

Significant Shifts in the Geopolitics of the South Caucasus

Gayane Novikova

A new status quo has emerged after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war in the South Caucasus. Its main manifestations can now be defined.

Involvement of the major global actors in the regional conflicts is diminishing, especially when viewed against the background of global security concerns related to health, poverty, migration, inequality, and cyber security. Although the current US administration has announced “a return of America on the global stage” and the EU leadership has stressed its readiness to contribute to peace in the South Caucasus, leverage to deal with hard security issues is lacking on both sides. Their involvement in regional affairs will be limited to assisting the implementation of “soft power” programmes. China is seeking to expand its economic might, mainly through its “Belt and Road Initiative,” a part of which includes the South Caucasus states. In the meantime, China faces several serious domestic problems and economic challenges all of which have slowed down its economic involvement in this region.

Regional security issues have increasingly become a source of concern and area of responsibility for the regional powers – Russia, Turkey, and Iran: their interaction is shaping the security environment. Hard security measures will remain a prerogative of Russia, Turkey, and – to a lesser extent – Iran.

These transformations should be taken into account in any further discussions on the security of the entire region and each of its constituent states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. In the next several years, the South Caucasus states will become fully involved in a direct and rigorous Russian-Turkish geopolitical rivalry.

Author

Dr. Gayane Novikova is the founder and former Director of the Center for Strategic Analysis, (Spectrum) in Yerevan, Armenia, and an Associate of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University.



Photo: MoD Armenia

In 2020, during the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh, this photo published by the Armenian MoD became an iconic image in the Armenian press. The soldier depicted died during the war.

Turkey's Breakthrough

The recent Nagorno-Karabakh war fulfilled Turkey's desire and intention to become a major regional power, to challenge Russia openly in political, economic, and military arenas, and even to try to minimise the latter's influence and positions in the South Caucasus. At the current stage of the Russian-Turkish competition, Armenia and Georgia have clear preferences. In Armenian political circles and the society at large, Turkey's unequivocal and multidimensional assistance to Azerbaijan – both in the course of the Nagorno-Karabakh war and after the ceasefire agreement – left no doubt that Ankara will continue its full-scale support of Baku.

A growing ambivalence has occurred as concerns the evaluation of Russia's role as Armenia's main strategic partner. At their core are Russia's inability (or unwillingness) a) to defend Armenia in accordance with the bilateral agreement of 2017 on joint Russian-Armenian military forces; b) to prevent both military incidents along the Armenian-Azerbaijani line of contact

and advance of Azerbaijani army units into Armenia's sovereign territory in two provinces; and

c) to oblige Azerbaijan to return all Armenian “prisoners of war and other detained persons” in accordance with Article 8 of the November 2020 trilateral ceasefire agreement.

Simultaneously, Russia has announced its readiness to assist Armenia and Azerbaijan with the accelerated delimitation and demarcation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani borders. Russian officials insist that negotiations on the status of Nagorniy Karabakh should be resumed immediately after resolution of the border issues.

Georgia's approach to the two regional powers is quite firm. Russia actually opened a gate to the South Caucasus for Turkey. The recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 made Russia de facto a party to these conflicts; it has solidified its military presence in these areas inside the internationally recognized territory of the Republic of Georgia. This Russian-Georgian enduring confrontation allowed Turkey gradually to become Georgia's most valu-

Photo: president.az



Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev speaking to the military leadership of Azerbaijan on the Armed Forces Day

able economic and military partner. The Turkish-Georgian strategic partnership is based first of all on the absence of political problems. Turkey has recognized Georgia's territorial integrity, and fully supports its aspiration for NATO membership.

Azerbaijan is a decisive actor in this new round of Russian-Turkish competition. The most significant leverage in Russia's Azerbaijani politics was the unresolved Nagorniy Karabakh conflict. In the course of the last several years, Azerbaijan did not hide its frustration with the Russian position both as a mediator and as Azerbaijan's strategic partner. With Azerbaijan's military victory over Armenia, Moscow lost the remains of its control over Baku especially if one takes into consideration that neither the Russia-led CSTO nor the Eurasian Union can be attractive for Azerbaijan.

Russia has been forced to consider Turkey's recent advance seriously. However, several immediate steps taken by the Turkish-Azerbaijani tandem allow to conclude that Russia's position and its role in the entire South Caucasus area are diminishing—despite even the deployment of its peacekeepers in Nagorniy Karabakh.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani-Russian ceasefire agreement (9-10 November 2020) did not contain a single word regarding Turkey's projected activity in the area of the Nagorniy Karabakh conflict. Then a few days later, Turkey and Russia announced the establishment of the Joint Center for Monitoring the Ceasefire (JRTCM) in the Aghdam district of Azerbaijan. Its launch in January 2021 allows Azerbaijan to balance Russia's military presence in its territory. Even more, it

marked a reestablishment – after more than a century – of Turkey's military presence in the South Caucasus.

The future of Russian forces in this South Caucasus state is in question. According to Article 4 of the trilateral ceasefire agreement, "the duration of the stay of the peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation is five years, with automatic extension for the next five-year periods if none of the Parties declares six months before the expiration of the period of intention to terminate the application of this provision." With a high probability, the Azerbaijani leadership will terminate Russia's peacekeeping operation and will secure Turkey's military presence in the region.

