

Liberated Karabakh

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Three Decades of Missed Opportunities

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The first anniversary of Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War provides an opportunity to reflect upon the question, at least in a preliminary way, of whether three decades of missed peace opportunities were necessary prolegomena to the armistice signed by the parties in early November 2020. After all, the conflict parties to the Nagorno-Karabakh disputes had been engaging in peace talks for nearly 30 years, with mediation roles initiated in the early 1990s prior to the end of the First Karabakh War.

At the time, a number of actors has volunteered to assume the function of potential peace-broker: Russia, Kazakhstan, Iran, Turkey, and finally, the Co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, which in 1992 initiated and later became engaged in the peace process with the aim of helping the parties to draft a mutually-acceptable formula to reach a final settlement.

Taking into account both the political chaos and the economic burden that the First Karabakh War put on the shoulders of the parties involved, signing a ceasefire appeared to be the best possible trade-off for both Armenia and Azerbaijan at that time.

During the decades-long peace process, there were a number of times when Armenia and Azerbaijan came close to a breakthrough. However, each time a final peace settlement remained just out of reach, despite the existence of a potential rapprochement between the disputants. Consequently, each failed negotiation attempt perpetuated

the unresolved state of the conflict and ultimately led to the resumption of large-scale military operations that resulted in significant military gains by Azerbaijan and the onset of the Russian-brokered armistice (enshrined in the tripartite statement of 10 November 2020). Widely labeled a “frozen conflict,” it suddenly but not unexpected became a “hot zone” on the map of the world before settling back into a state of affairs that all would agree did not result in the end of the conflict.

INEVITABLE?

It is noteworthy to begin by asking whether the Second Karabakh War was inevitable. In order to answer this question, there is a need first briefly to shed light on those failed moments of potential breakthrough and analyze a number of content and context factors that served as destabilizing elements in the negotiation process.

To start with, for the whole period of the Minsk Group-led process, a number of negotiation rounds that can objectively be labeled as missed peace opportunities. The first round of the negotiations, which took place in the 1992-1994 period, was, on the one hand, the most successful since the parties ended up signing a ceasefire agreement that established a line of contact and ended military hostilities; on the other hand, during this period Armenian forces not only occupied Nagorno-Karabakh but also seven adjacent territories in Azerbaijan-proper and successfully ethnically cleansed those territories of their Azerbaijani population. This was the only period when both Armenia and Azerbaijan felt a sense of urgency to end the violence and, in order to avoid further catastrophe, signed a ceasefire agreement that was supposed to pave the way for the conflict issues to be discussed at the negotiation table. Nevertheless, this period laid the foundation for the indeterminate future of the conflict’s destiny and set the negotiation process into a deadlock.

Another round of missed opportunities is traceable back to the 1997-1998 period, when the Minsk Group came up with several proposals for a stable peace settlement to the conflict. To be precise, the Co-chairs of the Group (Russia, France, and the United States), operating under the institutional framework of the OSCE, offered three proposals: the “package” plan, the

“step-by-step” or “phased” plan, and, finally, the “common state” proposal. None of these were seen as mutually-satisfactory or mutually-acceptable by the parties to the conflict. The main factor that prevented a breakthrough in the peace process during this phase was the expressed concern of the parties with respect to the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor.¹ Consequently, the parties chose to compromise and refused all three settlement proposals.

The Key West talks that took place in 2001 under the leadership of the George W. Bush Administration represented another opportunity to break the deadlock.² Expectations were high in the run-up to the start of these talks. The proposal put forward in this round was largely based on the Goble Plan that had been initially offered back in 1999 and contained provisions for territorial swaps between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This idea was initially considered by the leaders of both sides, but, due in part to internal disapproval of the respective elites of Armenia and Azerbaijan, ended up being rejected by both sides.

The face-to-face meetings between senior officials from Armenia and Azerbaijan that started in 1999 did not achieve expected results. The Prague Process that took place in 2003-2004 involved a new methodology whereby Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Minsk Group Co-chairs agreed to engage in a free discussion on any issue without any preset agenda, commitment, or negotiation. It seemed that this new model might lead to some progress within the Minsk Process. Even though the parties failed to reach any positive outcome during this period of negotiations, the Prague Process nevertheless laid a foundation for the development of what came to be known as the Madrid Principles.

