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RUSSIA AND THE CONFLICTS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: PERSPECTIVES FROM ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN

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ANALYSIS

Russia in the South Caucasus: Armenia, Artsakh, and the Developing New World Order

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Abstract

The article analyzes Russia's role and interests in the South Caucasus. It discusses Armenian–Russian relations in the framework of Armenia's so-called multi-vector foreign policy and presents the main aspects of cooperation. This is followed by a discussion of the Second Artsakh War, its transformative impact on the strategic security environment in the South Caucasus, and Russia's new role in the region. The article concludes by presenting some of Russia's approaches to Armenia and Armenia–Azerbaijan relations and suggesting ways of bringing a durable peace to the region.

Introduction: Russia in the South Caucasus

The developing new world order directly impacts regional security landscapes in various parts of the globe. The South Caucasus is no exception. The Second Artsakh War has clearly demonstrated that the geopolitical landscape has been undergoing gradual transformation, with the strengthening of some traditional actors, the weakening of others, and the arrival on the scene of new forces.

Russia has been one of the main actors in the South Caucasus for centuries. Today, its policy toward the region is based on comprehensive and full-scale political, geopolitical, military, economic, and cultural relations. Russia constructs its relations with the South Caucasus on both a bilateral and a multilateral basis. Multilateral relations include the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the idea of Greater Eurasia.

This is demonstrated by the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (2015), the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2016), and the newly ratified National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (2021), as well as other public strategic documents, articles, and interviews by Moscow and/or Russian scholars and experts.

The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation of 2015, under the article on strategic stability and equal strategic partnership, states that one of the main directions of Russia's foreign policy is the development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the CIS member-states, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. It goes on to emphasize that Russia is developing the potential of regional and sub-regional integration and coordination in the CIS area in the framework of the CIS, the CSTO, the EEU, and the Union State of Russia and Belarus. It says that Russia stands for the transformation of the CSTO into a universal international organization that can counter regional challenges of military-political and military-strategic character, as well as threats in the information domain. At the same time, the Strategy outlines that the formation of the EEU inaugurated a new stage of Eurasian integration. It states that Russia will make every possible effort to contribute to the strengthening of the Union, with the goals of achieving further integration, stable development, comprehensive modernization, and cooperation, as well as improving the economic competitiveness of the member-states (Strategy 2015).

The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation takes a similar approach to Russia's foreign and security policy toward the region. The Concept touches upon conflicts in the post-Soviet space and states that Russia actively stands for political-diplomatic resolution of the Transnistrian and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts in particular (Concept 2016).

In July 2021 Russia published its new National Security Strategy, which sheds more light on its perception of current security threats and challenges, as well as its interests in the South Caucasus. The South Caucasus has no separate reference in the Strategy. However, the countries of the region are mentioned indirectly in Article 101. Paragraph 5 of the Strategy says that Russia's foreign policy priorities are being implemented by "deepening cooperation with the member-states of the Commonwealth of Independent State (CIS), Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on bilateral basis, and in the framework of integration units, primarily EEU, CSTO and the Union State [with Belarus]" (Strategy 2021, p. 40). That paragraph also discusses economic integration and the development of multilateral cooperation in Greater Eurasia (Strategy 2021, p. 40). Paragraphs 30 to 32 of the same article likewise refer to the post-Soviet space and the CIS region, mentioning the revitalization of cooperation in international develop-

ment, the participation in the activities of regional international organizations, mutual economic assistance, and the resolution of social and humanitarian issues, as well as issues connected with the development of new technologies (Strategy 2021, p. 43). Paragraphs 11 and 12 mention "support for the elimination and prevention of the appearance of points of tensions and conflicts on the territory of states neighboring Russia" and "Russia's growing role in peacekeeping" (Strategy 2021, p. 40).

In sum, it can be concluded that Russia sees the South Caucasus as part of the wider CIS area. Moscow is interested in promoting strategic stability and cooperation (political, economic, and geopolitical) in and with the neighborhood, including in the South Caucasus. Finally, the development of the EEU, the CSTO, and the Greater Eurasia concept are top regional priorities for Russia.

Armenian–Russian Relations: Strategic Partnership as Part of a Multivector Foreign Policy Agenda

After gaining independence in 1991 following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Armenia started actively building relations with almost all global and regional powers present in the South Caucasus and beyond, chiefly Russia, the US, the EU, and Iran.

In the early 2000s, Armenian foreign minister Vardan Oskanyan conceptualized this approach as "complementary foreign policy." Later, under third President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan (2008 – 2018), the concept was renamed "multivector foreign policy," but it remained substantively almost the same.

The key idea of both concepts is that Armenia should develop multifaceted cooperation with all centers of power, from Russia and the US to Iran and China.

