Policy Paper No. 10
November 10, 2021

Nagorno-Karabakh One Year after the War: Peace, truce, or anticipation of a new clash?

Sergey Markedonov

Summary

On 10 November 2020, Presidents of Russia and Azerbaijan Vladimir Putin and Ilham Aliyev, and Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan issued a joint statement declaring 'a complete ceasefire and cessation of all military operations in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone.' The document was preceded by forty-four days of armed confrontation and several thwarted attempts at a diplomatic settlement. The year 2020 will therefore be forever rhymed with the word 'Karabakh' in the history of the Caucasus.

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Yet another military showdown in Nagorno-Karabakh introduced dramatic changes to the balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan. But have Yerevan and Baku made any progress toward peace and resolution of the long-standing ethnopolitical conflict? Are there any hopes that in the foreseeable future the Caucasus will be associated not only with wars, conflicts, and refugees, but also with future-oriented socioeconomic projects, transparency, and free travel of people of various nationalities? To answer these questions, we should first scrutinize the changes that took place in the Caucasus in the wake of the Second Karabakh War.

Geopolitical Reconfigurations

The month of November 2020 saw the hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh dismantle the military and political status quo of twenty-six years.[1] Azerbaijan got its revenge. Before the onset of the Second Karabakh War in September 2020, Azerbaijan had about 13% of its territory beyond its control [2], but as a result of last year's military campaign, seven districts adjacent to the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous District (that were referred to in Armenia as the "security belt") came under Baku's control. The Azerbaijani Armed Forces also seized some parts of the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (its second-largest city of Shusha, as well as the Hadrut District and portions of the Mardakert and Martuni Districts). But that was not the end of it, as the Azerbaijani military began invading Armenia's territory (its southern regions of Syunik and Gegharkunik) and then set up a checkpoint on the Goris–Kapan road, citing Soviet-era maps, when there were Azerbaijani exclaves in the Armenian SSR (and incidentally the other way round).

Having effectively addressed its military tasks, Azerbaijan embarked on the socioeconomic recovery of the recaptured territories, which it refers to as 'de-occupied'. On 6 September 2021, the newly built Fuzuli International Airport welcomed the first test flights from Baku, and on 26 October, the official opening ceremony was held, attended by Presidents Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey. The facility was completed on an unprecedented schedule, in less than a year. Two more airports are expected to be built in the Zangelan and Lachin Districts. It was in Shusha, i.e. in the Karabakh territory, that Presidents Aliyev and Erdogan symbolically signed a bilateral declaration on allied relations on 15 June 2021 aiming to bring the strategic cooperation between their countries to a whole new level. Baku spares no effort to emphasize that it will not allow any future revision of the status of the de-occupied regions.

However, Azerbaijan's success appears incomplete. Baku never succeeded to ultimately crush the NKR. The infrastructure of the unrecognized republic still exists, despite the loss of a part of its area. There are no Azerbaijani military, police or administrative structures there, no taxes are paid to the Azerbaijani treasury, and school curricula are based on Armenian textbooks and comply with the Armenian educational standards. The NKR makes use of the Armenian payment system and has its own military formations. According to Azerbaijan's official statements (such as the press release of the Ministry of Defence of 11 August 2021), the NKR was never completely demilitarized.

Baku has found itself in a double bind since November 2020. *First*, Russian peacekeepers were deployed in the territory of Azerbaijan. There had been none before (and neither had there been any other peacekeeping contingents). Had the peacekeeping operation not been deployed and hostilities lasted at least a few more days, Azerbaijani troops might have captured the capital of the unrecognized NKR, Stepanakert/Khankendi, and ended their campaign with the complete elimination of the self-proclaimed entity. Over the course of the year that followed, the Russian military (as well as specialists with the Emergencies Ministry) were able to clear mines and helped restore the local infrastructure. Since day one of the peacekeeping mission, Russian representatives have been actively engaged in bringing the people of Nagorno-Karabakh back to a peaceful life. Yet, they seem to be making no attempts to insistently raise the issue of its special status. Armenians therefore still prevail in the population structure of the reduced unrecognized NKR, the ties with Yerevan are preserved, the de facto authorities (president, government, parliament) remain operational, and the peacekeeping contingent guarantees that military operations will not resume.

