

**Perspectives of Nagorno Karabakh conflict settlement process
after the September 2022**

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the current stage of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict after the September 2022 attack of Azerbaijan against Armenia. It argues that after the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war, which ended with the trilateral Russia – Armenia – Azerbaijan statement of November 10, 2020, Azerbaijan launched a coercive diplomacy strategy, using the military escalation as the main tool for force Armenia to accept Azerbaijani vision of the future of Nagorno Karabakh and bilateral relations. Meanwhile, the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 resulted in weakening of Russian positions in the region, which started to lose the monopoly over the conflict settlement process. Currently Armenia – Azerbaijan negotiations are underway in three platforms, Moscow, Brussels, and Washington, which brings additional complexity to the situation, as Nagorno Karabakh conflict becomes a part of the greater Russia – West confrontation.

KEYWORDS: Nagorno Karabakh, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, United States, European Union, Turkey, Iran

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Introduction. Nagorno Karabakh conflict is one of the long-lasting conflicts in the post-Soviet space. The attempts of finding an efficient and fair settlement to this conflict were undertaken by various international organizations and states. This conflict has been in the center of attention of the UN Security Council (UN SC resolutions: 822 (April 30, 1993), 853 (June 29, 1993), 874 (October 14, 1993), 884 (November 12, 1993)).

Several books have been published about the conflict, including Thomas de Waal “Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War” (de Waal, 2013), Anna Ohanyan, editor, “Russia Abroad: Driving Regional Fracture in Post-Communist Eurasia and Beyond” (Ohanyan, 2018), and Laurence Broers “Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry” (Broers, 2019). There are also academic publications containing some elements of cultural and national political bias (Hakan, M. Yavuz, & Gunter M., 2022; Makili-Aliyev, 2007).

Prospects of Nagorno Karabakh conflict settlement

On September 13, 2022, Azerbaijan launched a new attack against Armenia in multiple directions, shelling military and civilian infrastructure and seeking to advance into the Syunik, Vayots Dzor, and Gegharkunik regions. Everyone following the developments in Armenia – Azerbaijan relations expected the escalation; however, the scope of hostilities was unprecedented and went beyond that of the April 2016 four-day war. After two days of active hostilities, Armenia and Azerbaijan reached a ceasefire on September 14, 2022.

Armenia applied to Russia, the US, France, the UN Security Council, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The UN Security Council held two meetings on the issue with both closed and open debates (Amid Fighting, 2022), while the CSTO sent a special mission to Armenia to assess the situation and prepare a special report for the heads of CSTO member states (The CSTO, 2022). As a result of this new attack, Armenia confirmed more than 200 deaths among its soldiers, while 16 soldiers remain missing. There were casualties among the civilian population too. Azerbaijan confirmed more than 80 deaths among its armed forces.

What was the reason behind the Azerbaijani decision to start a new war against Armenia? Just two weeks before this latest offensive, Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders met in Brussels to discuss how to move forward toward the signature of a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Press statement, 2022). On August 30, the Armenia-Azerbaijan border delimitation and demarcation commission met in Moscow. Apparently, Azerbaijan was not satisfied with the results of the meeting and decided to punish Armenia and force it to take some steps.

Azerbaijan has two main demands from Armenia – to accept the Azerbaijani position that no Nagorno Karabakh exists anymore and to provide a corridor via the Syunik region to reach Nakhijevan from Azerbaijan proper. Azerbaijan views the realization of the first demand through the signing of the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace treaty with no mention of Nagorno Karabakh. Thus, Azerbaijan does not demand Armenia drop any discussion about the independence of Nagorno Karabakh. Baku wants Armenia to explicitly state that there is no territorial administrative unit named Nagorno Karabakh.

The Kremlin understands the potential dangers of an Armenia–Azerbaijan peace treaty not mentioning Nagorno Karabakh. It will provide Azerbaijan an opportunity not to extend the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno Karabakh after November 2025. As a possible solution, Russia proposed the inclusion of a special article on Nagorno Karabakh in the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace treaty, which will declare that this issue is not solved. It will note that it shall be solved during future negotiations without providing a concrete timeframe and modalities. Azerbaijan rejects this approach and demands a peace treaty without mentioning Nagorno Karabakh at all.

