



# The Breakdown of the Status Quo and the International Dimension of the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis

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# The Internationalisation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Regional Conflict

An Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation is nothing new in international politics. It was one of the triggers for the disintegration of the USSR. Over the past three decades, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has evolved from an inter-community/inter-republic conflict within a single country (the Soviet Union) to a procrastinated inter-state dispute, which has considerably undermined the security of the entire Caucasus.

The escalation of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan on September 27, 2020 has clearly demonstrated the internationalisation of the lingering ethno-political conflict: it has gone beyond the limits of an individual Eurasian region. Russian expert on Oriental studies Vitaly Naumkin said, with good reason, that this latest round of tensions in the Nagorno-Karabakh region has revealed a “close connection between the South Caucasus and Levant.”<sup>1</sup> The conflicting parties themselves have blamed each other for bringing militants from the Middle East to the Caucasus. This has been reported by leading world media outlets, politicians and the intelligence communities of various countries.<sup>2</sup> The scale of penetration by the jihadists from the Middle East in the Caucasus and their role in the potential destabilisation of the region has yet to be assessed. However, it is already clear that the risks of instability moving from Syria towards Russia’s southern borders are very high.

September’s escalation stands out against the backdrop of previous clashes in the scale of Turkey’s military-political and diplomatic involvement in the conflict, which, until 2020, was considered a point of special attention from Moscow. The two other co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group – the US and France – also, in effect, recognised Russia’s role as the main mediator in the peace settlement. Despite the many differences of principle on the international and Eurasian agendas, Washington, Moscow and Paris have made concerted efforts to settle the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. The escalation of tensions in the Nagorno-Karabakh region in September of this year has

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<sup>1</sup>Vitaly Naumkin. *Will the Fire of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict Spread to the Middle East?* URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/will-the-fire-of-the-armenian-azerbaijani-conflict>

<sup>2</sup>*Syrian rebel fighters prepare to deploy to Azerbaijan in sign of Turkey’s ambition.* URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/28/syrian-rebel-fighters-prepare-to-deploy-to-azerbaijan-in-sign-of-turkeys-ambition>; *Rebels from Syria recruited to fight in conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, source says.* URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/01/middleeast/azerbaijan-armenia-syrian-rebels-intl/index.htm>

not changed this.<sup>3</sup> However, Ankara has essentially thrown down a challenge to the domination of the three co-chairs. It has openly accused them of diplomatic inefficiency and proclaimed itself as all but the determining factor in creating a foundation for a peace settlement under these new conditions, and in perspective, of the entire security system in the Caucasus. Considering the discrepancies in Moscow and Ankara's positions on Syria, Libya, and the Black Sea area, Turkey's invigorated activities near Russia's southern borders are making the situation more uncertain.

The expansion and scale of the hostilities, the destruction, and the intransigence of the conflicting parties have made the need for a peacemaking mission urgent. Until September 2020, this option looked more like a "sleeping norm" in the basic principles of a peace settlement<sup>4</sup>, whereas after the defreezing of the conflict, it has become all but the main instrument of de-escalation. A peacemaking operation under Russian aegis, as described in the joint statement by Vladimir Putin, Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan of November 10, 2020, is a foundation for stopping the armed confrontation and launching a settlement in a perpetual conflict.<sup>5</sup>

The issue of peacemakers has traditionally evoked Iran's concern that has consistently opposed the "basic principles" of a peace settlement that were supported by the OSCE Minsk Group. However, at the same time, Tehran supported a settlement that would be reached by the conflicting parties themselves with the support from the three neighbouring countries – Russia, Turkey and Iran. In this context, a peacemaking mission under Russian aegis is not likely to be resolutely opposed by the authorities of the Islamic Republic.

British conflict analyst Laurence Broers reached the justified conclusion that a demonstration of force in the Caucasus, against the backdrop of a decline in US global influence, is a symptom of a global shift towards a more multipolar world,<sup>6</sup> or to use an adjective coined by Richard Haas, a "nonpolar<sup>7</sup> world," where the traditional boundaries of "ours" and "foreign" are not universal but situational. Indeed, responses to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have shown that traditional alliances and integration associations do

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<sup>3</sup> Statement of the presidents of Russia, the United States and France on Nagorno-Karabakh. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64133>

<sup>4</sup> Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries. URL: <https://www.osce.org/mg/51152>

<sup>5</sup> Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and the President of the Russian Federation. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>

<sup>6</sup> Laurence Broers, *Just Another Incident or an Evolving Status Quo? Four Takeaways From the July Clashes Along the Armenia-Azerbaijan Border*. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/just-another-incident-or-an-evolving-status-quo>

<sup>7</sup> Haas R. *The Age of Nonpolarity. What Will Follow U.S. Dominance*. Foreign Affairs, p.14, 2008.

not guarantee common views among their members. In this sense, Russia and Iran's position on a ceasefire and the exclusive use of diplomatic methods for settling the conflict are much closer to the approaches of such NATO members as the US and France than the view of Turkey, their NATO ally. Meanwhile, Ankara would prefer to stick to unilateral support for Azerbaijan, which is not a NATO member. It is also important to note that the agreement on a ceasefire between Baku and Yerevan was reached with the decisive role of Moscow rather than the OSCE Minsk Group as a whole.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict even became a topic (even if not the most important one) in the election campaign in the US, and an item on the domestic political agendas in Turkey and France. The confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan is not the only reason for differences between Paris and Ankara; they have been accumulating for a long time over Mediterranean issues. However, the escalation in tensions in the Caucasus has become a major cause of a deepening Franco-Turkish split. The repercussions of the armed confrontation in Nagorno-Karabakh were clearly felt in Georgia, a neighbour of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. This emphasised once again the internal and external vulnerability of that country and the potential "alliance dilemmas" between Tbilisi and NATO.

This latest round in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has brought Russia's role in a settlement into focus and revealed the additional risks, not from Western pressure, which has become traditional, but from the growing ambitions of various regional players and non-government actors. In addition, Moscow also faces the need to maintain the fragile balance of interests between Armenia and Azerbaijan, two states that are important to Russia but are openly hostile to each other and are reluctant to make mutually acceptable concessions or reach a compromise.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has grown beyond a heretofore regional conflict that stems from the Soviet Union's collapse. Now the interests of various external players are focused on this bilateral confrontation. Their interests are based not on an affiliation with any bloc or integration association but on their individual approaches to both the conflicting parties and the prospects for a peace settlement. It is equally important that these external players are forming their tactical and strategic policies on Nagorno-Karabakh in relation to developments in other areas, whether it's the Middle East, the Mediterranean, the Black Sea region, or their own domestic political agenda, which imparts added political value<sup>8</sup> to the confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In the words of economists, "related conflicts" are likely to emerge.

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<sup>8</sup>*Erdogan obvinil Rossiju v "napadenii" na lager' opozicii v Idlibe (Erdogan accuses Russia of "attacking" the opposition camp in Idlib).* URL: <https://ria.ru/20201028/erdogan-1581919748.html>

Igor Subbotin. *Spor Erdogana i Makrona stavit tureckij flot pod udar (Dispute between Erdogan and Macron poses a threat to the Turkish fleet).* URL: [https://www.ng.ru/world/2020-10-25/2\\_7998\\_dispute.html](https://www.ng.ru/world/2020-10-25/2_7998_dispute.html)

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# The Breakdown of the Old Status Quo: New Challenges

In the process of settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it was vital for the players involved to fix the breakdown of the status quo that had been in existence for 26 years.

