

THE NAGORNY KARABAKH CONFLICT IN ITS FOURTH DECADE



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Abstract

As the Nagorny Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan enters its fourth decade, the 2020 war was a reminder that it remains the most dangerous conflict in the post-Soviet space. Azerbaijan completely reversed the losses it suffered in the conflict of the early 1990s, leaving the Armenian side defeated and humiliated. Russia inserted itself into the heart of the conflict zone for the first time, through the introduction of a peacekeeping force in Karabakh itself. But a final Armenian-Azerbaijani peace agreement that resolves the status of Nagorny Karabakh – the trigger for the conflict in 1988 – and a normalisation of relations between Baku and Yerevan looks as elusive as ever.

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Map of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh



1. Introduction

The Nagorny Karabakh conflict is the longest-running unresolved dispute in the former Soviet Union, dating back to the middle of the Gorbachev era in 1988. It is also the most deadly, as was proved in 2020 when Armenia and Azerbaijan went back to war over the disputed territory they had fought over in 1991-94. The new conflict lasted 44 days. The Azerbaijanis prevailed, winning back control of all the territory it had lost in the previous war, with the exception of one small corridor, and also capturing around one third of Armenian-inhabited Karabakh. Around 8,000 people died on both sides and around 30,000 Armenians were semi-permanently displaced. For the first time Russia inserted itself into the heart of the conflict, deploying a peacekeeping force of just under 2,000 men into the territory of Nagorny Karabakh, with the consent of Baku.

In the much longer conflict of 1991-94, fought mostly with low-tech Soviet-era weapons, the Armenians had prevailed, eventually keeping control not just of the former autonomous region of Nagorny Karabakh itself, but also, wholly or partially, of seven regions of Azerbaijan around it, which were home to more than half a million Azerbaijanis. If one includes the disputed territory of Nagorny Karabakh itself, Armenians held 13.6% of the de jure territory of Azerbaijan.¹ A ceasefire generally held, though with many violations, until a four-day outbreak of fighting in 2016 in which around 200 people died. But negotiations had been faltering as the two sides kept implacably to polarised positions on what would constitute a fair resolution of the conflict.

The Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement of 9-10 November 2020 confirms a complete Azerbaijani victory and resolved the main Azerbaijani grievances: the loss of territory and mass displacement of its inhabitants. But it did not bring the two sides in the conflict any nearer to a peace agreement. In the first half of 2021, tensions persisted over the continued detention of Armenian soldiers in Azerbaijan and the demarcation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border.

At the core of the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute is a virtually unresolvable issue on the status of the territory of Nagorny Karabakh. The new conflict tipped the balance of the dispute in Azerbaijan's favour but did not resolve it. The status issue is what first triggered the dispute in February 1988, when the regional soviet in Karabakh passed a resolution requesting that the region be transferred from the jurisdiction of Soviet Azerbaijan to Soviet Armenia, a move that triggered mass demonstrations of support in Yerevan and angry opposition in Azerbaijan.

For Armenians, Karabakh is a historic Armenian province with old Armenian churches that in modern times has had an Armenian majority but which was unjustly awarded to Soviet Azerbaijan in 1921 by the Bolsheviks. The protests of 1988 were seen as the culmination of a long history of democratic striving, which was met with violence in Azerbaijan. For Azerbaijanis, Karabakh is also regarded as a place of great cultural importance due to being a Muslim khanate for centuries, centred around the town of Shusha (known by Armenians as Shushi), the birthplace of many Azerbaijani musicians and artists. Situated on the plains of Azerbaijan,

¹ On statistics of the conflict, see Thomas de Waal (2013), *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*, New York University Press, Appendix 1, pp. 325-328.

Azerbaijanis assert that it is part of their country, in terms of its economy and geography, and that it is internationally recognised as such.

The conflict differs from others in the post-Soviet space in several important respects. It pits two nation-states against one another. Although the Armenians of Karabakh began the dispute in 1988 in a bid to secede from Soviet Azerbaijan, no one (including Armenia) recognised the Nagorny Karabakh Republic (or Artsakh Republic, as they called it from 2016 onwards), which was declared in 1991. The Karabakh Armenians were heavily reliant on the Republic of Armenia, financially, militarily and politically, and Yerevan has represented them in negotiations for the past two decades.

What began as a dispute about self-determination is better understood as a clash between Armenia and Azerbaijan fought through force of arms, diplomatic lobbying in international organisations and the information space (especially social media). Laurence Broers in his 2019 book, *Armenia and Azerbaijan, Anatomy of a Rivalry*, argues that the dispute is an “enduring rivalry”, more akin in many ways to the conflict between India and Pakistan than it is to the other post-Soviet conflicts.²

Another key difference is in the role played in the conflict by Russia. Moscow did not back one of the combatants, unlike in the other post-Soviet conflict zones. In this dispute Moscow has always sought good relations with both parties. Despite a formal military and economic partnership with Armenia, Russia also values a strong bilateral relationship with Azerbaijan. Russia was thwarted in its ambition to send peacekeepers to the conflict zone following the ceasefire agreement it brokered in May 1994, after Azerbaijan, tacitly supported by the Armenians, rejected a plan to deploy them along the Line of Contact separating the two sides.³ It finally did deploy peacekeepers in the region in November 2020, but only with the consent of Azerbaijan and for what was, at least formally, a limited five-year period.