This approach has been reflected in Armenia's cooperation with NATO and engagement with the EU. Armenia has signed Individual Partnership Action Plans and contributed to NATO's missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo, among other things. In 2009 Armenia joined the EU's Eastern Partnership Program; though it did not sign an Association Agreement in 2013, in 2017 Armenia and the EU agreed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, which came into force in 2020.

However, relations with Russia have held a special place in Armenia's foreign policy since independence. Armenia has been a full member of the Russia-led CSTO (known before 2002 as the Collective Security Treaty), the CIS, and the EEU; Russia also maintains a military base in Armenia with about five thousand soldiers. Economically, Russia—along with the EU—is one of Armenia's main trading partners and sources of foreign direct investment.

April 2018 witnessed the "Velvet Revolution" in Armenia, when street protests resulted in a peaceful transfer of power. The leaders of the "Velvet Revolution" did their best to make it clear both internationally and domestically that the revolution had no geopolitical agenda (Mkrtchyan 2019). The new government continued the multivector foreign policy strategy inherited from previous governments. This was reflected in the new National Security Strategy of Armenia, signed in summer 2020 (Strategy 2020).

Shortly after the revolution, new Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan gave an interview to Russian media outlet *RT* in which he averred: "As I keep saying, there is no geopolitical or foreign policy-related intention in the Armenian Velvet Revolution. And I keep saying there was no geopolitical plot. It was a purely internal process that had to do only with Armenia. This process will not result in a foreign policy U-turn. I say this because the people who made the revolution happen have no problem with the foreign policy of Armenia; there is no demand to change the foreign policy" (EU Relations 2018).

The issue had a special resonance among the Armenian public due to the cases of Georgia and Ukraine. Many in Armenia believed that the Rose and Orange Revolutions (as well as the Euromaidan) had pushed Tbilisi and Kiev to make a geopolitical U-turn toward the West and pursue EU and NATO membership, causing the deterioration of relations with Russia and leading to the Georgian war of 2008 and conflict in Donbas.

Since Russia was (and remains) Armenia's main security guarantor, cooling relations with Russia, many believed, would mean the loss of Artsakh[1] and a direct military threat from Turkey.[2]

Russia and the Second Artsakh War

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan—with the support of Turkey—began a new war against Artsakh, which ended on the night of November 10, 2020, after 44 days. As a result of the war, Artsakh lost a significant portion of its territory, including its cultural center—the city of Shushi—and Hadrud.

The conflict had been frozen since the first Karabakh war of 1992–1994 ended with the Three-Party Ceasefire Agreement of May 1994. The OSCE Minsk Group,

1 Artsakh is the Armenian name for the de facto Nagorno Karabakh Republic, which declared its independence from the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic upon the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Armenia supports Artsakh being populated by Armenians.

2 Since the early 1990s, Turkey has been blockading Armenia by closing its land border due to its support of Artsakh, has regularly threatened Armenia, and has directly supported Azerbaijan (both during the first war in the 1990s, when it amassed troops on the border and threatened direct invasion, and during the more recent war).

co-chaired by Russia, US, and France, had been leading peace talks. Despite frequent violations of the ceasefire, the co-chairs regularly visited Baku, Stepanakert, and Yerevan, as well as organizing direct meetings between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan. The talks were based on the Madrid principles (2007) and updated Madrid principles (2009)—1) non-use of force or threat of force; 2) the right of peoples to self-determination; and 3) territorial integrity—as well as six key components of conflict resolution (Statement by the OSCE 2009).

The Second Artsakh War changed the security landscape not only for Armenia, Artsakh, and Azerbaijan, but also for the region more broadly. Or to be more precise, it demonstrated the already transformed reality. The November 10, 2020, ceasefire statement was directly brokered by the President of Russia and signed by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia. The Statement contained nine points. Among these, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to open transportation routes between the countries, while Russia was to secure the newly built transportation infrastructure between mainland Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic through the territory of Armenia and deploy peacekeepers to Artsakh.

There are several views of Russia's position in the South Caucasus following the Second Artsakh War. Some claim that Russia has lost some influence because Turkey is now militarily involved in the conflict, which has not happened since the Sovietization of the region in the very early 1920s. Indeed, in Aghdam, an occupied part of Artsakh, Turkey has even received a formal military mandate (along with Russia) to control the ceasefire regime (Russian-Turkish Center 2021).

That being said, Russia has deployed around 2,000 peacekeepers to Artsakh and expanded its military presence in Armenia to help Armenia contain Azerbaijan's rising territorial ambitions. Moreover, if the November 10 Statement is implemented, Russia will receive control over important transportation routes in the South Caucasus.

A definite change, however, is that for the first time since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Turkey openly supported Azerbaijan and demanded full participation in the peace talks as an equal partner with Russia—and without the US and France (as OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs and major world powers). Given that the Artsakh conflict is one of the most important security issues not only in the South Caucasus, but in the entire post-Soviet space, this new format has the potential to revolutionize the regional security architecture and diminish the role of the West.

