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THE ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN CONDUNDRUM

In Search of Peace in the 'Black Garden'



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The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conundrum
In Search of Peace in the Black Garden

Introduction

The Nagorno-Karabakh, a 4400 km² mountainous region called 'Artsakh' by Armenians and "Black Garden" from its Turkic-Persian rendering, has historically been a landlocked territory in the South Caucasus. Disputed between two post-Soviet States, Armenia and Azerbaijan, the region was recognized by the international community as part of Azerbaijan after the demise of the former Soviet Union. Ever since the SSR Azerbaijani authorities were given control of this region as an Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) by the Soviet organization¹, 80% of its population was made up of ethnic Armenians who, in the name of the right of self determination, always demanded the reallocation to the SSR Armenia. Since 1988², the region has been the theatre of one of the bloodiest conflicts in the post-Soviet orbit, where, two principles of international law³ - namely, the right of self-determination and the principle of national integrity over internationally recognised national borders, have caused Armenia and Azerbaijan to militarily confront each other due to a constantly shrinking space for diplomatic and non-violent resolutions.

Under the parapet of the *Glasnost*⁴ and the *perestroika*⁵ which allowed national claims of independence from within the Soviet Union, ethnic tensions had already taken place regularly within Nagorno-Karabakh proper.

The so-called «First Karabakh War» (1992-94), a violent conflict which ended with a military defeat of Azerbaijan did not pacify the situation on the ground. In fact, Azerbaijan lost not only the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, but also other seven districts surrounding the Armenian-majority oblast. As a result, 700 000⁶ ethnic Azerbaijanis were forced to leave their places of residence and ended up becoming internally displaced. Since then, an elusive status-quo was favoured and preferred by Yerevan, leaving Baku to nourish the idea of regaining control of its lost territories. In 2016, the 4-Day War highlighted how both countries were constantly capable of militarily confronting each other despite the fully-fledged reconciliation process

¹ Despite the fact that everyone is saying that the attachment of Nargono-Karabakh to SSR Azerbaidjan was a decision made by Stalin, who was then president of the Caucasian bureau for the Bolshevik Party, there are no historical documents that prove it : -

<https://armenian.usc.edu/qa-with-arsene-saparov-no-evidence-that-stalin-gave-karabakh-to-azerbaijan/>

² In reaction to this revendication, the Azerbaijani authorities organized massacres of Armenians and pogroms in the cities of Sumgait, Baku and Kirovabad, "Nargorno Karabakh : Understanding Conflict" 2013, Johns Hopkins University, link here : https://sais.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/CM%20Field%20Trip%20NK%20March%2029%20Final_1.pdf

³ Inviolability of borders principle on one hand and the right of self-determination on the other one

⁴ "Transparency" in Russian, designates the policies of transparency and truth undertaken by M. Gorbachev

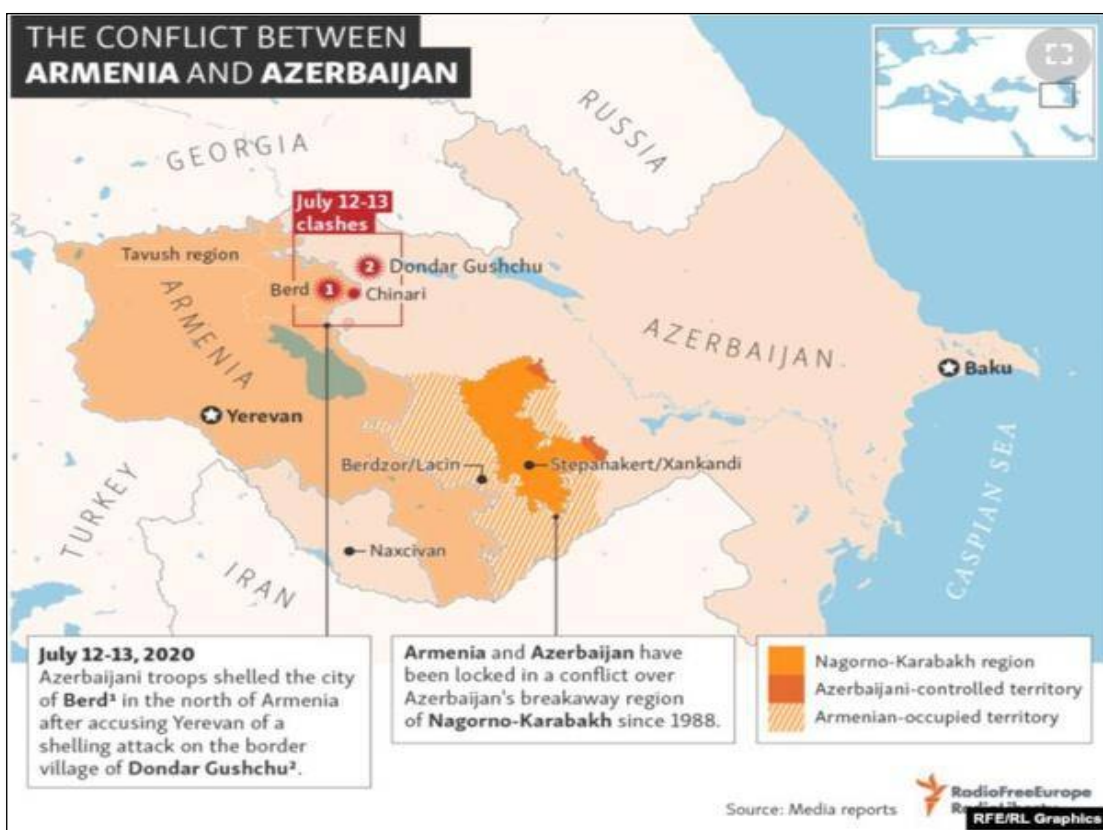
⁵ "Adjustment" in Russian, the word designates the economic restructuring policy undertaken in the USSR by M. Gorbachev in 1985

