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## *Russia and Turkey in Nagorno-Karabakh, between militarisation and diplomacy*

### **Abstract**

On 10 November, Russian president Vladimir Putin announced in a televised speech the ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia, after weeks of fighting. With thousands of civilian and military casualties, the fight for control of the region of Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Its significance extends beyond the region, both because of the geostrategic importance of the South Caucasus, and because of the two actors that are present in the region, Russia and Turkey. This article seeks to analyze the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as part of the foreign strategy of the Russian Federation, for which it is important to consider its relationship with Turkey in the Caucasus. But also in Syria, a scenario in which the two actors are currently fighting over the control of the territory.

### **Key words**

Russia, Turkey, Nagorno-Karabakh, Influence, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Syria

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## Introduction

Russia's goal of consolidating its position as a regional and global centre of influence faces a major challenge in the frozen conflicts that spread across the post-Soviet space. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the South Caucasus was the latest to flare up again on 27 September.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first hostilities, the number of civilian and military casualties is estimated in the thousands, in addition to displaced persons and refugees.

The South Caucasus is a region of great ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. Surrounded by Russia, Turkey and Iran, between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, three former Soviet republics are located there: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In addition to the geostrategic situation, which is relevant from the point of view of security and continental stability, there is also interest in the energy sector.

In this scenario, two countries with different capacities and situations face each other over Nagorno-Karabakh: Azerbaijan, on the Caspian coast, is autonomous in terms of security and has energy resources whose exploitation provides much of the country's wealth; Armenia, on the other hand, which is landlocked and "neither a producer nor a transit country"<sup>8</sup>, depends on its military cooperation with Russia to guarantee its security. Despite being a regional conflict, multiple internal and external factors are intertwined, giving it international significance, with consequences for the stability of the Caucasus region; and a potential for expansion beyond the Caucasus.

In this environment, Russia and Turkey, albeit indirectly, have become involved in the Azeri-Armenian confrontation with political, economic and military support. The two powers maintain trade, gas, nuclear and defence cooperation between them as partners; at the same time, in some scenarios and situations, such as Syria, the clash of interests and objectives adds a lot of tension to the diplomatic relationship between the two. In the complex environment created in Syria, with a diversity of actors and interests, the war has been dragging on for nine years. There, Turkey and Russia continue to jockey for control of the territory, seeking to advance their positions and thus gain influence in shaping the next strategic scenario in the Middle East.

This article seeks to analyse the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as part of Russia's foreign strategy. For this it is important to consider its relationship with Turkey in the South Caucasus, but also in Syria, the other scenario where the two actors are assuming a large part of the protagonism.

With this objective in mind, and considering Russia and its foreign policy as the central axis of this analysis, the article is structured as follows: the first section reviews the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between the Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan; the second section analyses the main actors in the regions under study, the Caucasus region around the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave and Syria; the third section examines

the links between the two scenarios; and the third section concludes with some final considerations drawn from the analysis.

## The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the control of the mountainous enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh has its origins in the process of the decomposition of the Russian Empire and the independence of the two countries in 1918. In the Soviet period, the Nagorno-Karabakh region, with a majority Armenian population over an Azeri minority, acquired the status of an autonomous *Oblast* within the territory of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. The Kremlin was thus able to keep the conflict frozen until the last years of the Soviet Union. At that time, and in parallel to the weakening of Moscow's power in the region, tensions between the Azeri government and the Armenian population around the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave were steadily increasing.

In 1988 the local authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh declared their intention to secede from Azerbaijan and join the Armenian SSR. The proposal, which was rejected by Baku, ultimately precipitated the war between Armenians and Azeris. Three years later, in 1991 and after the final collapse of the Soviet state, Azerbaijan decided to withdraw the autonomous status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The response of the Stepanakert authorities was to declare the independence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic<sup>1</sup>. With the political confrontation thus aggravated, the military conflict would continue until 1994, when the parties signed the Bishkek Protocol<sup>2</sup> establishing a ceasefire.

The negotiation of the agreement took place within the mediation framework established by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) when it set up the Minsk Group<sup>3</sup>. Along with the cessation of hostilities, it was decided to demarcate a buffer strip between the two sides. The so-called Line of Contact extended 110 miles into Azerbaijani territory and served as a progressively militarised border

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1 ESCRIBANO, G. "El corredor energético del Cáucaso Sur y sus implicaciones para Europa." *El gran Cáucaso*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. Strategy Papers. 156. 217-258. June 2012. Retrieved from: [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE\\_156\\_Gran\\_Caucaso.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_156_Gran_Caucaso.pdf) (last accessed 29/01/2021), p. 219.

