

The End of the Second Karabakh War: New realities in the South Caucasus

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ON 27 SEPTEMBER 2020, war erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the contested Nagorno-Karabakh enclave and surrounding regions, which had been under Armenian occupation since the end of the original hostilities in 1994.

Over the course of a six-week war, Azerbaijan's somewhat larger and significantly more modern military proved superior to the forces of Armenia and the self-declared, Armenian-backed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), also known as Artsakh. Both armies have Soviet origins, but Azerbaijan was able to deploy upgraded Soviet equipment and modern Turkish and Israeli weapons, including strike and reconnaissance drones and loitering munitions, which proved decisive. The combined Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh forces generally had older equipment reinforced by a few modern systems, such as Russian-made Su-30SM fighters and Iskander operational-tactical surface-to-surface missiles, though not in sufficient quantities.

The tipping point of the war came on 8 November, when Azerbaijani troops recaptured the town of Shusha, which is recognised for its historic significance to Azerbaijan, but also holds major military importance by overlooking Nagorno-Karabakh's capital, Stepanakert, some ten kilometres away. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan later said that up to 25,000 Armenian and NKR soldiers east of Stepanakert could have been surrounded. On 9 November, he accepted a Russian-brokered ceasefire by releasing a joint statement, effective from 10 November, with President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Turkey, a major backer of Azerbaijan, was not among the signatories but welcomed the deal.

THE 9 NOVEMBER AGREEMENT

The 9 November statement left Azerbaijan in control of a portion of Nagorno-Karabakh, including Shusha. It also forced Armenia to relinquish adjacent areas of Azerbaijani territory occupied in the 1990s, which had served as both a military buffer zone and a potential bargaining chip. Of the Armenian-occupied territories outside Nagorno-Karabakh, only the Lachin Corridor, which links

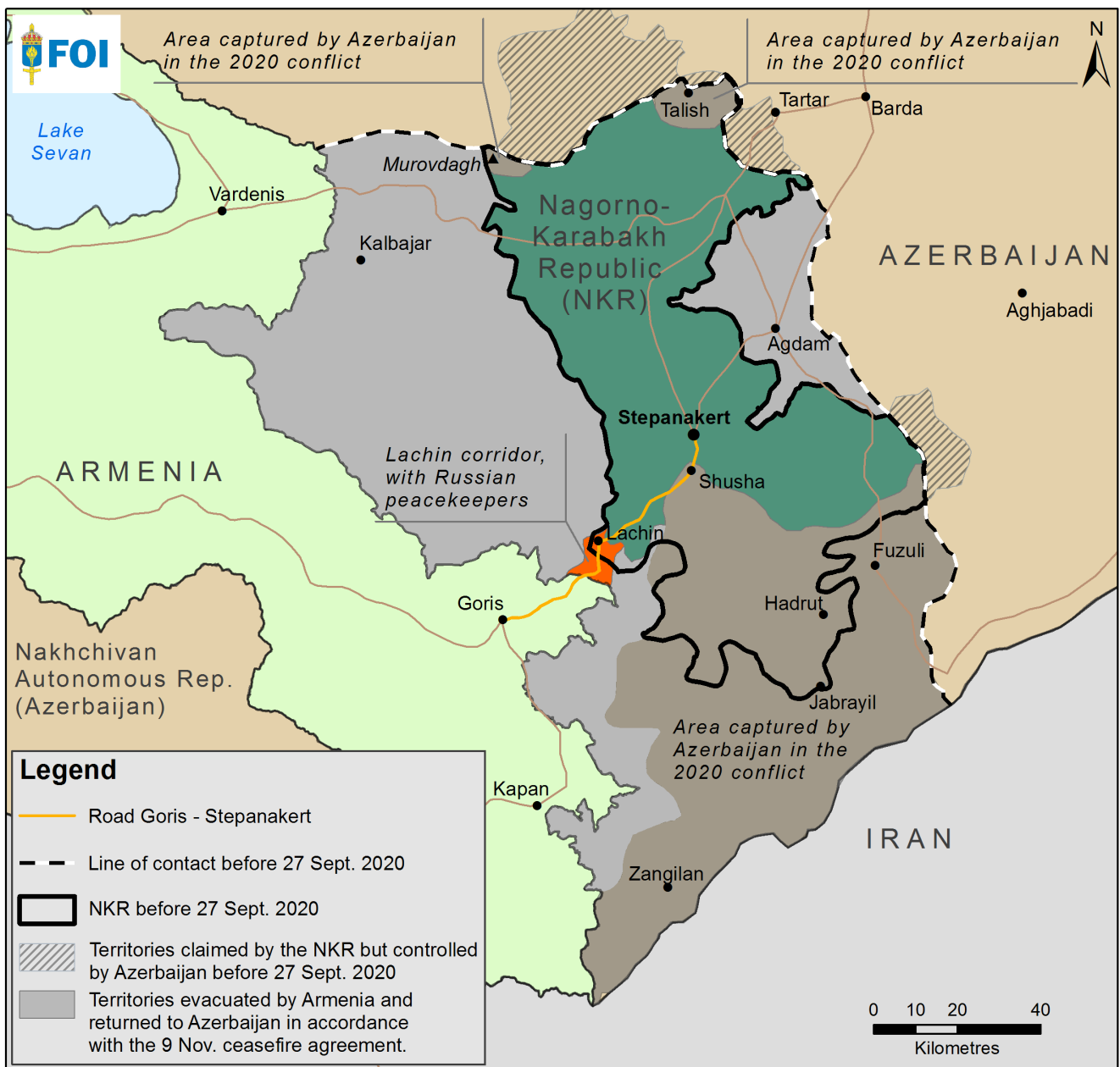
Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia proper, will remain in Armenian hands.

