



## The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Catalyst for a New Regional Order

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### Summary

*On November 9, Armenia and Azerbaijan signed an end-of-hostilities agreement, under the aegis of Russia. This ceasefire, which enshrines a military victory for Azerbaijan, will have many repercussions on regional security and beyond. The changing framework of the peace process surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – from a Euro-Atlantic enterprise to a regional enterprise – indicates that neither Russia nor Turkey continue to view the West as a relevant actor in their backyard. This dynamic, which we had already observed in other theatres of conflict in recent months, in particular following the military withdrawal of the United States from Syria, is indicative of a paradigm shift in the management of the course of international affairs, even in the world order. This paradigm shift is encouraged by a certain disengagement of the United States and a “revival” and an alliance of circumstance of the two main regional powers.*

As of the time this article was written, a Russian-sponsored ceasefire has ended the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The latest official reports speak of more than [2,300 soldiers and 50 civilians dead on the Armenian side](#), but this figure is incomplete since Azerbaijan has still not communicated its military losses, while reporting 93 civilians dead as a result of the conflict. Both sides claim to have killed “thousands” of soldiers on the other side. [Russian sources](#) indicate, two weeks before the establishment of the ceasefire, casualties were around 5,000, making it one of the deadliest conflicts of the year. In the course of military operations, many sources have indicated important territorial acquisitions made by Azerbaijan, including Armenian sources who tend to minimize their losses. After the [initial stupors and fears that this belligerent escalation would entail regional actors](#), notably Turkey and Russia, and their allies by extension, these external actors have



shown a certain restraint. It is still not possible to envisage what the solution to this conflict will be, but it is however already possible to affirm that this war will have consequences beyond the number of victims or the destruction on the ground. A new regional security framework developed alongside the fighting, potentially heralding a new international order.

The awakening of the “frozen conflict” in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan has [dragged on for months](#): after border skirmishes between Armenia and Azerbaijan [in July 2020](#), the autumn fighting has undoubtedly been the most violent since the establishment of a ceasefire in 1994. This sudden resumption of hostilities contrasts with the encouraging signs of agreement between the two camps which seemed to be emerging in 2018, in particular with the establishment of a direct alert line between the leaders of the two camps.

[Frozen conflicts](#) are often referred to as those secessionist conflicts in the former USSR, where secessionist parties have made military gains on the ground without gaining international recognition. These conflicts then get bogged down in interminable peace processes that end up falling into a state of dormancy due to the lack of progress in the negotiations. The term “frozen,” however, does not characterize so much the conflicts themselves, which often see the episodic resumption of violence, but rather the peace processes aimed at resolving them. This is particularly true in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which to date has not benefited from any peacekeeping force to enforce ceasefire agreements. It is important to

remember that this conflict is essentially a three-actor struggle – Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR, called Artsakh by the Armenians) – and has a dual nature: it is both an internal secessionist struggle in Azerbaijan and an international conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, although the fighting took place almost exclusively in Azerbaijan.

The fights of fall 2020 have taken on existential proportions for the main protagonists. Karabakh Armenians have been defending lands they have considered theirs for three millennia and, [by analogy with the Armenian genocide](#) of 1915, claim to [risk outright elimination](#). For its part, Azerbaijan seeks to restore its territorial integrity by restoring sovereignty over the self-proclaimed secessionist territory. Not only had secessionist forces freed themselves from Baku rule since the early 1990s, but they also occupied significant Azerbaijani territories, seven districts in fact, beyond what constituted the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region of Soviet times. The secessionist forces intended to use these occupied territories as a bargaining chip in their negotiations with the Azerbaijani authorities, while restitution has been demanded by [four UN resolutions](#) (Resolutions 822, 853, 974 and 884) since 1993. Gradually, the possession of these territories turned into an occupation, with the construction of infrastructure to link Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. Azerbaijan, frustrated and humiliated to see UN resolutions ineffective, and to be forced to absorb a large population of [refugees and displaced people](#), has been [seeking revenge](#) since the conflict erupted there thirty years ago.





