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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL - Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies



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Dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh – A Local Conflict with Global Implications

RENE D. KANAYAMA

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Abstract

Early 2022 unleashing the chain of internationally significant events and starting the new era of struggle over the geopolitical control of key parts of the world by most of the superpowers, the number of new conflicts with legacy roots continues to emerge in 2023. The Caucasus region of the former Soviet Union has always been prone to the bloodiest kinds of inter-regional and inter-ethnic conflict throughout the past several hundreds of years, and the clash between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the region of Nagorno Karabakh has proven to be of no exception.

While the chaos following the demise of the Soviet Union in early 1990's saw multiple military conflicts in many of its former domain – from Moldova to Georgia, to Tajikistan's full-fledged civil war as well as localized ethnic skirmishes in other parts of the Central Asia, the Nagorno Karabakh issue has probably been the most prolific and seemingly never-ending throughout the past thirty years.

Even though the United Nations resolution viewed the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as an unlawful occupation of Azerbaijan's territory by Armenia, the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh, consisting entirely of the ethnic Armenian population continued to relatively flourish for most of the thirty years between 1991 and 2023, and in the last decade of its existence (recognized only by other internationally unrecognized entities of the former Soviet Union), it managed to attract international attention especially in its tourism sector.

The ultimate Azerbaijan's supremacy over the territory of Nagorno Karabakh, following the so-called Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in September 2020 and culminating by full take-over of all remaining territory populated by the Armenians in September 2023, needs to be seen not only as a result of a significant economic rise of Azerbaijan propelled by its natural resources, but also as a consequence of other regional strifes often more important for the superpowers eyeing the control of the region. Most notably, the strong and strategic relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel, forged on the background of international isolation of Iran and countering many of the Iran's regional geopolitical ambitions, is, in the opinion of the author, one of the key elements deserving attention and analysis.

Rather than providing another outline of the individual periods of this long-term dispute with roots even before the demise of the Soviet Union – the topic to which manifold academic treatises have been dedicated in the past thirty years – the article focuses on the comparative implications of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with other regional conflicts looming in its vicinity, taking into account the extremely fast revolving nature of today's international relations, where new pacts sometimes inexplicably and unexpectedly replace the former alliances.

All'inizio del 2022, scatenando una catena di eventi significativi a livello internazionale e dando inizio a una nuova era di lotta per il controllo geopolitico di parti chiave del mondo da parte della maggior parte delle superpotenze, nel 2023 continua a emergere un numero di nuovi conflitti con radici ereditate. L'ex Unione Sovietica è sempre stata soggetta ai più sanguinosi conflitti interregionali e interetnici nel corso degli ultimi secoli, e lo scontro tra Azerbaijan e Armenia sulla regione del Nagorno Karabakh non ha fatto eccezione.

Mentre il caos seguito al crollo dell'Unione Sovietica all'inizio degli anni '90 ha visto molteplici conflitti militari in molti dei suoi ex domini – dalla Moldavia alla Georgia, alla vera e propria guerra civile in Tagikistan, nonché scaramucce etniche localizzate in altre parti dell'Asia centrale, la questione del Nagorno Karabakh è stata probabilmente la più prolifica e apparentemente senza fine negli ultimi trent'anni.

Anche se la risoluzione delle Nazioni Unite considerava il conflitto del Nagorno-Karabakh come un'occupazione illegale del territorio dell'Azerbaijan da parte dell'Armenia, l'auto-proclamata Repubblica dell'Artsakh, composta interamente da popolazione di etnia armena, continuò a prosperare relativamente per la maggior parte dei trent'anni tra il 1991 e il 1991. 2023, e nell'ultimo decennio della sua esistenza (riconosciuta solo da altre entità dell'ex Unione Sovietica non riconosciute a livello internazionale), è riuscita ad attirare l'attenzione internazionale soprattutto nel settore del turismo.