Russia and Armenia both have their own reasons for being opposed to Turkey's involvement: Russia, for instance, sees the South Caucasus as a sphere of its major or even exclusive interest. Yet it is clear that Turkey continues to strengthen its position in Azerbaijan, likely with a view to further expansion both in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia. Already, therefore, we are seeing the South Caucasus gradually shift from being exclusively part of the post-Soviet space to being an item on the Middle Eastern agenda.

The new reality will demand that the major players in the region (chiefly Russia, the US, and the EU) reevaluate the current reality and then—should they find it necessary—take decisive action. For their part, the Armenian political elites should modernize their foreign and security policy strategy to provide for Armenia's coherent development, including in terms of hard power capabilities, within this new, much more dangerous and unpredictable environment.

Discussion and Conclusion

During a recent Geopolitical Session at the Russian-Armenia University in Yerevan entitled "Armenia and Russia: Imperative for a New Strategy," Dr. Nikolai Silaev, a leading scholar at MGIMO's Institute of International Research, stated that the Second Artsakh War had caused Russia to engage much more actively in the Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia–Azerbaijan relations than it had previously.

In his view, "Armenia should be not just our [Russia's] ally, Armenia should be a strong ally. I mean that we can rely on an ally that has enough power to implement its functions in the framework of the alliance, which can defend itself in important, even not all, cases… The alliance provides a lot to both Armenia and Russia, as Russia's status as the dominating power in the South Caucasus depends on whether there is a resilient alliance between Armenia and Russia." He added that transport routes between Armenia and Azerbaijan should be opened to bring prosperity and peace for all sides (Geopolitical Session 2021).

The outcome of the war is still enormously painful for the Armenian state and society—and will be for a long time to come. Armenia clearly needs an explicit modernization strategy, resources, and partners to implement it. To date, Russia remains the main actor leading dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan and providing security to the population of Artsakh. Moreover, by facilitating and signing the November 10, 2020, and January 12, 2021, statements, Russia fosters peace and cooperation in the region.

However, when it comes to the normalization of relations with Azerbaijan, both Armenia and Artsakh have a trust deficit. Azerbaijan has massively undermined the trust of the Armenians by waging the war during the Covid-19 pandemic, keeping Armenian prisoners of war as hostages and asking for compromises to free them,

violating Armenia's territorial integrity after the war, and deploying troops on the territory of sovereign Armenia. This is all the more serious, since Azerbaijan's actions go against multiple statements by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs over the last 25 years to refrain from the "use of force" or the "threat of the use of force". Azerbaijan has violated these principles. This, in turn, goes against the logic of the November 10, 2020, and January 12, 2021, statements: the statements aspire to bring peace and stability to the region, but by acting this way, the Azerbaijani authorities are forcing the Armenian side to question the sincerity of Azerbaijani intentions. This has led to increased calls for the militarization of Armenia and Artsakh—and, someday, revenge.

Finally, peace and cooperation in the region cannot be established without providing security guarantees for the people of Artsakh. Azerbaijani policy over the last thirty years, as well as during the Soviet period, has clearly demonstrated that neither Azerbaijan, nor peacekeepers, nor a superpower will bring durable peace. The people of Artsakh should have the opportunity to determine their own fate and future, as enshrined in the OSCE Minsk Group's Madrid document, the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, and the UN Charter.

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ANALYSIS

One Year After the Karabakh War: What Is the Kremlin Up To?

By Anar Valiyev and Nigar Gurbanli (ADA University, Baku)

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Abstract

Following the 44-day war in September-November 2020, Azerbaijan liberated its seven occupied territories and established control over part of Karabakh. However, another part of Karabakh fell under the control of Russian peacekeepers, who will stay in the region until 2025. The main question that concerns the political establishment and the public in both Armenia and Azerbaijan is the fate of these territories. Which of the plethora of existing cases (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, Donbass, Transnistria) will serve as a model for Russia's involvement? So far, Russian action in Karabakh suggests that Moscow is following the approach taken in South Ossetia. However, the involvement of Turkey, the absence of direct borders, and the strength of Azerbaijan may lead to a different outcome. The absence of a comprehensive peace agreement and dependence on the statement from November 10, 2020, complicate the situation, making future uncertainties and even conflict realistic. The article tries to analyze and predict Russian actions in Karabakh and the implications thereof for the broader region.

Russia has long played an important role in all peace processes in post-Soviet Eurasia. Moscow has shown major support for the establishment of quasi-states in the contested territories of Abkhazia, Ossetia, Transnistria, and Donbass by deploying peacekeeping forces, strengthening separatist powers, and bolstering secessionist entities against their respective parent states (Fisher 2016). Indeed, providing economic, financial, and political support for the establishment of quasi-state structures has been among Russia's main strategies for the past 30 years, allowing Moscow to become these entities' security guarantor and bind them closely to Russia.