Although the NKR has survived independently from Azerbaijan since 1994, it is a *de facto* state that no other state has recognized, not even neighboring Armenia or Russia. The latter, however, recognized two other secessionist territories having acquired their *de facto* independence from neighboring Georgia in a similar context, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, following the war it waged against [Georgia in August 2008](#). Since these events, [Russia continues to intervene](#) in the political life of this small republic of the Caucasus. Like the secessionist territories in Georgia, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict challenges international law, which is faced with the dilemma of having to decide between two diametrically opposed principles: that of the right of peoples to self-determination and that of the right of States to defend their territorial integrity and sovereignty. The humanitarian crisis and the play of regional powers also challenge the international community and, could eventually require its intervention.

Given the warring parties' dissatisfaction with their respective insecurity, [the outbreaks over the summer](#) clearly set the stage for the fall war. On the occasion of the 75th United Nations General Assembly in September 2020, speeches delivered by the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders just days before the start of large-scale military operations on September 27 already bore the seeds of escalation. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev both used equivocal language: [the former](#) promoted the right to self-determination while denouncing Turkey's growing involvement, [the latter](#) lamented the lack of diplomatic progress in the

resolution of this conflict and accused the Armenian side of intransigence.

In fact, since the early 1990s, negotiations to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have been anchored in the Minsk process, which is part of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), from which a contact group co-chaired by the United States, France and Russia emerged: [the Minsk Group](#). This group was formed in 1992, when the OSCE was still the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). Despite its Euro-Atlantic framework, the Minsk Group includes all interested states and important regional state actors, including Turkey, with the notable exception of Iran. However, during the almost thirty years of its existence, this contact group has continued its work without achieving tangible results. There is a growing impression, especially in Azerbaijan, that the Minsk Group is unable or unwilling to provide an effective solution to the conflict. In early July 2020, President Aliyev openly [attacked the peace process and questioned the need to negotiate](#) with Armenia. Only a few days later the attacks on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border broke out. This coincidence, if it is indeed a coincidence, is reminiscent of similar criticisms made by the Azerbaijani authorities in February and March 2016, shortly before the resumption of hostilities – in what some have called the [“April War”](#) or the [“Five-Day War”](#) – which resulted in nearly 200 casualties and Azerbaijan's reconquest of some positions on the edge of Nagorno-Karabakh.





### What Changed in 2020

It is not unusual that we are witnessing a resumption of armed hostilities in this “hardly frozen” conflict. What distinguishes the current escalation from previous outbreaks, however, is Turkey's much more active role, Russia's more reserved role, and [the absence of the United States](#). The analysis of the official reactions of these external actors gives observers a glimpse of the consequences that this violent resumption of conflict could have: it could be the prelude to a transformation of the peace process from a Euro-Atlantic process into a more “regional process”.

Since the summer of 2020, Turkey – which has never been neutral on this issue due to its cultural proximity to Azerbaijan, but which has always avoided getting too heavily involved for fear of incurring the wrath of Moscow – seems to have abandoned its neutrality facade. Beyond criticism directed at Armenia during the July outbreaks, Ankara stepped up its rhetoric against Armenia in August, on the centenary of the Treaty of Sèvres. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has stepped up criticism of Armenia following joint Turkish-Azerbaijani military exercises in late July and early August this year. As early as September, observers reported increased [diplomatic support from Turkey](#) to Baku and [the transfer of Turkish military equipment](#) to Azerbaijan. Without this being officially confirmed, testimonies have accumulated to the effect that [Turkey is using hundreds of pro-Turkish armed fighters coming from Syria](#) to support Baku, although this is strongly denied

by the political and [intellectual](#) authorities of the country.