Since May 12, 1994, when the Indefinite Armistice Agreement entered into force<sup>9</sup>, 13.4 percent of the territory internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan, found itself under the control of the Armenian forces (formations of the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), and units of the National Army of the Republic of Armenia, which support it). The conflict was unique in that by the time a truce had been reached, the autonomy that broke off from the former Soviet republic and proclaimed itself a state, established control not only over the bigger part of its territory within the Soviet borders (92.5 percent) but also a number of adjacent territories (in all, seven regions, five of which it controlled fully and two partially). The area of the former Nagorno-Karabakh autonomy amounted to about five percent of Azerbaijani territory recognised by the international community, and the area of the regions around it to 8.4 percent. The greater part of these territories acquired as a result of the conflict is underpopulated but very important strategically. The Lachin corridor connects Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia (during Soviet times the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAR) was an enclave cut off from the Armenian SSR by the regions of the Azerbaijani SSR). The water supply systems for the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic were located in the northern part of these territories (Kelbajar). In the south, through the territory of the occupied regions, the NKR had access to Iran.<sup>10</sup>

Since May 1994, there have been no peacemaking operations in Nagorno-Karabakh. The absence of peacemakers has largely determined the developments in the conflict zone, which could be described as a dynamic

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<sup>9</sup>The Indefinite Armistice Agreement. Document No10 // quoted from *Peace to Karabakh* by Vladimir Kazimirov, Moscow. URL: <http://vn.kazimirov.ru/doc10.htm>

<sup>10</sup>In April-May 1992, the Armenian forces established control over the Lachin region, in March 1993 over the Kelbajar region, in June 1993 over parts of the Agdam, Jabrayil and Fisuli districts, in August 1993 over the Qubadli District and parts of the Jabrayil and Fisuli districts. For more details read: *Nagorny-Karabakh: Risking War*. Report by the International Crisis Group, No.187, Europe, Tbilisi-Brussels, 2007, p. 1. URL: <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/187-nagorno-karabakh-risking-war.pdf>

status quo whereby talks were periodically interrupted by truce violations and armed incidents. In the period between May 1994 and April 2016 (the events of the so-called “four-day war”, which was the biggest armed escalation at that time), the conflicting parties did not engage in hostilities along the entire “contact line” (its overall length was 193 km). The first minor correction of the status quo took place four years ago. Serzh Sargsyan (the then President of Armenia) admitted the loss of 800 hectares of land.<sup>11</sup> However, the infrastructure of the NKR was preserved and not even strongly affected by the military actions. It was not substantially affected by subsequent armed escalations, the largest of which was the confrontation along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in July 2020.

The situation underwent a major change during a month and a half after the resumption of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh. Although the military maps presented in public by Armenia and Azerbaijan did not coincide, it was clear that the former “contact line” had indeed changed. The hostilities went beyond it. The theatre of war had expanded.

For the first time since May 1994, the territory of the unrecognised NKR itself became an area of armed clashes, which led to the exodus of its population<sup>12</sup>. It is noteworthy that the hostilities moved to the territories of Armenia and Azerbaijan proper. It is enough to mention the incidents near the city of Vardenis in the Gegharkunik Province of Armenia and the attacks on the Azerbaijani cities of Ganja and Mingachevir outside Karabakh. As a result, Azerbaijan resumed its control over a greater part of the Armenia-occupied regions. The Azerbaijani armed forces also took hold of Shusha, a symbolically important city for Azerbaijan, the former capital of the Karabakh Khanate.

According to the agreements reached by the presidents of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia of November 10, 2020, the Agdam, Lachin and Kelbajar regions are to be gradually transferred to Baku and a corridor linking Yerevan and Stepanakert is to be established. The implementation of this initiative entails a number of actions that are not mentioned in “the basic principles” of the peace settlement. The matter deals with deblocking economic and logistics ties between the two conflicting Caucasus republics, in part, the ensuring of traffic between the western regions of Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan (the Azerbaijani exclave) under the control of the Russian border service<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Sara Khojayan & Tony Halpin. *War May Resume at 'Any Moment,' Armenian President Warns*. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-24/caucasus-war-may-resume-at-any-moment-armenian-president-says>

<sup>12</sup> *Vlasti Stepanakerta podschitali chislo ostavshihnya gorozhan (The authorities of Stepanakert have counted the people who remained in the city)*. URL: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/356144>

<sup>13</sup> Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/64384>

Naturally enough, the resumption of the hostilities called into doubt the negotiating agenda and also the negotiating format, which existed before 2020. Before that, three co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group (Russia, the US and France) dominated the mediation between the conflicting parties. During that period, the mediators offered them several options for reaching a compromise. By the time of the escalation of the armed confrontation in September 2020, the most topical option were “the basic principles” (updated in Madrid) that were published in July 2009.

This document is contradictory. On the one hand, these “principles” proceed from the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, but on the other, imply the granting of an “intermediate status” to Nagorno-Karabakh that was supposed to be determined by mandatory expression of the popular will, and the establishment of a security corridor between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. The general outline of compromises had to be filled with specific content but this was not done during 11 years. The parties were the closest to the signing of a compromise agreement on June 24, 2011, on the eve of the summit in Kazan. However, the agreement was never signed. Moreover, after the meeting in Kazan, there were no substantive talks between the sides. Diplomatic rounds (like the meeting between Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan in Dushanbe in September 2018) were devoted to conflict management rather than a political settlement)<sup>14</sup>.

But by November 10, 2020 Azerbaijan took by armed force the bigger part of what it was supposed to get stage-by-stage by diplomatic means. At the same time, the text of the joint statement by Vladimir Putin, Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan does not directly contradict “the basic principles.” The lot of the Republic of Serbian Krajina was not shared by the unrecognised NKR. The peacemaking operation designed for five years with a potential prolongation will make it possible to adopt a comprehensive approach to the determination of the Nagorno-Karabakh status, although the statement of November 10, 2020 does not contain direct instructions about this. The question of the socio-economic recovery of the territory destroyed by the hostilities remains open as well.

It should be noted that the usual format of the Minsk Group was subjected to doubt by one of its members but not the co-chairs, notably Turkey<sup>15</sup>. The confrontation on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue has never been so tough inside

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<sup>14</sup> *Aliyev i Pashinyan v Dushanbe dogovorilis' (Aliyev and Pashinyan agreed in Dushanbe)*. URL: <https://regnum.ru/news/2491142.html>

<sup>15</sup> *Erdogan slams Minsk Group over Nagorno-Karabakh occupation*. URL: <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-russia-france-involvement-for-ceasefire-in-karabakh-unacceptable-erdogan-158761>

the group and the OSCE in general. For the time being, it is not clear to what extent the two co-chairs of the Minsk Group, namely the US and France, will be ready to support Russia's decision to play the main role in ensuring peace in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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## Turkey: Old Interests, New Role

An analysis of Turkey's position in this new stage of the conflict should be based on its recent foreign policy. Ankara's involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a logical continuation of its increased activities in Syria, Libya, the eastern Mediterranean and Cyprus, as well as its estrangement from the EU and growing differences with NATO.

The chain of events that began in October 2019 has shown that Ankara is increasingly relying on military force. In October 2019, yet another Turkish operation against the Syrian Kurds was cut short by the efforts of the United States and Russia. Soon after that, Ankara became deeply involved in Libya. Early 2020 saw Turkey's direct armed clashes with the Syrian army that Moscow was supporting in Idlib. Turkey's bases and military presence in Iraq created new problems in the spring of 2020. In the summer of 2020, it had a serious altercation with Greece and the EU. Turkish-Egyptian relations have been complicated by their positions on Libya. In this context, the growing military factor in Ankara's activities in the South Caucasus did not look random at all. Turkey has cast itself as the only state opposed to a ceasefire, encouraging Azerbaijan to act more resolutely, up to forcing a complete de-occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>16</sup>

**First of all**, in geopolitical terms, Turkey's role became apparent when it started developing strategic military ties with Azerbaijan. The "one nation, two states" notion became popular in Ankara and Baku back in the 1990s. With military bases outside Turkey and muscle flexing in Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan) and the Middle East (Qatar and Libya), Ankara's rapprochement with Baku offers it a chance to strengthen its military standing in a critically important region.

