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The End of the Second Karabakh War: Has a Lasting Peace Come to the South Caucasus?

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Introduction

In a year in which the whole world seemed to have frozen its conflicts, uniting its efforts to curb the COVID-19 pandemic, a war broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions in Azerbaijan. This was a full-scale armed conflict involving two nations in the South Caucasus, but unlike the first Karabakh war that lasted for more than six years, this war lasted only six weeks. Mainly due to modern warfare and deployment of new sophisticated technology,

namely unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) by Azerbaijan, a long war of attrition was avoided. Thus, the second war caused a significantly lower destruction of properties and cultural sites in this region of rich history on the crossroads between Asia and Europe, the Caspian and the Black Sea. The short duration of this war also insured that no big players neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan get directly involved on either of the two warring sides, which could have had incomprehensible consequences for

the international community. This is because the countries neighboring the conflict area are substantively different comparatively to what they were in the first half of the nineties when the first Karabakh war took place. Firstly, to the north, Russia was then a country facing disintegration and social implosion, with its military in disarray, unable to quell a rebellion in its small republic of Chechnya in the North Caucasus. Today, Russia is the second military force in the world, spreading its political and military clout far beyond its borders. Secondly, to the west, Turkey has become a major political power in the region, assertive and ambitious, the size of its military is second only to that of the US in NATO. Thirdly, to the south, Iran which was by late eighties a country weary of conflicts after a long war with Iraq, is today a regional power wielding its leverage in most of the Middle East. Considering this, the second war in Karabakh had a potential of erupting to a wider regional conflict, and considering the players involved, even into a global conflict. However, while Europe was introducing a second wave of lockdowns in order to grind to a halt the coronavirus, and while the US was embroiled in the presidential election campaign, shattered by an unprecedented economic slump and civil unrest, the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan erupted without much attention of the international community. When the conflict finally started

to gain the interest of the world, it rapidly ended, leaving the international community once again perplexed. Has the ceasefire agreement signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan on November 9 brought a lasting peace to the South Caucasus, or is the truce just temporary, freezing the conflict for yet another round of hostilities?

Prelude to the war

The second Karabakh war that broke out on 27 September 2020 is merely the ultimate phase of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, that erupted into the first Karabakh war from 1988 till 1994, and which was simmering ever since. The first war between the two countries broke out three years before the collapse of the USSR in 1991, when it was evident that the Soviet Union would disintegrate. Along with brutal wars in the North Caucasus - in Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia, the Transnistrian war, and the war in Tajikistan that took tens of thousands of human lives, it proves that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was by no means peaceful, as sometimes incorrectly presented. In the first Karabakh war the Armenians had the upper hand, and over the six-year period they managed to steadfastly rout the Azerbaijanis, occupying around 16% of their country.

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At the end of the first war, Armenian seized control of not just Nagorno-Karabakh region, which had a status of an autonomous region within Azerbaijan, but also seven other regions surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to the south and the west, populated mostly by Azeri population. These regions around Nagorno-Karabakh were vital for the formation of the breakaway state that the Armenians call the Republic of “Artsakh”, as it served as a connecting zone between Nagorno-Karabakh and the Republic of Armenia. The loss of the city of Shusha in Nagorno-Karabakh, which has a special place in Azerbaijani culture and history, and the loss of these adjacent regions was particularly painful for Azerbaijanis, as after the 1994 ceasefire agreement they had to take care about a million refugees and internally displaced persons. Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis lost thousands of people, both combatants and civilians, but in the end the Armenian expelled the Azerbaijanis. The war dragged for more than six years, and the international community was unwilling to get involved. Europe was mostly focused on the war that followed the break-up of Yugoslavia, and the US did not want to meddle in the post-Soviet republics, but rather focused

on establishing relations with Russia, while planning the enlargement of NATO in Eastern Europe.

