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Immediate Geopolitical Consequences of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

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For 44 days in the fall of 2020, the armed forces of Azerbaijan and Armenia met in a dramatic clash in Nagorno-Karabakh. Despite both being minor powers, they possess considerable military capabilities which were engaged in an intense war of maneuver – probably the most dynamic military conflict in 2020. It was a typical case of two nation-states having developed national identity narratives regarding one and the same bit of territory and deciding the resulting dispute on the battlefield.

Azerbaijan won the war. It recovered most, although not all, of its internationally recognized territory that had been under Armenian control since the early 1990s. The war and its outcome also had other geopolitical consequences, however. Russia brokered the ceasefire agreement and, crucially, deployed its troops to Karabakh as its guarantors. Consequently, it now has military bases in all three nations of the South Caucasus. Even more importantly, it has gained a new and very strong lever to influence the behavior of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Ankara has enhanced its regional standing since Turkish support of Azerbaijan contributed to its victory. The West, on the other hand, appeared powerless to shape events and outcomes during the war and the making of a ceasefire. The war was certainly a decisive geopolitical episode. The history of the South Caucasus will go on with a number of new factors having been woven into it by the war and its consequences.

What Happened in the War

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War opened with the Azerbaijani offensive on the morning of 27 September 2020. Deterred by formidable Armenian defenses in the central portion of the frontline, the Azerbaijanis concentrated their attacks in the north and the south. Their initial successes were very limited. They managed to take a few heights in the north and a few villages in the south on the first day without anything approaching a strategic breakthrough.

For the next few days, the Azerbaijani advance stalled with both sides engaged in attacks and counter-attacks for the control of various positions on the frontline. Gradually, however, the contours of a decisive Azerbaijani advantage emerged even before it became reflected in serious territorial changes. Azerbaijan was very well prepared for this war in many respects but perhaps the most important single factor was its advantage in the UAVs. The Azerbaijani systematic precision strikes with the drones and with the artillery guided by them had horrifying consequences for the Armenian frontline troops which did not possess the same capability. The physical and psychological effects of this factor were devastating.

The first major breakthrough occurred on 3 October, in the southernmost portion of the frontline. Armenian defenses failed in the Aras (Araxes) Valley near the Iranian border. Azerbaijani forces poured through, quickly developing their success. The Armenians launched an attack from the north designed to cut off the advanced Azerbaijani units and surround them in the Iranian border area. Around 6 October, the attacking Armenian force met catastrophe somewhere near the village of Horadiz where it was decisively defeated by the Azerbaijanis. By 8 October, the Azerbaijanis took the city of Jabrayil deep behind the frontline that had been in place since the end of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War in 1994.

The victories at Jabrayil and Horadiz left the Azerbaijanis in complete advantage in the south. As early as 9 October, they were able to launch an attack on Hadrut – an Armenian-populated town and district

center within the Soviet-era autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh which was supposed to be protected by the buffer of the surrounding Azerbaijani districts occupied by the Armenians such as Jabrayil. The Armenian resistance in Hadrut initially was stiff, with the Azerbaijanis taking the town only by 15-16 October.

During the battle for Hadrut, the Azerbaijanis showed that drones were not their only trump card when their light infantry conducted a surprise maneuver, taking the heights that allowed them to threaten the flank and rear of the Armenian forces both in Hadrut and in the city of Fuzuli which had also been doggedly defended by the Armenians. Fuzuli fell by 17-18 October.

The Azerbaijanis relaunched their offensive in the Aras Valley by 17 October. They advanced very rapidly, taking the town of Zangilan by 20 October and establishing control over the whole length of the Iran-Azerbaijan border by 22 October. Once again, the Armenians attempted to exploit the 'stretched' geography of the Azerbaijani advance and cut off their forward units by attacking from the north. Details on this attempt are scarce at the time of writing but it appears that it produced less of a threat for the Azerbaijanis than did the operation in the Horadiz area and also ended in disaster.

The Azerbaijanis then expanded their control in the southwest of the warzone and took the town of Qubadli on 25 October. They also tried to quickly advance from that area towards Lachin – a town on the main road that connects Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenians repulsed this attack, however.

Meanwhile, in the north the Azerbaijanis failed to achieve a deep breakthrough despite repeated attacks. They managed to take over one portion of the Armenian defensive line with a couple of villages in the northeast of the warzone in early October. They also claimed to have taken some heights on the Murovdag mountain range in the north. They did not manage to develop these advances, however. In the north and northeast, the dynamic of fighting and continuous artillery exchanges with little alteration in territorial control continued until the end of the war.

