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

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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 Azer-

baijan 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 trans-

portation 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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