Moscow has never had a universal policy on post-Soviet conflicts or secessionist entities. Instead, Russian foreign policy contains two fundamentally different positions. The first, which has been present since the collapse of the Soviet Union, can be called the "status quo" position. This policy entails a clear refusal to recognize the new quasi-state (although providing unofficial support via various channels) and acceptance of the territorial integrity of the parent state. Moscow also gets involved in various peace talks and processes through which it expresses a positive or negative attitude toward the involved parties depending on their behavior. For their part, the conflicting sides continue to court the Kremlin's favor, including by supporting Russian positions during voting at the UN, Council of Europe, etc. The existence of such conflicts prevents the affected country—whether Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, or Armenia—from integrating into Western institutions or political blocs. This policy could be described as a kind of Finlandization, akin to the Finnish pursuit of neutrality after World War II in the face of a hostile Soviet Union (Valiyev 2012).

The second approach, dubbed the "revisionist" position, involves recognizing the independence of the quasi-state and withdrawing support for the territorial integrity of the parent state, as occurred in the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, the revisionist position is far more of an exception than the rule. It serves to determine the "red lines" in the region and figure out how far Moscow can go. The 2008 Russian–Georgian war and subsequent recognition showed that the international community was not going to clash with Russia over recognition, on which issue the latter skillfully used Kosovo as a precedent. The breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were recognized in response to Georgia's defiance and pro-Western orientation (Samkharadze 2016).

The recent Karabakh war—which has created a new situation and changed the existing status quo—presents a new paradigm for understanding Russian policies in post-Soviet Eurasia. According to official Azerbaijani sources, on September 27, 2020, Azerbaijani villages were shelled by Armenian troops located in Karabakh. Following reports of civilian deaths, Azerbaijan launched a counter-offensive along the entire line of contact to suppress these activities and ensure the safety of the civilian population. The war lasted 44 days and claimed the lives of around 3,000 Azerbaijani soldiers and 92 civilians, most of whom were killed by strikes of SCUD-B ballistic missiles, cluster bombs, and shelling of Azerbaijani cities and villages (Ganja, Barda, Tartar, etc.). Armenian sources put the death toll on their side at 3,800 soldiers and between 100–200 civilians. The war almost came to an end on November 8, when Azerbaijani troops took the strategically significant city of Shusha and gained oversight of Khankendi, the capital

of Karabakh. On November 9, the presidents of Russia and Azerbaijan and the Armenian prime minister signed a joint statement in which they agreed that around 1,960 Russian troops armed with firearms, 90 armored vehicles, and 380 motor vehicles would be deployed along the contact line in Karabakh and also control the Lachin Corridor. The agreement envisaged the phased withdrawal of Armenian military forces from those territories that would stay under Russian control, as well as from other occupied territories in the districts of Agdam, Kalbajar, and Lachin. The agreement also provided for the return of refugees and internally displaced persons under the auspices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees; the unblocking of transport and economic routes in the region; and so forth.

There were some clear winners from the November 10 agreement. Azerbaijan recaptured the territory that had been occupied by Armenia and Karabakh separatists 30 earlier and has not had to offer any autonomy to Karabakh of the sort envisioned in past peace negotiations. However, the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh means that there is once again a Russian military presence on Azerbaijani soil, undercutting what has been a major point of pride for the country since independence.

Russia, too, has good reason to be satisfied with the November 10 agreement. Russia not only managed the peace negotiations between the parties to the conflict, but also demonstrated its influence over both Armenia and Azerbaijan, influence that will allow it to achieve the results it desires for the foreseeable future. The land corridor between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan, which passes through Armenian territory, will be controlled by the Border Guards Service of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB); another corridor guarded by Russian peacekeepers will link Armenia to Khankendi. The question now facing the public, analysts, and scholars is: What is Russia's plan going forward? What model of relations/governance will Russia choose with the peacekeepers deployed in Karabakh? Will it attempt the Ossetization of Karabakh or keep it as a sword of Damocles over Azerbaijan, threatening recognition? Could Turkish involvement force Russia to change its behavior?

Karabakh as South Ossetia

For the last quarter-century, the public in Armenia and Azerbaijan lived under the paradigm that the Karabakh conflict would not be solved in the immediate future due to Russia's protection of Armenia and Karabakh. Thus, Azerbaijan, despite its military capabilities and the backing of the international community, did not dare to attack unrecognized Karabakh. The specter of the 2008 Russian–Georgian war haunted Baku, which was cautious not to repeat it (Valiyev 2009). Indeed, the 2008 war completely changed Baku's expectation of support from the West and forced the country's political establishment to satisfy Russian interests in the South Caucasus. Baku was left to continue negotiations with Armenians within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group, which did not achieve any results.

