

Existing powers and alliances before the 2020 war in Nagorny Karabakh

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Abstract

The South Caucasus region is a place where the interests of many powers and alliances encounter. Before the 2020 war, following the theory of balance of power, the negative peace in the region has been sustained for 26 years with the hegemony of Russia. But how was Russia's search for hegemony met by states and their coalitions and what were the consequences before the 2020 war? One of the theorists of the XX century stated that in the future an effective international organization will be an essential condition for maintaining a stable balance of power. Is it possible to say that OSCE plays the role of such an organization? To answer the questions, a literature review and retrospective analysis, expert survey and expert interview were conducted. The findings of the research show the strong veto power of Russia in the region and, also, suggest preconditions for future changes in the balance of power in the region.

Keywords: hegemony, balance of power, Russia, Turkey, OSCE

Introduction

Armenia and Azerbaijan were involved in an armed conflict almost from the first days of independence. There were no diplomatic relations, full-fledged economic ties between the countries, and the borders remained closed. On December 19-27, 1991, the internal troops of the USSR Minister of Internal Affairs were withdrawn from Nagorny Karabakh. The situation in the conflict zone has got out of control. The status of the region is the main issue that was raised at all the negotiations and is related to the process of overcoming the consequences of the conflict. The government of Armenia and the Nagorny Karabakh separatists demanded either the determination of the independence of the region or its unification with Armenia. Azerbaijan declared its readiness to leave the maximum possible autonomy to Nagorny Karabakh.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in Nagorny Karabakh is one of the earliest and largest on the territory of the former USSR and is increasingly becoming a protracted interstate and international problem, with unclear prospects for development. This conflict is a complex tangle due to the problems of interpretation of history and ethnic identity. It is also one of the most violent, and complex ethnic and territorial conflicts in the post-Soviet space. For three decades, this conflict has transformed from an inter-communal and inter-republican confrontation within

the framework of a single Soviet state, into an international conflict. The state of “no war, no peace” is very dangerous, as it is fraught with a constant threat of renewed hostilities. Both countries, which have already suffered huge losses due to the conflict, continue to suffer significant economic losses due to the preservation of the conflict for an indefinite period. Azerbaijan and Armenia, like most of the former Soviet republics, were linked by close economic relations, the rupture of which played an important role in the large-scale decline in the standard of living of the peoples of both states. Both countries have developed a stable “enemy image” and most of the political forces of both countries also contribute to strengthening this “image” to varying degrees. Enmity breeds a growing confrontation. Only small groups of actors expressed concern about this trend.

The paper aims to analyse how the power was balanced during the statu quo period in the Nagorny Karabakh region from 1994 to 2020. Although the analysis does not intend to give a comprehensive description of all theoretical aspects of the balance of power, some alliances of countries, their attempts to resist the hegemonic power of Russia are discussed because they may prove important for the understanding of the implications of the 2020 war in Nagorny Karabakh in terms of the international relations perspective.

Political concerns: mediations and outcomes

South Caucasus has an important transit capacity of natural resources (gas from Iran and Turkmenistan, oil from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan) to supply oil and gas of the Caspian region to the countries of Southern Europe and the Black Sea (see Figure 1). Proven oil and gas reserves are equal to 16.0-32.5 billion barrels and 236-337 trillion ft respectfully for Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (Effimoff, 2000, pp. 157-159). There were billions of dollars invested into the region, therefore, many interested parties were involved in the settlement of the conflict during the fragile statu quo period.

