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# The Next Surge of Conflict in the South Caucasus Is Still Preventable

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Picture: Last Armenians from Karabakh arrive to Kornidzor, September 30, 2023 © Ashley Chan/SOPA Images/Shutterstock.com

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The tragic exodus of the Armenian population from the Nagorno Karabakh region has closed a chapter in the long saga of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The disappearance of this self-proclaimed republic provides the opportunity to bring these bitter hostilities to an end; it takes, nevertheless, plenty of wishful political thinking to believe that a peace treaty could be swiftly negotiated. Mutual animosity is a profound, but not necessarily insurmountable obstacle. The greater problem is that it is hard to expect from Azerbaijan, ruled by the hereditary autocratic regime of President Ilham Aliyev, a magnanimity in victory. Pushing the defeated adversary further yet and maximizing the damage is much more in the nature of this regime, rendering the prevention of a new spasm of armed conflict an urgent task for all stakeholders in peace in the South Caucasus.

The fate of Nagorno Karabakh was predetermined by the outcome of the 44-day long air-land battle in autumn 2020, in which the Armenian forward defense positions were breached, leading to the capture of Shusha, a key stronghold in the rugged theater of operations, by the Azeri forces. In that triumph, Aliyev showed strategic patience and accepted the Russian offer of a ceasefire. Much in the same way he calculated the right moment for starting the offensive operation, he assumed a total victory was inevitable in a matter of a few years, lessening the need to push forward with the military conquest of the whole enclave. The timeframe for the Russian peacekeeping operation was set on

five years, but Russia's aggression against Ukraine made it possible for Azerbaijan to force the closure of the postponed final act of geopolitical drama two years beforehand.

It is futile to look for a direct connection between the wars in Ukraine and in the South Caucasus, but the start of the former, with Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, altered the political context of the latter. The escalation of violent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan at the start of the 1990s was one of the peripheral ruptures caused by the generally peaceful breakdown of the Soviet Union, and the determination of the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh to secede from Azerbaijan was perceived by many international observers (who at that time did not qualify as stakeholders) as a case of national self-determination. Russia, which in the early 1990s managed to negotiate and enforce ceasefires in chaotic hostilities in Moldova and Georgia, was seen as a natural external manager for this conflict, and the ceasefire was indeed agreed upon in May 1994, though no peacekeeping force was deployed. Moscow had few doubts selling arms to both parties of the smoldering conflict, but Azerbaijan was able to diversify its military modernization by importing high-tech arms systems from Turkey and Israel. Twenty years later, not only did Russia's role become dubious due to its grab of Ukrainian lands, but also the occupation by Armenian forces of vast territory in Azerbaijan beyond Nagorno Karabakh was then perceived as crude aggression.

Yerevan remained blind to these changes, and also underestimated the shift in Moscow's attitude following the 2018 "Velvet Revolution" in Armenia. For President Vladimir Putin, who positions himself as a champion of the counter-revolution cause, every step Armenia took in upholding democratic institutions became a personal challenge warranting punishment. In Baku, on the contrary, both the changed context of the old but never solidly "frozen" conflict and Russia's altered stance were assessed carefully, so the opportunity to deliver a decisive blow for breaking the seemingly immovable deadlock around Nagorno Karabakh was identified and exploited to the maximum. International mediators, who maintained that a military solution to this entrenched conflict was impossible, were proven wrong.

Moscow was also surprised by the collapse of the habitual and exploitable structure of irreconcilable conflict, and it appears probable that Russia's assessments of the balance of forces in the General Staff were influenced by Armenian confidence in its impregnable defensive positions. What the Russian military and policy planners had underestimated most of all, prior to the surprise Azerbaijani offensive (that they are still having trouble digesting), was the strength of the security cooperation between Azerbaijan and Turkey, as well as the readiness of the Turkish leadership for proactive engagement with the South Caucasus. The Kremlin presumed that its initiative in terminating the active phase of hostilities in November 2020 and the deployment of the Russian peacekeeping force would restore its dominant role in the region, only to be proven wrong once again. The failure of Russian peacekeepers to deliver humanitarian aid to Nagorno Karabakh during the nine month-long blockade since the start of 2023 proved the irrelevance of this operation, and Baku is now in a perfect position to prompt its discontinuation.

