach in Lebanon and Senegal.

The second fundament is moral advocacy. France puts itself forward as a mediator and defender of humanitarian principles. Thus, it positioned itself prominently in the erstwhile Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict under the OSCE Minsk Group, selectively denouncing some human-rights violations but not others. Rooted in universalist rhetoric, this sort of framing doubles as a mechanism for strategic entry into regional crises.¹² Former President of France Nicholas Sarkozy's mediation in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war followed the same pattern of using vocal neutrality as an instrument for strategic positioning.¹³

Although France has historically been militarily absent from the South Caucasus, it is now leveraging arms sales and defence cooperation with Armenia to enhance its role. This mirrors its practices in the Sahel and

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12 Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Government of France, "Influence par le droit: Stratégie de la France, 2023–2028," March 21, 2023, Available at: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/strategie_d_influence_par_le_droit_2023-2028_cle822128.pdf (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

13 Gueguen, A., "La médiation comme outil de maintien de la paix et de la sécurité internationale", Statement to the UN Security Council by the Deputy Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations, August 29, 2018, Available at: <https://onu.delegfrance.org/La-mediation-comme-outil-de-maintient-de-la-paix-et-de-la-securite> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

Middle East, where rhetorical idealism is matched by material support. In the Gaullist tradition, France also seeks to assert a certain autonomy in its foreign policy conduct. Its alignment with Armenia distinguishes it within the EU, where many partners prioritize their energy cooperation with Azerbaijan. Yet France has generally sought to maintain a strategic ambiguity reminiscent of 19th-century balancing tactics, holding itself aloof from Azerbaijan's capacity for strategic hedging and manoeuvring amongst foreign powers.

Finally, the logic of small-state patronage persists. As with the Maronites or Kurds, France positions Armenia as a moral client. This tactic can extend French influence, but it also risks overextension. France's posture in the South Caucasus continues to be shaped by the legacy of moral advocacy, regional competition, and the ambition to retain a global role as an intermediate power.

France and the New Militarization of Armenia

From Diplomacy to Defence: France's Shift Post-2020

The collapse of Armenia's defence capability and foreign policy performance, first in the 2020 Second Karabakh War and finally in 2023, exposed Armenia's misperceptions about Russia's security guarantees, which did not extend to the Armenian-occupied territories of Azerbaijan. With its attention and resources absorbed by Ukraine, Russia maintained the passivity of its peacekeeping forces during Azerbaijan's September 2023 anti-terror measures against the remnants of Armenia's armed forces, still in the Karabakh region three years after the 2020 Trilateral Statement ending the Second Karabakh War. Armenia, in response, adjusted its strategic alignment and France, in this context, transitioned from a position of rhetorical advocacy to direct defence cooperation with Armenia.

President Emmanuel Macron, previously outspoken during the 2020 conflict, intensified and amplified his accusations against Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Within Western institutions, France took the pro-Armenian lead. It championed the EU monitoring missions, elevated the question of the Lachin road at the UN, and framed Azerbaijan's actions in negative humanitarian terms. French officials, particularly former Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, cast these diplomatic

efforts as a principled defence of international norms. France’s response included the provision of advanced air defence systems and training programmes, marking a decisive break with its prior role as mediator.¹⁴ These developments are detailed further in the next section.

This policy contrasts markedly with the cautious posture evinced by the EU and NATO, which prioritize neutrality, energy interests, and alliance cohesion. France took advantage of the altered situation to justify a more assertive stance by leveraging its diaspora politics and self-asserted moral leadership.¹⁵ For this, it accepted the diplomatic costs, as it complicated the EU’s mediating role and risked friction with Türkiye and Azerbaijan.

France’s shift was crystallized when Macron called the migration of Armenians from the Karabakh region to Armenia in 2023 a “tragedy” and, aligning with Armenia’s discourse, assigned responsibility for it to Azerbaijan. As France accelerated its military support, its Minister of the Armed Forces, Sébastien Lecornu, declared Armenia a “foreign policy priority”.¹⁶ Discussions began on deepening France’s security footprint. These included expanding, without the consent of official Baku, the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA), monitoring the border with Azerbaijan, strong political support, and further increased military cooperation. There were, in the end, no troop commitments nor any formal treaty, but the signalling was unambiguous.

