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07

2023

Unresolved Conflict in the Shadow of Ukraine War: Is South Caucasus Coming Closer to a Lasting Peace?

By Krševan Antun Dujmović and Peter Marko Tase

Introduction

The Second Karabakh War, which was ended by a ceasefire agreement signed in November 2020, reshaped the geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus, with resounding effect felt in Europe and the Middle East. The breakaway region of Karabakh, also known as Nagorno-Karabakh especially during the Soviet times (hence the Russian attributive adjective

“nagorny”), had also gone through a war between 1988 and 1994. In this First Karabakh War, the Armenian forces had prevailed, thus gaining control over Karabakh, a historical region within the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan with mixed Armenian and Azerbaijani population. Furthermore, Armenia had also gained control over the

nearby districts standing between Karabakh and the Republic of Armenia by the end of the First War. The outcome of the First Karabakh War was particularly painful for Azerbaijan as it brought hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons to other parts of Azerbaijan, and created yet another frozen conflict in the post-Soviet area. Ever since the defeat in 1994, Azerbaijan has been striving to regain control over Karabakh, by either diplomatic or military means.

The Second Karabakh War that took a month and a half in the fall of 2020, was a totally different conflict. The Armed Forces of Azerbaijan had orchestrated a spectacular military campaign that embraced effective counter offensive attacks, mustered intelligence collection and showed great levels of expertise in the use of cutting-edge military technology. With its population and economy outmatching Armenia in a 3:1 ratio, Azerbaijan has opted for a clean and rapid military campaign, using modern military equipment, technology and tactics. Notwithstanding, the successful military campaign of Azerbaijan was not crowned with a peace treaty, but rather a ceasefire with Armenia, under the brokerage of the Russian Federation. In the light of new threats to European security, democracy and human rights, the stalemate in Southern Caucasus between Armenia and Azerbaijan represents a

principal factor of hinderance for the economic development and democratic institutions in the region of South Caucasus.

Still, recent events are leading to a possible just solution which would bring a lasting peace in the region. The Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has stated in May this year that his country is ready to recognize the disputed region of Karabakh as part of neighboring Azerbaijan under certain conditions, a compromise that could help end a decades-old conflict and revive an impoverished region. A month later Pashinyan has added that the Second Karabakh War in 2020 could have been avoided if Yerevan had recognized Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. Pashinyan shared these thoughts at a meeting of the parliamentary commission in the Armenian capital Yerevan summoned to investigate the circumstances of the Karabakh war. Still, these are only indications that Armenia is willing to make a major breakthrough. With the unfolding Russian aggression against another ex-Soviet Republic Ukraine, it remains to be seen whether genuine peace can eventually return to the south Caucasus.

Position of Armenia during and after the Second Karabakh War

Recent events in the south Caucasus, where

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced in May 2023 that Armenia is willing to recognize Azerbaijan within its internationally recognized borders, including the parts of the still occupied Karabakh region, have turned the attention of the global community to this region. Prior to the Second Karabakh War in 2020 it was evident that Armenian PM Pashinyan maintained perplexing difference between his rhetoric and actions. His country did nothing to avoid war, on the contrary, his administration resorted to provocations, convinced that any future military conflict would have ended just like the First Karabakh War. However, the Armenians would be caught by surprise when they received a series of bold responses from Azerbaijan Armed Forces, who were in 2020 on a much higher level of readiness, compared to the first conflict.

Armenian PM Pashinyan maintained perplexing difference between his rhetoric and actions.

On 13 April 2022, Pashinyan stated in front of the members of Armenian National Assembly: “I should be blamed not for handing over the lands, but for not doing it sooner.” Pashinyan stated on a press conference that “any recognition by Yerevan of Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan would be dependent on

guaranteeing the rights and security of ethnic Armenians living in the mountainous region.” Pashinyan also admitted the fact of misleading the public about the status of peace negotiations prior to the Second Karabakh War. According to Pashinyan the status of “Nagorno-Karabakh is not a territorial claim but rather a matter of “rights.” The Armenian PM added that he is to be blamed for not “directly” communicating with the Armenian public and telling them that before the Second Karabakh War, the negotiations over Karabakh primarily included the return to Azerbaijan of seven surrounding districts that had been taken by Armenian Armed Forces in the First Karabakh War.

On 27 September 2020, the Armenian Forces launched a attack against Azerbaijani army.