Sometime around 24 October, the Azerbaijanis launched the decisive operation of the war. Remarkably, it was primarily conducted by the light infantry and the Special Forces. In some sense, it was similar to an earlier operation when the Azerbaijanis took the heights between Hadrut and Fuzuli. The scale, however, was greater and its strategic consequences even more profound.

The Azerbaijanis' target was Karabakh's core area with the cities of Stepanakert/Khankendi and Shusha. They had difficulty breaking through to that area from the east where it would be possible to use roads for heavy armor and artillery. So instead, the Azerbaijani light forces conducted a deep flanking maneuver. Some 10-20 kilometers to the west of Hadrut, these forces began to move north into a large mountainous area devoid of proper roads. When they emerged on the other side of the mountains, they found themselves in the middle of the whole Armenian strategic position, some 10 kilometers from Shusha.

The Armenians did what they could to eliminate this breakthrough. In battles during the last days of October, they tried to prevent the Azerbaijanis from solidifying their position north of the mountains.

These attempts failed. After firmly establishing themselves in that area and having brought in additional forces, the Azerbaijanis began to advance in early November. By 5 November, they started the battle for Shusha.

The fighting in and around Shusha was vicious – likely the heaviest close combat of the war. The Azerbaijanis quickly took the city which was followed by major Armenian counterattacks to take it back. By 8 November, the battle was decided with the Armenian defeat.

Shusha is located on a mountain overlooking Karabakh's main Armenian center, the city of Stepanakert, four kilometers away. With this strategic position lost and their forces depleted, the Armenians could not hope to successfully defend Stepanakert. Its potential loss would mean the Armenian defensive effort losing its geographic coherence. Their frontline positions in the north and east would be attacked from the rear and certainly be overwhelmed one after another. Meanwhile, one immediate consequence of the fall of Shusha was that the Azerbaijanis cut the strategic Lachin road to Armenia without having to take Lachin itself. Besides, the Armenians were facing an imminent prospect of losing the whole area east and southeast of Stepanakert due to separate Azerbaijani attacks there. Overall, by 9 November, the Armenian strategic military position ceased to be tenable.

Late on the night of 9 November, the Azerbaijanis and the Armenians agreed to a [ceasefire](#) brokered by Vladimir Putin. Under its conditions, the Azerbaijanis kept the territory they had taken back during the war while in addition the Armenians agreed to transfer to them three more districts. All that the Armenians managed to retain was most (but not all) of the Armenian-populated part of Karabakh. The surrounding seven Azerbaijani-populated districts that had been under Armenian occupation and devoid of their inhabitants since the early 1990s returned under Azerbaijani control. As a result, the territory in Karabakh still under Armenian control became militarily indefensible by the Armenian forces in the case of a future war.

Under the terms of the ceasefire, Russia began the deployment of its military forces to Karabakh in the early hours of 10 November. They have the formal status of peacekeepers and are to function as guarantors of the ceasefire agreement. They also constitute a lever that Moscow is certain to use for furthering its geopolitical influence in its relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan.*

Russian Military Deployment in Karabakh

The official number of Russian troops in Karabakh is 1,960. They belong to the 15th Mechanized ('Motor Rifle' in Russian terminology) Brigade from Roshchinsky, Samara Oblast, of the Russian Central Military District's 2nd Army. [According](#) to the Russians, the deployed troops served in Syria in the past. Russian deployment also involves [Mi-8 and Mi-24](#) helicopters belonging to the army aviation and [Orlan-10](#) reconnaissance UAVs. Russian ground troops are armed with BTR-82A armored personnel carriers, Tigr armored all-terrain infantry mobility vehicles, Typhoon armored vehicles and Iveco LMV [Rys'](#) infantry mobility vehicles. The Russians have also sent their new [Leer-3](#) electronic warfare systems to Karabakh.

* This narrative is based on the author's daily monitoring of a variety of sources from different sides during the war.

As of the beginning of December 2020, Russian troops were deployed at 23 posts in various parts of the Armenian-controlled portion of Karabakh and in the five-kilometer wide corridor between Karabakh and Armenia along the Lachin road. They are divided between two local commands – “North,” under the 15th Brigade’s 1st Mechanized Battalion, and “South,” under its 2nd Mechanized Battalion. 11 posts are located in the “North” command area with 12 posts under the “South” command. The headquarters of all the deployed Russian forces is in Stepanakert/Khankendi. The Russians have officially [stated](#) that it involves “officers who have an extensive experience of commanding troops in armed conflicts.”

