

The South Caucasus between Putin and Erdoğan

IS RUSSIA ON ITS WAY OUT?

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Over the past few years, a series of wars have caused tectonic shifts that have upset the architecture of the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan, backed by Turkey, emerged victorious from the 44-Day War of 2020 after a quarter-century in which Armenia had been the winner in Nagorno-Karabakh. As a result, Moscow must now coordinate with Ankara in the region, which is becoming closer to the New Middle East. Since the start of its full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has reduced its attention to other areas of foreign policy, as Moscow cannot afford the distraction of second fronts. This encouraged Azerbaijan to blockade Nagorno-Karabakh and cleanse the region of its ethnically Armenian population, who fled to Armenia in September 2023. With no people in Nagorno-Karabakh left to protect, Russia's role in the South Caucasus has decreased dramatically.

This restructuring of the interplay among regional and external actors is affecting domestic as well as foreign policy agendas and even the geopolitical orientations of the region's countries. Longtime Russian ally Armenia has actively been seeking alternative external partners, while its oil and gas reserves have emboldened Azerbaijan to behave less cautiously toward Russia than in the past. Even Georgia's recently more accommodating policy with regard to Russia stems from security concerns triggered by the war in Ukraine rather than a desire for rapprochement with Russia. While history and geography mean Russia will always be a player in the South Caucasus, it is no longer the hegemon. However, this diminished role seems likely to increase regional instability rather than decreasing it: unless global players take on Moscow's former role as a force creating rules for regional interaction, the region may well turn into an arena for rivalry between the regional powers of Turkey, Iran, and Russia.

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Three Years, Three Wars

The first war marking the start of radical changes in the South Caucasus was fought in 2020 and became known as the Second Karabakh War or the 44-Day War. Azerbaijan's victory and capture of approximately three-quarters of the territory previously controlled by the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, followed by the deployment of a Russian peacekeeping force, radically changed the balance of power between the leading regional powers, Russia and Turkey, as well as between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have now swapped places. Armenia, which had been the winner for the 26 years since the end of the First Karabakh War of 1991-1994, has been plunged into shock by the humiliating defeat. Azerbaijan, which had been in a state of frustration for that same quarter-century, is now a victorious nation that has achieved its aspirations.

Moreover, a non-post-Soviet actor has engaged in a post-Soviet conflict: Turkey, which has directly supported Azerbaijan with weapons, military training, and planning. This is an unprecedented occurrence in the region. Neither in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, nor Transnistria were external actors seriously present. And although a number of religiously motivated radical Islamists, usually Salafi citizens of Middle Eastern states, fought in the Chechen wars on the side of the Chechens, they did so on their own initiative rather than under state sponsorship.

The 44-Day War resulted in the victory of Turkey's ally and the defeat of Russia's ally. Accordingly, the South Caucasus no longer belongs solely to the post-Soviet space; it has become part of the Greater Middle East. The intertwined interests of Russia and Turkey collided in the South Caucasus in almost the same way as they did in Syria. Of course, in the economic and cultural sense, Turkey has long been present in the region, mainly in Georgia and Azerbaijan, but its presence in the strategic security realm is a new phenomenon for the post-Soviet space. If in the past Moscow could put a stop to any escalation of the Karabakh conflict with a telephone call, it now has to coordinate with Ankara.

The second war that dramatically changed the situation began outside and continues beyond the South Caucasus. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine has changed the landscape of the post-Soviet space more globally than the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, the combination of the local and the global has led to total upheaval in the South Caucasus.

At the end of the Second Karabakh War, Moscow was able to persuade (or pressure) Azerbaijan to agree to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the conflict zone. This made it possible to preserve Russia's presence in the region while suspending the conflict by a thread part of which was Russian. In general, in the post-Soviet space, Russia uses two main levers: energy prices and security. In the case of Azerbaijan, which extracts its

own oil and gas, energy prices cannot play a role; security, meanwhile, is the most important component of Russian influence on both Armenia and Azerbaijan. This includes the sale of Russian weapons to both countries, close bilateral relations in the military sphere, and (in the case of Armenia) CSTO membership.

Whereas Russian troops have been stationed in Armenia since Soviet times, they were withdrawn from Azerbaijan back in 2013. However, the post-war agreements of November 9-10, 2020, allowed Russia to send a contingent of 1,960 peacekeepers into Azerbaijani territory, thus marking a return of sorts. Yet even with this new presence, Russia's position in the region cannot be compared to before 2020, when it had no competitors for influence. With the Second Karabakh War, Turkey firmly entered the region, putting an end to Russia's monopoly on external influence. The form of competitive cooperation that Russia developed with Turkey in Syria, among other places, has spread to the South Caucasus.

The peacekeeping force was instrumental for Russia, which explains why it was deployed at the moment when Azerbaijan's victory was obvious but not total: Moscow needed the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic to survive as an entity in order for Russia to maintain its presence in the region as the guarantor of security. This configuration had long allowed Russia to exert influence and to be needed by both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The situation changed dramatically with the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Although it bore no direct relation to the South Caucasus, the war in Ukraine changed the balance in the region no less than the Second Karabakh War had. Russia stopped selling weapons to Armenia, the peacekeepers all but stopped performing their functions, and the agreements reached on November 9-10, 2020, were no longer implemented.

Sensing this window of opportunity, Baku increased its pressure on the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh and on Armenia itself, combining various forms of leverage, from discursive and diplomatic to military. The road from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh, the unimpeded movement of people and goods along which Russia was supposed to ensure, was first moved by several kilometers, then blocked, initially by groups whom Azerbaijan called activists and then by the military, who deployed themselves to the border with Armenia. Finally, all routes from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia were blocked, completing the blockade. Food, fuel, and medicine were not delivered, causing a humanitarian crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh.