La supremazia definitiva dell'Azerbaijan sul territorio del Nagorno Karabakh, a seguito della cosiddetta Seconda Guerra del Nagorno-Karabakh nel settembre 2020 e culminata con la piena acquisizione di tutto il rimanente territorio popolato dagli armeni nel settembre 2023, deve essere vista non solo come un risultato di una significativa crescita economica dell'Azerbaijan spinta dalle sue risorse naturali, ma anche come conseguenza di altri conflitti regionali spesso più importanti per le superpotenze che mirano al controllo della regione. In particolare, la relazione forte e strategica tra Azerbaijan e Israele, forgiata sullo sfondo dell'isolamento internazionale dell'Iran e contrastando molte delle ambizioni geopolitiche regionali dell'Iran, è, secondo l'autore, uno degli elementi chiave che meritano attenzione e analisi.

Piuttosto che fornire un ulteriore profilo dei singoli periodi di questa disputa a lungo termine, le cui radici risalgono addirittura a prima del crollo dell'Unione Sovietica – argomento al quale negli ultimi trent'anni sono stati dedicati numerosi trattati accademici – l'articolo si concentra sulle implicazioni comparative di il conflitto del Nagorno-Karabakh con altri conflitti regionali che incombono nelle sue vicinanze, tenendo conto della natura estremamente rapida delle attuali relazioni internazionali, dove nuovi patti a volte inaspettatamente e inaspettatamente sostituiscono le precedenti alleanze.

Keywords

Azerbaijan, Armenia, Caucasus, Ethnic Discord, Regional Security, Global Conflict

1. Introduction – The Conflict of Thirty Years and the Dissolution of an Unrecognized Entity

Following the 2020 breakthrough in a conflict almost thirty years in making when the Azerbaijan's armed forces launched a massive offensive along the borders delineating the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh, and the capture of the second largest city of the region Shusha, three years later on September 19, 2023 Azerbaijan launched another military offensive whereby within 48 hours it gained the control of the Artsakh's capital city Stepanakert (Khankendi for Azerbaijan), leading to the full capitulation of the local ethnic Armenian government. On September 28, 2023 the Artsakh's President signed a decree dissolving the Republic by January 1, 2024, and on October 15, 2023 the Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev raised the Flag of Azerbaijan in front of the building previously used as the Artsakh's Presidential Palace.

The recent military operations have killed more than 200 people and wounded over 400. As at 3 October 2023, the conflict had displaced over 100,500 people, including at least 26,000 children, to Armenia through the Lachin corridor. This total is more than 80% of the estimated 120,000 inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh.¹

The September 2020 events around the military offensive in the Nagorno Karabakh, have resulted in significant gains for Azerbaijan, and even though roughly two thousand Russian peacekeeping forces were deployed in the region to monitor the remaining lifeline connecting the Artsakh with Armenia, both the military and political supremacy of Azerbaijan became clear – also with a view of the events to take place in the future.

Under the terms of the agreement, Azerbaijan regained control in all the areas adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh that ethnic Armenian forces had held since the previous war. In addition, Azerbaijan took substantial parts of Nagorno-Karabakh itself, already captured during the conflict. The remaining areas of Nagorno-Karabakh would continue to be governed by self-declared Armenian authorities. Two thousand Russian peacekeeping forces were also deployed to patrol along the line of contact and the land corridor of the Lachin Pass that links Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia.²

Although the presence of the Russian peacekeeping forces deployed after 2020 was understood to prevent any further violent clashes resulting in mass exodus of the population, and the moral and material support from the side

¹ Armenia-Azerbaijan: Nagorno-Karabakh: Humanitarian Impact of the Military Offensive (2023), ACAPS, Geneva, Switzerland, p. 1.

² Mills C. (2023), What is happening in NagornoKarabakh?, House of Commons Library, London, United Kingdom, p. 5.

of Armenia for the well-being of the Artsakh's ethnic Armenian population was taken for granted for all past thirty years, it was eventually the inaction on part of the peacekeepers as well as the Government of Armenia that led to an ultimate control over the territory by Azerbaijan.

