

Local and Regional outcomes of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war

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Abstract

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one of the main international fallout of the former Soviet Union. With the exception of the warring parties - Armenia and Azerbaijan - Turkey, Russia and Iran were indirectly involved in the conflict. Beyond them, strong international acts such as the United States and France were also parts of negotiations, although their objectivity towards warring parties was questionable, especially in Baku. It was the stalemate in the negotiations that created the militaristic environment and the preparation for a new large-scale conflict. The Second Karabakh War of 2020 completely changed the reality on the ground. Azerbaijan, with the help of Turkish weapons, not only managed to retake six of the seven regions around Karabakh but also occupied the city of Shusha, which was perceived to be the cultural centre of Karabakh. However, Russia also benefited from the military-political consequences, as it legally managed to deploy military forces not only in Armenia but directly in Azerbaijan as well. All this makes the situation on the ground quite complex. The paper discusses the post-war political and military situation in Karabakh and the region.

Keywords: Azerbaijan; Armenia; Karabakh; Russia; Minks Group; Second Karabakh war;

Introduction

1992-1994 turned out to be crucial for the first Karabakh war - the Armenian militia in Karabakh, indirectly supported by the Kremlin and Yerevan, managed to occupy not only most of the territory of the autonomous province of Karabakh but even seven adjacent Azerbaijani districts. With this, the Armenian separatists tried to create a paramilitary defensive shield or buffer around Karabakh. The so-called "Line of contact", should be as far as possible from the populated cities, in the depths of Azerbaijan. The victorious Armenians of the Artsakh Republic declared independence and some political factions of Yerevan considered Karabakh as a part of Armenia.

The conflict in Karabakh began in 1988. Although hotbeds of confrontation between Azerbaijan and Armenia have existed since 1918 and clashes have been taking place in Nagorno-Karabakh, the mixed population of Karabakh in the Soviet Union still manages to coexist relatively peacefully. Peace in the region lasted until 1988 when a local government of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) appeals to the USSR Supreme Soviet to transfer the NKAO from the Azerbaijani SSR to the Armenian SSR (Martin, 2001 p. 594). This failed attempt was not supported by the Soviet authorities as a fear of potential precedent was set, which could lead to separatist and irredentist movements throughout the Soviet Union. All of this resulted in massive demonstrations in both Armenia and Azerbaijan (Lee, 1988). The demonstrations were gradually followed by radical rhetoric, ethnic slurs, and finally pogroms. The conflict remained in a relatively passive phase until the end of 1991 when the NKAO held an independence referendum, followed the abolition of the autonomy status by official Baku. All of the above-ensued full-scale war in 1992.

Despite several attempts, the ceasefire failed until 1994, when the Russian-initiated Bishkek Protocol was signed. In addition to a ceasefire, the document stated the demilitarization of Azerbaijani districts around Karabakh and the withdrawal of foreign troops, while the IDPs had to return home. Despite the signing of a document it was only partially enforced. The ceasefire was fragile, the refugees and IDPs did not return, and the seven districts around Karabakh were not demilitarized and did not leave by foreign or NKAO troops (Papazian, 2008). On the contrary - militarization even more intensified after 1994. However, the agreement was still the first tangible attempt to stop the military phase of the conflict, which should pave the way for peace talks and solutions.

Despite international efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully, it ended in failure. On the one hand, the victorious side - Armenia - did not want to make significant concessions, including some territorial exchange (“Caucasus Report,” 10:32:10Z). On the other hand, there was no consensus in Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh's political status. However, it was also important to note that there were no peacekeepers between the warring parties, resulting in several skirmishes each year, resulting in casualties on both sides. In 2016, the clashes took on such a massive scale that there was a chance for a full-scale renewal of the conflict. The line of contact was changed for the first time as a result of the clashes (Simão, 2016).

Since then Azerbaijan has been critical of the peace process, especially when every offer from the OSCE rebuffed. As a result of intensive militarization and the border clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, the citizens of Azerbaijan demanded from the authorities to resolve the conflict by any means (Eurasianet, 2020).

Methodology

This article is an analytical review and report on the military and political situation in Karabakh. In order to thoroughly assess the pre-war period and unsuccessful attempts at peace talks and the aftermath of confrontation, it is necessary to analyze the secondary sources and data, including the documents and positions of the parties. The failed peace proposals and the ceasefire agreement reached at the end of the 2020 Karabakh war contains key information to successfully review the established political environment on the ground. In addition, I will use a comparison method in the paper to carefully analyze what has changed in time and space in terms of political outcomes.