The deployment [started early on](#) 10 November with Russian troops of the 15th Mechanized Brigade being transported from the Ulyanovsk Vostochny air base to the Russian Erebuni air base in Armenia by Il-76 and An-124 strategic airlifters of the Military Transport Aviation Command. These first deployed forces then moved in the south-eastern direction from Yerevan, concentrated in Armenia’s southern town of Goris and continued towards Karabakh. By 11 November, the advance troops of these forces [took control](#) of the Lachin corridor. On 12 November, troops of the 15th Brigade’s 1st Mechanized Battalion [entered](#) Stepanakert/Khankendi. They immediately proceeded to the [northern](#) part of Karabakh.

By 14 November, Russian Mi-24 and Mi-8 helicopters started to [provide air cover](#) to Russian columns marching through Armenia and Karabakh for their deployment destinations. By 18 November, the Russians finalized the establishment of their [23 posts](#) in Karabakh. On 20 November, they [completed](#) the process of the deployment to Karabakh that had been ongoing since 10 November. According to the Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, 250 military transport aviation flights had been conducted for this purpose. Also on 20 November, the commander of the Russian forces in Karabakh [reported](#) to Putin that his troops were extensively using UAVs “to control the situation.” The Russians now were fully established on the line of contact between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis and in control of the Lachin corridor connecting Karabakh to Armenia. On 2 December, it was [reported](#) that Russian military transport aviation would begin to use the Stepanakert (Khojaly) airport in Karabakh.

The term of the Russian military presence in Karabakh is at least five years. It will be extended automatically, however, unless either side requests its withdrawal six months before the five-year term is expired. This might lead to an indefinite military presence of Russia in Karabakh. The Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, has already [said](#) that he “does not think that the term of the Russian peacekeepers’ stay will be limited to five years.” Baku is not as interested in the presence of the Russian troops since they are now the only reason it still does not control a portion of Azerbaijan’s internationally recognized territory. Recent historical experience shows, however, that when Moscow does not wish to withdraw its “peacekeepers” it becomes rather creative in crafting ways to avoid their withdrawal, whatever is written in the agreements that caused their deployment in the first place. Much depends on the fate of the present regime in Russia. If it still controls the Kremlin five years from now, the Azerbaijanis might find out that the arrangement regarding Russian troops on their country’s territory is not as temporary as it first appeared to be.

There have been allegations regarding the presence of Russian mercenaries in Karabakh – either Wagner or their colleagues from other organizations. They have not been substantiated so far, although on 24

November, Canadian journalist, Neil Hauer, [reported](#) the following from the Kalbajar District – one of the three that were transferred to Azerbaijan by the ceasefire’s terms: “Strange unidentified masked men on the road today in Kelbajar region... Not Russian peacekeepers, who are clearly marked and separate. These were in small groups and heavily armed, some near deployed artillery pieces. Would not talk when approached.”

Besides their troops, the Russians have also developed another institutional framework for their presence in Karabakh. On 13 November, President Putin signed a [decree](#) to establish the Interagency Humanitarian Response Center. Its official purpose is things like helping in the return of refugees and the restoration of infrastructure. Among the [several dozen](#) Russian agencies involved in the Center are the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Center [began](#) to be established on 14 November. By 19 November, [it took](#) the contours of an administration complete with regional offices, transport, medical and trade agencies and its own media outlets. On 20 November, the Humanitarian Response Center [started](#) to function in Stepanakert/Khankendi.



Russian Defense Ministry’s map from 2 December 2020 showing Russian military deployments in the Armenian-controlled part of Karabakh. One can see that it is surrounded by the Azerbaijani-controlled territory and is connected to Armenia only by the narrow Russian-controlled Lachin corridor.

What Has Turkey Gained?

Turkey has openly and actively assisted its ally Azerbaijan during the war. In doing so, Turkey decisively contributed to the shaping of a geopolitical outcome in the South Caucasus, perhaps for the first time in the last 100 years. Even leaving aside Turkey’s possible future activities in the region, this very act has already increased its geopolitical presence and diplomatic influence in the South Caucasus. The ability to

shape physical events counts for more in this sense than decorative rhetoric or the adoption of [inconsequential parliamentary resolutions](#). The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War became yet another instance of the [activist foreign strategy](#) that Turkey has adopted in the last decade.