Neither Russian peacekeepers nor the Government of Armenia have intervened in the recent fighting. The Armenian Government has prepared to receive ethnic Armenians displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh. In a 29 September report, Russia stated that its failure to prevent the conflict escalation on 19 September was the result of Azerbaijan's late notification of its intentions for military action. On the other hand, Russia's military activities in Ukraine are considered to have limited its role as mediator and peacekeeper between Armenia and Azerbaijan.³

The very beginning of the thirty-year long conflict starting in 1988 saw much fiercer turns of events, with atrocities being committed by both warring sides. Although the "humanitarian crisis" factor has been highlighted especially at the early period of the conflict, when essentially all ethnic Azerbaijani population present in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh left to Azerbaijan mainly because the region was historically predominantly populated by ethnic Armenians (although the Soviet era records show the clear affiliation of the region to the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic as part of the Soviet Union), and amidst the general chaos following the independence declarations of 14 Soviet Republics the newly formed Azerbaijan was not capable of reinstating the previously recognized autonomous status of Nagorno Karabakh within Azerbaijani SSR, and had little recourse to the loss of the territory.

Between 1988–1994, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict killed more than 25,000 soldiers and civilians and displaced over one million people. Between September–November 2020, an escalation of tensions between the two countries over the territory resulted in the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, causing the worst fighting in decades and the displacement of over 90,000 people, 88% of whom were women and children.⁴

The initial stages of the conflict witnessing the face of the war in its rawest and bloodiest form, it is generally agreed that the most recent events have stopped short of any behavior on both of warring parties that would be classified as criminal or even genocidal.

There are no grounds to expect the ethnic cleansing that has been spoken of in Yerevan or the partisan war that Baku could fear. Judging by the comments

³ Armenia-Azerbaijan: Nagorno-Karabakh: Humanitarian Impact of the Military Offensive (2023), ACAPS, Geneva, Switzerland, p. 1.

⁴ Armenia-Azerbaijan: Nagorno-Karabakh Blockade (2023), ACAPS, Geneva, Switzerland, p. 1.

of the Azerbaijani authorities, they intend to treat the Karabakh Armenians as they do other national minorities, such as the Lezgins, the Talysh, and the Tats. There will be no special autonomous areas or adaptation programs. Still, it won't be easy for the remaining Armenians in Karabakh to get an Azerbaijani passport. Confronted with the new, brutal reality, they may decide after all to move to Armenia.⁵

2. Russia as the Guarantor of Peace in the Region

Russia's role and influence over the former Soviet Republics, especially the ones that remained either as part of the Commonwealth of Independent States, as part of regional economic alliances such as the Eurasian Economic Union, or as part of military pacts of the kind of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, has arguably changed over the past thirty years after the break-up of the Soviet Union. While in some areas of Central Asia the Russia's firm foothold is still felt especially in economic terms (millions of Uzbek workers temporarily relocated to Russia to provide for their families or the traditionally good relations the Russian Federation enjoys with Kyrgyzstan where the Russian language is still one of the official state languages), in other parts, especially in the Caucasus, its historic ties having roots either in the era of Tsarist Russia or along the religious identity of Orthodox Christianity have not prevented deterioration of both influence and the local adherence to the relationship with the Russian Federation. In relation to the particular subject of Nagorno Karabakh, and the perceived support of the Armenian cause as opposed to that of Azerbaijan, scholars observe:

Relations with Russia will have to be overhauled, since the main subject of discussion — Karabakh — will disappear. For most Armenians, the Kremlin will be seen as an unreliable ally that abandoned them in their hour of need. A turning point has been reached in the long-running conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Last week, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced that Armenia could only achieve peace on one condition: that it limit its territorial ambitions to the borders of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. In other words, it must relinquish its claim to Nagorno-Karabakh, having fought multiple wars with Azerbaijan for control of the mountainous region. A few days later, on April 23, Azerbaijan set up a checkpoint in the Lachin Corridor, the so-called "road of life" between Armenia and the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. It seems that Yerevan is ready to decisively surrender Karabakh.⁶

⁵ Krivosheev K. (2023), *Armenia Is Ready to Relinquish Nagorno-Karabakh: What Next?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington D.C., USA, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 1.