The signing of the Shusha (Shushi) Declaration on Allied Relations by the presidents of Turkey and Azerbaijan, on 15 June 2021, should be viewed as a step in this direction. In accordance with this document, their strategic partnership in the military, diplomatic, and economic spheres has been raised to a qualitatively new level. The most important aspects of the Declaration concern the coordination of efforts and actions in all strategic and regional issues; mutual military assistance and the holding of regular joint meetings of the security councils of two states; the conduct of joint consultations and coordination of the actions of their armed forces in case of threats to their sovereignty, territorial integrity, and internationally recognized borders. A special emphasis was put on joint efforts aimed toward the "sustainable development of the Turkic world."

President Erdogan did not rule out his country's permanent military presence in

Azerbaijan: "This issue is not outside the provisions of the Shusha agreement." It should be noted that the discussions on the establishment of a Turkish military base in Azerbaijan are not new: Turkey already has a visible presence in Nakhichevan. After the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers, the JRTCM can be transformed into a Turkish base.

Russia's reaction followed immediately: a spokesman of the Russian president stated that the deployment of NATO military facilities near Russia's borders is a reason for "special attention." It will try to prevent such a development; the question is whether it can succeed.

Another important aspect of the Turkish-Azerbaijani relationship appeared relatively recently: Azerbaijan has become a vocal supporter of Turkey's idea of a two-state solution for Cyprus. In July 2021, the Azerbaijani parliamentary delegation participated in the celebration of the 47th anniversary of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. Supposedly as a quid pro quo for Turkey's support in the Karabakh war, Azerbaijan will soon recognize the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

The Caucasian Chessboard

The newly-established security environment reveals advantages and disadvantages for the three regional powers and three regional states positioned on the geopolitical and security "chessboard" in the South Caucasus. Despite existing disagreements, Russia, Turkey, and Iran are enthusiastically discussing the possibilities of a broad, multilayered and multidimensional opening of the region in anticipation of huge economic benefits. Turkey will receive direct access to Azerbaijan and further to Central Asia; the far-reaching goal is a realization of Erdogan's pan-Turkic project;

Russia will establish a ground connection with the Middle East and the Persian Gulf states. Being in favour of multi-dimensional regional projects, it also has recognised that implementation of these projects will strengthen Turkey's position in the Caucasus and Central Asia. However, according to Article 9 of the truce agreement, "Control over transport communication will be carried out by the bodies of the Border Guard Service of the FSB of Russia."

Iran will be able to break through its international isolation and improve its economic situation. It is not by chance that the Iranian government, in parallel to Turkish President Erdogan's "Six-Country Regional Cooperation Platform" (11 De-



Photo: primeminister.am

24 August 2021, Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan introduced a new programme of the government for 2021-2026.

ember 2020), suggested quite similar regional cooperation project in January 2021. Although Iran is the only regional power that has stable relations with all three South Caucasus states, its capacity for economic infusion cannot compete either with that of Turkey or Russia.

In general, Russia, Turkey, and Iran have expressed their readiness to work together on opening the transport routes and corridors across the region. All three are also interested in minimisation of the role and activity of external powers, first of all the US.

Azerbaijan will unambiguously benefit from all these projects. As for now, Georgia and Armenia have rejected these initiatives for different reasons. Georgia's concerns are mainly related to Russia's participation in these projects owing to its control

over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and its increasing military presence in the region. Furthermore, Georgia has introduced itself as the only pro-Western and pro-Euro-Atlantic state in the region. Hence, concerns exist among Georgian political and analytical circles that the proposed broad regional cooperation projects will reduce even more the interest of Euro-Atlantic structures toward the South Caucasus. Finally, of concern, however silent, is that the opening of communications through the southern section of the region implies the possibility that Georgia will lose its current unique status as the only transit route across the region.

Armenia is the most vulnerable among the regional states. The major issue for this nation is a preservation of its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security

for its population. The Azerbaijani leadership continuously makes territorial claims and provokes tensions along the line of contact. On 12 May 2021, Azerbaijani military units penetrated into Armenia's sovereign territory and remain there up until now, continuously threatening the population of the villages and interrupting their normal life. On 28 July, deadly clashes were provoked by Azerbaijan in the Gegharkunik province of Armenia. Turkey and Azerbaijan insist on the opening of a corridor through Syunik province of Armenia (in their terminology, Zangezur corridor) to connect the main part of Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan. The Armenian side resists this idea by appealing to Article 9 of the trilateral ceasefire agreement, where no "Zangezur corridor" is mentioned: "All economic and transport links in the region are unblocked. The Republic of Armenia provides transport links between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic ...By agreement of the Parties, the construction of new transport communications linking the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic with the western regions of Azerbaijan will be provided."

The situation in the area of Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation is crucial for all further developments in the broad South Caucasus region. Among others, four questions assume a special urgency and remain to be answered: 1) For how long can Armenia withstand pressure from Azerbaijan and Turkey? 2) What price will be paid by Armenia for full-scale inclusion into the regional cooperation projects? 3) Will the de-blockade bring a long-lasting peace to the region, or 4) Will it further endanger the sovereignty of Armenia and interrupt its transformation to democracy? ■



Photo: Kremlin

Azerbaijan is a decisive actor in a new round of Russian-Turkish competition. Depicted is a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in January 2020.