

САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГСКИЙ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫЙ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ

Факультет международных отношений

Феррелл, Стивен Дональд Виктор

Выпускная квалификационная работа

**НОВЫЕ ДВИЖУЩИЕ СИЛЫ НАГОРНО-КАРАБАХСКОГО КОНФЛИКТА КАК
ВЫЗОВ УНИКАЛЬНОЙ ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ РОССИИ НА ЮЖНОМ КАВКАЗЕ**

**NEW DRIVING FORCES IN THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT AS A
CHALLENGE TO RUSSIA'S UNIQUE FOREIGN POLICY IN THE REGION**

Направление 41.04.05 «Международные отношения»,
Основная образовательная программа «Международные отношения (на английском языке)»

Научный руководитель:

д-р экономических наук, PhD,

профессор,

ТКАЧЕНКО С.Л..

Рецензент:

профессор, Юридический

факультет, Северо-Западный институт

КАРЦОВ А.С.

Санкт-Петербург

2023

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NEW DRIVING FORCES IN THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT AS A CHALLENGE TO RUSSIA'S UNIQUE FOREIGN POLICY IN THE REGION

Abstract: This study examines with a neorealist theoretical paradigm the relationship of Russia's unique foreign policy in the South Caucasus, with the current driving forces behind the Nagorno Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Included is historical analysis from the time of the Russian Empire, through the Soviet Epoch and into the newly globalized era. A comparative analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with two other significant post-Soviet conflict zones is elaborated upon, comparing the policy Russian peacekeeping operations. Finally, the study undertakes an analysis of the relationships of the three great regional powers surrounding the South Caucasus, and how the dynamics of economic cooperation and political competition fluctuate in response to external pressures and domestic ambitions.

Keywords: Nagorno-Karabakh, Competition, Russia, Peacekeeping, Multipolarity

НОВЫЕ ДВИЖУЩИЕ СИЛЫ НАГОРНО-КАРАБАХСКОГО КОНФЛИКТА КАК ВЫЗОВ УНИКАЛЬНОЙ ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ РОССИИ НА ЮЖНОМ КАВКАЗЕ

Аннотация: В этом исследовании с неореалистической теоретической парадигмой рассматривается связь уникальной внешней политики России на Южном Кавказе с нынешними движущими силами нагорно-карабахского конфликта между Арменией и Азербайджаном. Включен исторический анализ со времен Российской империи, советской эпохи и эпохи новой глобализации. Проводится сравнительный анализ нагорно-карабахского конфликта с двумя другими значимыми постсоветскими конфликтными зонами, сравнивается политика российских миротворческих операций. Наконец, в исследовании проводится анализ взаимоотношений трех великих региональных держав, окружающих Южный Кавказ, и того, как динамика экономического сотрудничества и политической конкуренции колеблется в ответ на внешнее давление и внутренние амбиции.

Ключевые слова: Нагорный Карабах, конкуренция, Россия, миротворчество, многополярность

Introduction

In the years leading up to and following the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, numerous armed conflicts broke out in regions seeking autonomy or independence in the myriad former Soviet republics which had regained national sovereignty. Under the liberalizing policies of Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika and Glasnost reformation programs, ethnic resentments and grievances which had been actively repressed by the extensive Soviet state security apparatus and egalitarian socialist rhetoric regarding the 'brotherhood of nations' erupted into fully inflamed nationalist movements and calls for self-determination across the vast superstate. Though the constitution of the Soviet Union in theory recognized the individual republics as sovereign and permitted them to leave the Union if they so choose, in practice this was a more difficult task, and often resulted in bloodshed.¹ Further complicating the matter was the status of autonomous regions within the republics themselves. Among the most troubled regions where this tension of self-determination and territorial integrity came into play in a highly visceral and emotive manner is the South Caucasus.

The South Caucasus region, a mountainous wedge of land between two immense seas of tremendous strategic importance at the intersection of Europe and Asia, has been inhabited by as many as two-hundred highly varied ethnicities and civilizations for millennia, its history largely shaped by the great empires with which it had become entangled, namely the Russians, Persians and Ottomans. The collapse of the great empires at the dawn of the twentieth century resulted in conflicting attempts at unity and carving of national boundaries among the three great South Caucasian civilizations – namely Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – and numerous ethnic conflicts, massacres, and deportations occurred as a result.

Nagorno-Karabakh, translated literally as 'Mountainous Karabakh' is a sub-region of greater Karabakh, a sparsely vegetated South Caucasus plateau within the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan. During the Soviet epoch, the mountainous highland portion of Karabakh, which was largely populated by ethnic Armenians but contained significant minorities of

¹ Merezhko, Oleksandr. *The Problem of Nagorno-Karabakh in International Law*. Kiev, Dmitry Burago Publishing House, 2014, p. 13.

Azeris and Russians, was provided regional autonomy as the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (Azerbaijan SSR), one of the fifteen constituent, officially ‘sovereign’ republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Nagorno-Karabakh had faced ethnic troubles even before the Soviet period.

The Nagorno-Karabakh region is of great importance to neorealist international relations studies, as it contains the perfect conditions for an analysis of the dynamics of balances of power due to the three great powers which surround it, in addition to conflicting jurisprudence regarding the seemingly conflicting values of national self-determination and the right to territorial integrity. The Armenians who form the majority population of the breakaway Republic of Artsakh (whose borders roughly correspond to the region of Nagorno-Karabakh) claim the right to self-determination in accordance with United Nations Charter Article 1(2) and 55, which states that one of the purposes of the United Nations is “to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace.”² Meanwhile, the Azeris claim a right to territorial integrity, which is outlined in United Nations Charter article 2(4), stating “All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.”³ Located at the crossroads of three great civilizations – that of Russia, Iran and Turkey, the resource rich region – particularly the Caspian oil fields of Baku – have been a source of envy for great powers in the immediate neighborhood and as far afield as Western Europe and the United States of America.

The British Empire briefly occupied the Azeri capital during the early twentieth century, and a key goal of the Wehrmacht’s eastern drive into the Soviet Union was to secure the Baku oil fields for the war effort. The European Union has expressed interest in providing international investment in the construction of infrastructure necessary to maximize alternative sources of energy, to reduce the dependency of central European states on Russian natural gas, particularly in the aftermath of the launch of the Special Military Operation in Ukraine in 2022. This, coupled with the increase in western economic sanctions due to the Special Military Operation has affected the balance of power in the region. NATO member Turkey has grown increasingly supportive of Azerbaijan as an indispensable

² United Nations. *United Nations Charter*, 1945.

³ United Nations. *United Nations Charter*, 1945.

arm of its pan-Turkic ambitions, while Iran has become increasingly open to collaboration with Russia due to shared grievances over western sanctions and a shared desire to seek alternative modes of trade to circumnavigate such restrictions. Therefore, the current driving forces of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict rest heavily on the economic and security interests of the three great powers which surround the region more so than policies pursued by Armenia or Azerbaijan themselves.

Originality and Methodology

The originality of this study is based in its analysis of Russia's unique foreign policy in the context of the changing power dynamics in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and how said foreign policy applies in the Southern Caucasus region as Russia faces significant challenges relating to western-imposed economic sanctions and limitations on its capability to engage economically with its claimed 'near abroad'. This study will also analyze the current driving forces in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute resulting from the shifting balance of power among the three great powers surrounding the caucasus region, namely Russia, Iran and Turkey. The New Russian Foreign Policy Concept announced by President Vladimir Putin in March 2023 opens new opportunities for scholarship relating to options for Russian collaboration with great powers surrounding the Southern Caucasus region who, in previous eras, would have been considered rivals and threats to Russia's goal to maintain its influence in the Russian 'near-abroad', while maintaining the fundamental neorealist paradigm of Russian foreign policy.⁴ Further, with the Nagorno Karabakh region now halfway through its third decade of conflict – particularly in the aftermath of the 2020 Karabakh war and the launch of Azeri offensives into Armenia proper – and Russia retaining significant peacekeeping forces in the region as per the 9 November ceasefire agreement, whose presence is set to be extended by 2025 unless either Azerbaijan or Armenia formally request their abandonment of the region within six months of the deadline, new perspectives can be gathered on the potential events which might take place in the region if Russia decides to not comply with the request and keep an active presence in the region. Russian ambitions to remain relevant in the face of rapid eastward NATO expansion and economic warfare have motivated the country to pursue

⁴ "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation - the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation." *Mid.ru*, 31 Mar. 2023, mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/.

partnerships and cooperation among regional great powers who share similar grievances and differences of paradigms with the Western worldview.

Russian influence in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict cannot be separated from its activities as a primary broker in ceasefire negotiations and subsequent peacekeeping activities, both as one of the co-chairs of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk Group and as an independent power. Tensions between the western participants in the OSCE Minsk Group and Russia, despite the latter being a member of the OSCE troika (the United States, Russia, and France) have characterized the development of every proposed and enacted ceasefire agreement in the region. Minsk Group inefficacy in successfully bringing about a viable ceasefire agreement, or a lasting settlement to bring the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to a formal end has served as an opportunity for Russia to assert itself as a more equipped and effective negotiator and a stabilizing force in the region. Therefore, the **aim** of this this thesis is to study the contemporary driving forces of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the context of Russia's unique foreign policy of neorealist multipolarity, the opportunities for Russia's maintenance of power in the region by cautious cooperation with the regional great powers in the face of western isolation, and the centrality of Russia's role as the primary broker of negotiations in Nagorno-Karabakh in achieving Russia's foreign policy goals.

The **methodology** of the research contained in this study is *historical analysis* and *systematic analysis* influenced by **neorealist theory**. The **chronology** of the study covers the period of 1876-2023. Neorealism (also called 'structural realism') both defensive and offensive, and historical analysis are the methodologies utilized for the purposes of the research contained within the text. According to neorealist scholar Dr. Kenneth Waltz in his pivotal 1979 work *Theory of International Politics*, the international system of state relations is anarchic.⁵ The behavior of individual states is not in reality beholden to international legal enforcement. Therefore, states must act in pursuit of their own self-interest, aiming fundamentally at securing the future of their own existence and prosperity. This system will only change when a state with sufficient power undertakes measures which result in substantial shifts in the international dynamic. The way states avoid large changes on the international chessboard is by attempting to balance their actions against each other.⁶ As a result, Waltz's systematic neorealism is titled 'defensive realism'. Waltz also asserts that there are three possible

⁵ Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Boston, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979, p.61.

⁶ Waltz, 1979, p. 125.

systems which account for the type of balance of power during a given period – namely, unipolar, bipolar and multipolar systems. Unipolar systems possess a single world hegemonic power, while a bipolar system contains two superpowers. A multipolar system contains a plurality of great powers with their own spheres of interest. Waltz asserts that a bipolar situation is more stable than a multipolar system, due to the fact that internal balancing can take place within a bipolar system which essentially allows it to self-regulate through polarity. Multipolar systems require states to engage in complex webs of alliances to balance each other out. Contradictions in webs of obligation among numerous powers could potentially lead to conflict.⁷

Dr. John Mearsheimer further developed neorealist international relations theory in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) by proposing a model of ‘offensive realism’, which posits that in an anarchic system, great powers will interact with each other based on the rational goal to achieve hegemony over their surrounding region. Mearsheimer also discusses the limits large bodies of water place on efforts by a state to achieve hegemony, and attempts by regional great powers to limit attempts by rival great powers to encroach on their sphere of influence. According to Mearsheimer, the economic strength of a state is the foundation of its military capabilities, which incentivizes states to actively fight against rivals seeking to dominate resource-rich regions.⁸ Another key concept in the neorealist paradigm is the ‘balance of threat’ as described in Dr. Stephen Walt’s 1987 work *The Origins of Alliances*. ‘Balance of threat’ theory asserts that countries will act in a manner intended to counterbalance perceived threats to their national security by evaluating several factors which help determine the scale of power of a possible threat. Such factors include aggregate power, offensive capability, offensive intentions and geographic proximity. Additionally, balance of threat theory argues that alliances of convenience will form between states to counterbalance greater threats, and that the perception of a threat increases when an emerging power is present in the international system.⁹

Another neorealist scholar whose work is pertinent to the purposes of the study is Dr. Steven Van Evera, whose works *Causes of War: Power and Roots of Conflict* outlines his ‘Offense-Defense’ theory, which aims to determine what conditions raise the possibility of warfare in a given region. Van Evera makes five propositions relating to this subject. First, the likelihood of war is increased

⁷ Waltz, 1979, p. 129-136.

⁸ Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, p. 1-14.

⁹ Walt, Stephen M. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 263-266.

when countries gain a sense of outsized confidence about a conflict's outcome. Second, war is more likely to take place when the first side in a conflict to attack has the upper hand. Third, the likelihood of war is increased when states' relative power is in a state of severe flux, when windows of vulnerability and opportunity for success are large. Van Evera's fourth hypothesis contends that the chances of war increase when a state's control of resources allows it to lay claim to even more resources or come to their defense. Finally, Van Evera proposes that when conquest is made easy, the chances of war increase.¹⁰

An understanding the current dynamics and driving forces of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis cannot be separated from the depth of historical resentments which characterize the highly emotive nature of the conflict. Therefore, it is appropriate to conduct a historical overview of the relationship between the Azeris and Armenians of Karabakh, starting from the period of Tsarist rule beneath the Russian Empire, during which Russia cemented its position as the primary great power in the South Caucasus. Beyond the Russian imperial period, a description of the social engineering policies of the early Soviet Union, with its *indigenization* campaigns, and deliberations regarding the placement of Nagorno-Karabakh in either the Armenian or Azeri Soviet Republics is necessary, as the outbreak of the modern Nagorno-Karabakh conflict largely stems from unresolved challenges from the early Soviet period. The historical analysis of the modern conflict period is primarily focused on the dynamics between Russia and the west in attempts to bring about a negotiated settlement to the conflict. Russia occupies a unique position in this matter, as it has been working to broker negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan both as an independent power and ostensibly as a member of the OSCE Minsk Group, which in practice represents the efforts of the west regarding the conflict.

The second chapter focuses on a comparative analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis and other post-Soviet crisis zones related to the question of national self-determination and territorial integrity. The conflicts in South Ossetia and Transdniestria are analyzed, compared and contrasted with the Nagorno Karabakh crisis, as well as Russia's neorealist foreign policy approach towards these troubled regions. The uniqueness of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is highlighted, as are the opportunities such crises serve for Russia's power projection in its near-abroad.

¹⁰ Stephen Van Evera. *Causes of War : Structures of Power and the Roots of International Conflict*. Ithaca, N.Y. ; London, Cornell University Press, 1999, p. 3-4.

The third chapter is a study of the current perspectives of the three great powers surrounding the South Caucasus regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, including a discussion of how regional cooperation in the interest of economic facilitation projects may be the key to bring the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to a formal end. Multinational projects including the International North South Transport Corridor, the Persian Gulf – Black Sea Corridor and the Rasht – Astara Railway are analyzed from the perspective of Russia seeking alternative means of international trade in the face of massive sanctions imposed by the west in response to the Special Military Operation in Ukraine. Additionally, new opportunities for regional cooperation due to shared extra-regional challenges and grievances are elaborated upon.

Literature Review

Important literature utilized for the purposes of this research include *Peace for Karabakh* (1998), Vladimir Kazimirov's memoirs regarding his period serving as Ambassador-at-Large and Plenipotentiary Representative of the President of the Russian Federation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict-resolution process and head of the Russian mediation mission, 1992-1996. This extremely-detailed, primary source of the complex negotiations taking place behind closed doors during the First Karabakh War proved to be indispensable for providing a first-hand account of Russia's perspective in the early stages of the conflict. *Black Garden* (2003) by Thomas de Waal provided a useful and comprehensive overview of the first fifteen years of the conflict and continues to be a common introduction to the dynamics of the conflict for western audiences. *Affirmative Action Empire* (2001) by Terry Martin provides a detailed analysis of Bolshevik ethnic policy in the early years of the Soviet Union, including the numerous transfers which took place between Armenia and Azerbaijan of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, as does *From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus* (2015) by Arsène Saparov, with a comparative analysis of the Soviet approach to the South Caucasian subregions of Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A similar comparative approach is undertaken by Emil Souleimanov in *Understanding Ethnopolitical Conflict: Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia: Wars Reconsidered* (2013).

Legal analyses of the conflicting principles of national self-determination and territorial integrity inherent in the dispute are provided by *The Problem of Nagorno-Karabakh and International*

Law (2014) by Olexandr Merezhko, and *The Nagorno Karabakh Conflict: A Legal Analysis* (2010) by Heiko Kruger. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (2018) by John Mearsheimer is a piercing critical analysis of how western international policy and liberal paradigms towards Russia and its near abroad is largely responsible for the events which took place in the South Caucasus in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. A detailed study of Russia's interventionist policy in Nagorno-Karabakh is provided by James J. Coyle in *Russia's Interventions in Ethnic Conflicts: The Case of Armenia and Azerbaijan* (2021), while a unique perspective on Iran's foreign policy regarding Armenia and Azerbaijan is expanded upon in *Iran's Foreign Policy In the South Caucasus* (2019) by Marzieh Kouhi-Esfahani, and *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (2017) by Gerard Toal offers a western-sympathetic perspective on Russian policy in the Caucasus. *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives* (2022) by M. Hakan Yavuz and Michael Gunter offers a very recent comprehensive analysis of the political environment of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict after the Second Karabakh War in 2020, including useful analyses regarding Turkey's ascendance as a potential rival for Russia in Karabakh. *The Nagorno-Karabakh Deadlock: Insights from Successful Conflict Settlements* (2020) by Azer Babayev, Bruno Schoch and Hans-Joachim Spanger is a highly useful comparative analysis of a number of successful conflict settlements which could serve as models for potential negotiations to formulate a lasting solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict which could ensure security and stability in the region.

Additional sources of research include the Valdai Discussion Club, a think tank based in Moscow covering a wide variety of geopolitical matters across the Eurasian region. Several eminent scholars have contributed to the Valdai Club, including Dr. Sergey Markidonov, Director of the Department of Ethnic Relations at the Moscow-based Institute for Political and Military Analysis, Dr. Vali Kaleji, an Iran-based expert on matters pertaining to Central Asia and the Caucasus, and Dr. Hasan Selim Özertem, an Ankara-based political analyst and visiting scholar at Carnegie Moscow Center. The Jamestown Foundation, a Washington D.C.-based think tank specializing in Chinese and Eurasian geopolitics, has provided a large variety of articles and studies relating to the South Caucasian region, particularly concerning risks of terrorism. The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, a think tank with offices in Washington D.C. and Stockholm specializing in the Caucasian, Central Asian, and Afghani regions, has been a useful resource in finding western perspectives on the events unfolding in the South Caucasus following the events of the Second

Karabakh War. An additional Russian-aligned think tank is the Russian International Affairs Council, based in Moscow and founded by former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. The organization's numerous Russian state connections offers an insight into the internal perspectives of Russian policy in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Chapter 1: The Historical Backdrop of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

1.1. History of Nagorno-Karabakh: 1876 – 2020

To understand the complexities of the region's dynamics of power and ethnicity, as well as the modern relationship Russia with Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan, it is necessary to provide an overview of the historical developments which have led to the current crisis, beginning with the relationship of Armenians and Azeris in the Southern Caucasus during the waning years of the Russian Empire at the close of the nineteenth century and the dawn of the twentieth. Tensions were already building in the Karabakh region by the end of the nineteenth century due to a multitude of factors, including a rapidly growing population – the population in the Southern Caucasus doubled in less than fifty years under the Rule of the Russian Empire – shifting demographics, economic developments and geographic challenges. Since 1876, the modern region of Karabakh was part of the Elisabethpol Governorate of the Russian Empire, and remained so until political instability and revolution ended the Empire in 1917.¹¹

The primary city in the Karabakh region during this period was Shusha, an ancient multicultural and multiethnic urban center based around the Shusha fortress completed in 1751 at the behest of Panah Ali Khan, the first Persian Khan of the Karabakh region. A census taken in 1886 found a total population in the city of 26,806, of which 15,188 were Christian Armenians and 11,595 were Muslim Azeris.¹²

The Russian Revolution of 1905 provided impetus for long-simmering tensions to explode as Imperial law and order decayed. Massacres were carried out between ethnic Armenians and Azeris

¹¹ M. Hakan Yavuz, and Michael M Gunter. *The Karabakh Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, p. 19.

