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# Winners, Losers and Absentees in Nagorno Karabakh

by Nathalie Tocci and Nona Mikhelidze

For all the talk about a new geopolitics in the Caucasus, made up of Turkish drones and Syrian jihadis, Iranian mediation and the clash of civilisations, war between Armenia and Azerbaijan has ended as unilaterally as it gets. It did so not only because of Azerbaijan's military victory over Armenia, reversing its defeat twenty-six years earlier, but also and perhaps most significantly because the only geopolitical game in town is now almost entirely in Moscow's hands.

After close to three decades of fragile ceasefire that put an end to the 1988-1994 war in which Armenia seized from neighbouring Azerbaijan the Armenian-populated Nagorno Karabakh as well as seven adjacent regions, war resumed between the two countries on 27 September 2020. It was a war that was long in the waiting. Azerbaijan never digested its defeat, and spent most of the last three decades – notably during the golden days of oil hovering around one hundred dollars per barrel – arming itself to the teeth. Azerbaijan modernised its army with state-of-the-art weaponry, imported notably from Israel as well as Russia. No one was under the illusion that its military spending was defensive in nature.

On many occasions, violence erupted along the line of contact. The ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan was never fully consolidated. Worst still, the mediation format – the so-called Minsk Group led by its three co-chairs France, Russia and the United States within the OSCE framework – dramatically failed to broker a peace agreement. The last meaningful steps in that direction – the Madrid principles – date back to 2007. The last ten years have seen only the vestiges of a diplomatic dance.

The six-week war between Armenia and Azerbaijan took a heavy toll. As the world buckled under the second

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wave of the pandemic, this ugly war saw thousands of casualties, including hundreds of civilians notably from Barda, Ganja, Shusha and Stepanakert. While we sat glued to our screens watching the vote count in the United States drag on, the historically symbolic Shusha/Shushi, towering over Karabakh's capital Stepanakert, fell to Azerbaijan's forces. A red line was crossed and on 10 November, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a Russian-mediated settlement.

The trilateral agreement signals, in all but name, Armenia's defeat. Through it, Azerbaijan regains full control of all the occupied territory surrounding Nagorno Karabakh, with the exception of a five-kilometre-wide corridor in Lachin that retains a territorial link between Armenia and Stepanakert but not Shusha. Azerbaijani internally displaced persons and refugees can return to their homes under the supervision of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Apart from regaining territory, the agreement makes no mention of the future constitutional status of Nagorno Karabakh. Azerbaijan also obtained for the first time since the 1990s war a direct connection to its exclave Nakhichevan, hence a transport link to Turkey.

These elements of the ceasefire agreement are in many respects the least surprising. That the war was initiated by Azerbaijan to reverse the status quo was clear, as was its military edge over Armenian forces. Azerbaijan was unlikely to stop before it meaningfully reversed the situation on the ground. Whether it would have stopped – or would have been made to stop – after recapturing some or all of the occupied territory surrounding Karabakh, whether this would have included the Lachin corridor, or whether this would have included parts or all of Nagorno Karabakh itself we did not know. The 10 November agreement clarifies that picture in a manner that does not present a huge surprise.

Far more surprising to many external onlookers, is not Azerbaijan's win, but rather Russia's. Russia is amongst the three Minsk Group co-chairs, it has close religious and security ties with Armenia, but over the last decade, it has significantly upgraded its economic relationship with Azerbaijan. During this six-week war, it repeatedly activated itself to broker humanitarian ceasefires, as did Iran, France and the United States.

However, much of the international attention pivoted elsewhere. It primarily turned towards Ankara, where Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's strident support for Azerbaijan's military endeavour jarred with the monotone calls for a ceasefire by European, US and Iranian leaders.

The first weeks of the war were rife with talk of Turkish drones and Syrian jihadis, and more broadly of Turkey's grand entry into the Caucasian scene. After a spring in which Turkey flexed its military muscle in Libya and a summer in which it postured itself assertively in the Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara's autumn in the Caucasus seemed the main game in town. So much so that a lot of the discussion revolved around a hypothetical clash of civilisations in the Caucasus: yet another theatre – after


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Syria and Libya – in which conflict would be ultimately determined a Russian-Turkish uneasy entente.

Turkey was, no doubt, far more assertive in the 2020 war than in its precursor in 1988–1994, and secured itself a role in the post-violence set up through a joint monitoring centre with Russia overseeing the ceasefire. Iran too was far more active now than in the past, in its case by seeking to facilitate a ceasefire between the parties. By contrast, notwithstanding Mike Pompeo's attempt to broker a cessation of hostilities, the United States is infinitely less present in the Caucasus today than it was in late 1990s. Europeans – despite France's role as a Minsk Group co-chair – have been missing in action. In other words, the geopolitical dynamics of the region have changed significantly over the last thirty years.

However, the ceasefire agreement reached on 10 November, points to another, perhaps even more meaningful story. Others tried, but it was Moscow that eventually brokered an agreement. For the first time, Russia achieved what it had always failed to obtain: sending its – and only its – peacekeepers to the region.

Along the line of contact in Nagorno Karabakh and the Lachin corridor, a contingent of almost 2000 Russian troops will be deployed for a duration of five years, renewable for a further five. This gives Russia not only unprecedented leverage to determine the future constitutional fate of Nagorno Karabakh, but also to exert far greater influence on the domestic politics of Azerbaijan and above all Armenia. The latter's timid overtures towards the European Union under the leadership of Nikol Pashinyan will most likely turn mute.

Indeed the Russian negotiated deal pushes Armenia to a political brink, imperilling its young democracy. Armenians erupted in mass protests, labelling the deal as betrayal and calling for Prime Minister Pashinyan's resignation. If this happens – and it is difficult to imagine that it will not –, the Kremlin will pocket a further win from this agreement.

Armenia has long been Russia's strategic partner, but bilateral relations soured after the 2018 revolution that brought Pashinyan to power. His democratic reforms and especially his fight against corruption, which ended up with the arrests of key Russian-affiliated oligarchs as well as former pro-Russian president Robert Kocharyan, were not exactly appreciated by the Kremlin. In all but name, President Putin took revenge.

Ending war that, below the international radar screen, was causing much death, displacement and destruction was an achievement. However, as the 1994 agreement itself suggests, a ceasefire is no guarantee for peace. It could represent a mere crystallisation of conflict. If the last twenty-six years serve as precedent, this is the most likely outcome. Alternatively, it could become a stepping-stone for peace.

While the territorial war is over, the conflict between the peoples of Azerbaijan and Armenia is certainly not.


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To veer the conflict's dynamics towards a genuine reconciliation, revisiting the mediation format and aiming this at peace-building and people-to-people contact will be key. Given the wide range of instruments that can be mobilised by the EU in this field, it is time for Europeans to belatedly make their weight felt in the region, and steer the direction of travel away from a mere crystallisation of conflict and toward that of a veritable peace.

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