



The War of Nagorno-Karabakh: Its Origins and Its Ulterior Consequences Barometer of Russia's Relations With Turkey

Jacques Lévesque
Université du Québec à Montréal

The Nagorno-Karabakh armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which began on September 27, lasted nearly two months and is said to have claimed more than 10,000 lives, twice as many on the Azeri side. It took the whole world by surprise. Yet, there is nothing surprising about it. It was a conflict frozen for twenty-two years and therefore practically forgotten, except of course, by the two small states involved. If it has had significant media coverage, it is because of the current international situation and the dimension of the new issues that it reveals in the international policy of post-Soviet Russia and the search for its place in the world.

Russia's Apparent Weakness

During the first month of the war, and beyond, Russia appeared hesitant and even incapable of supporting and defending Armenia, which was and remains its military ally. It is indeed part of the CSTO (Organization of the Collective Security Treaty), the alliance set up by

Vladimir Putin in 2002, which he saw as the hard core of Russia's allies and which is wrongly compared to a NATO from the east. It has six of the former Soviet republics and Armenia has a Russian military base.

It is understandable why Azerbaijan never joined. It was partially dismembered by Armenia soon after the end of the USSR. Dismembered on the one hand by the capture of Nagorno-Karabakh which was an autonomous region comprising 80% of Armenians, and on the other hand by the conquest of territories which extend far beyond the Armenian enclave. Azerbaijan thus lost 14% of its territory; Karabakh accounting for 9%. In the chaos that reigned in Moscow in 1992, public opinion was clearly in favor of Armenia. Russian military groups still poorly controlled by Yeltsin lent a hand to the Armenian fighters. In 1993 after the end of hostilities, 800,000 Azeris had left the conquered territories and 400,000 Armenians had emigrated to Armenia in the wake of two





pogroms which were assimilated to the Armenian genocide.

Russia's military passivity during Azerbaijan's reconquest of most of the territories lost at the turn of the century, including part of Karabakh, was justified by Vladimir Putin on grounds of international law. He argued, as if to justify himself, that the self-proclaimed independence of Nagorno-Karabakh had never been recognized either by Russia or even by Armenia; which is strictly correct.

However, he forgets to say that if Armenia did not do it, it was at the request and even at the request of Boris Yeltsin's Russia after the 1994 ceasefire. History explains things well. We were then in the midst of inter-ethnic wars of secession in the former Yugoslavia with their procession of horrors that would have been unthinkable in Europe a few years earlier. Mainly responsible for these wars, Serbia has been ostracized from the nations. As a result, the revision of the borders of the post-Soviet states was a taboo subject in Moscow for ultra-Westernists in Yeltsin's entourage whose primary objective was to see Russia “join the ranks of the civilized world,” to use their terms.¹

On November 17th, shortly after the cessation of hostilities in Azerbaijan, Vladimir Putin gave a very long interview to explain and justify Russia's behavior during the conflict.

¹ It should be noted for this reason that in 1992, Yeltsin refused to follow up on a very majority resolution of what was still called the Supreme Soviet of Russia concerning Crimea. This resolution demanded its return to Russia, arguing that its transfer to Ukraine by Khrushchev in 1954 was illegal because the Soviet Constitution demanded that a

Speaking as if he had been a neutral arbiter between the two sides, however, he criticized Armenia, but not Azerbaijan at all.²

To do so, he referred to the Minsk Group which had been established in 1994 and jointly chaired by the United States, Russia and France (in the spirit of the end of the Cold War) to find a solution to the conflict which would be acceptable to both parties and which has never been able to succeed despite several attempts. Putin underlined that in 2013 he had proposed, with the agreement of the two other co-presidents of the Group, a restitution by Armenia of seven Azeri districts to ease the situation and to be able to settle the status of Karabakh more easily. Yerevan was opposed to it to keep an important means of pressure in order to obtain the renunciation of this territory. In other words, according to him, it was Armenia's intransigence that was blocking a thaw of the situation. Putin also claimed that a few weeks after the start of the war in October, the President of Azerbaijan had agreed to conclude a ceasefire on the sole condition that former Azeri citizens, especially those of the city of Shusha, could return to Karabakh. He said he was surprised that the Armenian president refused to take up this proposal.

