

Understanding Russian Conflict Resolution in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Through Russia's General Foreign Policy

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Introduction

The volatile nature of the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia necessitates an active peacekeeping role to maintain the fragile ceasefire agreed upon in November 2020. While this resolution effectively ended the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, deep scars remain in both Azerbaijan and Armenia that, coupled with the ineffectiveness of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Minsk Group peacemaking processes, promise to make the Nagorno-Karabakh region a contentious subject for years to come. In this context, the presence of Russian peacekeepers in Azerbaijan, as stipulated by the ceasefire, becomes a very important factor in determining the future of Nagorno-Karabakh.

While the current ceasefire agreement, which was mediated by Moscow, permits Russian troops to remain in Azerbaijan for 5 years to maintain the conditions agreed in the statement¹, the geopolitics of the South Caucasus have the potential to prolong the presence of the Russian peacekeepers beyond the previous timeline. It is important to note that Russian involvement extends beyond just Nagorno-Karabakh to include the Armenian-held areas of Lachin, Kelbajar, and Agdam, as well as a corridor connecting Armenia to Stepanakert and Azerbaijan to its enclave in Nakhichevan². A variety of factors could determine the future of Russian military involvement: Kremlin policy towards the 'near-abroad', Turkey's continued belligerence towards Armenia and Russia, and the attitudes of Yerevan and Baku towards resolving the present conflict. As such, the Russian peacekeeping efforts in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will, in the short-term, ensure cooperation to the 2020 ceasefire while enabling Moscow to have a continued

¹ Rącz, European Union Institute for International Studies, *In Russia's Hands: Nagorno-Karabakh after the ceasefire agreement*, 2021.

² Crisis Group, *Getting from Ceasefire to Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh*, 2021.

role in determining the political future of states in its perceived sphere of influence and keep Turkey out of the South Caucasus.

Analysis of the 2020 Ceasefire and its Implications

The ceasefire that ended the second Nagorno-Karabakh War brought two months of fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia to a close at midnight on 9 November 2020. Although this agreement was lauded for its relative effectiveness in bringing an end to the violence that claimed almost 6,000 lives, including an estimated 150 civilian lives³, it has significant structural problems in order to maintain peace in the conflict in the future and “leaves the region short of a clear and stable peace”⁴. Additionally, the unilateral nature of the ceasefire’s enforcement has led many to question the motives of Russia in enforcing the ceasefire, including some in the West who believe the presence of Russia in Azerbaijan will have a detrimental effect on Azerbaijani sovereignty⁵. The involvement of Turkey in peacekeeping operations is equally alarming, as Turkey’s longstanding hatred of Armenia and alliance with Azerbaijan makes Turkish efforts biased. These concerns are valid, as the present agreement for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is lacking in both international consensus and long-term perspective, providing a quick fix when a more comprehensive resolution is necessary to maintain peace.

From a global governance perspective, the ceasefire worsens a trend of the declining influence of multi-lateral organizations such as the Minsk Group in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijan’s offensive to begin the war had already demonstrated the ineffectiveness of international organizations in mediating the conflict through Baku’s blatant disregard for calls of restraint from global powers⁶. However, the most telling sign of OSCE and Minsk Group’s lack of influence came in the ceasefire agreement, which Moscow successfully completed without gaining international consensus or United Nations mandate⁷. For Moscow, this is a major policy victory, one that demonstrates to its allies in the region that Russia remains the preeminent and can accomplish significant international initiatives without the help of the much maligned (at least in Russian propaganda) Western organizations. It also demonstrates the weakness of Western governments’ diplomacy in the South Caucasus region, especially the United States, as

³ Crisis Group, *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer*, 2021.

⁴ Crisis Group, *Getting from Ceasefire to Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Rubin, American Enterprise Institute, *The Problem with the Nagorno-Karabakh Ceasefire Agreement*, 2021.

⁷ Ràcz, *In Russia’s Hands*.

the U.S. Department of State meekly complied with the status quo⁸. Sentiments such as this only reinforce the belief that Western policymakers view the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a low-priority conflict⁹, which plays into Moscow's hand as security guarantor in the region. This lack of legitimacy in international diplomatic circles provides the basis for uncertainty and severely constrains the ability of especially Western powers to intervene in future conflicts.

The ceasefire also required a number of territorial swaps between Armenia and Azerbaijan, including the highly contentious city of Shushi/Shusha¹⁰. Shushi/Shusha, a mountain town which holds strategic importance for control of the Nagorno-Karabakh, was captured by Azerbaijani forces during the last days of the conflict. While Azerbaijan controls Shushi/Shusha, the capital of Nagorno Karabakh, Khankendi/Stapanakert, which is only a few kilometers away, will remain under Armenian control¹¹. This, combined with the transfer of the Kalbajar/Karvachar, Lachin/Berdzor, and western parts of Agdam/Aghdam regions from Armenian to Azerbaijan, shows the extent to which the ceasefire will perpetuate the existing sentiments centered on the fluid territorial situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh region¹². This stipulation of the ceasefire also forced many Armenians to abandon their homes and properties in the areas returned to Azerbaijani control, creating a refugee situation for Armenia. Under another condition of the agreement, all Armenian troops in the regions surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh were to withdraw from the region by December 1st. The problems with this short timeline aside, the vague language used in this section of the agreement has provided different legal interpretations in Azerbaijan and Armenia. For Azerbaijan, this was interpreted as *all* military forces which backed Armenia, including those of the Autonomous Oblast of Nagorno-Karabakh¹³. However, Armenian lawmakers used the imprecise definition of armed forces in the agreement to withdraw Republic of Armenia forces while encouraging those related to the Nagorno-Karabakh government to remain behind¹⁴. As Azerbaijan continues to incorporate the new territory into its political and economic systems, the