2 In December 1991, a referendum on independence was held in the region. In January 1992, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic declared its independence, which in 2017 was renamed the Republic of Artsakh.

3 The OSCE Minsk Group was established in 1994 with the aim of helping to create conditions for a negotiated solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, under the co-chairmanship of Russia, France and the United States. The Minsk Group also includes Belarus, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Finland and Turkey, as well as Azerbaijan and Armenia. This expanded format meets several times a year, but the weight of the mediation process is assumed by the tripartite presidency.

between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The demarcation left the territories that had fallen under Yerevan's control during the conflict to the west of the Line of Contact.

The situation resulting from the war was relatively comfortable and favourable for Armenia, which came to control not only the territory of the former Soviet *Oblast*, but also seven other Azerbaijani districts surrounding the original enclave<sup>4</sup> and extending southwards to the Iranian border. These territories constituted a security zone for Armenia, which felt victorious over the frustrated aspirations of the Baku government. After the war, the parties maintained the rhetorical and political confrontation, each side defending a vision of Nagorno-Karabakh's future in which the other community had no place<sup>5</sup>.

Since the end of the war in the 1990s, and as stipulated in the Bishkek Protocol, the parties continued, unsuccessfully, with attempts to find an agreed solution to the latent conflict in the region<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, sporadic clashes between Azeri and Armenian forces continued. Incidents, albeit of low intensity, have been constant since 1994. But it was not until 2016 that the clashes became serious enough to receive international attention and involvement.

In April 2016, Azerbaijani offensives on several points along the LoC led to what is known as the *four-day war*. Azerbaijan's strategy succeeded in regaining a small part of the territory. The 1994 Line of Control route was modified as a result of the Azeri territorial advance. What was relevant, however, was the reading that the parties were able to make of these changes. Since Baku, the forceful approach seemed more effective than the diplomatic one led by the Minsk Group. Armenia, for its part, saw its status as the victor of the 1994 conflict weakened and its chances in a future peace process limited<sup>7</sup>.

The resolution of the 2016 crisis was reached through diplomatic channels. The Kremlin took the lead in the negotiating process. It acted as chief mediator facilitating

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4 Armenia occupied the Shusha and Lachin districts between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh in 1992. Between July and October 1993, it occupied the districts of Kalbajar, Agdam, Jabrayil, Gubadli, Fuzuli, Zangilan, all adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh.

5 WAAL, T. DE. "No Compromise in Sight for Armenia and Azerbaijan." *Foreign Affairs*. 26/10/2020. Retrieved from: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/10/26/no-compromise-in-sight-for-armenia-and-azerbaijan-pub-83048> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

6 At the OSCE ministerial conference in Madrid in 2007, Armenia and Azerbaijan presented a peace agreement document revising the proposal made by the Minsk Group co-chairs in 2006. The Madrid Principles, as the 2007 agreement is known, provided for: the return of the seven districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan; the holding of a referendum on self-determination in the region; the conduct of an international peacekeeping operation; the establishment of an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh that would guarantee its security and self-government; the return of displaced persons and refugees; and the establishment of a communication corridor between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia.

7 SIMÃO, L. *The Nagorno-Karabakh redux*. issue 28. European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS). 2016. DOI: 10.2815/58373, p. 3.

tripartite meetings between President Vladimir Putin and the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan<sup>8</sup>. These meetings were formally within the Minsk Group's mediation procedure, but in practice left out the other two co-chairs of the Group, the United States and France. The Russian mediation succeeded in getting the two sides to agree to stop hostilities, but without going into the resolution of the latent conflict in the region. This left the door open to further crises.

On 12 July, clashes broke out again in the vicinity of the Line of Contact. Armenia used heavy artillery against Azerbaijani positions in the northern border area between the Azerbaijani towns of Tovuz and Gazakh and the Armenian region of Tavush. The Yerevan offensive was met with a response from Azeri forces. These clashes heralded the crisis that would erupt a few weeks later.

In a climate of growing tension in the area, on 27 September 2020 there were new clashes, the most serious since 2016. Shelling and the deployment of heavy weapons along the Line of Contact followed amidst a flurry of accusations about responsibility for initiating the aggression and the targets of the aggression. While Armenia accused Azerbaijan of being responsible for the first air strike on Nagorno-Karabakh, the Azeri government called it a counter-offensive to an earlier aggression by Armenian forces. Clashes quickly intensified and, as the conflict escalated, the governments in Baku and Yerevan decreed martial law and the mobilisation of their troops. For their part, the authorities of the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh, which has not yet been recognised by any state, applied for international recognition.