Turkey's role in the South Caucasus has gained new prominence since the start of the war in Ukraine, as Moscow is compelled to go to great lengths in order to uphold its strategic partnership with Ankara. Turkey has played the balancing act very skillfully, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan assumed that his key role in negotiating the "grain deal" in July 2022 would lead to his ascension to the role of mediator. Putin's decision to cancel that deal in July 2023 was seen in Ankara as a bargaining tool, and it was only at the meeting in Sochi on September 4<sup>th</sup> that Erdoğan discovered that the agreement was beyond rescue. Two weeks later, Azerbaijan delivered the final blow to the rump Nagorno Karabakh, and while Aliyev made his own calculations in terms of timing, conspiracy is typically the prevalent pattern of thinking in the Kremlin, thus making a retribution by Erdoğan likely for Putin's uncompromising stance.

The forceful elimination of the Nagorno Karabakh autonomy by Azerbaijan was definitely a setback for Russia, but one proposition Moscow is certain about is that the conflict in the South Caucasus is far from over. Many international stakeholders tend to assume that the removal of the long-festered core of the conflict opens opportunities

for a peace process, but the Russian leadership believes that its ability to keep Armenia anchored to its security structures, ensured by the continuation of Russia's military presence on its territory, depends on the unfolding of a new phase of the old conflict. The focal point has shifted to the Zangezur region, where Armenia borders Iran.

The geopolitical issue with this region is that it separates the main territory of Azerbaijan from the Nakhichevan enclave, which has a small (just 17 kilometers long) but crucially important border with Turkey. Baku has long cherished the vision of a transport corridor to this province and managed to insert a point on its implementation into the ceasefire agreement of November 2020. Yerevan had to accept this proposal, hoping that it would ensure survival of the curtailed autonomy for Nagorno Karabakh (which no longer exists), but never agreed on the condition of “extraterritoriality”, which implies ceding control over this as of now hypothetical transport route. Azerbaijan and Turkey could now join efforts to pressure Armenia in the hopes of maximizing gains from its military defeat and political isolation.

A large-scale military offensive by Azerbaijan might seem too ambitious, not least because it would constitute – unlike the establishment of full control over Nagorno Karabakh – an act of aggression and a violation of Armenia's territorial integrity. Azerbaijan, nevertheless, is not only advancing a discourse on its “historic rights” to Zangezur and the “voluntarist character” of old Soviet borders. It has also executed several incursions into Armenian territory in the course of hostilities, while Armenia has been very cautious not to put any pressure on Nakhichevan, which is a “home ground” for the Aliyev political clan.

Preventing this transformation of conflict from an externally supported secession to an inter-state war over territory is a difficult and urgent task, and Yerevan cannot count on support from Moscow in working on it. Russia will be interested primarily in ensuring its control over the as of now hypothetical “extraterritorial corridor” across the Zangezur region by deploying a grouping of military and border guard forces. In case of a large-scale offensive by Azerbaijan, the Russian 102<sup>nd</sup> military base in Gyimri would probably remain “neutral”, so that in the post-conflict phase, it would be conveniently positioned to provide “peacekeepers”.

Rushing forward with the new military operation may seem out of Aliyev's character, as he had carefully prepared every previous strike and waited patiently for the right moment. The stalemate in the trenches of Russo-Ukrainian war does not quite fit into the risk-opportunity calculations, but a possible Ukrainian breakthrough toward Tokmak, for instance, may be recognized as a useful opening. Erdoğan is also attentively monitoring the flow of combat operations, particularly on the maritime Black Sea theater, and will evaluate the response in Moscow to the international conference on promoting peace plans for Ukraine, scheduled to take place in Istanbul in late October 2023.

A new impact that may resonate in the South Caucasus is the war in the Gaza Strip caused by the massive attack by the Hamas terrorists on Israel. This escalation focuses international attention to such extraordinary degree, that Baku may assume its invasion to be barely noticed. Such calculations may be underpinned by the fact that the exodus of Armenians from Nagorno Karabakh has not produced a lasting impression on Western policymaking nor on public opinion. Dissuasion – if applied convincingly and consistently by a broad coalition of external actors (including even Iran) – can work for deterring this escalation. Conflict prevention is a political endeavor that the European Union is supposed to be good at, and its closer engagement with the fledgling democracy in Armenia combined with its cultivation of energy ties with Azerbaijan might make a difference in keeping the geopolitical rivalries in check.