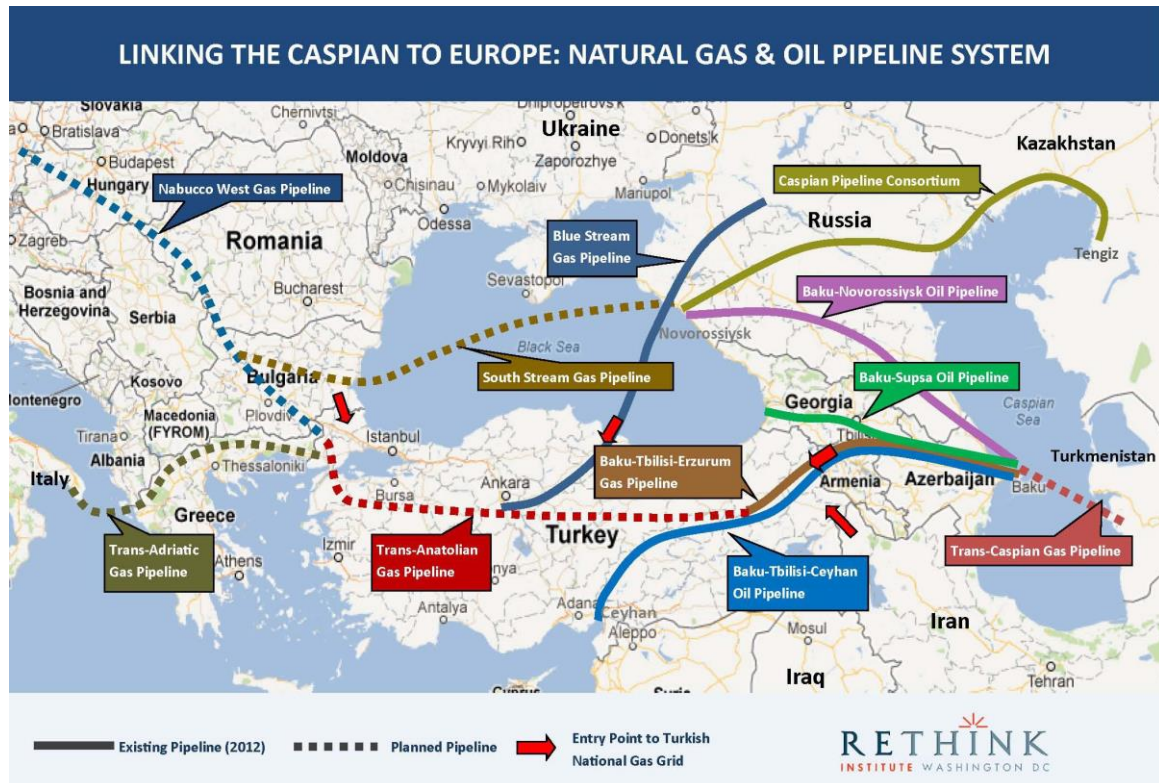


Figure 1: Illustration of transit capacity of Black Sea – Caspian Region. Source: (Medium.com, 2017)

On the 23 of September 1991, Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Armenia signed in Zheleznovodsk a communique on actions to achieve peace in Nagorny Karabakh (UN Peacemaker, 1991). An agreement on an indefinite ceasefire was signed in 1994, and a document on strengthening measures to ensure an armistice was signed in 1995. In 2008, the Presidents of Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia signed an interstate declaration at the Meyendorff Castle (Moscow Region), which was the first since 1994 to be signed by direct participants in the ethnopolitical conflict (Galstyan, 2016). In 2016, a meeting of the chiefs of the General Staffs of the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan and Armenia was held in Moscow through the mediation of Russia on a ceasefire on the line of contact between Azerbaijani and Armenian troops in Nagorny Karabakh. In the trilateral statement adopted in 2016 following the meeting of the Presidents of Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan in St. Petersburg, the parties reaffirmed their commitment to normalizing the situation. But armed clashes continued to occur at the border.

Azerbaijan sought cooperation and advice from Turkey, through which it hoped to earn Western aid. Turkey officially recognized Armenia in 1991, but in 1993 unilaterally closed the Armenian-Turkish border, hence, showed solidarity with Azerbaijan. In 2009, an attempt was made to normalize bilateral relations - the protocols “On the establishment of diplomatic relations

between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Turkey” and “On the development of relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Turkey” were signed in Zurich, but Turkey did not ratify them. Turkey's position as a NATO member is significantly different from that of its allies in the Alliance (the US and France), who are not in favour of a victory for one of the parties, but a compromise solution (Has, 2016).