The year 2006 was viewed as a golden year for the negotiations due to the absence of elections in both countries, with many policymakers suggesting that the right time for an agreement was at hand.³ The Co-chairs formally presented a set of Basic Principles for the Peaceful Settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict only in 2007, however. These Madrid Principles combined elements of both “step-by-step” and “package” methodologies, which helps to explain, in part, why they attracted significantly more attention than previous proposals. The Madrid formula initially fostered a hope that the proposal would be minimally acceptable to

both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, although initially supported by both conflict parties, the proposal was later ignored by the Armenian side, which refused to provide a concrete response to it and ultimately failed to formally respond to peace proposal.

Virtually from the moment the Madrid Principles were put forward by the Co-chairs, both sides (and both foreign ministries, in particular) engaged in rounds of destructive condemnation, blaming each other for wanting to unilaterally revise various parts of the document. By the end of 2008, the momentum had waned, and it once again became clear that a resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remained out of reach. The standard line that began to be heard from both Baku and Yerevan was that they accepted the Madrid document “in principle” without ever clarifying what “in principle” actually meant in practice.

In 2010, high-level representatives from both sides anchored their hopes on the talks that took place on the margins of the OSCE Astana Summit under the aegis of the Kazakh Chairmanship-in-office, although this too came to be seen as a “vivid example of the fiasco of the peace talks,” in the words of Fariz Ismailzade.⁴ The Astana Summit talks brought to the surface the incompatibility of visions regarding the conflict, the unwillingness of the parties to compromise, and the absence of a catalytic moment that could have resulted in a breakthrough. Notwithstanding the Astana Summit’s failure to achieve substantive progress, the parties continued to negotiate, meeting at the heads of state level in Sochi in March 2011 and again in Kazan in June 2011 under the leadership of Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, and with active engagement of the presidents of the other two Minsk Group Co-chairs. But it came to naught once more.

After the Kazan meeting, the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process entered a phase of turbulence. Armenia, in particular, projected confidence that its wartime gains were being consolidated by a lack of progress at the negotiating table. For instance, the country’s 2012 and 2017 parliamentary elections demonstrated how the Nagorno-Karabakh factor has lost its place in domestic discourse.

A further attempt by the Minsk Group to get the conflict sides to renew dialogue in 2013-2014 also failed to bring any development to the peace process. Despite the continued lack of progress, the Madrid Principles

remained on the table as the basis for a comprehensive settlement and showed that the parties continued to be interested in arriving at a peaceful settlement to the conflict. Thus, various attempts to reach an agreement based on the Madrid Principles continued in the following years, albeit without much diplomatic achievement. During this period, the negotiation process was limited to a number of meetings between the heads of state and foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan that ended, predictably, with expressions of disappointment with regards to the failure to overcome the diplomatic logjam.

One consequence of the four-day war that took place in April 2016, which resulted in limited territorial gains by Azerbaijan, was that it again drew high-level attention—by the international community in general and the great powers in particular—to the unresolved nature of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Still, little momentum was gained and substantive talks did not materialize. In fact, as an International Crisis Group report argued, the April 2016 war showed that both Armenia and Azerbaijan seemed ready to have recourse to arms for the first time since the 1990s—that, in other words, both countries were willing to consider the military option as a way forward to break free from the status quo.⁵ After the 2016 escalation, tension in the region constantly increased even though there was no clear sign of an approaching full-scale war.

Despite the lack of momentum to negotiate a peace deal in 2016, a number of positive improvements between the conflict sides were registered. In 2018, Baku and Yerevan launched a military hotline to manage more effectively ceasefire arrangements on the line of contact. Furthermore, Armenia and Azerbaijan managed to issue a joint statement in 2019 whereby the parties agreed to prepare their respective populations for peace.⁶ And in the wake of a colored revolution in Armenia that brought Nikol Pashinyan to power in the country, Azerbaijan seemed to exhibit high hopes that the deadlock could be broken—in part because the newly-elected prime minister did not belong to the country’s “Karabakh Clan” and was thus seen as a potentially more constructive leader in the quest to attain peace. Yet, the situation started to deteriorate in 2019 when a number of provocative statements and actions taken by the Armenian leadership led to the resumption of not only a new military operation in July 2020 but also the onset of a full-scale war in September 2020.