For more than 20 years Russia played a formal diplomatic role in partnership with two Western powers, France and the US, the other co-chairs of the OSCE’s Minsk Group. In practice, Russia became the most active international player in the dispute, with foreign minister Sergei Lavrov taking the role of de facto mediator. Even after it unilaterally brokered the November 2020 ceasefire, Russia still kept its multilateral options open and the Minsk Group continued to function.

Finally, the conflict is much more toxic than the others in the post-Soviet space. Armenians and Azerbaijanis do not just refuse to engage in political and diplomatic relations with each other; they also actively deny and erase the cultural and historical rights of the other nation. Since 1990, with the exception of Karabakh itself, there have been virtually no Azerbaijanis in Armenia or Armenians in Azerbaijan. When occupying the seven districts around Karabakh, Armenians destroyed every last town and village down to the foundations, partially erasing

² Laurence Broers (2019), *Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry*, Edinburgh University Press.

³ For this story, see Tatul Hakobyan (2010), *Karabakh Diary, Green and Black: Neither War nor Peace*, Yerevan.

graveyards as well. Azerbaijan has systematically erased Armenian cultural heritage on its territory, including precious medieval monuments in its exclave of Nakhichevan.

As in many other conflicts fought between neighbours, this conflict has deep roots in the societies on either side of the conflict divide. The struggle over Karabakh has shaped modern Armenian and Azerbaijani identity and it is inconceivable to most Armenians and Azerbaijanis, even those who aren't from the territory of Karabakh itself, to imagine giving up on their claims to it. Up until 2020, feelings of anger and trauma were especially strong in Azerbaijan, the original losing side in the conflict. Armenians are regularly denounced as “fascists” and “aggressors” in mainstream Azerbaijani political discourse. Following their defeat in the 2020 conflict, the traumatic experience was then especially strong on the Armenian side.

Tragic events from the 1980s and 1990s in which atrocities were committed are remembered by both sides to this day. For Armenians, the key moment was the pogrom in the Azerbaijani town of Sumgait in February 1988, in which an Azerbaijani mob killed 26 Armenians. After this the entire Armenian population of the town was evacuated, and a mass exodus began with ethnic Armenians leaving Azerbaijan and ethnic Azerbaijanis leaving Armenia. Every year Azerbaijan commemorates the worst episode of the conflict, the massacre by Armenian forces of 485 (or more) Azerbaijanis who were fleeing the town of Khojaly in February 1992.⁴ In the 2020 conflict, atrocities such as the summary execution of prisoners were not only committed but filmed and widely released on social media.

A 2018 report by the NGO International Alert noted how on all sides “people plan their lives through the prism of the conflict, around the conflict and within the conflict.” It talked of the psychological condition of “learned helplessness”, where people do not envisage a different life for themselves.⁵

In 2018 tensions eased a little between the conflicting parties following the peaceful revolution in Armenia that removed the unpopular regime of Serzh Sargsyan and brought in a new leader with a popular mandate, Nikol Pashinyan. For a while at least, this re-energised the almost moribund negotiation process around Nagorny Karabakh. Pashinyan informally met Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliiev three times at international gatherings within a short space of time, even before their first formal meeting in Vienna in March 2019.

Apparently relieved at the departure of Sargsyan, a Karabakh Armenian with whom negotiations had been difficult, the Azerbaijani authorities welcomed the appointment of Pashinyan. Both sides lowered their rhetoric against each other for a while. More importantly, casualty levels on the Line of Contact dropped significantly, with less than 20 deaths reported there in 2018.

⁴ For more details on Sumgait and Khojaly, see *Black Garden*, op. cit., pp. 32-45, pp. 182-185.

⁵ International Alert (2018), “Envisioning Peace, An Analysis of Grassroots Views on the Nagorny Karabakh Conflict,” ([www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Caucasus EnvisioningPeace EN 2018.pdf](http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Caucasus%20EnvisioningPeace%20EN%202018.pdf)).

In January 2019, after a meeting of foreign ministers Elmar Mammadyarov and Zohrab Mnatsakanyan, the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs put out the most positive statement in years. “The Ministers discussed a wide range of issues related to the settlement of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict and agreed upon the necessity of taking concrete measures to prepare the populations for peace”, they announced.⁶

However, Azerbaijani hopes that Pashinyan might re-energise the peace process were thwarted. On the contrary, the Armenian prime minister seemed keen to shelve serious discussion of the Karabakh issue, while focusing on his number one priority, domestic reform in the Republic of Armenia. When he did touch on the issue, he increasingly disappointed Azerbaijanis with nationalist rhetoric. Perhaps trying to prove his credentials with the Karabakh Armenians, Pashinyan played up the theme of ‘union’ (*miatsum* in Armenian), the central tenet of the Armenian cause on the Karabakh issue since the dispute first flared in 1988. In August 2019, visiting Karabakh, Pashinyan told a crowd of supporters, “Artsakh is Armenia – full stop” and led a crowd repeating the word *miatsum*.⁷

This reflected a general hardening of the Armenian position, with the occupied Azerbaijani territories being routinely referred to as “liberated territories” in mainstream Armenian discourse.

2. A new conflict

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan went back to war with Armenia. Negotiations had all but broken down. Relations had been newly inflamed by four days of clashes across the Armenia-Azerbaijan international border in July when around 18 people were killed. When the violence was over, crowds demonstrated in Baku, demanding a military response by the Azerbaijani government, and some protestors broke into the parliament building.