Regarding Western aid, during the *statu quo* period, the US was involved in the settlement of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict due to Washington's new commitments to support the formation of new states in Central Asia that could be applicable in the South Caucasus (Kazancev, 2012, pp. 155-164). The US established a biohazard lab in Armenia (USA, US Embassy in Armenia, 2016). Same as for Russia – the Caspian Sea and Central Asia are economic and security interests through the South Caucasus of the country (Nuriyev, 2015, pp. 51-64). The effort on establishing a dialogue between the Azerbaijani and Armenian peoples was carried out by the US organization Global Community, which organized several meetings between researchers, non-governmental and peacekeeping organizations of the two countries (Abasov & Khachatryan, 2002). But in the end, the US was focused on domestic affairs - i.e., President Trump's domestic policy priorities and the 2020 presidential elections, therefore, there was no significant influence on the development of events on its part. The US and France dropped out of the peacekeeping process at the last stage. France was either unwilling or unable to lead the EU's efforts on the Nagorny Karabakh issue. The French publication *Le Figaro* wrote that it is “... not only the defeat of Armenia but also the crisis of French diplomacy in the South Caucasus” (Galstyan, 2016). However, according to Delcour L. and Hoffmann K., the EU policy caused “promoting conflicting principles” because the European Neighborhood Policy Action Plan developed for Armenia “mentioned the right to self-determination” while the same document developed for Azerbaijan “referred to territorial integrity” (Delcour & Hoffmann, 2018, p. 11). Therefore, because France represents not only its interests but also pursues the EU strategic goals, it should be assumed that this is a common result for the EU and France.

Iran's interests in the mediation and peace settlement processes were predetermined by Iran's desire to exclude Western mediators from the region, who would come close to Iran's borders in the event of mediation. Also, Tehran's permanent interest is the geopolitical and geostrategic position of the South Caucasus-Caspian region, which includes the legal status of the Caspian Sea (Agazade, 2018, pp. 842-954). The first mediation proposal of Iran was in February 1992 (Mesamed, 2013). Armenia carried out the Khojaly genocide, after which Iran's image in

Azerbaijan was significantly damaged. Iran's mediation efforts increased again in April 1992, and in May 1992 (Sidorov, 2016, pp. 198-201). As a result, Azerbaijan and Armenia agreed to establish a ceasefire (UN, 1992). Despite joint agreements, in May 1992, Armenian forces attacked the Azerbaijani city of Shusha (UN, 2019), and Lachin, which connects Nagorny Karabakh with Armenia, was occupied (Rasizade, 2011, pp. 140-164). Hence, the Azerbaijani side rejected Iran's mediation intentions. After the creation of the Minsk Group, Tehran's role in resolving the conflict has decreased.

Black Sea-Caspian region is the area of national security and stability for Ukraine who initiated “the creation of a joint peacekeeping battalion of the GUAM member states¹ under the auspices of the OSCE to ensure the security of the South Caucasus” (Dudnik, 2013, pp. 36-45). GUAM is the first alternative integration project in the ex-Soviet space. Ukraine consistently supported the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, advocated the internationalization of the conflict in Nagorny Karabakh through the mediation of the UN and the OSCE, proceeded from the principles of a peaceful settlement of the conflict, and advocated that the status of the Nagorny Karabakh Autonomy should be determined by agreement of the conflicting parties. Ukraine tried to conduct joint military exercises and present its military forces (in the framework of the GUUAM membership²) in Nagorny Karabakh. Under the 1999 Istanbul Summit, the GUUAM states initiated the amendments to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe to force Moscow to limit its military presence in the region. These activities caused certain consequences – Russia concluded not to withdraw its troops from Georgia and Moldova, hence, not to follow the 1999 Istanbul Summit decisions. As a result, OSCE decided not to introduce the GUUAM forces into the region so as not to aggravate the situation. I think that the case of Kyiv illustrates that small nations still cannot act as independent decision-makers and cannot show real leadership when there is a hegemon neighbour. Official Kyiv offered mediation in the settlement of the conflict, based on its non-aligned status. According to Dudnik A., cooperation between Ukraine and Azerbaijan was mutually beneficial: during 2000-2001, Kyiv supported Baku to join the Council of Europe; in turn, Baku backed Kyiv regarding the extension of Ukrainian membership of the Council of Europe. Kyiv was rather for the preservation of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, which alienated Ukraine from Armenia and Russia. Ukraine sought to play the role of