Right up until the start of the Second Karabakh War, the expectation that the conflict parties would remain committed to the ongoing peace process was high—not only among representatives of what some call the international community but also among the publics of both countries as well as their respective political elites. Ironically, this expectation was maintained notwithstanding the increasingly bellicose rhetoric emanating from both Baku and Yerevan. Azerbaijan's leadership, in particular, quite transparently stated that in case mediation efforts remained ineffective, the Azerbaijani side would consider the military option for settling the dispute, thus taking upon itself the task of implement the four UN Security Council resolutions that had called for the withdrawal of Armenian troops from the area.

Bearing in mind all of the aforementioned instances of ineffective mediation and the demonstrably provocative attitude of Armenia, for Azerbaijan the Second Karabakh War was consequential. However, it could have been avoided by a more constructive approach of the parties to the dispute as well as by a demonstration of greater impartiality and problem-solving attitude on the part of the Minsk Group Co-chairs. The post-April 2016 war period could have served as a catalyst for generating momentum for the renewal of serious negotiations. But it didn't. Instead, the results of the Second Karabakh War are such that to dictate a new set of geopolitical realities that have come about since the end of the war.

This brings us to being able to shed light on the substantial reasons that account for the failure of diplomatic efforts over the past thirty years. Once the peace talks resume, it will be important to ensure the mistakes made in the past are avoided by all concerned.

INTRA- OR INTER-STATE CONFLICT?

After Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territory in the early 1990s, the UN Security Council adopted four resolutions—822, 853, 874, and 884—that demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from Azerbaijan as well as the return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes. Notwithstanding the binding nature of these resolutions on the conflicting parties, the Armenian side consistently ignored them (with the tacit approval of the Co-chairs), which ensured that

none of the demands they contained were able to be fulfilled. Until the onset of the Second Karabakh War, almost 20 percent of Azerbaijani sovereign territory remained under Armenian occupation, with approximately one million Azerbaijanis remaining the victims of ethnic cleansing and officially classified as internally displaced persons or refugees.

Armenia escaped the implementation of the Security Council's four resolutions on the basis of a legal argument that it did not recognize itself as a party to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenia, in other words, viewed the dispute as an intra-state conflict—that is to say, as an internal affair of Azerbaijan and a secessionist entity. Azerbaijan, of course, held the opposite view, maintaining since the onset of hostilities that it had been in a state of war with Armenia.

Even though Armenia denied its direct involvement into the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in the wake of the abolishment of Soviet direct command, the Armenian Supreme Soviet took what Svante Cornell called the “historical decision to promulgate the incorporation of Nagorno-Karabakh into the Armenian Republic.”⁷ It was thus Armenian irredentist “Karabakh” forces that occupied the whole territory of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as the seven surrounding territories of Azerbaijan-proper. And it was Armenia that had engaged in a campaign to fully ethnically cleanse the Azerbaijani population.⁸

Today, not a single ethnic-Azerbaijani is to be found on the territory of Armenia, and prior to the November 2020 armistice not a single ethnic-Azerbaijani was to be found on the territory controlled by the self-proclaimed “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.” This stands in stark contrast to the fate of ethnic-Armenians in Azerbaijan, where, as of today, something like 30,000 of them live in areas under the sovereign control of the authorities in Baku as it was understood prior to the end of the Second Karabakh War.⁹

In the early 1990s, Armenia's economic instability was a result of its direct humanitarian and financial support to secessionist entity. Through the occupied Lachin corridor, Armenia not only sent massive shipments of food and other materials, but also covered virtually all of what came to be known as the so-called Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's budget deficits.¹⁰ During the Second Karabakh War, notwithstanding the fact that the de-facto “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” had its own army, troops from

Armenia were the ones that were largely fighting the Azerbaijani military in the occupied lands. To this we can add, at a minimum, the shelling of Azerbaijani areas outside of the conflict zone from positions within Armenia during the Second Karabakh War.

Hence, the untenability of Armenia's position of neither being a conflict party nor of taking responsibility for decades of violations of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. Otherwise, Armenia's pre-Second Karabakh War demand to Azerbaijan to recognize the so-called Republic of Karabakh made no sense, notwithstanding the fact that Yerevan itself had not extended recognition to it.

However that may be, the fundamental point is that the period between the end of the First Karabakh War in 1994 and the end of the Second Karabakh War in 2020, no one had come up with a winning compromise formula for peace through diplomacy. This represented a main aspect hindering a potential rapprochement between the parties.