**Second**, Azerbaijan is an energy producing country, and support for its territorial integrity can ensure Turkey's future energy interests, including via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Trans-Anatolian Natural

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<sup>16</sup> *Turkey's Erdogan says Armenia must withdraw from Azeri lands.* URL: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-azerbaijan-turkey/turkeys-erdogan-says-armenia-must-withdraw-from-azeri-lands-idUSKBN26J10L>

Gas Pipeline (TANAP). By supporting Baku, Ankara can strengthen its position in the energy distribution market, especially considering that the share of Azerbaijan's gas on the Turkish market is growing. In 2019, Azerbaijan was the second largest gas supplier to Turkey after Russia (21.2 percent and 33.6 percent, respectively). In January-April 2020, Baku took the lead with 33.2 percent.<sup>17</sup>

**Third**, the South Caucasus is one of Russia's priority zones of responsibility and part of the "near abroad" (post-Soviet states). The Russian-Turkish relationship has been marred by several problems that have hampered cooperation, such as the situation in Idlib, the Kurdish issue in Syria, the Libyan crisis, the recognition of Crimea as part of Russia, and Turkey's growing military-technical collaboration with Ukraine. Ankara and Moscow do not see eye to eye on these matters. Ankara often uses foreign policy bargains to attain its goals. Its policy in Nagorno-Karabakh is no exception. Turkey's logic is to "sell" stability in a region of vital importance to Russia in exchange for concessions in its own "near abroad" in the context of its increased preparations for a military operation in northern Syria.<sup>18</sup>

**Fourth**, Turkish-Azerbaijani military-technology ties are an immensely important factor. Turkey has high hopes for boosting the already rapidly growing military exports to Azerbaijan. In 2020, through September, Ankara has sold \$123 million worth of weapons to Baku, or six times more than in the first nine months of 2019.<sup>19</sup> The developments in Nagorno-Karabakh are proof of a new approach to military-technology cooperation and combat operations. The Turkish *Bayraktar TB2* combat drones played a key role in the recent hostilities in the South Caucasus.

Turkey tested the *Bayraktar TB2* during its Operation Spring Shield against the Syrian government forces in Idlib in late February and early March 2020 and to prevent Khalifa Haftar from seizing Tripoli in the spring of 2020. These combat drones have proven their effectiveness and have been used in all of Turkey's subsequent military operations, including to neutralise Armenia's geographic advantages in Nagorno-Karabakh, and have become a new factor in the war.

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<sup>17</sup> Official statistics of Turkey's Energy market regulatory Authority (EPDK). URL: <https://www.epdk.gov.tr/Detay/Icerik/3-0-95/dogal-gazaylik-sektor-raporu>

<sup>18</sup> *Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan saygısız karikatüre tepki (President Erdoğan's reaction to the disrespectful cartoon)*. URL: <https://www.ntv.com.tr/amp/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogandan-saygisiz-karikature-tepki,3hB8BugSgEmhI-MUv2YsTg>

<sup>19</sup> *Türkiye'nin Azerbaycan'a silah ihracatı zirve yaptı (Exports of Turkish weapons to Azerbaijan peak)*. URL: <https://www.dw.com/tr/turkiyenin-azerbaycana-silah-ihracati-zirve-yapti/a-55276973>

Growing Turkish-Ukrainian military cooperation is another matter of concern for Moscow. Bilateral arrangements provide for the delivery of 48 Turkish-made drones to Ukraine in addition to the six it bought in 2019.<sup>20</sup> It is no coincidence that President of Ukraine Vladimir Zelensky visited Turkey during the Nagorno-Karabakh hostilities. Kiev supports Azerbaijan's position on territorial integrity in this conflict.

**Fifth,** Turkish involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh has been complemented with reports on the recruitment of Turkey-backed fighters in Syria and Libya for deployment in the South Caucasus conflict zone.<sup>21</sup> Jihadists have become a major factor in Turkey's foreign policy during the past few years. They are also becoming an integral part of Turkish home policy by taking jobs in vital government agencies, primarily national security bodies. A case in point is the tragic assassination of Russian Ambassador Andrei Karlov in December 2016.<sup>22</sup> Foreign mercenaries are also present in Turkish military operations zones, often fighting side by side with the Turkish army, for example in Syria and Libya.<sup>23</sup>

**The sixth and last,** though not the least, important factor is that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is influencing, although indirectly, the domestic personality-based political landscape in Turkey. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is using Turkey's involvement in various conflicts to consolidate the national elite. Azerbaijan's conflict with Armenia was a pretext to encourage nationalist sentiments and a chance to consolidate various opposition forces around the Turkish leader to shut out the alternative political groups, such as the new parties created by Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoglu, both former high-ranking politicians in Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ukraine eager to buy Turkish Bayraktar TB2 combat drones.* URL: <https://www.aex.ru/news/2020/10/6/217513>

<sup>21</sup> *Syrian rebel fighters prepare to deploy to Azerbaijan in sign of Turkey's ambition.* URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/28/syrian-rebel-fighters-prepare-to-deploy-to-azerbaijan-in-sign-of-turkeys-ambition>; *Rebels from Syria recruited to fight in conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, source says.* URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/01/middleeast/azerbaijan-armenia-syrian-rebels-intl/index.html>; *Prinuzhdenie k konfliktu (Enforcement to Conflict).* URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4537733>

<sup>22</sup> *Russian Ambassador to Turkey Is Assassinated in Ankara.* URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/19/world/europe/russia-ambassador-shot-ankara-turkey.html>

<sup>23</sup> Jones D. *Jihadist Ties to Turkish-Backed Free Syrian Army Rebels Raises Questions.* URL: <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/jihadist-ties-turkish-backed-free-syrian-army-rebels-raises-questions>

<sup>24</sup> *Davutoglu sozda Partiyu budushchego: "Erdogan nasazhdaet atmosferu straha" (Davutoglu Forms New Future Party: "Erdogan Sows Fear").* URL: <https://eadaaily.com/ru/news/2019/12/13/davutogla-sozda-partiyu-budushchego-erdogan-nasazhdaet-atmosferu-straha>

### ***What will change:***

The Armenia-Azerbaijan armed conflict has reinforced Turkey's position in the Caucasus. Ankara has strengthened its strategic ties with Baku and has increased its influence on Tbilisi, given its economic clout in Georgia and support for its territorial integrity aspirations.

The most difficult question in Russian-Turkish relations will be the interpretation of the peacekeeping operation's format, because the agreement on the deployment of Russian troops along the new contact line includes a provision on the establishment of a ceasefire monitoring centre, where Ankara will be represented. It is also likely that Ankara will try to interfere in the implementation of the peacekeeping operation and test Moscow's resolve to see if there is a chance to strengthen its position in the region.

The most probable scenario is that Ankara will use its success in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is how it views the outcome of the conflict, to step up its activities in other former Soviet regions, namely Central Asia and Ukraine.

