THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT: ESCALATING VIOLENCE AND SECURITY RISKS

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I. INTRODUCTION

On September 27, 2020, significant military escalation broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The two countries are engaged in a long-term ethnopolitical conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (a small territory of the South Caucasus with an area of only 4.4 thousand square kilometres). It was one of the first interethnic clashes on the territory of the former USSR. For about three decades it has transformed from an intercommunal and inter-republican dispute within one single state into a protracted international conflict with unclear prospects for its resolution. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the two newly independent countries in the South Caucasus have become involved in a military-political confrontation from the very moment of their independence. Until today, there are no diplomatic relations between them, and their border has been turned into a kind of front line.

New military escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh has again drawn attention to the situation in the Caucasus region. The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is not a new phenomenon in international politics. Many of its elements, such as the positions of the opposing sides themselves, as well as approaches of actors engaged in the peace settlement process, are well known. There has also been more than one escalation on the Karabakh contact line or along the interstate border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The escalation in July 2020 is one of the most recent large-scale cases. What is the novelty of the September situation? How dangerous is a new surge in the armed confrontation? Is there a great threat of internationalization of the conflict and what trajectories of its development are possible?
II. THE STRONGEST ESCALATION AFTER CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT OF 1994

Armenia and Azerbaijan have been survived periodic outbursts of violence in recent years, but the current fighting is the most serious since Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a ceasefire in May 1994. In its scales, it has exceeded both the four-day war of 2016 and the recent July border escalation.

First of all, it is worth paying attention to the wider theatre of military operations. They go not only along the 193-kilometre contact line of the conflicting parties in Nagorno-Karabakh but also spread to the territory of both Armenia and Azerbaijan itself. In this context, we can note incidents near the town of Vardenis in the Armenian Syunik region, located between the Sevan lake and Kelbajar region (one of the seven areas outside the former Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region/NKAO occupied by the Armenian troops as a result of the war in 1991-1994). It is a very important location because Kelbajar, as well as Lachin, ensure corridors connecting the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) and Armenia. Meanwhile, one of the toughest disputes in the Yerevan-Baku negotiations is the width of the corridor linking Armenia with NKR. At the same time, Armenia targeted large Azerbaijani cities Ganja and Mingachevir with missile strikes. Ganja, home to several hundred thousand residents and the country’s second-largest city, is located roughly 100 kilometres away from Stepanakert, Nagorno-Karabakh’s capital, and so is Mingachevir.

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1 Armenian MoD reports about shelling attacks on Vardenis: https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/52282/
2 Azerbaijan says Armenia targets cities outside conflict zone;
The situation can be changed and nowadays it is hard to say whether the Tavush or Nakhichevan directions, which located outside of the Karabakh contact line but being previously the arenas of confrontation, would be involved. However, any continuation of the armed confrontation is fraught with the internationalization of the conflict. Today, this threat is increasingly likely than ever especially if the two theatres of the Armenian-Azerbaijani fighting (Karabakh itself and the border regions) are involved simultaneously. The risks of this development are too great.

Following the idea of internationalization, it is impossible not to mention the role of Turkey. Ankara's support for Baku's positions is not new. Back in 1993, the Republic of Turkey closed the land border with Armenia and since then, there is no communication between the countries by land. Earlier, Ankara was the only member-state of the OSCE Minsk group that supported Azerbaijan without any nuances. However today there is no other country among the neighbours or involved mediators who would so consistently advocate the complete victory of Baku over Yerevan and Stepanakert on the battlefield. In his speech to the country's parliament, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused the OSCE Minsk Group in passivity and ineffectiveness and concluded that any demands on a ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh are unacceptable. Erdogan also targeted “big trio“ of Co-Chairs and identified his country’s national interest with Azerbaijani ones: “I want to reiterate that we, as Turkey, are siding with Azerbaijan in their struggle in Nagorno-Karabakh”.