If throughout the armed conflict Russia appeared to be losing influence and incapable of influencing the course of events, we subsequently saw that this was a deliberate

change of borders be agreed with the republics concerned and not just a decision of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR; which had not been respected. Crimea's populations was more than 70% Russian then.

² The text of his remarks deserves to be read in full, [click here](#).





choice. We were going to witness a major recovery in its role with the end of hostilities.

The Military Successes of Azerbaijan Backed by Turkey

Even before the first Karabakh war, Azerbaijan's relations with Russia were already very bad and only worsened thereafter, even if Moscow was not responsible for it. The economic collapse, one of the worst in the former USSR, and the absence of armed forces worthy of the name largely explain its defeat. The political chaos began to end soon after the 1994 ceasefire, with the rise to power of a high-caliber political figure: Heydar Aliyev. Along with Mikhail Gorbachev, Aliyev had been one of two members of the Politburo of the Communist Party of the USSR that Yuri Andropov was considering in 1984 to succeed him as Party Secretary-General. After his death in 2003 he was replaced by his son Ilham Alyev, still in place.



In the years following their accession to power, Azerbaijan's economic recovery was quite spectacular, thanks to the completion of several large projects to export oil to Turkey, which benefited greatly, both as a consumer and as a

consumer. transit route to Europe. We think here of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline which covers a route of 1,768 kilometers to arrive on the Mediterranean and of that of 1,300 kilometers from Baku to Russia at the port of Novorossiysk for export to Europe. It is not necessary to insist on the very heavy dependence of Turkey for its imports of Russian gas. These major economic ties have necessarily fostered important political ties, but vary between the three countries.

In October 2009, after years and years of hostility, two memoranda of understanding were signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The first aimed to establish diplomatic relations between the two States, to recognize their common border as definitive and thus to allow commercial exchanges. The second aimed to seek compromises on the issues that separated them. In Yerevan, consideration was given to diluting the demand for recognition of the genocide of 1915 by a project for a joint study of the events that took place then. Another commission was to seek a compromise on the future of Nagorno-Karabakh. The event sparked an uproar in Baku, where there were threats to suspend relations with Ankara and to cancel plans for new oil agreements. But, almost a year later, under pressure from the Armenian diaspora, the Yerevan Parliament rescinded the signed protocols. The common hostility of Azerbaijan and Turkey towards Armenia was markedly reinforced.

It is somewhat astonishing that the new war for Nagorno-Karabakh was not foreseen long before the outbreak of hostilities despite constant and strong tension. The balance of power, both military and economic, between





the two parties had nothing to do with that of the first war. Azeri soldiers under the flag numbered 67,000 and Armenia numbered 45,000. As for tanks and other armed vehicles, Armenia had 529 and 1,000, respectively, while Azerbaijan had 665 and 1,637. The total number of combat planes and helicopters was 127 on the Azeri side and 65 on the Armenian side. In 2019, Yerevan's defense budget was \$1.8 billion and Baku's was \$645 million.

Despite all this superiority, Ilham Aliyev considered it prudent both politically and militarily to ask for direct aid from Turkey. As we know, it was Turkey, which provided the drones which proved to be very effective and which sent very high-level officers to coordinate if not even direct the operations. There were also reports of mercenaries from the Turkish minority of Syria who fought the Assad regime before they had to take refuge in Turkey.