The agreement also stipulated that 1,960 lightly armed Russian troops would deploy as peacekeepers along the new contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh and in the Lachin Corridor, with "90 armoured personal carriers, 380 units of automobile and special equipment". Per the terms of the deal, the force will be deployed for five years but this can be prolonged for additional five-year periods with the consent of the signatories. Separately, a land corridor is to be established through Armenia to connect the Azerbaijani Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic exclave with the rest of Azerbaijan. It will be protected by the Border Guards of the Russian Federal Security Service, FSB.

The 9 November statement does not address the status of Nagorno-Karabakh nor does it create a path to a final resolution of the conflict. Since 1994, most attempts to resolve the conflict have been centred on the Minsk Group, established by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) and co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States. In 2007, the Minsk Group issued six "Basic Principles," known as the Madrid Principles (last modified in 2009), which were reluctantly accepted by both parties:

- return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control;
- an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance;
- a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh;
- future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will;
- the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence; and
- international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation.

Madrid Principles one, three, and six have now been implemented as an outcome of the conflict and the ceasefire deal, which also reconfirms principle five. Principles two



Map: Per Wikström, FOI.

and four were not reflected in the 9 November deal, which stopped short of addressing the ultimate core issue of the conflict: the legal-political status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Rather than being solved, the conflict has re-frozen in a new shape. If it heats up again, it will be with new complexities in a changed geopolitical landscape.

THE PATH AHEAD FOR ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN

In the absence of a political agreement, and given Azerbaijan's continued military superiority, Armenia may have to live for the foreseeable future under the threat of renewed Azerbaijani offensives. Yet, the loss of large areas

at the core of Armenia's national narrative was a painful experience and has set off major unrest in the country. The ministers of foreign affairs, defence, and economy all resigned in protest, while angry crowds attacked the parliament and government buildings in Yerevan after the deal was announced. Several politicians, including opposition leader Gagik Tsarukyan, were arrested on 11 November for fomenting these protests, but released after two days. The prime minister has nonetheless remained committed to the ceasefire deal, but his political survival is uncertain. Domestic spoilers may also seek to undermine implementation of the deal; one such hot spot could be the land

corridor that will link Nakhchivan to mainland Azerbaijan via Armenia.