⁶ "Forced displacement in the Nargony Karabakh conflict : return and its alternatives", conciliation ressources, august 2011(p49) - link here :

[-https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Forced%20Displacement%20in%20Nagorny%20Karabakh%20Conflict_201108_ENG.pdf](https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Forced%20Displacement%20in%20Nagorny%20Karabakh%20Conflict_201108_ENG.pdf)

underway, led by the co-chaired Minsk Group (OSCE). On September 27, 2020, the Turkey-backed full-scale military operation resulted in Azerbaijan gaining control of the majority of the majority of lost territories in a very short period of time. In an approximately 45-day war, Azerbaijan succeeded in changing the status-quo ground situation that had persisted for the last thirty years. Accordingly, the latter has not only forced Armenia to end the military confrontation and accept its military defeat, and reversed the ‘winners and losers’ position of the 1990s warfare.

This scenario poses the question of how a better understanding of the failures of the various peace agreements relating to the Nagorno-Karabakh is important to understand firstly the South Caucasus region and secondly the clash of Powers' interests from within. It is also important to understand how the peripheral position of the region provides a perspective from which the reasons of the so-called ‘2020 Karabakh War’ can be explored. Given this, one shall put into question the latest cease-fire agreement brokered by Moscow and, in turn, shed light on what kind of peace process may be possible to fully achieve the ending of such a territorial rivalry on the ground.



Map of the Nargono-Karabakh disputed region before 27 Sempتمبر 2020 /Source :RF E/RL Graphics

The Clash of (Ubiquitous) Hate Narratives

Without any doubt, it is too early to speak about a enduring peace. At this stage, the consequences of the war might keep people hostage, namely trapped in between political tensions and vested interests within the region. Both communities involved in the conflict nourish a communication deeply connected 'with a wealth of tumultuous, occupation, inquisitions, pogroms that have symbolically increased a more self-oriented collective faith and wrenching reality'⁷. This omnipresent hatred facilitated through rhetoric against the so-called "other" make security illusory.

On November 10, 2020, Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives signed, under the aegis of Russia, an agreement for ending the hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh. In short, this umpteenth truce recognises Azerbaijan's military victory and the Armenian defeat as a matter of fact, ending a six-week bloodshed a few hours after the capture of the city of Shushi (Şuşa in Azeri language) by Azerbaijani sabotage groups⁸.

While the Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev welcomed the peace agreement with great joy, affirming the de facto 'capitulation'⁹ of Armenia, the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, tried to politically survive the mass-scale protests that erupted and presented an 'extremely painful' decision¹⁰ to the Armenian nation. In fact, the latest truce has not only provoked an explosion of anger in the streets of Yerevan, where hundreds of Armenians have stormed the Parliament and places nearby, but also a sense of frustration and anger amongst all Armenians

At the same time, thousands of Azeri and Turkish flags were waved by ordinary citizens in Baku who welcomed the ceasefire agreement with jubilation. The latter meant nothing more than a long-awaited victory for all Azerbaijanis, especially for those Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who were forced to leave their places of residence during the 'First Karabakh War'.