Russia's Decisive Comeback

Throughout the Forty-Four Day War, Putin called for a ceasefire. He succeeded in obtaining it, or possibly imposing it, after Azerbaijan had recaptured almost all the territory surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh and a not insignificant part of it. We do not know the content of the many talks he had with Aliyev and Erdogan. However, based on various signs one can believe that they were very harsh and stormy. Three weeks after the start of hostilities, during a meeting in Istanbul between Ukrainian President Zelensky and his counterpart Erdogan, the latter reaffirmed to him that Turkey refused to recognize the

annexation of Crimea by Russia. We know that he openly supports the claims of the Tatar minority who accounts for 12% of the population of the peninsula. With his provocative bent, Erdogan went further and [even told Zelensky, in a joint statement](#), that he would help Ukraine join the ranks of NATO. He knows very well that it is in order to block such an eventuality that Putin supports the rebellion of Donbass which is still going on.

Putin succeeded in imposing the ceasefire before Armenia totally lost Karabakh. It is certain that it is Azerbaijan which chose to accept the ceasefire and which had to put Turkey in front of its decision. In doing so, Ilham Alyiev has shown that he gives a clear geopolitical preference to Russia. By asking him to agree not to completely restore the territorial integrity of his country, Putin wanted to avoid a total and catastrophic defeat of his Armenian ally. He will be indebted to his Azeri counterpart.

And that's not all he owes him. To guarantee the cease-fire, the agreements require the deployment of a Russian military contingent of 2,000 men in Azeri territory, around the small area of Karabakh, for a renewable period of five years. For the first time since the end of the USSR, Russian military forces will be stationed in Azerbaijan. Before the publication of the terms of the ceasefire, it was announced in Istanbul that Turkish military personnel would join the peacekeeping forces. It has not happened. At most, a few Turkish observers could be accommodated in a cease-fire monitoring center. Note that this agreement says nothing at all about the future of Karabakh. The cease-fire is renewable after five years.





Putin's skill in securing such a compromise is quite remarkable. Armenia's access to Karabakh is now guaranteed by the Russian military forces. In return, and this is a major concession for Armenia, which has accepted the construction of a road on its territory which will allow Azerbaijan to reach Nakhichevan, which is an important part of its landlocked territory between Armenia and Iran. Until now, land communications from Azerbaijan to its autonomous region needed to pass through Iran. Azerbaijan would thus obtain an exit towards Turkey with which it has no border.³ It was certainly a very difficult concession for Putin to obtain. However, it remains to be seen when and how this route can be taken.

A few words stand out about Iran's attitude during the conflict. It should be noted first of all that there are more than twice as many Azeris in Iran as in Azerbaijan; or 23 million compared to 10 million. On both sides, the vast majority of these are Shia, as are the vast majority of Iran's population. Relations between the two states have often been difficult. Notably due to the fact that Israel accounted for 60% of Azerbaijan's arms purchases between 2015 and 2019 [according to SIPRI figures](#); the rest coming from Russia and Turkey. It was after much hesitation and because of the weight of its Azeri population that Tehran supported Azerbaijan.



Source: Map of Azerbaijan with Nagorno-Karabakh and the zone controlled by the Armenian army until November 2020. [Check out the original file here.](#)

³ We can clearly see in the map all this arbitrariness of the borders established by Stalin.





If the war had lasted a few more days, Azerbaijan would have reconquered all of its territory, unless Russia entered the war. Did Putin have to threaten to do so? We may find out one day. Anyway, during his very long press conference of November 17, and contrary to his comments about Armenia, he showed great deference to Aliyev and even Turkey. In response to journalists' questions regarding the major support given by Turkey to Azerbaijan, he replied: "Azerbaijan is an independent and sovereign state and it has every right to choose its allies as it wishes." He would certainly not say the same thing with regard to Georgia and Ukraine. You could say that Turkey has a very special status in its relations with Russia.

Given that the ceasefire of 9 November says absolutely nothing about the future of Nagorno-Karabakh, there is a serious risk of returning to the conflict that was frozen for 25 years. How long would a new one last? If the road link planned in Armenia between the two pieces of Azerbaijan can be made, it should lead to a relaxation between the two states. The best to be hoped for in these conditions would be a formula of dual membership of Karabakh with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Is it possible? The future will tell.