¹² Saparov, Arsène. *From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus : The Soviet Union and the Making of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh*. London, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015, p. 112.

between 1905 and 1906, resulting in the destruction of hundreds of villages and thousands of deaths on both sides.¹³ As the Russian Empire collapsed entirely during the 1917 February Revolution, Armenia, Azerbaijan and neighboring Georgia declared their sovereignty as independent republics. Continuing ethnic resentments from the 1905-1906 massacres and disagreements over the delimitation of borders resulted in further ethnic conflict in the region. Conflicting claims over the Nagorno-Karabakh region between the young Armenian and Azeri republics led to another series of massacres by both peoples. A Transcaucasian Federation was attempted, but the federal state lasted a mere month before disassembling into the Democratic Republic of Georgia, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and the first Armenian Republic respectively, due to a lack of any sort of social or political unity among its multiethnic populace. Ottoman forces invaded the Southern Caucasus in late October 1914 and occupied Baku, before being fought back by the British, who shortly withdrew from the area due to resource limitations. In the chaotic power vacuum left behind, skirmishes continued between Armenians and Azeris, resulting in the near-total destruction of Shusha and the massacre of most of its ethnic Armenian population, numbering in the thousands.¹⁴

In July 1918 during the British occupation, the Armenian assembly in Nagorno-Karabakh declared the autonomy of the region and began the process of establishing a national council and local government. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, who also claimed sovereignty over the Nagorno-Karabakh region put forward Khorsrov Bey Sultanov as governor-general of the region. Sultanov's governorship was accepted by the occupying British forces pending decisions by the Paris Peace Conference following the First World War.¹⁵ In response, the Armenian government declared that the Nagorno-Karabakh region would be incorporated into Armenia proper. As another ethnic war broke out in the region to prevent Armenian annexation, the preoccupied Azeri army left the capital Baku vulnerable to Bolshevik conquest, which subsequently ensued with little resistance. After consolidating their control over the region, the external borders of the new Soviet Union were finalized with Turkey on March 16, 1921 under the Moscow Treaty, which granted Turkey control over the cities of Kars and Ardahan.¹⁶

¹³ Saparov, 2015, p. 4.

¹⁴ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 20-21.

¹⁵ Saparov, 2015, p. 91-95.

¹⁶ Yavuz and Gunter, 2015, p. 23.

The assertion of Soviet power in Nagorno-Karabakh was announced by Khosrov bek Sultanov, the governor-general of Karabakh, on April 29, 1920. In the same announcement, Sultanov declared himself the official ‘Military Revolutionary Committee of Red Karabakh’ chairman. A Soviet Red Army contingent arrived in Shusha on May 12. Two days later Sultanov was deposed and replaced with Dadash Buniatzade, who was made Karabakh’s extraordinary commissar. The Bolshevik’s arrival in Karabakh deeply incensed the local Armenians, who had assumed Russian rule would be reestablished, and the Armenian nationalist forces from Armenia proper retreated from the region.¹⁷

The Kavburo, an extension of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was tasked with the determination of internal Soviet borders of the Southern Caucasus. It faced numerous difficulties in determining a functional solution which would render the area coherently governable. As part of the consolidation process of Bolshevik rule, Karabakh was deemed to remain in Azerbaijan while the ethnic Armenian civilians within Nagorno-Karabakh received a certain level of political autonomy. It was not long before the Red Army learned that lofty Marxist rhetoric of the brotherhood of man and cautious delineation of internal borders were insufficient for the complex, multifaceted mash of cultures, languages and resentments of the Caucasus.¹⁸ Several uprisings took place in the years following the Bolshevik conquest of the region, with Azeri and Armenian communists engaging in political struggles throughout the summer of 1920. Rebellions emerged in Ganja and Shusha, respectively, from May-June that year. Zangezur in what is today Armenia’s Syunik province was the site of an uprising in October the same year. Nagorno-Karabakh was plagued with revolts through the spring of 1921. To maintain their rule, the Bolsheviks made numerous spur-of-the-moment deals and concessions with both the Azeris and the Armenians, further creating long-term confusion as conflicting alliances and obligations spiraled into ever more complexity.¹⁹

In delimiting borders, the Bolsheviks faced a crossroads – they could either utilize the principle of *uti possiditis*, a concept found in international law which holds that preexisting administrative boundaries of a former state, most commonly an empire, would remain as such within a new state, or, they could alter the borders so that the whole of titular ethnic groups would be contained within their own nation-state rather than exist as minorities within preexisting boundaries, following the principle

¹⁷ Saparov, 2015, p. 96.

¹⁸ Saparov, 2015, p. 105.

¹⁹ Ohannes Geukjian, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in the South Caucasus: Nagorno-Karabakh and the Legacy of Soviet Nationalities Policy*, Ashgate, 2012, p. 66.

of self-determination.²⁰ Inconsistency and internal disagreement on the part of the Bolsheviks between two options resulted in the region of Karabakh switching on more than one occasion between Azerbaijan and Armenia, largely based on short term convenience for the Bolsheviks to further entrench their power.

The Azeri claim to the region was recognized in 1920 after Communist Party rule was cemented to prolong support for the Bolsheviks, but then in December that year the region was transferred to Armenia for similar reasons of conjuring support for the Bolshevik cause. Karabakh was again declared to be made a part of Armenia in May 1921 to subvert anti-Communist sentiment in Zangazur.²¹ Then, a Kavburo general plenum with delegates from the Caucasus republics, the Soviet military and party apparatchiks met in Tblisi, the Georgian capital on July 2-3 2021 to decide a permanent status for the region. The next day, the plenum decided (with Georgian Bolshevik Joseph Stalin present) to propose two possibilities which could be utilized to determine the region's final status.²² The first possibility included a referendum which would take place across the whole of Karabakh to determine the region's status, while the second proposal involved lowland Karabakh remaining in Azerbaijan proper while Nagorno-Karabakh, the mountainous subregion with an Armenian majority, would be made a part of Armenia proper. The session voted to reject the possibility of a referendum across all of Karabakh, and in favor of Nagorno-Karabakh being transferred to Armenian administration. Nariman Narimanov, the head of the Azeri Revolutionary Committee intervened and successfully persuaded the Kavburo to defer its decision to the central government in Moscow.²³ After much consternation between the Azeri and Armenian Communists and the completion of Communist conquest in Zangezur, the Soviet central government saw little reason to court Armenia with false promises over the possibility of gaining permanent control of Nagorno-Karabakh. On June 5, the Kavburo adopted a new, final, decision for the region.

It was determined that Nagorno-Karabakh would be made an autonomous oblast within the formal borders of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, the final sub-republican administrative division of its type to be established in the Southern Caucasus.²⁴ The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, created by the Bolsheviks in 1923 had its delimitation of borders carefully drawn to include

²⁰ Merezko, 2014, p. 155.

²¹ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 24.

²² Geukjian, 2012, p. 70.

²³ Saparov, 2015, p. 11.

²⁴ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 22-25.

villages with ethnic Armenian majorities, resulting in an entity covering roughly 4,300 square kilometers and containing a population of 131,500, of which 94.4 percent were Armenian and 5.6 percent were ethnic Azeris. The administrative designation ‘Autonomous *Oblast*’ (or region) would be of a lower status than that of a Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), the primary national-territorial republican subdivision of the Soviet Union, or an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR).²⁵

The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast was also unique in that it was the sole autonomous subdivision of the Soviet Union in which its titular intended nationality was already represented by a full Soviet Socialist Republic (the Armenian SSR) which could advocate on its behalf in Moscow.²⁶ The other two autonomous oblasts of the Southern Caucasus, the Nakhichevan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (also in the Azerbaijan SSR) and the Adjarian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in the Georgian SSR were not based on any nationality, the Adjarians being an ethnographic subpopulation of the overall Georgian ethnicity. Shusha’s designation as the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh was removed and relocated to nearby Khankhendi, which was subsequently renamed Stepanakert in honor of Armenian Bolshevik and leader of the ‘Baku Commune’ Stepan Shahumian – a controversial decision as Azeris charge Shahumian with leading the massacre of thousands of Azeris in 1918 during the ‘March Days’, a period of ethnic strife in Baku during the brief period of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic, in which several tit-for-tat massacres of civilians caused the deaths of an estimated 2,000 Armenians and 3-12,000 Azeris. The population climbed slowly throughout the decades of Soviet rule, with ethnic tensions suppressed by the force of state egalitarian rhetoric which emphasized the ‘friendship of peoples’, censorship and political repression.²⁷

As General Secretary of the Communist Party Mikhail Gorbachev attempted to reform the stagnating Soviet Union during the second half of the 1980’s, his liberalizing policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* - ‘restructuring’ and ‘openness’ respectively - came to be viewed as an opportunity by various ethnonationalist factions to express grievances and revive ethnohistorical narratives that for generations had been suppressed under the totalitarian pervasiveness of the Soviet security state.²⁸ Local party functionaries and academics in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Nagorno-Karabakh

²⁵ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 24-25.

²⁶ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 25.

²⁷ Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, New York; London, New York, University Press, 2013, p. 130.

²⁸ De Waal, 2013, p.11-12.

Autonomous Oblast began the process of reigniting conversations about ‘correcting’ claimed historical injustices, with much of the rhetoric concerning the question of the Kavburo’s decision to keep Nagorno-Karabakh within Azeri borders. In the words of Thomas de Waal, “For Armenians, Karabakh is the last outpost of their Christian civilization and a historic haven of Armenian princes and bishops before the eastern Turkic world begins. Azeris talk of it as a cradle, nursery, or conservatoire, the birthplace of their musicians and poets.”²⁹ The first institution in the late Soviet Union to assert the need for a unification of Karabakh and Nakhichevan with Armenia proper was the Armenian Academy of Sciences in October 1987.³⁰ As the ethnic Armenians in the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast became more radical in their demands, Azeris responded with their own radicalism and conflict between the two groups erupted that same year. Azeris were expelled from the Megri and Kafan regions of the Armenian SSR in 1987.³¹ A petition for unification was put forward by the leadership of the NKAO which gained the signatures of 80,000 Karabakh Armenians and was promptly sent to the republic-level authorities in Baku and national-level authorities in Moscow.

Mass protests by Armenians were held in the main square of Stepanakert on February 11, 1988, which spread to Yerevan on February 20 as a delegation representing Armenian interests traveled to Moscow for a meeting with General Secretary Gorbachev.³² That same day, in an unprecedented move, the Nagorno-Karabakh Supreme Council voted to unite Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia proper. A halt was called for the protests upon the Armenian representatives’ return on February 27 due to the expectation of a formal decision to be made regarding the question of Karabakh by the Soviet Union’s Supreme Soviet governing body. Intercommunal skirmishes broke out across the region in the ensuing days, as well as in Yerevan and the multiethnic coastal city of Sumgait in Azerbaijan. Riots in the latter on February 28, 1988, resulted in the deaths of 26 Armenians and 6 Azeris. Moscow dispatched military forces to the region to prevent the redrawing of preexisting domestic borders and suppress local uprisings, but the momentum of conflict was too great. A wave of fear spread across the border frontier zones and deportations began to take place among both sides.³³

Moscow faced an immense challenge with how to handle the situation unfolding on the ground in the region. In March 1988, two options were put forward to handle the growing crisis – that of a

²⁹ De Waal, 2013, p. 3.

³⁰ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 46.

³¹ De Waal, 2013, pp. 18-19.

³² Geukjian, 2012, pp. 138-141.

³³ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 47.

comprehensive investment plan of 400 million rubles (\$668 million USD) to improve the economic conditions of the region or raising the status of Nagorno-Karabakh above that of an autonomous oblast to that of an autonomous republic. Neither option involved the transfer of the NKAO to the Armenian SSR. On March 18, 1988, the Communist Party Committee of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast voted in favor of unification with Armenia, a decision which was swiftly rejected by the Communist Party of Azerbaijan and Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union days later on March 23. The next day, attempting to satiate the grievances and claims of marginalization of the Armenian population of Karabakh the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party and the Council of Ministers passed a resolution to provide seven years of economic investment in the Karabakh region. Destructive anti-Azeri riots in Stepanakert and Shusha in September 1989 were followed by riots in Baku.³⁴

On July 12, 1988, the Nagorno-Karabakh Soviet of People's Deputies held a meeting in Stepanakert which was attended by 101 out of 150 deputies, in which three announcements were made. First, that the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast would withdraw from the Azerbaijan SSR entirely and be annexed by the Armenian SSR. Second, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast would be renamed to the 'Artsakh Armenian Autonomous Region'. Finally, that the general strike taking place in the region at the time be ended and employees ought to be sent back to work. The Supreme Soviet of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic's presidium held a meeting the same day after the Karabakh Armenians' announcement and declared on the basis of Chapter 11, Article 87 of the Soviet Constitution ('The Autonomous Region and Autonomous Area') which states "The Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic includes the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region," that the assertions of the Nagorno-Karabakh Soviet of People's Deputies are illegal.³⁵

Further, Articles 69-70 stated that only the "Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic reserves the right to freely withdraw from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," and "The territory of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic cannot be modified without its consent. Borders between the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic and the other federal republics can be modified under the mutual agreement with the respective republics and is subject to the approval of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics." Therefore, according to Azerbaijan, only the whole of the Azerbaijan SSR could secede

³⁴ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 50.

³⁵ *Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*, 1977, Moscow, Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1982.

from the Union as a whole, not the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast which was a constituent – if autonomous – region of the Azerbaijan SSR, and in the event the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast wished to be transferred to the Armenian SSR, it would require the mutual agreement of both the Armenian SSR, the Azerbaijani SSR, and final approval by the central government in Moscow – a practically impossible set of circumstances.³⁶ The Presidium of the All-Union Supreme Soviet after cautious consideration of the claims of the two bodies, sided with the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan on July 18, 1988.

In response to the decision by the Presidium of the All-Union Supreme Soviet, the Armenian nationalist movement grew in intensity. Acts of violence broke out across several Armenian cities in November 1988 including Gugark, Stepanavan and Spitak which resulted in 33 Azeri deaths. Moscow ultimately decided that the events taking place warranted the seizing of full administration of the area by the federal level administrative organs of the Soviet Union, appointing Arkady Volsky for the job, naming him the “representative of the central community of the Supreme Soviet” tasked with managing the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast on 24 July 1988. Azerbaijan reacted strongly to Moscow’s intervention, viewing it as an attempt to strip the republic of its sovereignty over its internal matters. After much protesting, Moscow withdrew its direct governance over the NKAO and restored the responsibility of Azerbaijan over the region on November 28. Shortly after, a joint session of both the National Soviet of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and the Supreme Soviet of Armenia voted in favor of the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia.³⁷

The decision prompted the most violent riots in Baku up until that point. On January 13, 1990, Azeris in the capital city of the republic filled the main square in the city and held a rally before men broke away from the crowd and fanned out across the city in search of the remaining ethnic Armenian population. What followed was a seven-day ethnic pogrom against Armenians resulting in between 48 and 70 deaths and several hundred injured through beatings, arson, and robberies. Those that could escape boarded ferries who carried them across the vast Caspian Sea to the Soviet Turkmen city of Krasnovodsk where planes were prepared to fly them to the Armenian capital. Armenian refugees from Baku claimed the “Popular Front people” were to be held responsible for leading the violence. Blockades of concrete bollards and trucks were established all over the city.³⁸

³⁶ Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 1977.

³⁷ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, pp. 50-51.

³⁸ De Waal, 2013, pp. 90-91.

Moscow ultimately decided enough was enough and, attempting to bring law and order back on the streets of the capital of Azerbaijan, declared a formal State of Emergency over Karabakh and other designated regions of the Azerbaijan SSR on January 19th 1990, sending in the military – about 26,000 Union soldiers in all were sent into the Baku alone. The official decree enacting this policy by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union stated “In connection with a dramatic escalation of the situation in the city of Baku, attempts of criminal extremist forces to remove from power by organizing mass unrest legally acting state authorities and in the interests of the protection and security of citizens, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, guided by point 14 of the article 119 of the Constitution of the USSR decrees: To declare since 20 January 1990 state of emergency in the city of Baku, by extending to its territory the effect of the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR from 15 January 1990.”³⁹ The barricades established by the Popular Front were smashed and lines of communication, be they telephone, or radio were cut by Soviet special forces. The events of ‘Black January’ as they eventually came to be known resulted in the deaths of between 133 and 137 people.

To save the crumbling Soviet Union, President Mikhail Gorbachev called for a nationwide referendum in early 1991 which would decide the fate of the transcontinental Union. Armenia, having declared its independence from the Soviet Union on 23 August 1990, alongside five other republics boycotted the plebiscite.⁴⁰ The plundering of arms stockpiles by factions of both Armenians and Azeris across Nagorno-Karabakh led to a request by Azeri president Mutalibov for aid from the central government in Moscow. At the order of Gorbachev, Soviet Army Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, armed with artillery munitions, helicopter gunships and heavily armored vehicles, in tandem with the Azeri Special Purpose Police Unit (OMON) swept through villages across the northern Shahumyan region in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and cleared them of their ethnic Armenian populations. The heavy-handed nature of the operation, codenamed ‘Ring’ led to a loss of trust in the Soviet central government by the newly elected noncommunist or ex-Communist Party officials across the Soviet republics, including Levon Ter-Petrosyan of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic and Boris Yeltsin in the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh region viewed the operation as an attempt to intimidate them out of their

³⁹ “İlke Haber Ajansı,” *Ilkha.com*, 10 Jan. 2023, ilkha.com/english/world/azerbaijan-commemorates-victims-of-“bloody-january“-309947 Accessed 8 May 2023.

⁴⁰ Saparov, 2015, p. 157.

demands for unification with newly independent Armenia.⁴¹ Ayaz Mutalibov was installed as the new First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Azerbaijan SSR by Moscow, while the central government attempted to disarm highland Armenian militias. The 23rd Motorized Rifle Division, sent into Karabakh by Moscow, began patrolling the border between the two republics in April 1991 in cooperation with the Internal Troops of the Ministry for Internal Affairs (MVD). Having forced their hand, the Armenian leaders conceded to negotiations with Moscow, sending a delegation from Stepanakert to the Azeri capital on July 20, 1991.⁴² The delegation agreed to give up the cause of unification of the NKAO with Armenia in favor of negotiations under the constitutional provisions of the Azerbaijan SSR. However, this state of affairs did not last long, as in September 1991 the Karabakh Armenians voted in a plebiscite to proclaim the independence of a Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, to which Azerbaijan reacted that November by stripping the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast of its legal status and divided the former NKAO into a patchwork of districts. Subsequently, on December 10, 1991, the ethnic-Armenian population of the former NKAO carried out a regional plebiscite, and independence for a Nagorno-Karabakh ‘republic’ was declared on January 6, 1992, within weeks of the demise of the Soviet Union as an internationally recognized legal entity.⁴³

The full-scale war which followed would claim the lives of an estimated 30,000 people. Ethnic cleansing was carried out by both sides in significant numbers, at times escalating into entire massacres of populations. By the signing of the Bishkek Protocols in May 1994, 300,000-500,000 Armenians in regions of Azerbaijan outside Karabakh had been deported or displaced, while over 700,000 Azeris were expelled from Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the seven Armenian-occupied surrounding provinces.⁴⁴ A notably grim example of the violence unleashed in the region is that of the Khojaly massacre, in which Armenian military forces in tandem with the Commonwealth of Independent States’ 366th regiment overtook the Azeri-majority town of Khojaly, which in 1992 also possessed the only airport in the Karabakh region. After a months-long blockade and shelling by the Armenian forces which resulted in the cutting of water, gas and electricity, the town fell to its assailants on 25 February 1991. According to contemporary reports, fleeing Azeri civilians were fired

⁴¹ Saparov, 2015, pp. 167-168.

⁴² Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p.52.

⁴³ Saparov, 2015, p. 187.

⁴⁴ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 67.

upon in addition to many who remained in the town, attempting to hide in their houses and basements. The death toll from the massacre numbered in the hundreds, including 106 women and 63 children.⁴⁵ It was the largest such massacre to take place in any of the immediate post-Soviet ethnic conflicts and continues to serve as a rallying point for vengeance against Armenians in Azeri culture and state rhetoric.⁴⁶

The defeat and massacre of the residents of Khojaly resulted in severe political fallout for Azerbaijan's political class. Accusations of mismanagement of Khojaly's defense were directed at the Azeri government by the Azerbaijan Popular Front. After submitting his forced resignation to the National Assembly of Azerbaijan on March 6th, 1992, Ayaz Niyazi Mutalibov submitted his resignation from the Azeri Presidency. Mutalibov was succeeded by Yakub Mammadov as interim president at the behest of the Azeri Parliament, until elections could be held within a period of three months following Mutalibov's resignation. However, after hearing accounts of the Khojaly massacre, and the removal of Mammadov following the Armenian capture of the strategically important city of Shusha in Karabakh, the Supreme Council of Azerbaijan restored Mutalibov to his presidential duties and acquitted him of any responsibility for the fall of the town on 14 May 1992. The next day, the offices of the Azeri Parliament and headquarters of Azerbaijani State Radio and Television were taken over by armed factions of the Azerbaijan Popular Front, who quickly deposed Mutalibov. Mutalibov fled to Moscow and the dissolved Supreme Council of Azerbaijan had its responsibilities given to the Azerbaijan National Assembly, which became controlled by ex-Communists and the Azerbaijan Popular Front, who subsequently installed Isa Gamber as the next interim president on 18 May 1992. Abulfaz Elchibey was elected with the support of the Azerbaijan Popular Front on 17 June 1992. Mutalibov would not return to his homeland for just over twenty years, residing in Russia until given amnesty by current Azeri President Ilham Aliyev in July 2012.