Second, the 2020 war increased Azerbaijan's dependence on Turkey, which supplied state-of-the-art weapons, sent military advisers, and aided in planning the assault to help crush the Armenian forces. Ankara is currently trying to involve Baku in the game that seeks the recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, as well as in cooperation with Pakistan in all of the Middle East and specifically on the Afghan issue. However, secular Azerbaijan fears being drawn into alliances driven by Islamist ideology. Moreover, building unions with Sunni powers is fraught with interdenominational strife within Azerbaijan, where Shiites form the majority, despite the ongoing Sunnization process, which seems to be picking up steam.

Under the circumstances, Armenia has as good as given up on its extreme aspirations. Yerevan is currently unable to fight for the return of the "security belt" on its own, and it can obtain external support for this from neither Russia, its strategic ally, nor the West. At the same time, Armenia has two main challenges to handle: 1) keeping Nagorno-Karabakh's status on the negotiation agenda and 2) completing the state border demarcation process with Azerbaijan. This is essentially what the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group (Russia, the U.S. and France) call for, although Paris appears to be the one that is the most articulate on the status issue. For Moscow, border delimitation and demarcation is a much more relevant matter to address in order to promote the restoration of transport connections between the two republics.

Therefore, the cessation of the hostilities in November 2020 did not herald the end the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. It reshaped it. Karabakh as its focal point was replaced by the 'border issue'. Over the entire thirty-year period after the disintegration of the Soviet Union border demarcation and delimitation between the two republics were never completed. Under the Soviet Union, there used to be exclaves which were 'mopped up' by the conflicting parties during the warfare of the 1990s. Once the Kelbajar District came under Baku's control in November–December 2020, Azerbaijani military and border guards moved to the new critical line (the south of Armenia). In contrast, Yerevan lost the 'security belt' separating it and Karabakh from Azerbaijan.

The state border delimitation climbed the agenda. Azerbaijan is trying to use leverage to put pressure on defeated Armenia. Its objective is threefold. *First*, Baku is interested in Yerevan's waiving diplomatic struggle for the status of Karabakh. *Second*, it seeks to benefit from unblocked transportation and expanded trade and economic connections with Turkey, Russia, and Iran as soon as possible. *Finally*, there is the wish to enjoy a growth, even symbolic, of its territory through the annexation of a portion of 'Armenia proper', a question of prestige for Baku, which suffered from national humiliation for thirty years. Hence, incidents were reported not only in the south, but also on Armenia's border with the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan and in the north (Tavush).

Moscow is de facto the main mediator in resolving the border disputes. Certain limitations apply to its actions, though. Its unambiguous support for Armenia could prompt Baku to challenge the legitimacy of the presence of Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh. Armenia's membership in the CSTO and Moscow's allied commitments prevent Russia from making any moves to support Azerbaijan. Neither conflicting side questions Russia's mediation in the resolution of the 'border dispute' at the moment. Looking at possible consequences, the instability on the Armenia–Azerbaijan border will persist in the foreseeable future. Baku feels that is has what it takes to combine military pressure with calls for peace and negotiations. At the same time, the Azerbaijani leadership is reluctant to openly sever its relationship with Russia, so it will try to reign in its pressure and disallow its military to get involved in any large-scale escalation.

Domestic Policy Aspects: Azerbaijan

The Karabakh conflict has remained the fundamental, pivotal problem for both Azerbaijani and Armenian societies for a few decades. High-profile resignations and appointments have often been shaped by the progress of the conflict. Has this 'Karabakh determinism' persisted after the face-off concluded in November 2020?