Russian Federation role in the conflict, and in the affairs of the Southern Caucasus may have been more significant, should the country also not experience the increasing challenges to maintain several conflict fronts open to its advantage – the two years of exhaustive military engagement in Ukraine is perhaps of one the most crucial factors in the inability devote more resources to the other regional issues. At the same time, the reason that Russia essentially abandoned Christian Armenians to their destiny may be simpler:

Only a few opposition figures from the old elites will maintain that this is all Pashinyan's [Armenia's Prime Minister] fault, and that if he had only recognized Crimea as Russian territory, everything would have been different. In all other respects, Moscow's influence will be on par with that of Ankara, Brussels, and Washington.⁷

The Ukrainian factor will most certainly contribute to further shaping of the Russian engagement in any of the potential conflicts in the Caucasus or wider Central Asia – these regions can always serve as locations through which some of the focus on the Ukrainian conflict may become diluted.

Ukraine aggravated the situation and there is no chance of amelioration in the foreseeable future. However given the current state of affairs, it is still too early to speculate on final outcomes or even mid-term repercussions of it for Russia. The immediate effect of the war was another Russian military base's appearance in the third South Caucasian state and this move, even when it was at the expense of its ally, can be considered as a tactical victory for Russia ... Russia on the other hand prefers to benefit from the fragile state of imposed peace. As long as Russia has adequate resources and internal stability, it can pursue a policy of exploiting conflicts rather than resolving them. Nevertheless, having allowed Turkey into the sphere of its interests, Russia compromised its role in the South Caucasus.⁸

There are international alliances where Russia certainly honors its commitments, such as in the case of Syria and the support extended to the incumbent President Bashar al-Assad, and it seems that any alliance is a two-way tie-up – in case of Armenia perhaps the Government of Nikol Pashinyan has courted the West a bit more than to the Russia's liking.

Moscow is wary of Armenia's new leader, premier N. Pashinyan, who came into power after street demonstrations with slogans about democracy, rule of law, anti-corruption and 'old habits'. The mere fact that the leader of a post-Soviet country that hosted a Russian military base as well as was a member of the

⁷ Ibid, p. 2-3.

⁸ Hayrapetyan L. (2022), *The Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020 and the Change of the Regional Status Quo*, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland, p. 93.

EEU and the CSTO came to power as a result of the so-called velvet revolution and tried to diversify its foreign policy was unforgivable for the Kremlin.⁹

Although Russia has been a key mediator in resolving the individual stages of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, alongside other Russia's allies of Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, it seems that Russia has grown to favor Azerbaijan's positions:

After V. Putin's ascension to power, Russia's rhetoric has shifted more in favor of Azerbaijan, despite Russia's effort to act as a mediator. As the president of the Russian Federation, V. Putin enhanced his country's relations with Azerbaijan and in a press conference, he stated that Russia may act as a mediator, but did not intend to directly intervene in the conflict. Later, while organizing multiple talks between the leaders of the belligerent states the Russian leader repeated his statement about not wanting to be a part of the conflict.¹⁰

Russian Federation's official positions regarding the Nagorno Karabakh issue may also have roots in her realpolitik alliance with Turkey – and alongside the Caspian neighbor of Azerbaijan, it makes sense that Turkey's economic needs can well be satisfied by the industrial potential Russia holds:

Despite Turkey's official declaration that it does not acknowledge Crimea's annexation and backs Ukraine, Russia develops a nuclear power facility there. The Turkish presence in the South Caucasus, which has long been considered Russia's sphere of interest, has provided a new point of contact between the two countries. Turkey's presence in Nagorno-Karabakh, which took the shape of a cooperative surveillance center in Agdam (the part of Nagorno-Karabakh controlled by Azerbaijan) had to be accepted by Russia. Putin's and Erdogan's deteriorating ties with the West have drawn the two countries closer together.¹¹

3. The West Looks Elsewhere

Armenia, in part owing to its large diaspora overseas outnumbering the actual population of the country, has been historically successful in lobbying their own international interests especially with regard to the historic events preceding the end of the World War I, results of which became visible with the number of countries recognizing the Ottoman persecution of the Armenian population in 1915-1923 as genocide overwhelmingly outnumbering the countries explicitly denying the genocide classification. Yet, the almost 10-month blockade of the Nagorno Karabakh by Azerbaijan blocking the La-

⁹ Ibid, p. 87.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 87.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 91.

chin Corridor connection between the enclave and Armenia since December 2022 did not receive any significant international media coverage, partly because of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and partly as Azerbaijan had significantly boosted its position and status vis-à-vis both the European Union and the United States. This, despite of some international news outlets pointing to the dire situation affecting the population of Nagorno Karabakh:

The blockade severely affected access to financial resources and the overall health situation of the people living in Nagorno-Karabakh. This means that the refugees arriving in Armenia were already experiencing high humanitarian needs. The blockade aimed to stop the mining activities in the enclave, which provided Nagorno Karabakh its primary source of revenue, and restrict access to the markets that catered to these activities. This directly affected those with mining-related livelihoods. As at 6 February, the blockade had affected 5,100 jobs in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹²

Azerbaijan's strengthened positions with regard to the West in general, can be attributed to two major factors:

3.1. The country's strategic location on the Caspian Sea with its hydrocarbon resources

Dating back to 2011 when the European Union and Azerbaijan concluded a joint declaration regarding the Southern Gas Corridor, Azerbaijan has bolstered its placement as both strategic as well as long-term partner of the European Union. Not only that the major Western energy corporations have historically had a stake in Caspian offshore hydrocarbon upstream locations, but the new economic sanctions severing the relations between Russia and the EU have led to EU's orientation towards other hydrocarbon majors in the region, from where the future supply can be secured. Azerbaijan's national oil company SOCAR has placed itself as a reliable partner of the West also within the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict, where it continues supplying Ukraine with high-quality fuel needed for both military and civilian needs. Furthermore, the July 2022 agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan on increasing the gas supply to Europe from the Caspian nation two-fold by 2027 placed Azerbaijan firmly along the group of non-Russian economic partners, around whom the EU's energy security policy will be developing in the years to come. While the Middle Eastern and other non-Eurasian energy resources do play some role in EU's energy source diversification, the Caspian Basin, with further potential tapping of Central Asian resources flowing

¹² Armenia-Azerbaijan: Nagorno-Karabakh: Humanitarian Impact of the Military Offensive (2023), ACAPS, Geneva, Switzerland, p.4.

over Azerbaijan as a transit country is a proven and cost-wise the most reasonable option which EU can afford to depend on.

3.2 Azerbaijan as a strategic ally of Israel and the West at large against Iran's regional geopolitical ambitions

Both Iranian and Western analysts agree that Baku has in recent years become a center of regional intelligence operations for especially the Israeli and Iranian security agencies, both claiming their supremacy in the knowledge of “corridors of power” in Azerbaijan. Iran, in the new push for both local and regional hegemony opened a Consulate-General in the city of Kapan in October 2022, location which is strategically placed in the Armenian province of Syunik in the narrow corridor between Azerbaijan proper and Nakhchivan – a step widely recognized as a calculated measure to increase the surveilling capacities of the Islamic Republic. Likewise, the January 2023 incident when an individual walked into Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran with an automatic weapon, killing the security guard, was seen as an indication of deteriorating relations between Azerbaijan and Iran; the understanding being that Israel's historically increasing supplies of weapons and military technology to Azerbaijan in return for a reliable source of petroleum has a degree of direct relationship to Azerbaijan being prepared by the West as a platform from which any offensive measures against Iran can be taken.