Shusha – viewed by Azeris as the cradle of their musical and poetic heritage – fell to the combined Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh forces on May 8, 1992. Following an attempted push by the under-equipped Azeris to reclaim lost territory in summer 1992, the Armenians successfully managed to capture virtually all of Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian supplies were quickly replenished due to their control of the Lachin Corridor, a key valley road that connects Armenia proper with

⁴⁵ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 54.

⁴⁶ Azer Babayev, et al. *The Nagorno-Karabakh Deadlock: Insights from Successful Conflict Settlements*, Springer VS, 2020 p. 21.

Nagorno-Karabakh. Meanwhile, Baku was beset by political instability yet again when Colonel Surat Huseynov attempted to launch a coup in January 1993 on the Azeri government, pushing the country to the brink of civil war. President Elchibey fled for the Nakhichevan exclave while Heydar Aliyev, the former leader of the Nakhichevan Communist Party, traveled to the Azeri capital with the support of Moscow and successfully negotiated with Huseynov to form a government with himself as the unofficial leader of the country (Elchibey was still technically the holder of the office of president until August 1993) and Huseynov as the legal premier and minister of defense. In October 1993, Aliyev was elected President of Azerbaijan. By spring 1993 the Armenian combined forces had managed to occupy most Azeri-majority regions immediately surrounding the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, including Fuzuli and Kelbajar. The United Nations Security Council weighed in on the continuing conflict, by issuing Resolution 822 on April 30, 1993, which called for an immediate Armenian withdrawal from the Kelbajar region, which served little strategic purpose for the Armenians. The Armenians ignored the statement, as the occupation of Kelbajar could serve as a bargaining chip in later negotiations between themselves and Azerbaijan.⁴⁷

The chaotic domestic environment in Azerbaijan provided an opening for the Armenians to seize even more territory beyond the former NKAO's borders, including the districts of Agdam, Goradiz, Kubatly, Jabrail, and Zangelan. Armenia subsequently established a military occupation across the seven districts it had managed to successfully conquer. Azeri civilians fled the occupied regions *en masse*, fearing ethnic cleansing similar to the events in Khojaly. The withdrawal of Armenian troops was again called for in United Nations Security Council resolutions 853, 874 and 884, to no effect. A failed Azeri offensive in the winter of 1993-1994 left both militaries exhausted, and after a series of intense negotiations brokered by Russia, a ceasefire was signed in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan on May 5, 1994, by representatives of Armenia, the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh republic, Azerbaijan and Russia, which brought the First Karabakh War to a de-facto conclusion.⁴⁸

1.2. Eurasia vs. Euro-Atlantic in the Early Karabakh Peace Process 1991-1994

⁴⁷ Coyle, James J. *Russia's Interventions in Ethnic Conflicts*. Springer Nature, 30 Nov. 2020, p. 81-84.

⁴⁸ Babayev et al., 2020, p. 22.

Russia's early policy towards the Southern Caucasus in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution was marked by hesitancy. The country was in the midst of an economic crisis, with hyperinflation taking hold. The western-sympathetic perspective of Moscow's high-ranking officials – including Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikolai Vladimirovich Kozyrev – saw little reason to intervene in regions of the former Soviet Union which were unlikely to prove useful to Moscow. Such reticence was short-lived, however, as Russian foreign policy began to shift towards a more 'Eurasianist' perspective in 1992, and neorealism began to be adopted as the primary methodological approach for Russian involvement in its 'backyard'.⁴⁹

Throughout the 1990's and early 2000's, Russia reasserted itself as the dominant external power in the South Caucasus, thanks to its capability to project both hard and soft power on both the northern and southern sides of the Caucasus mountains. The populations of all three Caucasian republics retain economic, political and social links due to their shared legacy as republics of the Soviet Union and, even earlier, former territories of the Russian Empire.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the region is additionally flanked by two other major powers, Turkey and Iran, and the presence of large, active Russian military bases in Armenia (at the geographic center of the Southern Caucasus) discourages these powers from attempting to gain considerable leverage over the three Caucasian republics. Resource-rich Azerbaijan is important for Russian multinational economic ambitions, and competing economic projects throughout the region, including the construction of several gas and oil pipelines which transport gas through Turkey into Europe, incentivizes Russia to maintain a close presence and relationship with Baku. Russia is additionally incentivized to take an active role in the region to dissuade further western penetration into its 'near-abroad'.⁵¹

To understand the development of Russian policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh region regarding the period leading up to and during the First Karabakh War further, it is important to note that, independent of the organs of the crumbling Soviet bureaucracy, Russia also made early attempts at reconciliation between the two sides. Russian president Boris Yeltsin and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev attempted to establish a treaty to prevent the outbreak of full-scale war in September 1991, when the Soviet Union was still an extant entity (if only on paper). A temporary

⁴⁹ Marzieh Kouhi-Esfahani. *Iran's Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus: Relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia*. London; New York: Routledge, 2020 p. 102.

⁵⁰ Marzieh, 2020, p. 102.

⁵¹ Marzieh, 2020, p.103-104.

break in fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh (partly a result of the shock of the 1991 August Putsch) created conditions which were perceived at the time as conducive to mediation and possible avoidance of full-scale war. The mediating mission took place between September 20-23, when the presidents of Russian SFSR and Kazakhstan SSR traveled to Baku, Yerevan and Stepanakert.⁵²

The mission considered the principles of territorial integrity and the non-interference in a sovereign state's internal affairs, as well as recognition of civil rights as the foundation for forging a peaceful solution to the continuing ethno-political breakdown in the region. Notably, this proved to be successful, if only temporarily. Armenia renounced its claims on Azeri territory on September 22, and on September 23 a joint communique was signed between the parties – namely Boris Yeltsin, Nursultan Nazarbayev, Armenian leader Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Azeri premier Ayaz Mutalibov among others including Robert Sedraki Kocharyan who would later go on to serve as the second President of Armenia. The communique established a set of key guidelines which included a commitment by both Armenia and Azerbaijan to draw down militia activities in the region and disarm any rogue actors, in addition to permitting displaced peoples of both ethnic groups to return to their homes, and the reestablishment of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast with additional representative delegations for negotiated peace.⁵³ Despite the ultimate failure of the Zhelenovodsk communique in preventing the outbreak of total war in Nagorno-Karabakh, it established a groundwork for the launching of negotiations concerning the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict which have continued to the present day.

The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), an intergovernmental, multinational association of former Soviet Republics created in February 1992, provided for a 'collective security umbrella'. Russia's role in the early mediatory efforts of the Commonwealth of Independent States can hardly be overstated. According to Russian ambassador Vladimir Kazimirov, who between 1992 and 1996 served as the head of the Russian mediation mission, the official representative of the Russian Federation on Nagorno-Karabakh, and co-chairman of the OSCE Minsk Group, "More than once it was precisely Russia that had initiated the consideration of that problem by many of the CIS agencies that it chaired. Its striving to use the CIS resources for the purposes of extinguishing the conflict in Karabakh is only natural." While still in the process of formalizing its institutions, the CIS

⁵² Vladimir Kazimirov. *Peace to Karabakh : Russia's Mediation in the Settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*. Moscow, Ves Mir Publishers, 2014, p. 325.

⁵³ *Zheleznovodsk Declaration*, 1991.

leadership was calling for Armenia and Azerbaijan to jumpstart negotiations once again. A resolution on Nagorno-Karabakh which expressed the intention to send in third-party observers and peacekeeping forces upon request by both states after the signing of a ceasefire agreement was signed in Kiev on March 20, 1992. The Kiev resolution received some reservations from Baku, whose envoy requested that the agreement only take effect ‘after ratification by parliament’.⁵⁴

Additionally, the new CIS was careful to keep the United Nations, the CSCE (later OSCE) and other various international entities and countries duly informed of every decision adopted under the process, should the latter collectively agree to participate and organize cooperation with the process. In contrast with the later approach of the western powers, the CIS settlement lacked the exclusivity of an implied or claimed monopoly in settling the conflict. Following the accession of in September 1993 of Azerbaijan to the CIS and the Collective Security Treaty (a precursor to the Collective Security Treaty Organization or CSTO), the CIS member states adopted a resolution in the Turkmen capital of Ashgabat in December 1993 calling for an end to the war without delay, the signing of an agreement for the end of military activity in the region and announced their preparation to operate as backers of its enactment in accordance with the mechanisms of the CIS Collective Security Council, in addition to appealing to the CSCE and the United Nations for diplomatic and political aid.⁵⁵

Russian mediation and the forums of the Council of the CIS Heads of State were instrumental in the establishment of contacts between the Azeri and Armenian leaders, including representatives of the Karabakh Armenian faction. Azeri acting president Heydar Aliyev (father to current Azeri president Illya Aliyev) and Armenian president Levon-Ter Petrosyan were able to hold high level, private meetings in Moscow under Russian mediation, setting a precedent of Moscow-based dialogues which continued long after the 1994 ceasefire. During the 26-year interwar period of Karabakh, these meetings served to reduce flare ups in regional tensions and provide a launchpad for possible compromises. The timing of meetings post-1994 typically paralleled the schedule of Council of the CIS Heads of State sessions, at times with the participation of the Russian head of state. Armenia and Azerbaijan held another round of meetings in Moscow in 1999 starting on April 1st which continued

⁵⁴ Kazimirov, 2014, p. 325.

⁵⁵ Kazimirov, 2014, p. 176.

sporadically in various phases through January 2000, shortly after Vladimir Putin succeeded Boris Yeltsin as president of the Russian Federation.⁵⁶

It is worth noting that the establishment of the CSCE/OSCE Minsk Group was inexorably tied to the negotiation and peacemaking activities of the CIS during this period. Concurrently with CIS efforts to build the institutions necessary to pursue viable negotiations between the parties, the basis of peacemaking efforts were being developed within the framework of a pan-European organization. The first CSCE meeting in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was held in Helsinki by the Council of CSCE Ministers on March 24, 1992, where a resolution was passed to convene a conference on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue in Minsk, the Belarusian capital and the location of the Headquarters and Secretariat of the Commonwealth of Independent States, with the participation of interested parties and eleven states. The contradictory positions of the direct parties of the conflict made the prospects of a conference even happening appear unlikely. Therefore, it was considered prudent to hold ‘preparatory meetings’ for the conflict’s participants in Rome between the 1st and 5th of June. A series of additional meetings followed which served as the unofficial birth of the OSCE Minsk Group.⁵⁷

On March 9, 1994, a protocol resolution was adopted by the Council of the CIS heads of State which restated the organization’s support for ongoing mediatory efforts by CIS member states and the Russian Federation’s peacemaking activities. The document provided a formula which strengthened the determination to send observers and separation forces in the region, which asserted that the main priority and imperative of establishing a peaceful settlement is an immediate ceasefire. The United Nations and the CSCE were both appealed to by the CIS Heads of State Council to provide the mediatory mission of Russia with assistance. In July 1994, after the Bishkek protocols were signed, a second Commonwealth forum, the Council of Ministers for Foreign Affairs requested an appeal to bring about the ceasefire fixing and an agreement to be signed for an ultimate peace deal to the conflict be sent to the Minsk Group member states in addition to prominent members of the CSCE. The Council put forward the idea of a Troika tasked with facilitating the final implementation of a peace agreement, whose membership would consist of Russia, the CSCE Minsk Group, and the Commonwealth of Independent States.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Kazimirov, 2014, pp. 325-329.

⁵⁷ Kazimirov, 2014, pp. 48-50.

⁵⁸ Kazimirov, 2014, pp. 329-340.

During an April 1994 meeting of the Council of the CIS Heads of State in Moscow, a statement was declared wherein the Council praised the efforts of both the CIS heads of states and the peacemaking efforts of Russia, while also reiterating the need to secure a compromise solution according to the formula outlined during the March 1994 protocol resolution. The comprehensive communication networks established between contacts of the parliaments of CIS countries aided in the streamlining of peace talks and ceasefire negotiations. In May 1994, following several rounds of meetings by parliamentary delegations of the warring parties with the leadership of the CIS Inter-Parliamentary Assembly in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, the primary goal of the formula was achieved. The Bishkek symposium included a delegation from the Aland Islands at the invitation of Medetkan Sherimkulov. Contrasting with the Mariehamn summit, which served more as an advisory event to train the warring parties in peaceful inter-ethnic conflict settlement, the Bishkek meeting was set with the intention of formulating a document which would end the hostilities in Karabakh entirely. The dates of May 8-9, 1994, for the signing of the protocols were intended as a nod to the anniversary of the former Soviet Union's victory in the Second World War.⁵⁹

Two difficult days of negotiations ensued before the representatives of Armenia and Artsakh agreed to sign the document. Azeri representative Affiyadin Dzhililov declined signing the document due to a lack of powers to do so without consultation of Heydar Aliyev, the Azeri head of state, prior to his trip to Brussels for a NATO summit.⁶⁰ On May 16, Vladimir Shumeiko and Medetkan Shrimkulov, the Chairman of the Council of the CIS Interparliamentary Assembly and the leader of the Assembly's Nagorno-Karabakh peacemaking group respectively, made an appeal to the CIS member state parliaments built upon the progress made in Bishkek, which declared that a preferable approach to peacekeeping forces required either a United Nations mandate or the establishment of multilateral forces under the rules of the CIS.⁶¹ Another meeting between representatives of Azerbaijan and Armenia took place in Saint Petersburg on June 8 under the auspices of the Council of the CIS Interparliamentary Assembly, in the presence of the Russian president's plenipotentiary envoy.⁶²

⁵⁹ Kazimirov, 2014, p. 332.

⁶⁰ Kazimirov, 2014, p. 205.

⁶¹ Kazimirov, 2014, p. 333.

⁶² Kazimirov, 2014, p. 334.

The first anniversary of the Bishkek Protocol (May 3-7 1995) was marked by the visit to the Karabakh region of a peacemaking group lead by Vadim Gustov, the Chairman of Russia's Federation Council Committee for CIS Affairs alongside representatives of Moldovan and Belarusian Parliaments and the Russian State Duma. The delegation brought with them 40 tons of Russian humanitarian provisions, primarily medical and addressed matters related to the exchange and treatment of prisoners-of-war with representatives of the conflicting factions. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the CIS Interparliamentary Assembly again met with Azeri and Armenian delegations in Vienna in June 1995 in coordination with the Minsk Group Chairman Jan Eliasson on the grounds of the Swedish Embassy in Austria.⁶³ The head of the Russian Mediator Mission traveled to Baku on May 8 for negotiations with Aliyev, and successfully persuaded the Azeri leader to consent to Azeri representative Milli Guliev's signature of the Bishkek Protocols. Thus, under the auspices of Russia in cooperation with the organs of the CIS, a ceasefire was finally enacted, and continued to hold for twenty-six years with few disruptions until the outbreak of war once again in 2020. The sheer duration of the ceasefire alone was a credit to the capabilities of Russia and the CIS to successfully establish an extended pause in hostilities independent of western involvement.⁶⁴

Tensions between Russian and CIS peacemaking negotiators on one side and Western negotiators were present early in the conflict. Russia's active participation in the mediatory mission of Nagorno-Karabakh and other regions of its 'near abroad' as the conflict progressed led the western powers to engage Russia throughout the proceedings.⁶⁵ Further, the OSCE Minsk Group at times aimed to restrict Russian cooperation with the CIS, despite Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia all being members of the Commonwealth, and the matters in Nagorno-Karabakh affecting interests of the Commonwealth member states as individuals and the interests of the Commonwealth as a whole. Summit appeals by the Commonwealth of Independent States were left unanswered by the OSCE Minsk Group. In the words of Vladimir Kazimirov, head of the Russian mediatory mission to Karabakh during the First Karabakh War, "Just imagine what a surprise, what an uproar even would have arisen should the West have tried to exclude the Organization of American States or the Organization of African Unity in matters concerning settlement of any armed confrontation in Latin

⁶³ "OSCE Talks on Nagorno Karabakh Considered." 21 June 1995, www.osce.org/node/52558 .

⁶⁴ Kazimirov, 2014, pp. 333-334.

⁶⁵ De Waal, 2013, p. 254.

America or Africa.”⁶⁶ Kazimirov additionally charges in his memoirs of his time involved in the mediation processes leading up to the 1994 Bishkek protocols that the western membership of the Minsk Group either delayed or ignored several proposals by Russia during OSCE meetings, including the acknowledgement of the tripartite nature of the conflict, the necessity of the separation of forces, and the need for a legally binding document to be signed by all participating parties rather than a schedule of events.⁶⁷

1.3. Russian-Led Interwar Negotiations and the Return of Full-Scale Violence

Following the OSCE Budapest Summit in December 1994, establishing the co-chairmanship for Russia’s preeminence in carrying out negotiations in accordance with the Minsk process framework, the western delegates attempted to change several rulings in the draft agreement regarding the CIS’ role that had previously been settled. Various members of the Minsk Group’s western participants were opposed to any formal participation of the CIS as an incorporated entity, rather preferring to use the term ‘CIS member states’. The removal of provisions regarding the CIS’ role was prevented thanks to Russian intervention, and the Russian delegation managed to persuade the western states to agree to the agreement using the term ‘Consolidated Plan of the OSCE, the CIS and the Russian Federation’ to refer to itself. Despite Russia’s grievances, the western delegates too have likewise accused Russian and CIS delegates as behaving unnecessarily obtuse, having made meeting arrangements with delegates from Armenia and Azerbaijan in Moscow without informing them.⁶⁸ Even after the Bishkek protocols were signed in 1994 Russia continued to oppose western efforts to sideline the participation of the CIS in international bodies aimed at creating a viable solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, even Finland, who had succeeded Sweden’s seat in the OSCE Minsk group on April 21, 1995, suggested a compromise in which CIS observers would attend negotiations upon the invitation of Russia.

Negotiations between the Armenia and Azerbaijan with Russia or the OSCE Minsk Process operating as mediators or negotiations platforms continued into the twenty-first century. After three

⁶⁶ Kazimirov, 2014, p. 337.

⁶⁷ Kazimirov, 2014, pp. 336-338.

⁶⁸ De Waal, 2013, p. 254.

failed proposals which were denied by either Armenia or Azerbaijan for reasons relating to the withdrawal of occupying troops or Azerbaijan's rigid insistence on its territorial integrity, the Minsk Group instead refocused its efforts towards conducting one-on-one meetings between representatives of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Delegates from Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the three Minsk co-chairs congregated in Paris on January 26, 2001 and later on March 4-5 that same year, followed by a meeting in Key West, Florida in April.⁶⁹ No progress was made during these negotiations. Three years later, in 2004, the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan met in Prague, but the sensitivity of the issues being discussed resulted in neither side being willing to offer the slightest bit of compromise. Again, no progress was made. The lack of elections in either Armenia or Azerbaijan in 2006 led many to assume that 2006 would prove to be a turning point in negotiations, but again, the OSCE Minsk Group made little to no headway in finding a viable proposal to bring the two sides to compromise in any form.

The closest the interwar negotiations came to progress was the creation of the Madrid Principles in November 2007 during the OSCE ministerial conference. The proposals, which were based on an updated version of a peace settlement proposed in early 2006, outlined a scenario aimed at building confidence and ensuring stability for the two sides, where the Armenian-occupied regions surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh would be transferred back to Azeri governance, while Nagorno-Karabakh would be provided an interim autonomous status with security and internal governance guarantees. Additionally, a protected corridor would be provided for transport between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia proper, followed by a legally binding referendum which would determine the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh.⁷⁰ A peacekeeping operation would be established to ensure a smooth transition, as well as investigative mechanisms to monitor ceasefire violations along the lines of contact. All peoples internally displaced as a result of the fighting would be permitted to safely return to their original places of residence in the region.⁷¹ Both Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed that the proposals contained enough appeal to return to the negotiating table, but the awaited progress never materialized. Still, attempts at carrying out negotiations to decide the future of Nagorno-Karabakh continued. Notably, a summit of the OSCE Minsk Group was held in Bern, Switzerland in

⁶⁹ United States Department of State. "Key West Peace Talks on Nagorno-Karabakh." 2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2001/1243.htm.