Paris has stopped short of pledging battlefield support, insisting that its arms transfers are defensive and oriented toward preserving Armenia’s sovereignty. For Azerbaijan and Türkiye, however, France’s moves are escalatory. In late 2024, Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev warned that France’s actions risked reigniting conflict.¹⁷ France has shown itself

14 Reuters, *France to boost Armenia’s air defences with radars, missiles – minister*, October 23, 2023, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/france-boost-armenias-air-defences-with-radars-missiles-minister-2023-10-23/> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

15 Leon, B., and Rzegocki, S.-J., “Can France Rescue Armenia From its Security Isolation?”, *CEPA Insights & Analysis*, July 1, 2024, Available at: <https://cepa.org/article/can-france-rescue-armenia-from-its-security-isolation/> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

16 Eurasianet, *Armenia–Azerbaijan: Macron stirring things up in the Caucasus*, March 6, 2024, Available at: <http://eurasianet.org/armenia-azerbaijan-macron-stirring-things-up-in-the-caucasus> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

17 Azertag, *President Ilham Aliyev was interviewed by Dmitry Kiselev, Director General of ‘Rossiya Segodnya’ International News Agency*, December 18, 2024, Available at: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/president_ilham_aliyev_was_interviewed_by_dmitry_kiselev_director_general_of_rossiya_segodnya_international_news_agency_video-3336671 (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

ready to accept this increased tension as the cost of its new strategic alignment with Armenia.

Armenia's Military Revitalization and French Support

The 2020 Second Karabakh War left Armenia's armed forces materially degraded and strategically exposed. Losses included over 200 tanks, extensive artillery and air defence systems, and critical positions entrenched in the formerly occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Armenia's vulnerability to drone warfare, its outdated radar infrastructure, and its overdependence on Russia's military supply became painfully clear. Russia's reluctance to intervene decisively during either the 2020 war or Azerbaijan's 2023 anti-terror operations accelerated Armenia's shift towards other defence partners.

Armenia had already begun to diversify its military procurement by 2021. From India, it acquired Swathi counter-battery radars and Pinaka multiple-launch rocket systems. Meanwhile, it was looking for drones

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and dual-use systems from such other third parties as China and Iran. The most consequential new alignment, however, was with France. The delivery of Thales GM200 radars in 2023 provided Armenia with 3D AESA (active electronically scanned array) surveillance coverage, previously absent from its

defensive posture. These were coupled with France's commitment to supply Mistral short-range air defence missiles, forming the basis of a layered air shield. Additional assistance from France included armoured vehicles, night vision systems, and advisory support.¹⁸ Moreover, France's growing bilateral cooperation with India – in areas such as defence technology, strategic coordination, and joint arms production – is viewed in Armenia as beneficial to its own political and economic objectives.

This shift was not confined to hardware. In 2023, France and Armenia signed a defence cooperation memorandum that formalized personnel training and laid the groundwork for long-term strategic collaboration. Armenian officers have begun receiving French instruction, and French advisors are reportedly active in support roles.¹⁹ Armenia has also

¹⁸ Nersisyan, L., and Melkonian, S. *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Paitjan, A., "Armenia is developing new defense capabilities, will it be enough?",

hosted joint drills with the United States in its territory and increased its contacts with NATO.²⁰ One important practical effect of all this is to reinforce a broader pivot to Western interoperability.

Yet this transformation carries the risk of escalation. Azerbaijan may interpret Armenia's rearmament as a threat, and it has a superior arsenal to mitigate this threat. Indeed, Azerbaijan has warned that France's military assistance could encourage Armenia to revive its territorial ambitions, triggering renewed conflict. Armenia frames the build-up as defensive, but the distinction between deterrence and provocation is increasingly difficult to make. An arms race dynamic has now become plausible, in which Azerbaijan would accelerate its own military procurement to preserve its existing advantage.