Contrary to expectations, the unequivocal support from Turkey and its military presence in Azerbaijan [was not met with a strong reaction from Russia](#), which for almost ten days contented itself with appealing restraint towards belligerents – a very unvoccal position which gave the impression that Russia, despite being Armenia's strategic ally within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), [is not very interested in getting involved](#) in this conflict. [After ten days](#), Moscow bustled into piloting peace talks, even after [one of its helicopters was mistakenly shot down by Azerbaijani forces](#) over Armenian territory. Several analysts in Moscow and elsewhere even questioned whether the involvement of Russian diplomacy in this conflict would generate [too high a cost for Moscow to derive benefits from it](#). Russia succeeded in negotiating a ceasefire on October 9, a humanitarian truce on October 17 and another on October 26, three agreements that were ignored on the ground. The agreement of November 9 seems to have had more echo: a ceasefire was signed by Armenia and Azerbaijan, in particular an agreement which includes a peacekeeping role for Russia. This is





a first, as the previous ceasefire, which suspended most of the armed hostilities between 1994 and 2020, was not accompanied by an interposition force deployed in the region. Note that the agreement makes no mention of the role of the Minsk Group or the OSCE.

### Towards a Turkey-Russia Tandem in the Caucasus?

Although tacit, Turkey's participation in a conflict in a region that Russia sees as its backyard can be seen through the prism of a foreign policy synergy from Moscow and Ankara on several fronts. So even as Turkey and Russia stand on opposite sides in the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, they have both found common ground in their respective estrangement from Western political and even military paradigms. For Turkey, this estrangement lends itself to [criticism from its NATO partners](#), a phenomenon whose magnitude grows as Ankara multiplies unilateral provocative gestures, whether in Syria, Libya or, more recently [in the eastern Mediterranean](#). President Erdogan's regime increasingly openly displays an unapologetic nationalist foreign policy, which some qualify as [irredentist](#), but which is more focused on [political and security considerations](#) and is said to be closer to a certain "[Turkish Gaullism](#)". Many are now questioning whether Turkey is still a reliable partner in the Atlantic Alliance, which undermines the climate of trust that is essential between allies as Turkey seeks to [make its mark on the regional scene](#). On the side of Moscow, this change in approach could be explained by an attempt to revive the

[Primakov doctrine](#) (named after the former Russian foreign minister and prime minister Yevgeny Primakov), wanting Russia to form regional alliances in order to resist the world hegemony of the United States.

Many observers believe that the resumption of armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is a [new chapter](#) in the centuries-old proxy war [between Moscow and Ankara in the Caucasus](#). However, after a closer examination of the current geopolitical situation, it seems rather that the two parties have developed a certain agreement, even a [pragmatic collaboration](#) in certain files in the Caucasus rather than using every pretext to reignite their historical rivalry. This renewed conflict appears to provide them with an opportunity to work together to exert influence in the region while excluding the Western powers.

The Turkish-Russian love-hate relationship became most evident when, on November 24, 2015, Turkish F-16 fighters shot down a Russian Sukhoi SU-24 plane over the Turkey-Syria border. The incident, which could have been used by Moscow to [escalate tensions with Ankara](#), simply resulted in a momentary diplomatic chill that was already forgotten in mid-2016, when the two countries announced the [resumption of diplomatic relations](#). By 2017, Turkish-Russian relations had already become friendly enough again for the two countries to sign a military cooperation agreement paving the way for Ankara's purchase of [Russian-made surface-to-air missiles](#). In view of the undeniable [security problems](#) posed by the purchase of Russian military equipment by Turkey for the latter's partners in NATO, the fear that Turkey will fall





into Russia's camp in a climate reminiscent of that of the Cold War, provoked the ire of Washington, which [canceled certain cooperation programs with Ankara](#), including the F-35 program, and even started to think about the possibility of excluding Turkey from the Atlantic Alliance. Ankara does not seem to care, pursuing openly, provocatively in the eyes of the West, [an agreement with infrequent regimes – Iran, Venezuela and Russia](#) – while adopting an increasingly nationalist policy on the [regional scene](#). It must be said that NATO member countries can hardly exclude Turkey from the Atlantic Alliance, a strategic impossibility according to several analysts, because this would mean for NATO to cut itself off from the Bosphorus Strait, which is essential for its ships and would lead to the complete isolation of the Romanian and Bulgarian fleets, in addition to destroying the possibility of one day seeing Georgia join NATO. Aware of his strategic position, Erdogan mocks the concerns of his NATO partners by deciding to test his new Russian missile systems on October 16, 2020, in the midst of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, a gesture that will probably be followed by [exclusion of Turkey from other NATO programs, even sanctions](#), without leading to its expulsion.