⁷ "Unfreezing the "other": collective trauma and psychological warfare over Nargono-Karabakh rivalry", FrancescoTurpia,2017, (p37), link here : - http://e-jlia.com/papers/7_2.pdf

⁸ This is a strategic city and the breakthrough of Azerbaijani forces pushed the Armenian population to leave the province

⁹ Nagorno-Karabakh: Armenia and Azerbaijan sign a "total ceasefire", Anissa el- Jabri and Régis Genté, RFI, 10/11/2020

¹⁰ Nikol Pashinyan, in his message published on his official Facebook account the night of the signing agreement added ; "there is no defeat as long as you do not consider yourself beaten"

A Region of Vested Interests

" The South Caucasus, placed at the forefront of the new threats of the 21st century represent a major importance for international security "11.

Lord Georges Roberson



Source: Mappery¹²

In 2003, the Secretary General of NATO¹³ was already warning about regional security in the aftermath of the '2020 Karabakh War', highlighting much higher risks for future conflicts in a region full of rivalries. The historical opposing position of Armenia and Azerbaijan about the resolution of the Karabakh issue takes roots in the very nature of the Caucasian region. Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia¹⁴ freed themselves from the Soviet Union in fire and blood. Among other factors, the border dispute over

¹¹ Jaba Devdariani, " Nato interes in Caucasus Security Confirmed by Secretary General's visit ", Eurasianet.org, 19 May 2003

¹² Link available here : - <http://www.mappery.com/Political-Map-of-South-Caucasus>

¹³ North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

¹⁴ Their borders were drawn at the end of World War I and during the Russian Civil War, The Russian Federation uses the term "Transcaucasia" in a way of historical continuity, thus the term "South Caucasus" has no meaning in Russia"

Nagorno-Karabakh came to shape an interstate duel of collective memories and reciprocal mistrust between the two populations. On one hand, Azerbaijan, a pivotal country of the Caucasus energy stakes, organizes its power, structures its society and redistributes its wealth through the energy prism. Thus the 'agreements of the century'¹⁵, signed in 1994, allowed Baku to invest massively in its defence industry, which was enabled by a considerable increase in its oil rents.

On the other hand, the population of Armenia continues to decline due to increased emigration since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Nevertheless, the role of its diaspora continued to grow and plays a centrally paramount role in constituting, and being recognised, as a central pillar of the Armenian nation. Three generations after the genocide of 1915, the Armenian diaspora is present in more than 50 countries and plays an undeniable role indeed: for the economic recovery, the recognition of the genocide and the support of the formerly de facto Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Thus, Armenia and the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh faced the anguish of a terrible past, caught between the repeated threats of ethnic cleansing uttered by Baku and the denial of genocide cultivated by Ankara.

As mentioned above, the contested region is geographically located on the periphery at the crossroad of Europe, Russia, the Middle-East and Asia. More properly, Nagorno-Karabakh is a geographical junction of three former empires henceforth known as the Russian Federation, Turkey and Iran. These three great powers exert influence on the region by checking-and-balancing their respective economic, strategic and political interests. Despite international cooperation with Russia on a military ground and with the European Union through the Eastern Partnership (EaP), Iran has a cautious and pragmatic approach due to, among other things, its significant Azeri minority (around 20 million Azeris live in the north-west). Teheran therefore has always tried to have strong economic ties with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moreover, the Southern Gas corridor pipeline project (or Trans-Anatolic Pipeline) runs from Azerbaijan to Europe.

This complex interplay also leads to global rivalries between Russia, NATO, the United States and the European Union because of EaP. Major crises have historically taken place due to border handovers and international crises that have impacted the South Caucasus with a typical spill-over effect. These include the Iranian nuclear crisis, the Yugoslavian war, the US-led military campaign in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the Gas war, the enlargement of NATO to the East. To these tensions must also be added the spread of radical Islamism affecting the region from the Caucasus to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The latest is re-mindful of the Syrian

¹⁵ - Agreements signed with 19 multinational companies for the exploitation of seven deposits (oil and gas) in the Caspian Sea and the sum of more than 8 billion dollars for 30 years (1995- 2025)

mercenaries'¹⁶ involvement recruited by Turkey in support of Azeri forces in Nagorno-Karabakh.

However, the current impasse in the long-standing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is only a reflection of the disruption of the international order. If we observe a military rather than a diplomatic victory - the agreement of November 10 does not mention a word on the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh -, it is above all a human catastrophe in which the Armenians find themselves, once again, to take the roads of exile.

