

**More than one Year Later: an Evaluation of the
Geopolitical Implications of the Second Karabakh War**

Több mint egy évvel az események után: a második karabahi
háború geopolitikai következményeinek értékelése

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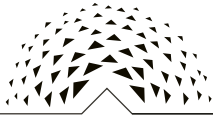
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Abstract: This paper describes the background and main cornerstone of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and reveals the main geopolitical outcomes of the second Karabakh war. It argues that the war has caused a major geopolitical shift in the region, as it has cemented Russia's military presence in Karabakh, thus creating a frozen conflict despite the Azerbaijani victory and territorial gains. Furthermore, it has also strengthened the position of Turkey in the region and boosted the Azerbaijani-Turkish alliance, which gathered pace throughout 2021. However, other regional actors such as Iran see this change as increasingly threatening. Various attempts to create a regional forum to mend fences and establish stability have had limited results, thus tensions remain permanent in the South Caucasus.

Keywords: Nagorno-Karabakh, 44-day war, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, Russia, South Caucasus

Absztrakt: *A tanulmány célja a karabahi konfliktus hátterének a leírása, illetve az elmúlt egy év legfontosabb eseményeinek áttekintése, ezzel együtt pedig a konfliktus okozta regionális geopolitikai változások áttekintése. Az elemzés rámutat arra, hogy jelentős módosulás történt a Dél-Kaukázus geopolitikai helyzetében azáltal, hogy Oroszország katonai jelenléte Karabahban az azerbajdzsáni győzelem ellenére egy befagyott konfliktust eredményez. A háború megerősítette továbbá Törökország jelenlétét a régióban és szorosabbá tette az azeri-török szövetséget, amely 2021 folyamán tovább erősödött. Azonban más regionális szereplők, úgymint Irán fenyegetőnek látják ezt a változást. A regionális fórum létrehozására és az ellentétek rendezésére, a stabilitás kialakítására tett törekvések egyelőre nem vezettek eredményre, ami a feszültségek továbbélését jelenti a Dél-Kaukázusban.*

Kulcsszavak: Hegyi-Karabah, 44 napos háború, Azerbajdzsán, Örményország, Törökország, Oroszország, Dél-Kaukázus

INTRODUCTION

One year has passed since the ceasefire agreement was signed between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, terminating the 44-day war. Last year's military confrontation signalled that conventional wars between states are not over, and more well-equipped troops using the latest military technology can defeat 'traditional' warfare. Much has been written about the takeaways of the war; however, developments during the last roughly one year should also be evaluated. Some rapprochement occurred between Armenia and Azerbaijan to

mend fences in November and December 2021. This analysis gives an overview of the background of the conflict as well as its effects on regional dynamics in geopolitics.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

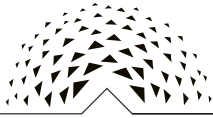
Beyond Nagorno-Karabakh, seven Azerbaijani districts (rayons) were occupied by Armenian forces as a result of the first Karabakh war in 1992-1994: Kalbajar, Lachin, Qubadli, Zangilan, and Jabrayil fully, while the Fuzuli and Agdam districts were only occupied partially. Due to the war, nearly [700 thousand Azerbaijanis had to leave their](#) home and became internally displaced persons (IDPs), while another 185,000 fled from Armenia as refugees. In turn, some 300,000 Armenians left Azerbaijan.

The ceasefire agreement of 1994 has never concluded the conflict, which has become a 'frozen conflict' such as the one in Transnistria or Abkhazia in the post-Soviet zone (meaning the presence of Russian troops and a working ceasefire). Skirmishes, small-scale hostilities were permanent along the contact line. The only major action happened in April 2016, when the Azerbaijani Army [launched an offensive](#), but it stopped after four days due to [the international pressure](#). Nevertheless, the military offensive served as a useful basis for the war in 2020 because it could test the defensive lines of Karabakh. In July 2020, [another clash took place](#) between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Tovuz region; this time the Azerbaijani Armed Forces started to use UAVs in greater number.

In order to mediate the conflict, the OSCE Minsk Group had been formed under to co-chairmanship of Russia, France, and the United States in 1992. The group could do little to solve the issue [despite four UN](#) resolutions requesting the full withdrawal of Armenian forces. Importantly, Nagorno-Karabakh or the self-declared Republic of Artsakh has not been recognised by any UN member state. Neither has it been recognised by Armenia, which did not want to risk such a diplomatic act to infuriate Baku and Moscow. Thus, having a fragile ceasefire agreement on one side between the two parties, and a reluctant international community to broker a viable peace agreement on the other, has resulted in a frozen conflict.

THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR OR THE 44-DAY WAR (27 SEPTEMBER – 10 NOVEMBER, 2020)

Before the war, the size of the armed forces in Nagorno-Karabakh was around 20,000 soldiers, while Armenia's army counted around 45,000. These forces combined roughly equalled [the Azerbaijani army](#). However, the mountainous region, the trenches and fortified lines increased the odds of the Armenian defensive forces. Despite the disadvantages posed by the terrain, technology massively favoured



the Azerbaijani side. Due to its massive petrol and gas revenues, it had been able to modernize its army by acquiring the most advanced Russian, Turkish, and Israeli technology and weapons.

Azerbaijan spent some USD 19 billion on its army between 2011 and 2019, while Armenia less than USD 5 billion. Baku's extensive [cutting-edge Israeli military technology purchase](#) also facilitated its success. Its major superiority appeared in the air: by using Turkish Bayraktar-B2 drones and Israeli drones, for example, Sky Striker, IAI Harop, IAI Mini Harpy, and Orbiter-1K UAVs, the Armenian defence had practically nothing to counter them.

The second Karabakh war started on 27 September, 2021, after Azerbaijani forces attacked four segments of the line of contact. In the north, following a battle that lasted several days, they occupied Murovdag (in the Kalbajar district), which allowed the Azerbaijani forces to control the M-11 route. On the eastern front, more intense fight took place surrounding the town of Madagiz, which was eventually occupied. However, the rough, mountainous ground, in line with the Armenian defensive lines, hindered greater advancement.

The Azerbaijani forces were more successful in the south(east): preliminarily in Fuzuli, where the ground was more favourable for armoured units. Although the Armenian forces caused heavy losses to the attackers and stopped their advancement, after one week the Azerbaijani air superiority and especially the extensive use of UAVs weakened the defensive line, and in early October the frontline was broken through in Fuzuli, near the Iranian border. After several days, Azerbaijan [forces occupied Hadrut](#), and they reached Agband on 22 October, thus liberating the whole Iranian border zone until the Armenian border. The offensive ended with the liberation of Susha, which was recaptured on [8 November](#), triggering national celebrations in the country. Shortly after the fall of the city, Armenians asked for a ceasefire to avoid total defeat. The ceasefire declaration was signed between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia on 9 November.

[Several lessons have been learnt from](#) the second Karabakh war. The extensive use of drones and their integration of land-based fire support was successful against an enemy without adequate sensors, electronic warfare, and counter-drone capabilities. The Armenian military leadership had prepared for fighting a twentieth-century-style war, and its less-developed military equipment made it very difficult for it to face the challenges stemming from the new technology. Azerbaijani commandos were also successfully deployed beyond the frontlines, and their activities weakened defensive capabilities.

Armenia's deterrence strategy also had less effect and failed to counter the Azerbaijani operations. Even though it targeted several cities with ballistic missiles and caused civilian deaths, the country finally avoided a high-scale confrontation with Azerbaijan. On the Azerbaijani side, civilian losses were instrumentalised to maintain the high combat morale and show the evil nature of the enemy.

INVOLVEMENT OF REGIONAL ACTORS

TURKEY

Based on the 'brotherly' relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan (frequently referred to as 'one nation, two states'), Ankara showed unanimous support for Baku during the war. Military cooperation between the two countries became tighter in 2010, after [signing the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support](#), which includes the obligation for both parties to cooperate when either country faces aggression from a third state or group of states. Since 2013, joint military drills have also come to be regular; in August 2020, it was organized in Azerbaijan, and Turkish warplanes remained in the country even after the end of the drill.

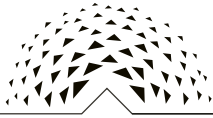
Significantly, Turkey has started to sell its Bayraktar drones to Azerbaijan. [Arms sales increased from](#) nearly USD 300,000 in the month of July to USD 36 million in August, and USD 77.1 million in September, according to the Turkish Exporters' Assembly. This rise was even more spectacular compared to the first nine months of the previous year, when sales to Azerbaijan only totalled USD 20.7 million.

While Turkey has maintained close ties with Azerbaijan, its relations are practically frozen with Armenia. Turkey closed its borders at the beginning of the first Nagorno-Karabakh war, and despite some exploratory diplomatic moves in 2008 and 2009, real rapprochement could be not realized between the two countries due to historical antagonism, as well as Turkey's special relations with Azerbaijan. In this case Ankara did not owe anything to the Armenian side on the eve of the military operation.

RUSSIA

Russia has remained a major actor in the South Caucasus after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It established close relations with Armenia, and by signing a mutual defence agreement and stationing troops in [Gyumri](#) (around 3,000 soldiers) and at the Erebuni air base (some 1,000 soldiers), it has cemented its military relations with Yerevan. Not surprisingly, Russia is the most important weapon importer of the country. Armenia has joined Russia-led international organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union or the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Azerbaijan's pragmatic foreign policy to create good relations with Russia but preserve a strategic independence has borne fruit. Baku signed a military agreement with Moscow in 2003, and despite the growing Israeli and Turkish arms trade, Russia has dominated Azerbaijani weapon import during the past two decades. Moreover, Azerbaijan was ready to pay for the latest Russian technology, while Armenia usually received second-tier weapons at cheaper prices.



