



Russian Crisis Behavior, Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkey?

By Richard Giragosian, David G. Lewis and Graeme P. Herd

Introduction

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan initiated a war to retake the disputed Armenian-populated enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven districts of Azerbaijan held by Armenian forces.¹ The forty-four-day war resulted in a resounding defeat for the Armenian forces and only halted with the acceptance of a Russian-imposed agreement for a cessation of hostilities on November 9-10, 2020. Although the war was initially expected to unfold as a war of attrition with an eventual stalemate based on the advantages of terrain of the Armenian defenders, reality differed in terms of duration, intensity, and outcome.

Assessment

Both the timing and the terms of the Russian-crafted ceasefire agreement displayed a deft and sophisticated approach to coercive mediation by Moscow, acknowledging both the complexity of competing interests and the “red lines” of the combatants. We can point to four ways in which the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict strengthened Russia’s power and position.

First, Nagorno-Karabakh represents an important success in reasserting Russian influence in the post-Soviet space through its demonstration effect. Russia was able to assert its status as the decisive and indispensable deal-maker. Russia can use the peacekeeping operation as a mechanism to conduct direct mediation between Baku, Yerevan, and the remnants of Nagorno-Karabakh, rather than indirectly as the leading arms provider to both sides. Indeed, the greater the number of disagreements between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the more indispensable Russian mediation and arbitration becomes. The convening power of Putin is demonstrated by his capacity to summon and cajole both Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Aliyev to Moscow to accept the implementation of the ceasefire. Whereas Nagorno-Karabakh was formerly the only conflict in the Former Soviet Union with no Russian presence, Russia now has military bases in all three states in the South Caucasus (over 11,000 troops) and expanded its economic leverage through its presence in policing transport corridors (Megri and Lachin). The Russian narrative that “Color Revolutions”—such as the “Velvet Revolution” that brought Prime Minister Pashinyan to power in 2018—end in violence and defeat is reinforced.

¹ This *Perspectives* is a summary of the first “Russian Hybrid Seminar Series” (RHSS), a new GCMC initiative aimed at bringing together subject matter experts to discuss Russia’s evolving strategic behavior and risk calculus. The first seminar was held on January 19, 2021.

Second, a Western vision of the Caucasus—with a pro-Western Georgia and Azerbaijan and an increasingly pro-Western Armenia after the 2018 revolution—has faded, if not failed. The OSCE’s mediating Minsk Group has accepted and legitimized Russia’s diplomatic initiative, as co-chairs France and the U.S. were sidelined, presented as they were with the binary logic: legitimize the Russian peacekeeping operation as a *fait accompli*, and with it the creation of a potential Russian protectorate, or accept continued warfare with a likely humanitarian catastrophe. Two authoritarian states (Azerbaijan and Turkey) militarily attacked a weak democracy (Armenia), which was saved from total defeat by a third authoritarian state (Russia). Democratization is undermined and reform is imperiled.

Third, Russia’s peacekeeping operation represents a top-down alternative illiberal approach to peace. It demonstrates that authoritarian models can be effective (Chinese expert analytical communities reportedly embrace this conclusion) and deployed more widely and more often. The German mantra of “there can be no military solution” is false. Russia’s peacekeeping operation was rapidly deployed, and exerts control over multiple domains: humanitarian, political, military power, and informational. The peacekeeping operation does not share control with civil-society or other actors and has no need for any external mandate (UN, OSCE, CSTO), etc.) If after five years the peacekeeping operation ends, the risk that the conflict will resume may increase and this possibility serves as lingering leverage over Armenia.

Fourth, Turkey won the war for Azerbaijan but lost the peace to Russia. Turkey sold Bayraktar TB2 attack drones to Azerbaijan, shared signals intelligence and military advisers, provided logistical help, and supplied proxy forces. Sergei Naryshkin, the head of Russia’s SVR, declared that Turkish-backed proxy jihadi terrorists should not be deployed to Azerbaijan and Russia and enforced this “red line” by launching attacks on a Feylak-i Sham (“Sham Legion”) training camp and headquarters in Idlib. Nagorno-Karabakh now tops a long list of places where Russia and Turkey compete, including Syria, Libya, the eastern Mediterranean and Cyprus, the Black Sea and Ukraine, Central Asia, the Balkans, and East Africa. However, increased Russian-Turkish tensions are mitigated by open channels of communication and a history of managing brinkmanship through pragmatic transactionalism, as well as a seemingly anti-Western alignment.

The Kremlin calculus discounted or downplayed several factors raised by analysts as potentially salient: the financial costs of the peacekeeping operation; the weakening of the credibility of CSTO guarantees; the prospect of Armenian public opinion turning against Russia; and uncertainties over the undefined status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Russian peacekeeping operation itself. Russia bets that “a little bit of Turkey is better than a lot of the West,” particularly as Turkey appears over-extended with a weak economy. Russia may be concerned, however, about potential new outbreaks of fighting (Armenian radicals launching revenge attacks or the Azeri state provoking clashes with deniability to restart a military campaign?) and a Turkish military foothold in the South Caucasus. As the ceasefire upheld *uti possidetis* claims,² this may have ramifications for Russia’s management of conflicts around Crimea and Donbas in Ukraine, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia in Georgia and Transnistria in Moldova.

² *Uti possidetis* is “a principle in international law that recognizes a peace treaty between parties as vesting each with the territory and property under its control unless otherwise stipulated.” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/legal/uti%20possidetis>, accessed January 21, 2021.

Conclusions

The clear loser of the conflict was Armenia. Armenia no longer guarantees security in Nagorno-Karabakh. It failed to counter Azerbaijan in the field. Its efforts to coerce Russia into supporting it by targeting Azeri critical national infrastructure outside of the conflict zone (“Doomsday Plan”), thereby causing an Azeri attack on Armenia proper, also failed. Armenia was forced to accept military defeat in order to avoid outright political-strategic annihilation. Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are now fully dependent on Russian security guarantees and Armenia is now even more firmly locked within the Russian orbit, as a virtual supplicant and subordinate Russian garrison state.

The clear victor of the conflict was Azerbaijan, as victory increased regime legitimation, at least in the short-term, with official narratives highlighting the necessity of a strongman authoritarian leader. Finally emerging from his father’s (and predecessor’s) shadow, Aliyev achieved his own victory while maintaining relations with Russia and strengthening ties with Turkey, although he remains precariously balanced between both. At the same time, the timing of the ceasefire between the capture of Shusha and imminent capitulation of Stepanakert, allowed Aliyev to avoid responsibility for a humanitarian disaster and subsequent ethnic cleansing, as well as fighting in winter.

Turkish narratives claim not only regional leadership but also future leadership in the Islamic world. Turkey has inserted itself into the South Caucasus as a *de facto* power broker and a challenger of Russian hegemony and Russia’s notion of a “sphere of privileged interest.” Turkey has solidified ties with Azerbaijan, demonstrating an ability to project power at low cost and appeared to effectively deter Russia from wholesale support for Armenia. Turkish power projection comes at Russian expense. Russia’s escalation of effort to manage the conflict places it—post-November 10, 2020—in a riskier position than Turkey. Over the longer term, the peacekeeping operation irritates Azerbaijan and reminds Armenia of its humiliating dependence. Turkey can capitalize on both these dynamics.

About the Authors

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