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## Iran: A Policy of Careful Balance

If it comes to Iran's foreign policy vis-à-vis Central Asia and the Caucasus, particularly the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Iranian governments have not announced any specific strategy or official document on these issues. However, principles of Iran's foreign policy towards the conflict can be understood via analysis of the positions taken by Iranian officials and also Iran's practical approaches in the last three decades.<sup>25</sup>

Regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Iran has consistently pursued a balance approach toward the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia and in this framework, at the initiative of the Iranian side, within the framework of diplomatic efforts on the normalisation of the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and on the Azerbaijani-Armenian border, the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia were invited to Tehran for negotiations on May 7, 1992. The presidents of Iran and Armenia, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Levon Ter-Petrosyan, plus acting head of Azerbaijan Yagub Mammadov met in the Iranian capital to sign a Joint Statement<sup>26</sup> on Nagorno-Karabakh. The Tehran Statement declared the parties' commitment

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<sup>25</sup>Vali Kaleji. *Eight Principles of Iran's Foreign Policy Towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/eight-principles-of-iran-s-foreign-policy>

<sup>26</sup>Joint statement of the heads of state in Tehran. Document No. 3 // Quoted from Kazimirov V.N. URL: <http://vn.kazimirov.ru/doc3.htm>

to use diplomatic and peaceful means for resolving the confrontation. However, the further escalation of hostilities (Armenian forces took over the city of Shusha two days after the meeting) effectively rendered that initiative meaningless. After the end of the war in May 1994, as the role of Russia and the OSCE Minsk Group increased, Iran's policy became less active and was actually limited to maintaining equally balanced relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Nevertheless, Iran has adhered to a number of consistent principles in pursuing its policy on the Caucasus. One, to support Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, deserves specific notice. Basically, Iran's opposition to the ethnic dynamics and secessionism is one of the fundamental factors in Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus. Iranian society is comprised of various ethnic groups and therefore, Iran opposes any ethnic-political dynamic that is separatist, whether it is Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or Karabakh. After the resumption of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan in September 2020, Ali Akbar Velayati, Iran Supreme Leader's senior adviser for international affairs, spoke in favour of Armenia returning the occupied regions to Azerbaijan.<sup>27</sup> However, unlike Ankara, Tehran has traditionally advocated peaceful means for achieving this goal.<sup>28</sup>

Ever since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Azerbaijan and Armenia, the Iranian government has always advocated a balanced approach and maintaining ties with the governments of both Caucasian states. Therefore, Iran's position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is different from that of Turkey, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Pakistan who have either cut their relations with Armenia or have not recognized it as an independent country. Irish scholar Fred Halliday calls this approach "bunch of flowers policy," while American specialist on Islam and Iran Shireen Hunter calls it "pragmatism". For this reason, in the clashes of the past few years including the four days' wars of April 2016 and July 2020 and also the clash that started in September, 2020 the Iranian high-ranking officials have immediately called for ceasefire between the two parties in Karabakh.

Generally, the principles of Iran's foreign policy towards the conflict can be understood via an analysis of the positions taken by Iranian officials and also Iran's practical approaches in the last three decades that can be referred to, which can clear up many probable ambiguities:

1. Recognising the government of Azerbaijan's right to sovereignty over the Karabakh region and the seven regions around it,

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<sup>27</sup> *Leader's aide calls on Armenia to retreat from Azerbaijani territory.* URL: [https:// www.tehrantimes.com/news/453291/Leader-s-aide-calls-on-Armenia-to-retreat-from-Azerbaijani-territory](https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/453291/Leader-s-aide-calls-on-Armenia-to-retreat-from-Azerbaijani-territory)

<sup>28</sup> *Karabah obrastaet mirotvorcami (Nagorno-Karabakh crowded with peacekeepers).* URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4519763>

2. Non-recognition of the Republic of Artsakh and other political developments in the Karabakh region,
3. A balanced approach and maintenance of relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan,
4. Opposing the war and the use of force to resolve the Karabakh crisis,
5. Maintaining the rights and security of the Armenians of Karabakh in the Karabakh peace plans,
6. Opposing the interference of trans-regional powers in the resolution of the Karabakh crisis,
7. Opposing the stationing of international peacekeeping forces along the border between the Karabakh region and Iran,
8. Mediating the process of peace and dispute resolution at the request of the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia.<sup>29</sup>

## Iran's position towards the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

A part from the ancient and long-lasting historical, religious and lingual ties between Iran and the Caucasus, there are 800 kilometres of border lines that connect Iran to this region. The Iranian provinces of Ardabil and Eastern Azerbaijan have 369 kilometres and 200 kilometres of joint borders with the Republic of Azerbaijan respectively. Eastern Azerbaijan is the only Iranian province that shares borders with Armenia. This border line is 35 kilometres long. Iran is also the only country adjacent to the disputed region of Karabakh. None of Georgia, Russia and Turkey is in such close proximity to these disputes.

Therefore, the recent Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has directly affected Iran's north-western areas. Since the beginning of the war, several rockets and mortar shells have landed inside Iran. The Iranian villages in county of Khoda Afarin, located on the Eastern Azerbaijan-Armenia border, was hit by the artilleries of the conflicting parties several times after hostilities resumed in late September, 2020.<sup>30</sup> Aliyar Rastgoo, the political and security deputy governor of East Azerbaijan, stated on October 21, 2020 that since

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<sup>29</sup> For further details, see: Vali Kaleji, *Eight Principles of Iran's Foreign Policy towards The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/eight-principles-of-iran-s-foreign-policy>

<sup>30</sup> *Iran vyrazil gotovnost' stat' posrednikom v uregulirovanii karabahskogo konflikta (Iran ready to mediate the Karabakh conflict resolution)*. URL: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/355829>

the beginning of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a total of 68 rockets had hit the border areas of Iran, adding: “Only today, 71 rockets have hit villages of Khoda Afarin County.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, many drones came down inside Iran’s north-western provinces, which border Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan. For example, a drone crashed in the border county of Parsabad-Moghan in the north-western Iranian province of Ardebil on October 13, 2020.<sup>32</sup> In another case, a drone crashed in grasslands near the village of Qara Qouch in Manjavan district, Khoda Afarin region, East Azerbaijan province on October 20, 2020.<sup>33</sup> In reaction to these events, Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent official letters to the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia and has strongly voiced the Iranian government’s consternation regarding the violation of the country’s territorial integrity, noting the harm to security and the financial damages inflicted on Iranian citizens after shells and rockets fired in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict hit Iran.<sup>34</sup>

This puts Iran in a sensitive situation so that tension and war in Karabakh region and its surrounding areas directly impacts the security of Iran’s north-western borders. In addition, the presence of millions of Azeris in the north-western provinces of Iran who are sensitive to the position of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the Karabakh issue as well as presence of a hundred thousand of Armenians in Iran who sympathize with Armenia has made the Karabakh dispute outstanding for Iran from an ethnical perspective.

The other dimension is the religious considerations that the Shia seminaries particularly in the cities of Qom and Mashhad inside Iran and Najaf in Iraq have about supporting the Shia Muslims of the Republic of Azerbaijan and expect the Iranian government to support the Republic of Azerbaijan in the Karabakh dispute more actively. It is also noteworthy that there is a close tie between the two religious and ethnic considerations in many parts of North-western Iran with an Azeri majority population. In the meantime, some pan-Azeri and Pan-Turkish currents activate the religious and ethnical sentiments in these Azeri settling areas of Iran. In many occasions they disseminate false news about Iranian government’s position vis-à-vis the Karabakh dispute<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> *More than 70 rockets hit northwestern Iran today in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.* URL: <https://iranpress.com/content/28853>

<sup>32</sup> *Azeri or Armenian drone crashes on northwestern Iran.* URL: <https://en.irna.ir/news/84074208/Azeri-or-Armenian-drone-crashes-on-northwestern-Iran>

<sup>33</sup> *Another Karabakh War Rocket Hits House at Iran’s Bordering Village.* URL: <https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/13990730000958/Anher-Karabakh-War-Rcke-His-Hse-a-Iran%E2%80%99s-Brdering-Village>

<sup>34</sup> *Iran Sends Protest Letters to Baku, Yerevan after Being Hit by War Shells.* URL: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/10/07/2365061/iran-sends-protest-letters-to-baku-yerevan-after-being-hit-by-war-shells>

