

**ETHNIC RELATIONS AND
REGIONAL CONFLICTS****TWO POSITIONS
ON THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH WAR:
RUSSIAN AND TURKISH
(1990-1994)****Emil SOULEIMANOV**

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Introduction

The winter months of 2011/2012 marked the 20th anniversary of the beginning of full-scale warfare in the highlands of Nagorno-Karabakh, de jure an Azerbaijani enclave inhabited mostly by ethnic Armenians and controlled

by the latter and an unrecognized republic that has essentially been claiming independence since the final days of the Soviet Union. The armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent areas, which with various levels of intensity lasted

from the end of the 1980s until 1994 when a ceasefire brokered by Moscow was signed, has greatly shaped the post-Soviet independence of Armenia and Azerbaijan, contributing to the long-term fragmentation of the Southern Caucasus and complicating its integration into world affairs. Indeed, the fundamentals of the regional power constellation that has endured since then were laid down at the beginning of the 1990s, with the Karabakh conflict playing a significant role in it.

As of yet, years after the end of the Karabakh war, a definite solution to the conflict still seems to be out of sight, with both the Azerbaijani and the Armenian governments occasionally making use of militarist rhetoric in order to either reverse the current status quo in their favor or ensure it, respectively.¹ Small-scale fighting in the borderline areas of the disputed territory has never completely stopped, and every year hundreds of Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers fall victim to occasional positional warfare. Importantly, the foreign political agendas of Baku and Erevan have been heavily centered on the Karabakh issue, with Azerbaijan routinely investing billions of dollars of its oil and natural gas revenues in the improvement of its military capabilities and advocating on the international scene for regaining the territories lost in the conflict.²

Like other post-Soviet states, Armenia has also recently been experiencing what a number of commentators both inside and outside this South Caucasian country regard as a certain reduction in the nation's economic independence in favor of Russia. *Vis-à-vis* Baku's prospective attempts to restore its territorial integrity by launching a renewed war effort in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenians consider the rather significant concessions the Armenian Republic has made to its major ally north of the Greater Caucasus Mountain Range with respect to its economic and political autonomy to be instrumental in containing the

Azerbaijani (and Turkish) threat. As a "lesser evil," they are still being accepted by mainstream Armenian public opinion, even though opposition opinions are articulated from time to time by local intellectuals. Interestingly, many Armenian politicians tend to point at Moscow's stance in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war over South Ossetia; according to the prevailing view, it indicated the Kremlin's commitment to defend its remaining bastions in the Southern Caucasus providing full-scale support of its allies.

However controversial Russia's role in the current stage of conflicts on the Georgian and Azerbaijani periphery, the details of the Nagorno-Karabakh war with regard to Russia's involvement in it still remain largely unclear. Yet an understanding of Moscow's policy toward the chronologically first armed conflict that occurred in the Soviet Union and continued following its dissolution is instrumental in realizing Russia's attitude toward the Southern Caucasus in general and Armenia and Azerbaijan in particular.

However, Russian policy in the Southern Caucasus cannot be viewed separately, as it is interconnected with the policies of the other geopolitical actors in the region. Historically, the struggle for the Southern Caucasus has been among Turkey, Iran, and Russia. Due to Iran's recent more passive policy, Turkey and Russia were regarded as the main contenders for the status of regional superpower. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Turkey's South Caucasian policy was significantly activated, which in turn was conditioned by several factors. First of all, Russia's political impact on the former "Soviet territories" was sensibly reduced, which gave other "interested parties" an opportunity to realize their geostrategic plans. Besides the traditional regional players, the West, especially the United States, also began actively showing its interests in the strategically vital regions of the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia. NATO member and pro-Western Turkey was regarded as the best counterbalance to Russia's influence and Islamist Iran's possible political comeback. This is the reason Turkey was heavily supported by the West in its attempts to become a regional superpower. However, Tur-

¹ In fact, merely a ceasefire, not a peace accord, was signed by Armenia and Azerbaijan back in 1994.

² Along with the area of Nagorno-Karabakh, seven districts of the Azerbaijan Republic are controlled by Armenian forces.

key itself had its own interests and plans, which in some respects coincided with those of the West. The dispute around Nagorno-Karabakh was used effectively by all the regional rivals, including Turkey and Russia, as grounds for realizing their strategic goals.

This article is an attempt to shed light on the evolution of Russian and Turkish policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between 1991 and 1994 and show how it has affected these countries' attitude toward the post-Soviet nations of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Russia's Position

Russia and the Southern Caucasus

As Dov Lynch points out, in Russian strategic thinking "the Northern and Southern Caucasus are integral parts of the same security system. Developments, whether positive or negative, in one area are seen to impact automatically on the other."³ The parts of the Northern Caucasus located within the borders of the Russian Federation are ethnic republics (before 1991 they were ethnic autonomous republics within the Russian Federation)⁴ spreading from the Caspian Sea almost all the way to the Black Sea; certain North Caucasian ethnic groups called for independence in the 1990s, and Chechnia nearly achieved independence. Moreover, "the indigenous population [of the Northern Caucasus] is closely linked, both culturally and ethnically, to their brethren in the south of the Greater Caucasus and the predominantly Russian-populated plains. The unity of the Federation is therefore at stake."⁵ Thus, it is believed that separatist moods among the North Caucasians must either be directly stimulated from the south of the Greater Caucasus Range, or encouraged by the example of the already recovered South Caucasian republics. Seen from this perspective, securing Russian military and political dominance in the Southern Caucasus would serve as a stabilizing element for the internal development of the Russian Northern Caucasus.⁶ Importantly, the Caucasus is in a strategic position between the Middle East and Russia, Europe and (Central) Asia, and is the key to the Caspian Sea with its rich oil and natural gas fields from the west. Furthermore, "the strengthening U.S. presence in the South Caucasus is seen to mean weakening Russian control over the North Caucasus."⁷ Any loss of the Northern Caucasus facilitated by Moscow's strategic retreat from the Southern Caucasus could cause a domino effect throughout the territory of the multiethnic Russian Federation. In light of Moscow's growing fears of America's activity in Russia's "soft underbelly," in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia, it was necessary to do everything possible to secure firm control over the South

³ D. Lynch, "Why Georgia Matters," *Chaillot Paper* (Institute for Security Studies, Paris, February 2006), No. 86, p. 50.