DEVELOPMENTS AFTER THE WAR

The [November 9 ceasefire statement](#) (importantly: not an agreement) ended the hostilities and granted the Russian Federation the opportunity to send troops to Karabakh, namely “1,960 troops armed with firearms, 90 armored vehicles and 380 motor vehicles and units of special equipment.” As the agreement was signed between Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, no other actors were involved. This was a setback for Ankara, which had demonstrated particular diplomatic support for Azerbaijan during the war, and Baku had made efforts to bring Turkey to the negotiation table. Furthermore, the Minsk Group was also not mentioned in the document, clearly signalling that its role had become negligible.

The statement also expresses that the Agdam, Kalbajar, and Lachin Districts have to be returned to Azerbaijan, and a transport corridor should be established between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia (the Lachin corridor) under the control of Russian peacekeepers. The document also envisages the exchange of prisoners of war, hostages, and dead bodies, as well as the return of internally displaced persons and refugees. Finally, it sets that “all economic and transport connections in the region shall be unblocked” in order to open a transport connection between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, overseen by the Border Guard Service of the Russian Federal Security Service.

The realisation of the statement was slow due to the short deadline for the withdrawal, but the Armenian troops eventually left the above-mentioned districts. Although the document set an end to the hostilities, minor skirmishes have occurred between the two parties, also with the involvement of the Russian peacekeepers.

The return of territories has also created a new situation at the border zone of Armenia and Azerbaijan, culminating in a border dispute. In May 2021, minor hostilities occurred at the South Armenian border, as Azerbaijani [troops were deployed in a pocket of Armenian territory](#), claiming that they were originally Azerbaijani territories and the border shall be demarcated.

The military defeat and loss of territories, in line with a mass arrival of refugees (since the citizens of the Republic of Artshak also had Armenian citizenship, they are perceived as IDPs) has put enormous economic and psychological burden on Armenia. The military losses of the country of 2.9 million people were high, around [2,900 soldiers died](#) (the Azeri losses were roughly the same). This situation was further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which overloaded the health infrastructure. Armenia also had to face huge losses of military equipment: more than [360 tanks](#) were destroyed or seized by Azerbaijani forces, reducing the capabilities of the Armenian Armed Forces.

The new situation has also triggered major economic difficulties for the underdeveloped country: it has lost sizable arable land and has had to find a solution for the incoming IDPs as well. The financial burden worsened due to the higher military spending limiting the room for manoeuvre in the government budget.

The losses of territory and life have also incurred national mourning and frustration. Even a [coup d'état attempt](#) was organized against the Pashinyan government in early 2021. However, Pashinyan was re-elected in the general elections, and he started a rapprochement to Azerbaijan in late Autumn 2021. Later on, he also signalled his country's willingness to mend fences with Turkey. These endeavours were interrupted by several bloody [military clashes](#) during the year; nevertheless, Yerevan's general commitment towards a settlement has remained strong. The meetings between President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, supported by [Moscow](#) and [Brussels](#), have opened a new chapter in bilateral relations.

On the other side, Azerbaijan has reached the majority of its military goals. Mass celebrations and a military parade on 10 December, 2020 showed that the victory will dominate the political agenda in the coming years. The liberation of Susha was especially celebrated in the Azerbaijani media. Reconstruction and mine clearance has started, although they will take several years. Nevertheless, [border delimitation issues](#) have led to renewed conflicts between the two states during late spring and summer in the border zone, in the proximity of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Having Russian troops in Nagorno-Karabakh makes the future unclear, although it is still believed that in five years the whole entity will be under Azerbaijani control. Baku has indicated its willingness to compromise with Yerevan and its commitment to opening the Zangezur corridor – which is still hindered by the Armenian government.

MAJOR GEOPOLITICAL CHANGES

Six main geopolitical changes can be outlined for the South Caucasus after the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. Russia has cemented its presence in this part of the South Caucasus, and it has been declared the [greatest winner of the conflict by many](#). In other regional conflicts stemming from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, from Transnistria to Abkhazia and South-Ossetia, the presence of Russian troops has turned them into frozen conflicts. The current situation is similar to these, even if the peacekeepers can leave after five years (four years remaining). Moscow could easily assert its influence over Azerbaijan and Armenia by stationing its troops in Nagorno-Karabakh, and it also has special status by controlling the southern transportation corridor when it opens. During 2021, Moscow could maintain its role as a mediator between the two countries, as several meetings between the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders were held on Russian territory, and Russia continues to keep its troops on Armenian soil as well. While preserving its leverage in the South-Caucasian 'near abroad', it will face growing Turkic cooperation in its neighbourhood.