Furthermore, some direct references are being made by scholars to the Israel's role in the Second Karabakh War of 2020:

Israel not only provided arms and technology to Azerbaijan prior to the war, but there is also evidence that supply dispatches took place during the war. As the battles were raging, Azerbaijan's cargo airline, Silk Way, undertook several flights from Israel to Azerbaijan, indicating that Israel likely was sending new hardware and supplies to Azerbaijan as the war progressed.¹³

Shamkhal Abilov, a graduate student at Leipzig University, observes that the historical ties between Israel and Azerbaijan have a deeper, inter-ethnic component:

Today the country [Azerbaijan] is proud of its good relations with Israel and the Jewish minority in the country. The Jewish community serves as an important factor in Azerbaijani bilateral economic and diplomatic relations with Israel and the United States. Azerbaijan is home to some 11,000 Jews, residing primarily in Baku, Sumqayit, Oguz, and the Krasnaya Sloboda settlement in the Quba district of Azerbaijan. There are also nearly 5000 Ashkenazi Jews

¹³ Idan A. and Shaffer B. (2021), *Israel's role in the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War*, The Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Washington D.C., USA, p. 200.

living mostly in Baku. Historically, Jews in Azerbaijan have been represented by various subgroups, mainly Mountain Jews, Ashkenazi Jews and Georgian Jews.¹⁴

On the other hand, the military support, similar to that of Israel's to Azerbaijan, was extended to Armenia by Iran, not the least to prevent Azerbaijan from potential territorial gains for creating a corridor connecting the Azeri mainland and the exclave of Nakhchivan:

During the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan war, Iran served as the main conduit of Russian arms and other supplies to Armenia. Russian ships arrived at Iran's Caspian port of Anzali and brought Russian arms and other supplies by truck into Armenia and into the battle zone. Russian supply flights to Armenia also transited Iran's airspace. Iran even directly intervened militarily in the battlefield during the 2020 War in attempt to prevent or at least slow down Baku's advance.¹⁵

It is understood that the excellent Azerbaijan – Israel relations are mutually beneficial, and that the newly emerging international conflicts may only strengthen this relationship.

Over the last twenty years, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel has developed and changed. Nonetheless, the core common “realist” interests persist, namely balancing Russia and Iran as the main challengers to Western interests in the region, and preventing the realization of the revanchist imperial policies vis-à-vis Azerbaijan, which boosts the value of both countries in the eyes of the West and the US in particular. There are several other strategic factors that have kept Israel and Azerbaijan together for more than twenty years. One factor is an Israeli interest in receiving reliable oil supplies from the Caspian region, where Azerbaijan functions not only as an important supplier of oil to the West and Israel, but also as an important transportation link.¹⁶

While the focus of this article is not the current new stage of stand-off between the West and Iran, not least on the background of ongoing conflict in Ukraine where Iran has steadily been providing the military hardware support to Russia, it is understandable that Azerbaijan with its clear political position of standing firmly on the side of the West is a true strategic ally, and as such the local conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia does not present priorities within the conflict resolution capacities of the West.

¹⁴ Abilov S. (2009), *The Azerbaijan-Israel Relations: A Non-Diplomatic, but Strategic Partnership*, Leipzig University, Leipzig, Germany, p. 149.

¹⁵ Idan A. and Shaffer B. (2021), *Israel's role in the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War*, The Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Washington D.C., USA, p. 196.

¹⁶ Murinson A. (2014), *The Ties between Israel and Azerbaijan*, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv, Israel, pp. 10-11.