⁴ From the east westwards, these ethnic republics comprise Dagestan, Chechnia, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and the Adighe Republic, which until 1991 was formally within the administrative borders of the Krasnodar Territory.

⁵ D. Trenin, "Russia's Security Interests and Policies in the Caucasus," in: *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. by B. Coppeters, Vrije Universiteit Press, Brussels, 1996, available at [<http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/ContBorders/eng/ch0301.htm>], 3 January, 2008.

⁶ The Northern Caucasus, together with Tatarstan, have traditionally been among the Russian regions with the most pronounced tendency toward secession, but unlike Tatarstan, the Northern Caucasus is not in the middle of Russia, but in a strategically important border area that would enhance risks for Moscow in case of regional secessionism.

⁷ D. Lynch, *op. cit.*

Caucasian area. This strategic task was already motivating Russian foreign policy toward Baku and Tbilisi during the first years after the end of the Soviet Union.

Relations with Azerbaijan

Formerly the leader of the National Front of Azerbaijan, the second president of post-Soviet Azerbaijan and a devote pan-Turk with a strong pro-Western attitude, Abulfaz Elchibey consistently rejected Azerbaijan's ascension to the CIS, deployment of Russian military bases in Azerbaijani territory, and joint guarding of the Azerbaijani-Iranian and Azerbaijani-Turkish borders with the Russians—in fact, he rejected the full list of Moscow's demands at the time.⁸ A no less serious problem was that Elchibey's government absolutely excluded any share of Russian (and Iranian) companies in the hastily organized Azerbaijani international oil consortium, from which it expected large financial profits and greater political weight around the world.⁹ For Moscow, Elchibey's (and later on Aliiev's) intentions to prepare the ground for a strong Western, especially U.S., presence in the region rich in oil and natural gas in keeping with a more significant role for Turkey in South Caucasian affairs was unacceptable as such a development would greatly reduce Russia's dominant standing in a strategically important area of the Caspian in general and the Southern Caucasus in particular.

Importantly, during the course of 1992, the space allotted to the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia on Moscow's foreign policy agenda was rather marginal. It is widely believed that this was caused by the general lack of interest of Andrey Kozyrev, Russian foreign minister at the time, in the current developments to the south of Russia's borders; the motto of the "early" Yeltsin government until the middle or the end of 1992 was the military and political withdrawal of Russia from its former provinces, a definitive break with its imperial past, and a "return to the family of civilized nations."¹⁰ Moscow's un rushed relationship with the West was given clear priority over post-Soviet affairs as Russian-American relations were witnessing their euphoric stage in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In its foreign policy, Kozyrev's administration made every possible effort to distance itself from what was then perceived as the imperial Soviet legacy.

However, in 1993-1994, following the general weakening of Yeltsin's liberal entourage and the stronger role of (neo)conservative and revanchist sentiments in the country's domestic policy fuelled by increasing popular disaffection with the ongoing socioeconomic collapse and calling for Moscow to establish relations with the West, the Russian strategists reversed their attitude toward the former Soviet colonies, formulating principles of a new foreign policy strategy in relation to the countries of the Near Abroad. This new concept assumed Russia's more active participation in the territory of the successor republics of the Soviet Union; dominance in that territory was, among other things, supposed to secure the renewal of its superpower status for the Eurasian power.¹¹

⁸ During his only visit to Moscow in the course of his presidency in September 1992, Elchibey, being a former anti-Soviet dissident and university professor of Arabic philology, even refused to speak in Russian, requesting a personal Turkish-Russian interpreter.

⁹ See: J. Mollazade, "Azerbaijan and the Caspian Basin: Pipelines and Geopolitics," *Demokratizatsiya*, January 2006, p. 30.

¹⁰ Cf. P. Kuchyňková, "Utváření ruské zahraniční politiky po roce 1991 v postsovětském prostoru," in: *Rusko jako geopolitický aktér v postsovětském prostoru*, ed. by P. Kuchyňková, T. Šmíd, Mezinárodní politologický ústav, Brno, 2006, pp. 22-25. For a categorization of the particular phases of the foreign policy of post-Soviet Russia, see: N.J. Jackson, *Russian Foreign Policy and the CIS: Theories, Debates and Actions*, Routledge, London, New York, 2003.

¹¹ See: W. Russell, "Russian Relations with the 'Near Abroad'," in: *Russian Foreign Policy since 1990*, ed. by P. Sheorman, Westview, 1995, p. 50.

In the context of the renewed Russian aspirations for regional hegemony, Moscow pushed for the signing of the Tashkent Collective Security Treaty (May 1992); among the original signatories were the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Armenia. Among other things, the parties to the treaty agreed to join in the common defense of the “external borders of the CIS,” establish military bases of the Russian Federation in their territory, and not to enter into any military pacts with other countries. The Tashkent accords created a military and political framework for the planned integration—military and economic—of the post-Soviet republics into the Tashkent Treaty.¹² Since 1993, Russian foreign policy has generally become more steadfast and assertive; as previously mentioned, Moscow’s exclusive dominance in the Southern Caucasus, among other places, seemed to be a necessary starting point for the recovery of Moscow’s power in the post-Soviet space, thereby guaranteeing Russia’s equality in relations with the West, notably the United States.