arbitrary nature of this segment of the ceasefire agreement is likely to be yet another point of contention in the future. However, this does not necessarily concern Moscow, as

⁸ Rubin, *The Problem with the Nagorno-Karabakh Ceasefire Agreement*.

⁹ De Waal, Survival, *Remaking the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process*, 2021.

¹⁰ Ghaplanyan, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, *Armenia and Azerbaijan: High Risk of cross-border violence in Nagorno-Karabakh despite Ceasefire*, 2021.

¹¹ Ràcz, *In Russia's Hands*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Russian politicians are keen to capitalize on the immediate clout gained from the diplomatic coup and seek to continue the growing Russian influence in the area.

The ceasefire signed by Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan in November is a step towards reconciliation between Baku and Yerevan on the subject of Nagorno-Karabakh and put an end to the costly fighting for both sides. However, the lack of political settlement and international quorum attached to the agreement as well as numerous territorial questions left unanswered has significant implications for the future of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. For Russia, the ceasefire and subsequent settlement was an outstanding political and diplomatic victory, one that promises to secure Russian influence in the region for years to come.

Russian Policy in the Near-Abroad

The most likely explanation for Russia's interest and continued presence in the Nagorno-Karabakh region stems from its desire to maintain the former Soviet Union's sphere of influence in Eurasia. In maintaining order in Nagorno-Karabakh and other areas associated with the ceasefire agreement, Russia achieves a series of foreign policy objectives. By the nature of the agreement between Moscow, Baku, and Yerevan, the 2,000 Russian peacekeeping personnel will be stationed in conflict zone¹⁵. While in theory this ensures that Azerbaijan will comply with the stipulations of the ceasefire agreement, it also provides coercive power for Moscow over Baku. On a global scale, the ceasefire demonstrated Russia's diplomatic power and excluded Western powers, who Russian President Vladimir Putin is eternally wary of gaining influence on Russia's borders. Therefore, the present situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has provided a major opportunity for Russia's foreign policy objectives, even if its main regional rival Turkey also gained from the arrangement.

Russia and Azerbaijan

In Azerbaijan and Russia's relationship, the ceasefire deal is likely to bring the two countries closer, whether Baku wants it or not. The presence of some 2,000 Russian troops on formally Azerbaijan's territory is an obvious reason for strengthening of ties between the two states, however the extent of the countries' connections will likely be

deeper than simply militarily. As Baku continues to build its hydrocarbon export network toward European destinations via Turkey, Russian policymakers are keen to prevent any

¹⁵ Ràcz, *In Russia's Hands*.

increased Western involvement in the region as a result¹⁶. The Azerbaijani usage of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline as well as British Petroleum's (BP) presence as the largest foreign investor in the Azerbaijani hydrocarbon sectors create significant anxiety for Russia¹⁷, who view this as violations of its sphere of influence. With an increased role in Azerbaijan's domestic politics, the hydrocarbon sector's westward pivot is one likely target of Russian pressure. Geopolitically, Russia "sees ties with Azerbaijan as important and seeks to integrate Azerbaijan into Kremlin-dominated security and economic structures"¹⁸, most of which Armenia is already a member. However, with Azerbaijan's continued fostering of relations with Turkey, Russia could impose its will and significantly crackdown on Azerbaijan's capacity to govern through its presence on the ground under the auspices of peacekeeping. As such, this relationship will be the most important in determining the future conduct of Baku towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and in its greater foreign policy.

Russia and Armenia

Russia's relationship with Armenia is much more nuanced than Azerbaijani-Russian relations and as a result, provide a different set of paradigms of analysis. Contrary to Azerbaijan, Armenia possesses very little hydrocarbon resources, making it reliant on imports to keep the lights on. As such, Russian-Armenian energy cooperation is a notable area of partnership between the two states and a driving force behind Armenia's joining of the Eurasian Economic Union in 2013¹⁹. Outside the scope of energy, Russia supplies Armenia with weapons and other military hardware and is bound to defend Armenia's interests through a treaty of mutual defense²⁰. Russia's failed to act during the second Nagorno-Karabakh War demonstrates the complexities of the relationship, with many scholars opining that Putin was keen to teach Nikol Pashinyan a lesson. Regardless of the Kremlin's motivations by remaining neutral, Armenia's reliance on Russia today is even greater, as Russian peacekeepers serve as protectors of the significant Armenian

enclave still trapped in Nagorno-Karabakh²¹. However, balancing appeasement for Russian objectives in the two states partnerships while maintaining Armenian sovereignty

¹⁶ Branch, Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, *Armenia and the South Caucasus*, 2018.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Clark and Yazici, Institute for the Study of War, *Erdogan Seeks to Upend Kremlin-backed Status Quo in Nagorno-Karabakh*, 2020.