On 27 September 2020, the Armenian Armed Forces launched a large-scale military attack against the positions of the Azerbaijani army on the front line, using large-caliber weapons, mortars, and artillery. Immediately the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan responded with a counter-offensive along the entire front; conducting successful operations and utilizing precision-guided munitions launched by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), purchased by Azerbaijan from the military technology companies in Türkiye,

including the Baykar company, producer of Bayraktar strike drone. Immediately after the war, Azerbaijan has pushed Armenia to sign the surrender document. A joint statement on the matter was made by the Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev, Armenia's PM Pashinyan, and the president of Russia Vladimir Putin, and the three have signed a ceasefire treaty on 9 November 2020, becoming effective the very next day.

US and Turkish position during and after the conflict

This region has a vital geostrategic position as it borders Russia, which is still conducting a military campaign against Ukraine, in the biggest armed conflict in Europe after 1945, and Türkiye, a key country between Asia, the Middle East and Europe, holding one of the biggest militaries in the North Atlantic Alliance. For the Biden Administration Azerbaijan is an important geopolitical asset and is an important strategic regional partner. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has prioritized the recent political and international developments in the Caucasus, while Azerbaijan has demonstrated to be a reliable American partner. Therefore, the US Government has decided to host and infuse a trilateral dialogue with the government of Azerbaijan and Armenia. Washington, under the administration of President Trump,

has been somewhat reluctant to take the leadership in the South Caucasus. However, the administration of President Biden has invested effort to bring the Armenia - Azerbaijan conflict to the center stage of international politics.

*For Biden Administration
Azerbaijan is an important
strategic regional partner.*

On 1 May 2023, the ministers of foreign affairs of Armenia and Azerbaijan met in Washington for another round of talks hosted by the US that were aimed at hammering out a peace agreement between the two South Caucasus nations locked in a protracted conflict over Karabakh. Before the meeting of foreign ministers Armenia's Ararat Mirzoyan and Azerbaijan's Jeyhun Bayramov met separately with Antony Blinken, who had earlier expressed Washington's continued support for the Armenia - Azerbaijan peace efforts. These discussions, perhaps would never have taken place, had the Second Karabakh War never happened. The military - political structure of Azerbaijan, the strategic and technological support provided by Türkiye and highly skilled personnel of Azerbaijan Armed Forces, made possible the formidable conduct during the Second Karabakh War from September till November 2020. The swift Azerbaijani military

campaign attracted a growing attention of the US and EU diplomacy.

Armenia's Ararat Mirzoyan and Azerbaijan's Jeyhun Bayramov met with Antony Blinken.

The most important geopolitical competitors of the US are exerting unbridled influence in the outskirts of East Europe, and Washington is aware of these unprecedented moves while a peace treaty between Azerbaijan and Armenia is more important than ever for Yerevan. This peace treaty between both countries is indeed a pending geo-strategic matter that has attracted serious attention of the transatlantic partners as its protracted tendencies hinder NATO's military - intelligence operations in other strategic flanks of Europe.

The impact of the ongoing war in Ukraine on the situation in the South Caucasus

Looking at the recent statements of the Armenian PM, one can justifiably ask himself as what convinced Pashinyan to reproach Azerbaijan? After decades of conflict and harsh rivalry between Armenia and Azerbaijan, officials in Baku and abroad, namely Brussels and Washington, question the sincerity of Pashinyan's statements. It also needs to be

stressed that back in Armenia the continuing occupation and control over parts of Karabakh still enjoys a wide support of various parts of Armenian society. If Pashinyan continues to pursue the agenda of recognition of Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan, large parts of Armenian society would probably be enticed to protest, or even obstruct Pashinyan's moves, or more, question his premiership. After years of intense fighting and decades of frozen conflict, which have temporarily been erupting to a series of low-scale military faceoffs between the two major wars, one can only speculate on Pashinyan's intentions of rapprochement with Azerbaijan.

The 2020 armistice on 9 November 2020 has been struck under the patronage of the Kremlin.

With the ongoing military aggression of Russia against Ukraine, it is very likely that these moves and occurrences in the south Caucasus and inextricably entangled with the war in Ukraine. Armenian government is worried that both in cases of Russian success or failure in Ukraine, south Caucasus could be their next target. In case of Russian victory, which after more than 500 days of war looks day after day less likely, Moscow would certainly feel emboldened to press its rights in different corners of the

former Soviet Empire, including the South Caucasus. The 2020 armistice on 9 November 2020 has been struck under the patronage of the Kremlin, and Russian troops have ever since been deployed on the demarcation line in Karabakh, dividing the Azerbaijani forces from Armenians separatists. Furthermore, Russian forces are deployed in the Republic of Armenia, holding a major military base near the Armenian city of Gyumri. Russia is also controlling two breakaway provinces, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, that are formally part of the third South Caucasian Republic of Georgia. With its military forces deployed basically on all major strategic points in both Russian Northern Caucasus and in the South Caucasus, Russia would be confident in its swift move aimed at undermining its dominance in the region.