Moscow’s strategic approach, however, was blocked by the continuing unwillingness of the government in Baku to accept Russia’s demands for the country to join the CIS and to ratify the Tashkent Treaty. In the cabinets of the Moscow strategists, concern was therefore growing about the possible consequences of Elchibey’s policy regarding the presence of the West in Azerbaijan. The Elchibey regime was understood in Moscow as a sort of “Trojan horse” in post-Soviet territory, striving for the establishment of a strategic partnership with Turkey, a NATO member state and Russia’s most important rival in the Southern Caucasus, which was moreover attempting to draw influential Western countries into events relating to Russia’s vital interests.¹³ The war in Nagorno-Karabakh was therefore perceived as an opportunity to exert pressure on Baku, which was finally supposed to force that South Caucasian country to accept Russia’s demands; this is also where we can look for the causes of the increasing Russian support of the Armenian military on the Karabakh battlefield and beyond.

In the second half of June 1993, the ceremonial signing of the “Contract of the Century” was supposed to take place in London—this was to be the title of an agreement between Baku and a number of mostly Western oil drilling companies on the exploitation of the rich Azerbaijani oil deposits. At that time, it was assumed that Azerbaijan would soon become the “Kuwait of the Caucasus.” Regardless of the continuing defeats on the Karabakh front, Elchibey’s government exhibited no signs of flexibility, and it was still unwilling to accept even the mildest of Russian demands. As the subsequent pages indicate, the result of the uncompromising line taken by Baku, as well as of the government’s inability to take important steps in both the military and the socioeconomic sphere, was the loss of not only nearly all of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and several areas around it by July 1993, but also a drastic worsening of relations with two powerful neighbors—Iran and especially Russia.

Relations with Armenia

Few people in Armenia in the early 1990s doubted that their tiny, mountainous country lacking natural resources with its small population would need a powerful ally to guarantee its territori-

¹² For the text of the Tashkent Treaty that came into effect two years later, see [<http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/cfe/text/tashka.htm>].

¹³ For more detail on this matter, see: S.E. Cornell, “Undeclared War: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Reconsidered,” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Fall 1997.

al integrity; for some, even the nation's survival was at stake given the increased tension with two of four neighbors, Azerbaijan and to some extent Turkey too. Indeed, two decades ago it could have been said quite confidently that Armenia was predestined to be oriented toward Russia as the country most willing to provide it with the security guarantees it needed given the geopolitical stalemate it found itself in.

Initially, however, it was far from clear whether or rather how vigorously the Armenia- Russia alliance would be renewed after the breakup of the Soviet Union. After 1990, when Ayaz Mutallibov, a (post-)communist and heavily pro-Moscow figure with strong ties to the Kremlin, came to power in Azerbaijan, Moscow was not as clearly in favor of Armenia's efforts in Karabakh as it might have seemed at first glance. In fact, in the spring of 1991, Soviet Army divisions even took part together with elite units of the Azerbaijani Interior Ministry in an operation named *Koltso* (Russian for "ring") in areas to the north of Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁴ The prevailing opinion was that as long as the (pro-Moscow) communists stayed in power in Baku, such a "sign of loyalty" on the part of Moscow would not be exceptional. After satisfying certain conditions, and especially after approval of Moscow's access to the dominant use of Azerbaijan's oil wealth and in light of the close military and political cooperation between Baku and Moscow, Moscow's relations toward economically and geopolitically more important Azerbaijan might have been more favorable, and this would have undoubtedly influenced Russia's stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Moreover, Armenia's continuing security concerns regarding Turkey (and Azerbaijan) made it an ally with very limited room for maneuver. As it turned out, however, Baku and Moscow never became so close; this was mainly thanks to the domestic failures of Mutallibov's rule and to the policies of Abulfaz Elchibey and subsequently of Heydar Aliiev, who were notably opposed to Russia's positions.¹⁵

Russia and the War in Nagorno-Karabakh

After the breakup of the U.S.S.R., Russia inherited an effective tool for putting pressure on Azerbaijan and Armenia—the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. The close military and economic union of Erevan supporting the military campaign of the Karabakh Armenians with its strategic ally in the region, Moscow, and at the same time the unwillingness of the Baku government to yield to Russia's demands played an instrumental part in the course and outcome of the war. In retrospect it turned out that the joint operation in 1991 was the only case of Russian-Azerbaijani military cooperation in Karabakh and its environs.

There is no unanimous opinion about whether the Kremlin was basing its policy toward Armenia and Azerbaijan before the middle of 1992 on any overall concept. As outlined above, many analysts believe that Moscow's approach toward Baku and Erevan during the earliest period of their independence was characterized by chaos and overall lack of interest. In this regard, Pavel Baev suggests differentiating between the top Russian generals' approach to the Karabakh conflict and to the conflicts in Georgia; he states that "the key guidelines were to stay away from the Nagorno-

¹⁴ For more detail, see: Th. de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, New York University Press, New York, 2003, pp. 113-117.

¹⁵ Fears that Baku and Moscow would come to an agreement "behind their backs" and that the victim of that agreement would be Armenia continue to some degree in Armenian society to this day.

Karabakh quagmire and to concentrate on consolidating the military presence in Georgia.”¹⁶ The key was supposed to be gaining control over Georgia’s deep-water ports and the South Caucasian Black Sea region.

The interventions of Russian soldiers in events on the Karabakh front, for example the deployment of the 366th regiment of the 4th Russian Army at the start of 1992 in the Armenian campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh, are explained by an overall decentralization in policy formation in the early 1990s, when the Ministry of Defense was acting as an independent player, often ignoring the propositions of the Foreign Ministry.¹⁷ According to this interpretation, Russian military commanders intervened capriciously in local conflicts based on their own sympathies or motives without having to take into consideration the official position of Moscow. Similarly, Russian soldiers and pilots (along with their colleagues from Belarus, Ukraine, etc.), captured mainly by the Azerbaijani side during the conflict, were labeled by Russia as mercenaries who had nothing in common with the policy of the Russian state. Not even the supplying of weapons to both parties in the conflict was entirely balanced, but depended on the benevolence and financial cravings of individual Russian commanders.¹⁸ The fact that even international observers in the Karabakh conflict noted many more cases of support for the Armenians by the local Russian units is explained by the far greater share of high-ranking ethnic Armenians than Azerbaijanis in the Soviet (Russian) armies, including in the Transcaucasian Military District. The Armenians were also more willing to provide tangible support to their countrymen than the Azerbaijani officers.¹⁹ And last but not least, Russian officers were inclined toward the Armenians, who were considered culturally closer than the Muslim Azerbaijanis.²⁰

However, as early as the first months of the war between the newly established South Caucasian republics, a series of events occurred that can call into question the thesis regarding the lack of any clear concept in Russian policy in the early 1990s. In May 1992, after Azerbaijan refused to enter into the Tashkent Agreement and suspended its activities in the CIS, the Armenians decided, within a few days, to go on the offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh, the result of which was the occupation of Shusha and the opening of the so-called Lachin Corridor leading to Armenia.