The incumbent Azerbaijani government seems to have strong positions. It does not come up against any serious internal political competition and is quite resistant to risks. The war has shored up the power of President Ilham Aliyev. There is a widespread opinion in the Western media and the expert community that the Azerbaijani opposition, which criticizes the authorities for authoritarian pretensions, is more constructive when it comes to the Karabakh issue. There is obviously a unity of views on the belonging of Karabakh, if not a complete national consensus. Even sharp-tongued political emigrants (such as the Yunusovs residing in the Netherlands), who habitually act as harsh critics of official Baku, support Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

In many ways, Aliyev's determination to launch a military operation in September 2020 was prompted by the mass public protests of July, triggered by military incidents on the Armenia–Azerbaijan border and unprecedented losses in the country's brass (a major general and a colonel of the armed forces of Azerbaijan were killed). The protesters demanded that mobilization be declared and COVID-19-related restrictions lifted in order to reinforce the army, and a worthy message be delivered to Armenia. This 'awakening of the street' showed Aliyev that authoritarianism was possible everywhere except concessions to Yerevan.

The president of Azerbaijan is currently perceived as a politician who made up his mind to return the occupied lands and succeeded in his endeavour. However, there are numerous posts in blogs and social media claiming that Aliyev failed to achieve a complete victory and did not capture Khankendi (the Armenian name is Stepanakert). If the opposition chooses to pick some idea to build its reaction around it, it may as well adopt that of the 'unaccomplished victory'. Consequently, Aliyev says that the conflict is over, and the only thing left now is to ensure economic recovery and attain peace with Armenia. He resolutely discards the pending issue of the status of Karabakh. In his opinion, closure has been achieved. He has made repeated statements that Karabakh can be part of Azerbaijan simply as a regular region.

Ilham Aliyev's solid position cannot be attributed solely to his authoritarian policy. Contributing to the strong presidential power were the weakness and fragmentation of the opposition, its inability to nominate strong candidates, and the absence of serious alternative programs for the country's development. The authorities also appear to benefit from the negative recollections of the short-lived rule of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan, led by Abulfaz Elchibey, in the early 1990s, with which today's critics of the incumbent are traditionally associated. In public opinion, that period stands for chaos, degradation of governance, and the escalation of the military conflict.

Domestic Policy Aspects: Armenia

The early elections to the National Assembly became the 2021 political highlight for Armenia. The extraordinary election campaign was generated by the internal political crisis that erupted following the defeat in the Second Karabakh War. Nikol Pashinyan was victorious, despite having agreed to make unprecedented concessions to Baku, including the transfer of Shushi under Azerbaijan's control.

The 'surrender' of Karabakh triggered protests, which peaked twice — in December 2020 and February 2021. But they were never truly massive. Moreover, after the New Year holidays, Pashinyan launched a counter-offensive by staging rallies in his own support, making more visits to the regions, and having increasing numbers of contacts with the media. A paradox was observed. President Armen Sarkissian, Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II, representatives of the National Academy of Sciences, prominent opposition politicians, and former leaders of the country spoke in favour of dismissing the premier and the government after November 2020. In the southern marzes (regions) of Syunik and Gegharkunik even municipal leaders voiced their discontent with Pashinyan's policies. However, Pashinyan's position remained sound. His Civil Contract party not only won 53.91% of the vote but was also able to form a homogeneous government on its own. The politician was re-elected prime minister without much trouble. The opposition's attempts to challenge the results of the vote at the Constitutional Court failed.

Reasons behind the success of the Civil Contract party are heterogeneous. The notorious 'administrative leverage' is only one of them. Having formally resigned, Pashinyan retained his control of the government and the parliament. But there is more to it. Armenian society is tired of the war and the Karabakh conflict. This is why Pashinyan won the campaign even in the south of the country, where a new conflict with Baku over border delimitation was unfolding before the eyes of Armenian voters. It is in that direction that the Azerbaijani leadership is planning to build a railway and a road between mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhichevan exclave. In the Syunik District, 53.51% of votes were cast for Civil Contract (27.50% for Armenia and 2.76% for I Have Honour). In Gegharkunik, the figures were as follows: 65.93% for Civil Contract, 14.42% for Armenia and 4.25% for I Have Honour.