The Russian dimension compounds this volatility. Armenia remains a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and it hosts a Russian military base in the city of Gyumri, but tensions between Armenia and Russia have grown. Russia views Armenia's increasing engagement with Western militaries, particularly those of NATO states, as encroachment. The Russian Foreign Ministry, interpreting France's engagement as an effort to dislodge Russian influence, has condemned it.²¹ Armenia's defence realignment has coincided with a collapse in arms deliveries from Russia. Russia's share of Armenia's arms imports has fallen from over 90 percent to roughly 15 percent.²² At the same time, the CSTO's credibility in Armenians' eyes has fallen still further in view of Russia's expansion of military ties with Azerbaijan.²³

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CivilNet, May 17, 2024, Available at: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/776667/armenia-is-developing-new-defense-capabilities-will-it-be-enough/> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

20 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *Armenia Kicks Off Joint Military Exercises With U.S. Despite Russian Opposition*, September 11, 2023, Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-military-exercises-us-russian-opposition/32587572.html>; Azatutyun, *NATO Begins First-Ever Exercises in Armenia*, June 15, 2023, Available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/1471674.html> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

21 Azatutyun, *Russian Security Chief Warns Against Western Military Presence In Armenia*, October 4, 2024, Available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33146457.html> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

22 Nersisyan, L., and Melkonian, S. *op. cit.*

23 Silvia B., *Kavkaz Files* 33(2), March 10, 2025, Available at: <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2025/03/10/armenia-csto-analysis/> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

The breakdown in relations between Russia and Armenia is further indexed by the latter's refusal to host CSTO exercises and by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's references to "freezing" Armenia's participation in the organization. Armenia has not formally withdrawn from the CSTO but no longer sees its security guarantees as reliable.²⁴ France's support, therefore, substitutes not only matériel but also strategic reassurance. France, by offering modern defence systems and military cooperation, is promoting Armenia's re-establishment of a posture of deterrence.

This effort reflects France's broader threefold vision. Its goals are ostensibly to prevent renewed conflict by raising the cost of military confrontation, to displace the Russian monopoly over Armenia's security, and to embed Armenia more fully within a Western-aligned architecture. The policy also plays to France's traditional role as a patron of small states under threat. Still, French policymakers must tread more carefully than they have done, since Armenian rearmament, beyond a certain point, gives rise to the perception of escalation, facilitating its interpretation as latent revisionism. Reassurances to Azerbaijan and continued diplomatic engagement may or may not be enough, but they are absolutely necessary.

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In the view from Armenia, the imperative is survival. The military collapse during the 2020 Second Karabakh War and the 2023 September anti-terror operations have made defence planning an urgent matter for Armenia. France assists Armenia in addressing such key vulnerabilities as restoring radar coverage, rebuilding mobile defence, and upgrading infantry survivability.

France's bet is that an Armenia with greater defensive capabilities will reduce the likelihood of war rather than provoke it. On the one hand, this bet assumes rational signalling and mutual restraint by the parties concerned whereas, on the other hand, this rearmament could rather intensify competition instead of stabilizing the region. The durability of peace will depend on more than military hardware. France needs to understand that its growing role in Armenian defence entails responsibility not only for deterrence but also for containment.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Geopolitical Implications of Armenian Militarization

France's expanding defence relationship with Armenia endangers not just the South Caucasus's security environment but also France's strategic posture within the Western alliance system. Armenia increasingly views France as its most credible security partner, even though no formal treaty exists between the two countries. A survey conducted in 2024 found that 69 percent of Armenians believe that it is France that cares most about their security.²⁵

From France's perspective, this alignment complements the ambition to project influence beyond its traditional periphery. Acting as Armenia's principal Western backer affirms France's aspiration to enhance its diplomatic profile as a nation capable of independent initiative when other powers remain cautious. With its sponsorship of Armenia, France seeks to elevate its visibility in Black Sea–Caspian affairs, thus gaining potential leverage in the EU's Eastern Partnership policy as well as in broader bilateral relations with Russia and Türkiye. At the same time, there are tangible material incentives beyond arms exports. These include access to Armenian infrastructure, potential participation in energy transit initiatives, and expanded civil cooperation.

The liabilities are nevertheless significant. Whereas France maintains pre-positioned forces and forward bases in Africa and the Indo-Pacific, it lacks such a presence near Armenia. Logistical constraints are acute: Armenia is landlocked and reachable only by geopolitically perilous routes through Georgia or Iran. Neither NATO nor the EU has any commitment to Armenian security, so any serious French intervention would be unilateral. France's military guarantees, if they exist at all, are political rather than operational, and likely limited to advocacy at the UN or inside the EU. The resulting gap between any expectations by Armenia of French intervention on the one hand and, on the other hand, France's practical capacity to intervene, could produce disillusionment in Armenia and among its citizens.²⁶

25 Kalfayan, P.R., "France Casts Itself as Armenia's Savior But Is it One?", *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, March 25, 2024, Available at: <https://mirrorspectator.com/2024/03/25/france-casts-itself-as-armenias-savior-but-is-it-one/> (Accessed: April 15, 2025).