Then in February 1993, Suret Huseynov willfully ordered the retreat of his units from the battlefield in northern Karabakh, thereby causing the collapse of Azerbaijani defense in the area of Mardakert and Kelbajar. This happened a few days after Elchibey’s government again refused to have the country join the CIS and deploy Russian peacemaking troops in Nagorno Karabakh.²¹ The Elchibey regime then accused Huseynov of treason, claiming that the latter had been carrying out Moscow’s orders. It is not without interest that Huseynov’s troops, which set out in June of the same year to march on Baku for the purpose of overthrowing Elchibey, and thereby preventing the signing of the “Contract of the Century,” were generously supplied with arms and munitions by the 104th division of the

¹⁶ P. Baev, *Challenges and Options in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, Strategic Studies Institute Report, 22 April, 1997, available at [<http://permanent.access.gpo.gov/lps12677/00111.pdf>].

¹⁷ For more detail on the competing roles of individual state institutions in the initial years of post-Soviet Russia, see: P.J. Dobriansky, “Russian Foreign Policy: Promise or Peril?” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1999, p. 137.

¹⁸ See: D. Trenin, op. cit.

¹⁹ See: S.E. Cornell, *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, Report No. 46, Department of East European Studies, Uppsala University, 1999, p. 54.

²⁰ In this regard, it is worth mentioning the case of former Soviet General Anatoly Zinevich, who was involved in planning and carrying out a number of important operations of the Armenian forces of Nagorno-Karabakh from 1992 until the end of the war. For more information on the matter, see, for instance: L. Chorbajian, P. Donabedian, C. Mutafian, *The Caucasian Knot: The History and Geopolitics of Nagorno-Karabagh*, Zed Books, London, 1994, pp. 17-18.

²¹ See: F. Hill, P. Jewett, *Back in the USSR: Russia’s Intervention in the Internal Affairs of the Former Soviet Republics and the Implications for United States Policy toward Russia*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994, pp. 12-13.

Russian Army, which had just pulled out of Ganja. It was no secret that Huseynov was under the protection of General Shcherbak, the commander of the 104th division.²² As a result of the *coup d'état*, anti-Russian Elchibey was overthrown and the ground was prepared for the comeback of Heydar Aliiev, a former communist and KGB general who was widely believed to be a pro-Russian cadre. In fact, according to a widely shared belief, the *coup d'état* of 1993 was organized by the Russian intelligence services.²³

There is also evidence that the Karabakh Armenian and Armenian divisions were using Russian oil; it is known that the commander of the 7th Russian Army deployed in Armenia was also the chief-of-staff of the Karabakh Army.²⁴ It is not without interest that in the summer of 1993, Colonel Aliakram Gumbatov, who had close ties with Huseynov, declared the separatist Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic in the southeast part of the country in the Lenkoran region, inhabited mainly by the Iranian-speaking Talysh ethnic group.²⁵

The regime change in Baku could, under certain circumstances, have caused a noticeable shift in Russian policy toward Armenia and Azerbaijan. After taking power, Heydar Aliiev repeatedly emphasized that the republic's recovery demanded the deepening of mutual ties with the republics of the former U.S.S.R. and above all with Russia. He took a number of important steps in foreign policy that were understood at the time to be part of a 180-degree about-face in Baku's foreign policy orientation from Ankara toward Moscow. Nonetheless, as Svante Cornell points out, this was not an instant process, so Aliiev's efforts had to be speeded up somewhat: "However, Aliiev had not yet committed Azerbaijan to the CIS [in the summer of 1993]. Just as the Armenian forces were about to seize Jabrail on 20 August, a Russian deputy minister of foreign affairs flew to Baku with the simple aim of 'ascertaining Azerbaijan's position regarding the CIS.' The Armenian offensive continued unabated, and on 5 September, Aliiev flew to Moscow and promised Azerbaijan's application to CIS membership. He even spoke of Russian military bases in Azerbaijan financed by the Azerbaijani government."²⁶ Azerbaijan finally joined the CIS (in September 1993) and signed the Tashkent Agreement on mutual defense (that very month).²⁷ Aliiev cancelled Elchibey's Russia-free "Contract of the Century" and postponed its signing indefinitely. He objected that in principle he was not opposed to the deployment of Russian military bases in Azerbaijani territory, but he demanded reciprocal support from Moscow for the territorial consolidation of the country, i.e. in the matter of the retaking of Nagorno-Karabakh. In one of his first presidential interviews, Aliiev unequivocally expressed his approach, saying: "We understand that Russia has its interests, but we also have our own interests. The participation of Azerbaijan in the CIS depends on the prospects for regulating the conflict with Armenia... As long as Armenia's aggression continues and the demands of Azerbaijan are not given a hearing, what would we need such a confederation for? ... The key to resolving the Karabakh conflict is in Russia, which is capable of resolving the conflict."²⁸

At this time, Moscow did not hold back from making promising gestures toward Baku: it supported three U.N. Security Council resolutions dated 29 July, 1993, 14 October, 1993, and 12 No-

²² See: V. Shorokhov, "Energy Resources of Azerbaijan: Political Stability and Regional Relations," *Caucasus Regional Studies*, Issue 1, 1996, available at [<http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/crs/eng/0101-04.htm>], 28 December, 2007.