The recent war seems to have completely changed the paradigm of the Russian policy in South Caucasus. For the 44-day period of military activities, the Russian establishment did not rush to help its ally Armenia under the CSTO agreement or via military cooperation. Moreover, the Russian establishment consistently stated that Armenian sovereignty had not been violated and that Karabakh was Azerbaijani territory. Only when the Azerbaijani army liberated Shusha, the old cultural capital of Karabakh, where most of the Armenian army and Karabakh forces were trapped, did Russia rush to save its ally, preventing Baku from completely solving the Karabakh issue.

Since the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to Karabakh, certain of their behaviors have created a situation reminiscent of the South Ossetia scenario. Beyond protecting the quasi-regime militarily, Russia has also been involved in the construction of houses for the local population; helping to rebuild infrastructure; and indirectly supporting the local economy by buying products and services from the local population for its peacekeepers. Most of the actions of the Russian authorities have served to irritate Baku, increasing the price of negotiations therewith. For instance, when the separatist authorities of Karabakh began an initiative to make Russian an official language of Karabakh, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that while it does not insist on this, Russia welcomes making Russian the second official language of Karabakh and is ready to help further its spread (The Moscow Times 2020). Peskov added that it is up to Armenia and Azerbaijan to determine any official second languages in their own countries. It is obvious that the Karabakh separatist authorities, who are under Russian control, initiated this proposal on the recommendation of Moscow; the Kremlin's abstinence showed Baku the "constructive" position taken by Moscow. More importantly, Moscow makes no efforts to disarm the local separatist entities, instead turning a blind eye to their presence in those territories under the control of peacekeepers.

The Russian plan in the area where peacekeepers are deployed is relatively straightforward. After more than 20 years, Russia has finally been able to set foot on Azerbaijani territory, even if not through military bases. The presence of around 2,000 peacekeepers in Karabakh does not represent a military threat to Azerbaijan but has more of a symbolic and political effect. The Karabakh Armenian population is not becoming

citizens of Azerbaijan or even Armenia (although they all have Armenian passports) but instead remains under the direct supervision of the Russian military command. Currently, security issues, reconstruction efforts, and all other questions—including relations with Azerbaijan—are effectively under the control of Russian troops. This is directly analogous to the situation in South Ossetia before 2008; indeed, there were even some rumors that Russian passports would be distributed among Karabakh Armenians.

Going forward, the Russian establishment will keep Karabakh divided on the grounds of security issues, preventing the reintegration of Armenian-populated territories into the rest of Azerbaijan. Beyond that, the Russian authorities will sideline Armenia in any type of negotiation process, instead representing Karabakh Armenians themselves. The Russian authorities will continue to press Armenia to recognize the Azerbaijani borders; will support the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan; and will help Azerbaijan with its reconstruction efforts—but without ever removing their peacekeepers from Karabakh. Thus, Karabakh is becoming a bargaining chip for the Russian establishment in its negotiations with Azerbaijan. Russia may hand over the northern part of Karabakh to Azerbaijan piece by piece over the course of the next decade in exchange for certain concessions on other issues, but this process is likely to be slow. In the worst case, Russia could press Baku to restore the autonomous status of Karabakh as it existed in Soviet times.

For Karabakh Armenians, the Russian intervention was a mixed blessing. After the destruction of the local forces, they were able to gain some protection, and for Moscow, Karabakh represents a bargaining chip in its negotiations with Baku. In the future, Moscow is likely to pass on costs for maintaining the Karabakh Armenians on Yerevan while Russian troops are taking care of security. In reality, the Armenians of Karabakh will be directly subordinated to Moscow via the Russian peacekeeping forces. At the same time, to keep its troops *in situ* beyond the agreed five years, Russia must work closely with Armenia and the *de facto* authorities in Karabakh to make sure that Azerbaijan cannot unilaterally ask Moscow to leave. Yet Moscow also wants to avoid the threat of an Azerbaijani veto on extending the mission in 2025. That means keeping on the best possible terms with Azerbaijan and assuring Baku that Karabakh is no longer a separatist territory. So, in case if Azerbaijan decides to push Russians out of Karabakh, Moscow may create a situation when the local separatist forces armed with the Russian weapons attack Azerbaijani positions creating incidents. Meanwhile, Russia has little reason to help Armenia and Azerbaijan to normalize relations. Any government in Yerevan needs Azerbaijan as its bogeyman in order to manipulate the population, while Russia benefits from being seen as the guarantor of peace.

What Can Azerbaijan Do?

Yet there are several reasons to believe that Karabakh will not become another South Ossetia. First, it would be much more costly for Russia to alienate Azerbaijan than Georgia. Both economically and politically, Baku is extremely important for Moscow. During Putin's two decades in power, the Kremlin tried to maintain good relations with Azerbaijan because of its importance as an economic partner as well as its role as a North–South transport corridor. Second, a direct analogy with South Ossetia is perhaps not appropriate given the absence of direct borders between Russia and Karabakh, as well as of a diaspora in Russia akin to the Ossetians. Third, and most importantly, the Azerbaijani cause enjoys strong Turkish support. Ankara's backing was crucial in winning the war and continues to be important in checking Russian expansion.