On the other side, in case of a Russian defeat in Ukraine, which seems to be looming over the Kremlin, Russia could be seeking other targets of its geostrategic ambitions, which have during the Ukraine war opted fully for military rather than diplomatic tools or economic leverage. Russia is already showing its intentions to resort to military resources in the territories of the former Russian and Soviet Empires, with saber-rattling stretching between the Baltic States to the five post-Soviet Central Asian states. For all of these reasons, we have to put the situation in the south Caucasus in the

context of war in Ukraine and draw a parallel in actions taken by Russia in different corners of the ex-Soviet Union. These parts include Moldova and Ukraine in the West, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the south, and Central Asian countries in the East. These post-Soviet republics are a part of the unstable zone at the rim of the Russian Federation, where Moscow is using a range of tools, in some cases using covert actions, in other overt military aggression, in order to regain control of this zone. Considering this, it is not incomprehensible to perceive a stronger military posture or even involvement in the south Caucasus, and hence the Armenian rapprochement with Azerbaijan and the Western powers.

Türkiye has carved its way to become a dominant regional player.

In assessment of Pashinyan's statements, Türkiye's role is also to be considered. In the past, and especially during the Second Karabakh War, Türkiye has carved its way to become a dominant regional player, with equal or even stronger leverage in the south Caucasus than Russia. Armenians are fully aware of this situation and try to make a rapprochement with Türkiye as well, while being aware of the strong bond between Azerbaijan and Türkiye,

and that the way to brokering a genuine peace deal with Baku goes over Ankara. Armenia has already demonstrated its willingness to make a thaw in relations with its old rival Türkiye. In February this year, Armenia jumped in to send humanitarian help to Türkiye after the earthquakes that had devastated a vast swathe in the south of the country, and a month later the two countries have announced their intention to reopen, at least partially, their land border.

Conclusion

The prolongation of the occupation of parts of Karabakh that are still under control of the Armenian separatists seems less and less likely to be in favor of Yerevan as time passes by. After Azerbaijan seized back control of the districts on its territory, standing between Karabakh and the Republic of Armenia in the Second Karabakh War, only a narrow corridor in Lachin stands as a connection between Armenians in Armenia and Armenian separatists. Furthermore, this fragile and for Armenians vital connection, which brings in fuel, medicines and food supplies to Armenians that still withstand in Karabakh, is under the constant strain of Azerbaijani protestors who block the access road. Azerbaijan claims that the protestors are there due to the illegal logging and exploitation of natural resources located in Karabakh, while

Armenians believe this is yet another attempt of Baku to put pressure on the separatists.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has also convinced the international community, primarily the EU and the US, that unresolved and frozen conflicts on the rim of Europe are a threat to European security. Furthermore, with the EU decoupling from heavy dependence on Russian fossil fuels, the importance of Azerbaijan for the energy security of Europe is growing. Azerbaijan lies on the oil and gas reach Caspian Sea and is exporting gas via TANAP and TAP pipelines to the EU, making the country a vital source of energy in Europe's attempts to diversify its energy sources and step away from Russia. The importance of energy supplies coming from the Caspian Sea, over the south Caucasus and Türkiye to Europe, and the importance for the overall security structure of Transatlantic community, will entice both Washington and Brussels to get further involved in order to bring a just and lasting peace deal between Azerbaijan and Armenia. This peace deal however, can only be achieved with the unwavering abiding to the rules of international law and with the respect of territorial integrity of every country.

Krševan Antun Dujmović is a Senior Associate at the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO).

Peter Marko Tase is a senior adviser to the Global Engineering Deans Council at the George Mason University in Virginia, United States.

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Institut za razvoj i međunarodne odnose
Institute for Development and International Relations

 **Hanns
Seidel
Stiftung**

Ured u Zagrebu

Institute for Development and International
Relations - IRMO
Lj. F. Vukotinovića 2, Zagreb, Croatia
www.irmo.hr

Hanns Seidel Stiftung
Amruševa 9, Zagreb, Croatia
www.hanns-seidel-stiftung.com.hr