Besides their suspicion and oppositional stance towards the West, Russia and Turkey have both taken advantage of several developments over the past two years to increase their cooperation, especially in the South Caucasus. The increased isolationism of US foreign policy in recent years and the declining interest of European countries in the region provide an opportunity for Russia and Turkey to “hijack”

the Nagorno-Karabakh dossier from the OSCE Minsk Process by converting it into a regional enterprise. This act of conversion is even accelerated by the gestures of defiance posed by Turkey, which no longer hesitates to offend Western countries. After months of stormy relations between Ankara and Paris, over Libya or oil exploration in the Mediterranean, Erdogan now blames French President Emmanuel Macron for his plan to fight radical Islamism in France. Faced with very little diplomatic criticism from Erdogan, who [questioned Macron's “mental health” by inviting him “to seek treatment,”](#) France had no other choice but to [recall the Turkish ambassador](#). On the same occasion, the Turkish president accused France of being [“responsible for the occupation](#) of part of the territory of Azerbaijan by pro-Armenian separatists,” which obviously aims to undermine the credibility of France, which is home to a large population of Armenian origin, in her potential role as a neutral mediator in this conflict and as co-chair of the Minsk Group with the United States and Russia. The severing of Franco-Turkish diplomatic relations can only further limit the pressure that Paris is able to exert on the actors in this conflict, while Turkey is showing its participation more and more openly. With the United States completely absorbed in the presidential campaign and its aftermath, only Russia remains to deal with the Minsk peace process. In this context, it is not surprising that Turkey is calling for the establishment of a new negotiating framework for the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, a [framework which would henceforth be made up of four: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey](#).





The consequences of transposing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from a multilateral OSCE framework into a [more regional Russian-Turkish framework](#) (with a [possible Iranian role](#), but that is not yet clear) could be major and lasting. In this context, Russia's initial "wait and see" approach, followed by its involvement in negotiating a ceasefire between the protagonists, is bearing fruit. Indeed, Russia has cleverly used its various pressure levers to impose its alternative peace process to that of the Minsk Group. Moreover, the cease-fire negotiated on November 9 provides for the [deployment of a Russian peacekeeping force](#) made up of 1,960 soldiers, a prospect that had never been accepted by the protagonists (especially Azerbaijan), until now. Turkey is given a role as supervisor of the implementation of the agreement. Another consequence of this agreement is the complete evacuation of the prospect of Nagorno-Karabakh: indeed, until now, Armenia has always refused to sign any agreement without the NKR being a party. The fact that Armenia signed this disadvantageous ceasefire agreement not only indicates its [extreme geopolitical vulnerability](#), but also gives credence to the Azerbaijani thesis which for decades has asserted that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is not so much a secessionist conflict on its territory as an interstate conflict between Azerbaijan and neighboring Armenia. So, while it is clear that Azerbaijan has gone on the military offensive in recent weeks, this state likes to project a self-image as being the victim of Armenian intransigence for thirty years.

From Turkey's point of view, the recent conflict and the possible regional diplomacy working with Russia to resolve it brings a double

benefit: the opportunity for Erdogan to claim a military and diplomatic victory and, more importantly, the strengthening of Turkey's "mentoring" on Azerbaijan. These two elements allow Turkey to advance its program of affirmation on the regional and international stage.

Despite the UN Security Council's call, launched on September 29, to contain the conflict and continue its mediation within the framework of the OSCE, it has become clear that the Minsk process is no longer a viable option for the actors involved in the conflict. This means the final burial of the dying process, which had already been abandoned by Armenia long ago.