<sup>35</sup> Vali Kaleji. *Eight Principles of Iran’s Foreign Policy Towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict.* URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/eight-principles-of-iran-s-foreign-policy>

Indeed, the spread of various and occasionally contradictory news about transit of members of the Free Syrian Army and Syrian Turks to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has led to security concern for Iran. Therefore, the Karabakh conflict might lead to security threats from Sunni fundamentalist terrorists known in Iran as “takfiri” groups, whose anti-Shia and anti-Iranian attitudes manifested in the Syrian Civil War. For this reason, Iranian officials such as President Hassan Rouhani and Ali Akbar Velayati, the international relations advisor to the Supreme Leader, have warned against the danger of “takfiri” and jihadi groups on Iran’s border. Indeed, Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif warned about the transfer of ISIS/DAESH remnants to the Nagorno-Karabakh region and noted that: “the Islamic Republic will not tolerate the presence of Takfiri terrorists near its borders. In recent talks and even before, we informed the officials of Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as those of Russia and Turkey, that the Islamic Republic of Iran will not tolerate such a thing. Currently, these terrorists are not present along our borders, but the probability that they will be present at a distance from our frontiers is still high, and we have declared this concern to both sides.”<sup>36</sup> Also, President Hassan Rouhani stated this rather unambiguously on October 7, 2020: “The transfer of a number of terrorists from Syria and other regions to the Iranian border is totally unacceptable to Tehran.”<sup>37</sup>

## Iran’s security and military reactions

In reaction to the threat, Tehran attempted to secure Iran’s north-western borders. In this regard, Iranian border guards have pursued the case in meetings with Azeri and Armenian border guards and submitted formal letters of protest over the violation of the Iranian border territories by the two neighbouring states. Iran’s Army Ground Force launched a one-day military drill in the north-west of the country on October 9, 2020. The Chief Commander of the Iranian Army, Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi, attended the unannounced exercise.<sup>38</sup> The military exercise was held to enhance the preparedness of the army to counter possible threats against the country. The war game included mechanised infantry and armoured units, drone squads, and artillery units. Also, Iran’s Revolutionary Guards also sent military reinforcements to the nation’s borders with Armenia and the Republic of

<sup>36</sup> *Iran won’t tolerate terrorists’ presence near borders: Zarif*. URL: [https://parstoday.com/en/news/iran-i128855-iran\\_won%E2%80%99t\\_tolerate\\_terrorists%E2%80%99\\_presence\\_near\\_borders\\_zarif](https://parstoday.com/en/news/iran-i128855-iran_won%E2%80%99t_tolerate_terrorists%E2%80%99_presence_near_borders_zarif)

<sup>37</sup> *Prezident Irana prizval ne rasprostranyat’ konflikt v Karabahe na region (Iranian President warns against spreading the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to the region)*. URL: <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3084331.html>

<sup>38</sup> *Army launches military drills in northwest Iran, Iran Daily*. URL: <http://www.irandailyonline.ir/News/259964.html?catid=3&title=Army-launches-military-drill-in-northwest-Iran>

Azerbaijan to protect its civilians from any missiles coming from the conflict zone. Tanks, ground troops and military equipment have been deployed in Khoda Afarin and Jolfa, which are on the Azerbaijan border and also near Iran's border with Armenia.<sup>39</sup>

With the continuation of exchange of fire between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces, Brigadier General Abolfazl Shekarchi, a senior spokesman for the General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces urged the warring sides in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to avoid further confrontations, warning against the endangering of Iran's border security. He confirmed that "the Iranian military will take the necessary measures to reinforce its borderlines", and warned the warring sides that "security along the country's borders is a red line for the Islamic Republic, and Iran will give a tough response to any form of threat and violation."<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Commander of the Iranian Army Ground Force Brigadier General Kioumars Heydari visited to the border areas of Jolfa and Khodaafarin on October 30, 2020 and emphasised that the peace of the border residents is a red line for Iran's armed forces and that no danger threatens the north-western borders of the country. He noted that the "Increasing capabilities of the Armed Forces have made us very well prepared to carry out missions and protect the borders and honorable people of the country so that nothing threatens the north-western borders".<sup>41</sup>

## Iran diplomatic dynamisms

During the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, Iran demonstrated its diplomatic dynamism in the region.

Javad Zarif held separate telephone conversations with Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov and Armenian Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan on September 27, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on October 6, 2020. Indeed, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani had a phone call with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashynian on September 6, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliiev on 6 October, Russian President Vladimir Putin on October 10 (after the Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement in Moscow among the foreign ministers of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia) and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on October 22, 2020. In these conversations, Iran stressed the need for an immediate ceasefire, stability and security in the Caucasus, peaceful negotiations in Karabakh conflict and

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<sup>39</sup> *Iran's IRGC deploys forces near border with Nagorno-Karabakh*. URL: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-10/27/c\\_139469060.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-10/27/c_139469060.htm)

<sup>40</sup> *Any Violation of Iran Borders to Draw Tough Response*, *Tasnim News*, October, 23, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> *No danger threatens northwestern borders of Iran: Army Commander*. URL: <https://iranpress.com/content/29203>

Iran's readiness to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan to overcome their existing problems.

One of important diplomatic reactions was an interview of Ali Akbar Velayati, the advisor to the Supreme Leader of Iran on international affairs, who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1981- 1997 and mediator of the Karabakh war in the beginning of the 1990s. Velayati in an interview with the Iranian daily *Kayhan* on October 6, 2020 noted that "We call on Armenia to return those occupied parts to the Republic of Azerbaijan. More than one million Azeris have been displaced after the occupation of those areas and must return home soon." The Leader's adviser underlined that Iran takes the same stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that it has adopted on the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. Velayati made it clear that the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan has no military solution whatsoever, and must be resolved politically. He went on to condemn foreign parties, such as Israel and Turkey, for fanning the flames of war, adding, "Why is Turkey insisting on the continuation of war? This country (Turkey) must help end the war if it can do so, provided that the occupied cities of the Republic of Azerbaijan are decisively liberated."<sup>42</sup>

Another Iranian response to the conflict was a regional diplomatic tour by Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Seyed Abbas Araqchi to Baku, Moscow, Yerevan and Ankara in pursuit of peace in Nagorno-Karabakh from October 28-30, 2020. As Iran's Special Envoy for the Settlement of the Karabakh Conflict, Araqchi tried to present the proposed initiative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to resolve this conflict and achieve a lasting peace between Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan and, consequently, the region. Although the details of Tehran's plan have not been publicised, Araqchi believes that "Iran's proposed plan, which is based on a series of accepted international principles, including respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity, ending occupation, the inviolability of borders and the return of refugees can contribute to peaceful settlement of Karabakh conflict."<sup>43</sup>

Iran's most important reaction was by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on November 3, 2020. In his speech commemorating the birthday of Prophet Mohammad, he commented on the ongoing conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and said the war between two of Iran's neighbouring countries is a bitter issue which has to speedily come to an end. He said the territories

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<sup>42</sup> *Leader's Adviser: Armenia Should Leave Occupied Azeri Lands*. URL: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/10/06/2364004/leader-s-adviser-armenia-should-leave-occupied-azeri-lands>

<sup>43</sup> *Iran's initiative can help end Karabakh conflict: Deputy FM*. URL: <https://en.irna.ir/news/84096019/Iran-s-initiative-can-help-end-Karabakh-conflict-Deputy-FM>

belonging to the Azerbaijan Republic should be liberated and the security of the Armenian nationals, too, should be guaranteed. The leader further stressed that the international borders should be respected and terrorists should never think of approaching Iranian borders because if they do so, they will be strongly dealt with.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, Iran welcomed Russian-brokered peace deal between Azerbaijan and Armenia on November 10, 2020. In this regard, Mahmoud Vaezi, the Iranian president's chief of staff, said that "The Islamic Republic of Iran welcomes the mediation of Russia between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the acceptance of the ceasefire by the two sides in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. We continue to emphasise the two countries' adherence to international borders and the protection of civil rights of all".<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Abbas Araqchi, the Iranian deputy foreign minister for political affairs, said "Fortunately, the principles and framework that we introduced for a ceasefire and the start of the talks were welcomed, and the Russia-brokered agreement that was finally reached between Azerbaijan and Armenia two days ago, was, in fact, within the framework of the principles and framework and proposals that Iran had put forward."<sup>46</sup>

### ***What will change?***

Tehran is comfortable with a situation where Russia comes to the fore with a weaker connection to the OSCE Minsk Group. So in this regard, it is no coincidence that Tehran supported a Moscow-led peacekeeping operation in Nagorno-Karabakh, not a multilateral one<sup>47</sup>.