APPLE OF DISCORD

As a result of a population exchange carried out by the Russian empire in the nineteenth century, a huge number of Armenians that had lived in the Persian and Ottoman empires were settled in Russia's newly-conquered Caucasian territories, especially in the western territories of what is now known as the South Caucasus.¹¹ According to Russian census data as researched by Svante Cornell, before the onset of St. Petersburg's population exchange policy in 1823, 9 percent of Nagorno-Karabakh's population was Armenian whilst the remaining 91 percent was registered as Muslim. By 1932, the Armenian population had increased to 32 percent and by 1880 it had reached a majority of 53 percent.¹² By 1987, Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh made up 74 percent of Nagorno-Karabakh's population.¹³

This demographic argument was emphasized by the communist authorities in Yerevan in 1989 when they attempted to illegally annex Nagorno-Karabakh to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, as it was then known. After this failure, their strategy changed. In the early 1990s, their main argument shifted to extending support to Nagorno-Karabakh's

ethnic-Armenian population in their struggle for self-determination on territory that Armenia itself, together with the rest of the world, recognized as belonging to Azerbaijan from the point of view of international law.

The beginnings of a shift in position came to be seen in August 2019 when Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan called for the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. It is important to note here that this represented a fundamental shift in Yerevan's position in a number of senses, including the fact this implied an Armenian admission that it now was, in fact, a direct party to the conflict.

From the onset, Azerbaijan has understood the conflict to be about the occupation of its internationally recognized sovereign territory—Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven surrounding regions—by Armenian military forces. According to Baku, Armenian support for the establishment of a second Armenian state (or its annexation and subsequent incorporation into Armenia) at the expense of the violation of territorial integrity of Azerbaijan is against the norms of international law and can never be supported by any lawful political regime. Indeed, if this would not have been the case, many UN member states would have felt free to recognize the existing regime of the so-called “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.”

Hence, the conflict issue for Armenia does not seem to be centered on the self-determination of the ethnic-Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh because the Azerbaijani leadership has always emphasized its readiness to grant the highest degree of autonomy to Nagorno-Karabakh. Rather, it is about claiming the sovereign territories of Azerbaijan and an insistence on recognition of the so-called “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.”

Prior to the armistice that ended the Second Karabakh War, the apple of discord between the conflict parties was presented within the framework of the two basic principles of the UN Charter, namely the principle of self-determination and the principle of territorial integrity. Consequently, the determination of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, which has been the most defining part of the peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan, can be solved either based on the principle of self-determination understood as being equivalent to an avowed right of secession, or the principle of territorial integrity.

In general, the aim of all universal principles is to maintain peace and security in the world; however, the degree of prevailing importance of the aforementioned principles has been subject to extensive debate. The principle of territorial integrity is an important objective of international law that has played a tremendous role in maintaining stability and security at the global level. Meanwhile, the principle of self-determination has come to be seen in some quarters as constituting a fundamental collective human right.

Now, since Armenian support for the establishment and recognition of the so-called “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” represents a clear claim on sovereign Azerbaijani territory, this brings to light the concept of what Italian legal scholar Salvatore Senese and others called “external self-determination.” Senese defined this as the “recognition that *each people* has the right to constitute itself as a nation-state or to integrate into, or federate with, an existing state.” Thus, Senese argues, any case of a claim to external self-determination involves a simultaneous claim to territory.¹⁴

To guide us in understanding these two principles we can turn to 1960’s UN General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) entitled Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. While it does stipulate that “all peoples have the right of self-determination,” resolution 2625 (XXV) from 1970 also indicates that “any attempt at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and the territorial integrity of a country is incompatible with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”

The unambiguous conclusion to be drawn from this seminal text of international law is that the principle of territorial integrity denotes that no claim to secession can be justified by referring to the principle of self-determination.¹⁵ Furthermore, we know from the practice of international relations that, as a general rule, neither states nor international organizations favor the establishment of new states from territories of already existing sovereign entities. The key point here is that the doctrine of classical self-determination, which is misinterpreted today by partisans of secession, was extremely narrow: namely, to allow for the establishment of new sovereign entities within the context of decolonization.¹⁶ (The UN even made a list of colonial possessions that were understood to qualify for independence

on the basis of self-determination. It goes without saying that Nagorno-Karabakh was not on it.) Thus, a sovereign state may consider the principle of self-determination of a people to supersede the cornerstone principle of territorial integrity only if the term “people” means the entire population of that state.¹⁷ This is evidently not the case in the context of Nagorno-Karabakh, for the legitimization through recognition of the so-called “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” would in fact constitute the establishment of a second nation-state of the Armenian people, which already has a sovereign home in the Republic of Armenia.