Within the framework of the Minsk Group and at the initiative of Russian President Vladimir Putin, a meeting took place on 10 October in Moscow<sup>9</sup> between the foreign ministers of Armenia, Zohrab Mnatsakanián, and Azerbaijan, Jeyhun Bayrámov. After hours of negotiations, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov as chief mediator, the parties agreed to a humanitarian ceasefire for the exchange of prisoners and the dead. The agreement also included the launch of a negotiation process aimed at reaching a peaceful settlement of the conflict, mediated by the co-chairs of the Minsk Group (the United States, France and Russia).

However, it took only hours for the fighting to resume, and Baku accused Armenia of shelling the Azerbaijani town of Ganja. The Nagorno-Karabakh authorities in turn blamed Azerbaijan for the attack on their capital, Stepanakert. In the midst of this tense atmosphere, there were two further attempts to stop the conflict: a second ceasefire on 17 October, negotiated in Paris; and a third on 25 October, agreed in Washing-

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8 PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA. *Meeting with Serzh Sargsyan and Ilham Aliyev*. 20/06/2016. Retrieved from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52189> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

9 OSCE. *Statement by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group*. 10/10/2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/466737> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

ton<sup>10</sup>, both of which were short-lived. Azeri and Armenian offensives that broke each of the ceasefire agreements continued to fuel mutual accusations.

Russian-led talks under the auspices of the Minsk Group went ahead, and on 30 October the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers reached a new compromise<sup>11</sup> which, while not leading to a ceasefire, maintained the basis of the 10 October agreement.

Moscow's diplomatic efforts to establish more stable and durable conditions continued. Finally, on 9 November Vladimir Putin announced in a televised speech<sup>12</sup> the signing of a comprehensive ceasefire and termination of hostilities agreement. The date of entry into force would be 10 November, one month after the first of the failed attempts to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The points resulting from the negotiation take up the principles established at the Madrid conference held in 2007<sup>13</sup>.

In the document signed by the parties<sup>14</sup> the following was agreed:

- the establishment of a complete cessation of hostilities from midnight on 10 November;
- the commitment of the parties not to advance the positions they held at the date of the agreement;
- Armenia undertook to return the districts of Kalbajar, Agdam, Lachin to Azerbaijan;
- the deployment along the Line of Contact and the Lachin corridor of a Russian peacekeeping force with, among other capabilities, 1,960 military personnel and 90 armoured vehicles;
- the Lachin corridor, which connects Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, would remain under the control of Russian peacekeepers;
- Russian peacekeepers would conduct a phased deployment parallel to the Armenian withdrawal;
- the presence of the Russian forces is guaranteed for an initial period of five years, which may be automatically extended for a further five years, unless

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10 OSCE. *Press Statement by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group*. 25/10/2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.osce.org/minsk-group/468204> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

11 OSCE. *Press Statement by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group*. 30/10/2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.osce.org/minsk-group/468984> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

12 PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA. *Statement by the President of Russia*. 09/11/2020. Retrieved from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64381> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

13 OSCE. *Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries*. 10/07/2009. Retrieved from: <https://www.osce.org/mg/51152> (last accessed 29/01/2021).

14 PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA. *Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation*. 10/10/2020. Retrieved from: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

either party gives notice of its intention to abandon this clause six months before the end of the first five years;

- the establishment of a peacekeeping centre to monitor the ceasefire;
- surveillance of transport connections was transferred to the Russian Border Guard Service, a branch of the Federal Security Service (FSB)<sup>15</sup>, the heir to the Soviet State Security Committee, the KGB;
- the lifting of the economic and communications blockade;
- the construction, within three years of signature, of a new route through the Lachin corridor to ensure the connection between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. Russian peacekeepers would be responsible for ensuring security along this communication route. Azerbaijan undertook not to interfere with the movement of vehicles, goods and people between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh; and
- the exchange of prisoners and the dead; the return of refugees and displaced persons to Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent areas under the supervision of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Russia has assumed the role of mediator between Armenians and Azeris in the September conflict, as it had done in previous clashes, which gives it greater control over the final disposition of forces. From what is stipulated in the agreement, in which it is easy to recognise the Russian imprint, it is clear that, with the concession of partial demands, the Russian objective has been to guarantee a minimum level of stability in the area, as well as the Russian presence not only in the region, but also on the ground in the conflict through the deployment of troops. These two elements should either prevent the outbreak of new crises or, if not possible, limit their scope and possible consequences for the stability and security of the region and the region's energy resources.