26 Leon, B., and Rzegocki, S.-J., "Can France Rescue Armenia From its Security Isolation?", *op. cit.*

France's strategic ambiguity is deliberate. It seeks to raise the political cost of putative Azerbaijani 'aggression' against Armenia, but without assuming any direct warfighting responsibility. Yet not all states, even within the EU, support France's assertiveness. Energy-dependent members like Hungary and Italy have cooperative relations with Azerbaijan and may not align their national policies with those of France. Although the EU border monitoring mission is nominally multilateral, it is functionally driven by France at the head of a subgroup of Western European states. Discord over the 'Armenian file' could, in fact, fragment the EU's external action.

In NATO, the stakes are higher. Türkiye, a central ally, views France's presence in the South Caucasus as antagonistic. Türkiye has condemned France's moves as neo-imperial, framing them within a longer arc of bilateral rivalry spanning Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and now the South Caucasus.²⁷ The United States (notably the former Biden Administration), while broadly supportive of Armenia's stabilization, has preferred a more balanced approach. The U.S. continues to engage both Armenia and Azerbaijan, particularly given the latter's relevance to energy transit and to the containment of Iran. France sought unilaterally to fill, in part, a perceived strategic U.S. and Russian absence from the region. However, if the U.S. re-engages substantively, then France would have to adjust its conduct to avoid redundancy or strategic contradiction.

The regional power triangle – Russia, Türkiye, and Iran – adds complexity. Russia perceives France's engagement as a challenge to its primacy in the post-Soviet space. The decline in Russia's arms exports to Armenia, now supplanted by suppliers from the West and other countries such as India, has proceeded apace with the tightening of Russia's security ties with Azerbaijan. Türkiye, for its part, interprets France's support for Armenia as a provocation that warrants counterbalancing.

Türkiye is gradually expanding and strengthening its military ties with Azerbaijan, thus reinforcing its commitment to bilateral cooperation in line with the two countries' 2021 Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations. Iran occupies an ambivalent position, quietly welcoming France's engagement as a buffer and counterweight

²⁷ Cutler, R.M., "What are France's Motives in the South Caucasus?", *op. cit.*

against Azerbaijan–Türkiye cooperation yet remaining wary of any lasting Western military footprint near its northern border. Any permanent French role would complicate the already delicate regional equilibrium.

France's broader foreign policy calculus is also in play. Its assertion of prominence in the South Caucasus, even pretending to leadership there, aligns with its long-standing pursuit of European strategic autonomy. Success would validate the French model of independent diplomacy, while failure could reinforce scepticism about unilateral initiatives. France's past record of counterterrorism in Libya, Mali, and the Sahel offers examples of both the promise and the limits of such efforts.

In sum, France's support for Armenian militarization is a geopolitical wager. It positions France as the principal Western counterweight to the Russia–Türkiye–Iran triangle in the region, while it simultaneously threatens to ensnare France again, soon after its recent ignominious retreat from its former colonies in West Africa. For Armenia, French support offers critical reassurance following the collapse of Russian guarantees. For Azerbaijan and Türkiye, it represents unwelcome interference. For Russia, it is an undeniable marker of loss of influence. If France's policy, now committed to reinforcing Armenia, should provoke escalation, then this would damage French credibility and even NATO and EU cohesion.

Conclusion

This article has examined how and why France shifted from neutral mediation to active military alignment with Armenia in the South Caucasus. France's engagement in the South Caucasus has undergone a fundamental transformation from multilateral mediation under the OSCE Minsk Group to bilateral defence alignment with Armenia. For nearly three decades, France had been tiptoeing a diplomatic tightrope between strategic neutrality and cultural affinity, using its co-chair role to steady its regional influence. The 2020 Second Karabakh War snapped the rope beneath its feet, sending that posture into free-fall. With the Minsk framework defunct, France faced a choice between marginalization and reinvention. It chose the latter.

