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**THE SECOND KARABAKH
WAR, OR THE FIRST POST-
POST-SOVIET WAR**

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Second Karabakh War, sometimes called the six-week war, took the lives of thousands of Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers, abruptly changed the status quo in the Karabakh conflict that had existed since the end of the First Karabakh War in 1994, and reformatted the geopolitical configuration of the South Caucasus.

It is also likely to become a turning point in the history of the post-Soviet world.

It happened so recently that emotions and propaganda still prevail in the information flows. Data is fragmentary; even the exact number of casualties is not known. Exchange of prisoners of war is still ongoing. Borders are being delineated. Many details about the course of the warfare are unclear. It is too soon for conclusions.

Now that the fighting is over, media battles are becoming more heated. Myth-making is on the rise in various groups and communities in third countries as well as in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. Narratives about the Second Karabakh War vary depending on the stance of journalists and experts in the political realities of their own countries, including countries far away from the Caucasus.

This said one can already try to wrap one's mind around what happened and what it means for the region and the wider world.

II. THE 20TH CENTURY FIGHTING AGAINST THE 21ST

Lasting just forty-four days from 27 September to 10 November 2020, the Second Karabakh War was one of the largest wars in the former USSR in terms of losses (probably over 10,000 soldiers on both sides), of the daily number of casualties and the number of troops involved, reaching 200,000 on both sides combined by the last days of the fighting. The losses it incurred over six weeks are comparable to those of the war in Donbas that lasted almost a year.

The Second Karabakh War was fought by sides with vastly different resources and technical capacities. Nagorno-Karabakh used technologies and strategies dating back from the 1980s and 1990s; it employed tanks, lacked state-of-the-art dynamic defence and had almost no drones. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan, an oil-rich state, spend a quarter of a century preparing to fight a modern war. At a time of relatively high oil prices, Azerbaijan used its revenues from oil to buy modern weaponry. It also had Turkey's direct support in the planning of military operations and in arms supplies, including a virtually unlimited supply of high-precision Bayraktar TB2 combat drones carrying missiles and bombs.

As a result, Azerbaijan controlled the airspace over the war zone throughout the war. In the first days of the fighting, it destroyed dozens of anti-aircraft guns that Karabakh inherited from the Soviet army at the time of the disintegration of the USSR; the exact number is unknown since some of the guns were dummies. A number of Karabakh's radars were also taken down in the first days, followed by parts of S300 surface-to-air missile systems and the launcher of a Tor missile system, also of Russian make. Drones continued to effectively destroy the military equipment of the Karabakh army, including tanks, armed personnel carriers and artillery.

This was in fact the first war in history where the main military goals were achieved by means of drones; as necessary, drone attacks were coordinated with fire from multiple rocket launchers.

Arguably, in military terms, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh has seen the long-expected revolution in military strategy, made possible by Turkey's strategic planning capacity and Turkey's arsenal of drones.

It is noteworthy that traditional aviation was barely used by either of the sides in this war. While it is well known that unmanned combat and reconnaissance aerial vehicles are many times cheaper than traditional aviation, this was the first war where aviation was consistently replaced with UAVs. Apart from the cost of a military jet, there is the matter of training pilots; even Turkey has only a few dozen trained pilots who can man F-16 jets (General Dynamics F-16 Fighting Falcon). Having tested its drone strategy in local wars in Africa and Syria, Turkey proceeded to apply it in a carefully planned military campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Subjective factors also played a role. Now that the war is over, analysts point out that Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh did not do a good job in terms of fortifying its line of defence. Just like Azerbaijan, Armenia had a quarter of a century to prepare for this war, but all it built was one line of fortifications, which proved insufficient.

Apparently, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh were relying on their capacity for defence with artillery and missiles, a grave miscalculation in the modern conditions. Already in the previous major escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh in April 2016, there were clear signs of the potential role of drones in a modern war. It will take a while to figure out why the Armenian military ignored these trends. One of the reasons may have been exaggerated reliance on the political deterrence toolbox and underestimation of the likelihood of a large-scale war

in Nagorno-Karabakh. Over-confidence following victory in the First Karabakh War may have also played a part, alongside the overall political situation, the change of power in Armenia and turbulence in domestic politics. Combined with strategic miscalculations, all this may have contributed to the Armenians' defeat.

It was by means of drones that Azerbaijan broke through the defence of the Karabakh army in the Horadiz gorge, a key area in the south of Karabakh ten to fifteen kilometres wide between the river Araks and a mountain range.



Source: https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/52755/?fbclid=IwAR1ptHBhsHDE038Hc-M2FXOT0HnqAfuL_OCuktoUne57jxCvi_2IrM6gQ5U

Incurring heavy losses, Azerbaijan's troops made slow progress across the defence lines; by the end of the first decade of October, they broke into the flatland that lies between the south of Karabakh and the border with Armenia. In the northern and central parts of Karabakh, drones were less instrumental due to the terrain. The Karabakh army was able to repel Azerbaijan's westward offensive by holding its positions in the semi-circle of mountains that rise in natural terraces.