The moment to initiate military action was carefully chosen. Winter weather in the highlands of Karabakh, which would make combat difficult, was only a few weeks away. The Covid-19 pandemic constrained diplomacy. The US, one of the three co-chair mediators, was distracted by its ongoing presidential election campaign.

The larger context was also more favourable to Azerbaijan for three reasons. First, Azerbaijan had built up its military in the 15 years since it was humiliated on the battlefield in the 1990s. Turkish officers had trained the Azerbaijani military to new NATO standards. In the first decade of Ilham Aliyev’s presidency, between 2006 and 2011, Azerbaijan drew on its big oil revenues to double its military budget twice, to more than \$4 billion a year.⁸ In subsequent years, as oil revenues fell, spending dropped but in the four days of fighting in 2016 Azerbaijan used tanks,

⁶ See www.osce.org/minsk-group/409220.

⁷ Joshua Kucera (2019), “Pashinyan calls for unification between Armenia and Karabakh,” *Eurasianet*, 6 August (<https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-calls-for-unification-between-armenia-and-karabakh>).

⁸ Milda Seputyte and Ott Ummelas (2016), “Oil Riches Help Azerbaijan Outgun Armenia in Military Spending,” *Bloomberg*, 6 April, (www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-06/oil-riches-help-azerbaijan-outgun-armenia-in-military-spending).

heavy artillery and attack helicopters, as well as Israeli-produced military drones. In 2020 even more sophisticated technology was deployed. Azerbaijan deployed Turkish Bayraktar TB2, and Israeli military 'kamikaze' Harop, Orbiter and SkyStriker drones to devastating effect, before having to use ground troops. These drones destroyed Armenian armour and defences, enabling Azerbaijani forces to make rapid progress in the regions south of Karabakh. There is a strong body of evidence that Turkey also recruited more than 2,000 mercenaries from Syria to fight for Azerbaijan, although Baku and Ankara continue to deny this.⁹

Second, Turkey gave Azerbaijan direct military support for the first time. Since the early 1990s Turkey had backed Azerbaijan politically and had closed its land border with Armenia in 1993 in solidarity after Armenian forces captured the Azerbaijani district of Kelbajar. However, Ankara had also pressed for a peaceful solution to the conflict and in 2008-10 had also explored a normalisation of relations with Armenia. The Zurich Protocols with Armenia were signed in 2009 but never ratified. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reversed this policy and gave Azerbaijan full military and political support in the conflict of 2020, helping Baku to break the equilibrium that had persisted in the conflict zone.

Third, Russia's position in the conflict was much more equivocal than most Armenians had anticipated. This was not, as some speculated, a question of President Vladimir Putin having a personal antipathy towards Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, although Putin undoubtedly enjoyed much better personal relations and mutual understanding with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev than he did with Pashinyan, a populist democrat. It was a matter of Russia's overall strategy in the South Caucasus, in which good relations with Azerbaijan were just as important as those with Armenia, despite Moscow's formal military alliance with Yerevan, and Armenia's membership of two Russian-led organisations, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Azerbaijan is key for Russia as a transport route southwards to Iran, Turkey and the Middle East. It also shares a strategically sensitive border with Russia's most fragile region, Dagestan.

The elites in Baku and Moscow see eye to eye on many other issues. There was frustration in Moscow at Armenia's perceived inflexibility at the so-called Lavrov Plan, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's proposals, formulated after the 2016 fighting, to unblock the conflict, return several occupied Azerbaijan districts to the control of Baku, open communication routes and deploy Russian peacekeepers to Karabakh. It is almost impossible to know to what extent Russia was aware of plans by Azerbaijan to launch a military offensive in September, and if they were expecting something it was almost certainly a more limited operation. But an Azerbaijani attempt to shake up the status quo by force and make the Armenian side more pliable was very likely not unwelcome to many Russian officials, who could use it to further their own strategic agenda.

Once started, the offensive had a galvanising effect on Azerbaijani society. Almost everyone, including the radical opposition, backed the military operation. Thousands of volunteers signed up to fight. Morale was also initially high on the Armenian side, but quickly began to deteriorate. The Armenians, along with many international experts, had assumed that their control of the

⁹ See <https://stj-sy.org/en/government-policies-contributing-to-growing-incidence-of-using-syrians-as-mercenary-fighters/>.

high ground and rings of defences built up over many years would protect them against a new Azerbaijani offensive. This proved to be an illusion. Azerbaijani tactics delivered swift results. The Armenian military — primarily the forces of the unrecognised Armenian-administered Nagorno-Karabakh Republic — not only lost territory but were also unable to rotate their men. The de facto leader Arayik Harutyunyan later said that morale had collapsed and troops were sick.¹⁰

In mid-October, Azerbaijani forces captured Hadrut, the Armenian-majority town inside Nagorny Karabakh itself. On 22 October, Azerbaijan announced it had reconquered the full length of its frontier with Iran along the Araxes River. Azerbaijani forces then appeared to be moving to cut off the ‘Lachin Corridor’, the road that connects Armenia with Nagorny Karabakh. In the final few days of October the push switched to the town of Shusha. This vitally important hilltop town, which had a large Azerbaijani majority during the Soviet period, is situated in the heart of Karabakh and overlooks the whole territory.