¹⁹ Manvelyan, Contemporary Eurasia, *The Implications for Eurasian Economic Union South Caucasus Energy Policy*, 2017.

²⁰ Russell, European Parliamentary Research Service, *Russia-Turkey Relations*, 2021.

²¹ Sukiasyan, European Union Institute for Security Studies, *Appeasement and Autonomy*, 2021.

has caused significant rifts in Armenia's domestic politics. While this paradoxical aspect of the relationship remains a hindrance to further cooperation, especially as Pashinyan has lost much of his popular support, the relationship between Russia and Armenia remains important to Armenian interests and preservation of Armenian territory.

Russia-Turkey's Complicated Geopolitical Interactions

In recent years, Turkey has become an increasingly belligerent and disruptive force in the international geopolitical order. Although Turkey is a member of NATO, it has been increasingly portrayed as an international pariah by Western governments, especially after its unrestrained support of Azerbaijan's offensive in the second Nagorno-Karabakh War²². This conflict is just one in a plethora of tension points between Moscow and Ankara, with others being the ongoing wars in Libya and Syria, the latter of which was the scene for the infamous shooting down of the Russian jet in 2015²³. However, there have been significant inroads between the two countries, highlighted by the purchase of S-400 air defense systems by Turkey from Russia that resulted in sanctions and withholding of advanced military technology from the U.S.²⁴ This, coupled with the rise of authoritarianism from the Erdogan regime, has resulted in a complicated relationship between Turkey and Russia²⁵, one that has significant impact for the future of conflict resolution in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

For Russia, a closer relationship with Turkey is beneficial to a certain extent, however as Turkey continues to infringe in Russia's perceived sphere of influence, this relationship will be put to the test. For Moscow, Turkey offers a strategic partner which, although is a member of NATO, is painted as authoritarian and increasingly at odds with the West²⁶. Additionally, a partnership with Turkey would enable Russia to project its influence past the former Soviet Union, a step which would create significant anxieties in the West while demonstrating a resurgent Russia²⁷. Beyond this, Putin would achieve a

goal that is always at the forefront of his foreign policy agenda by separating an important NATO member from the Western framework. Economically, a closer partnership with

²² Baev, French Institute of International Relations, *Russia and Turkey: Strategic Partners and Rivals*, 2021.

²³ Russell, European Parliamentary Research Service, *Russia-Turkey Relations*, 2021.

²⁴ Rumer, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Russia in the Middle East*, 2019.

²⁵ Melvin, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *The Risks of Military Confrontation in the Black Sea*, 2018.

²⁶ Russell, *Russia-Turkey Relations*.

²⁷ Ibid.

Turkey could see increases in Russian hydrocarbon exports through its pipelines to Southern Europe, especially the TurkStream pipeline system²⁸.

This would effectively eliminate the need for Ukraine as a transit country for Russian oil and gas exports and accomplish yet another of Putin's long-term goals.

With these advantages for Russia in mind, it is important to note a series of disagreements that have the potential to shape Russia and Turkey's relationship for the worse and even adversely affect Russia's geopolitical position. In the making of the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Turkey's geopolitical influence in the region significantly increased and poses a direct threat to Russia's dominance of the South Caucasus. Turkey played a major role in arming the Azerbaijani military and promoted the September offensive against Armenia and now enjoys a role in maintaining the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan²⁹. To outside observers, this appears to be a crafty political maneuver, one that Putin certainly understands and is unlikely to forget. As such, the prospects of further Turkish-Russian reconciliation are unlikely as their interests continue to diverge in the South Caucasus.

Conclusion

The Russian role in conflict resolution in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a complicated issue. While Russia's efforts to create a lasting peace deserve credit, especially given the failure of Western organizations, the timing and magnitude of the agreement it has promoted raise questions about the deeper motives of Moscow's southern Caucasus policy. The lack of significant political agreement and resolution of old territorial disputes has led many scholars to believe the agreement has been undercut by Russian geopolitical objectives. While this could very well be true, the presence of Turkey in the conflict guarantees that Russia will not take a passive role in the future. For the civilians embroiled in the conflict, this is a good thing, as Russia's desire to keep Turkey's influence out of its perceived sphere of influence will prevent Turkish atrocities against the Armenian population it is supposedly tasked with protecting. All in all, the Russian presence as peacekeeper in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is driven by a desire to maintain its influence over the near abroad while demonstrating it is more effective at solving the problems of the former Soviet Union than the West and its associated multi-lateral organizations.

²⁸ Katz, Atlantic Council, *What are Putin's Objectives*, 2021.

²⁹ Yalcinkaya, German Marshall Fund of the United States, *Turkey's Overlooked Role in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War*, 2021.

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