²³ See: F. Hill, P. Jewett, op. cit. (see also: St. Blank, "Russia's Real Drive to the South," *Orbis*, 39, Summer 1995, p. 371).

²⁴ See: D. Trenin, op. cit.

²⁵ See: E. Nuriev, *The Southern Caucasus at the Crossroads. Conflicts, Caspian Oil and Great Power Politics*, LIT, Berlin, 2007, pp. 226-227.

²⁶ S.E. Cornell, *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, p. 56.

²⁷ In 1999, however, Azerbaijan withdrew from it.

²⁸ Quoted from: V. Shorokhov, op. cit.

vember, 1993. In early 1994, General Pavel Grachev, Russian defense minister, joined in persuading the Azerbaijani president with a statement that Aliiev had already signed the Tashkent Agreement, which was supposed to become a new platform for negotiations.²⁹ As a friendly gesture, Moscow soon closed the Russian diplomatic mission to the separatist movement Sadval that was demanding, among other things, the separation of northern areas of Azerbaijan inhabited by Lezghians. The separatist efforts in Lenkoran were stopped. "In November, Kozyrev threatened the Karabakh Armenians with retaliation if they did not stop their activities; Russia also sent 200 military 'advisers' to aid the Azerbaijani army," which received helicopters and tanks and soon attempted a counteroffensive.³⁰

Eventually, on 12 May, 1994 a ceasefire was signed in Bishkek between Erevan and Baku mediated by Moscow. The three-month ceasefire was signed by the defense ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia, the commander of the army of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, and Pavel Grachev as a mediator. On 27 July, a framework peace agreement was signed between the warring parties. It cannot be ruled out that the Azerbaijani president consented during internal discussions to the stationing of Russian troops (most likely under the mandate of the CIS) in the territory of Karabakh, but that was supposed to have been preceded by the complete withdrawal of Armenian troops from the security zone and an agreement on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh.³¹ The Armenian side—both Erevan and Stepanakert—insisted, however, that it was not willing to withdraw its troops from the security zone before an agreement was made on the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. The final disagreement between Erevan and Baku gave the Azerbaijani side a strategically important break. Using this formal excuse, Baku delayed its consent to the request to station Russian military bases on its territory.³² While Moscow was focusing on persuading the parties to the conflict, Baku intensified its efforts to implement the "Contract of the Century," which was eventually signed in Baku in September 1994, opening a new page in the history of the Southern Caucasus in general and Azerbaijan in particular.

Turkey's Position

Turkey and the Southern Caucasus

Due to their geopolitically important positions, large amount of natural resources, and linguistic-historical ties, the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia have historically been in the center of Turkey's geostrategic interests. The dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh and the collapse of the Soviet Union essentially changed the geopolitical order in Eurasia, creating an opportunity for Turkey to become a regional superpower. As a result of the disintegration of the U.S.S.R., the five Turkic repub-

²⁹ See Jan Wanner's article in: B. Litera, L. Švec, J. Wanner, B. Zilynskij, *Rusko? Vzájemné Vztahy Postsovětských Republik, Ústav Mezinárodních Vztahů*, Praha, 1998, p. 120.

³⁰ See: S.E. Cornell, *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, p. 56.

³¹ It should be added, however, that no document regarding this has yet been made public, and it is hard to say whether one ever existed.

³² Jan Wanner points out in this connection Aliiev's unwillingness to accept the peace contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh that Moscow was pushing for in 1994-1995, more than a quarter of which would consist of Russian soldiers (see: B. Litera, L. Švec, J. Wanner, B. Zilynskij, op. cit., p. 114).

lics (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) became independent in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia, which Turkey saw as a “historical chance” to realize its euphoric Pan-Turkic ideas. The Turkish government has continuously used ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural ties to spread and expand its sphere of influence on the newly independent Turkic republics, acting as a political and economic “role model.” The Turkish leaders began speculating on the idea of creating an “All-Turkic Union” with Turkey’s dominance. Slogans such as a “Turkish world from the Adriatic to the China Sea” were heard from such people as the President of the Republic.³³ Nevertheless, this shift in Turkey’s status quo policy adopted since 1923 was expected, since it had a strong historical base. Even Atatürk, who officially condemned the Young Turk’s Pan-Turkic ideology, noted in his speeches the kinship between the Turks and the Azeris and underlined the importance of acting as a protector of the newly formed Azerbaijan Republic: “...Today Russia is our friend, our neighbor and an ally: we are in need of that friendship. But no one can predict what will happen tomorrow. As the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, it can be disintegrated and split in pieces as well. ...The world order can be changed. In that case Turkey must know how to react. Under the rule of our friend (the Soviet Union) live our brothers, who share our language and religion. We should be ready to recall them... We cannot wait until they reach us. We should reach them.”³⁴

However, Turkey’s policy toward the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia were not limited to its Pan-Turkic ambitions. The Turkish president at the time Turgut Özal (1989-1993) was concerned about enhancing Turkey’s strategic importance to the West by deepening Turkish influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.³⁵ It was believed that the Turkic countries would help Turkey in international relations and become a loose union in which they, enjoying status and veto rights, could possibly control a Russian threat to Turkey.³⁶ Last, Turkey was interested in establishing direct economic relations and entering their raw material production markets ahead of other states.

It is noteworthy that the current form of pan-Turanism, unlike the one during the Young Turks’ rule, was mostly based on principles of *realpolitik*. Turkey’s goal was to spread its political influence to the geopolitically vital Caucasus and Central Asia and become a regional superpower, for the status of which several regional and non-regional “actors” (Russia, Iran, Turkey, the U.S., and the EU) have been striving throughout the history.