Failed peace process

Since 1994, the OSCE’s Minsk Group has been actively trying to resolve the conflict and propose peace plans. In 1997-1998 and in 2007-2009 the group proposed four peace documents – “Package deal”, “Common state deal”, “Step-by-step deal”, “Madrid Principles” - which were never supported by both sides, the main reason for which was the mistrust between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Armenia was afraid of making any concessions. Official Yerevan perceives Baku as an

untrustworthy political actor and in the case of concession of some territories to Azerbaijan, a security dilemma would arise for Karabakh. In the absence of mutual trust, this dilemma would deepen and can lead the defensive or offensive actions. The second challenge was related to the existence of a precondition concerning the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. Official Baku had previously stated that it would reject any proposal that violates Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. All the proposals put forward by the Minsk Group are intended to uphold the principle of territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, although it did not clearly define the legal status of the Nagorno-Karabakh and left room for speculation.

From the Armenian side, the main precondition on the effective negotiations was the determination of the legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh and its international recognition. All of that should be acceptable to both Armenia and Karabakh. Without meeting this precondition, the Armenian and Karabakh armed forces refused to leave the seven occupied Azerbaijani districts around the NKAO.

The terms of the talks included granting broad autonomy to Nagorno-Karabakh and deploying peacekeeping forces in the region. Although Karabakh remained part of Azerbaijan, it would have great political, administrative and cultural autonomy and the region would be demilitarized. (*Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair Countries*, n.d.)

All these preconditions made effective negotiations even more difficult. However, the chances of negotiations in 1997-1999 and 2007-2009 became tangible when proposals were put forward by the Minsk Group. Despite all the attempts and proposals every negotiation failed and went nowhere. During and after the war there was active militarization of both sides with several occurrences of rekindle fighting alongside the line of contact.

Azerbaijan does not have high confidence in the Minsk Group and its work. Several times there were statements from Baku regarded to the impartiality of the group co-chairs. As early as the first Karabakh war, Russia expressed indirect military support for Armenia, and since 1994, despite an internationally requested embargo, Russia has been supplying large quantities of arms to Armenia, most of which fall within the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia transferred weapons worth several billion dollars to Armenia in 1994-2018 (Anthony, I. 1997), (Cutler, 2020), (*Eurasianet*,

n.d.). However, the Kremlin also sold weapons to Azerbaijan, which increased the likelihood of the existing permanent tension and confrontation between the parties.

In 1999 possible Russian links appear during the political unrest in Armenia, when an armed group broke into the parliament building ensued killings of high profile political figures and contributed to the disruption of the peace process. In 2005, Alexander Litvinenko, a former member of the Russian Security Forces, accused the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) to conducting of facilitating this event (Danielyan, 2005).

Russia tried to prevent Azerbaijan and Armenia from withdrawing from its sphere of influence. Baku could deepen its ties with Turkey, and Armenia could get closer to the West. In the long run, Russia failed to foil Azerbaijan's plans to establish military and political relations with Ankara.

Besides, Russia has a military base in Armenia's city of Gyumri, which is the only legally established Russian military facility in the South Caucasus. At the same time, Armenia and Russia have political and military ties and the former always participate in military exercises planned by Russia. Moreover, due to Armenia's membership in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, Russia's involvement in Armenia's security is particularly large. All this calls into question Russia's impartiality and makes it problematic for Baku.

Azerbaijan has demanded an increase or replacement of the Minsk Group co-chairs, due to a significant number of Armenian Diasporas in Russia, France and the United States, which have noticeable influences over the regional or national level within these countries. It is therefore difficult for any of these states to make a proposal that does not take into account the domestic political attitudes. At the theoretical level, Robert Putnam has well incorporated this reality into his two-level game theory. The theory asserts that every international negotiation also takes place in the context of the domestic political environment.