The shift of a peace process from a multilateral framework – the OSCE Minsk Group – to a more regional Russian-Turkish framework indicates that the West is an increasingly irrelevant actor in the backyard of Russia and Turkey. Whether by choice or by accidental convergence, the two regional powers are ready to define and implement their own security strategies in the South Caucasus bilaterally, with only symbolic and timid objections on the part of the West. The Minsk process appears to be the latest victim of this trend as well as of the American disengagement from the course of world affairs.

## Political Considerations for Canada

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict concerns Canada in many ways. First, Turkey's increasingly documented support for





Azerbaijani forces is of concern, as this NATO partner delivered [Canadian technology to the Azerbaijani armed forces](#), who used it in their military operations in the fall. In response, Canadian firm [BRP has suspended deliveries of drone engines](#) to Turkey, and a [full review of Canadian military products](#) that may have been used on the Caucasian battlefield is being conducted by Canadian authorities to see if there is a need to expand the embargo.

Second, as a middle power, Canada has always favored the diplomatic work of international organizations. This is a Canadian way of having a voice on the international stage, a voice generally little heard outside of these organizations due to [Canada's historic alignment with the geopolitical positions of the United States](#). However, the failure of the Minsk Group and the virtual absence of Western mediation in this conflict is a lost opportunity. Being widely perceived as a relatively neutral state on issues in the Caucasus, Ottawa would have been well positioned to try to bridge the gap between the protagonists. Such a diplomatic initiative [could eventually help Canada in its ambitions to obtain a non-permanent seat](#) on the UN Security Council.

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Finally, Ottawa must take a stand on the issue of recognizing – or not recognizing – the independence of the NKR. This is a sensitive issue for Canada, which is home to a [small population of Armenian origin that includes many artists, intellectuals and public figures](#). This community has a much greater visibility than people of Azerbaijani origin, who are far less numerous in the country, which allows it to benefit from a certain [capacity to influence](#) Canadian political authorities. This is how Armenia was able to convince Canadian lawmakers to recognize the genocide of 1915, despite threats of retaliation from Turkey, a NATO ally. This influence also explains the initiative of [Senator Leo Housakos, who tabled a motion calling for recognition of the independence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic](#). Canada is not the only country to be challenged by the Armenian diaspora community, because a real [movement has been launched for the international recognition](#) of the NKR. Uruguay, as so often with this kind of issue – after all, it was the very first state in the world to recognize the Armenian genocide of 1915 – opens the ball by explicitly discussing the possibility of recognizing the independence of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, even if this is done on a diminished territory. Its capital, [Montevideo, has formally recognized it](#).

For Canada, however, it is advisable to be careful before embarking on such a process of state recognition. Nagorno-Karabakh is an entity that seceded from a sovereign state, Azerbaijan, which Canada recognized within its borders inherited from the Soviet era. However, apart from colonial situations, international law generally does not recognize







a right to secession, except in very rare specific situations – such as foreign occupation (as in Kuwait in 1990) or in the event of state dissolution (such as the USSR and Yugoslavia in 1991 and Czechoslovakia in 1993) – conditions which are not applicable in Karabakh. Certainly, activist jurists have been trying to develop a new right to secession for some twenty years, namely in the case of populations that would be subjected to severe and long-term repression. The only case that has been able to benefit from it so far [is that of Kosovo](#), yet a case that is far from unanimous. Still contested by Serbia, Kosovo's independence is only recognized by a hundred states and the entity fails to gain the support it needs to join the UN. At the time of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008, most states that recognized it as a new independent state, such as Canada, took the trouble to point out that this was a unique case that would not set a precedent. However, whatever the Canadian authorities think, and [despite the warnings of specialists](#), such a uniqueness is untenable in international law and the recognition of Kosovo does indeed constitute a precedent, which has also served as a model for the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia and a few other states in 2008.

If Canada engages in such a new recognition, it risks reproducing what has always been presented as unique. It is a dangerous game which could, on the one hand, destabilize the international order by trivializing interference in the internal affairs of states while promoting the proliferation of states and, on the other hand, haunt Canada if ever a Canadian province sought to secede and obtained foreign support

in its secessionist efforts. Ottawa cannot expect restraint from other states if it allows itself to support an approach that blatantly undermines the sovereignty of others.