Azerbaijan’s position, which it had maintained throughout the period of Minsk Group-led peace talks, was centered on a recognition of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh as citizens of Azerbaijan enjoying equal rights and obligations as any other citizens of the country, and had responded to irredentist Armenian claims by indicating a readiness to grant the highest level of autonomy to Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan.

From this we can conclude the following: Armenia’s real goal was not to secure the self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh’s ethnic-Armenians but rather to legitimize Nagorno-Karabakh as a territory and thus to establish a second Armenian state carved out from the sovereign territory of Azerbaijan, in violation of international norms.

These diametrically opposite views go a long way towards explaining why for close to 30 years no mediator had been able to come up with a winning compromise formula for peace through diplomacy.

WITHER THE MADRID PRINCIPLES?

From 2007 up until the start of the Second Karabakh War, the negotiations had been based on the formula contained in the Madrid Principles, according to which the sides agreed to solve the dispute based on their implementation. Ironically, as Thomas De Waal has pointed out, this formula was, in its essence, an updated version of the peace plan that Armenia’s founding president Levon Ter-Petrosyan had supported in 1997—principles that had led to his ouster.¹⁸ As political scientist Thomas Ambrosio has pointed out, this explains why Ter-Petrosyan’s successors

were “far less enthusiastic [about the Madrid Principles], largely because these principles reportedly envisage the province [Nagorno-Karabakh] remaining at least *de jure* within Azerbaijan.”¹⁹

One main problem with the Madrid Principles, as indeed with other possible deals that had been put on the table prior to the Second Karabakh War, were the mutually-incompatible perceptions by the conflict sides regarding the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor, which is located in Azerbaijan-proper and provides the only road link between the territory and Armenia.

Another was the failure to overcome the longstanding disagreement between the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides on the sequence of the implementation of proposed principles, notwithstanding the fact that the parties had initially accepted it. Up until the start of the Second Karabakh War, Armenia was reticent to acknowledge the need to withdraw in the first stage from five of the seven occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh as it would have meant relinquishing its main bargain point, notwithstanding that it would not have had to immediately relinquish the northwest territory of Kelbajar or the western territory of Lachin—two buffer lands sandwiched between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. One reason for this is that had negotiations on the basis of the Madrid Principles failed at a later stage, Armenia would have been unable to reclaim these same five territories, having returned them initially to Azerbaijan. Thus, a later-stage failure of talks would have been interpreted as a defeat by Yerevan. The risk, in other words, was too high, from the Armenian perspective, for the immediate return of the five territories would have granted Azerbaijan a great tactical advantage in the sense that it would have received direct access to Nagorno-Karabakh itself, which would have, in turn, made it easier to retake the rest of the occupied territories by force.

And yet the outcome of the Second Karabakh War has rendered many of the Madrid Principles moot. The seven surrounding areas are now firmly under the control of Azerbaijan again. Some were liberated by military means, others without a shot being fired. Russian peacekeeping troops, under the terms of the armistice, provide a perimeter around parts of Nagorno-Karabakh and ensure a 5-kilometer-wide corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh via Lachin. The same armistice provides

for the establishment of a land corridor across Armenia—also guaranteed by Russia—along its border with Iran, which will provide for a link between Azerbaijan and its Nakhichevan exclave. Azerbaijan also managed to return to its control a number of villages located in the Tovuz district—located far away from the Karabakh region, along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border—that were also occupied by Armenian forces in the early 1990s.

This is now the new status quo, and it seems to have changed the rules of the game. The political setting in the South Caucasus has been updated. In a nutshell, this translates into the following.