Since the end of September 2020, Turkish representatives have talked about the de-occupation of

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Azerbaijani lands no less, if not more, than Azerbaijani officials. Even the thesis about the actual identity of the national interests of the two countries is voiced. This position casts doubt on the only consensus between the Russian Federation and the West in Eurasia - the "Basic (or Updated Madrid) principles" of the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement. This means nothing less than an attempt to review the negotiation process. It is obvious that Ankara is already trying to offer conditions that do not directly correspond to the “Basic principles” agreed many times prior to the current escalation. This document says nothing about the "liberation of the land" by military means, although the de-occupation of seven regions of Azerbaijan outside the former NKAO and the return of refugees are proposed. However, these measures are also linked to the provisional status of Nagorno-Karabakh (actually understood as a unit within the borders of the former NKAO) and a legally binding referendum to determine its final legal status. Now it is clear the current Turkish approach is not kinked with the common international position of the trio of OSCE Minsk Group Co-chairs.

Iran looks like a contrast to Turkey. From the first day of September escalation, the Foreign Ministry of the Islamic Republic declared its readiness to act as a mediator. Moreover, Tehran has already had such an experience. At the peak of the military confrontation in May 1992, it was in Iran that the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia met and issued a joint statement on the ceasefire and consequent conflict settlement. It was not implemented, and subsequently, Tehran reduced its activity as the mediator. However, its interest in the

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[^5]: Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries: [https://www.osce.org/mg/51152](https://www.osce.org/mg/51152)

settlement of the conflict between two neighbouring countries in Karabakh in this country has remained. Turkey does not seem to trust the current mediation format. It makes its position closer to official Tehran. At the same time, some differences in nuances exist. Iran objects any military solutions while it is against the “Basic principles” offering deployment of international peacekeepers. Tehran for a long time has insisted on the settlement based on the activities of regional actors (the two conflicting parties and Eurasian neighbouring powers- Iran itself, Russia and Turkey with no the U.S or EU engagement).\(^7\)

III. WHY DID SEPTEMBER, 2020 BECOME THE STARTING POINT OF NEW ESCALATION?

The 2020 growing tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan have broken the “Karabakh pendulum” - specific situation when clashes swing back to rounds of negotiations. Unlike the four-day war in April 2016, when the pendulum returned to the field of diplomacy on the fifth day, that didn’t happen this summer after the July outbreak of military fighting. There were, of course, efforts to minimize the risk of armed unrest on the border, primarily by Russian diplomacy. Contact was activated via both the Foreign Ministry and Defense Ministry channels. Russia’s efforts had the backing of the West, and both sides in the conflict saw Moscow’s mediation as a largely positive aspect. Yet negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan did not resume, even at a symbolic level, and the excuse given of the new coronavirus pandemic wasn’t very convincing: it didn’t prevent other foreign meetings by representatives of the two countries at the same time.

There are other nuances to the current drastic escalation, too, including increased Turkish involvement. Soon after the July border clashes, Turkish and Azerbaijani troops held joint exercises. Representatives of Ankara started speaking out about the ineffectiveness of the peace process, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, speaking earlier this month at the 75th UN General Assembly, described Armenia as the biggest obstacle to long-term peace in the South Caucasus. This is not to say that the new escalation was provoked by Turkey, but it undeniably contributed to Azerbaijan’s tougher position amid the stalled talks.⁸