During and after the Second Karabakh war in 2020, the role of France as a mediator was also problematic. France has a particularly large population of more than half a million Armenians and their political influences are high. During the earlier phase of clashes, president Macron condemns Turkey's so-called "bellicose" stance on Nagorno-Karabakh, while both countries are members of the Minsk Group. Then the French Senate proclaimed and supported a non-binding resolution to call for recognition of the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenian: Artsakh), which gives

the president the right to make a final decision. Afterwards, the Azerbaijani government appealed to the OSCE for the withdrawal of France from the co-chairmanship of the Minsk Group. Questioning of impartiality diminishes the real effectiveness and potential of the Minsk Group.

There has been no significant response from the US Presidential Administration and the State Department to the renewed conflict in Karabakh. It was only on October 23 when the US began to talk about the importance of negotiations between the two warring sides and initiate bilateral and trilateral talks. A ceasefire agreement reached by the US on October 26 broke down within hours, to which President Trump assessed the disappointment. Also, it is important to note that before the negotiations Trump tweeted: "We're working with Armenia. We have a very good relationship with Armenia - they're very good people, they're so dedicated, they're incredible people, and we'll see what happens." Even though nothing wrong is within this statement the timing was not ideal, especially before the negotiations.

During the 2020 war, still presidential candidate Joe Biden criticized Azerbaijan for trying to resolve the conflict militarily and accused Turkey of inciting warmongering (*Joe Biden, 2020*). Moreover, Biden also made a statement against Russia, accusing it of supplying weapons and using mercenaries. And all this against the background that Turkey is a member of the Minsk Group, while Russia is a co-chair.

Finally, there is another important aspect - the conflict ended with the direct involvement of Russia and the deployment of its military units in Karabakh. The Lachin corridor is also controlled by Russia for at least five more years. All this gives Russia significant leverage against both Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Russian peacekeeping force was deployed in Karabakh not as part of the OSCE mission, but as a result of Russia-led negotiations. All this reduces the role of the Minsk Group in the conflict. At the same time, the representation of Turkey in the South Caucasus has increased, which completely changes the existing picture and the rules of the game. It is very likely that without the direct interest of Turkey and Russia, OSCE Minsk Group's effectiveness in conflict resolution would be more tangible.

Second Nagorno-Karabakh war and its consequences

On September 27, 2020, the renewed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh completely changed the existing order in the South Caucasus. In terms of military Azerbaijan have managed and waged 21st-century modern warfare, destroying the part of the Armenian army based in Karabakh, and inflicted up to two billion dollars military equipment losses to Armenia. As a result of the fighting, the Azerbaijani military captured not only the southern part of the former Karabakh Autonomous Region and its historic centre, the city of Shusha but also the other four regional centres around Karabakh, which since 1994 were no longer controlled by official Baku. The Azerbaijani army also made significant progress northward, capturing two important cities, a reservoir and a mountain range. Despite the apparent Azerbaijani military advantage, the fire in Karabakh ceased on November 10 and create a new reality on the ground.

As a result of the truce, a peacekeeping mission consisting of Russian troops was formed which occupy the rest of the territory of the former Karabakh Autonomous Region (Oblast), which is still held by Armenian forces, centred in Stepanakert. They also occupied the Lachin corridor, which connects Karabakh with Armenia. According to the agreement, the Armenian militia and armed forces must withdraw from all Azerbaijani districts around Karabakh by December. But as Russia is responsible for controlling, observe and overseeing peace on the ground it is possible for Armenian militia to remain in and around Stepanakert. No matter how this issue is resolved, it is clear that the region gets a large Russian military base on the territory of de jure Azerbaijan. Despite that, the 26-year status quo has changed, which will result in Azerbaijan successfully recaptured all areas around Karabakh except Lachin, official Baku has not been able to fully retake Karabakh territory and de facto cede the control rest of the territory to Russia and indirectly to Armenia. This changes the pre-existing order even more, as Russian military bases and, consequently, political leverage is found in the internationally recognized territories of the three South Caucasus countries: Georgia – in occupied Abkhazia and Samachablo (AKA South Ossetia), Armenia – in Gyumri, and in Azerbaijan – Karabakh and Lachin. As a result, Russian influence throughout the region is growing and creating a so-called Russian Peace (Pax Russica), a term that portrays reality far from real peace, development and stability. If Armenia or Azerbaijan seeks to aspire to an independent foreign policy from Russia and/or pursue projects that are unacceptable

to the Kremlin, Russia, as a peacemaker, may launch a military-political manoeuvre to dissuade both of them.