It should be noted, however, that in the face of September 2023 overwhelming victory on part of Azerbaijan in securing all territory of Nagorno Karabakh that has been previously under the Armenian control, the European Parliament did voice its opposition to the tactics used by the Azeri armed forces:

... whereas the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has various historical and geopolitical complexities; whereas on 19 September 2023 Azerbaijan launched a pre-planned, unjustified military attack against Nagorno-Karabakh, leading to significant loss of life; whereas a ceasefire was agreed on 20 September 2023, but the security situation of civilians remaining in Nagorno-Karabakh is not guaranteed; whereas there are reports that hundreds of Armenian civilians were killed and wounded during Azerbaijan's military operation against Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁷

The European Parliament also paid a detailed attention to the exodus of the majority of 120,000 population of the Artsakh, paving a way for the region to become populated entirely by the Azeri ethnos in the time to come:

... whereas over 100 000 Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh have been forced to flee to Armenia since the Azerbaijani offensive on 19 September 2023; whereas as a result, Nagorno-Karabakh has been almost entirely deprived of its Armenian population, who have been living there for centuries; whereas the Azerbaijani Government stated that it would guarantee the rights of the civilian population, including educational, cultural, religious, and municipal electoral rights; whereas Azerbaijan's promises to respect the rights of the local population were not considered credible by Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian inhabitants, who fear reprisals or the loss of the freedom to use their language and practise their religion and customs; whereas there have been credible reports of looting, destruction, violence and arrests committed by Azerbaijani troops since the beginning of the offensive.¹⁸

While the European Parliament declaration stopped short of voicing demands for outright sanctions against Azerbaijan, classified as an "aggressor" in the latest turn of September 2023 events, it did reflect on the very strategic resources issues that have placed Azerbaijan previously as a reliable partner of the European Union:

... regrets the fact that the President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, had characterised Azerbaijan as a 'trustworthy energy supplier'; calls on

¹⁷ Situation in Nagorno-Karabakh after Azerbaijan's Attack and the Continuing Threats against Armenia (2023), European Parliament resolution of 5 October 2023 on the situation in Nagorno Karabakh after Azerbaijan's attack and the continuing threats against Armenia, European Parliament, Strasbourg, France, p. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 3.

the Commission to quickly reconsider the ‘strategic partnership’ with Azerbaijan in the field of energy, given Azerbaijan’s repeated violations of its international commitments, including commitments made in talks mediated by the EU and binding provisions under international law; notes that, in the light of Azerbaijan’s aggression against Armenia in September 2022 and its unjustified use of force against and forced displacement of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, as well as the country’s alarming human rights record, developing such a ‘strategic partnership’ is incompatible with the objectives of EU foreign policy as defined in Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union.¹⁹

4. Post-Soviet Union Nagorno-Karabakh and the Caucasus Region at Large as the Harbinger of Future Discords

The Nagorno Karabakh conflict was undoubtedly the longest running territorial and ethnic dispute in the Caucasus Region of the former Soviet Union, having shown the ugliest aspects of inter-ethnic relations in the region, especially during the years immediately preceding and following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Most of the Azerbaijan’s population displaced from Nagorno Karabakh during the First Nagorno Karabakh War of 1988 to 1994 never hid their emotions long after they have found a stable livelihood in other parts of the former Soviet Union or worldwide, referring to the atrocities they witnessed during the initially *de facto* civil war. Likewise, the Armenians that have eventually prevailed following the Russian-brokered ceasefire in 1994 and settled in their view permanently in newly formed Republic of Artsakh knew that should a status quo change at any point in time in the future, they will be facing an utmost resolve and fierce retaliation from the Azeri side readying its resources for the eventual takeover of the enclave.

We should, however, not dismiss historically important events of likewise brutal civil conflicts in the Caucasus in early 1990’s, including the Georgian Civil War of 1991-1993 which concentrated in the parts of the southern parts of Georgia – South Ossetia and Abkhazia – which eventually led to an international conflict between Georgia and Russia in 2008, resulting to partially recognized new independent republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Georgia considering these breakaway regions as unlawfully secessionist). The accounts of the individual events taking part during the 1991-1993 conflict, most of them so savage that historians usually tread carefully when deliberating this period are however the very warnings that the local population needs to remind themselves with today – with continuous new conflicts emerging

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 7.

worldwide, any slight change in geopolitical circumstances of larger political entities with vested interest will lead to new wars and subsequent local conflict, where the memory of the population tends to be extremely long-term.