Turkey’s main target was Azerbaijan, as “...the independence of the Central Asian states can be rendered nearly meaningless if Azerbaijan becomes fully subordinated to Moscow’s control.”³⁷

It is noteworthy that even before the fall of the U.S.S.R. and since the beginning of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Turkey had been activating its policy toward Southern Caucasus and Azerbaijan in particular. However, the first reactions by the Turkish government concerning the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute were moderate because of their fear of possible counteractions by the Soviet Union. The Turkish side refrained from direct expression of its position on the conflict, but prepared the domestic scene for possible future developments.

The circumstances around the Nagorno-Karabakh, Bulgarian, and Bosnian crises, on the one hand, and the “Kurdish issue,” on the other, stimulated the rise of nationalism and Islamism in Turkey, re-

³³ See: B. Oran, “The Turkish Approach to Transcaucasia and Central Asia,” in: *Contrast and Solutions in the Caucasus*, ed. by O. Høiris, S.M. Yürükel, Aarhus University Press, Denmark, 1998, p. 457.

³⁴ M. Mufti, “Daring and Caution in Turkish Foreign Policy,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 1, Winter 1998, p. 33.

³⁵ See: F.S. Larrabee, “Turkish Foreign Policy in the Age of Uncertainty,” RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2003, p. 99.

³⁶ See: B. Oran, op. cit., p. 458.

³⁷ Zb. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, 1998, pp. 46-47.

storing the position they lost as the result of the 1980 *coup d'état*. Unlike the cautious Turkish government, which did not want to experiment with the results of "interference in the domestic issues of Soviet Union," the nationalists, with their leader Alparslan Türkeş, began actively making use of the "Outer Turks" factor.³⁸ The Turkish press also contributed to the rise of the pan-Turanist, nationalistic atmosphere in Turkish society. The lobbies of the Caucasian diaspora in Turkey, composed of Azeris, Abkhazians, and Circassians and totaling around 8 million, were working to keep public and political concern alive.³⁹

As a result, Turkey was among the first countries to recognize the independence of Azerbaijan and the Central Asian republics. Moreover, Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs came up with an official statement, expressing Turkey's contentment with Azerbaijan's proclamation of sovereignty and once again pointing out the cultural and historical "brotherly" ties between the two nations. Turkey also announced its willingness to be a mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

Azerbaijan, being involved in the armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and due to its closer cultural and linguistic ties, was the most pro-Turkish country among the Turkic states. This is also explained by the rise of national awakening in the second half of the 1980s. Parallel to the perestroika process, several interconnected nationalist groups appeared in Azerbaijan, the strongest and largest of which was the pan-Turkic Azerbaijani People's Front (Azərbaycan Xalq Cəbhəsi), established in 1988 in the context of the first developments around Karabakh. The head of the APF was former Soviet dissident, pan-Turanist, nationalist Abulfaz Elchibey, who considered himself "a soldier of Atatürk." Unlike the pro-Soviet (pro-Russia) communists, the People's Front, playing the "Karabakh card," was efficiently gathering great masses of people.

Turkey was actively backing the APF as it was seen as an appropriate base on the Azerbaijani domestic scene for implementing Turkey's geostrategic plans.

Relations with Azerbaijan in the Context of the Nagorno-Karabakh War

The activation of Turkey's policy toward Azerbaijan was affected by the January 1990 deployment of Soviet troops in Baku. The Turkish political and public sectors began to show even more interest in the fate of Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani Turks. Azerbaijan, in turn, had a rather strong Turkish orientation. Even during the rule of communists Vezirov and Mutallibov, who are believed to have adopted pro-Soviet (then pro-Russian) policies, the Turkish factor still played a major role in building an independent Azerbaijani state. That is primarily because almost every group or organization that had at least some power in the country was pro-Turkish and anti-Soviet.⁴⁰

However, in spite of the widely shared opinion about first Azerbaijani President Ayaz Mutallibov's Russian orientation, the first official political and military ties with Turkey were established during his rule.

³⁸ Türkeş, who had developed ties with Azerbaijan and Central Asian Soviet Republics, periodically made public speeches about the ethnic, cultural, and religious affinity between the Turks and other Turkic peoples living in the territory of the U.S.S.R., encouraging warm, brotherly relations among them.

³⁹ See: B. Oran, *op. cit.*, p. 463.

⁴⁰ The Azerbaijani people also, in general, had sympathy for Azerbaijani-speaking APF leaders, rather than Russian-speaking Vezirov and Mutallibov. The APF's nationalist pro-Turkish ideas spoken in the mother tongue were much more acceptable and comprehensible to the Azeri people.

Soon after Turkey's recognition of Azerbaijan's independence, Head of Turkish General Headquarters General Doğan Güreş visited Baku and met with President Mutallibov. Azerbaijan, being engaged in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, was first trying to get diplomatic and military support from Turkey. The latter chose the second option after its diplomatic failure in an attempt to play a mediator's role in the resolution of Karabakh conflict. Thus, as early as 1991 through 1992, the first military supplies, including approximately 5,000 submachine-guns, grenade-guns and ammunition, arrived in Azerbaijan by secret air operations through Nakhchivan.⁴¹

In late January of 1992, Mutallibov paid an official visit to Ankara that resulted in a mutual agreement on the retraining of Azerbaijani officers in Turkish military colleges. In March-April of 1992, Turkish military officers trained 450 Azerbaijani volunteers at the base of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Azerbaijan.⁴² During one of the interviews, Mutallibov stated that when forming the Azerbaijani Armed Forces Azerbaijan relied on Turkish support.⁴³

Turkey's policy toward Azerbaijan was especially activated after Azerbaijani People's Front's candidate Abulfaz Elchibey came to power. Elchibey adopted an exclusively pro-Turkish and Western-oriented policy, deteriorating relations with Russia and Iran. Elchibey even went as far as officially declaring Turkish the state language of Azerbaijan. He also promised Turkey full participation in the exploitation of Caspian oil.