¹ GUAM is a regional organization for democracy and economic development, member states of which are Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova.

² Initially created as GUAM, the organization accepted membership of Uzbekistan, which lasted during 1999-2005. Therefore, it was called GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova).

a peacemaker, but not under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) from the beginning, i.e., without Russia. In its efforts to resolve the conflict, Kyiv pursued to focus on the west, and integrate with Europe. Dudnik A. underlined that Moscow warned Kyiv several times by sharing its belief that most of Ukraine belong to Russia (Dudnik, 2013). In my opinion, Ukraine in its decisions/activities relied on the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurance of 1994, according to which, Russia, the US, and the UK “reaffirm their commitment to Ukraine, ..., to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine” (United Nations, 1994). I think, historical events of 2014, as a result of a well-planned task, show that political agreements signed at the OSCE conference cannot guarantee security, territorial integrity, and political independence. Furthermore, I strongly believe that these historical events of 2014 undermine the image of the OSCE as an organization that develops confidence- and security-building measures. The case of Ukraine is a good lesson to learn for Kazakhstan that signed the same memorandum in 1994. Before the events of 2020, a multi-vector policy turned out to be the right choice. Mediation offered by Kazakhstan and the way it was implemented did not contradict the approaches of Russia. In comparison to Ukraine, Kazakhstan launched a mediation mission jointly with Russia, for instance, in 1991 when President Nazarbayev visited the conflicting regions with President Yeltsin (The USC Institute of Armenian Studies, 2018). Consequently, Kazakhstan’s actions did not pose a threat to the national interests of Russia.

Due to the growing influence of Russia in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus - i.e., the war between Georgia and Russia, annexation of Crimea, conflicts in eastern regions of Ukraine, consequently, self-proclamation of two Ukrainian regions – Azerbaijan was forced to become friends with Russia (Shiriyev, 2019, pp. 6-11). In 2010, Russia and Azerbaijan agreed on the delimitation and demarcation of the border (Russia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011). The signing of the five-party Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in 2018 can also be considered a common success of Baku and Moscow.

International intergovernmental organizations and regional integration associations also participated in the settlement of the conflict in Nagorny Karabakh. During 2010-2018, the EU, the OSCE, and the OIC³ were the most active and made attempts to resolve a controversial issue / develop effective solutions. It is possible to distinguish the activities of the EU since the chosen way of resolving the conflict differs from the traditional one. While the OSCE, the UN and several

³ Most of the OIC member states (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Kingdom of Bahrain, Iraq) supported Azerbaijan throughout the NK conflict.

other organizations sought to establish peace by signing an agreement between Baku and Yerevan, the EU developed programs of assistance directly to the population, and through work with the population of Nagorny Karabakh, they intended to eliminate and prevent military actions. The OSCE Minsk Group presented several plans to address the situation but none of them was approved by the main actors because what corresponded to the permanent interests of one side did not satisfy the other side. For instance, at the 1996 Lisbon Summit, the OSCE adopted a resolution calling for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, the highest degree of self-government of Nagorny Karabakh, and the guarantee of security for Nagorny Karabakh and its entire population. The resolution was adopted by all OSCE members, but Armenia vetoed it. Perhaps the only acceptable option was the gradual establishment of economic integration ties at the regional level. Regional integration associations, in which Armenia and Azerbaijan participate separately (Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for Armenia and GUAM for Azerbaijan), almost did not show themselves in this matter. In general, there is a tendency to reduce the participation of intergovernmental organizations in this process.