Active tours of the country, populist rhetoric, and success in capitalizing on the threat of new military escalations proved to be effective. Civil Contract enjoyed a very high level of electoral support in the Shirak Region (about 65.22%), although it was its natives — soldiers of the Armenian army — that were captured by the Azerbaijani military in December 2020. Pashinyan structured his campaign to make it look like a clash between his supporters and the 'exes'. He referred to Robert Kocharian and others as revenge-

seekers. The focus was on residents of villages and smaller towns. It was mostly those people who managed to get rid of the post-Soviet leaders who had become the real masters of Armenian regions after 1991. Pashinyan made his regional tours more often than others, pitched his image of a 'regular guy' (he was born in Ijevan), and emphasized his non-big city origins in every possible way.

The positive attitude of the key external players to Pashinyan's extended term of office also played a role. For Russia, he is the guarantor of the agreements of 10 November 2020 and 11 January 2021. For Turkey and Azerbaijan, he is more predictable than Kocharian, whom Baku calls a 'war criminal' and a 'nationalist'. For the U.S. and France, he is already a familiar partner.

The local elections of 17 October 2021 became a fly in the ointment for the Armenian authorities. Pashinyan's party lost the elections in three of the six communities: Gyumri, Goris, and Meghri. Whereas Gyumri enjoys the informal status of the 'northern capital' of Armenia, both Goris and Meghri were in the spotlight after the Second Karabakh War due to the newly relevant issue of the border demarcation and delimitation. Anyway, in all of the three municipalities, the ruling party retains its significant representation in the local Councils of Elders (legislative bodies), whereas the local opposition tends to be somewhat detached from the national opposition.

Russia as the Chief Mediator

After the resumption of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh in late September 2020, one of the main questions was how Russia would respond. The more the dispute gained in intensity, the more surprising Moscow's discreet attitude to the flaming conflict became — especially in contrast to its conduct during the Ukrainian crisis or the war with Georgia. On the fifth day of the fighting, Laurence Broers, a prominent British Caucasus expert and editor-in-chief of The Caucasus Survey journal, tweeted, 'Where is Russia?' A few days later, Nicu Popescu, the then director of the Wider Europe programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations, also wondered why Russia, which had gone to such lengths to promote itself as a great power and a reliable ally, was in no hurry to support Armenia. Indeed, over those few weeks, Moscow's negotiations with Yerevan and Baku did not seem to be very effective. But then the day of 10 November came, and it was Russia that proved to be the main driver behind the joint cease-fire declaration, after which shootings stopped and Russian peacekeepers moved to a new line of contact.

For Moscow, last year's war was marked by a significant complication of its Caucasus region agenda. Up until 2020, it was the key moderator in the settlement of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Neither the U.S. and the EU, nor Turkey and Iran interfered with that continued process. For the West, Russia's policy on Karabakh was not associated with 'revisionism' (tested in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea). However, in November 2020 the situation changed. *First*, Turkey strengthened its position. It had to be reckoned with as an independent player that was unwilling to have anyone's approval. As a NATO member, Turkey's conduct in the Caucasus was that of a self-sufficient actor that asserted its national interests, rather than some integration goals and objectives. *Second*, Azerbaijan broke the previous status quo on its own, without Russia's sanction. *Third*, Armenia, Moscow's strategic ally, was defeated and forced to make humiliating concessions.

However, it was Moscow that prevented Baku from eliminating the infrastructure of the unrecognized NKR by deploying its peacekeepers in the conflict zone. Moreover, it did not let Turkey participate in the joint operation. The conflict of 2020 did not cause any additional outbursts of confrontation with the West. Moreover, the two co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group (the U.S. and France) de facto agreed to both the Russian mission in Karabakh and Moscow's special role in the post-war peace settlement. Otherwise, the legitimacy of the Minsk Group itself would have been called into question.