For Azerbaijan, the war was a major success. Since 9 November, Aliyev has mocked Pashinyan, while warning that Armenia must not drag its feet nor prevent displaced Azerbaijanis from returning. As long as withdrawals continue according to plan, Baku's main priority may be to promote Turkish involvement as a hedge against Russian dominance.

A DIPLOMATIC VICTORY FOR RUSSIA

Having ensured a political outcome in line with its long-term interests, Moscow can claim a diplomatic success that helps cement Russia's predominant position in the South Caucasus.

Notably, the 9 November agreement makes no reference to either the OSCE Minsk Group or Turkey, underlining Russia's dominant role in an area it considers within its exclusive zone of interest.

Although Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Russia may countenance a role for Ankara given its involvement as a partner of Azerbaijan and the recent history of transactional Russian-Turkish deal-making, including in Syria and Libya. However, although Turkey may eventually be offered a junior partnership in the Nagorno-Karabakh arrangements, the United States and the European Union are sidelined. Moreover, there has been no fundamental change to the state of frozen conflict that helps Russia exert influence over both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the Russian peacekeeping mission is likely to ensure Moscow's continued centrality.

Given these achievements and the fact that Russia has staked its credibility on the 9 November agreement, Moscow must be wary of turmoil in Armenia, in so far as it compromises the implementation of the deal. However, Moscow would not necessarily be displeased if Pashinyan were edged out of power. Russian trust in the Armenian prime minister, who gained power through a 2018 popular uprising, is very low.

Despite the new presence of peacekeepers, it remains unclear to what extent Armenia can rely on Russian protection. Russia had previously extended defensive guarantees to Armenia through a 1997 bilateral agreement as well as its membership in the multilateral Collective Security Treaty Organisation, but neither proved to be of significance during the recent fighting. Instead of intervening in Armenia's defence, Putin stressed that Russia's

sole obligation is to defend Armenia against attacks on its sovereign territory. In other words, Armenia could not expect support in Nagorno-Karabakh nor in other occupied Azerbaijani territories.

RUSSIA'S NEW MILITARY POSTURE

Already before the second Karabakh War, Russia had three military bases in the region: the 102nd military base in Gyumri in western Armenia and two bases in Russian-backed breakaway regions of Georgia: the 4th in South Ossetia and the 7th in Abkhazia. These bases are combined-arms brigade-size units, which, in theory, jointly constitute the core of an army corps, although no such command structure is apparent.

Following the 9 November deal, Russia now also has peacekeepers on the ground in Nagorno-Karabakh, something it has sought since 1994. In fact, Russia has not had a military presence in Azerbaijan since the closure of the Soviet-era Gabala radar station, in 2012. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan previously rejected the deployment of Russian peacekeepers, and Moscow, Washington, and Paris were formerly in general agreement that any monitoring or peacekeeping group should be drawn from the OSCE states, but not from the Minsk Group's co-chairs nor a neighbour of Armenia and Azerbaijan. That formula, which excluded Russia, no longer applies.

The Russian peacekeepers were initially dispatched to Nagorno-Karabakh from the 102nd military base and have since been complemented by forces from Russia. The peacekeeping force has thus increased Russia's military footprint in the region and added to Moscow's ability to deal with small-scale crises or the initial phases of a local war. It is important, not primarily for its lightly armed soldiers, but for the establishment of a new Russian geographical foothold and the deployment of command and control structures and support resources, including helicopters. However, it is not without risks. Should tensions in this volatile region rise to the point where Turkey or Iran are drawn into a wider conflict, Russia's foothold may prove tenuous. Russian access to the South Caucasus is naturally limited by geography, since military movements across the Greater Caucasus mountain range must primarily pass via three land corridors: along the Black or Caspian Sea coasts, or across the mountains via the Georgia Military Road. Only the bases in Georgia are reachable overland from Russia, and none of these three routes extends to the 102nd military base in Armenia nor to the peacekeeping force in Nagorno-Karabakh. In practice, therefore, Russia

will need either Georgia, Iran, or Azerbaijan to open their territories and air space to supplies, personnel rotations, and potential reinforcements. Given that air and land transports are vulnerable to both political and military adversarial measures, Russian forces are, in some scenarios, at risk of being isolated.