Baku's victory in the Karabakh war proved the virtue in the longstanding Azerbaijani policy of "strategic patience": waiting for a favorable moment to change the situation. Arguably, only Russian involvement in the final stage of the war deprived Azerbaijan of achieving its ultimate goal to reestablish effective control over its territory.

Over the next decade, Azerbaijan's Karabakh policy will take several directions. First, the massive reconstruction and population of liberated territories will become a priority for the country. Crucial here is the demining of all territories: since the end of the military campaign, dozens of Azerbaijani soldiers and civilians have lost their lives to mines. After the Armenian side declined to simply tell Baku where the mines were located, Baku traded Armenian POWs for maps of the landmines in two regions (Agdam and Fizuli), a process it hopes to continue in order to hasten reconstruction efforts. Baku will use reconstruction to try to win the hearts and minds of Karabakh Armenians by showing them the benefits of being under Azerbaijani (as opposed to Russian) control. Accordingly, Azerbaijan's largest project in the next decade will be to turn Shusha, the historical capital of Karabakh, into an Azerbaijani showcase city or cultural capital. With regard to repopulation, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev announced in January 2021 that "settlements recently liberated from Armenian occupation will be re-established based on the concept of smart city/village" (*Caspian News* 2021).

Second, Azerbaijan will continue to pursue its policy of "strategic hedging," trying not to yield to Russian demands to join the CSTO or the Eurasian Union (Valiyev 2019). The Azerbaijani political establishment

will continue to bring Turkey into discussions to shield itself from Russian influence: the Shusha Declaration between Turkey and Azerbaijan, as well as discussions about a Turkish base in Azerbaijan, serves to counterbalance the Russian influence.

Finally, Azerbaijan will seek to establish another transportation route to the West and especially to Turkey. Building on the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Baku aims to strengthen its economy by securing a railroad/highway corridor (often referred to as the Zangezur corridor, using the Azerbaijani ethnonym for the Armenian province Syunik) to the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan. This would not only give Azerbaijan direct access to Turkey, but also significantly reduce the time it takes to deliver products from Europe to China. Resolution of the Karabakh conflict would make it possible to unblock the transportation routes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, giving Baku a transportation route to Turkey and Yerevan a route to Russia. In other words, Azerbaijan could become the link between Russia's North–South initiative and the BRI. The Russian political establishment has hailed this idea and is pushing Armenia to unblock transportation lines, hoping to control this corridor (40 km long).

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's current policy toward the territories under peacekeepers' control is silent ignorance. Baku claims that the war is over and that the country's territorial integrity has been restored. The establishment prefers to disregard the presence of a separatist regime under Russian protection despite its fear that Moscow will instrumentalize the latter against Baku. It is obvious that in the coming years, Baku will have to negotiate with Moscow over the fate of those territories under the control of peacekeepers, knowing that Russia will demand a high price.

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ANALYSIS

Azerbaijani–Russian Relations: Transactional Diplomacy in Action

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Abstract

By applying transactionalism—conceptualized as a series of iterative *quid pro quo* arrangements—to relations between Azerbaijan and Russia in the context of the Second Karabakh War, this article shows how the contingent interactions that characterize the Azerbaijani–Russian relationship produce unexpected outcomes. The war in Karabakh in the fall of 2020 is seen as a product of such transactional exchange: Russia tacitly supported Azerbaijan's right to regain territories it lost in the early 1990s in exchange for Baku's approval of Russia's deployment of its peacekeeping (PK) mission to Karabakh. Russia's military presence in what is internationally recognized as Azerbaijan's sovereign territory provides the Kremlin with a toolbox of policy leverage, including the status issue, keeping Armenian troops in or out, continued arms sales to Armenia, and the PK mission's mandate. These tools allow the Kremlin to maintain a constant sense of insecurity in both Armenia and Azerbaijan and to promote Russia's ambition to dominate the region.

Transactionalism

Azerbaijani–Russian relations can be characterized as a continually shifting, complex, multifaceted, and largely asymmetrical set of interactions. During the presidencies of Vladimir Putin and Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan and Russia have enjoyed a relationship that can be described as pragmatic and transactional. Transactionalism—with its logic of exchange of tangible benefits—implies that the given relationship lends itself readily to contingency as the timing, substance, and outcome of a bargain is uncertain and unpredictable.

The relationship is complex because the linkages between the two countries are not limited to a single issue but encompass a broad range of issues—political, economic, energy, military, and cultural—at both inter-state and transnational level. Russia hosts a large Azerbaijani diaspora (exceeding 1 million people) (Shiriyev 2020) and there are 119,300 ethnic Russians living in Azerbaijan (State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan 2009).