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⁸ Erdogan Says Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Undermines “Peaceful Future” Of World:
Another important factor is changes to Baku’s diplomatic lineup. Elmar Mammadyarov, Azerbaijan’s long-serving foreign minister (2004-2020), retired during the July border clashes. His replacement is the former education minister, Jeyhun Bayramov, who does not have much diplomatic experience. Meanwhile, Hikmet Hajiyev, a foreign policy advisor to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, now has an expanded operational role. But the issue is not so much the new appointments as Mammadyarov’s departure. For the last two years, he was the chief optimist over what concessions the new Armenian government might be prepared to make under Nikol Pashinyan. Ever since Armenia’s Velvet Revolution, which brought Pashinyan to power in 2018, Baku had nurtured the hope that the new prime minister, who has no connections to Nagorno-Karabakh and who, on the contrary, had waged war on Armenia’s “Karabakh clan” (whether or not that clan really exists is another question), could find a new opening to resolve the long-running conflict. To be fair, it wasn’t only Mammadyarov who held such hopes: they were shared by many influential experts and diplomats in the West. Even within Armenia, Pashinyan’s opponents tried to label him a traitor who had sold the country’s national interests in exchange for Western money.

In reality, however, the position of Armenia’s new prime minister on Nagorno-Karabakh was tougher than ever, as evidenced by his demands that representatives of the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh republic be directly involved in negotiations, not to mention his bold statement that “Karabakh is Armenia”. These actions could not fail to reinforce the position of hawks in Baku. Following the July border clashes, Azerbaijan’s foreign policy line became tougher. After all, the status quo doesn’t suit Azerbaijan at all, since it makes the country feel like the losing side. Baku has never ruled out the use of force to try to solve the problem of

9 Pashinyan calls for unification between Armenia and Karabakh: https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-calls-for-unification-between-armenia-and-karabakh
its territorial integrity. The current escalation is a direct consequence of freezing the negotiations process. There have never been such short intervals between major armed flare-ups in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Even the four-day war of 2016 was preceded by a nearly four-month lull. Now there are two hotspots in the standoff: one on the border, 300 kilometres from the line of contact, and another in Nagorno-Karabakh itself.
IV. WHERE IS RUSSIA?

On the fifth day of the September 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani escalation Laurence Broers, well-known British scholar, editor-in-chief of the academic journal “The Caucasus Survey”\textsuperscript{10} wrote in his twitter: «Where is Russia? I’m trying to figure out Russia’s role/strategy + set out some thoughts here; would be interested to hear other’s (constructive) thoughts on this (thread)».\textsuperscript{11} Naturally, Moscow’s cautious position seems to many in Armenia to fail to meet Russia’s obligations as its CSTO (Common Security Treaty Organization) ally. In other conflicts in the former Soviet arena, from South Ossetia and Abkhazia to Crimea, Moscow took far tougher action. So why is it exercising such restraint where Armenia and Azerbaijan are concerned?

The Kremlin’s reaction reflects several fundamental aspects of Russian policy in the region. Firstly, Moscow does not have a universal approach to regulating all the conflicts in the Caucasus, let alone across the former Soviet Union. The model used in the breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was not used in Transnistria, just as what happened in Crimea was not repeated in the Donbas. Moscow doesn’t follow any preset standards or ideological tenets; it simply reacts to the dynamic of the conflict on the ground.

Secondly, for Russia, even in multilateral structures, bilateral relations are particularly valued. One key difference between Azerbaijan and Georgia, where Russia responded harshly to the escalation of August 2008, is that Baku does not accompany its actions to


\textsuperscript{11} https://twitter.com/laurencebroers/status/1311793429425332231?s=21
restore its territorial integrity with anti-Russian rhetoric. On the contrary, Azerbaijan looks favourably upon Moscow as a mediator in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and always has, and Putin and his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev have a good relationship. Baku may be sceptical about the prospects of joining the CSTO or the EEU (Eurasian Economic Union), but unlike Georgia, it doesn’t aspire to join NATO or the EU and is openly critical of many Western political and social standards.

Moscow and Baku also cooperate in many areas, from cross-border security and energy to the use of Caspian resources and transport projects. The Kremlin does not want to see Azerbaijan turn into another Georgia, and so does not intend to push Baku onto the path of confrontation. If Azerbaijan’s leadership itself chooses to turn its back on Russia and pursue a path of Euro-Atlantic solidarity, then Moscow’s position will, of course, become far less cautious and nuanced. But until that happens, Russia will strive to perform a balancing act between Yerevan and Baku.