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However, Armenian success in the first Karabakh war was never met with the international approval, and “Artsakh” was never internationally recognized. At the same time, the Azerbaijan never came to terms with the fact that more than 16% of its territory was occupied, and ever since 1994 the main political, military and economic goal of Azerbaijan was to reintegrate the Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions under its control. Thus, right after the ceasefire agreement was signed that ended the first war, preparation had started for a future conflict. With the occupation of Azerbaijani territory after the 1988-1994 war another frozen conflict emerged, along with the other Post-Soviet conflicts in Moldova, North Caucasus and Central Asia. These conflicts were followed by the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, and Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014, and these countries have still frozen conflicts on their territories to present day.

Russia as the peace broker between Armenia and Azerbaijan

In years that followed, the frozen conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been taking a fierier course as the clashes broke out in a number of occasions along the line of contact between the two sides, most perilously in 2016. Throughout 26 years since the 1994 ceasefire, the international community has been manifesting its willingness to resolve this situation, but mainly declaratory. Even during the first Karabakh war in 1992 the OSCE formed the Minsk Group to resolve the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Group was co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States. Notwithstanding, all the attempts of the Minsk Group were futile and managed only to keep the conflict frozen rather than to bring the genuine peace agreement appeasing both Armenia and Azerbaijan. The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Resolution 62/243, under the title „The Situation in the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan”, and it demanded “immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of all Armenian forces from all the occupied territories of Azerbaijan,” but this UN resolution took no effect, as in many other cases around the world.

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Years passed with no progress, and occasional clashes kept taking a heavy toll in human lives. After 1994 agreement, ceasefire was breached over 7,000 times, indicating that the armed conflict was inevitable. The situation for a new war seasoned in autumn this year. After years of numerous clashes between the two sides along the line of contact, Azerbaijan decided to take a decisive action to take control over its occupied territories. The political situation in the world was ideal for launching an assault against Armenian forces in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. With Russia focused on protests in Belarus, frozen conflict in Ukraine and war in Syria, Azerbaijan felt that the big northern neighbor would be reluctant to intervene. This was of crucial importance for Azerbaijan, as Russia has a considerable influence on Armenia, and both Russia and Armenia are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Like its Western counterpart NATO, CSTO perceives an attack on one state as an act of aggression against all member states. Russia has also established a big military base in the second biggest Armenian city Gyumri. However, after the hostilities broke out on 27 September,

Russia clearly stated that it would not intervene in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions of Azerbaijan, in other words that it would only intervene if the territory of the Republic of Armenia was invaded.

Azerbaijan procured Turkish “Bayraktar TB-2” and Israeli “Hermes 900” drones, and these weapons turned the tide of war on its side.

Azeri troops swept swiftly through the territory separating Nagorno-Karabakh from Iran and Armenia, in attempt to cut off Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenian supply routes and then to encroach on the region in a final assault. Azerbaijan’s population and GDP respectively are threefold bigger in comparison to Armenia, allowing Azerbaijan to build up and modernize its military. Azerbaijan procured Turkish “Bayraktar TB-2” and Israeli “Hermes 900” drones, and these weapons turned the tide of war on its side, as Armenian armed vehicles and tanks proved obsolete and effectively defenseless against Azeri UAVs. By mid-October, Azerbaijani closed in on Lachin pass, a mountain corridor connecting the breakaway Armenian state and the Republic of Armenia. This was a stalemate, and when on 8 November Azerbaijanis took control over the city of Shusha in Nagorno-Karabakh, the position of “Artsakh” was untenable. Nonetheless, just a day later

on 9 November, the international community was once again taken by surprise as Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia.

South Caucasus cornered between regional powers

Russia stepped in at a moment it perceived most opportune, and in order to prevent a melee combat around and in Stepanakert (Azerbaijani Khankendi, renamed in 1923 after the Bolshevik revolutionary Stepan Shaumian), the largest city in Nagorno-Karabakh. By brokering a ceasefire agreement signed by the President of Russia Vladimir Putin, the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and the Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan, Russia also wanted to show to the region and to the world that it is still the dominant power in the South Caucasus. Russia’s control in the Caucasus, be it North or South, is decisive in order to establish itself in the region that connects the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea and the Middle East. By controlling the Caucasus, Russia controls the energy routes connecting one of the biggest energy reservoirs in the world with Central Asia on one side and Europe on the other.

Russia now has a foothold in all three states in the South Caucasus, and its leverage is even stronger than before the war broke out.