¹⁶ - Turkish and Azeri authorities have denied recruiting Syrian soldiers, despite accounts of Syrian fighters published in international media outlets. Also, the use of mercenaries, according to the legal definition, can be used for both sides in regard of Armenian diaspora who opted to support militarily the Armenian cause. <https://observers.france24.com/en/20191021-syria-turkey-militia-ahrar-sharqiya-investigation-abuses>

The Failure of Conflict Resolution.

The Case of the Co-Chaired Minsk Group (OSCE)

“As always in a conflict, two parties bear a responsibility and the failed Soviet Union also bears its share of responsibility”¹⁷. The definition of the so-called “frozen conflict” reflects peace processes failures. For example, the 1994 ceasefire agreement reached in Bishkek was seldom respected, leading to the violations noted by the observers of the Minsk¹⁸.

In addition, the Minsk Group, in charge of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States is facing many critiques as a failure of multilateralism. The call of the French Senate regarding the recognition of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh raises the problem of a co-president member's bias. However, it also shows that the positions in the Minsk Group may need to change in the future plans in respect of the neutrality of each member. Thus, a long-term peace resolution process has failed because of strong identity tension and the lack of political motivations and wills to compromise.

The conflict resolution principles set out in the so-called *Madrid Principles* of 2007 have never been implemented. Among these principles, we find the territorial integrity of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the recognition of a status based on the self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh, the Lachin corridor (‘Berzdor’ in Armenian language) linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh, and the right of return for internally displaced Azeri populations.

The 2020 Karabakh War has highlighted the impasse in which the Minsk Group finds itself. This has definitely played out in favour of Russia. Moreover, the oil element in the region is a key factor impacting long-term instability as Azerbaijan supports the European Union’s security needs and the United States is a key trade partner. Thus, beyond the political will of each party, the resolution of the conflict is subject to multilateral influences and remains partly subordinated to the future of the wealth in the Caspian Sea.

¹⁷ - Comment by Jacques Faure, Former French Ambassador to Armenia and French co-chair of the Minsk Group during the 2016 conference: “ Nagorno-Karabakh , Local war, global stake? ” organized by the Foundation for Strategic Research: available at this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cN9GYUq_kIU

¹⁸ - Reports available at this link: - <https://www.osce.org/mg>

Russia : A Tutelary Power or Regional Spoiler?

A similar approach to the Monroe doctrine can be observed in the policy of the near abroad¹⁹ that Moscow adopted following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Thus, the Kremlin has already failed several ceasefire attempts in Nagorno-Karabakh²⁰. Otherwise, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S.Lavrov explains that no alternative to diplomatic resolution of the conflict was possible.

However, with this agreement, Moscow asserts its image of mediator in the region facing growing Turkish influence. Indeed, this last agreement was negotiated outside the Minsk Group²¹. On the other hand, the Russian Federation's timid support to the Republic of Armenia reveals a contrast with the alliance sealed between the two states²². Indeed, according to Turkey's engagement with Azerbaijan, it would have led to a direct confrontation between NATO and the CSTO. Therefore, Moscow 'wins' the recognition of Azerbaijan while leaving no alternative for Armenia, whose velvet revolution has caused a deterioration of the relations between the Russian and Armenian leaders. Although if this Azerbaijani victory, attributable to the technical and financial side of the war (spending on defence by Azerbaijan, and Turkish and Israeli technological support); it has also "showed to Azerbaijani leaders that their centrist balancing worked better in dealing with Russian concerns"²³.

It is also clear that Moscow's hegemony over former Soviet republics has been challenged by Turkey. Indeed, "if a Russian interposition force will be deployed on this plateau for five years within the framework of the agreement of November 10, Turkey, has an outpost on the Caspian Sea at the end of this war"²⁴. In fact, for the Kremlin, the policy of the Caspian is based on the control of hydrocarbons and to do so, Moscow must maintain control in the Caucasian corridor at all costs. Therefore, Russian ambitions in the Middle-East and Mediterranean sounds like an echo of Turkish claims, among which we note several points of Russian-Turkish discord (Syria, Libya). So, this Russian-Turkish 'entente' demonstrates a desire to control and contain conflicts.