First, Russia proved that it still remains the host of the region. *Second*, Turkey proved that regardless of existing deep contradictions between itself and Russia on many political issues, Ankara and Moscow can still bargain and act together when needed. *Third*, both the European Union and the United States have lost much of their substantial political influence in the region. *Fourth*, Armenia has lost the game. At least three important points derive from this point. One, it seems that neither internal nor external conditions are likely to serve its political or economic recovery for the foreseeable future. Two, the trauma of the Armenian nation caused by its defeat on the battlefield in the Second Karabakh War and enshrined in the armistice agreement drafted by Russia will take a long time to heal, if this ever happens. Three, having in mind the collective historical memory of the Armenian nation, its destructive stance towards “Turks” will deepen even further. And *fifth*, Azerbaijan has emerged as the victor of a three decades’ old dispute whilst demonstrating its strong commitment to international norms, which brought about the restoration of just claims for both its nationhood and statehood.

RUSSIA’S TRUMP CARD

Thomas De Waal’s description of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as “nobody’s front yard, but everybody’s backyard” perfectly depicted the attitude of the mediators towards the peace process. Although the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been intensively meditated since 1992, the self-oriented character of each of the go-betweens represented a hurdle to the achievement of a breakthrough in the peace process. The composition of the

Minsk Group has always been a topic for debate in the disputing countries, since it was believed that the U.S., the EU, and Russia had chosen to enter into in the process for the sake of advancing their own (mainly geostrategic and energy-related) interests.²⁰ The mediators were accused either of not being interested in peace in the region or of being interested in a particular type of settlement. Obviously, such accusations did not represent the sole obstacle to peace, yet they did play a significant role in what had been observed in the region for the past three decades.

The environment in which the Karabakh conflict was embedded for the last three decades had not only determined the state of the problem but also set the conditions under which this problem got to be addressed during the Second Karabakh War. These factors were mainly a product of dynamics particular to the region itself: the geopolitical and strategic interests of the major powers with interests and ambitions in the South Caucasus: Russia, the United States, the EU, Turkey, and Iran.

The ignorant attitude of the mediators along with the constraints imposed by Russia, in particular, set the rules of the peace talks game. Russia has undoubtedly been playing the main role in the region of the South Caucasus: by keeping Armenia under its control, Moscow could use the Karabakh conflict as a leverage towards both Armenia and Azerbaijan. The existence of the Karabakh conflict in the region has always managed to benefit Russia. Moscow managed to preserve its regional oversight function while benefitting from the sale of military equipment to both parties to the conflict.

For instance, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), during the period of 2010-2015, 85 percent of Azerbaijan's arms purchase were imported from Russia.²¹ It is also a fact that since the early 1990s, military supplies of Russian arms and equipment to Armenia facilitated military action between the parties to a large extent. Russia wants all three South Caucasus states to acknowledge it as the region's powerbroker and, hence, accept its supremacy. War in the region is only possible if Russia does not object to it. Only because of Russia's green light did the April 2016 war broke out; and only because of Russia's rejection of Armenia's leadership and its consequent non-interference in the resumption of hostilities was the Second Karabakh War allowed to continue until one of the dispute sides win the war. A number of international events—along

with the internal developments in both Armenia and Azerbaijan—may have influenced the timing of Azerbaijan's successful launch of defensive military operations on 27 September 2020, but not decisively so.

Russia's stance towards the Second Karabakh War—which is regarded, rightly or wrongly, as support in Azerbaijan and betrayal in Armenia—served foremost to protect and promote its national interests. One of the provisions of the tripartite statement drafted personally by Vladimir Putin—the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the liberated territories—was of a particular concern for Azerbaijani public, an example of less than full trust in the Kremlin's intentions.

It is worth noting that it was with Russian support that the Armenians were able at first to settle and then to claim for the Nagorno-Karabakh region. And it was Russia that has been consistently supporting Armenia since the 1990s in the form of free armaments deliveries, loans, and free training of Armenia's military.²² For instance, in 1997, Russia delivered to Armenia \$1 billion worth of weapons, including tanks and missiles;²³ at the beginning of the 2000s, Russia was openly allocating loans to Armenia, which made up more than 60 percent of Armenia's budget.²⁴ Russia still has two military bases in Armenia and Russia's military troops guard Armenia's borders with Turkey and Iran. Consequently, in the past Yerevan perceived such support by the Kremlin as a guarantee of its security against Turkey and Azerbaijan in case war with the latter resumes.