On the other hand, it does appear that Ankara got somewhat less out of the war than it had come to expect. On 11 November 2020, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [said](#) that “Turkey will join the peacekeeping forces” in Karabakh. Also on 11 November, Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the MHP party – a political partner of Erdogan’s ruling party AKP – [claimed](#) that “Russian and Turkish peacekeepers will be deployed along the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh and in the Lachin corridor.”

Moscow quickly refuted such notions. On 12 November, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, specifically [stated](#) that “no peacekeeping units of the Turkish Republic will be sent to Nagorno-Karabakh” and that the peacekeeping operation would be “conducted exclusively by the forces of the contingent of the armed forces of the Russian Federation.” In the same statement, Lavrov also said that “there are no plans to broaden the trio of co-chairs” of the OSCE Minsk Group that works on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution, referring to the possibility of Turkey gaining such status, presently held by France, Russia and the United States.

Turkey’s institutional participation in matters pertaining to the ceasefire in Karabakh is supposed to be provided by the Russian-Turkish Joint Center for Monitoring Ceasefire. On 11 November, Moscow and Ankara signed a memorandum regarding the establishment of the Joint Center.

Once again, however, Turkish expectations turned out to be somewhat optimistic. President Erdogan [claimed](#) that the Joint Center “will be established on Azerbaijani territories that were liberated from Armenia’s occupation” and that “all measures in preventing violations of the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh will be taken by this center.” Lavrov, on the other hand, [stated](#) the next day after Erdogan that the Center “will be situated on the territory of Azerbaijan not adjacent to the conflict zone.” Lavrov also said that “the boundaries of mobility of the Turkish observers will be limited to the geographic coordinates designated for the Russian-Turkish monitoring center that is being created in the part of Azerbaijan’s territory not abutting Nagorno-Karabakh.” He clarified that “the center will work exclusively in a remote mode” using UAVs and other technological means of observation from a distance. Lavrov made sure to stress: “This work will be conducted on the territory designated for this joint center. It is not connected to any peacekeeping activities within the conflict zone and this must be very well understood.”

On 17 November, Vladimir Putin said in an [interview](#) that “both Azerbaijan and Turkey have always talked about the possibility of Turkey’s participation in peacekeeping operations” in Karabakh but that he managed to “convince” them to refrain from this. Putin confirmed Lavrov’s statements regarding the remote mode of the Joint Monitoring Center’s functioning and the rejection of a Turkish presence on the Armenian-Azerbaijani line of contact in Karabakh. He appeared to take a somewhat softer line than Lavrov concerning the Center’s location, saying that “it will be situated on the sovereign territory of Azerbaijan and Azerbaijan has a right to decide where it will consider it proper to place it.”

Evidently, Ankara was not satisfied with the restrictions imposed on it by the Russians. Reports [emerged](#) on 23 November that Turkey intended to set up its own separate military observation post in Azerbaijan, besides the Joint Center. Russia reportedly was not happy with this idea, with Ankara and Moscow engaging in talks over this point of disagreement. Meanwhile, on 1 December, the two sides reached an agreement on the technical details of the future Joint Center's functioning.

At the time of writing it was yet unknown whether Turkey would undertake unilateral steps to enhance its military presence in Azerbaijan in the short term.

State of Play by Late 2020

Russia has gained considerable leverage on Armenia and Azerbaijan as a result of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. The reason lies in the combination of the Russian military presence with the new strategic reality in Karabakh. The post-war situation provides Moscow with powerful [instruments to influence the behavior](#) of both Baku and Yerevan to a greater extent than was the case prior to the war.

Despite Baku's rhetoric suggesting that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been decided by this war, the fact is that the separatist administration in Karabakh has survived and will continue to function. Moreover, it will now do so under the protection of Russian troops with the Russians showing no inclination whatsoever to dismantle it.

After a Russian general, Rustam Muradov, was appointed commander of the Russian peacekeeping forces in Karabakh, he held meetings both with the separatist leader ("president"), [Arayik Harutyunyan](#), and the top commander of the separatist armed forces (Artsakh Defense Army), [Mikael Arzumanyan](#). The latter fact confirmed that the ceasefire agreement was not interpreted by Moscow as envisioning any kind of liquidation of this Armenian armed force in Karabakh. Armenia's Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, [stated](#) on 16 November that this force's status would remain the same as prior to the ceasefire agreement. "The Artsakh Defense Army exists and will continue to exist. The Defense Army must develop, become stronger and be a guarantor of the sovereignty of Artsakh [Armenian name for Karabakh]," said Pashinyan.