¹⁹ - ближнее зарубежье or "blizhneye zarubezhye" designates the Russian policy among the successor States to the Soviet Union

²⁰ - The Kremlin failed an Iranian ceasefire attempt in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1992 and another similar Turkish-American initiative in 1995

²¹ - Created in 1992 by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), this group, claimed to be European, includes representatives of the European Union, the United States and Russia

²² - Enclosed in the Russian bosom, Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and has a Russian military base on its territory in Gumri

²³ - "What do Aliyev, Ivanishvili and Zelensky have in common?", Taras Kuzio, November 24 2020, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/11/24/what-do-aliyev-ivanishvili-and-zelensky-have-in-common/>

²⁴ - "L'accord sur le Haut-Karabakh selon Igor Delanoë, directeur adjoint de l'Observatoire franco-russe", Eurasia Prospective, published by Cyrille Bret, 14/11/2020 - available at this link: <https://eurasiapropective.net/2020/11/14/laccord-de-cessez-le-feu-sur-le-haut-karabakh-selon-igor-delanoë-directeur-adjoint-de-lobservatoire-franco-russe/>

Conclusion

Currently, in the capital Stepanakert of the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh, institutions continue to function, whereas the city of Shushi (or Şuşa), only ten kilometres away, is now controlled by the Azerbaijanis and patrolled by Russian peacekeepers. As of now Armenia is gradually restituting the territories it conquered thirty years ago at the expense of Azerbaijan. After Aghdam, in the north of Nagorno-Karabakh, the Azerbaijani military retook possession of the Kaljabar²⁵ district, further west, on Wednesday 25th November. The disputed gold mine next to the village of Sotk in Armenia (near Kaljabar) embodies the complexity of this new delimitation - half of the field is located in the Karvachar (Kaljabar)²⁶.

Thus, one of Baku's priorities is to repopulate these regions after the withdrawal of Armenian troops. Meanwhile, authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh have called for inhabitants to return. As such, people who had fled the fighting are returning home by crossing the Latchin corridor under the close surveillance of Russian peacekeepers. This corridor is now the only land-link between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Obviously, not all former inhabitants will return. The situation is far too unstable. There are still too many concerns and uncertainties about the future. And this future, also and above all, depends on the question of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. After more than 30 years, no mutually acceptable solution has been found. Hence the idea raised by some researchers and diplomats that we could see a replica of the Kosovo scenario²⁷. It seems undeniably unrealistic to bring to a compromise two societies that perceive a peaceful resolution as impossible. However certain actions and perspectives could be taken into account in order to attain a sustainable peace process in Nagorno-Karabakh :

²⁵ - This district includes many Armenian cultural sites as the Dadivank Monastery, it is the second last of the seven districts which have been conquered by Armenia in 1994, at the end of the war for the independence of the Armenian enclave

²⁶ - "Gold deposit on new Armenia-Azerbaijani border -whose mine is it?", Jamnews, Karabakh 2020, 28/11/2020, link here : - <https://jam-news.net/sotk-gold-mine-struggle-for-mine-armenia-nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan/>

²⁷ - "Le Haut-Karabakh au coeur du nouvel Etat", Cairn info, Michèle Kahn, Le Courrier des pays de l'Est 2008 (p40-43), link here : - <https://www.cairn.info/revue-le-courrier-des-pays-de-l-est-2008-3-page-40.htm>



Map of Nagorno-Karabakh and the division of its territory according to the last agreement/by Caucasian Knot

- Establishment of an international commission of inquiry to ensure the total cessation of the war that began on September 27, 2020 in order to release captives and hostages (Sargis Ghazaryan²⁸).
- International observer missions with sufficient capacity and resources to investigate violations of the truce regime and ensure the return of displaced persons (Sargis Ghazaryan).
- Relaunching of peace negotiations under the co-chairmanship of the Minsk Group in order to define the status of Nagorno-Karabakh.
- Integration of Nagorno-Karabakh authorities into the negotiation process as the territory was de facto independent for the last twenty seven

²⁸ - "Haut-Karabakh, la guerre des récits", Le Grand Continent, Sargis Ghazaryan, Alban Claude, September 29, 2020
link here : <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2020/09/29/nagorno-karabakh/#easy-footnote-3-85116>

years. To deny its existence as a party to the conflict is denying the reality on the ground (Kristoff Kohlhagen²⁹).

- Set up of an inventory mission composed of international experts for the preservation of cultural and religious heritage, both Christian and Muslim (Audrey Azoulé, director of UNESCO).
- Exploration of ways to better integrate the viewpoints of the Nagorno Karabakh population through more formalized mechanisms (Thania Paffenholz³⁰).

²⁹ - *"The Flexible Barrier of History: Moving Peace Forward Through The Past"*, Nargono-Karabakh : understanding conflict, 2013

³⁰ - *"Civil Society and Peacebuilding"*, research in 11 conflict area, 2010