As for Turkey's growing influence, Iran is ambivalent about this. It seems generally acceptable – as part of a tentative "Eurasian format" (joint action with Moscow and Ankara). At the same time, the Iranian side is wary of Turkish "proxies" that could follow Turkey to the Caucasus, north of Iran's border, which is dangerous both from a religious perspective (more Sunni representatives) and in terms of ethno politics (ethnic Turks account for a large percentage of Iran's own population). In fact, from Tehran's point of view, it is

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<sup>44</sup> *Leader: Iran not to be affected by who becomes next US president.* URL: <https://en.irna.ir/news/84097576/Leader-Iran-not-to-be-affected-by-who-becomes-next-US-president>

<sup>45</sup> *Iran welcomes Russian-brokered peace deal between Azerbaijan, Armenia.* URL: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/454507/Iran-welcomes-Russian-brokered-peace-deal-between-Azerbaijan>

<sup>46</sup> *Azerbaijan-Armenia Peace Deal Based on Iran's Proposal: Deputy FM.* URL: <http://irangov.ir/detail/350890>

<sup>47</sup> *Iran gotov pomoch' Rossii v razvyortyvanii mirotvorcheskoj missii v Karabahe (Iran ready to help Russia deploy peacekeeping mission in Karabakh).* URL: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2020/11/10/iran-gotov-pomoch-rossii-v-razvyortyvanii-mirotvorcheskoj-missii-v-karabahe>

crucial that the trilateral agreement only references Russian peacekeepers, not Turkish ones, as Baku has proposed. Tehran resents Ankara's growing role in the South Caucasus. To underscore its suspicions, Iran's Foreign Ministry quickly declared itself ready to facilitate the Russian peacekeepers' passage to Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, Iran's position could change drastically if and when the peacekeeping operation becomes multinational. In any other scenario, the current status quo does not basically run contrary to Iranian interests.

Indeed, some Iranian experts are concerned about the new corridor between Republic of Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan. In fact, one area that may hurt Iran's economic interests is a provision in the truce that allows Azerbaijan to establish a transit corridor across southern Armenia. Until now, land connections between Azerbaijan and its Nakhichevan exclave have passed through Iranian territory. As Hamidreza Azizi from the German think-tank SWP pointed out, the new corridor will diminish Iran's leverage over Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Turkey, which borders Nakhichevan, gains land access to the entirety of Azerbaijan without having to pass through Iran or Georgia, potentially setting up a more direct trade route to Central Asia. That corridor, however, will be managed by Russian border troops from the Federal Security Service (FSB). This is a far better outcome for Iran than other proposals floating around.<sup>49</sup> Under these circumstances, Iran sees that to safeguard its own interests, it needs a more proactive South Caucasus policy.

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## Georgia: Fragile Neutrality

Georgia shares borders with both Armenia and Azerbaijan and, despite the never ending tensions between Yerevan and Baku, the country has been able to maintain pragmatic and constructive relations with both neighbours, for a number of reasons.

Armenia's borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey are closed, thus, Georgia, like Iran, remains a window to the rest of the world for Armenia. Almost 70 percent of Armenia's foreign trade goes through Georgia, which explains Yerevan's low profile when it comes to recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Not recognising the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic has always been a sufficient argument for Armenia to take its time with officially recognising Sukhum and Tskhinval.

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<sup>48</sup>Eldar Mamedov, *How Iran views the Nagorno-Karabakh truce*. URL: <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-how-iran-views-the-nagorno-karabakh-truce>

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid*

Ties between Baku and Tbilisi have not grown weaker, and are in fact, probably stronger. Azerbaijan plays a very prominent part in Georgia's foreign policy and economy. The two countries have certain bitter political issues in common such as losing part of their territory and a separatist threat (an issue often present in political rhetoric). They also share many energy and transport projects, including the geopolitically important Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline and the Baku-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Kars railway. Both countries were among the founders of the GUAM integration project which later grew into the Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development.

That said, it would be inaccurate to see Azerbaijan and Georgia as having entirely congruent views, and not only because Azerbaijan's foreign policy is more diversified than Georgia's and lacks solid Euro-Atlantic accents. Baku has not made a final choice between the West and Russia. The key issue complicating the relationship between Tbilisi and Baku is an unresolved border dispute. Twenty-nine years after the Soviet Union's disintegration, the delimitation of these two Caucasus states' common 446 km border is not complete. Since 1996, an intergovernmental commission to resolve the matter has been rather ineffective, judging by the resonating incidents that still occur occasionally near the David Gareji Monasteries on the border.

As far as Georgia is concerned, the Armenia-Azerbaijan issue has a domestic dimension as well. The population of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region that borders Armenia and Turkey is 56 percent Armenian. Ethnic Azerbaijanis populate Kvemo Kartli (four districts with centres in Gardabani, Bolnisi, Dmanisi and Marneuli) and make up the majority of residents in the Marneuli District (77 percent), the Bolnisi District (66 percent), the Dmanisi District (64 percent), as well as 43 percent in Gardabani.

Since the military escalation on September 27, 2020, Tbilisi has repeatedly proposed acting as a mediator between Yerevan and Baku. Both President Salome Zourabichvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia have spoken on the issue<sup>50</sup>. At the same time, Mikheil Saakashvili, leader of the Strength is in Unity opposition bloc (currently based in Ukraine but aiming for the post of prime minister if his political movement wins the parliamentary election), has made his stance clear: Nagorno-Karabakh is an integral part of Azerbaijan<sup>51</sup>. Furthermore, Georgia's decision to deny access to its airspace and land routes to countries supplying weapons to Armenia and Azerbaijan has

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<sup>50</sup> *Gruziya predlozhila prinyat' vstrechu Minskoj gruppy OBSE po Karabahu (Georgia proposes hosting OSCE Minsk Group meeting on Karabakh)*. URL: <https://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2020/10/05/1866473.html>

<sup>51</sup> *Mihail Saakashvili: "Nagornyj Karabah – suverenaya territoriya Azerbajdzhana"* (Mikheil Saakashvili: *Nagorno-Karabakh is Azerbaijan's sovereign territory*). URL: <https://www.ekhovkaza.com/a/30862347.html>

caused controversy<sup>52</sup>. But one way or another, Georgia has stuck to its signature style of restraint and caution when it comes to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, at least where its official stance is concerned, mainly because any imbalance could trigger a serious domestic conflict in Georgia itself, which would be a disaster considering the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

***What will change:***

Georgia's reaction to the November 10, 2020 agreement on Nagorno-Karabakh has been ambiguous. On the one hand, President Salome Zourabichvili has officially supported peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, calling it the beginning of a new era in the Caucasus<sup>53</sup>. On the other hand, Deputy Speaker of the Georgian Parliament Kakha Kuchava has expressed a lack of trust in Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh as guarantors of security<sup>54</sup>. His opinion, which is broadly echoed by the country's political and expert community, is that Russian peacekeepers will promote their own interests rather than regulate the conflict.