Russia's unconditional support to Armenia since the collapse of the Soviet Union was understood—wrongly, as it turned out—by the current Armenian leadership as a constant instead of a variable. The stance Russia took during the Second Karabakh War disappointed Armenia and was regarded by the Armenian public as its strategic partner's betrayal. Pashinyan's strategically irrational steps in both domestic and foreign policy cost the Armenian nation thousands of lives and resulted in its military and diplomatic defeat.

Once a new war erupted, Russia made it clear that it would only intervene on the side of Armenia against Azerbaijan on the basis of its commitments under the terms of the Collective Security Treaty Organization unless Azerbaijan attacked Armenia. Armenia attempted to bait Azerbaijan a number of times during the war, to no avail, by indiscriminately shelling a

number of Azerbaijani cities located outside the conflict zone—as a result of which around 100 Azerbaijani civilians were killed, including women, children, and elderly people.

Even though Armenia lacked Russia's support in the Second Karabakh War, it nevertheless welcomed the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the region in its aftermath—regarding it as a security guarantee for the Armenians willing to return to the region. Taken into account the role of Kremlin in drafting the armistice and the terms that were agreed (particularly those authorizing the presence of Russian peacekeepers), even a *resolved* Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could still remain one of Russia's trump cards in the region.

WHY IT BECAME POSSIBLE?

In addition to the Russia variable that made this large-scale military operation possible in the first place, one other important variable needs to be taken into account in order to explain how Baku turned this possibility into a long-awaited victory: the strengthening presence of a popular urge in Azerbaijan to settle the Karabakh conflict

Until recently, the absence of an urge to settle the conflict in both Armenia and Azerbaijan had also contributed to the failure to achieve a breakthrough in peace process. For decades, the status quo seemed to have benefitted both sides.

Armenia, as the winner of the First Karabakh War, had managed to occupy not only Nagorno Karabakh itself but also the seven adjacent territories. It was sitting pretty: its strategic posture was not predicated on the imperative for compromise. Prior to the Second Karabakh War, Armenia was not much interested in pursuing a solution that did not presuppose Azerbaijan's recognition of the independence of the so-called "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic."

As for Azerbaijan, it used the post-First Karabakh War period to improve its smart power, without which it would not have been possible to make strides in achieving a just outcome to an unjust situation characterized by the occupation of 20 percent of its territory and the presence of one million

refugees and IDPs within its free borders. The urge was naturally created for Azerbaijan when, after three decades of ineffective mediation efforts, the Armenian leadership started openly demonstrating a provocative attitude regarding the Karabakh conflict and disregarded Azerbaijan's political willingness and ability to force the issue by military means. Russia's non-interference policy coupled with a Turkish commitment to unconditionally support Azerbaijan in its liberation effort contributed to an already ripe moment for Azerbaijan.

It is still not clear which side struck first in both July and September 2020: each side blames the other. It does not much matter. What is more important is that—notwithstanding the predictions of a few analysts—the resumption of hostilities was quite an unexpected development for both publics. To this should be added that the popularity of the military option had been growing steadily for the past few years, among both the political elite and the public in Azerbaijan. Both the "urgency" factor and the "military option" factor can be explained by recourse to a number of developments manifested by Armenia such as Pashinyan's unprecedentedly aggressive rhetoric and various recent decisions taken by the Armenian leadership.

Pashinyan's call for unification of Karabakh with Armenia in 2019 during his visit to the occupied territory caused a huge discontent in Azerbaijan.²⁵ The inauguration of the president of the so-called "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" in Shusha,²⁶ as well as the announcement of the transfer of its parliament to the same city,²⁷ were met with anger in Azerbaijan, for it represented a unilateral change in the status quo perpetuated by the Minsk Progress, which did not react in any serious way to any of this. Naturally, this was disappointing to the people of Azerbaijan as well as to its government.

To this can be added the start of construction of a new highway connecting Armenia and the occupied lands,²⁸ but also the resettlement of Lebanese Armenians that began in August 2020.²⁹ Both were strongly condemned by Azerbaijan and less forcefully by the international community, although there seemed to be a general agreement that these constituted violations of international law.

These developments, when put alongside stagnation or even reversal with regards to the peace process, as well as the apathetic attitude of the international community to violations of international norms all served

as triggers for the start of the Second Karabakh War. This was not all. Presidential elections in the United States, a growing discontent directed at Russia's foreign policy, and the possibility of Moscow-Ankara cooperation in the South Caucasus made the Second Karabakh War feasible.