When Azerbaijani forces achieved the formidable feat of capturing Shusha on 8 November, they were close to encircling the region’s main city of Stepanakert and had a real prospect of capturing the whole of Armenian-administered Nagorny Karabakh and driving out its ethnic Armenian population. Estimates of the territory’s population ranged from between 100,000 and 150,000, a large proportion of whom had fled to Armenia during the conflict, although many had stayed behind. This posed the serious risk of even greater bloodshed and a much greater humanitarian crisis. There was also a strong chance that Armenia might try to deploy Russian-made long-range Iskander missiles against Azerbaijan, a step it had not taken hitherto in the conflict (there is evidence that one Iskander missile was fired against Baku on 9 November but did not hit its target).

It was at this point that Russia intervened. President Putin’s ceasefire statement of 9-10 November,¹¹ co-signed by the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders, averted a complete Armenian defeat, while also ratifying a strong Azerbaijani victory. Russia had probably hoped to broker a deal that did not so strongly favour one side over the other, but the Azerbaijani military exceeded all expectations and the Armenian leadership failed to take the opportunity to make concessions earlier. Talking to journalists after the ceasefire agreement, President Putin suggested¹² that the Armenians might not have lost so much territory had Prime Minister Pashinyan agreed to a Russian-brokered ceasefire, which Putin proposed on 19-20 October. In June 2021 foreign minister Lavrov said, “[the conflict] ended a little later than we proposed to the parties. It is not our fault that the war lasted longer than it could have and the truce was reached later than it could have been reached.”¹³

¹⁰ See <https://hetq.am/en/article/124150>.

¹¹ The ceasefire came into force at 12 am (midnight) Moscow time, which was 1 am in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

¹² See <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64431>.

¹³ See <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64431>; Foreign Minister Lavrov hints at this <https://bit.ly/2XGcS5U>.

3. A long road to peace

The ceasefire agreement of 9-10 November 2020 halted the war and saved lives. But it left the conflicting parties a long way from a full peace agreement, which would see Armenia and Azerbaijan open their borders and establish diplomatic relations. A medium-term window opened up that promised to curtail the violence, as the Russian peacekeeping mission in Karabakh was deployed there for an initial five years. According to the agreement, the mission could be extended for a further five years but one of the three signatories — presumably Azerbaijan — could veto the extension. Russia would certainly find powerful arguments with Baku as to why its soldiers should stay, but this clause in the agreement gives Azerbaijan leverage over Russia that is not available to Georgia, Moldova or Ukraine.

In the following ten months, several issues left the Armenian side angry and resentful. Around 45 Armenian detainees remained in Azerbaijani captivity. The Armenian side claimed they were prisoners of war who should be released under international humanitarian law. Various international organisations, as well as the US¹⁴ and the EU, also called for their release. The Azerbaijani side said that the men had been captured after the November ceasefire agreement and were not liable to the same treatment as those taken captive during the conflict. Tensions simmered along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, which had not been legally demarcated following the break-up of the Soviet Union. An apparent Azerbaijani incursion into an area, which most maps show to be Armenian territory, and the subsequent detention of six Armenian soldiers, inflamed tensions even more. For the Azerbaijani side, the main concern was the continued presence of lethal landmines in the seven occupied districts it recovered in late 2020. Baku asked the Armenian side for maps only to be told that there were none to be had. Two journalists were killed after their vehicle hit a landmine in the Kelbajar region.¹⁵ The lack of cooperation, even on humanitarian issues, was proof that, as the International Crisis Group reported, every issue had become “a political bargaining chip”. On 12 June, in a Georgian-brokered agreement, 15 Armenian detainees were freed and the Armenian side shared maps of minefields in the Aghdam region.¹⁶

These rows overshadowed the main promised medium-term peace dividend of the November agreement: the planned reopening of transport routes, especially a route connecting western Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan. A follow-up meeting in Moscow of the three signatories of the November agreement, Aliyev, Pashinyan and Putin, focused on the economic aspects of the deal, by forming a trilateral working group to address the transport issues. However, there has been no progress on agreeing on the implementation of new transport connections across Armenian territory.

The November agreement resolved one of the two major issues of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict: the occupation by Armenian forces, partially or wholly, of the seven districts around Nagorny Karabakh and the displacement of their entire population. By 1 December 2020, all of those regions, with the exception of the narrow Lachin Corridor connecting Armenia and

¹⁴ See <https://www.state.gov/detention-of-armenian-soldiers/>.

¹⁵ See <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-demands-mine-maps-from-armenia>.

¹⁶ See <https://jam-news.net/azerbaijan-swaps-15-armenian-soldiers-for-landmine-map/>.

Karabakh, had been restored to Azerbaijani control. This gives the right of return to more than half a million Azerbaijani displaced persons, even though it will take many years of reconstruction for them to be able to exercise that right and return home.

The second issue, the fundamental problem at the root of the conflict, the issue of the rights and status of the Armenians of Karabakh, remained unresolved. Armenian-administered Nagorny Karabakh continued to exist, albeit under much reduced circumstances, after the ceasefire agreement. The de facto government continued to operate as before. However, Armenian military units withdrew from the territory, and restrictions were imposed on who was able to visit via the Lachin Corridor from Armenia. Moscow had effectively replaced Yerevan as the patron of Nagorny Karabakh, a change of circumstance reflected in the introduction of Russian as the second language of the territory, alongside Armenian.

The diplomatic channel established to negotiate the status issue, the co-chairmanship of the OSCE Minsk Group, still exists. While keeping its leading role, Russia has not formally given up on the Minsk Group. However, there is no expectation that it will be able to work on the political side of the dispute any time soon. In June 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov recognised this.