The Difficult Good Relations Between Russia and Turkey

In the simplest terms, what explains these good relations are their disappointments and disillusionments. Most recent in the case of Turkey, with the Western world. These disappointments and disillusionments concern Europe more in the case of Turkey, and more the United States in

the case of Russia. With the annexation of Crimea and above all because of the Donbass war and its thousands of deaths, Russia was ostracized from the entire Western world. As for Turkey, it must be remembered that during the first years of his power in Ankara in 2003, Erdogan made many efforts to meet the demands of the European Union so that Turkey could join, only to eventually be refused. He subsequently cultivated nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire as well as for Islam to give Turkey an international mission, without of course wanting to reconstitute it.

Geography and history therefore ensure that there is a partial, but not negligible, overlap of what Moscow calls the "sphere of legitimate interests" of the two states; the term sphere of influence having become politically incorrect. Despite all the friction that has arisen between them, Russia attaches great importance to Turkey because it sees it as a very important factor of multipolarity in the current international situation.

We touch here on what has become the central objective of Russia's international policy since it was taken over in January 1996 by Yevgeny Primakov, an eminent scholar and great master of geopolitics, in the context and due to the second enlargement of NATO to the East. It was with China that Russia founded in 2001 the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), one of whose first objectives was to promote multipolarity in the world by strengthening their economic, political and military ties. It is in this context, we see major military maneuvers took place between China, Russia





and some of its allies in Central Asia⁴. With varying statuses, several other states have joined the SCO, which has become the main focus and promoter of multipolarity.

In 2012, Turkey applied to become a full member of the SCO. Erdogan obtained a special status there, Turkey being a member of NATO; a unique case. In November 2016, a few days after the Parliament in Strasbourg suspended its negotiations with Ankara for its accession to the European Union, the SCO entrusted it with the presidency of a consultation group on energy issues. With strong support from Moscow, it was the first time that the SCO gave such a mandate to a special status member.

Turkey's geopolitical importance to Russia is also, and perhaps even more, due to its purchase of Russian S-400 air defense missiles, which are among the most sophisticated weaponry Moscow has. This is an unprecedented event in the history of NATO. Erdogan resisted numerous pressures on this from the United States, including the application sanctions. Despite this, a second purchase contract was concluded last August. Because of the resulting disruptive effects on NATO cohesion, Russia can only hope that Turkey will remain in the alliance.

In conclusion, it should be noted that Russia is currently paying a fairly low political price compared to what Turkey could be worth in terms of multipolarity. It is within the Russia-Iran-Turkey triangle which seeks to restore the

territorial integrity of Syria that Russia takes more account of the interests of Turkey which wants to establish a buffer zone on its borders to prevent a possible passage of Kurdish forces. For Erdogan, both internal and external Kurdish demands are the main danger facing Turkey.

What Can Canada Do from So Far Away?

On October 22, in the context of the events mentioned above, but not directly related to them, Vladimir Putin addressed a large audience of foreign academics and editorial writers from the United States, Canada, and others as part of its annual meeting which is called the "Valdai Discussion Club." [He made remarks](#) of much more arrogance than usual:

Let me assure you dear friends that we objectively assess our potentialities: our intellectual, territorial, economic and military potential. I am referring here to our current options and our overall potential. As we strengthen this country and look at what is happening in the world and in other countries, I would like to say to those who still expect to see Russia's strength gradually decline, the only thing that worries us is to catch a cold at your funeral.

We see in these words a compensatory reflection of the banishment of Russia in the

⁴ It is worth noting the recent and colossal "Vostok-2018" maneuvers, both land and naval, conducted last September

in the Far East by Russia with a very important participation of China. They mobilized more than 300,000 people.





Western world and the multiple sanctions to which it has been subjected in recent years. If Putin has not yet hailed Joe Biden's electoral victory, it is certainly not out of deference to Donald Trump. The reason is that he expects worse and that he seeks, as we sometimes say, “to raise the bar” for compromise. Canada has already been able to help facilitate a significant easing of tensions between the United States and Russia. It is not clear that it still has the capacity.