Russia has set a precedent that any conflict in the South Caucasus will eventually come to end when Russia really insists. Throughout the war, both the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides had communicated with Kremlin. The abrupt end of the conflict indicates that during all six weeks of fighting both official Yerevan and Baku had not only openly, but also covertly negotiated with official Moscow. Such a development indicates an increase in Russian political weight which threatens the Western interests in the region.

Despite the victorious war, Azerbaijan failed to fully restore its territorial integrity. On a short time scale with the change of the status quo, Azerbaijan gains a noticeable advantage and even manages to get rid of the label of a loser. It is also expected that official Baku will soon begin the process of returning 600,000 IDPs to its controlled territories. In addition, the Azerbaijani military is gaining the status of a leading and modern force in the region. Despite all of these significant successes, de facto control of Azerbaijan could not be exercised over the entire territory of Karabakh, which is compounded by the emergence of Russian military bases on the ground. This reality is, from a strategic point of view, a problem, a challenge, and to some extent a limitation of foreign political sovereignty for the country that won the war.

Another notable result is the stabilization of the government of Ilham Aliyev and the achievement of political consolidation. The demand for Azerbaijani political diversity will not be tangible for some time. At the same time, Turkish influence in Azerbaijan's domestic and foreign policy will increase, which has been growing dynamically in recent years. After the war significant infrastructural projects in and around Azerbaijani controlled Karabakh supported or financed by Turkey (Gokhan Ergocun, 2021). It is also important to note that in the long run the increased role of Turkey during and after the conflict will inevitably come into conflict with Russian interests, and this is clear to all actors. This is especially true, after January 2022 Armenia and Turkey started normalization of political relations, which could increase Ankara's economic influence over Armenia. To Russia increasing Turkey's influence in South Caucasus will be problematic.

Militarily, Armenia was defeated. The perception inside the country about the invincibility of the Armenian army is changing, which is followed by the dissatisfaction and anger of the people. The investments of the Armenian Diaspora, used for the reconstruction of Karabakh, were destroyed

in six weeks, and a significant part of the territories inhabited by the Armenian population came under the direct control of Azerbaijan. Armenia's military potential is significantly reduced, as well as its combat motivation. The country will definitely have to go through a reassessment process and think about who its real ally is and what the country's foreign policy vector should be. The war has once again proved that the existence of Russia as its main ally is a mistake and contains wrong expectations especially when the Kremlin have a bad reputation of being an unreliable force. But still, it is unknown what conclusions Armenia will draw after the war.

The situation is changing in Yerevan as well. If the revolutionary government of Nikol Pashinyan and his project of modernization and democracy, to some extent, allowed the idea of playing independently from Russia, now this may change – Pashinyan has to fight for its own political survival.

Despite the defeat in the war, Armenia still manages to maintain fragile but de facto control over the small part of the former Karabakh Autonomous Region (Oblast) – centred in Stepanakert. This means that the worst-case scenario was avoided by Armenia, which would lead to the complete loss of the Armenian-populated territories in Karabakh. It is clear that as a result of the war, Armenia's foreign policy will become even more subordinate to Russia. Of course, recognizing and assessing military defeat after the victorious war in the 1990s will not be easy and consolidating revanchist forces may occur, but it will further destabilize the country.

Another very important outcome is the possible construction of a road connecting Nakhichevan with the rest of Azerbaijan which will build through the Syunik province of Armenia. If this project is implemented and Azerbaijan will invest heavily to the road to Nakhichevan. The road will pass through Armenian province of Syunik. It is also important to note that the high-permeability concrete-asphalt road from Nakhichevan to Turkey already exists and can be widened. This further increases the motivation to implement the Syunik road project. After some tensions in late 2021 Azerbaijan and Armenia agreed to start working to impliment the project (Mushvig Mehdiyev, 2021). It is still unknown who and in what form will control the road between Nakhichevan and the rest of Azerbaijan and whether there will be customs services on it. The issues around the corridor could be another conflicting subject in relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, but in Baku expectations for this project are very high.

Azerbaijan Imports from Turkey was US\$1.56 Billion during 2020 (Trading Economics, 2022.). A significant part of them was transported by land or air corridor of Georgia. If this is reality changes and corridor diversifies, it will slightly reduce the geopolitical weight of Georgia, but it will not pose a threat to the existing gas or oil pipelines, which are one of the main energy arteries for the EU.

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