⁷⁰ Coyle, 2020, pp. 144-145.

⁷¹ *OSCE Minsk Group, Madrid Document*. November, 2007.

December 2015, which received the attendance of the presidents of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, but once again little true progress was made.⁷²

Nearly seven thousand ceasefire violations were recorded between the two parties between 1994 and 2016, but the severity of these ceasefires were relatively mild compared to the events which unfolded in the region on April 2-6 2016.⁷³ On 2 April, Azerbaijan commenced a military offensive on Armenian-occupied regions of Karabakh along the lines of contact from the southeast and northeast. The Armenian frontlines were broken at several points, during which the Azeri military was able to regain control of numerous highland locations, including Lalatapa hill and areas near the villages Talysh and Seysulan.⁷⁴ Civilian villages and towns were shelled, and the Azeri military threatened to bomb Stepanakert, the capital of the breakaway Republic of Artsakh. The unusual severity of the clashes compared to previous ceasefire violations resulted in the enlistment of Armenian reservists in Stepanakert. After four days of fighting, which included the use of heavy artillery, armored vehicles, tanks, high-caliber grenade launchers, mortars and, in a new development, Israeli-sourced aerial drones, on April 5 both sides suddenly ceased their aggression and a ceasefire was declared on April 6, following meetings between the chiefs of staff of the warring factions which took place in Moscow.

After the 2016 clashes, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, a Russian of Armenian descent himself, offered a proposal to the disputing states comprised of two sections, which would ensure Nagorno-Karabakh would possess a unique status in exchange for five of the Armenian-occupied regions, while Armenia would retain control over the districts of Lachin – linking Armenia with the Republic of Artsakh – and Karavajar, provided a referendum be carried out in order to determine a final status for Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia's rejection of this plan signaled Armenia's confidence in its long-term capability to maintain control over Karabakh – an overconfidence that may have led to its devastating loss four years later.⁷⁵

The immediacy of the ceasefire may have been a result of fears that the skirmishes could intensify into a full proxy war between Russia and Turkey, who were in the middle of a diplomatic dispute at the time due to the shooting down of a Russian jet over Syria in November 2015. The

⁷² Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 119.

⁷³ Armenpress “Opponent Fired More than 7,000 Shots with Rifles of Different Diameters“, 2 May 2015, armenpress.am/eng/news/804069.

⁷⁴ OSW Centre for Eastern Studies. “The Four-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh.”

Centre for Eastern Studies, 6 Apr. 2016, www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-04-06/four-day-war-nagorno-karabakh.

⁷⁵ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 162.

Turkish Prime Minister was vocal in expressing Turkey's support for Azerbaijan, stating "Let the whole world know that Turkey will be shoulder to shoulder with Azerbaijan until the end of time [...] We will continue supporting Azerbaijan on all issues, including Nagorno-Karabakh, until all its lands are liberated." Unlike the First Karabakh War, the 2016 clashes did not involve mass displacement of civilians from either side. Azerbaijan asserted that the offensive was carried out in response to Armenia violating the 1994 ceasefire by shelling civilian locations in Azerbaijan, a charge which the Armenian government denied.

Blame for the outbreak of violence could be seen as a combination of Azeri desires to distract its domestic population from a slump in oil prices, in addition to the sluggish progress of negotiations by the OSCE Minsk Group, of which Azeri President Ilham Aliyev had become increasingly critical in the days leading up to the outbreak of violence, stating during a speech commemorating the Novruz holiday on 19 March, 2016: "The co-chairs of the Minsk Group have received a mandate to engage directly in this issue, but are serving the freezing of the conflict by their destructive activities [...] Instead of putting pressure on Armenia, they patronize the Armenians and protect them."⁷⁶ Additionally, the Azeri operation may have been a test of Armenian resolve and preparedness.

The successful ceasefire negotiations under Russian auspices which ended the April 2016 clashes further entrenched Russia's position as the preeminent negotiator in the conflict, increasing perceptions of OSCE Minsk Group irrelevancy. Indeed, the OSCE Minsk Group neglected to issue to the extent that it did not hold a meeting on the outbreak of violence until four days after the fighting had started. However, the lack of any provisions for the establishment peacekeeping forces in the hastily-produced 2016 ceasefire left the region vulnerable to a revival in all-out war. Despite the increased tension in the region, the leaders of both Azerbaijan and Armenia agreed on a joint effort to lessen the frequency of ceasefire violations along the line of contact – an effort which proved fruitful, as the average number of daily ceasefire breaches fell from 35 to 20, a rate which held until relations again worsened in July 2020 and a series of clashes broke out along the northeastern line of contact on 12-16 July resulting in the deaths of five Armenian and sixteen Azeri soldiers, and two high-ranking Azeri officers.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Aliyev, Ilham. "Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Nationwide Festivities on the Occasion of Novruz Holiday» Official Website of President of Azerbaijan Republic." *President.az*, 19 Mar. 2016, president.az/en/articles/view/19436 .

⁷⁷ Gorecki, Wojciech. "Nagorno-Karabakh: What Is Russia up To?" *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, 13 Apr. 2016, www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-04-13/nagorno-karabakh-what-russia-to.

1.4. The Second Karabakh War, Causes and Aftermath

Four years following the 2016 ceasefire, the specter of war once again hung over Karabakh. In July 2020, there was an outbreak of violence along the international borders of Armenia and Azerbaijan which lasted several days and resulted in the deaths of eighteen people, a civilian among them. This new spate of violence, which ended the unofficial truce in place since 2017, foreshadowed events which were to come mere months later.⁷⁸ Along the contact lines in the morning of September 27 2020, the Azeri military launched an offensive against Armenian-occupied territories of Karabakh which included the use of aerial drones and loitering munitions. Simultaneously, a secondary front was launched in the digital sphere, which saw the widespread use of social media for state propaganda. Throughout the entirety of the war, the Azerbaijan Ministry of Defense uploaded numerous videos on YouTube displaying their technological capabilities on the battlefield, including combat footage recorded from newly-acquired drones. On the streets of Baku, the same footage was displayed on jumbotron screens, serving as potent propaganda intended to rally the support of the public for the war effort and the Aliyev government.⁷⁹

The United Nations quickly organized a statement calling for the immediate end of hostilities to little effect.⁸⁰ In the ensuing weeks Azerbaijan, with the aid of Turkish training and logistical support, made gain after gain. Azerbaijan's initial move was to reconquer the Armenian-occupied Jabrail and Fuzuli territories south of Nagorno-Karabakh before turning northward to surround the western border of the de-facto Artsakh Republic, endangering the Karabakh Armenians' access to the critical Lachin Corridor, which connects Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia proper. Azerbaijan, armed with several categories of Israeli and Turkish unarmed drones, quickly overpowered the Armenians, who were mostly equipped with Russian and Soviet-era munitions. By October 22 Azerbaijan had managed to gain full control of the regions to the south of Nagorno-Karabakh and was rapidly

⁷⁸ Stronski, Paul, and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "Behind the Flare-up along Armenia-Azerbaijan Border." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 22 July 2020, carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/22/behind-flare-up-along-armenia-azerbaijan-border-pub-82345.

⁷⁹ "The Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflict Hints at the Future of War." *The Economist*, 8 Oct. 2020, www.economist.com/europe/2020/10/08/the-azerbaijan-armenia-conflict-hints-at-the-future-of-war.

⁸⁰ France24. "UN Security Council Calls for Immediate End to Fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh." *France 24*, 30 Sept. 2020, www.france24.com/en/20200930-un-security-council-calls-for-immediate-end-to-fighting-in-nagorno-karabakh.

approaching the Lachin Corridor.⁸¹ Regaining the highland regions was more difficult for the Azeris, who did not have the geographical ease of the lowland Karabakh plains at their disposal. Nevertheless, the Azeris were able to get close enough to Stepanakert to begin shelling the Artsakh capital city.

With the aid of Turkish-made KARGU loitering munitions, Azerbaijan was able to retake Shusha, a city of immense historical importance to both Azeris and Armenians, located a mere fifteen kilometers away from Stepanakert.⁸² After Shusha's capture, a Russian-brokered ceasefire was signed by the parties on 09 November 2020, 44 days after the start of the conflict, which froze the conflicting parties once again along the lines of contact on the day of the ceasefire's signing.⁸³ Had the ceasefire not been signed, it is entirely possible Azerbaijan would have captured the whole of Karabakh. The result was an overwhelming military victory for Azerbaijan and a crushing defeat for Armenia and the breakaway Republic of Artsakh.⁸⁴ Azerbaijan had successfully regained control of 286 villages, four towns, five cities, and secured the entirety of its border with Iran. One hundred thousand Armenians were displaced from the region, in addition to the temporary displacement of forty thousand Azeris. Casualties numbered in the hundreds.

Under the terms of the 2020 ceasefire agreement, a Russian peacekeeping force was introduced into the region to prevent future ceasefire violations. Numerically, the ceasefire agreement provided for a maximum of 1,960 personnel armed with small arms, 380 trucks and other vehicles, in addition to 90 supportive armored personnel carriers. Deployment of the peacekeeping contingent had already begun by 21 November 2020, according to Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu.⁸⁵ The provisions of the ceasefire stipulated that Russian peacekeeping forces would remain in the area for five years, until 2025, and the five year time limit would be extended a further five years if either Armenia or Azerbaijan do not request a withdrawal of Russian peacekeeping forces within six months of the deadline. As of March 2021, the only regulations agreed upon by Azerbaijan and Armenia on

⁸¹ Giragosian, Richard. "Azerbaijan's next Move Will Make or Break Karabakh War." *Asia Times*, 26 Oct. 2020, asiatimes.com/2020/10/azerbaijans-next-move-will-make-or-break-karabakh-war/.

⁸² Yermakov, Alexander. "Analytics." *Valdai Club*, 4 Dec. 2020, valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/unmanned-aerial-vehicles-over-nagorno-karabakh/?sphrase_id=1515279.

⁸³ International Crisis Group. "Improving Prospects for Peace after the Nagorno-Karabakh War." *JSTOR*, International Crisis Group, 22 Dec. 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep31561?searchText=&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dnagorno-karabakh%2B2020&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv%2Fcontrol&searchKey=&refreqid=fastly-default%3A222f2a262c50da27133560d995fe1eaa&seq=3 p.3.

⁸⁴ International Crisis Group, 2020, pp. 3-4.

⁸⁵ Racz, 2021, p. 6.

the role of Russia's peacekeeping operations in the region are a set of sparse paragraphs in the text contained in the ceasefire agreement, concluding with a statement on the redeployment of Russian peacekeeping forces after the construction of a new route in the Lachin Corridor to connect Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh, the plan of which is to be finalized within three years of the ceasefire's signing.⁸⁶

The 2020 Ceasefire was a diplomatic victory for Russia and a loss of face for the west, exposing the latter's weakness. However, Russia's lack of full intervention early in the conflict may have signaled a desire to avoid alienating Azerbaijan by denying them potentially huge gains, encouraging the perception that Russia operates in the region primarily on behalf of the Armenians. Despite this, it utilized its considerable leverage over Azerbaijan to prevent it from conquering Karabakh entirely. The speed at which Azeri forces were successfully moving through Karabakh and Russia's hesitation at intervening meant that by the time of the ceasefire, Azerbaijan had not only regained the seven Armenian-occupied districts but also some 30% of territory within the de-facto Republic of Artsakh itself, displacing tens of thousands of ethnic Armenians and a severe loss of confidence among Armenians in Russia's role as a guarantor of their security. Azerbaijan simply had more to offer the Russian state economically than landlocked and poorer Armenia, which had its economic potential stifled by the 1993 closure of its borders with Turkey and a persistent brain drain of skilled labor from the country to Russia, Western Europe and the United States since its independence from the Soviet Union.

During negotiations for the ceasefire, the Armenians attempted to at least guarantee some measure of autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh, but Aliyev decided against making any such commitment. Russian President Vladimir Putin, though sympathetic to the Armenian cause like Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, understood the determination of the Azeri leadership and prior to the outbreak of the war in September 2020, provided Armenia with Iskandar missiles for defense. Nevertheless, Armenia's catastrophic defeat resulted in a loss of trust in the role of Russia as protector of the Armenians, even if Russia itself may not have fully viewed its role in the region as such to begin with. Calls were made among the Armenian diaspora and even among domestic figures for the

⁸⁶ Commonsplace.eu. "Document: Full Text of the Agreement between the Leaders of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan." *Commonspace.eu*, 10 Nov. 2020, www.commonspace.eu/news/document-full-text-agreement-between-leaders-russia-armenia-and-azerbaijan.

country to turn away entirely from Russia. This, however, cannot take place when Armenia is surrounded by hostile neighbors and lacks the capability to fully provide its own security.

Additionally, the small remaining unconquered territory of the de-facto Artsakh Republic, constituting about 70% of the Artsakh Republic's territory prior to the war, has been left entirely dependent on the Russian peacekeeping forces for their security, including safe passage along the Lachin corridor connecting with Armenia proper. Armenian military forces were required to leave Karabakh entirely as per the 2020 ceasefire agreement. Azerbaijan would surely manage to secure the remaining region otherwise, given the pace of success it had made during the 2020 conflict. A further complication of the ceasefire for both sides is its lack of provisions for a future political settlement, once again leaving the region in a 'frozen' state. It has provided an opportunity for Russia to make its presence in Nagorno-Karabakh permanent in practice and further cement its power in the region. Indeed, despite the provisions outlined in the ceasefire calling for a maximum limit of scale for peacekeeping forces, there have been reports that the number of forces and materiel on the ground in fact far exceeds that limit. The ceasefire agreement allows for a maximum of 1,960 personnel with small arms, while Azeri monitors have indicated that at least 5,000 Russian personnel are present, including military police units, demining specialists, employees of the Prosecutor General's office in addition to representatives of the Ministry of Emergency Situations. Though the agreement stipulates that Russian peacekeeping forces carry only small arms, they were deployed armed with BTR-80 and 82 armored personnel carriers, their turrets mounted with 14.5-millimeter machine guns and 30-millimeter automatic cannons.⁸⁷

From the Azeri perspective, the eventual outbreak of a second war in the Karabakh region was bound to take place. The national humiliation Azerbaijan experienced in the aftermath of the First Karabakh War had weighed heavily on the national consciousness for a quarter of a century. The country had been using the income gained from its lucrative oil and gas deposits to re-arm itself in the years leading up to the 2020 conflict. Aliyev, aware of the importance of retaining a positive relationship with Russia, however aimed to avoid furthering Russian goals for the region. His decision was informed by the 2008 conflict in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the skirmishes of 2016. His growing skepticism of the OSCE Minsk Group's capability of establishing a concrete negotiated settlement additionally influenced his paradigm that a diplomatic resolution to the conflict

⁸⁷ Racz, 2021, p. 6.

was a near-impossibility. UN Resolution 10,693 (March 14, 2008) which called for the total withdrawal of Armenian forces from the Karabakh region and reaffirmed Azerbaijan's right to territorial integrity, received opposition from the Western powers. Aliyev had called for sanctions to be imposed upon Armenia much like those leveraged against Russia in the aftermath of the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia. Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 resulted in little political and economic fallout for Russia, signaling that western security could not be guaranteed for states in the Russian 'near abroad'. Separatism had become a method for Russia to keep considerable leverage in the South Caucasus. Despite these considerations, Aliyev did not seek to entirely alienate Russia, but rather sought to maintain ties between the two countries on cordial – if cautious – terms.

The capture of Shusha proved to be a significant symbolic victory to the Azeris, who had lost the city during the First Karabakh War the day after the Tehran Communique was signed. According to Nagorno-Karabakh scholar Thomas de Waal, a de-facto status quo of Armenian occupation and control over the seven surrounding districts of Nagorno-Karabakh was preferred by Minsk Group 'Troika' of Russia, the United States, and France. This state-of-affairs had managed, with some exceptions, to keep the region tentatively peaceful for over two decades, which cultivated an assumption on the part of both the Armenians and the Minsk Group participatory states of Armenian military superiority. On the other hand, some Armenian scholars have attempted to explain the return of war to the region as being the result of Russian permissiveness over its warming relationship with Turkey operating in tandem with Turkey pressuring Azerbaijan to act.

These proposed reasons for the outbreak of war, however, neglect the agency of Azerbaijan in choosing to launch an offensive on Armenian-controlled regions, and avoids the responsibility of Armenia for failing to adequately maintain its control over the occupied territories. The confrontational rhetoric of Nikol Pashinyan following his rise to power as leader of the 2018 Armenian revolution, coupled with his visit to Stepanakert the day after his election by the Armenian parliament to commemorate capture of Shusha during the First Karabakh War deeply incensed the Azeri population, and despite holding a cordial meeting with President Aliyev during a September 2018 CIS summit in Dushanbe, the Tajik capital, which led to an agreement to de-escalate tensions along the lines of contact in Karabakh and the Azeri-Armenian state borders, the Armenian Prime Minister publicly expressed his desire for unification of Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. During a speech in the breakaway Republic of Artsakh's capital on 5 August 2019, Prime Minister Pashinyan stated "Artsakh is Armenia, the end," to great applause from the gathered crowd. Mere months before the

outbreak of armed conflict in the region once again, Pashinyan had announced that Shusha would be made the new capital of the breakaway Republic of Artsakh. The Artsakh parliament was relocated to Shusha in August 2020, further escalating tensions in the region.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic at the time additionally served as a fortuitous event for Azerbaijan's ambitions to retrieve what it had lost in 1992-1994. Uncertainty over the severity of the pandemic, domestic concerns, establishment of lockdowns, debates over how to prevent further spread of the coronavirus and challenges in coordinating the international response kept virtually all major powers in the region and further afield preoccupied and limited the chances of international intervention in Karabakh if Azerbaijan launched a full offensive. Russia was also preoccupied with lingering economic challenges due to western sanctions introduced after the referendum and annexation of Crimea in 2014, coupled with the ongoing conflicts in Luhansk in Donbass and declining oil and gas prices.⁸⁸

The OSCE Minsk Group had proven itself to be impotent and incapable of overcoming internal partisanship among its co-chairs Russia, France and the United States.⁸⁹ The negotiations process was hampered by Armenia's adamant that they maintain the occupation of the seven surrounding districts of Nagorno-Karabakh. Shifting geopolitical positions were not considered by the Armenian government, which had grown presumptuous of having the tacit support of the Western powers and Russia thanks in part to its considerable soft power via the large Armenian diaspora.⁹⁰ It had failed to maintain the means necessary to retain its hold over the occupied districts and withstand any attempts by Azerbaijan to regain those territories. Armenia had assumed that the Russian military was still the strongest force in the Southern Caucasus, and its membership in the CSTO, coupled with the presence of large Russian military bases in the country, most particularly in Gyumri, heightened the Armenians' sense of security and confidence.⁹¹ The Armenian military remained reliant on aging Soviet-era weaponry, some provided secondhand by Russia. While Armenia was content to rely on Russia as a security benefactor, Azerbaijan was in the process of rearming itself. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), which records global arms industry spending, has reported that Azerbaijan, bolstered by income from its lucrative oil industry, had spent over 24 billion USD between

⁸⁸ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 158.

⁸⁹ Babayan, 2014, p. 53.

⁹⁰ Babayan, 2014, p. 55.

⁹¹ Babayan, 2014, p. 65.

2008 and 2018 on military purchases. By comparison, Armenia had spent a mere 4 billion USD during the same interval. Armenia, sandwiched between hostile neighbors Azerbaijan and Turkey, had little other option than to rely on its historic benefactor, Russia, for support. According to Pashinyan, there were few other options available for Armenia.⁹²

Reasons for Turkish support of Azerbaijan in the lead up to the Second Karabakh War include an opportunity for Turkey to expand its sphere of influence with minimal risk, pan-Turkic vision of Azeris as ethnic kin suffering under the influence of a culturally foreign power, support for Azerbaijan's right to territorial integrity, a view of Armenia abusing its historical victimhood for western support and operating as a pawn for Russian imperial goals, in addition to broader economic goals of Turkey to link itself to the Turkic states of states of Central Asia across the Caspian Sea.⁹³ It is very likely that President Erdogan seeks to steer the ongoing events in Nagorno-Karabakh in such a way that Turkish military and political power in the region is expanded at minimal cost. Turkey and Azerbaijan had already signed an "Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Cooperation" in 2010, which provides a framework for the country's relationship in the spheres of military and economic matters. Article 2 of the agreement contains an understanding that either Turkey or Azerbaijan would come to the support of the other in the event of a threat to their security.⁹⁴ During a speech at the opening of the fourth legislative session of the Turkish parliament in Ankara, President Erdogan noted the closeness of Turkish-Azeri relations, stating "As Turkey, we will continue to support our Azerbaijani brothers with all means with all our hearts in line with the principle of 'two states, one nation' [...] Efforts to slander Turkey also won't be able to save the Armenian administration."⁹⁵

According to John Mearsheimer's neorealist paradigm, "Power imbalances can lead to conflict in two ways. First, two states can gang up to attack a third state. Second, a major power might simply bully a weaker power in a one-on-one encounter, using its superior strength to coerce or defeat a minor

⁹² Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, pp. 161-162.