“I understand that many people say that the status of Nagorny Karabakh remains unresolved. This will eventually be agreed with the participation of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, who should not worry too much about the status issue, but should promote confidence building measures and the resolution of humanitarian issues, and help both Armenians and Azerbaijanis live together in peace, security and economic prosperity. And then, I assure you, if we help establish this situation in two or three years, it will be much easier to resolve all the status problems.”¹⁷

The positions of the parties to the conflict remain mutually exclusive. The outcome of the conflict would seem to kill off the aspirations of the Karabakh Armenians to achieve independence from Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev, who had earlier offered the territory “the highest autonomy in the world,” now says that there will be no offer of any territorial autonomy at all. Azerbaijani officials, including ones from Shusha, say that ‘Nagorny Karabakh’ or ‘Mountainous Karabakh’ no longer exists as a concept.¹⁸ However, Armenians continued to refer to the territory as ‘Artsakh’ and to insist on its right for ‘remedial secession’. The continuing status dispute had immediate repercussions for the current Armenian residents of Nagorny Karabakh, as Baku pressed to keep them isolated. As before, the only international organisation allowed access to the region is the ICRC.

To back down from their sovereignty claims is almost unthinkable for either side. Officially the Minsk Group co-chairs still refer to the ‘basic principles’ framework. This is a short framework document known since 2007 as the ‘Madrid Principles’ as it was first written down on paper at the OSCE Ministerial Council in Madrid in November 2007. The most serious push to close a

¹⁷ See www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4779515.

¹⁸ See <https://www.azernews.az/karabakh/178534.html>.

deal on this basis was made by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at an inconclusive meeting in Kazan in 2011.

The text has never been made public and has reportedly been revised several times over the years. But its essence is not a secret as a summary of the six main points was published in three declarations by the presidents of France, Russia and the US at three G7 summits in L'Aquila, Muskoka and Deauville in 2009-11.¹⁹ Moreover, in 2016 the Armenian Research Center (ANI), published what appears to be a leaked version of the original 2007 Madrid document.²⁰ The preamble of the document refers to three articles of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975: "Article II related to refraining from the threat or use of use [*sic*] of force, to Article IV related to the territorial integrity of States, and to Article VIII related to the equal rights and self-determination of peoples." Seeking to resolve the tension between the two latter articles as they relate to the Karabakh dispute, the central idea of the Madrid plan is stated as being that: "The final legal status of NK [Nagorny Karabakh] will be determined through a plebiscite allowing the free and genuine expression of the will of the population of NK."

However, other provisions of the document, namely the return of displaced persons, the establishment of the Lachin Corridor and the deployment of a peacekeeping force, have already been implemented thanks to the November 2020 agreement. And it seems highly unlikely that Azerbaijan would allow the Armenians of Karabakh a vote on their own future, which would legitimise secession.

4. International context

The primary drivers of the Karabakh dispute are local: the capitals of Baku and Yerevan and to a lesser extent the Karabakh Armenians. Their entrenched positions, reluctance to consider compromise and aggressive rhetoric are the main factors that have sustained the conflict into its fourth decade.

The international context is also important, however. The role of **Russia** was greatly enhanced by the way it negotiated the ceasefire agreement of November 2020 and deployed a peacekeeping force to the region for the first time. Russia thereby eclipsed all other international actors in the Armenia-Azerbaijan context. The agreement allowed Russia to regain a military presence in Azerbaijan for the first time since 1993. It can also pursue an agenda of opening up communication routes, which would restore its overland links to Turkey and Iran via Azerbaijan and Armenia. This is seen as a political triumph in Moscow, also because the agreement marginalised the Western powers.

As noted earlier in this book, however, Russia's role in this conflict is different than in other post-Soviet conflicts. Russia is more vulnerable here and must tread more carefully. Moscow cannot afford to support one side over the other, but tries to maintain influence by pivoting

¹⁹ See www.osce.org/mg/51152.

²⁰ See ANI Armenian Research Center, "Madrid Principles – Full Text" (2016), 11 April (www.aniarc.am/2016/04/11/madrid-principles-full-text/).

between them, a balancing act that frequently risks alienating either Armenia or Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the Russian peacekeeping force deployed to Karabakh in November 2020 has no formal mandate. Its soldiers are in an uncertain position and could potentially come to harm if violence resumes between the conflicting parties. Unlike in other post-Soviet conflict zones, the Russian peacekeeping mission is also liable to renewal after five years.

Russia has always been constrained in this region by a multiplicity of interests and the need to keep good bilateral relations with Baku and Yerevan, the two capitals in direct confrontation with each other. This strategic ambiguity dates from 1988-91 when Moscow, in its previous capacity as the centre of the Soviet Union, failed to prevent the escalation of the conflict. There were several reasons. First, Mikhail Gorbachev initially failed to grasp the gravity of the dispute and believed it could be solved with appeals for workers' solidarity. Second, a plan to offer Nagorny Karabakh an 'economic renaissance' with direct financial assistance from Moscow fell through as both communities rejected it. And third, Moscow gave out mixed signals, with two leading members of the Politburo, Yegor Ligachev and Alexander Yakovlev, respectively lending their personal support to Baku and Yerevan.²¹ In 1990-91 these contradictions grew as the Soviet security establishment increasingly backed Soviet Azerbaijan and sought to punish the more rebellious Armenia, while the newly empowered Russian Supreme Soviet under Boris Yeltsin openly supported the Armenians. As war broke out, unemployed Soviet military officers fought on both sides, although the new Russian military increasingly gave more support to Armenia.