Azerbaijani leaders have long been cognizant of Russia's regional ambitions and have therefore avoided taking actions that could antagonize the Kremlin and harm bilateral cooperation. Leveraging its formidable military capabilities, Putin's Russia seeks to return the country to its former status as a great power, in what some scholars have called "the Putin restoration" (Stent 2008, 1095). This reality accounts for the asymmetry that characterizes Russia's relations with "small states" such as Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia.

Historically, Russia in its various incarnations—first as the Romanov Empire and later as the Soviet Union—dominated the South Caucasus for centuries, and it remains a force to be reckoned with. Azerbaijan's previous losses of sovereignty to the Russian Empire/Soviet Union and Putin's geopolitical ambitions create a sense of insecurity in Baku. In a sense, Moscow is perceived as posing an existential threat to Baku.

This permanent sense of insecurity forces Azerbaijan to seek allies capable of counterbalancing Russia's assertive foreign policy. Due to its strong cultural affinity and historical friendship with Turkey, Azerbaijan has sought to engage the latter as a counterweight to Russian power (Remler 2020, 13). Azerbaijani relations with Turkey are based on the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support of 2010, which stipulates mutual defense in the event of a military attack and provides for the training of Azerbaijani military personnel in Turkey—a factor that proved to be decisive in the Second Karabakh War in the fall of 2020 (Yalçınkaya 2020). This strategic partnership was consolidated by the political and military support provided by Ankara during the war and the signing of the Shusha Declaration on June 15, 2021.

Upon independence, balancing between the competing interests of Russia and the West became the cornerstone of Azerbaijani foreign policy. With the relative weakening of Western presence in the South Caucasus since 2008 and the resurgence of Russian regional hegemonic ambitions (especially since the annexation of Crimea in 2014), however, Azerbaijan has arguably shifted its policy from one of balancing to one of "pacifying" Russia (Shiriyev 2019).

Moreover, the relationship between the two countries is not fixed but constantly shifting due to the interplay of international, regional, and national-level variables. As circumstances change, relationships are (re) negotiated, policies adjusted, and new deals reached until a new challenge to the existing order emerges, forcing key actors to embark on a new round of bargains and adjustments in policy stances.

If ideology—whether the shared Soviet legacy, the pan-Turkic ideas espoused by former Azerbaijani President Elchibey, or post-colonialism—played a prominent role in early post-independence relations between Azerbaijan and Russia, these relations are believed to have become more pragmatic and transactional in recent years. Remler (2020, 11) describes them as "cordial, neighborly, and devoid of emotion." Transactional diplomacy—the term most often used to describe former U.S. President Donald Trump's approach to foreign policymaking—seems to apply well here too. Henke (2017) defines "transactional diplomacy" as follows:

> At its core, transactional diplomacy is based on a *quid pro quo* logic: I don't do anything for you if I don't get something in return. Moreover, transactional diplomats perceive a zero-sum world. What benefits you does not benefit me. That's why if I help you, you need to pay me for it. In a transactional world, the *quid pro quos*—or "deals"—that states can engage in are almost infinite.

Finally, while there is a certain degree of continuity in this relationship (such as Russia's efforts to regain its regional influence and Baku's balancing act between Russia and the West), there is also an element of contingency. A contingency is an event that was not expected to occur but, when it does, has the power to alter the course of events (Mahoney 2000).

In analyzing Azerbaijani–Russian relations during the 2020 war in Karabakh and its aftermath, this article argues that transactionalism and contingency are useful conceptual lenses through which to understand the current and future development of Azerbaijani–Russian relations around the Upper Karabakh region.

Azerbaijani–Russian *quid pro quo* in the Context of the Second Karabakh War

After a new war between Armenia and Azerbaijan broke out on September 27, 2020, Russia—which is Armenia's key ally and has an extensive military presence in the country—maintained a position of relative neutrality, notwithstanding multiple attempts by Yerevan to drag Moscow into the conflict. Moscow reiterated on several occasions that its obligation to protect Armenia would be activated only by an attack on the Republic of Armenia and that this protection did not extend to the territory of Karabakh.

There is no consensus as to what caused the drastic shift from a conflict that had been "frozen" for 26 years to "hot" war. However, transactionalism—with its focus on *quid pro quo* deals—can shed some light on this. While the element of contingency is certainly present, the key contours of a new status quo were apparent before war broke out, having been articulated in the so-called Lavrov plan. According to this plan, Armenian troops would pull out of the occupied Azerbaijani districts adjacent to Upper Karabakh (the former Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast)[1] and a Russian peacekeeping contingent would be installed. With Armenia's withdrawal from the occupied territories, more than 700,000 Azerbaijani citizens displaced during the first war in Karabakh would finally get the chance to return to their homeland. While there is no formal proof that any such deal existed, it is possible that Moscow tacitly agreed to suspend its protection of Armenia, creating the momentum for Azerbaijan to take back the occupied territories, in exchange for Baku not objecting to Russia placing peacekeeping troops in Karabakh. (Such an arrangement would also have had the benefit to Russia of "punishing" Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan for his pro-Western reforms.)