France's redefinition of its role draws on deeper historical reservoirs. Cultural affinity, the politics of memory, and geopolitical legacy – reaching back to France's 19th-century self-image as a guardian of Christian minorities – converged to frame Armenia not simply as a partner but as a cause. Yet Macron's public accusations against Azerbaijan, which was the country with parts of its territories occupied, and overt solidarity with Armenia, which was the occupying country, marked a decisive break from neutrality. This shift coincided with Russia's preoccupation in Ukraine and the breakdown of Moscow–Washington coordination, which together gave France the opportunity to act where others hesitated.

Strategically, France's support comes with both gains and constraints. On one hand, it boosts France's prestige as a moral actor in Armenia and as a strategic stakeholder east of the Black Sea. On the other hand, it ties France's credibility to a volatile situation in the South Caucasus with limited enforcement tools. Armenia benefits from increased morale, material support, and diplomatic insulation provided by France, but must manage a risky triangle: reform moving it towards the West, reliance on French arms, and cohabitation with Russian troops. If the conflict reignites, France could face a stark test: offer more than rhetoric, or watch its commitments unravel.

The risks are plain. France could overextend itself diplomatically, especially if its EU partners grow wary of alienating Azerbaijan. Militarily, arming Armenia may provoke escalation or misperceptions, especially if its posture hardens due to domestic and diaspora opinion. France's efforts may also invite countermeasures from Russia. Domestic constraints in France could further erode sustained engagement, should political winds shift. Looking ahead, three possible strategic trajectories emerge. These are France as balancer (unlikely), as guarantor (problematic), and as fading mediator (already in effect).

France as balancer could maintain its current trajectory of arming Armenia for deterrence while leveraging the EU's diplomacy to stabilize the region. In this role, France would not exclude Russia or Türkiye but would rather offset their dominance. France hitherto pursued a policy of military aid ostensibly calculated for defensive exigences only, with a view to morally facilitating the signature of the

peace treaty. However, this policy has yielded opposite results, *viz.*, the negative reaction from Azerbaijan and France's alienation from the mediation process. This pattern would resemble a modern Concert of Powers dynamic, adapted to multilateral structures.

France as guarantor could escalate its commitment by entering into formal security arrangements, proposing still further expansion of the EU's monitoring mission, or even promoting multilateral deployments in Armenia itself. Direct military intervention remains unlikely, yet France might increasingly act as Armenia's *de facto* shield. However, this posture would require broader buy-in from NATO or EU partners, which seems unlikely. By placing France in direct opposition to Turkish and Azerbaijani desiderata, it could potentially formalize a frozen stand-off in the South Caucasus. France might gain credibility in the eyes of Armenians, but this gain could be more than offset by the risk of entanglement.

France as fading mediator would eventuate if circumstances rendered its activism unsustainable. A final bilateral peace agreement or a reconfiguration of the Russia–Türkiye–Iran triangle would marginalize France. Shifting domestic priorities or leadership changes in France might redirect its focus away from the region. In this scenario, France's support would recede to symbolic gestures, delivering humanitarian aid and diplomatic declarations but avoiding further military involvement. This would disappoint Armenia and reduce France's regional profile, but it could be a 'realist' (and realistic) adjustment if the strategic payoff to France from its involvement diminishes.

France's stance in the South Caucasus fuses its self-appointed moral purpose with its enduring appetite for strategic relevance. From co-chairing a conflict-settlement framework to supplying integrated defence systems, France has transitioned from being a not entirely impartial facilitator to being a disruptive stakeholder. Whether France's engagement will ease the tensions or entrench the confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains to be seen. The wager is both historical and geopolitical. The extent to which France's presence will diminish tension or exacerbate broader confrontation remains in question.

For now, as French weapons are arriving and Armenian officials are resetting, Azerbaijan's rhetoric is understandably hardening in

response. Russia, though tactically withdrawn, remains observant. France is no longer a neutral interlocutor but rather an active participant, betting that its strategic presence and historical voice can still move the dial. The test ahead for France is whether it can hold its autonomous course without exacerbating tensions and without straining its alliances. Like the legendary Paris – who offered the apple of discord to Aphrodite, spurning Hera and Athena – the French capital has now offered its own award to Armenia, wagering that its Judgement will, this time, not unleash a wider war.