Economic ties

Since January 2015, Armenia has been a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). About half of all foreign investments coming to Armenia are of Russian origin. Many of the country's strategically important facilities are also owned by Russian companies.⁴ Russia is the main trade partner of Armenia; it ranks first in terms of trade turnover (Kurylev, Galoyan, Stanis, & Bredikhin, 2018, pp. 108-118).

With closed land borders and no diplomatic relations, Turkey benefited greatly from trade with Armenia. Since 2009 the trade turnover has increased by \$ 75 million, reaching the indicator of \$ 253 million. The main products of imports from Turkey are food, household goods, light, and chemical products, and exports are metal and gold products, leather (Armenia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

France maintained close economic affairs with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Over the years of long-term cooperation between Azerbaijan and France, many agreements have been signed in the economic, cultural, educational, and military-political spheres (France, Ministry of

⁴ According to the Eurasian Development Bank report, aggregate volume of investment was equal to \$21 billion, out of which 44,3% is foreign direct investment. Geographically, EAEU countries are leading; share of Russia is equal to 49,2% as of December 2019. The statistical data supports comment of Hoagland R.E., co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group – the conflict in NK destabilizes the region and hurts interests of Russia (Eurasian Development Bank, 2020, pp. 16-20).

Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018a). In Armenia, French equity is widely represented in the service sector, cultural, educational, military and political spheres, and infrastructure assets (France, Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018b).

In 2017, the level of trade turnover between Iran and Armenia reached \$ 263.5 million, an increase of \$ 68.5 million, compared to 2009 (Financial Tribune, 2018). An import from Iran to Armenia was equal to \$314.89 million in 2020 (Trading Economics, 2021).

Hard power

Armenia is Russia's most important strategic ally in the Caucasus. Russia has a 102nd military base in Gyumri. Russian border guards, together with their colleagues from Armenia, guard the outer perimeter of the state border of the republic. Russia heads a regional group in the military-political alliance - the CSTO, which includes Armenia, but not Azerbaijan. Later in 2020, this fact will play an important role, which from a legal point of view will not allow Russia to interfere in the Nagorny Karabakh war, since this region is not a member of the CSTO, therefore, Art. 4 of the Collective Security Treaty regarding the obligations to protect its members is not applicable (Collective Security Treaty Organisation, 2012). De jure, Nagorny Karabakh is a part of Azerbaijan. I believe that taking into account the events that took place within the framework of the strategic task of returning Nagorny Karabakh, Azerbaijan made the right decision not to join the CSTO, so it turned out to be free from the hegemon of that time. Although it is noted that this was a failure of the diplomatic way to resolve the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, which experts called "Karabakh in exchange for Azerbaijan's membership in the CSTO" (Centr podderzhki russko-armianskih strategicheskikh i obshestvennyh iniciativ, 2016). From the military perspective, Azerbaijan became free from Russia in December 2012 when Russian soldiers left Gabal as a result of the expiration of the lease agreement for the radar station.