Either way, after the November agreement, Baku and Ankara's influence on Tbilisi will be stronger, which could lead to domestic political consequences in the form of more intense nationalism and Turkophobia. This, in turn, could potentially (although not in the short term) deepen the scepticism about a Euro-Atlantic choice.

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## Russia, the United States and France: Results of the Stress Test

The flare-up of an armed confrontation in Nagorno-Karabakh has become a stress test for the involved global players that otherwise have differences on a broad range of issues in international politics and security but who are still united in their positions on settling the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is enough to say that the first three attempts to establish a truce were made in turn by Russia, France and the US with mutual support from each other. Apart from the Nagorno-Karabakh agenda, these

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<sup>52</sup> *Gruziya zapretila tranzit oruzhiya v zonu armyano-azerbajdzhanskogo konflikta (Georgia prohibits weapon transit to Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict zone)*. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4519368>

<sup>53</sup> *Nagornyj Karabah i novye realii na Yuzhnom Kavkaze: vzglyad iz Gruzii (Nagorno-Karabakh and new reality in South Caucasus as seen by Georgia)*. URL: <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/conflicts/20201110/249994389/Nagornyy-Karabakh-i-novye-realii-na-Yuzhnom-Kavkaze-vzglyad-iz-Gruzii.html>

<sup>54</sup> *V Gruzii obespokoilis' iz-za rossijskih mirotvorcev v Karabahe (Georgia concerned about Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh)*. URL: <https://vz.ru/news/2020/11/10/1069866.html>

three powers are united by the common goal to counter the international terrorist threat. In this context, a settlement of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh potentially creates a common space for cooperation.

## Moscow between Baku, Yerevan and Ankara

The current escalation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict has not revealed any new approaches by Russia to the situation in the Caucasus but has compelled to look at them more attentively. Moscow has shown once again that it does not have a universal approach either to ethnic and political clashes in Eurasia or to the de facto states in the South Caucasus. Russia recognises the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus officially refusing to support Georgia's territorial integrity. But this approach has never been automatically applied to Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. The latter is not even mentioned in the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept as a separate entity or a party to the conflict (as distinct from Transnistria, which is viewed as a party to the conflict)<sup>55</sup>. Importantly, Russia is most interested in preserving a balance between Yerevan and Baku, which is particularly relevant after the loss of influence on Georgia in 2008. Russian leaders traditionally describe relations with Yerevan as allied, in referring to membership in common integration associations, and they view relations with Baku as a partnership, implying mutual benefits but with certain discrepancies, for example, in their positions on energy.

As distinct from Georgia's conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both parties involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh confrontation are interested in Russian mediation. The evaluations given by Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan after the escalation of the conflict are indicative.<sup>56</sup> As a political scientist specialising in international affairs, and editor-in-chief of the Moscow Carnegie Centre website, Alexander Baunov put it succinctly, "Russia may have reasons to help its ally Armenia, but it has no reason at all to punish Azerbaijan, which has been an example of model behavior among the former Soviet states, as far as Russia is concerned... Armenia finds itself in a triangle of alliances."<sup>57</sup> This situation largely compels Russia to display restraint and avoid a final choice between the two parties, being aware of the risks of a potential loss of influence in the South Caucasus. Russia has already faced a

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<sup>55</sup> Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016. URL: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248)

<sup>56</sup> *Dmitrij Kiselev vzyal parallel'nye interv'yu u prem'er-ministra Armenii Nikola Pashinyana i prezidenta Azerbajdzhana Ilhama Alieva (Dmitry Kiselev takes parallel interviews from Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan and President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev)*. URL: <https://aftershock.news/?q=node/913083&full>

<sup>57</sup> Alexander Baunov. *Why Russia Is Biding Its Time on Nagorno-Karabakh*. URL: <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82933>

situation where positive trends in relations with Armenia were accompanied by numerous problems on the Azerbaijan track. This happened from 1991 to 2001. Moscow would not wish to return to that situation. Nor does it wish to revise its strategic relations with Armenia and downgrade what has already been achieved in this respect.

Meanwhile, in September 2020, the Ankara factor was added to the traditional Baku and Yerevan balancing act. The increase in strategic cooperation between Azerbaijan and Turkey has raised several questions for Russia. How will Russia be able to influence Baku when all political decisions made there take into account the Turkish factor as it views the alliance with Ankara as a key to successful promotion of Azerbaijani interests in the world arena? Against this background, many concerns have cropped up due to Turkey's desire to mediate a settlement in the conflict and create a four-party go-between mission (Turkey-Russia-Azerbaijan-Armenia) patterned after the Astana format for Syria.

Moscow is not very happy about granting Turkey special powers in the region, which is within the sphere of its own special interests. Nevertheless, the complicated and even contradictory experience of bilateral cooperation in Syria and Libya has shown that they can cooperate on Nagorno-Karabakh.

This logic largely explains Moscow's actions aimed at stopping hostilities and conducting a peacekeeping mission on its own for settling the conflict in the mid-term perspective. Turkish troops will not take part in the peacekeeping operation, but, as Ilham Aliyev put it, the Turkish military will participate in the control mechanism that will ensure compliance with an armistice. This variant could be viewed as a kind of compromise in the Ankara-Baku-Moscow triangle even though earlier Turkey formally limited its participation in settling the conflict to membership in the OSCE Minsk Group.<sup>58</sup>

## US: Nagorno-Karabakh against the background of the election campaign

The aggravation of the military-political situation in the South Caucasus has not been a priority in US policy. As before, Washington's basic approach in this respect is determined not so much by relations with the Caucasus states themselves as with the dynamics of its relations with the three major Eurasian countries in the region – Russia, Turkey and Iran.

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<sup>58</sup> *Tureckie voennye budut rabotat' v mirotvorcheskom centre v Karabahe (Turkish military to work in the peacekeeping centre in Nagorno-Karabakh)*. URL: <https://ria.ru/20201110/karabakh-1583852204.html>

The US did not see the Kremlin's actions in Nagorno-Karabakh as "revisionism" that could threaten its interests in Eurasia. On the whole, Washington was ready to support Russia's interest in mediation, which was revealed in the position of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo who demanded that Baku and Yerevan comply with the terms of the armistice that was reached in Moscow with Russia's mediation. At the same time, having been somewhat irritated by Erdogan's actions in the Middle East and the Mediterranean where the Turkish leader had to push the White House and the Department of State to choose between its NATO allies (France, Greece), Washington could afford to criticise Ankara for its interference in the conflict and its unilateral support for Azerbaijan.<sup>59</sup>

The Armenian lobby continued to influence US approaches to a settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh. After the September flare-up, Armenia's lobbyists in Congress submitted initiatives not only on recognising Nagorno-Karabakh but also on expelling Turkey from NATO. At the same time, Azerbaijan's lobbyists promoted the opposite approach. The following companies had influence in this respect: primarily the Podesta Group (John David Podesta Jr was the White House Chief of Staff under Bill Clinton and a counsellor to President Barack Obama), as well as the Livingstone Group and Stellar Jay Communications, to name a few<sup>60</sup>.

The repercussions of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict reached the presidential election campaign. Thus, on October 14, 2020 Democratic nominee Joe Biden criticised the current administration for being passive and ceding the initiative to Moscow<sup>61</sup>. In this context, it was not a coincidence that the Department of State suggested separate talks with the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia Jeyhun Bairamov and Zohrab Mnatsakanyan, respectively. The subsequent announcement of a ceasefire did not stop the bloodshed in Nagorno-Karabakh. Trump's obvious "pro-Armenian" statements (in an attempt to win the votes of the vast Armenian Diaspora in the US) and his comments on an easy settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict can be explained as campaign rhetoric.<sup>62</sup> Apparently, Washington will be unable to make a more or less meaningful contribution to settling this conflict until after the completion of the presidential election.