In the Caucasian scenario, the interplay of forces and pressures between the actors is played out in very different positions and capacities. The weakest piece is Armenia. Even with the trump card of having the territory taken from Azerbaijan (its security belt) under its control, the lack of energy resources and economic potential closes the door to obtaining comparative advantages that would allow it an acceptable degree of autonomy in its strategic relations.

The Kremlin is aware of the post-conflict situation in Armenia and its limited resilience, as well as the potential for instability if public opinion is dissatisfied with the post-conflict situation and the losses incurred. At Putin's initiative, Moscow has sent a Russian delegation to Yerevan to discuss the context arising from the 9 November agreement and to study those factors aimed at the complete resolution of the

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<sup>15</sup> The FSB cooperates directly with the National Defence Management Centre of the Russian Federation. Since 2014, the Centre has been responsible for monitoring the global situation, channelling information and coordinating Defence.

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict<sup>16</sup>. It does not appear that Baku and Yerevan will facilitate stabilisation in the region. Mutual accusations of ceasefire violations have continued since the ceasefire was signed on 9 November. Russia, as the on-the-ground guarantor of regional stability, needs to contain isolated incidents and avoid widespread violence<sup>17</sup>.

Since the beginning of the negotiation process, Ankara has on several occasions reiterated its interest and intention to participate in monitoring compliance with the agreement. But it was not until 11 November, with the agreement already in force, that Turkey and Russia signed a memorandum<sup>18</sup> for the creation of a joint Russian-Turkish ceasefire monitoring centre. Following the signing of the Armenian-Azeri agreement on the 10<sup>th</sup>, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, at the invitation of his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev, attended the military parade in Baku to celebrate his victory over Armenia<sup>19</sup>. Without lowering the confrontational tone maintained to date, Erdogan took advantage of his visit to try to publicly assert his place in the region, in the conflict and in Azeri success.

### Actors in Nagorno-Karabakh

The South Caucasus is a region that has traditionally attracted strategic, military and energy interest, drawing diverse actors from the West, the Middle East and Eurasia into a competition for regional influence and dominance.

It is not possible to understand the regional scenario without considering the important role played by the resources in the unequal distribution of forces and the positioning of actors in the South Caucasus. The region's energy value determines its geo-economic role and the intense competition of mutually exclusive energy transport systems contributes to the climate of tension<sup>20</sup> in a region with deep fault lines that place it in a state of near permanent instability.

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16 On 7 December 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov held a press conference with his Armenian counterpart Ara Aivazian. The full transcript is available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/4469797](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/4469797) (last accessed 12/12/2020).

17 "Aliyev blames Armenia for ceasefire violation in Nagorno-Karabakh." *Tass Russian News Agency*. 12/12/2020. Retrieved from: <https://tass.com/world/1234379> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

18 "Russia, Turkey agree creation of Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire monitoring center". *Tass Russian News Agency*. 11/11/2020. Retrieved from: <https://tass.com/world/1222765> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

19 "Azerbaijan celebrates Nagorno-Karabakh victory, Erdogan attends." *Aljazeera*. 10/12/2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/10/azerbaijan-celebrates-nagorno-karabakh-victory-erdogan-attends> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

20 RUSSETSKY, A. "Una aproximación geopolítica al Cáucaso." *El gran Cáucaso*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. Strategy Paper 156. 23-72. June 2012. Retrieved from: [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE\\_156\\_Gran\\_Caucaso.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_156_Gran_Caucaso.pdf) (last accessed 29/01/2021), pp. 55-56.

In recent years, however, interest in this complex region has waned, especially from the West, where there seems to be no clear regional strategy. Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), stated that NATO was not a party to the Armenian-Azeri conflict. On the other hand, the role played by powers such as France and the United States, co-chairs of the Minsk Group, has been limited to the mediation procedure, with neither having achieved significant progress.

Since 2016, Iran, Russia and Azerbaijan have regularly held tripartite summits that have focused on cooperation in the Caspian Sea region, economic, security, energy and communications issues. In the field of communications infrastructure, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)<sup>21</sup> would connect Russia with Iran and the Middle East via Azerbaijan. This project opens the door for Azerbaijan to be an important player because of the opportunities it provides for Russia to exert political and economic influence over Iran<sup>22</sup>.

In the Armenian-Azeri conflict, Iran supports Baku's claim to respect its territorial integrity<sup>23</sup>. On the other hand, Armenia, which has developed closer trade ties with Iran, has turned to the Islamic republic as an alternative energy supplier to Russian gas<sup>24</sup>. This is without prejudice to the mistrust that Iran may generate in Yerevan. Iran's position in the region is the result of a combination of ethnic and strategic issues, the presence of actors such as Israel, and Tehran's commercial and energy objectives, among others. With the risk of an escalation of tension in Nagorno-Karabakh exporting insecurity and instability to its territory, in the 2016 and 2020 conflicts Tehran has urged the parties to seek an agreed solution and on both occasions has offered to mediate the process.