The second demand of Azerbaijan is the establishment of a corridor via the Syunik region to Nakhijevan with no Armenian control. Theoretically, Azerbaijan may agree to Russian control over the routes, making routes via Syunik similar to the Lachin corridor which connects Armenia with Nagorno Karabakh. Armenia rejects this demand and insists that Armenia should implement border and customs control according to national laws.

Russia is interested in opening of these routes as an additional connection with Turkey via Azerbaijan and Armenia. However, Russia does not want to see these routes as an alternative China – Europe connection circumventing Russia. Thus, Russia calls for the restoration of communications and wants to have control over them, meanwhile rejecting any idea of extraterritorial corridor (Russia Signals, 2022). An Azerbaijan – Turkey corridor without Russian control is detrimental to Russian interests.

Armenia launched a wave of diplomatic activities after the latest Azerbaijani aggression. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan visited New York and Paris (France demands, 2022); the Armenian foreign minister met with his Azerbaijani counterpart in New York through the mediation of the US Secretary of State; the Secretary of Armenia's Security Council Armen Grigoryan spent an entire week in Washington, where he met with President Aliyev's top foreign policy aide Hikmet Hajiev (Armenia's Security, 2022) and held discussions with several American state institutions, including a surprise visit to CIA headquarters. During these hectic movements, Pashinyan put forward the idea of deploying international observers along the Armenia–Azerbaijan border and indirectly criticized Russia for breaching signed contracts for weapons sales for which Armenia had paid. Grigoryan welcomed the US involvement in the South Caucasus, arguing for its positive effect and additional security guarantees.

On September 29, 2022, a Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman claimed that several extra-regional players sought to bring instability to the South Caucasus region (Moscow sees, 2022). Answering a question

about Pashinyan's idea to deploy international observers along the Armenia-Azerbaijan borders, she stated that Russia stood for the full and unconditional implementation of the agreements reached by the three countries to ensure a settlement of the conflict, adding that there was a general rule not to replace what was working with something illusory. On September 30, 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that discussions are underway to use CSTO observers to create favorable conditions for the realization of trilateral Armenia-Russia-Azerbaijan agreements, particularly for the delimitation and demarcation of borders (As Lavrov, 2022).

Russia is concerned about the possibility of deploying international observers along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. As the Russia-West war continues, Russia perceives the presence of Western observers as a direct step to increase their influence in the South Caucasus and weaken Russia's position. Meanwhile, Russia understands that if the Kremlin does nothing to stop future Azerbaijani attacks, Armenia will be forced to find other solutions. Russia cannot afford direct military intervention against Azerbaijan, which may quickly transform into a Russia-Turkey military clash, opening a second front for Russia. In this context, deploying CSTO observers may create obstacles to further Azerbaijani attacks and simultaneously prevent the emergence of additional Western presence in the South Caucasus.

As several actors are involved in active diplomatic efforts after the recent Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia, and Armenia-Azerbaijan relations are slowly becoming another battlefield in the Russia-West war, the negotiations between Yerevan and Baku on the elaboration of a future peace treaty loom on the horizon. During his interview with Public TV on September 30, 2022, PM Pashinyan stated that Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers would start the detailed discussion of the peace agreement (Prime Minister, 2022).

On October 6, 2022, within the framework of the first meeting of the European Political Community in Prague, Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan and President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev held a meeting at the initiative of the president of France and the president of the European Council. After an hours-long discussion, they adopted a joint statement, according to which Armenia and Azerbaijan confirmed their commitment to the UN Charter and the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1991, through which both sides recognized each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty. They confirmed that this would serve as the basis for the work of the commissions on delimitation. Armenia agreed to facilitate the deployment of the European Union (EU) civilian mission along the border with Azerbaijan (Statement, 2022).

The implications of this statement should be divided into two parts — implications for the self-proclaimed Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) Republic and implications for Armenia. The reference to the Alma-Ata declaration of 1991 sent a clear message to all external players involved in South Caucasus geopolitics that the Armenian government is ready to recognize Nagorno Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan.