⁹³ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 165.

⁹⁴ Abbasov, Shahin . "Azerbaijan-Turkey Military Pact Signals Impatience with Minsk Talks -- Analysts | Eurasianet." *Eurasianet.org*, 18 Jan. 2011, eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-turkey-military-pact-signals-impatience-with-minsk-talks-analysts.

⁹⁵ "President Erdoğan: "We Will Continue to Extend Support with All Our Facilities and Hearts to Our Azerbaijani Brothers and Sisters."" *Wt.iletisim.gov.tr*, President of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 10 Jan. 2020, www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-we-will-continue-to-extend-support-with-all-our-facilities-and-hearts-to-our-azerbaijani-brothers-and-sisters.

state.”⁹⁶ Months before war broke out once again on September 27, Turkey had been supplying Azerbaijan with large volumes of military equipment, training and logistical support – a not entirely subtle sign that Azerbaijan had plans to soon challenge the continued Armenian dominance of Karabakh. Joint military exercises between Azerbaijan and Turkey were carried out between July 29th - August 10th, 2020, in addition to a series of bilateral meetings between July 16th and August 13th. As the Second Karabakh War was being waged, numerous reports were published reporting the presence of over one thousand mobilized Turkish-trained Syrian National Army forces being deployed to aid the Azeris.⁹⁷

Turkish President Erdogan has spoken at length about his support for Azeris as Turkic brethren, reviving the rhetoric of the ‘one-country, two states’ paradigm common in Turkish and Azeri political discourse during the late 1990’s. This stands in marked contrast to his predecessor, Turgut Ozal, during the First Karabakh War, in which he dismissed the Azeri-Turkish relationship, stating “Azerbaijanis are closer to Iranian culture and they are Shia, we are Sunni.”⁹⁸ The Turkish head of state has stated on several occasions that Armenian activities in Karabakh as an illegal occupation of sovereign Azeri land, which had been carried out with the backing of predominantly ‘Christian’ nations like Russia and those of the west (The United States and France, also co-chairs in the OSCE Minsk Group alongside Russia) in opposition to Muslim peoples, indicating a point of view that the conflict can be understood in terms of a clash of civilizations. His vocal support for the Azeri cause corresponds with public sentiment in both Turkey and Azerbaijan, possibly representing a measure of regret on the part of Turkey for its lack of support for its Turkic brethren during the first Karabakh war. The overwhelming military victory of Azerbaijan during the 2020 war with Turkish aid has made Ankara a new major factor in Karabakh developments moving forward, challenging Russia’s position as the primary great power involved in the conflict’s development and potential resolution.

The signing of the Shushi Declaration in June 2021 further increases the level of coordination between Ankara and Baku in matters of military, security and diplomacy.⁹⁹ For Russia, this could be

⁹⁶ Mearsheimer, John J. *Back to the Future : Instability in Europe after the Cold War*. 1st ed., vol. 15, International Security, June 1990.

⁹⁷ Liechtenstein, Stephanie. “With Multilateral Efforts Bypassed in Nagorno-Karabakh, OSCE Struggles to Find Role.” *IPI Global Observatory*, 3 Dec. 2020, theglobalobservatory.org/2020/12/multilateral-efforts-bypassed-nagorno-karabakh-osce-struggles-find-role/.

⁹⁸ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 165.

⁹⁹ Permanent Representation of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Council of Europe. “Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey.” *Coe.mfa.gov.az*, 21 June 2021,

cause for concern regarding its security interests in the South Caucasus. Turkey is a member of NATO, which Moscow views as a fundamental threat to Russian national security. The loss of another post-Soviet state to even indirect NATO influence may incentivize Russia to pursue more active measures in maintaining its role as the dominant broker in Karabakh. Russia's actions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2022-2023 are an indication of the lengths Moscow will go if it perceives a fundamental threat to its vital interests has taken root. The scale of Russian military presence introduced under the pretense of peacekeeping in accordance with the November 2020 ceasefire declaration indicates that Russia has taken the possible implications of greater Azeri-Turkish military cooperation very seriously. This, however, has not prevented Russia and Turkey from seeking to cooperation when their interests intersect, and when Turkey seeks to split with the western alliance if it perceives better opportunities elsewhere.

The South Caucasus therefore can no longer be strictly considered the 'Russian backyard'. Rather, it is the backyard of both Russia and Turkey, establishing a quasi-bipolarity into the regional power dynamic. Russia's strategic position in the South Caucasus is further threatened by the inauguration of the Trans-Adriatic-Pipeline, which is connected to the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline crossing through Turkey and into Azerbaijan, bypassing Russia and reducing European dependence on Russian gas reserves.¹⁰⁰ Russia's sizable military presence in Karabakh, however, are enough to secure Russia's lasting influence in Azerbaijan for the time being. Turkey and Russia therefore have collaborated where their interests intersect, namely the monitoring of violations of the ceasefire in Karabakh via the 'Turkish-Russian Monitoring Center for the Nagorno-Karabakh Ceasefire', established in 2021 and various policies aimed at investing in and connecting infrastructure in Azerbaijan with both states via the International North South Transport Corridor multinational economic project.

Armenia's loss in the 44-day Karabakh war was devastating, both to Armenia proper and the ethnic Armenian population of Karabakh. The state of confidence established in Armenia proper, further bolstered by the political dominance of the 'Karabakh clan' of Karabakh-originated bureaucrats was irreparably broken, and a loss of faith in the Armenian state has contributed to the

coe.mfa.gov.az/en/news/3509/shusha-declaration-on-allied-relations-between-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-and-the-republic-of-turkey.

¹⁰⁰ Matveev, Igor, and Yaghia Tashjian. "From Syria to Nagorno-Karabakh: Assessing Russian-Turkish "Co-Opetition." *Valdai Club*, 13 Mar. 2023, valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/from-syria-to-nagorno-karabakh-assessing-russian/?sphrase_id=1516461.

sizable brain drain resulting from the youth of the country seeking better economic opportunities elsewhere, particularly Russia, the European Union and the United States. According to the International Crisis Group, approximately fifty percent of the population and ninety percent of children, women and the elderly left for Armenia proper.¹⁰¹ Despite Azerbaijan's claims that the Karabakh Armenians may be permitted to eventually return to their homes. Karabakh's future is in the hands of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey, and the population of Armenians on the ground in Karabakh as negotiations continue remaining a major bargaining chip for both Armenia and Azerbaijan when discussions of autonomy inevitably arise. The Karabakh population in total has collapsed to a mere 45,000 individuals – the lowest recorded in recent history.¹⁰² If the population of Karabakh Armenians continues to decline, there will be too small a population remaining to discuss any viable proposals for regional autonomy or justify the presence of Russian peacekeepers in the area.

The loss also triggered a national discussion on the part of Armenia on how to proceed with the direction of the country and its political ambitions. Two contrasting positions gained prominence in the Armenian national examination of conscience – the first being an acceptance of Armenia's failure in the war and loss of Karabakh coupled with the need to pivot away from the needs of Artsakh being the primary goal and focus of the Armenian nation, instead focusing on improving its own economy and consolidating its geostrategic position in the Southern Caucasus. The second position held that Armenia 'lost the war but not the cause' and must thus aim to re-arm itself and prepare for a third war to reclaim the territories lost to Azerbaijan's 2020 offensive to such an extent that no other political option would be left but for the international community to recognize an Armenian annexation of the region.¹⁰³

Furthermore, the ongoing presence or lack thereof of Russia's peacekeeping forces in the region have direct, visceral implications for the remainder of the breakaway Republic of Artsakh, which remains more vulnerable than ever before since the start of the modern Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, with Azeri forces regaining the valued ancient city of Shusha, mere kilometers from Stepanakert, the Artsakh capital. If Russia withdraws from Karabakh, Azerbaijan could easily overrun

¹⁰¹ "Post-War Prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh." *International Crisis Group*, 9 June 2021, www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/264-post-war-prospects-nagorno-karabakh.

¹⁰² Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 177.

¹⁰³ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 178.

the remainder of Artsakh and complete its stated desire of ‘liberating’ the entirety of Karabakh and firmly placing it under the government of Baku. Such a scenario would inevitably result in the near-total of the ethnic Armenian population of Karabakh voluntarily leaving or being forcefully deported.¹⁰⁴ The lack of political settlement provided by the ceasefire, coupled with Armenia’s reliance on Russia as a security guarantor (all Armenian forces were required to leave the Karabakh region as a condition of the November 2020 ceasefire agreement, leaving the Lachin corridor – the single land connection between the de-facto Republic of Artsakh and Armenia proper - under the protection of Russian peacekeeping forces instead) have proven to be thorny issues relating to the dynamics of power in the region. Armenian reliance on Russian-provided security was called into question after Russia’s lack of intervention during the 2021 Armenian-Azeri border clashes, which ultimately resulted in Azerbaijan occupying land internationally recognized as belonging to Armenia.¹⁰⁵ Azerbaijan, for their part, have justified this scenario based on de-facto political acceptance of Armenia’s occupation of the seven surrounding districts of Nagorno Karabakh – internationally recognized as the sovereign territory of Azerbaijan - for 26 years following the Bishkek protocols.

The November 2020 ceasefire declaration also provides for an unblocking of regional transport links. Article 9 states “The Republic of Armenia guarantees the safety of transport links between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic in order to ensure the unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions...”¹⁰⁶ This section of the agreement has become key to discussions regarding the stabilizing of the region in the long-term. The single route explicitly mentioned in the document concerns the route through Armenia’s southern Syunik province connecting Azerbaijan with its Nakhichevan exclave – described as the ‘Zangezur corridor’ by Azerbaijan - and its guarantee of security for passengers along the route by the Border Guard Service of the Russian Federal Security Bureau (FSB). The lack of such a guarantee for the Lachin corridor, typically used by Armenians traveling between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia proper, signals that the balance of power in the region post-2020 leans in favor of

¹⁰⁴ Poghosyan, Benyamin. “The Future of Peacekeeping Operations in Nagorno Karabakh.” *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, 11 Feb. 2023, mirrorspectator.com/2023/02/11/the-future-of-peacekeeping-operations-in-nagorno-karabakh/.

¹⁰⁵ Laurence, Broers. *Is Azerbaijan Planning a Long-Term Presence in Armenia?* Chatham House, 26 Sept. 2022, www.chathamhouse.org/2022/09/azerbaijan-planning-long-term-presence-armenia.

¹⁰⁶ Commonsplace.eu. “Document: Full Text of the Agreement between the Leaders of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.” *Commonspace.eu*, 10 Nov. 2020, www.commonspace.eu/news/document-full-text-agreement-between-leaders-russia-armenia-and-azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan and Turkey. Further, there is ambiguity and a dispute over the interpretation of Article 9 by the conflicting states. The Azeris claim the section requires a maximalist reading, which would mean that an extraterritorial corridor must be established, while the Armenians advocate for a restrained approach, citing the fact that the use of ‘corridor’ in the text only happens in the third clause of the ceasefire arrangement, exclusively pertaining to the Lachin corridor to connect Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁰⁷

This lack of the terminology of ‘corridor’ in the text of the ninth article thus would lead one to assume that such a function would not be conferred upon a potential route through the Syunik province to connect Azerbaijan proper with Nakhichevan. The opening of economic transport networks in the region poses the potential to improve diplomatic connectivity in the region, with the shared economic benefits made possible in such a manner to cultivate a mutual interest in regional cooperation.¹⁰⁸ For Armenia, however, the establishment of the Zangezur corridor could cut the core of the country off from its important – if short – border with Iran, leaving its border with Georgia its only access to global economic markets. Armenia remains under a blockade from both Azerbaijan and Turkey, and until its borders with the two states are unblocked, its capability to reverse the persistent brain-drain and economic limitations it has faced for decades will remain minimal.

The Russian Ambassador to Azerbaijan, Mikhail Bocharnikov has expressed his belief that the Zangezur Corridor project has a sound base for implementation. He noted that the Russo-Armenian-Azeri tripartite working group had already reached a considerable degree of understanding from the point of view of both business and technical interests, and that the primary factors in the settlement of Azeri-Armenian relations are the restoration of transportation and economic connections, the final demarcation of state borders between the two republics, and the signing of a final peace treaty to bring the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to a concrete end. When speaking in an interview to Azeri news website haqqin.az, Bocharnikov stated that “I think the lack of progress on one of these should not stop progress on the others.” and asserted that economics is the primary reason for the restoration of relations, saying “I think putting the economy first would not be bad.”¹⁰⁹ Such sentiments are in

¹⁰⁷ Gawliczek, Piotr, and Khayal Iskandarov. “The Zangezur Corridor as Part of the Global Transport Route (against the Backdrop of Power Games in the South Caucasus Region).” *Security and Defense Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 1, 31 Mar. 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Gawliczek and Iskandarov, 2023.

¹⁰⁹ Mirzoyan, Armen. “Zangezur Corridor Is Feasible, Says Russian Ambassador to Azerbaijan.” *Hetq.am*, 9 Feb. 2023, hetq.am/en/article/153012.

line with Russia's significant pivot towards encouraging further development of Eurasian trade networks, particularly the International North South Transport Corridor, of which Azerbaijan is a key node for the transportation of freight and energy resources through the region.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, Russia may be seeking to avoid damaging its cautious relationship with Turkey, which holds a major interest in the establishment of a Zangezur corridor.

Iran had a positive view of the November 10, 2020 ceasefire agreement, brokered by Russia. Tehran and Russia's interests in the region broadly intersect, with the two states finding increasingly common ground over shared grievances including western-backed sanctions and a desire to prevent western institutional incursions into the region, including spread of NATO and the influence of the western members of the OSCE Minsk Group.¹¹¹ Iran has pursued a certain measure of openness towards cooperation with Turkey when it comes to economic matters – particularly in the context of the INSTC, but its concern over the potential for Turkish 'proxies' to enter the region has led to support for Russia remaining the only peacekeeping force in the Nagorno-Karabakh, and opposing Azeri calls for Turkish peacekeepers to be introduced to the region. Further, there are concerns from Iran regarding the Zangezur corridor project as well, which would cut Iran off from direct access to the core of Armenia, a key ally, and deprive it of the economic benefits received from Azeri traffic through Iran along the route which bypasses Armenian territory to access the Nakhichevan exclave, providing Iran with a certain amount of leverage over Azerbaijan. The possible establishment of the corridor through the southern Armenian city of Meghri – near the border of Iran – using military force by Azerbaijan with Turkish support have also incensed Tehran.¹¹² Azeri President Aliyev's fiery rhetoric regarding the potential of such a move does not help matters, with Aliyev stating on Azeri national television "We will be implementing the Zangezur Corridor, whether Armenia wants it or not."¹¹³ A 'Zangezur Corridor' would also mean that NATO-member Turkey, bordering Nakhichevan, would gain access to the whole of Azerbaijan and further into Central Asia across the Caspian Sea

¹¹⁰ Kaleji, Vali. "Iran and Russia Cooperation in the Construction of Rasht-Astara: The Only Remaining Railway of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)." *Valdai Club*, 30 Mar. 2023, valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/iran-and-russia-cooperation-in-the-construction/?sphrase_id=1516499.

¹¹¹ Has, Kerim, et al. "The Breakdown of the Status Quo and the International Dimension of the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis." *Valdai Discussion Club*, Dec. 2020, pp. 18–19.

¹¹² Has, Kerim, et al. 2020, pp. 19–20.

¹¹³ "Aliyev Threatens to Take Zangezur by Force "Whether Armenia Wants It or Not" – Asbarez.com." *Azbarez*, 20 Apr. 2021, asbarez.com/aliyev-threatens-to-take-zangezur-by-force-whether-armenia-wants-it-or-not/.

without passing through Iran in transit. If peacekeeping forces in Nagorno-Karabakh become a multinational operation, this could cause a significant shift in Iran's position towards the conflict.

Iran has additionally contended with a changed situation regarding its borders in the aftermath of the 2020 Karabakh War. Azerbaijan had recaptured the Jabrail, Zangilan and Fizuli regions from Armenian occupation – regions which directly border Iranian territory along the Aras River valley. Iran's priority regarding the current stage of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the effects of the now Azeri-controlled borders on transportation routes leading from Iran through Syunik into the core of Armenia.¹¹⁴ Border disputes with Armenia proper could pose a security threat to Iranian-Armenian transit through the region, a key economic lifeline for Iran-allied Armenia. A 20km stretch of highway between the Iranian border city of Norduz to Yerevan which was under the control of the de-facto Republic of Artsakh had fallen under Azeri control during the 2020 Karabakh War, impeding the privilege of unencumbered transportation for Iranian freight trucks between Iran and Georgia via Armenia.¹¹⁵ Azerbaijan sought to extract income from Iranian traffic by imposing a \$130 fee to travel across the 20km stretch of road which passes through its territory. This prompted Tehran to seek secondary routes which pass only through the internationally-recognized territory of Armenia proper. A proposed option is the Tatev-Aghvani route through the Syunik region. Iran has even pledged to cover the cost involved in the construction of the new route.¹¹⁶

Another source of tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan resulting from the Second Karabakh War is the potential for future Azeri military activity to spill over into Iran itself. Iran is within a vulnerable distance from the conflict, unlike the more remote regional great powers Russia and Turkey and is at risk of being drawn directly into the conflict. During the 2020 hostilities, rockets launched from Azeri positions during the rapid reconquest of Armenian-occupied territory unintentionally veered off course and landed on Iranian soil near the village of Khoda Afarin, in the Iranian province of Eastern Azerbaijan.¹¹⁷ Thus, the prevention of future armed hostilities near its border remains a matter of national security for Tehran. Additionally, Iran faces the challenge of a shift in the balance of power weakening its position in the South Caucasus. Western attempts to gain a foothold in the

¹¹⁴ "Iran Increasingly Uneasy about Threats to Common Border with Armenia." *Jamestown Foundation*, 14 Oct. 2022, jamestown.org/program/iran-increasingly-uneasy-about-threats-to-common-border-with-armenia/.

¹¹⁵ Has, Kerim, et al. 2020, p. 20.

¹¹⁶ Isayev, Heydar, and Ani Mejlumyan . "Azerbaijan Starts Charging Iranian Trucks Supplying Armenia." *Eurasianet.org*, 14 Sept. 2021, eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-starts-charging-iranian-trucks-supplying-armenia.

¹¹⁷ Has, Kerim, et al. 2020, pp. 14-16.

region if Russia yields any weakness could also be perceived as a cause for alarm with Iran as well, particularly if the United States is involved. Israel's close relationship with Azerbaijan is an additional cause for alarm for Iran, as Israel is among the nations Iran considers its sworn enemies. Ultimately, Iran's role among the current driving forces of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict could be that of greater participation and advocacy for the clarification of article 9 of the 2020 ceasefire agreement into a more tangible interpretation agreed upon by all involved parties. When the status of a connection between Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan proper is formally defined, then Iran can move forward in developing a coherent approach to the region.

After the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Russia and Turkey in recent years have entered a stage of 'cooperative rivalry'. That is, the two states have been simultaneously competing for influence in the region while cooperating where their interests intersect. According to the neorealist theory of John Mearsheimer, the rise of such a situation is not entirely unexpected. He notes that "A bipolar system is superior to a multipolar system [...] Bullying and ganging up are unknown, since only two actors compete. Hence the power asymmetries produced by bullying and ganging up are also unknown. When balancing is required, it is achieved efficiently. States can balance by either internal means--military buildup--or external means--diplomacy and alliances."¹¹⁸ Turkey and Russia's 'bipolarity in miniature' could serve to stabilize the region while negotiations for a final settlement take place. The dangers of asymmetry could additionally be resolved if Turkey is provided a position as co-chair in negotiating bodies alongside Russia. Azerbaijan has championed the possibility of Turkey becoming a lead co-chair alongside Russia, France and the United States at the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk Group, despite Turkey not being an initial signatory of the organization - having previously expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that the three leading chairmanships of the organization all have very large Armenian diaspora populations significant enough to have serious lobbying power to bias Minsk Group negotiations and proposals in favor of Armenia and the Karabakh Armenians.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Mearsheimer, John J. *Back to the Future : Instability in Europe after the Cold War*. 1st ed., vol. 15, International Security, June 1990, p. 15.