Russia manoeuvred between Armenia and Azerbaijan selling millions of dollars worth of weapons to both Yerevan and Baku. During 2013-17, the share of Russia's total export of major arms to Azerbaijan was equal to 65%, while the share of Israel was equal to 29% and Turkey - 2.5%. "Azerbaijan procured loitering munitions from Israel, while Armenia procured ballistic missiles from Russia" (Wezeman, Fleurant, Kuimova, Tian, & Wezeman, 2018, p. 6). The Iskander ballistic missiles of Russia were supplied to Armenia in September 2016 (Nikolskii, 2019) the year when the four-day military operation was carried out in April and which was called the largest "military testing" compared to 2008 and 2010 (Centr podderzhki russko-armianskih strategicheskikh i obshestvennyh iniciativ, 2016). Azerbaijan and Armenia paid different prices for purchased arms: Azerbaijan paid the international price while Armenia – Russian domestic prices under the Russian-Armenian agreement on military cooperation in 2013. Azerbaijani side accused Armenia "of illicit weapons trade and reselling to terrorist groups, weapons that it has purchased from Russia at artificially low prices" (Cutler, 2020). Although the OSCE requested "that all participating States and all states in the region impose an immediate

embargo on all deliveries of weapons and munitions to forces engaged in combat in the Nagorny Karabakh area” (OSCE, 1992), before the 2020 conflict, Azerbaijan increased the import of arms (SIPRI, 2012, p. 13); and Russia sold arms worth of more than \$1 billion to Armenia during 1993-1996, which become the reason of aggravation of Azerbaijani-Russian relations (Unusov, 2007, p. 44).

Despite the obvious lack of military cooperation between Armenia and Turkey, the armed forces of both countries took part in the fourth joint NATO military exercise Nobel Partner in 2018. This fact is evidence that even with the active cooperation of Ankara and Baku on the issue of regulating the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, the opposing states should still cooperate within the framework of the exercises of the North Atlantic Alliance (RIA-a, 2018).

Concluding remarks

It could be noted that: (i) hegemonic position of Russia was not challenged during the statu quo period (at least not in a way it was observed in 2020), hence, Russia retained its absolute power; (ii) if it is a bordering country, then it is difficult to separate from hegemon. If a small state poses a threat to the hegemon, the corresponding measures on the part of the latter are irreversible. This turned out to be the case in Ukraine. Ukraine is Russia's buffer zone and Russia will not allow NATO to be within its borders. One of the interviewees mentioned that, for instance, former Czechoslovakia managed to escape Russia mostly because it was not a bordering country; (iii) coalitions of small countries does not lead to drastic changes without the support of great powers or international organizations, and in turn, they do not support this types of coalitions because confrontations with the hegemon are not in their interest; (iv) OSCE tried to manage the power relations between different countries but it cannot create a balance and, therefore, maintain it. As it was mentioned by one of the interviewees, NATO was created around one great power (the US) against a superpower of that time (the Soviet Union) and it can be used to balance the power against Russia. But then another power would be needed to balance NATO.

According to one of the interviewees, the 1992-1994 war was fought by Armenians and Azerbaijanis without the direct involvement of Russia's military forces as was observed in the case of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, etc., but rather military assistance. In 1994, full control over the autonomy of Nagorny Karabakh was established, and seven border regions of Azerbaijan were also fully or partially occupied. During the statu quo period, armed conflicts were used as mechanisms to bring the changes that could not be achieved with the help of negotiations. But till the 2020 war, Nagorny Karabakh remained de facto Armenian and de jure Azerbaijanian.

Interactions between actors before the 2020 war were formed following their national interests. South Caucasus is a buffer zone for Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkey; it has great transit capacity and it is a gateway to Central Asia, therefore, the region is an object of permanent interest of not only above listed countries but also the European Union, Ukraine and the US. Mediation efforts were offered by all the actors listed, but the most active were those who had historical ties or common borders. In addition to these countries, the settlement of the conflict in Nagorny Karabakh through peaceful negotiations was supported by the international intergovernmental organizations and regional integration associations. Joint efforts of all the actors helped to maintain negative peace for 26 years.

By 2020, Armenia and Azerbaijan transformed into two different economies. Armenia's debt reached \$ 7.721 billion by June 2020 (Armbanks, 2020), there were internal political problems and most important Yerevan was losing Moscow; while Azerbaijan armed the army with petrodollars, developed allied relations with other countries, and enlisted the support of Turkey.

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