The recognition by Armenia of Nagorno Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan provides Baku with opportunities to reject any notion of independent Nagorno Karabakh. When Pashinyan hinted in April 2022

that Armenia was ready to discuss autonomy for Nagorno Karabakh within Azerbaijan, he hoped that President Aliyev would abandon his claim that no Nagorno Karabakh existed after the second Karabakh war. However, Azerbaijan continued in its claims that there was no Nagorno Karabakh, and it was not going to discuss that issue with anyone.

Recently, the Armenian government has spoken about the necessity of Azerbaijan – Nagorno Karabakh or Baku – Stepanakert talks within some special international mechanisms. However, if the Armenia – Azerbaijan peace treaty does not mention Nagorno Karabakh, it is implausible that Azerbaijan will agree to talk with Nagorno Karabakh as a political entity.

Many in Nagorno Karabakh believe that an Armenia – Azerbaijan peace treaty will have no concrete implications for Nagorno Karabakh. The Nagorno Karabakh Republic authorities will state that regardless of what the Armenian government thinks about the status or existence of Nagorno Karabakh, they will never be a part of Azerbaijan and will never take Azerbaijani passports. According to this narrative, as long as Russian peacekeepers are deployed in Karabakh, Azerbaijan will not have the capacity to invade Karabakh by force or use troops to force Karabakh Armenians to accept Azerbaijani passports or to leave. This logic has some right to exist. However, it might not function by the end of 2025. After a Armenia – Azerbaijan peace treaty with no mention of Nagorno Karabakh, it will be difficult for Russians to justify their presence in Karabakh after November 2025.

The deployment of EU civilian mission in border regions of Armenia will decrease the likelihood of another large-scale attack by Azerbaijan (Q&A, 2022). However, the EU mission will not be able to prevent minor incidents. The EU deployed a civilian monitoring mission in Georgia in October 2008. However, during its 14 years of activities, the mission could not prevent incidents along Georgia – Abkhazia or Georgia – South Ossetia line of control. The mission's duration is fixed for two months until the end of 2022. Probably, Azerbaijan will use this short timeframe as another tool to press Armenia to sign a peace treaty and agree on principles of border delimitation and demarcation until the end of 2022; otherwise, it will threaten Armenia with a new large-scale attack after the departure of the mission.

Meanwhile, there was absolutely nothing in the statement about restoring communications. During his speeches in parliament on September 14 and during the 2022 UN General Assembly, the Armenian prime minister emphasized the importance of securing the internationally recognized territories of Armenia within its 29,800 square km. He hinted that he was ready to make painful decisions to secure Armenia. Many understood these statements as a willingness to make significant concessions on Nagorno Karabakh to secure Armenia and make Azerbaijan drop its demands for the “Zangezur corridor.”

However, after the Prague summit, Pashinyan stated that Aliyev again rejected his offer to open communications based on the concept of each state's complete control over routes in its territory. In his turn, Aliyev, after the summit, again accused Armenia of not providing a route to Nakhichevan and for breaching its obligations under the November 10, 2020, trilateral statement. Thus, while Armenia de facto accepted the Azerbaijani demand to recognize Nagorno Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan and may do it again if it signs a peace treaty with Azerbaijan with no mentions of Nagorno Karabakh, Azerbaijan continues to demand the establishment of the "Zangezur corridor."

The recent events in and around Armenia – Azerbaijan relations raised alarm bells in the Kremlin. On October 24, 2022, the Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman issued a lengthy statement arguing that the West put unprecedented pressure on Armenia to change its foreign policy vector while the NGOs funded by the West actively spread anti-Russian sentiments in Armenia (Russia Decries, 2022). According to Moscow, the West's suggestions for normalization of Armenia – Azerbaijan relations were unbalanced, while the primary goal of the West was to push Russia out of the region. Russia argued that the Western efforts would break the fragile balance in the region established by the November 10, 2020, trilateral statement.

In parallel with harsh criticism against the West, Russia decided to reengage in the Armenia – Azerbaijan negotiation process actively. Answering a question from the representative of Armenia at the Valdai Forum on October 27, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin hinted that the Russian version of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict resolution does not mean recognition of Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the part of Karabakh where Russian peacekeepers are temporarily stationed. Putin also made an important clarification: "Let Armenia itself decide with whom to resolve the conflict – with the West or Russia." According to him, the American or Washington version of potential peace treaty assumes that Karabakh will remain part of Azerbaijan (U.S. Favors, 2022). On the initiative of President Putin, a new trilateral Armenia – Russia – Azerbaijan summit took place in Sochi on October 31, 2022 (Trilateral talks, 2022).