Azerbaijan regarded its military counterattack to take back its own territories as a peace enforcement operation through which it was fulfilling four Security Council resolutions that have been ignored by both Armenia and the international community for almost three decades. For its part, the Armenian leadership rejected to return to the negotiation table and implement those same resolutions, thereby leaving Azerbaijan with no other reasonable choice but to continue its peace enforcement operation until Yerevan was ready to accept full defeat. Had a settlement to this conflict been achieved by different means, it would have been easier to imagine a moment in time in which reconciliation between Armenians and Azerbaijanis would be at hand.

WHAT NEXT?

After 30 years of ineffective peace talks and a number of missed opportunities to settle the conflict without having recourse to arms, Armenia and Azerbaijan once again signed a Russian-brokered document that this time not only put an end to military operations but also drew very close to the final settlement of the dispute itself.

For Armenia, this tripartite statement amounted to a complete capitulation that seemed to be unexpected for the Armenian public, having been fed with false information and spurious updates from the battlefield. The political situation in the country remained tense, with continued street protests and demands for Pashinyan to resign until the same disgruntled public voted for the same Pashinyan's Civil Contract party that won an early parliamentary election in June 2021. It should be noted that Pashinyan turned out to be quite a brave politician for he, along with his colleagues, agreed yet again to take on all the burdens the defeat put on Armenia. The means by which this conflict has been resolved will deepen the existing animosity between the two nations. In particular, in the Armenian collective memory there exists a historic animosity that creates a hostile attitude on the part of Armenians

towards Azerbaijanis, who are equated with and disparagingly called Turks. This racist attitude points to two things: that both the support provided to Azerbaijan by Turkey in the Second Karabakh War and the participation of Turkish soldiers in the activities of the peacekeeping center established as part of the armistice agreement underpin Armenians' already deeply-rooted mistrust of "Turks." Under such conditions it would be exceedingly naïve to hope for a quick reconciliation of the two nations. That being said, on a diplomatic level the presidents of Azerbaijan and Turkey both expressed their readiness to reopen their respective borders with Armenia and to engage in regional economic cooperation in case Yerevan signs a peace agreement with Azerbaijan and both countries mutually recognize each other's territorial integrity and state borders.³⁰ Yet it does not seem that Armenia is willing to change the newly established status quo in the region and reach a sustainable peace, which once again reveals the antagonist and occupant image of Armenia.

For Azerbaijan, this was a long-awaited glorious victory that overturned a fundamental injustice, restored the nation's territorial integrity, and provided an opportunity for the return of about 750,000 IDPs to their homes. Under those conditions, there could not have been a better peace deal for Azerbaijan. On the one hand, the public looks askance at the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the region; on the other hand, the presence of Turkish peacekeepers on the ground seeds hope in the fairness and balanced approach of the present peacekeeping operation. In the aforementioned tripartite statement, Azerbaijan also managed to secure a corridor (Zangezur Corridor) uniting its mainland with the Nakhichevan exclave, which shares a land border with Turkey.

As a result of the Second Karabakh War, Turkey has managed to claim its soft influence in the region. More importantly, Russia seemed to make a conscious choice not to try to eliminate Turkey's role in the theater of operations either during the war or since the armistice statement was signed. Hence, the influence of Turkey in the region has relatively strengthened, which is likely to benefit Azerbaijan to a great extent. It is unlikely that Russia will ever willingly make room for Turkey to fully stand alongside Russia in determining the geopolitical rules of the game in the South Caucasus.

Postwar developments in the region have been primarily controlled by Russia. This fact, automatically, abolishes the involvement of any other *interested* party in determining the region's post-conflict destiny. It seems likely, therefore, that the Minsk Group will no longer be a factor. For it has clearly proven its ineffectiveness in times of both peace and war for nearly long thirty years.

Notwithstanding the signed tripartite statement, emerging regional economic and diplomatic opportunities, and the reconstruction projects being implemented in the liberated territories by Azerbaijan, Armenia's refusal to enter into peace negotiations as well as indications that it continues to transfer military personnel and equipment through the Lachin Corridor into the Karabakh region, coupled with regular exchanges of fire along the state borders and the death of soldiers from both sides in the summer of 2021 are frustratingly illustrative facts that diminish the effectiveness of the changed status-quo.

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