Following Armenia's military losses and Azerbaijan's successes, there were several attempts to negotiate a ceasefire agreement. The ceasefire that succeeded in ending the war was brokered by Putin personally. Signed on November 9/10 (Statement 2020) by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, the Trilateral Statement not only stopped the fighting, but also urged Armenia to withdraw from the remaining districts and called on the conflict parties to allow the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces in the Karabakh zone. The sides also agreed to facilitate the return of refugees and to unblock transportation links. Following the ceasefire, Russia quickly deployed some 2,000 Russian soldiers to the parts of Karabakh that remained outside Azerbaijani control.

The war resulted in a victory for Azerbaijan, which managed to recover most of its sovereign territory that had previously been controlled by the Armenian armed forces and gained the Kremlin's support for a new land route through Armenia connecting Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave and Turkey. Moscow's biggest geopolitical gain was that it obtained a military presence on the ground in what is internationally recognized as the territory of Azerbaijan.

Russia's New Leverage

Having installed its troops, Russia seized the newly created opportunities for leverage and bargaining. Moscow deliberately left the conflict only partly resolved (Yavuz

1 Under international law, Upper Karabakh and seven surrounding districts belong to the Republic of Azerbaijan. UN Security Council Resolution 853 (1993), para. 9 refers to "the Nagorny Karabakh region of the Azerbaijani Republic". Nagorno-Karabakh was deemed "occupied" by the judgement of the European Court of Human Rights [ECtHR] in the "Chiragov and Others v. Armenia" case (see Azarova 2015).

and Huseynov 2021). Western countries were also left out, leaving Russia as the only guarantor of the ceasefire. The new status quo serves Russia's interests well, placing Russia—the chief "peace broker"—at the center of dispute resolution.

The new status quo also gives Moscow leverage over both sides. Russia's ambiguity with regard to the final status of the Upper Karabakh region, the non-withdrawal of Armenian military forces from the area, the supply of weapons to Armenia, and the mandate of its PK mission are all tools that the Kremlin can employ in future transactional foreign policymaking.

First of all, despite the fact that the final status of Upper Karabakh is not even mentioned in the ceasefire agreement (Miklasová 2020), Moscow has brought it up on several occasions. Putin has variously proclaimed that Karabakh is an "integral part of Azerbaijan" (Kremlin.ru 2020) and that the final status of the Karabakh territory that is temporarily under the control of Russian PKs "has not yet been settled" (TASS 2020). The Kremlin's ambiguous statements on this point suggest that Moscow is likely to use the "status issue" as leverage in future bargains with Baku.

Second, although the ceasefire agreement mandates the withdrawal of Armenian troops from the territory where Russian PK forces are deployed (Statement 2020, Art. 4), this clause has not yet been implemented. The non-implementation of this provision is another bargaining chip in future transactions with either Baku or Yerevan.

Third, Russia's continued supply of weapons to Armenia fuels revanchist sentiments in Armenia. In late August 2021, Armenia signed arms contracts with the Russian military-industry complex to buy weapons, following an earlier meeting in Moscow between the Armenian and Russian defense ministers at which Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu pledged continued support to Armenia in modernizing its armed forces (Harutyunyan 2021).

Fourth, a major issue that will define Azerbaijani–Russian relations in the next four years (and possibly beyond) is the absence of an internationally agreed mandate for the Russian PK mission, which is renewable every 5 years unless one of the sides expresses a wish to terminate it (Statement 2020, Art. 4). The track record of Russian peacekeeping forces shows that once Russian troops are in, they never leave. It is also clear that the Russian PK contingent has already deviated from its formal mission. For example, the troops have been equipped with helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles even though the original Trilateral Agreement only mentions firearms and armored vehicles (Socor 2021).

Conclusion

Given that transactionalism is built on negotiation and renegotiation of the terms of a bargain (or a series of interrelated bargains), there is an element of uncertainty with regard to the substance and outcome of a transaction. In the wake of the Second Karabakh War, Russia gained additional cards it can leverage against either party to the conflict. As briefly discussed above, Russia now has at least four issues to leverage. First, Moscow can manipulate the definition of the final status of the territory under temporary (or prolonged?) PK control. Second, Moscow can keep Armenian military forces in the area or force them out as a tit-for-tat with Baku or as a tool to pressurize Yerevan on other issues. Third, Russia can feed the sense of insecurity in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, fueling the arms race between the two countries to create a market for Russian weapons that benefits the latter's defense sector and military-industrial complex. Fourth, the unclear mandate allows Russia to interpret the scope of its PK mission as it deems necessary, deviating from what was agreed. This creates even more room for leverage-bargaining in transactional exchange.

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ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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