After nine months of blockade, in September 2023, Azerbaijan carried out a military operation (which it called an "anti-terror" operation) to cleanse Nagorno-Karabakh of its Armenian population. This lasted about a week. The approximately 100,000 Armenians who remained in Nagorno-Karabakh were compelled to flee to Armenia. An average of 1,000 persons passed through the border checkpoint every hour, and traffic jams extended

the journey from Nagorno-Karabakh's capital, Stepanakert, to the border with Armenia, which typically takes around two hours, to between 20 and 40 hours. With the exception of an unknown number of persons who were killed or taken prisoner (the latter group includes several former leaders of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic), the entire population of Nagorno-Karabakh has [found](#) refuge in Armenia.

Geographical Changes

The elimination of the de-facto state [led](#) to the most recent change of the geopolitical situation. The direction of this change was the same as before: Russia's strategic role in the region decreased again, this time radically. The South Caucasus is likely to preserve its economic ties to Russia; some forms of cultural interaction; and some dependence in the realm of communication, although this may gradually decline.

But strategically and geopolitically, Russia's influence in the region has hit its lowest point since the collapse of the USSR. Russia's peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh has lost its function; it no longer has anyone to protect. Sooner or later, it will leave Azerbaijan, but even while it stays, its presence does not affect Azerbaijan in any way. Several Russian peacekeepers were even killed by the Azerbaijani military, apparently for interfering with the ethnic cleansing of Armenians, and all it led to was a formal apology. Russia is clearly not going to open any second fronts because it cannot be distracted from the task that the Kremlin considers existential, namely its war in Ukraine and, more broadly, its conflict with the West.

The fact that Azerbaijan could afford to ignore Russia's interests to such an extent speaks volumes. The reasons are clear: Russia relies on Azerbaijan for "gray" energy exports to Europe and has allied relations with Turkey, a country of special importance in the context of the war in Ukraine. Plus, the importance of Azerbaijan's oil exports to Europe means that despite its consolidated authoritarian regime, Baku maintains fairly close ties with many European countries.

As for Armenia, its goal in joining the CSTO in the first place and then in agreeing to the peacekeeping operation in Nagorno-Karabakh was to ensure its security. When this failed, Armenia began to diversify its policies, turning to other external actors in search of political instruments of security. Yerevan has been looking for negotiation platforms other than those provided by Moscow, increasing the level and frequency of its contacts with the West, purchasing weapons from various countries, and joining such international formats as the Rome Statute.

In Russia, this has predictably caused annoyance, expressed in harsh statements, which have in turn triggered strong responses from Armenia. To date, this information war has not led to institutional changes – Armenia has not left the CSTO, the CIS or the Eurasian Economic Union – but two points bear noting: first, this might well happen in the future,

and second, just four years ago the present kind of terse exchanges between Armenia and Russia would have been unimaginable.

The changes have affected domestic as well as foreign politics. With the start of the Ukrainian war, Georgia, which had to that point positioned itself as unequivocally pro-Western, began to behave more cautiously toward Russia, for obvious reasons: Georgia borders Russia and feels endangered. This, in turn, has produced a new dynamic in Georgia's domestic politics: the opposition accuses the authorities of having a pro-Russian bent, while the authorities insist on the priority of national interests over geopolitical orientations.

In Armenia, negative attitudes toward Russia [are](#) on the rise, both in society and among elites. Anti-Russian sentiment has long existed in Armenia, but it has historically been expressed by intellectuals, journalists, and the political opposition, not by senior public officials. Nowadays, it is Armenia's prime minister who condemns Russian policies.

Azerbaijan continues to pursue a fairly complementary policy using its oil and gas resources. While it does not aspire to political forms of engagement with European institutions due to the nature of its regime, Baku prioritizes economic interaction with the West. In the strategic dimension, Turkish influence on Azerbaijan is visibly increasing.

The South Caucasus is thus no longer an exclusively post-Soviet region. If "post-Soviet" describes zones of Russian influence, in the South Caucasus, this influence has decreased to an extent that may be irreversible. Of course, whatever happens, Russia will remain a major regional player. A nuclear power that borders the region and is the former parent state of the empire that included all the region's countries will play a role in any event, even if it does not consciously seek it. However, Russia is no longer the hegemon, the main external player and arbiter.

Of course, this change of "mental geography" will not happen overnight. The withdrawal of Russia's peacekeeping force from Azerbaijan, changes to the institutional format for Armenia-Russia ties, Georgia's further integration into the EU, the creation of new regional formats – all of this will take time. However, we are past the turning point: the Nagorno-Karabakh problem has all but disappeared with the elimination of its autonomous entity. Russia can no longer play the role in efforts to settle Armenian-Azerbaijani relations that it played until 2020, or even 2022.

This does not mean that the risks of turbulence in the region will go away. Indeed, the opposite might well be true. With little attention from global players, the region will turn into an arena for rivalry between regional powers: Turkey, Iran, and Russia.

The view that a strong Russia is more dangerous than a weakened one seems controversial, to say the least. Future changes anywhere – from Palestine to, say, Syria or

Central Asia – may have unpredictable consequences. Given the specifics of decision-making in Erdoğan’s Turkey and Putin’s Russia, further violent steps are a possibility.

What is already clear is that the South Caucasus will no longer be the same region. Over the past three years, the region has transformed from Russia’s backyard into a zone of competition among regional powers, and regional conflicts have been geopoliticized. Unless global players step into the role of a force creating rules for regional interaction, the South Caucasus may well turn into a full-fledged part of the New Middle East, with all the negative connotations that this carries.

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