While Armenian forces irredeemably lost the capacity to successfully defend Karabakh as a result of the latest war, a new decisive element of the situation is Russia's military presence there. As long as this presence lasts, Azerbaijan cannot conduct military operations in the part of Karabakh that remains under Armenian control. It is not dealing with just about 2,000 Russian troops there. Moscow's political will and its military apparatus stand behind those troops. Endangering them can bring about a drastic military response. Moscow has already [indicated](#) that much to Baku.



12 November 2020, *Commander of the Russian forces in Karabakh meets the Azerbaijani Defense Minister.*

The fact that the Armenian-controlled part of Karabakh retains its administration and armed force and the fact that this territory is untouchable for the Azerbaijani military due to the presence of the Russian troops give Moscow considerable leverage over Baku. In the case of a serious future disagreement between the two, the Russians will have the option to throw their diplomatic and military weight behind the Armenians in Karabakh. They could even encourage them to act against the Azerbaijani troops and others near the line of contact. The Russians have a vast experience of doing things like that in other places. It would be unreasonable to neglect the possibility of them doing the same in Karabakh if they decide that this is required to influence the Azerbaijani government's behavior in some matter of critical importance.

As for the Russian leverage over Armenia, it has acquired a most decisive nature as a result of the war of 2020.

Prior to this war, the Armenians were under the impression that they were capable of defending Karabakh against a potential Azerbaijani attack. They had long-established fortified positions and mountainous terrain that is thought to favor the defending party in a war. They believed in their general military superiority over the Azerbaijanis due to the outcome of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War that ended with Armenian victory in 1994. The Armenian-populated part of Karabakh was surrounded by a defensive buffer in the form of seven occupied districts of Azerbaijan.

Every single one of these factors has been eliminated by the latest war. The Armenian-controlled Karabakh is now a rather small rump territory left without all of the natural and artificial defensive

layers on which it used to rely. It is surrounded by Azerbaijani-controlled areas on all sides. It is completely indefensible militarily. If Azerbaijan and Armenia were to be left one on one, this territory either would have to be surrendered to Azerbaijan or could be taken by it in a military operation of a rather short duration. The only reason why Azerbaijan cannot just take the whole place over is the Russian military presence and Moscow's political will to prevent that.

This means that Yerevan has completely lost the capacity to stand its ground in the relations with Moscow. The continued existence of an Armenian administration in Karabakh, the safety of the ethnic Armenian population there and, as a consequence, the political survival of any Armenian government that has to deal with this situation now all depend on the Russians. Armenia's sovereignty as an international actor with its own free will has been diminished by this war. Armenia has been in the Russian sphere of influence since the restoration of its independence in 1991 but the outcome of the war of 2020 has made Armenia, perforce, an even closer follower of the Kremlin's lead.

All this can potentially cause resentment towards Russia in both Armenia and Azerbaijan to be sure. But resentment cannot negate the harsh reality of Moscow having the capacity to severely punish either side due to its newly gained presence and influence in Karabakh. Both conflicting sides will have to listen to what Moscow has to say, even more than they did prior to the war. They could eliminate this power that Russia has gained over them by coming to a compromise – for instance, a strong Armenian autonomy in Karabakh under Azerbaijan's sovereignty. As of late 2020, however, neither side appears to be prepared for such a solution. And so, they will have to endure increased Russian influence over their national policies.

As to the other external players, Turkey has also bolstered its influence in this region as a result of the war, albeit probably in a less substantial way than Russia, at least in the short term. The West, on the other hand, was left completely off-side. Diplomatic gestures during the war by both the United States and France were in a rather weak connection with what was happening on the ground and failed to make any meaningful contribution to the final outcome.

Russia's conduct during the war, when it waited as Azerbaijani offensive unfolded only to jump in at the very last moment to play a decisive role, is another in the series of its activities designed to promote its domination over the neighbors. Russia now has its troops stationed in all three nations of the South Caucasus for the first time since the early 1990s. How long-term this state of affairs turns out to be will depend primarily on the internal socio-political stability and regime survival in Russia. For now, however, the Kremlin has strengthened its hand in the South Caucasus.