¹¹⁹ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 117.

Chapter 2: A Comparative Analysis of Other Post-Soviet Conflicts and Russian Foreign Policy

2.1. The Case of South Ossetia

To better understand the motives and complexities of Russia's operations in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it is necessary to compare Russian peacekeeping policy and military support to involved parties with those of other ethnic conflicts across the former Soviet Union. Particularly those in which a constituent ethnic minority within a former Soviet Republic seeks to gain independence and recognition of sovereignty. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, the best conflicts of comparison are those which take place on the internationally recognized territory of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan's neighboring trans-Caucasian republic, namely the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of which have limited international recognition and are supported militarily and economically by Russia. The South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (SOAO) was a political entity created in the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and as an independent oblast was granted autonomy in 1922 with the intention of further integrating Georgia into the new Soviet Union. The whole of ethnic Ossetian settlement was not contained within the SOAO, thus setting the stage for later conflict decades later as the Soviet Union ultimately collapsed. In 1988 the rebirth of the South Ossetian nationalist movement appealed for the creation of an autonomous republic within Georgia. The Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic objected to such a measure with military support from Moscow. Tensions in the region developed into armed scuffles in January 1991, with a ceasefire called and signed with the newly independent Georgian government on 24th June 1992 after the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali was assaulted by Georgian government forces thrice unsuccessfully.¹²⁰ The ceasefire held with the aid of joint Russo-Georgian-Ossetian peacekeeping forces until 2008, when Georgia – three years Georgia's American-supported, pro-Western 2005 'color revolution' - invaded South Ossetia following an escalating series of border skirmishes. Russia responded by invading Georgia on the 7th of August 2008 under the pretense of protecting ethnic Russian minorities in the region. The Russo-Georgian war, lasting a mere five days until the 12th of August 2008 resulted

¹²⁰ Babayan, 2014, p. 56-57.

in an overwhelming victory for Russia and South Ossetia, and the expulsion of ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia and the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia, a parallel breakaway state northeast of Georgia proper.¹²¹

Russian support for Ossetia compared to that of Nagorno-Karabakh during the first Karabakh war is more obvious. Unlike the breakaway Republic of Artsakh, South Ossetia lacks a proxy state from which supplies can be filtered like Armenia, and Russia formally recognized South Ossetian independence almost immediately after the five-day war on August 28, 2008 and granted many South Ossetian nationals Russian citizenship. A North Ossetian republic exists already within the borders of the Russian Federation, just across the Caucasus mountains. The overall Russian contribution to the 1991-1992 Ossetian war is relatively ambiguous, in contrast to the post-2008 arrangement. Moscow provides overwhelming support for the Ossetian government, with over half of Ossetian government offices filled by Moscow and the vast majority of the South Ossetian Republic's budget being provided by Russia. Despite the territory having a mere 56,000 citizens, the Russian state provides 840 million dollars into South Ossetia, and the official currency is the Russian ruble.¹²² Russia additionally maintains between 7 and 9,000 combat, security, and border monitoring forces. Russia even signed a treaty to incorporate the military forces and economic networks of South Ossetia into its own in March 2015. Like Azerbaijan, Russia signed the Commonwealth of Independent States security pact following its failure to recover Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but later withdrew from the pact in 1999. Nearly a decade later, the government of Georgia submitted a NATO Partnership Action Plan, much to the consternation of Russia, who has been in vocal opposition to NATO's eastward expansion since the late 1990's. Further deterioration in the Russo-Georgian relationship took place in April 2008, mere days before the outbreak of war when during a NATO summit in Budapest, Georgia was assured of its future NATO membership.¹²³

¹²¹ Babayan, Nelli. *Democratic Transformation and Obstruction*. Routledge, 21 Aug. 2014, p. 67.

¹²² Sprague, Andrew. "Russian Meddling in Its near Abroad: The Use of Frozen Conflicts as a Foreign Policy Tool." *JSTOR*, 1 Jan. 2016, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep14215.8?searchText=south+ossetia+nagorno-karabakh&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dsouth%2Bossetia%2Bnagorno-karabakh&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3Af6c8020c05b8ced728170a483da3cc33&seq=2.

¹²³ Sprague, 2016. p. 14-15

2.2. The Case of Transnistria

An additional comparison can be made with the case of Transnistria, a breakaway region in the former Soviet republic of Moldova. Unlike the Caucasus, Transnistria is within the immediate vicinity of the European Union, with neighboring Romania being an EU member state. Moldova's history in the Russian sphere is more brief compared to that of the South Caucasus, as the country was initially a region of Romania before being separated and later incorporated into the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Transnistria, the sliver of land east of the Dniester River was a part of Ukraine between 1924 and 1940. During a revival in Moldovan nationalism in the 1980's as the Soviet Union grew increasingly fragmented, minority communities in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic expressed growing alarm, as nationalist groups began to call for reunification of Moldova with Romania. The Moldavian SSR later declared itself independent in June 1990, to which Transnistria declared independence from the Moldovan SSR in September of that year and began the process of converting Moldovan bureaucratic institutions into Transnistrian institutions. As the Soviet Union crumbled, full scale armed conflict erupted in March 1992. After a four-month war a ceasefire was signed by Transnistria and Moldova after Moldovan forces were forced back to the western bank of the Dniester River.¹²⁴

Unlike South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia provides no formal diplomatic support for Transnistria, but has continued to call for Moldova to enact the restoration of rights for national minorities. The independence fighters of Transnistria were supported by the 14th Russian Army regiment and were further reinforced by Ukrainian and Russian volunteer militias. The presence of up to ten thousand sympathetic troops resulted in Transnistria gaining access to significant numbers of Soviet arms and willing recruits. In practice, Russian peacekeeping forces established in the area supported the breakaway government of Tiraspol and aided in the establishment of a Transnistria military even larger than that of Moldova proper. Like Georgia and Azerbaijan, Moldova signed the Commonwealth of Independent States security pact after its loss in the Moldovan civil war. Transnistria is sympathetic to joining the Eurasian Economic Community, unlike Moldova proper which has charted a course in favor of the European Union. In 2005, Moldova began the process of

¹²⁴ Sprague, 2016, p. 16-17.

harmonizing its policies with that of the European Union. In response, Russia banned Moldovan exports. Russian activity in Transnistria dissuades the European Union from further pursuing the cause of Moldovan accession to the European bloc. Moldova has remained among the poorest countries in Europe.¹²⁵

2.3. Common Factors and Fundamental Differences

Common factors among these cases include the considerable military support of Russia for secessionist movements and forces on the battlefield. Russia provided the Karabakh Armenians (via Armenia proper) with considerable munitions and food provisions prior to the outbreak of war in Nagorno-Karabakh. Rogue members of the 366th Russian army regiment have even been implicated in participation alongside Armenian forces at the Khojaly massacre.¹²⁶ Azerbaijan captured members of the 7th Russian Army Spetsnaz detachment during the first Karabakh War. Russian loans at the time to Armenia for weapons purchases leading up to the full outbreak of war were so significant it triggered a protest note from the Azerbaijan ministry of foreign affairs. Transnistria in 1991-1992 and South Ossetia (most clearly after 2008) likewise received considerable military support from Moscow.¹²⁷

Beyond military matters, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria have been beneficiaries of large preferential loans from Russia, intended to bolster and fund basic bureaucratic functions and maintain military armaments. Arguments of Russian support on the basis of protection for ethnic Russian populations in these regions have been rejected by the de-facto Republic of Artsakh and the South Ossetian Republic. Eastward NATO expansion was a major factor in Russia supporting the breakaway regions. Moldova sought to unify with Romania, theoretically this would result in automatic EU membership as a result of formal annexation by an EU member state. The Russian invasion of Georgia was preceded three years earlier by a pro-Western color revolution, and subsequent calls for the South Caucasian republic to join the western military alliance. Turkey was a key supporter of NATO expansion into the South Caucasus. Russia's attempts to maintain the

¹²⁵ Sprague, 2016, p. 17.

¹²⁶ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 17.

¹²⁷ Sprague, 2016, p. 11.

Commonwealth of Independent States security pact further motivated the country to take a more active role in the myriad national minority independence movements across the former territory of the Soviet Union.¹²⁸

Unlike the cases of South Ossetia and Transdniestria, however, Russia in fact funded both sides of the conflict in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia was selling considerable numbers of arms to Azerbaijan at the same time it was providing loans and munitions to Armenia.¹²⁹ Russia sent training personnel to the military forces of Azerbaijan as the First Karabakh War raged on. Additionally, Russian security details protected Azeri general Surat Huseynov and his private army in Karabakh.¹³⁰ The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has longstanding historical roots, with Armenian-Turkic clashes taking place in the region at the start of the twentieth century and earlier, thus mutual animosity and mistrust present among ethnic Armenians and Azeris in the region had already been primed for centuries, and compared to other post-Soviet conflicts, the highly emotive nature of the conflict influenced the severity with which civilians and prisoners of war treated: it is notable that very few prisoners were taken during the First Karabakh War, and civilians belonging to the opposing ethnic group of the approaching forces of either Armenia or Azerbaijan fled in immense numbers up to the hundreds of thousands. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is unique in that it is the only ongoing post-Soviet conflict in which the two primary state parties in the conflict are both full members of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The Karabakh War is unique among post-Soviet conflicts in the sheer scale of use of heavy weapons, including armored vehicles, multi-launch rocket systems and aerial bombardments. Additionally, there was a large presence of mercenary warfare in the region. Mujahadeen fighters from wide swaths of the Islamic world volunteered to fight on the side of Azerbaijan.¹³¹

On the mediatory side, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is also distinct due to the desire of all three parties involved for Russia to serve as the primary mediator. Russia is incentivized to display restraint in its dealings with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Alienating either state could risk one or the other pivoting away from Russia for security and towards western organizations. This could severely increase the likelihood of war. John Mearsheimer notes that “When a powerful country

¹²⁸ Sprague, 2016, p. 19.

¹²⁹ Berry, Lynn. “Russia Defends Selling Arms to Both Azerbaijan and Armenia.” *AP News*, 9 Apr. 2016, apnews.com/article/21dd4e22cf944d95867c6102dfe783a7.

¹³⁰ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, p. 57.

¹³¹ De Waal, 2013, p. 236.

pursues liberal hegemony, it runs the risk that other states will follow the dictates of realpolitik. This greatly increases the likelihood of a miscalculation, which could lead to a crisis or even a war.”¹³² Such was the case with Georgia in 2008.

Azeri perceptions of preferential treatment of Armenia by Russia throughout the 1990’s cost Russia a great deal of leverage in Azerbaijan, and like Georgia, may have incentivized Baku to disrupt the dynamics of power in the region. In the case of Georgia this manifested in a turning towards the institutions of the west, particularly NATO, while Azerbaijan sought to strengthen its relationship with Turkey as an alternative means of support. This, of course, came to a head in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020 as Azerbaijan, supplied with Turkish arms, managed to score an overwhelming territorial victory during the Second Karabakh War. A component of maintaining Azeri trust in Russian intentions in the region is the fact that the November ceasefire agreement contained the provision of a five-year time limit on Russian peacekeeping activities in Nagorno-Karabakh, set to be extended by another five years only if Azerbaijan or Armenia do not request within six months of the deadline that Russian peacekeeping forces withdraw. Should Baku or Yerevan make such a request, Russia would be obligated to comply. Both the five-year time limit and the option of mandatory withdrawal at the behest of one of the conflicting parties are not present in the Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or Transdniestria ceasefire agreements.

Chapter 3: Current and Future Challenges: Nagorno-Karabakh and Regional Powers

3.1. Russian Political Maneuverability and Ongoing Challenges

In accordance with the neorealist paradigm, Russia has maneuvered itself in such a way that it was able to successfully exploit the insecurities of both Azerbaijan and Armenia to promote its own interests in the region. Despite Armenia being the most reliant on a Russian presence in the region than Azerbaijan, particularly in the case of providing security for the remaining ethnic Armenians in the Karabakh region, Azerbaijan was likewise vulnerable to Russia asserting its influence. The conflict

¹³² Mearsheimer, John. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. S.L., Yale University Press, 1 Jan. 2018, p. 171.

in and of itself therefore is not a matter of Russia backing a proxy against the west and its institutions, even with the comprehensive support of Azerbaijan by Turkey, a member of NATO. Russia's leverage of Azerbaijan prevented the latter from gaining control of the whole of Karabakh, and Turkey was unable and unwilling to risk spoiling a potential relationship-of-convenience with Russia by blocking Russia's brokerage of a ceasefire, as reflected in the ceasefire being signed by Russian and Azeri Presidents Putin and Aliyev, respectively, and Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan. Azerbaijan was persuaded to reluctantly agree to Russian demands while Armenia had little to no option but to completely submit to Russia for assistance. The nine-point ceasefire truce is of historical significance, because it forms the basis of a final peace treaty.¹³³

Azerbaijan may have been able to claim victory during the Second Karabakh War, but Russia denied Azerbaijan the full diplomatic victory – particularly recognition of Azeri control over the totality of Nagorno-Karabakh and Azeri sovereignty over the whole of the people who live within it. Russia itself gained a diplomatic victory with the ceasefire, having proven itself capable of brokering cessations in hostilities independent of the efforts of the OSCE-Minsk Group and the western world. Armenia's poorly trained forces, mostly armed with aging Soviet-era weaponry, had few options but to entirely withdraw from the Karabakh region. Had Armenia pursued a more assertive diplomacy following the First Karabakh War and not become excessively self-secure following its overwhelming victory in 1994, the result of the 2020 Karabakh War may have been different.

Despite the establishment of a Russian-brokered ceasefire signed by Armenia, and Azerbaijan on 9th November 2020, the trilateral agreement contains numerous issues which have proven to be an 'elephant in the room' for all participants. Matters such as the demarcation of borders – the ceasefire essentially froze the battle lines where they were on the day of the signing of the ceasefire – and the lack of mechanisms to prevent ceasefire violations have practically encouraged rogue members of both parties in the conflict to commit violations. The safe return of refugees is not guaranteed, particularly in the aftermath of Azeri expulsions of remaining Armenians in the captured areas of the Republic of Artsakh. Furthermore, the longtime security of the remaining Armenians of Artsakh is not guaranteed, especially if Russia complies with an Azeri request to withdraw its peacekeeping forces within six months of the 2025 peacekeeping mission deadline.

¹³³ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, pp. 171-174.

After the 2025 requirement, it is possible that Russia will attempt to bring Armenia and Azerbaijan back to the negotiation table instead of risk the potential outbreak of war once again. As the deadline approaches, it is likely that instability will return once again to the region, either from the withdrawal of Russian peacekeeping forces, or if Russia chooses not to comply with a request for withdrawal by either Armenia or Azerbaijan.¹³⁴ The ceasefire agreement itself lacks a formal, internationally agreed-upon mandate in the framework of traditional United Nations or OSCE peacekeeping missions.¹³⁵ Turkey likewise expects to take a more active and assertive role in future negotiations due to its comprehensive support of Azerbaijan during the 2020 war and its key long-term interests in a stabilized Nagorno-Karabakh for economic and pan-Turkic ambitions. Ankara engaged in a diplomatic back and forth with Russia throughout the conflict. An example of Turkey's increased activity in matters relating to Nagorno-Karabakh after the 2020 ceasefire agreement is the joint Turkish-Russia Monitoring Centre for the Nagorno-Karabakh Ceasefire, established in 2021. The Centre operates on an equal basis, manned by 60 soldiers from both Turkey and Russia, who have respectively provided a military general to lead the Centre's operations (Major General Viktor Fedorenko and Major General Abdullah Katirici, respectively). The creation of the monitoring centre was agreed upon on 11 November 2020, gaining the signatures of Azerbaijan and Russia, but not Armenia. Despite Armenia's lack of agreement to the Centre's creation, the Artsakh military nevertheless maintains contact with the Centre, as do all sides of the conflict. The Centre is additionally of ambiguous legality, due to Turkey's lack of being a signatory to its establishment.¹³⁶

Ceasefire violations between Armenia and Azerbaijan primarily take place outside of the ordinary lines of contact. During a meeting in Moscow on 11th January 2021, Azeri and Armenian leaders agreed on the opening of regional road networks and railroads between the two republics, but there remains no official timetable for formal, renewed negotiations to determine the long-term status of the region and ultimately, a final settlement.¹³⁷ The status of the breakaway republic of Artsakh remains critical in the negotiation process, with Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev denying any form

¹³⁴ Rác, András. "In Russia's Hands: Nagorno-Karabakh after the Ceasefire Agreement." *JSTOR*, 1 Apr. 2021, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep30226?searchText=nagorno-karabakh+2020&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dnagorno-karabakh%2B2020&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3Ae96ff81c218f36a967d7377ee04e3d22&seq=6.

¹³⁵ Racz, 2021, p. 4.

¹³⁶ Racz, 2021, p. 5-6.

¹³⁷ "Press Statements Following Talks with President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan." *President of Russia*, 11 Jan. 2021, en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64880.

of special status or autonomy for the region if it falls under Azeri control. Out-migration of ethnic Armenians from the Karabakh region will create greater difficulties to justify the provision of any form of autonomous status for the remaining ethnic Armenians residing in Karabakh and, if Azerbaijan regains full control over the breakaway Republic of Artsakh, those who decide to stay if Azerbaijan does not formally expel the Armenian population. As it currently stands, the Karabakh ethnic-Armenians number approximately 0.5% and 1.3% of the total population within the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan, or 45,000 – 120,300 people. For Armenia proper, the priority remains international recognition of the Artsakh Armenians’ right to national self-determination and recognition of the Republic of Artsakh – a challenge considering Armenia itself does not formally recognize the independence of the Artsakh republic despite its treatment as an Armenian proxy state.¹³⁸

At the time of the signing of the November 9 ceasefire to end the 44 days of hostilities which had preceded it, the main priority was to bring the armed exchange to a quick halt, rather than to formulate a future, agreed upon status for the disputed territory. To raise the question of the establishment of a final status for Nagorno-Karabakh as a precondition for the enactment of a ceasefire would have ensured that a long-term peace initiative would not take place, similar to previous proposals by the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs in Madrid and Prague. During a January 2021 meeting in Moscow with the presidents of Russia and Azerbaijan, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated “Unfortunately, this conflict has not been settled even up to this day. Of course, we have ensured a ceasefire, but many issues are still outstanding and must be resolved.”¹³⁹ Delimitation and formalizing of borders likewise remains an unsolved issue, alongside Azeri blockades of the Lachin Corridor and alternative routes into Armenia proper. Though Russia has taken the lead in brokering agreements between the two parties, the United States and France are still active in monitoring Russia’s activity in the region. If Russia shows any signs of weakness in Karabakh, it will be seen as an opportunity by the west to further their policy of containing Russia and limiting influence over its backyard. Thus, Russia must keep Azerbaijan and Armenia focused on negotiating a lasting settlement to the conflict, the end of which could open the region to alternative economic networks for Russia to

¹³⁸ Yavuz and Gunter, 2023, pp. 177-178.

¹³⁹ “Press Statements Following Talks with President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan.” *President of Russia*, 11 Jan. 2021, en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64880.

circumvent western sanctions and avoid the pitfalls Russia had experienced in its engagement with Georgia.

3.2. Demarcation of Borders and Competing Monitors

The demarcation of borders continues to be one of the greatest stumbling blocks for progress in negotiations. Final borders between Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Artsakh republic are not formally outlined. The demarcations in the joint ceasefire statement is vague, merely indicating that the factions ought to freeze at the positions they occupied by the time of the signing of the ceasefire.¹⁴⁰ On May 19, Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov stated during a meeting in Dushanbe of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the CSTO member states that “According to a preliminary agreement with the parties, the Russian Federation proposed to facilitate the start of delimitation and demarcation as well as to initiate the creation of an Armenian-Azerbaijani commission, in which Russia can participate as an advisor and mediator.”¹⁴¹ Foreign Minister Lavrov additionally noted that the issue of Armenian-Azeri border delimitation was discussed among the CSTO member states’ foreign ministers during the Dushanbe summit. Armenia turned to the CSTO - of which it is a member – to call for the activation of Article 2 of the May 15, 1992 Collective Security Treaty, which states “The Member States shall consult with each other on all important issues of the international security affecting their interests and coordinate positions on these issues.”¹⁴²

After trilateral meetings were held in Brussels with the heads of state of Armenia and Azerbaijan respectively, and President of the European Council Charles Machel on May 23, 2022, Armenia and Azerbaijan started negotiations on demarcation of the borders and discussed the possibility of unblocking transit links, with Deputy Prime Minister of Armenia Mher Grigoryan and

¹⁴⁰ Ghaplanyan, Vardan. “Armenia and Azerbaijan: High Risk of Cross-Border Violence in Nagorno-Karabakh despite Ceasefire.” *JSTOR*, ACLED, 1 Feb. 2021, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28646.10?searchText=&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dnagorno-karabakh%2B2020&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&searchKey=&refreqid=fastly-default%3A943713a826c47c441f9513837828e870&seq=2.