Intra-Turkic cooperation. The conflict was one of the first examples of palpable intra-Turkic cooperation in military and diplomatic terms. Turkey's assistance helped the Azeri Armed Forces reoccupy the Armenian-held territories, while at the diplomatic level Ankara also supported the Azeri cause at various international fora. Importantly, other members of the Turkic Council also sided with Azerbaijan in the conflict and expressed their support. Finally, the massive use of Turkish drones was a valuable demonstration of their effectiveness, skyrocketing the arms purchase of other countries.

Strengthened Turkish involvement in the South Caucasus. The establishment of the joint Russian-Turkish monitoring centre, staffed by 60 military servicemen from each country, in line with the [agreement signed in December 2020](#), has boosted Turkey's involvement. Although Russia has remained the responsible actor by sending peacekeepers to Karabakh, Turkey has managed to gain some diplomatic and symbolic presence in the region, which could be celebrated as a victory at home. Furthermore, the second Karabakh war has catalysed Azeri-Turkish cooperation. Since 2021, the two countries' citizens are allowed to enter each other's country using their [biometric ID card](#). Previous cooperation, such as joint military drills, continues between the two countries.

New transportation route. The inclusion of the establishment of the [Zangezur corridor](#) in the ceasefire agreement has given a new dimension to the intra-Turkic transportation networks. The corridor would set a direct line between Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan proper via South Armenia. Although the land road would be monitored by the Russian FSB, giving Russia some influence over the region again, the opening of the corridor can link Ankara and Baku via land. Although the Armenian government has refused to establish the corridor, recent developments, such as [Pashinyan's remarks](#) about a possible opening, give some hope to the Azerbaijani side. If the corridor is set, it will harm Iran's, and possibly Georgia's, interests. Until today, land transportation between Nakhichevan and the rest of Azerbaijan occurs via Iran, which can lose its transit role in the future. A direct link between Turkey and Azerbaijan can also reduce the relevance of Georgia as a transit country, as the corridor can shorten the [transportation line by 340 kms compared](#) to the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway.

Remaining regional tensions. Turkey's strengthening regional influence has not been welcomed by every regional actor, especially by Iran, which was practically left out of the conflict, despite its regional interest and relatively good links to Armenia. Although Tehran has traditionally shown more understanding and pragmatic cooperation towards Yerevan, the Iranian government has acknowledged Azerbaijan's rights to control its own territory since the beginning of the conflict. However, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's victory celebration messages raised concern in Tehran. Later on, the joint military drill between Azerbaijan and Turkey in 2021 summer, along with other issues, [triggered tensions and harsher rhetoric](#) on the Azerbaijani and Iranian sides, both in autumn 2021. [Israel's good relations](#) with Baku also infuriates Tehran, which will not give a new issue in the bilateral relations, but it is going to stay on the agenda.

Although the Turkish side has proposed a [six-way platform](#) to create a forum where intraregional tensions and conflicts could be handled by Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Iran, Russia, and Turkey, this proposal has met with limited enthusiasm from Armenia, Georgia, and Iran.

West out. The other important geopolitical outcome of the war has been that the main Western powers have been left out of the settlement, indicating the [decline of Western influence](#) in the region. The timing of the operation coincided with the Presidential elections in the United States, which decreased the probability of any US intervention in the conflict. The other Western actor involved in the conflicts since the mid-1990s, France, did not have any palpable impact on the conflict, even if its statements rather favoured Armenia due to the large Armenian diaspora living in the country. This also outlined the weakness of the OSCE Minsk group in handling the conflict. Despite this, the group can still make some contributions in that it brokered a meeting between the Armenian and Azerbaijani Foreign Ministers during the September 2021 UN session, which was a small step to pave the way towards a possible settlement.

CONCLUSION

Recent developments, such as the rapprochement between Armenia and Azerbaijan or the meeting of the members of the 3+3 platform suggest that 2022 will bring further amelioration. [Several issues](#) will remain on the table: ending the border delimitation or establishing transportation routes are [key concerns](#) for Azerbaijan. While Russian troops will stay on the ground, Baku will try to enlarge its room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis Moscow (i.e. keeping its commitment towards the Non-Aligned Movement or building cordial ties with Ukraine). Along with the diplomatic efforts, the Azerbaijani government will continue to make efforts to reintegrate the territories regained in the war by supporting the slow demining process and building transportation routes and [airports](#). For Armenia, difficult decisions to cope with the post-war situation will occur in the foreseeable future, such as steps [to normalize relations with Turkey](#) with the support of Moscow. Taking last year's developments into consideration, there is now a greater chance of a normalization of ties between Azerbaijan and Armenia.