Turkey, using this favorable atmosphere in Azerbaijan, began expanding its influence there. However, due to the international situation, Turkey had to continue its military assistance unofficially and indirectly, involving the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (Milli Hareket Partisi-MHP) and its head Alparslan Türkeş. For this purpose, Türkeş had several meetings with Elchibey. As a result, a powerful military unit was to be formed, which later would become the core of the regular army. This, in turn, ensured the security of Elchibey. To this end, with the efforts of Turkish nationalists led by Türkeş, a "grey wolves" camp (named "Rüzgâr" (wind) as suggested by Türkeş) was built in Azerbaijan, where Azerbaijani soldiers were supposed to have military trainings and diversion tactics classes. In addition to Azeris, volunteers from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkey were to be trained in the Rüzgâr camp, thus supposedly forming a "Turan Army" ("Turan ordusu").⁴⁴ After the Susurluk scandal of 1996, it was revealed that the idea of forming a "grey wolves" camp in Azerbaijan did not belong to Türkeş, but to MİT (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilâtı),⁴⁵ which traditionally used Turkish nationalist and radical right-oriented elements for its plans. It was disclosed that a large amount of money had been transferred to MHP (Milli Hareket Partisi)⁴⁶ from the fund of Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Çiller for development of their activities in Azerbaijan.

During Elchibey's rule Turkish-Azerbaijani relations entered a qualitatively new phase. But Elchibey's power lasted for only a year, and after Heydar Aliiev returned to power, Azerbaijan adopted a more balanced foreign policy. Aliiev normalized relations with Russia and Iran and retained highly developed relations with Turkey and the West. Aliiev, who had great experience in politics, was viewed as a "better option" for Turkey than the temperamental Elchibey, who had little political clout. Thus, Turkey's policy toward Azerbaijan did not offer much change. Azerbaijan's policy toward Turkey became more moderate in comparison with Elchibey's fanatic pan-Turkism, but did not change in

⁴¹ See: R. Bhatti, R. Bronson, "NATO's Mixed Signals in the Caucasus and Central Asia", *Survival*, Vol. 42, No. 3, Autumn 2000, p. 134.

⁴² See: *Ibidem*.

⁴³ See: H. Demoyan, *Karabakh Drama: Hidden Facts*, Erevan, 2003, p. 6.

⁴⁴ See: Yu.Z. Arpacık, *Kan Fırtınası*. İtteriş Yayınları. 4. Baskı, 2005, pp. 89-95.

⁴⁵ National Intelligence Organization.

⁴⁶ Nationalist Movement Party.

essence. The slogan “one nation and two states” first used during Elchibey’s rule continued to be the principle of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations.

The military support by Turkey continued as Azerbaijan’s efforts on the Karabakh front remained unsuccessful. In November 1993, Baku came up with an appeal addressed to several countries, including Turkey, to send troops to Azerbaijan.⁴⁷ In a meeting with Turkish Chief of General Staff Doğan Güreş, at the request of Heydar Aliiev, Azerbaijan Minister of Foreign Affairs Hasan Hasanov asked for Azerbaijan to be provided with direct military support.⁴⁸ But Turkey refused to be directly engaged in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.

In February 1994, during an official visit to Ankara, Heydar Aliiev appealed to the Turkish president and vice president to send a large contingent of Turkish officers to train the Azerbaijani army and was promised all the necessary support.⁴⁹

Despite this, Azerbaijan did not glean any tangible results on the Nagorno-Karabakh front. Azerbaijan continued to suffer losses one after another, thus also disillusioning Turkey’s expectations of its geopolitical benefits if the Karabakh conflict were resolved in Azerbaijan’s favor. On the other hand, even after the ceasefire protocol was signed in May 1994, Turkey continued playing the “Karabakh card” in the policy toward achieving its major goal of becoming a regional superpower. In order to secure its military presence in the Southern Caucasus, Turkey suggested it deploy its peacekeeping mission in Karabakh. But after stern replies from Armenian and Russian officials, Turkey had to reconcile itself to its defeat in the geopolitical struggle with Russia, which restored its regional power in Southern Caucasus.

Relations with Armenia in the Context of the Nagorno-Karabakh War

Armenia, being at the crossroads of the Turkey-Azerbaijan-Central Asia strategic path, has historically been one of the obstacles to realizing Turkey’s pan-Turkic plans. This is one of the primary reasons why Turkey has particularly focused on its relations with the newly independent Armenian Republic. The latter hoped to kill two birds with one stone by regulating its relations with Armenia.

- First, Turkey wanted to prevent any steps Armenia could take toward international recognition of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, thus also ensuring the reduction of political pressure by the West.
- Second, Armenian-Turkish relations being the only problematic ones for Turkey’s Southern Caucasus policy, if normalized, would expand Turkey’s regional role in the Southern Caucasus, becoming a counterbalance to Russia.

After Turkey officially recognized the independent Armenian Republic as an international entity, it became clear that this gave it preconditions for establishing diplomatic relations with Armenia. This would mean that Armenia would have to officially renounce any territorial claims against Turkey, abandon the international recognition of the Armenian Genocide, and stop aggression toward Azerbaijan.

⁴⁷ See: H. Demoyan, op. cit., p. 19.

⁴⁸ See: S.I. Cherniavskiy, *Novy put Azerbaidzhana*, Moscow, 2002, p. 231.

⁴⁹ See: H. Demoyan, op. cit., p. 20.

Armenia, taking into consideration its historical experience with Turkey and the rise of its population's nationalistic moods and popular pan-Turkic slogans such as "Union of the Turkic World," etc., remained skeptical toward Turkey's intentions of establishing normal bilateral relations. After Turkey's preconditions and evident political support of Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, Armenia's concerns about Turkey became even more substantial.

Thus, Armenian-Turkish diplomatic relations failed to become established. Moreover, along with the military gains of the Armenian armed forces, Ankara's policies toward Erevan became more severe.