The ceasefire agreement envisages that Agdam, Kalbajar and Lachin Districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh are to be evacuated by Armenia, but also invokes deploying almost two thousand Russian troops in Nagorno-Karabakh for a five-year period, but with no defined cession to control of Azerbaijan. This means that Russian troops will be based on Azerbaijani territory, dividing Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh from Azeris. As Russia is effectively supporting the *de facto* independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia, and with its military facilities already in Armenia, this means that Russia now has a foothold in all three states in the South Caucasus, and that its leverage is even stronger than before the war broke out. However, things are still all but complex in this region. Turkey emerged as another dominant power in the South Caucasus, and its political support and arms sales were indispensable for Azerbaijan. Without Turkey's support, Azerbaijan would probably have never embarked on a military campaign that could have also backfired in a region of extremely important geostrategic location as South Caucasus. It seems that strong presence of Russia and Turkey persuaded Iran to stay out of the game. But more significantly, the West was left outside of the events that occurred during the war and led to the ceasefire agreement. Although France and the US are co-chairs of the Minsk Group, they did not get involved in

the second Karabakh war, by supporting either of the belligerents, or by getting involved in peace brokering. France and the US host big Armenian diaspora, but the Élysée Palace and the White House decided not to meddle in the conflict. Some criticism of Azerbaijani offensive did occur among a number of French MPs and American politicians, but this can mainly be attributed to shattered relations between Turkey and the West. It is yet to be seen how Turkish support to Azerbaijan will affect Turkey's relations with the US under the administration of the President-elect Joe Biden, and whether NATO allies will demand from Turkey to retract and restrain from further fomenting its leverage in its neighborhood.

It is evident that after the second Karabakh war Turkey once again emerged as a key regional power that needs to be taken into account in the South Caucasus.

Further to this, it is still not clear whether Turkish troops will be deployed in Azerbaijan as peacekeepers, along Russian troops. Azerbaijan is a staunch advocate of greater Turkish involvement, while Armenia, due to its traditional animosity with this country, is anxious about any Turkish presence. Whatever

part Turkey takes in the peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh, it is evident that after the second Karabakh war Turkey once again emerged as a key regional power that needs to be taken into account in the South Caucasus. At the same time Western policies turned futile and ineffective. All of the six countries involved in the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative face either massive civil unrests, and isolation, or have to cope with frozen conflicts on their territories.

Conclusion

The second Karabakh war took the international community by surprise and unprepared, but it also ended relatively quickly, in just 6 weeks. Although this war took both civilian and military casualties on both sides, it was much less brutal than the first war in Karabakh. Still, atrocities against civilians did occur. In Armenia's ballistic missile attacks on the Azerbaijani city of Ganja, with Tochka and Scud missiles, almost 30 civilians lost their lives, although Ganja is located around 100 kilometers away from the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijani city of Barda was also attacked by BM-30 Smerch missiles, banned weapons designed to inflict heavy casualties on manpower. Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh and the regions around

it is also faced with deprivation, as Armenians are not willing to remain in Agdam, Kalbajar and Lachin Districts that will be controlled by Azerbaijanis. After the first war in Karabakh Azeris were expelled from these regions by the Armenians. Now, in the aftermath of the 2020 Karabakh war many Armenians are burning their own houses, properties and even forests before fleeing these regions, rather than leaving it under the Azerbaijani control. Still, Azerbaijan rightly sees this war as its victory as it will regain control of a major part of its territory that has been occupied by Armenians for almost three decades. While the Azeris celebrated in the streets of Baku and other cities, the territorial losses of the Armenians stirred massive protests in Yerevan, where the Speaker of the Parliament and even the Prime Minister Pashinyan were targeted by the mob. It is yet to be seen how Armenian society will cope with the loss of territories in Karabakh, and with the fact that Azerbaijan will be granted a corridor connecting its mainland to the Nakhichevan exclave. On the other side, the Azeris allowed the Russian troops to be present on their turf, and considering the strength and size of the Russian army, many fear that this presence is here to stay for a long time. However, taking all factors into account, it seems that the foundation for peace and stability has been laid in the Caucasus, if not a lasting one, then at least in years to come.

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