Azerbaijan's successful offensive in the south determined the outcome of the war. Relying on a continuous supply of new armaments from Turkey, Azerbaijan's army gained control of the entire Araks valley and progressed toward the north, in the direction of the forests of central Karabakh.

Azerbaijan's advantages included logistics and transportation. It delivered military supplies and troops to the frontlines via numerous roads and two railroads. Armenian troops were chiefly transported via one road, the M-12; the only other road crossed several mountain passes and had major vulnerabilities that reduced its capacity. As a result, the rate at which Azerbaijan moved its troops was about ten times that of the Armenians.

Azerbaijan's northern offensive against the central parts of Nagorno-Karabakh relied on mountain rifle regiments and special ops units; the need for the latter may be the reason why Azerbaijan imported mercenaries via Turkey from parts of northern Syria under Turkey's control.

Outnumbering Karabakh's army approximately three to one, Azerbaijan's troops eventually succeeded in seizing Shushi, a fortress dominating over Nagorno-Karabakh's capital Stepanakert, and cut off the road to Armenia.

The November 9, 2020 ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia was the only way to stop the fighting and prevent the extermination or deportation of the remaining Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. No Armenian civilians remain on the territory captured by Azerbaijan's troops.

In line with the ceasefire agreement, Azerbaijan retained control of all the land that was captured during this war, and Armenians had to leave those territories that had not been part of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region in the USSR. Out of the 12,000 square kilometers controlled by Nagorno-Karabakh prior to the second war, it is now left with around 3,000, plus a five-kilometre wide corridor to Armenia. A Russian peacekeeper force was flown to Nagorno-Karabakh to be in charge of maintaining security and preventing the resumption of hostilities.

III. THE GEOPOLITICS OF WAR

Azerbaijan chose the perfect timing for starting a war. The USA were busy with landmark elections, and the European Union, with post-Brexit challenges and an overall management crisis. The NATO was trying to sort out complicated relations with its member state Turkey. Russia was facing problems in Ukraine and Belarus, dealing with the North Stream, western sanctions and its deteriorating relations with the West in general. All these players, alongside the rest of the world, were also under the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Accordingly, the South Caucasus was relegated to the farthest margins of international attention, and this was the gamble of Azerbaijan's and Turkey's leadership in starting this war. It worked. The war unfolded rapidly, there was no stopping it by political means such as statements, calls for peace or diplomatic activity. No external actor resorted to any other means until Russia entered the game at a moment when there was no doubt about the outcome of the war.

This appears to be in line with the current trend. It is increasingly typical for the modern world that international players are reluctant to interfere in local conflicts. At the time when the Cold War unfolded in a bipolar world dominated by the NATO and the countries of the Warsaw Pact, even the remotest local conflict, from Grenade to Palestine, became a battlefield between the two competing superpowers. This is all in the past. As regional powers rise to prominence, local conflicts do not necessarily become part of global politics. They remain local and only attract the attention of the powers that have a stake, usually regional ones. In the former Soviet space, the external players fighting for influence no longer include the United States, more often, it is Poland, Romania or Turkey, and in Central Asia, also China.

Turkey played a pivotal role in the unleashing and the outcome of the Second Karabakh War, and became its main beneficiary, arguably, even more so than Azerbaijan.

Already before the war, Turkey had a strong economic presence in the South Caucasus, chiefly in Georgia and Azerbaijan. It had always supported Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in terms of diplomacy, lobbying and economic sanctions. However, it did not become directly involved in the conflict with military means.

This time, it was Turkey's supply of armaments, strategic planning, command and training of military personnel that enabled Azerbaijan to unleash a state-of-the-art military operation against Nagorno-Karabakh. Judging from the way the fighting unfolded, Turkey's support was pivotal to Azerbaijan's fast and decisive victory.

As a result of this war, the South Caucasus has transformed into a region where Russia and Turkey are competing for power. Moscow will no longer be able to act in this region without coordinating its moves with Ankara. A few months ago, any escalation on the frontline could be stopped by a shout from Moscow; this is no longer the case. The new configuration is similar to the one existing in Syria, where Russia has to bear Turkish interests in mind. The emergence of Turkey as a political player has overhauled regional politics in the South Caucasus.

The presence of Russian peacekeepers, seen as Russia's new leverage over Azerbaijan, is hardly enough to compensate for Turkey's presence. There are in fact reasons to doubt that having peacekeepers in the conflict zone will increase Russia's influence over Azerbaijan. For example, in no way did its control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia give Russia leverage over Georgia's domestic or foreign politics. The same can be said for Donbas and Ukrainian politics. Even in Moldova, Russia's engagement hardly has to do with Russian peacekeepers stationed in Transnistria.