In May 1994, following the signing of the ceasefire agreement negotiated by Russian envoy Vladimir Kazimirov, Russian Defence Minister Pavel Grachev tried to impose a Russian peacekeeping force in the conflict zone, but this was rejected by Azerbaijan, with the covert support of the Karabakh Armenians, neither of whom wanted to see Russian soldiers on the ground.

After Vladimir Putin became President of Russia in 2000, Russia continued to be the main mediator, while displaying little sense of urgency to resolve the dispute. Putin himself prioritised enjoying good bilateral relations with Baku and Yerevan. In 2010 Putin stated:

"Both Russia and other participants in this process are ready to help, but we cannot take Armenia or Azerbaijan's place. Russia will not take on any additional responsibility to press the countries to act, only to be viewed as guilty of some misdeed by one or both of the countries later on. Our relationship with Azerbaijan and Armenia spans centuries. We do not want to be seen as having pressured one side to accept an unfair outcome. I would like to stress that we can only guarantee any agreements that are reached."²²

This approach also allowed Russia to sell weapons to both sides, in what seems to be a clear breach of its commitments as an OSCE mediator. In the Four-Day War of 2016 and again in

²¹ *Black Garden*, op. cit., p. 60-61.

²² From press conference between Putin and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 8 June 2010 (<http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/10922/>).

2020, Russia was heavily criticised by Armenians for staying neutral and not coming to the aid of its military ally, Armenia.²³ Russia's popularity has also declined in Azerbaijan since the ceasefire agreement: a diplomatic success also has political costs.

The other two big neighbours in the region, **Iran** and **Turkey**, are also both former imperial powers in the South Caucasus.

As noted above, Turkey's intervention to support Azerbaijan in the 2020 conflict reversed a longstanding Turkish position of backing Baku politically but not favouring a military resolution of the conflict. During the conflict, Turkish President Erdoğan voiced ambitions for Turkey to play a bigger political role and for the OSCE Minsk Group to be dissolved. There was talk of a mixed Russian-Turkish peacekeeping force being deployed in the region. In the event, Turkey's role was limited to the deployment of 45 military monitors in a joint monitoring centre with the Russians 20 km from the new frontline. Both Russian and Turkish monitors will use drones to monitor the ceasefire in what looks currently to be a mainly symbolic operation.²⁴

If Turkey's bigger political ambitions appear to be thwarted, it has every reason to be otherwise satisfied with the outcome of the conflict. The support for a Turkic kin state was wildly popular in Turkey and boosted President Erdoğan domestically. The conflict was seen as a great advertisement for Turkish military technology. Turkish companies were invited to participate in the Azerbaijani reconstruction process. Perhaps most importantly, the new post-conflict landscape and the prospect of a new transport route connecting western Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan across southern Armenia potentially opens up a new corridor for Turkey to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. The existing route is through Georgia via the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway that opened in 2017, but an alternative, more direct route will be attractive, even if it will not be viable for many years.

For 30 years **Iran** has aspired, without much success, to be a strategic player in the South Caucasus. Like Georgia, it must tread carefully, having both Azerbaijanis and Armenians as its citizens —in fact a whole area in the north of the country around the city of Tabriz is largely Azerbaijani-speaking. Iran only once tried to play a mediating role, in 1992, but was humiliated when the Armenians launched a big offensive in Karabakh, just as a meeting was held in Tehran. Since then, it has been kept out of any formal mediating role, partly at the insistence of the Americans, and also because the conflict is the preserve of the OSCE, a European institution of which Iran is not a member. Evidently concerned by the active role played by both Russia and Turkey, Iran has tried to reactivate its diplomacy with both countries since the November 2020 ceasefire. Its main agenda of increasing its political influence in the region appears to be falling short as new transport routes open up across the region.

²³ See "Armenians Protest Against Russian Arms Sales To Azerbaijan" (2006), *RFE/RL*, 13 April (<https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-protest-russian-arm-sales-to-azerbaijan/27673173.html>).

²⁴ See <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/264-post-war-prospects-nagorno-karabakh>.

Multilateral diplomacy and Western diplomatic engagement were badly damaged by the 2020 conflict, but both are just about still alive. Formally, the main international multilateral organisation dealing with the conflict remains the **OSCE**. Its predecessor, the CSCE, took on the mediation role in 1992, when the conflict was still ongoing and there were great hopes for its possibilities as a pan-European security organisation. The Budapest Summit of 1994, which followed the ceasefire agreement of May that year and turned the CSCE into the OSCE, established three structures for the resolution of the conflict, which were intended to be ‘three legs of the stool.’

The first leg, the Minsk co-chair group mediation mechanism (two co-chairs until 1997, three since then) continues to be the main diplomatic channel for the dispute, although its authority was much diminished by the 2020 conflict.