¹⁴¹ Teslova, Elena. “Russia Suggests Organizing Commission on Armenia, Azerbaijan Border Delimitation.” *Www.aa.com.tr*, 20 May 2021, www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/russia-suggests-organizing-commission-on-armenia-azerbaijan-border-delimitation/2247871.

¹⁴² “Collective Security Treaty, Dated May 15, 1992.” *En.odkb-Csto.org*, 15 May 2012, en.odkb-csto.org/documents/documents/dogovor_o_kollektivnoy_bezopasnosti/#loaded.

Azeri Vice-President Shahin Mustafayev appointed as heads of a bilateral commission aimed at determining the final delimitation and demarcation of interstate borders in the region.¹⁴³ According to a formal statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, “On May 24, 2022, within the framework of the implementation of the agreements reached between the two countries and in accordance with the relevant orders, the first meeting between the Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia Mher Grigoryan and the Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan Shahin Mustafayev was held in the state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with the format of the joint work of the commissions on delimitation and border security between Armenia and Azerbaijan.”¹⁴⁴

On January 23, 2023, the European Union announced it would be deploying a detachment of roughly 100 people for a period of two years to monitor border frontier regions after a rise in tensions and disputes regarding the delimitation of borders. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov asserted that the establishment of a western-backed mission in Armenia would prove to be counterproductive due to Azeri rejection of the monitoring plan.¹⁴⁵ Moscow released a statement concerning the EU mission days later on January 26th, which stated that the EU had “... turned into an appendage of the United States and NATO and is carrying out confrontational policy only bringing geopolitical competition into the region and exacerbating existing conflicts.” Further, the Moscow statement doubted that the EU monitoring mission was of a civilian nature, stating “We shouldn’t be deceived by the declared civilian nature of the EU mission, it is formulated in the framework of the EU’s Common Security and Defense Policy with all the attendant consequences,” warning that the 2,000-man Russian peacekeeping mission in neighboring Karabakh was not afraid to use force if need be in response to the behavior of the EU mission, despite the fact that the EU mission is set to be unarmed.¹⁴⁶

The CSTO announced its plans to establish its own observer mission in Armenia a day after the EU announcement, with Vladimir Zaynutdinov, the CSTO Press Secretary telling Russian newspaper RBK that CSTO monitoring mission proposal is “at a high level of readiness but it was not

¹⁴³ Avedian, Lillian. “Armenia and Azerbaijan Launch Border Demarcation.” *The Armenian Weekly*, 25 May 2022, armenianweekly.com/2022/05/25/armenia-and-azerbaijan-launch-border-demarcation/.

¹⁴⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia. “Meeting of the Deputy Prime Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan.” *Www.mfa.am*, 24 May 2022, www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2022/05/24/Arm_Az_commission/11467.

¹⁴⁵ Mgdesyan, Arshaluis. “EU Approves New Monitoring Mission for Armenia, over Russian and Azerbaijani Objections.” *Eurasianet.org*, Jan. 25, eurasianet.org/eu-approves-new-monitoring-mission-for-armenia-over-russian-and-azerbaijani-objections.

¹⁴⁶ Kucera, Joshua. “Russia Strongly Criticizes New EU Mission in Armenia.” *Eurasianet.org*, 27 Jan. 2023, eurasianet.org/russia-strongly-criticizes-new-eu-mission-in-armenia.

possible to adopt it at the last session of the CSTO Collective Security Council.” Press Secretary Zaynutdinov further stated that “Work on the [CSTO] mission proposal continues. Upon completion of the approval procedure, the project will be submitted for consideration by the statutory bodies of the organization.” Speaking on the potential of the CSTO monitoring mission, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated “We note that Yerevan choosing not to bring the work of CSTO to its logical conclusion, has opted in favor of the EU. If our Armenian allies retain interest in the potential of the CSTO, its mission can be quickly deployed in Armenia.”¹⁴⁷

Armenia’s cooperation with the European Union mission signals a shift away from reliance on Russia for its security assurance. Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan announced in January 2022 that the country would not be holding joint exercises with the CSTO, contradicting reports from a week prior by Russia’s Ministry of Defense that the CSTO joint exercises would be taking place. Russia’s failure to lift the blockade set by Azerbaijan on December 12th, 2022, along the Lachin Corridor connecting Armenia proper with Karabakh and prevent attacks Armenian soil in Syunik province have eroded trust in Russia’s reliability to enforce the ceasefire and prevent rogue actions by Azerbaijan. The Russia-centered CSTO failed to respond to Azeri attacks on internationally recognized Armenian territory in September 2022.¹⁴⁸

Armenia faces several challenges if it wishes to diversify the sources of its security provisions, however. Russia remains capable of utilizing its hard power in Armenia, if need be, due to the presence of large Russian military garrisons including in the country. Antagonizing Russia excessively could result in Russia further choosing to passively ignore ceasefire violations committed by Azerbaijan and reduce the leverage Armenia possesses during peace negotiations. The remaining territory of the breakaway Republic of Artsakh not under Azeri control relies almost entirely on the Russian peacekeeping forces to not be overrun completely by the Turkish-aided Azeri military, and Russia’s interest in maintaining positive ties with Azerbaijan due to economic matters – especially in the context of the International North-South Transport Corridor – has strengthened the relationship between the two countries, already reducing the bargaining power of Armenia which remains more isolated and economically limited in its current state.

¹⁴⁷ Kucera, 2023.

¹⁴⁸ Kucera, 2023.

Dr. Sergey Markedonov, Director of the Department for Problems of Ethnic Relations at the Institute for Political and Military Analysis in Moscow stated - regarding the tensions Armenia faces in this regard – that while Moscow’s strong reaction to the implementation of the EU mission is expected, “The deployment of missionaries to Armenia does not mean the country’s exit from the CSTO or the Eurasian Economic Union, or sharp turns in Yerevan’s foreign policy.” Markidonov noted that “Attempts to deploy the CSTO mission alongside the EU one should not be halted, on the contrary, the project should be worked on still more actively. There is no final decision in politics. The choice of an ally, as Earnest Revan says about the nation, is a *daily plebiscite*. The thought should be how to win it, not to multiply grievances.”¹⁴⁹ Dr. Markedonov’s comments ring true – from the standpoint of neorealism, in the anarchic system of international politics, it is at times beneficial to keep close contacts with the devil one knows, rather than the devil one does not know.

3.3. The Lachin Corridor Blockade

Still, Russia’s lack of action in persuading Azerbaijan to lift its ongoing blockade on the Lachin corridor, which started on 12 December 2022, is curious. The Armenian leadership has warned that a humanitarian catastrophe is imminent in the breakaway Artsakh Republic because of Azerbaijan’s blockade, which it claims is the result of actions by groups of ecological activists. Azerbaijan has openly ignored calls by various international organizations to bring an end to the blockade. Even the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague in February 2023 ordered Azerbaijan to ensure that traffic along the Lachin Corridor remains unhindered.¹⁵⁰

The Nagorno-Karabakh Office of the Ombudsman has published a list of claimed violations of human rights which have taken place over the course of the blockade, additionally providing photographic evidence and alleged first-hand accounts of those affected. The listed effects of the blockade have included the prevention of nearly 4,000 people to return from their homes, of which 570 are children, Azerbaijan cutting off the civic gas supply, the loss of 9,800 jobs and sources of income, and civilians being unable to receive necessary elective surgeries in Armenia, whose hospitals

¹⁴⁹ Kucera, 2023.

¹⁵⁰ “New Troubles in Nagorno-Karabakh: Understanding the Lachin Corridor Crisis.” www.crisisgroup.org, 22 May 2023, www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/new-troubles-nagorno-karabakh-understanding-lachin-corridor-crisis.

are better staffed and supplied than those in Nagorno-Karabakh. The document additionally accuses Baku of planning to “subject Artsakh to ethnic cleansing and destroy the indigenous Armenian population of Artsakh through physical and psychological intimidation.”¹⁵¹ Even side roads utilized by the Armenians of Karabakh to access Armenia proper have been blockaded by Azerbaijan. In the case of a dirt path circumventing the main route through the Lachin Corridor, the Azeri military on March 25 2023 utilized bulldozers and excavators to tear the road apart. The Azeri Defense ministry called the actions “necessary local control measures.”¹⁵²

The actions, which were confirmed by Russian peacekeeping representatives, resulted in a rare public criticism of Azeri forces by Russia’s Defense Ministry, who in a formal statement reported that Azeri units had violated the first point of the 2020 ceasefire agreement which froze the lines of contact where they were located upon the signing of the ceasefire on 9 November 2020, by crossing the line of contact near Shusha and occupied a highland position 2.9 kilometers northeast of Mt. Saribaba and commenced engineering activities, which the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called on to cease. The local authorities of the de facto Artsakh republic reported on Facebook that Russian peacekeepers had positioned themselves at a height parallel that of the violating Azeri forces and begun negotiations with the Azeri forces to persuade them to retreat. The bypass road in Stepanakert joins the main Lachin corridor.¹⁵³

Alexander Krylov, a Russian political scientist has theorized that Russia may not be forcing Azerbaijan to lift the blockade due to a disagreement on the role of Russia’s peacekeeping mission mandate. He noted that Russia’s mandate to carry out peacekeeping operations does not necessary entail operating as a local police force. Azerbaijan’s weaponization of civil activists rather than its own armed forces, though obvious to all involved, does not permit Russia to carry out police duties even if said activists are only non-state actors on paper, but not in practice. Russia’s diplomacy on this matter is carefully attempting to avoid the sparking of a ‘Second Front’ in the Caucasus. Krylov explained, “Russian diplomacy is doing what it can do, but it can do it through negotiations personally with Erdogan and Ilham Aliyev.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ JAMnews. “The 100th Day of the Lachin Corridor Blockde.” *English Jamnews*, 21 Mar. 2023, jam-news.net/100th-day-of-the-lachin-corridor-blockade/.

¹⁵² Kucera, Joshua. “Azerbaijani Armed Forces Advance to Close off Armenia-Karabakh Road.” *Eurasianet.org*, 26 Mar. 2023, eurasianet.org/azerbaijani-armed-forces-advance-to-close-off-armenia-karabakh-road.

¹⁵³ Kucera, 2023.

¹⁵⁴ JAMnews. “The 100th Day of the Lachin Corridor Blockde.” *English Jamnews*, 21 Mar. 2023, jam-news.net/100th-day-of-the-lachin-corridor-blockade/.

3.4. Future Risks and Possible Peace Through Economic Cooperation

Risks to Russia's current position of influence in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the context of the growing influence of the surrounding great states of the South Caucasus, namely Turkey and Iran, are primarily based on the need to cautiously maintain its relationship with an Armenia that is seeking to diversify its international relationships and distance itself from reliance on Russia for its national security, and Azerbaijan which has charted a course of pragmatic engagement with the West – particularly in the field of energy – and Turkey, with whom it shares ambitions of establishing a pan-Turkic socioeconomic bloc. Turkey, which like Russia has been led by an ambitious nationalist with visionary goals for recovering past influence, has also fought more wars with Russia than any other pair of states in history. Despite this, Russia and Turkey have cautiously collaborated when their interests intersect, particularly in the economic sphere. The successful de-escalation of tensions following the shooting down of a Russian bomber over Syria by the Turkish Air Force displayed the willingness of both sides to avoid unnecessary mutual antagonization. Despite this, Turkey's heavy involvement in supporting Azerbaijan leading up to and during the Second Karabakh War presents a new challenge to Russia as the sole 'external' great power directly involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and serves as a revival of the 'one nation, two states' concept which became prominent in Azeri-Turk diplomatic rhetoric in the 1990's. Turkish support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity can also serve to bolster Turkish energy interests and projects such as the Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline or the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline. Thus, Turkey's position in the energy distribution market is reliant on a stabilized Azerbaijan, who provides a plurality of its energy needs.¹⁵⁵

Russia's lack of expectations of formal allyship with Turkey operates to the benefit of Moscow in that it maintains a pragmatic relationship of shared interests. As the global political order becomes less centered towards the west, Turkey, which has an at-times ambiguous relationship with western institutions and Russia, whose skepticism of the west evolved into outright defensive antagonism can find common cause in building institutions and relationships independent of western involvement and dependency. However, the specter of regional crises continues to make Russia and Turkey's

¹⁵⁵ Matveev, Igor, and Yaghia Tashjian. "From Syria to Nagorno-Karabakh: Assessing Russian-Turkish "Co-Opetition." *Valdai Club*, 13 Mar. 2023, valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/from-syria-to-nagorno-karabakh-assessing-russian/?sphrase_id=1516461.

partnership of convenience a fragile state of affairs. Turkey has become increasingly reliant on its military forces to project its power abroad – one need only observe its intervention in Syria against Kurdish rebels in October 2019, or its military excursions in Libya, followed by direct combat operations against the Syrian army which was supported by Moscow in early 2020. The military-technological ties of Azerbaijan and Turkey are another case where this increasingly militaristic approach has been on display. In 2020 alone, Turkey sold \$123 million USD of weaponry to Azerbaijan, an increase of sixfold compared to 2019. Turkish Bayraktar TB2 combat drones were heavily utilized throughout the 2020 Karabakh war – a technology which was previously used during Turkish operations in Idlib, Syria in February-March 2020.¹⁵⁶ Turkish military support for the Azeri side in the recent conflict even included recruitment of Turkey-sympathetic fighters from Syria and Libya according to some reports. It is possible that Turkey may utilize the Russo-Turkish Ceasefire Monitoring Center to test Russia’s resolve by interfering with Russia’s peacekeeping operations.¹⁵⁷

Russia is trying to avoid becoming embroiled in a second war front from the south by allowing the rest of the breakaway Republic of Artsakh and by extension, its ethnic Armenian inhabitants, from being entirely conquered by Azerbaijan, which would likely result in mass deportations of the remaining Armenian population from the region as well as total loss of Armenian confidence in Russia as a peacekeeping force in the region and a reliable security partner. Loss of Armenian confidence in Russia’s capability to serve as a stabilizing force in the region could also motivate Yerevan to turn further to the West as an alternative security provider. The large Armenian diaspora in the United States, for example, had lobbied the United States Congress to cut off American aid to Azerbaijan via Section 907 of the ‘Freedom for Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets Support Act’ as early as 1992.¹⁵⁸ Russia must also avoid alienating Azerbaijan to the extent that it rejects cooperation with Russia in economic matters – namely the INSTC – which Russia cannot afford due to the imposition of western sanctions.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, Russia must seek to remain within the

¹⁵⁶ Postma, Joël. “Drones over Nagorno-Karabakh: A Glimpse at the Future of War?” *Atlantisch Perspectief*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2 Nov. 2021, pp. 15–20, www.jstor.org/stable/48638213?searchText=nagorno-karabakh+drone&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dnagorno-karabakh%2Bdrone&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A6eb44ed859944103d2528e648aae8a4b&seq=2.

¹⁵⁷ Has, Kerim, et al. 2020, pp. 9-11.

¹⁵⁸ United States Congress. “H.R.4547 - Freedom for Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets Support Act of 1992.” *Congress.gov*, 6 Aug. 1992, www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/house-bill/4547.

¹⁵⁹ Has, Kerim, et al. 2020, pp. 24-25.

good graces of both Armenia and Azerbaijan while simultaneously avoiding a total unconditional victory for Baku over the remainder of Nagorno-Karabakh, while also avoiding the alienation of Turkey and squandering opportunities for pragmatic cooperation when interests align. However, maintaining a constructive relationship with Turkey must not be taken to mean turning a blind eye to Turkish attempts to gain a deeper foothold in the region and increase its power projection. Though not optimal, the formal presence of Russian peacekeeping forces in Karabakh and the continuation of active Russian involvement in peace negotiations – particularly in brokering agreements which would result in the withdrawal of any transport blockades – serves as a viable foundation for Russia to continue to play the leading role in the region while providing Turkey with some sense of importance to the Karabakh peace process as an observer.

Another recent development in the region is the emergence of the ‘3+3’ platform, proposed by Iran and the ‘Six Party Regional Cooperation Platform’ proposed by Turkey. Both projects would involve the participation of the three South Caucasian states (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) and the three great powers which surround the region (Russia, Turkey and Iran). The proposals aim to facilitate regional cooperation on a variety of issues including political, economic, and infrastructural development, and have gained the support of Moscow.¹⁶⁰ Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov stated during a press conference in Moscow with Hossein Amir-Abdollahin, his Iranian counterpart, on October 6, 2021 that regarding the 3+3 format, “The joint statement (the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire) contained the principles that define joint steps to advance the settlement, including work on unblocking all transport communications, unblocking all economic ties in this region, from which not only Armenia and Azerbaijan but also Georgia will benefit.”¹⁶¹ The establishment of various regional cooperation forums containing only the three South Caucasus states and the surrounding trio of great powers could serve as a means for Russia to reduce western encroachment into the region, particularly when it comes to Georgia, arguably the most pro-western state in the Southern Caucasus.

¹⁶⁰ “Iran and the 3+3 Regional Cooperation Format in the South Caucasus: Strengths and Weaknesses.” *Jamestown Foundation*, June 2021, jamestown.org/program/iran-and-the-33-regional-cooperation-format-in-the-south-caucasus-strengths-and-weaknesses/.

¹⁶¹ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at a Joint News Conference Following Talks with Foreign Minister of Iran Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Moscow, October 6, 2021 | Iran Watch.” *Www.iranwatch.org*, 6 Oct. 2021, www.iranwatch.org/library/governments/russia/ministry-foreign-affairs/foreign-minister-sergey-lavrovs-remarks-answers-media-questions-joint-news-conference-following-0.

The dual projects also offer a greater variety of opportunities for meetings to take place between Nagorno-Karabakh conflict participants and arrange further negotiations to potentially bring the conflict to a formal settlement which would achieve the primary aim of unblocking transport routes and accelerating the development of alternative trade networks for sanctions-affected countries in the region. Armenia and Georgia, however, remain unconvinced of the benefits of such projects for their national interests. Armenia has been weakened by its major loss during the Second Karabakh War coupled with the ongoing border crisis and occupation of internationally recognized Armenian territory by Baku, in addition to the Azeri blockade of the Lachin corridor connecting Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh. Though cooperation with Azerbaijan and Turkey may benefit Armenia economically, it also carries with it the risk of further losses to the remaining Armenian-majority regions of Nagorno-Karabakh. For Georgia, the issue is even more prominent. Russia's role as a member in the platform is an awkward diplomatic scenario for Georgia, which continues to claim the Russian-occupied partially-recognized states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Further, Georgia has contested on numerous occasions the Russian-claimed lines of demarcation of the borders of the partially-recognized countries and Georgia proper. Georgia therefore continues to be reticent over participation in any sort of regional integration discussion platform that includes Russia as a full member. Indeed, during the first meetings of the '3+3' forum which were held in Moscow on December 10, 2021, Georgia did not participate.¹⁶²

3.4 Regional Cooperation Through Shared Challenges

President Putin's visit to Iran in July 2022 brought a great deal of commentary on the need to revitalize and complete the International North-South Transport Corridor. This projects a significant shift in urgency for Russia post-2022 to complete the multinational project with the possibility of aid and cooperation from Iran, who likewise has endured western sanctions – and for a period far longer than Russia. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a vast proposed multi-modal network of rail, road and maritime transport totaling over 7,200 kilometers (about 4473.87 mi) in length and stretching across Russia, the Southern Caucasus, Iran, Turkey, Central Asia, and

¹⁶² Kaleji, 2021.