Russia is satisfied with the current volatile status quo when Nagorno Karabakh is de jure part of Azerbaijan but de facto is controlled by Russia, and Baku has no influence and leverage. The best-case scenario for Russia is to extend this situation until 2025, which will ensure the extension of the deployment of Russian peacekeepers for at least another five years. This approach is in line with Armenian interests. The continuation of the current status quo is not ideal for Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, but after the defeat in the 2020 Karabakh war, there are no ideal solutions for Armenia. Armenia faces a choice between two scenarios: to lose Karabakh immediately or to keep the current status quo.

Thus, Armenia – Azerbaijan normalization process slowly starts to become part of the Russia – West confrontation, which may negatively impact Armenia and Azerbaijan. Another feature of the ongoing regional geopolitical chess game is the growing Iranian involvement. Tehran is unhappy to see increased Azerbaijan – Israel defense cooperation, and Israel's indirect presence along the Azerbaijan – Iran border. The ongoing

Azerbaijani and Turkish claims on the “Zangezur corridor” to connect Azerbaijan with Turkey via the Syunik region of Armenia are another concern for Iran.

In late October 2022 the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps launched large-scale military drills along Iran – Nakhijevan and Iran – Azerbaijan borders. The Iranian foreign minister visited Armenia and opened an Iranian consulate in the Syunik region (Consulate, 2022). Russia is objectively focused on the war in Ukraine and cannot provide significant attention to the South Caucasus. Meanwhile, given the growing Russia – Iran strategic cooperation, the Kremlin may ask Iran to increase its involvement in the South Caucasus to balance the US and Turkey.

Against this very complicated geopolitical background, Armenia should avoid any steps which may be interpreted or perceived as a U-turn in Armenia’s foreign and security policies. A clear message should be sent to all external actors — Russia, Iran, the EU and the US. Armenian efforts to bring international observers into Armenia have nothing to do with Russia–West war or US–Iran confrontation. The only thing of interest to Armenia is to prevent new Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia and to not allow ethnic cleansing in Nagorno Karabakh, which is inevitable without the international military presence and agreed and guaranteed status for Nagorno Karabakh.

Armenia and Azerbaijan should take all necessary steps to avoid being trapped in Russia – West confrontation. The ongoing war in Ukraine proved that this scenario might have catastrophic implications for both states. It does not mean that negotiations should be stopped. However, the hectic moves to sign a US or EU-prepared agreement, which Russia may view as an attempt to kick it out from South Caucasus, may destabilize the situation and bring new war instead of peace. In this context, the possible option to not lose the momentum could be a signature of a document that will envisage the principles of the future peace agreement while providing more time to carefully draft a peace treaty based on the balance of interests of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and other actors.

On December 12, 2022, Azerbaijan blocked the Lachin corridor, the only route which connects Nagorno Karabakh and its 120000 population with Armenia and outside world, causing acute humanitarian crisis. Using the pretext of alleged ecological problems in Nagorno Karabakh to justify the closure of Lachin corridor, Azerbaijan continues its policy to put pressure on Nagorno Karabakh Armenians, seeking to push as many Armenians from the region as possible. As blockade entered its third week on December 26, 2022, it hampered the already volatile peace process, and if continued, would destroy any chances of peace agreement to be signed in 2023.

Conclusion. Nagorno Karabakh conflict remains among the most protracted conflicts in the Post-Soviet space. Azerbaijan sought to solve the conflict by military means, launching the large-scale war against Nagorno Karabakh in September 2020. However, despite Azerbaijani military victory, Azerbaijan failed to push all Armenians out of Nagorno Karabakh. Currently, 120000 Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh continue their struggle to resist Azerbaijani pressure and protect their right to live on their homeland, while Armenia and Azerbaijan have been involved in difficult circles of negotiations seeking to sign a peace agreement. Despite some positive momentum in negotiations in late September – early October 2022, situation remains volatile, while ongoing Russia – West confrontation puts its mark on the process. In current situation the key task for the international community is to prevent a new attack by Azerbaijan against Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, which will completely ruin the peace process and make any breakthrough unlikely.

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