In May 1992, after the Armenian forces took control over Shusha and Lachin, Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin stated that Karabakh was Azerbaijani land and Turkey would support Azerbaijan in all international entities. He added that Turkey would not allow changes of Azerbaijan's borders, otherwise Armenia would be responsible for the consequences.⁵⁰ Turkish President T. Özal claimed the necessity of deploying Turkish troops in Nakhchivan to protect it from a "possible Armenian attack."⁵¹ That was followed by some activation of Turkish armed forces along the border of Armenia-Nakhchivan, which made Armenian-Turkish relations even more strained.

In June 1992, during a meeting between Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosian and Turkish Vice President Süleyman Demirel, the Turkish side demanded that recently gained Shusha and Lachin be relinquished. In return, the Armenian side remained in its position of seeking problem resolution within the framework of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe).⁵²

As Armenian subunits continued to record military achievements on the Karabakh front, the Turkish leaders made a number of statements on Turkey's possible direct intervention in the conflict. In order to substantiate its intention to control the Turkish-Armenian border, Turkey occasionally accused Armenia of allegedly supporting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, or PKK), which is recognized by Turkey as a terrorist organization. Several Turkish media sources also condemned Armenia for hosting PKK training camps in its territory.⁵³

Seeing no positive changes in Azerbaijan's favor, some circles in Turkey began to actively support direct military involvement in order to stop the Armenian military advance in Karabakh. In April 1993, the speaker of the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) and the deputy of the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi) claimed the necessity of Turkish military intervention in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.⁵⁴ The Deputy Chairman of the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) İstemihan Talay accused the Turkish government of not providing Azerbaijan with enough military support, which he regarded as the main reason for Azerbaijan's losses.⁵⁵

The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Turkey notified ambassadors of France, Great Britain, and Russia about the possible Turkish intervention. But the United States' and especially Russia's strict warning of a direct counteroffensive if the Turkish military intervened in Karabakh forced Turkey to abandon the idea of military involvement, understanding the risk of a possible clash with Russia. However, Turkey engaged in diplomatic demarches and economic sanctions by hermetically sealing the border with Armenia in April 1993.

⁵⁰ See: *Milliyet*, 21 Mayıs, 1992.

⁵¹ *Hürriyet*, 23 Mayıs, 1992.

⁵² See: *AZG*, 29 February, 1992.

⁵³ See: *Hürriyet*, 25 Ekim, 1993; *Türkiye*, 20 Şubat, 1994.

⁵⁴ See: A. Avagian, "The Activities of the Turkish Nationalists in Azerbaijan from 1990 to 1994," *HaykakanBanak* (Armenian Army), *Defense-Academic Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 49, 2006, p. 54 (in Armenian).

⁵⁵ See: *Ibidem*.

Turkish-Armenian relations were not affected even by the Bishkek ceasefire protocol. Turkey continued its diplomatic and economic sanctions, supporting Azerbaijan in all international entities within the framework of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution.

Conclusion

The Russian attitude toward the war over Nagorno-Karabakh significantly evolved between 1991 and 1994 and reflected on the evolution of its alleged national interests vis-à-vis the parties to the conflict, Azerbaijan and Armenia, and its self-perception as a post-Soviet nation with respect to the disputed role it should play in what was further termed its Near Abroad. Toward the year of 1993, a rather self-isolating agenda as regards the southern frontier of the former Soviet Union advocated by the “early” Yeltsin administration greatly diminished paving the way to a more assertive policy toward the Southern Caucasus, the aim of which was to secure Moscow’s dominant position in a strategically important area of the Southern Caucasus and, in a broader context, of the Caspian region. Within this constellation, the Nagorno-Karabakh factor was crucial as it provided Russian authorities with a welcome lever of influence on the policies of the internally rather instable, economically weak, and militarily far from self-sufficient nations of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In fact, Moscow’s stance toward the Karabakh conflict in 1991-1994 was significantly shaped by two major factors: first, as Erevan’s tension with Azerbaijan and, as a matter of fact, with Turkey too intensified and Armenia increasingly found itself in an overt military confrontation with its neighbor, its room for maneuver gradually shrank along with its increasing dependence on Moscow as far as military, political, and economic issues of common interest were concerned.

Second, the fact that Erevan had to rely on Moscow’s support provided Russian policy with more opportunities with regard to Azerbaijan, which was considered a key country of the Southern Caucasus ensuring access to the Caspian Sea with its rich deposits of oil and natural gas. Initial Soviet cooperation between Moscow and Baku in the armed Karabakh conflict, enabled by the prevalence of the (post-)communist regime in Azerbaijan, was later reversed; both Elchibey and, as it turned out, Aliev continually, though with varying degrees of commitment, turned down Moscow’s demands for military, economic, and political integration. The commitment of the Azerbaijani elite to follow its own path was most likely dictated by the existence of the vast oil resources in the vicinity of the Azerbaijani shores of the Caspian Sea, a fact that was supposed to attract significant Western, above all American, presence in the region as a counterbalance to Moscow’s dominant position, the integration attempts of which were widely considered detrimental to the newly gained independence of the Azerbaijan Republic. All in all, optimistic expectations for the country’s future, given its rich natural resources, should it retain and ensure its independence from Moscow seem to have played a significant role in shaping the foreign political agenda of both Elchibey and Aliev. As a matter of fact, Moscow, with varying levels of intensity, used the Karabakh conflict as a lever to force the Azerbaijani leadership to adopt a more benevolent approach toward its demands; however, to largely no avail.

Analyzing Turkish policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh war, we can draw the following conclusions:

- First, the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. changed the geopolitical order in the region, thus activating the struggle among the main contenders to a regional superpower status. Turkey, being among them, used the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute as grounds for expanding its influence in Southern Caucasus and Central Asia.

- Second, Turkey's policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh war was conditioned by the rise of the nationalistic, pan-Turanist moods on the domestic scene and the West's (particularly, the United States') heavy support of the "Turkish model" of development (for the newly independent Turkic-speaking states) on the foreign scene. Therefore, Turkey's policy during the Karabakh war was exclusively pro-Azerbaijani.
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