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<sup>59</sup> *Pompeo blames Turkey for inflaming situation in Nagorno-Karabakh region.* URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1750086/world>

<sup>60</sup> Boland B. *How Azerbaijan Is Lobbying Washington To Sanitize Its War.* URL: <https://eurasianet.org/in-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-us-missing-in-action> 2020

<sup>61</sup> *In Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, U.S. missing in action.* URL: <https://eurasianet.org/in-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-us-missing-in-action>

<sup>62</sup> *Trump Says He'll Easily Solve Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, Deserves Nobel Peace Prize.* URL: [www.newsweek.com/trump-says-hell-easily-solve-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-deserves-nobel-peace-prize-1541988](http://www.newsweek.com/trump-says-hell-easily-solve-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-deserves-nobel-peace-prize-1541988)

## France: the Mediterranean, European leadership and internal unity through the Nagorno-Karabakh prism

The unfolding of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh has increased Paris's interest in the prospects of settling the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan considerably. However, it is worth noting the categorical and tough statements made by President Emmanuel Macron and French diplomats as compared to the more reserved statements by Russian and US officials<sup>63</sup>. France has a large Armenian Diaspora, the third largest in the world and the largest in the EU.

But the uptick in France's diplomatic activities in this area is not due to simply its Armenian Diaspora or an increased interest in its historical past<sup>64</sup>. Paris is Ankara's opponent in the Mediterranean. This applies to the entire package of issues on Turkey's relations with Greece and Cyprus, as well as to Libya. Commenting on the outcome of the Mediterranean Seven Summit (Med7) in September 2020, Macron said the following: "We must be tough with the Turkish government rather than the Turkish people that deserve more than the Erdogan government."<sup>65</sup> France believes that Turkey is making further advances in Eurasia with its involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh, which doesn't conform to its views on how the situation should develop in the region.

President Macron also wants to present himself as the true leader of "a united Europe," which at this point doesn't really look a model of genuine unity or common values during the coronavirus pandemic. His involvement in the peace process in Nagorno-Karabakh is a great opportunity to remind the world about himself and French diplomatic potential. Steps in this area are all the more important because there are no tangible achievements on a settlement in Donbass (France is one of the Normandy Four), and over the course of this year the US has left the EU far behind in terms of the Kosovo track.

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<sup>63</sup> Three days after the armed escalation the French leader said at a joint news conference with Prime Minister of Latvia Arturs Krisjanis Karins: "I paid attention to Turkey's political statements that seem rash and dangerous to me." He emphasised that Ankara's bellicose statements compel Baku to tougher actions in Nagorno-Karabakh. In turn, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said that "foreign interference, in part, by Turkey in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is unacceptable and only fuels the escalation." *Macron condemns Turkey's 'bellicose' statements on Nagorno-Karabakh fighting*. URL: <https://www.france24.com/en/20200930-macron-condemns-turkey-s-bellicose-statements-on-nagorno-karabakh-fighting>

<sup>64</sup> In 2000, the French Parliament recognised the tragedy of the 20th century as Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire, while the President (Jacques Chirac at that time) signed a relevant law in 2001.

<sup>65</sup> *Mediterranean drilling dispute sees Macron blast Turkish president Erdogan*. URL: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/mediterranean-turkey-greece-france-1.5718480>

Macron's predecessors have some experience with successful moderation in the Caucasus, notably, President Nicolas Sarkozy's efforts with Tbilisi and Moscow. The French president was more flexible than Angela Merkel in this respect. During the low in relations between the EU and the Kremlin, Macron himself initiated a conversation with Vladimir Putin on Nagorno-Karabakh<sup>66</sup>.

Incidentally, the conflict in the Caucasus also has domestic political implications for the French president. A recent series of tragedies (cruel murder of history teacher Samuel Paty by an 18 year-old terrorist for religious reasons, and terrorist attacks in Nice and Avignon) have stirred up French society, reigniting the debate on immigration, the anti-terrorist struggle and the line between freedom and public security. Macron's main opponent Marine Le Pen is most likely to exploit this issue on the eve of the presidential election in 2022. Indicatively, the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is taking place against the backdrop of articles and numerous statements by politicians on jihadists moving from Syria to the Caucasus and Turkey's assistance in this "transfer." Hence, the need to counter extremist intrusions will again be a major plank in French political platforms. As a consequence, the Turkey factor and its ambivalent activities in the Middle East and the South Caucasus will not be overlooked in the French political arena.

## Big deals or pragmatism? Potential scenarios

As US political analyst Jeffrey Mankoff observed, with good reason, "local tensions meet global rivalries in Nagorno-Karabakh."<sup>67</sup> In the autumn of 2020 we have seen that the lingering ethnic and political conflict in the South Caucasus highlighted the differences inside NATO on the issues that are not directly linked with the status of the disputed territory in the post-Soviet space. It also showed the paradoxical unity of Russia and the West on settling the Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation and clearly demonstrated the potential rivalry between Eurasian giants. Eventually, this will become a substantial obstacle to creating a non-bloc and inclusive security system that doesn't require external stabilising balancers.

A settlement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict leaves certain opportunities to manoeuvre for all the main parties involved in the conflict in one way or another. A number of potential scenarios are possible.

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<sup>66</sup> *Putin, Macron discuss Nagorno-Karabakh*. URL: <https://tass.com/politics/1207151>

<sup>67</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff. *Why Armenia and Azerbaijan Are on the Brink of War*. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2020-10-01/why-armenia-and-azerbaijan-are-brink-war>

A “**big Eurasian deal**” could become one of the possibilities. It could be similar to the agreement reached almost a hundred years ago by the two revolutionary leaders of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: Vladimir Lenin and Kemal Ataturk. There is no lack of analogies on this issue today. However, a “division of spheres of influence” in Eurasia between Moscow and Ankara does not seem like a realistic scenario. Given the magnitude of these historical figures, they were not really system-oriented players. They were the creators of new reality, the founders of the Soviet project and the republic in the Islamic East, respectively. Meanwhile, modern Turkey and Russia are too intertwined in key international processes and their “revisionism,” as noted by many analysts in the West, is very selective. Moreover, the Moscow-Ankara rivalry casts doubt on the long-term nature of any “final” deal.” The terms of this deal would be subject to excessive conflict-prone approvals and adjustments.

As for Turkey, it cannot be assumed that Ankara, and President Erdogan personally, would be willing to make a major “civilisation break” with the West. It is also clear that the United States and Turkey’s other allies, despite all the existing problems between them, as well as fatigue from the unpredictability of the “Islamic partner”, would see the collapse of NATO and the formation of the “Eurasian axis” as a catastrophic scenario for their interests. Thus, they would be willing to avoid this threat.

A **Russia-West rapprochement** scenario based on rejecting Turkey’s actions also seems unlikely. Developments in Syria in the past five years and, before that, the striking opinion discrepancy regarding Libya and Iraq have shown that the US and its allies are not prepared for a “package” improvement of relations with Moscow even on the issue of countering terrorism.

That said, **selective cooperation** is quite possible, and it would be unwise to avoid it. Such cooperation could help create a new agenda for the future that would be free of Cold War stereotypes and subsequent American domination.

On November 10, 2020, Moscow gained a reputation as an effective mediator and peacemaker. Its leadership on this track can help Russia strengthen its status in the Caucasus and in Eurasia as a whole. It could create the conditions for a dialogue with the leading world powers from a stronger position. Strategically this is more reliable than a search for “big deals” for the sake of Eurasian or pro-Western solidarity. This more positive scenario will open opportunities for updating the model in which pragmatism rather than bloc solidarity or coalitions will be the decisive factor.

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