Moscow therefore lost its geopolitical leadership monopoly in the Caucasus. It now needs to pay heed to Turkey's interests and opinions. The situation around Karabakh became related to Syria on the same grounds, as Moscow and Ankara are also forced to engage without having complete agreement. Here is where Russia has a chance to play its Syrian card to put pressure on Ankara's positions in the Caucasus. However, there is a possibility that Turkey will apply the same algorithm. Nevertheless, Armenia and Azerbaijan are ready for Moscow's exclusive role in resolving the confrontation. In fact, the trilateral format (Putin–Aliyev–Pashinyan) has left the OSCE Minsk Group in the shade.

There are only two documents (the joint statements by the leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia of 10 November 2020 and 11 January 2021) that identify the contours of the post-war status quo. And in both cases, Moscow is exclusively involved in their respective implementation. Neither the West nor Turkey has such an opportunity. Russia's position in and around Karabakh is very different from the Abkhazia and South Ossetia cases. It turned out that Moscow is not supposed to pick between Yerevan and

Baku, and it is still not put in a position where it needs to make this hard choice. As a consequence, it is balancing, manoeuvring and intervening through active diplomatic participation, rather than the format of military operations.

Moscow's focus is currently on the unblocking of transport connections as a way to draw Baku and Yerevan into the peace process in a non-political (pragmatic) way. Russia is not obsessed about addressing Karabakh's status as soon as possible, and the Kremlin makes it clear that it is not interested in resolving the issue forcefully and fast. According to statements made by high-ranking Russian officials (Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov), the status issue can be resolved in the future on a mutually beneficial half-way basis.

Conclusion

The Caucasus turning into a less stable and predictable region became the main result of last year's military operation. Its connection with the turbulent Middle East has grown stronger, given Turkey's more active involvement in the regional agenda and the possible influence of the Syrian momentum on processes in Karabakh (and vice versa). The situation will remain consistently unstable in the foreseeable future. Azerbaijan will reintegrate the previously lost territories by all means and on an incredibly tight schedule. This will be easier than it may seem, since there is no foreign ethnic population in these territories. Treated by Armenia as the 'security belt', they had been neglected, and Yerevan was uninterested in their development. This means that in the future Baku will be able to show the world new airports, bus terminals and investment projects. Shusha and the districts that used to be part of the unrecognized NKR are the only exceptions in this context. However, the Armenian population has left them, so Baku will not experience much trouble integrating them.

Baku, backed by Ankara, will continue to put pressure on Armenia, combining various military demonstrations with calls for peace. Ankara will benefit from an obvious advantage in the 'peace track', as it does not need to address the status of Karabakh or border demarcation. Russia will seek to keep balance, trying to maintain its influence on both Yerevan and Baku. However, as we approach November 2025 (when Russia's peacekeeping mission in Karabakh is supposed to expire), Russia's relationships with Azerbaijan and indirectly with Turkey could come into collision. While Moscow insists on a hard comprehensive compromise, Baku and Ankara wish to close the Karabakh case and hastily integrate what is left of the former NKR into the Azerbaijani state. Some MPs, human rights activists and bloggers are already there, making comments about the need to finish the peacekeeping operation fast. It is obvious, though, that Moscow avoids

premature decision-making. There are reasons to believe that, given Tbilisi's negative experience of the early 2000s, the Azerbaijani authorities are not going to turn the Russian presence in Karabakh into the kernel of the predicament in their bilateral relationship.

1. Read more in: Storm of the Caucasus. Under the editorship of R.N. Pukhov. Moscow, Centre for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST). 2021. 128 p.

2. A.S. Abasov, A.T. Khachatrian. Karabakh Conflict. Optional Solutions: Ideas and Reality. Moscow. International Relations. 2004. 61 p.

Sergey Markedonov
Leading Research Fellow, Institute for International Studies, Moscow State Institute of International Relations of the Foreign Ministry of Russia; Editor-in-Chief, Journal of International Analytics; Member of the Minsk Dialogue Expert Council