The Greater Caucasus Range may also limit air operations from Russia, by obstructing radar coverage and increasing flight times to areas of operations. However, the Russian Black Sea Fleet and Caspian Flotilla could probably support any Russian operations along the coasts, offering both some air radar coverage and long-range fire support in the form of cruise missiles.

A TURKISH QUEST FOR INFLUENCE

Turkey's exceptionally close relationship to Azerbaijan is built on mutually reinforcing strategic, economic, and Turkic ethno-cultural links, epitomised by the popular slogan "one nation, two states". Turkey has long assisted Azerbaijan's military, both in the form of military aid and for more self-interested reasons: to counter their common enemy, Armenia, while also locking in a receptive market for Turkey's growing military industry. In 2010, Baku and Ankara signed a mutual defence agreement.

Early signs of a stepped-up Turkish role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were on display in July 2020, when Ankara reacted with unusual vehemence to a round of Armenian-Azerbaijani fighting that, in retrospect, foreshadowed the recent war. Ankara vowed to fast-track the delivery of Turkish-manufactured drones to Azerbaijan, which later played a significant role in Azerbaijan's victory.

Turkey also appears to have taken part in planning and preparing for the 27 September fighting. Indeed, multiple sources have reported that Turkey had already begun to recruit Syrian rebel fighters to fight in Nagorno-Karabakh in early September. Although these militia fighters must have been of limited importance in what was, after all, a war between two conventional armies, the Syrians may have been deployed for reasons of deniability or as a low-cost support element for drone operators and other Turkish staff. It is worth noting that Turkey previously used similar tactics in Syria and Libya, including combined deployments of Syrian fighters and Turkish drones. Although

the war was a military victory for the Turkish-backed side and has led, among other things, to the promise of a land corridor connecting Turkey and Azerbaijan through Nakhchivan, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has since voiced some frustration. Ankara claims that its military is set to operate alongside Russia in a "peacekeeping center" that, per the statement, is to "exercise control over the ceasefire." However, the text says nothing about Turkish participation. Through November, Russian and Turkish leaders continued to haggle over how to interpret the ceasefire and unpublished bilateral agreements. While the dispute remained unresolved at the time of writing, Russia appears to have offered Turkey some participation in a monitoring center of unclear relevance, while continuing to resist direct Turkish influence over the new conflict arrangements.

CONCLUSIONS

The second Nagorno-Karabakh war was fought between two Soviet-style forces, not too different in size, but one of them significantly more modernised. Azerbaijan's modern weaponry appears to have been decisive in securing an Armenian defeat, although the Russian-brokered 9 November agreement effectively re-froze the conflict in five-year instalments, rather than ending it.

For Armenia, the war was a clear defeat, and Yerevan's ability to implement the agreement may be diminished by political turbulence. For Azerbaijan, by contrast, the war was a victory that allowed the country to retake significant territory and may help resolve a longstanding displacement crisis, while Baku retains the upper hand militarily. However, both Azerbaijan and Armenia now have to contend with the direct involvement of Russian peacekeepers, something they were previously unwilling to permit.

For Russia, the continuation of a frozen conflict offers political benefits and creates a platform for a peacekeeping mission that Moscow has long sought. The agreement also serves Russia's interests in other ways, notably by sidelining Western influence via the OSCE Minsk Group in the conflict resolution. The impact on Russian-Turkish relations is less clear, except in that Nagorno-Karabakh now serves as yet another unresolved conflict where Moscow and Ankara may interface, either as rivals or partners. ■

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