



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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Turkey's Place and Role in the Second Karabakh War

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The second, 44-day war in Karabakh lasted from September 27 to November 10, 2020 ending with the signing of a ceasefire agreement by the presidents of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia.

This document is plainly a capitulation of the Armenian side. This war has three clear winners - Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey:

- Azerbaijan, which after a 27-year pause, has regained control of most of the occupied territories, also enabling the return of refugees thereto.
- Russia, which has deployed its peacekeeping forces in Nagorno-Karabakh for at least five years and gained control of the Lachin corridor connecting Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh, will also control the pass connecting Nakhichevan to the rest of Azerbaijan.¹
- Turkey, which became a game changer in the conflict by providing assistance to its brotherly Azerbaijani side.

In fact, Ankara has for the first time and successfully participated in the ongoing military conflict in the post-Soviet space and strengthened its influence in the Caucasus. This issue, therefore, requires a more detailed discussion and analysis.



Situation in the conflict zone as of December 1, 2020. Areas that came under the control of the Azerbaijani side are marked in yellow.

¹ Doç. Dr. Yıldız Deveci Bozkuş, Günün sonunda Kafkasya'da kazanan ve kaybedenler, <https://www.indyturk.com/node/279971/t%C3%BCrki%C3%87yeden-sesler/g%C3%BCn%C3%BCn-sonunda-kafkasyada-kazanan-ve-kaybedenler#.X8ZeNmoZsHk.twitter>;

Turkey's Role in the Conflict

If in the cases of the past Karabakh war and subsequent escalations Ankara was limited to more verbal and symbolic support in relation to its brotherly Azerbaijan, the situation has changed recently. This change of position by Turkey is directly related to Ankara's recent rather ambitious strategy of pursuing a maximally independent foreign policy course, often causing Ankara's policy to meander.

At the same time, it should be taken into account that Turkey and Azerbaijan, due to their linguistic and cultural proximity (the Sunni-Shiite difference in this case is not significant and is of a secondary importance), pursue a policy known as "one nation, two states." Based on this principle, they consider each other's success and/or failure as their own victory and/or defeat.

It is hard to imagine that Baku would have started active hostilities without a prior arrangement with Moscow and Ankara. As the subsequent developments (the pre-arranged text of the agreement, the Russian "peacekeeping force" prepared to be deployed to the conflict zone, etc.) also indirectly confirm, some (probably more general) verbal agreement between the parties directed their actions during the conflict.

At the same time, Turkey was very actively involved in the training of Azerbaijani military units as well as in the supply of military equipment (especially drones which are the most advanced means of modern military affairs).²

The news was also reported in the mass-media about the deployment of hundreds of Syrian jihadist fighters by Turkey in support of Azerbaijan. However, Ankara categorically denied the information.³

It is also noteworthy that the joint Turkish-Azerbaijani military exercises were held with considerable intensity in order to raise the combat level of the Azerbaijani army. Thirteen such joint exercises were conducted in 2019 alone.⁴

² Alexander Gabuev, "How Turkey and Russia Have Gained from the Conflict," <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54903869>;

³ Dimitar Bechev, "What Does the Nagorno-Karabakh Deal Mean for Turkey and Russia?," <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/11/18/the-nagorno-karabakh-settlement-and-turkish-russian-relations>.

⁴ Dağlık Karabağ: Türkiye, Azerbaycan'ın askeri kapasitesini geliştirmesinde nasıl rol oynadı?, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-54379105>;



The Turkish-Azerbaijani joint military exercises.

After one of the last such exercises, which took place from July 29 to August 10, 2020 in various parts of Azerbaijan,⁵ the Turkish F-16s did not return and remained in Azerbaijan. The President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, did not conceal this fact. On October 26; that is, during the war, Mr. Aliyev said that the F-16s left in the country after the exercises will be used in the case of an external aggression against Azerbaijan.⁶

In the end, the Azerbaijani side, with the significant assistance from Turkey, was able not only to change the 27-year status quo in the conflict zone but also achieve an almost complete military victory.

Telephone conversations on the Karabakh issue between the Turkish and Azerbaijani presidents, as well as with the Turkish and Russian presidents, were constantly being held during the conflict. During the transition to the final phase, after the capture of Shusha, a tripartite ceasefire agreement was signed in which Turkey was not directly represented. However, it is clear that part of Ankara's interests (for example, the withdrawal of Armenia from three Azerbaijani territories without a fight

⁵ 10. yılında Azerbaycan-Türkiye Stratejik Ortaklık Anlaşması ve ortak askeri tatbikatlar, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/10-yilinda-azerbaycan-turkiye-stratejik-ortaklik-anlasmasi-ve-ortak-askeri-tatbikatlar/1937068>;

⁶ Azerbaycan Cumhurbaşkanı Aliyev: Dışarıdan bir saldırı olursa o zaman görürsünüz F-16'ları, <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/10/26/azerbaycan-cumhurbaskan-aliyev-d-sar-dan-bir-sald-r-olursa-o-zaman-gorursunuz-f-16-lar>;

and the opening of a corridor between Nakhichevan and the rest of Azerbaijan) were incorporated into the text of the agreement.