Europe.¹⁶³ It was proposed with the aim of increasing freight and transport connectivity between a number of major transit nodes for economic exchange including Mumbai, Baku, Tehran, Moscow, and Astrakhan. Transport of freight cargo from Mumbai to Saint Petersburg via the current Suez Canal route takes between 30 and 45 days, while proposed INSTC land transport routes could reduce transport times to as low as 15 to 28 days, a reduction of fifty percent. Member states of the INSTC include Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey and India.¹⁶⁴ The outbreak of conflict in Ukraine and the launch of the Special Military Operation by Russia in February 2022, followed shortly thereafter by the wave of new western sanctions served as a primary driver of INSTC implementation. Russia is incentivized to revive interest in the project to build alternative economic networks to offset the damage caused by cessation of Russo-European economic ties and seek attractive trade routes for third-party access to global trade markets via the routes through East Africa, Iran, the Gulf States and Southern Asia.¹⁶⁵

Indeed, as noted by Russian President Vladimir Putin during his March 31, 2023, address in which he introduced the New Russian Foreign Policy Concept, a new anti-western coalition was needed to offset the stumbling blocks caused by what President Putin considers Western European and American destabilization of the Eurasian continent. The New Russian Foreign Policy Concept emphasizes the role of Russia in creating a multipolar world order, subordinating beneath that role the broad foreign policy objectives of the Russian state, among them the end of American dominance in international affairs.¹⁶⁶ Iran has been among the most vocal proponents of increased collaboration with nearby great powers to offset the effects of western economic sanctions, having found common cause with Russia in this regard. On March 29th, 2023 Iranian foreign minister Hossein Amir Abdullahim expressed his anticipation for a long-term cooperation agreement to be signed with Russia. Such a document would serve as a ‘successor’ of sorts to the March 2001 cooperation agreement signed by Tehran and Moscow, with the agreement extended after the initial decade by a series of five-year terms. The proposed updated agreement would include increased collaboration and

¹⁶³ Advaliani, Emil. “The Expansion of the International North-South Transport Corridor: Geopolitical Updates.” *Silk Road Briefing*, 4 Apr. 2023, www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2023/04/04/the-expansion-of-the-international-north-south-transport-corridor-geopolitical-updates/.

¹⁶⁴ Vinokurov, Evgeny. “Russia and Middle East Need International North-South Transport Corridor.” *Valdai Club*, 21 Feb. 2022, valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-and-middle-east-need-international/.

¹⁶⁵ Vinokurov, 2022.

¹⁶⁶ Barabanov, Oleg. “New Concept of Russian Foreign Policy: Structure and Semantics.” *Valdai Club*, 4 Apr. 2023, valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/new-concept-of-russian-foreign-policy/.

coordination between Russia and Iran in the key areas of trade, regional security and transportation – in line with the goals of the International North-South Transit Corridor. Further, with both states serving as members of the Shanghai Cooperation organization, further cooperation is expected across a range of multinational projects between the two powers and beyond.¹⁶⁷

Igor Levitin, Russian Presidential Aid and State Council Secretary and former Minister of Transport of the Russian Federation (2004-2012) visited a rail route in January 2022 which was due to be used – and later utilized – for a second test in October 2022, in which seven Russian freight rail trains traveled to India after passing through Iran into Central Asia. Levitin’s visit was a major milestone in relations between Iran and Russia. For Iran, Russian cities located on the river Volga and regions further afield including the post-Soviet Central Asian republics and the Black Sea region, with millions of potential consumers will be made available if the INSTC is completed. From Azerbaijan, Iranian exports could venture eastward to the Kazakh port of Aktau on the Caspian Sea, and the establishment of connections to Georgia’s lucrative Black Sea ports could provide access to the European market.¹⁶⁸ Iranian Economy and Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi has stated that he expects the north south transport corridor to be complete by 2025 – the same year the Russian-brokered ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh is due to expire should either Armenia or Azerbaijan request the withdrawal of Russian forces within the six months of the deadline. Progress has already been made in increasing freight transit through the corridor. By February 2023, cargo transport via Russian Railways along the corridor doubled compared to the same month just a year prior, reaching 764,000 metric tons of freight. In total, cargo shipments through the corridor surpassed 2.3 million tons in 2023, out of which about 2.2 million tons were shipped through the western branch of the transportation corridor and 74,200 tons traveled across the Trans-Caspian branch of the corridor.¹⁶⁹

Russian economist Evgeny Vinokurov, in his paper published at the Valdai Discussion Forum and presented in the fourth session of the 11th Valdai Club Middle East Conference discussed his views on why the INSTC is necessary for Russia and the Middle East. In it he introduced the concept of the ‘Eurasian Transport Framework’, which he claims, “lays the groundwork for the development

¹⁶⁷ Mehdi, Sayed. “Iran Says Long-Term Cooperation Pact with Russia to Be Finalized next Month.” *Www.aa.com.tr*, 29 Mar. 2023, www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/iran-says-long-term-cooperation-pact-with-russia-to-be-finalized-next-month/2858620.

¹⁶⁸ Tashjian, Yeghia. “Russia, INSTC and Regional Trade Interconnectivity.” *The Armenian Weekly*, 27 Apr. 2023, armenianweekly.com/2023/04/26/russia-instc-and-regional-trade-interconnectivity/.

¹⁶⁹ Yeghia, 2023.

of trade and investment relationships within Eurasia and addresses the need to accommodate the long-term economic interests of many countries of the Eurasian continent, in particular those that are landlocked.” In his study, Vinokurov estimated that the best-case scenario for total shipments of freight across the INSTC could be as high as 11.9 million tons by 2030, transporting foodstuffs, wood, machinery, textiles, footwear, and metals. Trade flows between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) member states and Azerbaijan, Iran, and Southern Asia would serve as the primary contribution to overall container traffic along the route.¹⁷⁰

Azerbaijan likewise has a critical role alongside Turkey and Georgia as a key node of the Baku-Tblisi-Kars railway system, which will further intertwine the INSTC with the interests of the EAEU. The geography of Azerbaijan as well as its more developed infrastructure – funded in part by state profits from the lucrative Azeri oil and gas fields – is more conducive to serving as a major node for regional trade networks than Armenia, which is landlocked, mountainous and isolated. Therefore, Azerbaijan stands poised to become a major regional geoeconomic player despite its relatively small size.¹⁷¹ Aware of this opportunity, Baku has carried out numerous infrastructure expansion projects. In March 2017, the Astara-Kars railway linking the Azeri town of Astara with the Iranian border city of the same name was inaugurated after being in construction since April 2016. The 8.3-kilometer route will be connected to the Iranian Islamic Republic Railways (RAI) Qazvin network, with which Azerbaijan has aided in the funding of construction for 160 km Rasht – Qazvin rail line.¹⁷² A railroad bridge across the Astarachay River along the border of Azerbaijan and Iran started construction in January 2022 and was completed later that same year. In March 2019, the Gezvin-Rasht railway segment, a 175-kilometer stretch linking Azerbaijan to Iran was inaugurated and the completion of the incomplete 164-kilometer Rascht-Astara rail segment remains a key priority for both Azerbaijan and Iran.

Russia’s opportunities to aid and benefit in the creation of efficient non-western trade networks are frustrated by Azerbaijan’s reticence to risk secondary sanctions from the United States because of its cooperation with Moscow and Tehran. Russia therefore turned to Iran to secure funding for the

¹⁷⁰ Vinokurov, 2022.

¹⁷¹ Tashjian, Yeghia. “Russia, INSTC and Regional Trade Interconnectivity.” *The Armenian Weekly*, 27 Apr. 2023, armenianweekly.com/2023/04/26/russia-inste-and-regional-trade-interconnectivity/.

¹⁷² Smith, Kevin. “Azerbaijan Inaugurates New Link to Iran.” *International Railway Journal*, 6 Mar. 2017, www.railjournal.com/freight/azerbaijan-inaugurates-new-link-to-iran/.

unfinished Rasht-Astara rail line along the coast of the Caspian Sea, with Russian State Council Secretary Igor Levitin visiting the railway site in January 2023, expressing Russia's intentions to invest in and finalize the infrastructure project within three years, which would connect Iran to Azerbaijan through the railway. Additionally, the revival of the disused Soviet-era Jolfa-Nakhichevan railway (which was heavily damaged because of the First Karabakh War) which would connect Iran to Armenia via Azerbaijan's Nakhichevan exclave has been on Russia's docket for several years. Completion of this project would remove the need to build a railway which would directly connect Iran with Armenia through the country's southern Meghri province.¹⁷³ Such regional interconnectivity could theoretically reduce the possibility of instability in the region. Iran signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Azerbaijan on March 11, 2022, to decrease military pressure on Armenia by offering Azerbaijan the construction of railways and highways connecting Azerbaijan proper with Nakhichevan by bypassing Armenia entirely. The terms of the MoU additionally provide for the construction of four bridges across the Aras River, a boundary between Azerbaijan and Iran as well as "unspecified energy infrastructure." Azerbaijan therefore is capable of pressuring both Moscow and Tehran into serving their interests under threat of further destabilization of the Karabakh region and along the border of Armenia, due to their reliance on Baku as a key transit node.¹⁷⁴

Armenia has a possibility of playing a transit role in region if Azerbaijan lifts its blockades on Armenia in the aftermath of a final settlement on the Karabakh question. Russian border guards could provide security of transit between routes which would connect Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan via Syunik province. The official text of the Second Karabakh War ceasefire released on 09th November 2020 by Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, and President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin notes in its ninth article that "All economic and transport links in the region shall be unblocked. The Republic of Armenia shall guarantee the safety of transport communication between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic to organize the unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles and cargo in both directions. Control over transport communication shall be exercised by the Border Guard

¹⁷³ Kaleji, Vali. "Iran and Russia Cooperation in the Construction of Rasht-Astara: The Only Remaining Railway of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)." *Valdai Club*, 30 Mar. 2023, valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/iran-and-russia-cooperation-in-the-construction/?sphrase_id=1516499.

¹⁷⁴ Kaleji, 2023.

Service bodies of the Federal Security Service of Russia.”¹⁷⁵ The specific reference to Russia’s role in controlling border traffic signals that Russia aims to maintain a concrete presence on the ground in the region, serving Russia’s power projection capability and cementing its role as a major broker even after the Karabakh conflict itself has ended.

A secondary, alternative corridor with support from Armenia and Iran may prove to be a challenge to Azerbaijan in the future and another opportunity for Russia to gain from non-western trading networks. The Persian Gulf - Black Sea corridor is a proposed network intended to connect Mumbai in India with the Iranian city of Bandar Abbas before heading through Armenia and into Russia and Europe. The network is planned to operate parallel to the INSTC, but will bypass Azerbaijan entirely – an attractive prospect for India as Azerbaijan’s relations with the country are poor because of close Azeri ties with Turkey and post particularly, Pakistan. Iran’s support for Armenia parallels that of India, having been a staunch supporter of Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenian-Indian ties have grown closer in recent years, with Armenia making key purchases of military equipment from the South Asian state.¹⁷⁶ In February 2022, Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan announced that the Armenian state will be accepting bids to start construction on the Sisian-Kajaran stretch of the Armenian North South Highway Project. The planned route will consist of numerous bridges and road tunnels which will avoid the difficult topography of Southern Armenia’s Syunik region. The project may gain funding via an Indian Line of Credit – not an unusual proposal as India has already provided similar funding to its neighbors over the past decade, increasing from approximately three billion dollars in 2014 to nearly fifteen billion dollars in 2020. The European Union has likewise become more adamant to engage with Armenia and on 2nd July 2021 announced five flagship initiatives which primarily focus on the development of transport infrastructure in the Syunik region.

On April 20, 2023, Armenia hosted trilateral consultations in Yerevan with India and Iran, signaling its increasingly diversified foreign policy following a decline in the country’s relationship with Russia. Various deputies and assistants associated with the foreign ministries of the three

¹⁷⁵ Office of the Prime Minister of Armenia. “Statement by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the President of the Russian Federation.” *The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia*, 11 Oct. 2020, www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2020/11/10/Announcement/.

¹⁷⁶ Haas, Davin. “How the Global Battle to Secure Supply Chains Is Impacting the Armenia-Azerbaijan Dispute.” *Emerging Europe*, 4 May 2023, emerging-europe.com/news/how-the-global-battle-to-secure-trade-routes-is-impacting-the-armenia-azerbaijan-dispute/.

countries were involved in the talks, which according to a text released by the Armenian foreign ministry would primarily focus on “economic issues and regional communications channels.” Though Armenia’s focus was on economic matters, there was additionally the topic of alternative non-Russian sources of security due to Armenia’s loss of confidence in Russia’s capacity to operate as a reliable security partner. Baku’s occasional threat to establish the ‘Zangezur Corridor’ through the south of Armenia has attracted the ire of Tehran, and such an action would – in the words of Iranian officials – constitute a “red line” for Iran, prompting them to intervene.¹⁷⁷

The interruption of arms shipments from Russia to Armenia have incentivized it to look elsewhere for munitions, and according to some reports, India proved to be a willing seller of artillery, drones and missiles. The Armenian military-connected news website Hetq reported that deals have been confirmed for various multi-launch rocket systems, anti-tank munitions and several artillery systems. The trilateral discussions further discussed possibilities for expansion of the Persian Gulf – Black Sea trade route to streamline the process of sending goods from India into the West and Russia. Further driving home Armenia’s sense of abandonment by its traditional ally Russia, the Armenian ambassador to India Yuri Babakhanyan stated during a speech to the India Central Asia Foundation on 13th April 2023 “We [Armenia and India] have very long historical ties. I call this civilizational partnership... someday we will turn this into a strategic partnership and I think that day is close. We share common interests and we have no contradictions. This must be institutionalized into long-term cooperation between the two countries... Armenia felt abandoned by the West and Russia as the Trump administration’s half-hearted efforts to broker a ceasefire came late.”¹⁷⁸

Iran opposes Azeri claims for the establishment of a corridor through Syunik to connect with Nakhichevan and Turkey, which would jeopardize Iran’s 40km border with Armenia. Iranian opposition to the Zangezur corridor project stems back to the origins of the modern Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Significant damage was wrought to the Iranian economy due to wartime damage severing Iranian railway access to the vast transport network of the Soviet Union. A major goal of Iran in the context of the INSTC is to restore war-damaged cross-border transport networks, providing

¹⁷⁷ “<https://eurasianet.org/Armenia-Hosts-First-Trilateral-Meeting-With-Iranian-And-Indian-Officials>.” *Eurasianet.org*, 21 Apr. 2023, [eurasianet.org/armenia-hosts-first-trilateral-meeting-with-iranian-and-indian-officials](https://eurasianet.org/Armenia-Hosts-First-Trilateral-Meeting-With-Iranian-And-Indian-Officials).

¹⁷⁸ Peri, Dinakar. “India-Armenia Partnership Civilizational, Will Turn into Strategic Partnership Soon: Envoy.” *The Hindu*, 14 Apr. 2023, www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-armenia-partnership-civilizational-will-turn-into-strategic-partnership-soon-envoy/article66738234.ece.

greater access for the Iranian economy to the Caucasus and broader Eurasian economic sphere.¹⁷⁹ Transport between Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan proper in and of itself is not an issue for Iran. Azeri traffic is permitted to access Nakhichevan by bypassing Armenia and traveling across the Iranian border instead. Rather, Iranian objections to the creation of a ‘Zangezur Corridor’ primarily concerns the specific definition of route asserted in Azeri rhetoric – that is, the ‘Corridor’ would operate according to its own unique legal regime rather than Armenian law and provide Turkey with the means to significantly expand its economic influence and further progress Ankara’s goals of establishing a pan-Turkic sphere. Furthermore, the establishment of the ‘Zangezur Corridor’ could cut Iran – which remains under western sanctions – off from the economic benefits gained from Azeri traffic through the country’s north. The provision of a unique extraterritorial legal status to a ‘Zangezur Corridor’ would likewise severely limit Iran’s access to the Armenian economy and by extension, its only merging point with the Eurasian Economic Union.¹⁸⁰ Iran’s power in the Caucasian region rests on its important status as a key transit node for East-West traffic. Therefore, Iran has continuously objected in various ways to the creation of the Zangezur corridor, viewing it as threatening its influence in the Southern Caucasus.

Conclusion

The results of the research contained in this study indicate that the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis serves as a **microcosm of the geopolitical challenges facing Russia in the twenty first century**. Russia’s increased isolation because of NATO encirclement and western economic pressures has incentivized it to take an extremely cautious approach towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, to **maintain both its capability of power projection in the remaining areas of the Russian near-abroad where it still possesses a preeminent geopolitical role, and to build new avenues of economic development outside western Euro-Atlantic institutions**. The continuation of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis serves as a stumbling block to this end. Regional economic projects including the International North-South Transport Corridor, the Persian Gulf – Black Sea Corridor

¹⁷⁹ Yeghia, 2023.

¹⁸⁰ Bonner, Brian. “Geopolitical Transformation in the South Caucasus.” *GIS Reports*, 10 Mar. 2023, www.gisreportsonline.com/r/geopolitical-transformation-south-caucasus/.

and the Rasht-Astara Railway cannot be fully realized to their maximum potential if the specter of instability is an ever-present, real threat. However, in aiming to maintain its capabilities of power projection while minimizing the risk of regional instability, **Russia cannot risk alienating Armenia**, a historically staunch ally, by simply withdrawing its peacekeeping forces upon Azerbaijan's request **without a negotiated final settlement**, to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe if the remaining area of Armenian-majority Nagorno-Karabakh falls entirely under Azeri control with no provision for local autonomy. **The New Russian Foreign Policy Concept**, with its emphasis on **multipolarity**, very likely will serve as a basis for the creation of a **Russo-Iranian sphere of influence** as Russia aims to disentangle itself socioeconomically from the west, and any form of western-style liberal institutionalism. Tehran and Moscow, having a broad range of shared conflicts with the west, find ever-more reasons to cooperate with each other.

Turkey, under the helm of President Erdogan, will continue to serve as a full-throated **benefactor of Azeri interests in the region**. The rhetoric of 'one country, two states' retains its salience. Turkish policymakers understand that Armenia's only feasible security guarantor is Russia, however fragile said security is in reality. They likewise understand that Russia, having been isolated from the western world, **will be more willing to make compromises with other regional powers surrounding the Caucasus to maintain the remaining influence it has** in its near-abroad. This necessarily would include avoiding policies that alienate Turkey, a NATO member state. This means that **Armenia's protection from Turkish power plays is not formidable**. Turkey, working in tandem with Azerbaijan, is likely capable of **pressuring Russia to use its leverage over Armenia to make Yerevan concede to the establishment of the Zangezur corridor**, finally establishing a concrete trans-Caucasian route for Turkey to extend its political and economic reach directly to the Caspian Sea and into Central Asia. Further into the future, this could lead to conflict with Russia, who views the former Soviet states of Central Asia as **integral parts of the Russian near-abroad**.

Iran has sought to **further integrate its economic policy with that of Russia**, having found common cause in seeking to work around systematic western economic sanctions, in addition to dissuading the west and its organs (NATO, the European Union) from penetrating deeper into the vicinity of its northern border. Furthermore, Iran faces the question of **how to keep its large northern Azeri population from being mobilized by Azerbaijan proper into making attempts at secession**, or forming a fifth column within its borders. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a visceral issue for Iran, as munitions during armed exchanges have landed within its sovereign territory, **placing its own**

citizens and national security at risk. However, Iran is seeking to engage with Azerbaijan on **regional transport infrastructure that does not conflict with Iranian interests**, including the construction of border crossings and railway lines. Iran is skeptical of Turkish intentions in the region, and remains opposed to the creation of the Zangezur corridor, which could cut Iran off from the core of Armenia, a key ally in the region, and deprive it of the much needed income from Azeri transit between Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan proper. The development of alternative trade routes in the region have incentivized Iran to **invest more resources into its Caspian Sea trading infrastructure.** The International North-South Transport Corridor, if fully developed and utilized, can serve as an economic lifeline for Iran, and make the challenges posed by western economic sanctions increasingly negligible. However, a resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the only way in which this potential can be maximized.

The chances of the Armenians of Karabakh gaining a favorable settlement are slim. President Ilham Aliyev has made it clear that **no form of autonomy will be accepted.** For President Aliyev, justice for the national humiliation Azerbaijan faced in the aftermath of the First Karabakh War will not be accomplished until **all of Nagorno-Karabakh submits to Baku.** Azerbaijan's economic power, combined with the military support of Turkey, means that if Russia complies with the request for withdrawal, the remainder of the de facto Republic of Artsakh will almost immediately come under Azeri control. Armenia must therefore **seek to improve its domestic infrastructure and prepare for an influx of the remaining ethnic Armenian population of Karabakh.** A potential avenue for Armenia's future is the rehabilitation of disused Soviet-era railways to reconnect with Iran through Nakhichevan, and to aid in the reconstruction of transport connections to Baku, through which it can maintain economic ties to Russia. In this way Armenia can **serve as a transport hub due to its central location in the Southern Caucasus**, and potentially reverse the economic stagnation it has faced for a generation. **The primary driving force in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict today, then, is the dynamic of regional great powers both cooperating – and - competing in the South Caucasus to maximize and consolidate the relative power they possess as transport facilitators between east and west, north and south, while aiming to avoid or mitigate western pressures.**

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