It was Moscow that brokered a ceasefire in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in May 1994 and put an end to the four-day war in April 2016. It’s likely that this time, too, it’s Russia that will get the two sides back to the negotiating table. Unlike in Abkhazia or the Donbas, Russia’s role in this conflict is viewed positively by both the United States and the EU, not to mention the two sides in the conflict. For Moscow, it’s not worth risking that capital just for another opportunity to demonstrate its strength, though that option can’t be ruled out altogether, especially as a response to attempts by other world powers to disrupt the status quo to force Russia out of the region. Russia can also not be compared with Turkey. While Ankara ignores the Armenian interests at all treating Yerevan as its geopolitical opponent and being afraid of precedent of the genocides’ recognition Moscow considers Baku as a partner although unlike Armenia Russian does not share the same integration structures with Azerbaijan.
Thus Russia’s commitments to Armenia as part of a Moscow-led regional security bloc do not include the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region where fighting is raging between Armenia and Azerbaijan, President Vladimir Putin said on October 7, 2020, explaining the Russian reaction on the hostilities between Baku and Yerevan. At the same time commitments themselves are confirmed.12

Nevertheless, one novelty can push Russia to make some revisions to its current approaches to the Yerevan-Baku confrontation bases on the status quo prior to the 2020 developments. That is growing strategic Turkish-Azerbaijani cooperation and strengthening of the Ankara’s influence on both foreign and domestic policies of Azerbaijan. This variable should be seriously taken into the account especially in the context of the Turkish offensive in the Middle East, Northern Africa, Mediterranean basin and the Balkans.

12 Russia’s Security Guarantees for Armenia Don’t Extend to Karabakh, Putin Says: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/10/07/russias-security-guarantees-for-armenia-dont-extend-to-karabakh-putin-says-a71687
V. IS THE ONGOING WAR SCENARIO INEVITABLE?

Possible risks and uncertainties were listed above. There are more of them than ever before. However, a number of parameters of the September escalation allow us to conclude that there are still opportunities for the confrontation not to grow. First, neither side has a quick and decisive victory. Armenia has no desire or need for any territorial expansion. And if the "Basic principles" of the conflict settlement presuppose a legally binding referendum on the status of Karabakh, nothing of the kind is envisaged for the adjacent regions that were not part of the NKAO in Soviet times. They should be liberated from the Armenian troops. In this regard, the new "load" of territories will not work in favour of Yerevan. However, Baku does not have an overwhelming advantage to destroy the infrastructure of the unrecognized NKR. Of course, Azerbaijan has an advantage. Baku has more military weapons and a growing population. But this superiority is not decisive. Azerbaijan does not have enough military resources, both in terms of personnel and equipment, to win a decisive victory in Karabakh.

There are several possible outcomes to the current situation. The most likely is a battle for small and not particularly important pockets of land, allowing for the symbolic declaration of a "victory," and a more concrete PR victory at home. That strategy may look foolproof in theory, but in practice, raising the bar in a conflict makes it very difficult to stop as planned. The opponent may have an entirely different view of things, and then a new strand of the confrontation is inevitable. Under the current circumstances, there is a high probability of prolonging the positional war, and economically this is a serious blow for the two conflicting countries. This scenario is a work of attrition. Furthermore, there is a high probability of increasing the efforts of intermediaries to "force negotiations" by diplomatic, not military
means. In this regard, Russia and the West have no special differences, unlike other points of the post-Soviet space. If today in Karabakh, as in Abkhazia or South Ossetia, there is a situation where one of the warring parties would clearly focus on Russia, and the other on the United States, the way out of the impasse would be much harder. And it is obvious that the longer the conflict lasts, the greater the international pressure to bring it to a negotiated format, if not to end it. This, of course, does not guarantee against further re-escalations but at least it brings some comfort, at least temporarily.