The second leg is the ceasefire monitoring mission headed by the Personal Representative of the Chairman in Office of the OSCE, consisting of six monitors. Set up in 1994 with a very limited mandate, it has been headed since 1996 by Ambassador Andrej Kasprzyk. For years his team monitored the ceasefire twice monthly in pre-arranged visits to the Line of Contact. Kasprzyk, with his deep knowledge of the conflict, often acted as a de facto fourth co-chair. Other parts of this mission’s mandate, such as work on assisting confidence-building measures, were rarely applied. Since 2016, discussions have been ongoing on expanding on this mission, but Baku and Yerevan have not been able to agree on how to do so.²⁵

The third leg is the High-Level Planning Group (HLPG), a small office based in Vienna, mandated to design and establish a peacekeeping mission. The HLPG was active in the first two or three years after the Budapest summit, but was marginalised thereafter, and was further eclipsed by the 2020 conflict and the deployment of a unilateral Russian peacekeeping mission. Its main hope for future relevance lies on the theoretical possibility that the peacekeeping mission could be changed into being a multilateral one in 2025.²⁶

The second and third legs of the stool suffer from the way that the OSCE has failed to develop into the strong organisation that was envisaged in the 1990s. The OSCE lacks the organisational depth or the resources to do more than manage the burden of the conflict. Its consensus basis means that Armenia and Azerbaijan both have vetoes, with the result that initiatives to strengthen the ceasefire regime have been blocked by Baku, and Yerevan in particular has sometimes made life difficult for the HLPG.

²⁵ Summary of the mandate at www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/afet/dv/201/201106/20110615_mandatepr_en.pdf.

²⁶ On the ‘three legs’ of the OSCE and the role of the High Level Planning Group see Thomas de Waal (2016), “Prisoners of the Caucasus: Resolving the Karabakh Security Dilemma,” *Carnegie Europe*, 16 June (<https://carnegieeurope.eu/2016/06/16/prisoners-of-caucasus-resolving-karabakh-security-dilemma-pub-63825>).

The **US** is the only other international actor that has occasionally spent political capital on pursuing a Karabakh peace settlement. The US hosted a summit in Key West in Florida in 2001 when it took the lead from the other two OSCE co-chairs and tried to persuade Presidents Heydar Aliiev and Robert Kocharian to strike a deal. After some initial positive signs, Aliiev eventually disavowed the proposed deal.

As with other international powers, the Karabakh dispute has become a second-order priority for Washington over the past decade. It is also constrained by bilateral relations with Yerevan (which has many friends in the US Congress) and with Baku (which has strong supporters in the US military and energy sector). Under the Trump administration, the new US Minsk Group co-chair, Andrew Schofer, was not given ambassadorial status, in a departure from previous practice. When conflict came in 2020, during the US presidential election campaign, Washington was largely absent. One round of negotiations was held in Washington, with the declaration of a ceasefire, which was violated almost immediately.

France is the least visible of the three co-chair countries, although French presidents have taken a sudden periodic interest in the conflict, as Jacques Chirac did in 2000 and again in 2006. The role of co-chair has not gone to prominent diplomats and France rarely convenes public meetings on the conflict. During the 2020 conflict, Paris took an unabashedly pro-Armenian stance, and President Macron clashed with Turkish President Erdoğan over other issues at the same time. This has largely discredited France in the eyes of Azerbaijan.

The **European Union** is involved diplomatically in so far as France is an EU member state. The EU is briefed by France on the latest developments when they occur. The EU was not a fully-fledged political actor when the conflict of the 1990s was fought and commentators and officials periodically argue that it should be now given more weight in the conflict resolution process. This notion is generally resisted by both France and Russia (but less so by the US). Periodic attempts by the EU to become more involved have not been successful. Most notably, the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, Peter Semneby, aborted a planned visit to Nagorny Karabakh in June 2007, after objections from Baku and without receiving support from the OSCE co-chairs.

The new post-war landscape would undoubtedly benefit from the expertise the EU has previously deployed in the Balkans, as well as its more liberal approach to conflict resolution. In practice its absence from Track 1 mediation still leads the EU to confine itself to indirect support for the peace process. It is the biggest supporter of NGOs in the region working on the conflict through the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorny Karabakh (EPNK) project. The third three-year phase of the EPNK project ended in April 2019, after funding five international NGOs with a total budget of €4.7 million.²⁷ A new region-wide programme entitled EU4Dialogue began in 2020.

²⁷ Details at www.epnk.org/.

5. Challenges for the next five years

The second Karabakh war of 2020 fundamentally changed the whole landscape of the South Caucasus. It reversed the situation on the ground, tipping the balance of power decisively in favour of Azerbaijan, restoring lands that Baku had lost more than a quarter of a century before and giving hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis the chance to return home. The Armenian side was left defeated and traumatised. However, it did not resolve the underlying differences between the two sides, notably the future status of the Armenians of Karabakh. Public Armenian-Azerbaijani discourse remains as toxic as ever.

The five-year expiration date on the Russian peacekeeping mission lasting until November 2025 provides some reassurance to Azerbaijan that they have some leverage over Moscow to stop the mission becoming a permanent fixture. But the prospect of that mission ending in 2025 is also a source of anxiety for the Armenians of Karabakh, and potentially destabilising for the new status quo that was established after the war.

Progress is undermined by the lack of political dialogue and ongoing confrontation (stopping short of war) in the one area where opportunities opened up after the November 2020 ceasefire agreement: plans for the restoration of closed cross-regional transport routes. The final section of the statement reads:

9. All economic and transport connections in the region shall be unblocked. The Republic of Armenia shall guarantee the security of transport connections between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to arrange unobstructed movement of persons, vehicles and cargo in both directions. The Border Guard Service of the Russian Federal Security Service shall be responsible for overseeing the transport connections.

As agreed by the Parties, new transport links shall be built to connect the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and the western regions of Azerbaijan.