However, there was one important issue for the Turkish side that was not enshrined in the aforementioned agreement; namely, there was some prior agreement between the parties whose details later became necessary to put in place.

The point is that the Turkish side very much wanted to legalize its military presence on the territory of Azerbaijan. Addressing the nation a few minutes after the signing of the tripartite agreement on November 10, the Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, stressed that Turkish troops would be stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh along with the Russian peacekeepers.⁷ The same thing was repeated the next day by the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.⁸

Against this background, the Russian side decided to put an end to this issue on November 12. The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, made it clear that Turkish troops will not be stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh. He added that a joint Russian-Turkish monitoring center would be set up on the territory of Azerbaijan (meaning outside Nagorno-Karabakh) whereon the parties would agree separately.⁹

Despite such a position of the Russian side, the Turkish parliament passed a bill on November 17 according to which the Turkish contingent should be sent to Azerbaijan precisely on a "peacekeeping mission."¹⁰

At the same time, quite difficult negotiations between the parties continued and only ended on December 1 when the Russian and Turkish defense ministers signed an agreement on the establishment of a joint Russian-Turkish monitoring center.¹¹

To discuss these and other issues, the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, will pay a visit to Baku as an honorary guest on December 9-10 where the official celebration of the victory in the second Karabakh war will be held. The parties will also assess the situation and outline the ways for further cooperation.¹²

⁷ В Карабахе будет совместная миротворческая миссия Турции и России, <https://interfax.com.ua/news/general/702204.html>

⁸ Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan ortak barış gücü açıklaması, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogandan-ortak-baris-gucu-aciklamasi-530122.html>;

⁹ "No Turkish Peacekeepers to be Sent to Nagorno-Karabakh — Lavrov," <https://tass.com/politics/1222931>;

¹⁰ Dağlık Karabağ Tezkeresi Kabul Edildi, <https://www.amerikaninsesi.com/a/daglik-karabag-tezkeresi-kabul-edildi/5666383.html>.

¹¹ РФ и Турция подписали соглашение о Совместном центре в Карабахе, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/739394>;

¹² "Erdogan to Visit Azerbaijan to Attend Nagorno-Karabakh Victory Parade," https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/erdogan-to-visit-azerbaijan-to-attend-nagorno-karabakh-victory-parade?gallery_image=undefined#big

What Did Turkey Gain?

Although Turkey is not a signatory to the tripartite agreement signed on November 10, it can be considered as one of the victorious parties. Ankara (as well as Moscow and Baku) may not have achieved its goals with 100% but it still has some tangible achievements:



Celebrating victory in the second Karabakh war with Turkish flags has become a common practice in Baku.

1. The success of Azerbaijan, Turkey's main ally in the region, is also the success of Ankara in the Karabakh war. It is also a matter of the prestige of the latter. Consequently, Turkish influence in Azerbaijan has significantly increased. It is likely that Turkish influence will increase even more in the future, both in this country and throughout the region.

2. In the face of a significant confrontation against the West (we saw the last heated Turkish-American confrontation at the NATO Foreign Ministerial on December 1¹³), Ankara has sent a signal to the West that it can find common ground with Russia on a number of issues.

3. Turkish troops will be officially stationed in the Caucasus and, notably, now with the consent of Russia (although, they will be peacekeeping force stationed in the observation post and not directly in the Karabakh).

4. A land route between Nakhichevan and the rest of Azerbaijan has been opened (indicated by a blue circle on the map) which may also connect Turkey and the rest of the Turkish world (however, control of this road also remains in Russian hands).

¹³ "US and Turkey Target Each Other in NATO Meeting," <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-turkey-target-each-other-nato-meeting>.



5. It successfully tested its own unmanned aerial vehicles in a full-scale war, thus increasing the prestige of the Turkish military-industrial complex. Numerous countries (Ukraine, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, etc.) have already expressed their willingness to cooperate with the Turkish side in this direction.

However, it should be emphasized here that the second Karabakh war is only but one moment in Russian-Turkish relations. Despite difficulties, they hardly but still managed to reach an agreement on various hotspots.

The future of these and other deals, as well as bilateral relations, will largely depend on the direction in which Turkey-West relations develop and whose outlines are expected to emerge at the EU summit on December 10-11, 2020 and after Joe Biden's inauguration in the US on January 20, 2021.