Overall, Russia's influence on the parties to the Karabakh conflict did not go up; with regard to Azerbaijan, it went down. Following the war, Baku no longer needs Russia in the security sphere to the extent that it used to; its orientation shifted toward Turkey.

Russian peacekeepers will soon become a source of exasperation for Baku. In popular perceptions, Russia will soon be viewed in Azerbaijan as the player that checked the progress of Azerbaijan's troops, preventing them from resolving the Karabakh problem once and for all.

In Armenia, societal attitudes to Russia deteriorated during the war, and its unfavourable outcome will make them worse. Perceptions of security in Russia and Armenia are asymmetric. While in Armenia, the security of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh is not viewed separately from that of residents of the Republic of Armenia, in Russia, the two are quite distinct. Armenia is a member state of the CSTO, whereas the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic is not. These differing perceptions are not acknowledged by Armenian society and cause resentment.

This does not mean Russia has lost the South Caucasus. The Armenian-populated territory of Nagorno-Karabakh outside Azerbaijan's control will remain under Nagorno-Karabakh control even though the ceasefire agreement says nothing whatsoever about its status.

Meanwhile, the Turkish military presence in Azerbaijan will become a fact regardless of how it is officially defined. Security used to be a Russian trademark in the former Soviet space; it was adequately marketed and sold well. In the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan and Turkey demonstrated that Russia is not the only supplier of this type of goods and that it faces competition, including from regional powers such as Turkey.

IV. THE CONSEQUENCES

The war overhauled Armenia's political layout. At the time of writing, it is hard to predict political developments in Armenia over weeks, let alone months. Armenia is going through a political crisis and emotional shock; turbulent developments cannot be ruled out. In the history of the South Caucasus, there were cases when a national leader had to step down following military defeat (Musalibov and Elchibey in the early 1990s) but there is also one where the president remained in power after losing a war (Saakashvili in 2008). There are many options; one thing that is clear is that the defeat will directly affect politics.

The popularity of Armenia's post-Velvet-Revolution government is plummeting. Society is polarized, the ruling class is weak, and so is the opposition. Many elements of the political reality will need to be rebuilt from scratch. Post-revolution as well as pre-revolution elites are viewed as outdated and incapable of handling the challenges that Armenia is facing as a nation. Post-war economic decline is a certain prospect. Post-war reconstruction of Nagorno-Karabakh is a challenge; Armenia is also hosting thousands of refugees who have nowhere to go.

The future of the Karabakh conflict is vague. The trilateral document signed by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia on November 9 is a ceasefire agreement, not a peace treaty. It does not mention the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. It would be naïve to expect a document signed overnight amidst an escalating crisis to resolve a conflict that did not lend itself to resolution for thirty years.

Apparently, it is envisaged that following the implementation of the agreement, the parties in conflict will move toward a peaceful resolution. However, it does not sound logical that

following a military victory, Azerbaijan will become ready for the compromises that it rejected before the war.

In Azerbaijan, the victory served to strengthen the rule of Ilham Aliiev and his spouse Mehriban, respectively, the country's president and vice-president. Further strengthening its power vertical amidst the rising patriotic spirits, Azerbaijan will become increasingly like a classical Middle Eastern oil state with a power rotation system typical for this type of regime. This will be furthered by Azerbaijan's close relations with Turkey, which has become Azerbaijan's most important partner as a result of this war.

The former Soviet space is rocked by a whole series of crises. Dramatic events in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Karabakh are arguably manifestations of the same trend. Roughly one generation after the disintegration of the USSR, the paradigms of post-Soviet nation-building created in the early 1990s have begun losing their inertia. Models elaborated at the time when the USSR disintegrated are being revised. Frozen conflicts thaw, re-emerging in new forms rather than the ones typical for the last decade of the twentieth century.

The Second Karabakh War has more similarities to the war in Syria than to the Russia-Georgia war in 2008, or indeed to the First Karabakh War. Regimes transform: the one in Azerbaijan is closer to the Egyptian model, whereas the ones in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan follow Latin American or South European models. As the Soviet legacy fades into the past, new realities take shape.

Russia's influence is no longer what it used to be in the late 1990s when former Soviet republics were viewed as "Russia's near abroad". Russia is competing against other players in the former Soviet space, chiefly against the regional powers that neighbour on it. Accordingly, the former Soviet countries can no longer rest assured that Russia will remain a traditionalist player in the sphere of security, consistently opposing revisionist trends.

One way to phrase this is that the post-Soviet space has become the post-post-Soviet space. Its countries will need to become more self-reliant and to learn to react to external pressures in more flexible ways. The post-post-Soviet space is no longer a unified space with a clear centre and clear rules of the game. While the Second Karabakh War is not the first sign of this trend, it is certainly a convincing one.

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