This reflects a shared Azerbaijani-Russian-Turkish agenda to see road and rail connections restored on a route that runs down from Russia along the Caspian Sea's coast to Baku, across southern Azerbaijan, including the districts formerly under Armenian occupation, through a small part of southern Armenia into the Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhichevan. This would directly reconnect Nakhichevan to the rest of Azerbaijan after three decades of separation caused by the conflict. It would also link Russia to Turkey directly by rail for the first time since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Potentially, it would open up a new lowland route from Central Asia to Turkey via the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan and a small section of Armenia.

The last point is the crucial one. A high-quality fast road and rail link to and from Nakhichevan across Armenia's southern Meghri region was a goal of Azerbaijan even in Soviet times. It was the basis of negotiations between Baku and Yerevan between 1999 and 2001, when Heydar Aliiev and Robert Kocharian were respectively the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia and worked on an agreement to this basis. However, these proposals have always been met with the suspicion by Armenia, and to a lesser extent by Iran, that they compromise Armenian sovereignty.

In April 2021, President Ilham Aliyev referred to Zangezur — now the Syunik region of southern Armenia — as “our lands”, referencing the fact that it used to have a large Azerbaijani population. He said: “We are implementing the Zangazur corridor, whether Armenia likes it or not. If they do, it will be easier for us to implement, if not, we will enforce it.”²⁸ This became a hot topic in Armenia and was seen as a threat to annex Armenian territory. Armenian Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigoryan, the official entrusted with negotiating on the new transport links, suggested that his country would be ready to embrace a northern transport route via the town of Ijevan which would give Armenia more revenue and political benefits.²⁹

In theory it would be possible to formulate plans that were mutually beneficial to all, and would eventually reconnect Armenia and Turkey as well, if and when they were to open diplomatic relations. However, without at least a minimal level of political trust, it is hard to see these new transport schemes being implemented. Incidents of stone-throwing, which characterised the early phase of the conflict in the late Soviet era in 1988-89, were reported in early 2021.³⁰ A few young men throwing stones at vehicles or putting obstructions on a railway line could severely disrupt even the most lavishly funded new transport projects.

The bigger challenge is how to begin working on reconciliation between two societies still in a state of deep antagonism towards one another, indeed, whose whole nation-building projects are founded on a rejection of the aspirations of the other. Following the 2020 conflict, Azerbaijan’s anti-Armenian discourse barely changed, on the official level at least. President Aliyev openly mocked the Armenians. A grotesque ‘trophy park’ was opened in Baku, displaying caricatured Armenian figures and captured Armenian helmets in triumphalist fashion. There was little sympathy for Armenians, even among those in a less vindictive mood. Thousands of ordinary Azerbaijanis were still full of raw emotion after being presented with the full picture of the destruction visited on the seven occupied territories by Armenian occupying forces over more than 25 years, with whole towns stripped down to nothing and gravestones broken.

Given these deep grievances and the unusually toxic discourse, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is even less resistant than other post-Soviet conflicts to ‘conflict transformation’, the kind of incremental change in which barriers are broken down and bonds of trust are restored across the conflict divide.

The two societies have had practically no contact with one another since the late 1980s. Only very limited social groups, such as traders who do business in Georgia, or students who meet the other side in foreign capitals, encounter members of the other ethnic group and hear their point of view. Up until 2020, civil society dialogue initiatives and confidence-building measures were difficult to implement, primarily because Azerbaijanis were reluctant to engage in dialogue that ‘normalised the status quo’ without any tangible political progress. Following the

²⁸ See <https://en.president.az/articles/51216>.

²⁹ See <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-proposing-restoration-of-rail-route-through-azerbaijan-to-russia>.

³⁰ See <https://newsarmenia.am/news/armenia/azerbaydzhantsy-zabrosali-kamnyami-armyanskuyu-mashinu-nadoroge-stepanakert-goris-vitse-mer-gorisa/>.

latest conflict, Azerbaijanis are now the stronger voices calling for dialogue, while Armenians, traumatised by their losses, are likely to be more unwilling to engage.

Few people on either side can imagine living in peace with the other. The 2018 International Alert report *Envisioning Peace* found that, “in Armenia and Azerbaijan, people say they find it hard to plan a long-term future. This could be down to people living according to a system of learned helplessness.” Those social and regional groups most directly affected by the conflict were also the most marginalised by it. “Armenia and Azerbaijan are quite similar once again in this regard: the further people live from the frontline, the more strongly they speak about patriotism,”³¹ the report observed.

Hopes that a new generation would demand change were not borne out. The new generation grew up with dominant national narratives that portray the other side, Armenians or Azerbaijanis, as enemies. Unlike older generations who lived in the Soviet period, they lacked memories of a time when the two nations lived side by side peacefully and most could speak a common language. In 2020, it was predominantly young men aged between 18 and 21 years who were the victims of the new conflict, meaning that their generation, which had not yet been born when the conflict of the 1990s was fought, now bears its own scars. A younger generation is also active across the world and is also busily engaged in an ‘information war’ on social media, full of hate speech and abuse towards the other side.

All this suggests that anyone seeking an end to the Karabakh conflict must employ a double strategy in the shorter and longer term that eschews the vocabulary of ‘conflict resolution’ employed in other contexts. The short term requires ‘conflict management’ to try to build on the fragile basis of the new 2020 ceasefire and keep the two sides from resuming violence in the period before the five-year mandate of the Russian peacekeeping forces is set to expire in 2025. The longer term calls for an approach of strategic patience and ‘conflict transformation’ in which more work is done inside Armenian and Azerbaijani societies rather than between them.

³¹ *Envisioning Peace*, op. cit., p 6, p 9.