By the same token, all of the other regions of the North Caucasus, albeit currently part of the Russian Federation, have seen their share of discord and military action. The insurgency in the region, countered by Moscow as the struggle with domestic terrorism in the years between 1994 and 1996, and then again sporadically after 1999 all the way until 2017, concerned almost all the republics in the region – the most notorious being in Chechnya, but also Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and North Ossetia. The manifold academic discussions regarding the future of the Russian Federation, following the 2014 events in Ukraine which saw new territorial dispute and disintegration, focused on not whether the Russian Federation would once come to an end as a federative entity, but rather when this would happen. The Caucasus, by all accounts judging from its recent history, may be a logical hotspot where inter-religious and inter-ethnic strife may flare up at any unexpected moment.

Every new geopolitical development that is yet to be seen in the Caucasus Region will also depend on the multiple strategic and tactical plots deployed by the regional powers – Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

Iran, concerned about Israel's presence in the region and Turkey's growing influence, strives to foster diplomacy as well as strike up economic integration projects that would make another escalation worthless. Turkey tends to expand to Central Asia via Azerbaijan. On the map of the "Turkish world" that has been handed by the nationalist party representatives to Erdogan recently, Azerbaijan, all Central Asia, some regions of Iran, Mongolia and big parts of Russia were highlighted as "The Turkish world".²⁰

5. Conclusions

While both Armenia and Azerbaijan as mainland entities struggling over the sovereignty of the Nagorno-Karabakh have always been keen to be presented as guardians of the territory and/or the actual population being present in the region at any given time throughout the past thirty years, October 2023 saw a clear capitulation on part of Armenia with regard to the fate of the Republic of Artsakh. During the international investment trade events highlighting the economic potential of either Azerbaijan or Armenia, both coun-

²⁰ Hayrapetyan L. (2022), *The Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020 and the Change of the Regional Status Quo*, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland, p. 93.

tries have always done their best to promote the region of Nagorno-Karabakh through the prism of their influence as part of their respective national development. While Artsakh may have been represented at some of these events as a quasi-independent subject attracting international attention especially to its tourism potential, Azerbaijan has officially established the Karabakh Revival Fund, and the corresponding development plan of the region's economy in 2021, with the view of full implementation of various industry sector programmes in the near future. In an international investment forum in October, when the specialists attending to the Armenian national exhibition stand were asked what has changed in their national planning with regard to the Artsakh, one of the attendants angrily exclaimed "Armenia does not answer for Artsakh!". This not only put an end to any further discussion, but was also a symbolic point that made it clear there is no continued relationship between Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh any longer.

The newly emerging conflicts, including that of Israel against Hamas, highlight not only the increasing antagonism based on both ethnic and religious characteristics, but also unexpected turns in securing global support for its cause on parts of the belligerents. With irregular intervals from the beginning of 2022 the world witnesses the phenomenon whereby the new conflict replaces the focus on the previous one, to the detriment of the masses who often depend on the media coverage to attract attention to their cause. The September 2023 final takeover by Azerbaijan of the long disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh was a mere episode in the international relations constantly evolving towards the worse scenarios of potential resolution – there is no permanent peace installed, and it is usually only one side that comes out as a winner creating another long-term period of resentment – which will inevitably materialize in a form of another dispute in the future. Relative to the other major geopolitical clashes now present on almost every continent, the Nagorno Karabakh conflict has probably entered the history records as an event with a rather benign ending – masses were displaced, but the major bloodshed was prevented this time. However, such scenario may not be true for the other conflicts that have been brewing for centuries and the current period seems to be that interval in history where we will witness them all in their most potent form.

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