Both in the run-up to the September 2020 conflict and in its development, the main external actors have been Russia and Turkey.

As a result of an overview of its foreign policy, Russia maintains a web of objectives and interests across different scenarios that inevitably end up overlapping and, not infrequently, clashing with the interests and objectives of other actors such as Turkey, in the Caucasus, in Syria or in Libya. Exports in the energy sector and the exploitation of oil and gas pipelines and resources located in former Soviet territories are two of

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21 The states participating in this multimodal transport corridor project are: Iran, Russia, India, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Belarus, Oman and Syria.

22 MURADOV, M. "Russia and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War." *Geopolitical Monitor*. 08/11/2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/backgrounder-russia-and-second-nagorno-karabakh-war/> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

23 Iran shares a Shia identity with Azerbaijan.

24 GIRAGOSIAN, R. "Paradox of power: Russia, Armenia and Europe after the Velvet Revolution." European Council on Foreign Relations. Policy Brief. 07/08/2019. Retrieved from: [https://ecfr.eu/publication/russia\\_armenia\\_and\\_europe\\_after\\_the\\_velvet\\_revolution/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/russia_armenia_and_europe_after_the_velvet_revolution/) (last accessed 29/01/2021).

the Kremlin's strengths in the Federation's external projection<sup>25</sup>. In the South Caucasus both elements converge, overlap and reinforce each other with defence, security and influence of vital importance to Russia in any scenario where its presence is already established or sought.

Russia's historical ties with the former Soviet territories make them indispensable in the Kremlin's strategic planning. In the South Caucasus, Russia has political, historical, security and economic interests and ties that have been translated into *ad hoc* strategic lines. Thus, in line with Russia's eminently pragmatic approach to foreign policy, its strategies shift from confrontation with Georgia, to cooperation with Armenia and confusion with Azerbaijan<sup>26</sup>.

Three decades after the demise of the Soviet Union and two decades since the arrival of Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin, Russia maintains a cordial relationship with the Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan, considering the two states as partners<sup>27</sup>. Maintaining stability in the post-Soviet area and in the South Caucasus under Russian control is a priority objective. Defence plays a prominent role in the Kremlin's strategies with the two former Soviet republics. In practice, however, there are notable differences between Moscow's links with Baku and with Yerevan.

Russia's presence in Armenia has been consolidated through agreements such as the "friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance" agreement signed on 29 August 1997, which implied joint defence in the event of aggression; the creation of a joint air defence system in December 2015, which extended the joint protection of Armenian airspace in force since the 1990s; the membership of both countries in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), within whose statutory framework Russia, at Yerevan's request, would be obliged to intervene in the event of aggression on its Armenian borders; and the creation in December 2016 of a joint force group. In each of these agreements, the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, whose independence has not been recognised by Russia, has always been kept out of any possible Russian intervention for the territorial defence of the enclave.

Russia has had a military presence in Armenia since 1996. It currently has more than 3,000 troops at the 102nd military base in Gyumri and an air squadron estab-

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25 BUGAYOVA, N. "Putin's offset. The Kremlin's geopolitical adaptations since 2014. Military learning and the future of war series." *Institute for the Study of War*. September 2020. Retrieved from: <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/putins-offset-kremlin-s-geopolitical-adaptations-2014> (last accessed 29/01/2021), p. 19.

26 MINASSIAN, G. "South Caucasus." In *Russian military presence in the Eastern Partnership Countries*. Belgium: European Parliament. 2016, 24-30. ISBN: 978-92-823-9902-6, p. 24.

27 On 22 October Vladimir Putin participated together with several experts in the final plenary session of the Valdai International Discussion Club. The full statements can be found at <https://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-meets-with-members-of-the-valdai-club-transcript-17th-annual-meeting/> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

lished at Yerevan airfield<sup>28</sup>. Both locations are close to the border with Turkey, which has always been considered by Moscow as a very sensitive area<sup>29</sup>. Russia, while being Armenia's main defensive guarantor, is also its main arms supplier. It is also noteworthy that the Russian military influence even extends to Armenian Military Doctrine, which takes on some elements of Russian military thought. However, Russian projection has not excluded Armenia's political decision to establish relations with the Atlantic Alliance<sup>30</sup>. Yerevan contributes troops to UN and NATO missions and cooperates with the Atlantic Alliance through an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP)<sup>31</sup>.

In 2018, the so-called Velvet Revolution in Armenia brought the leader of the protests, Nikol Pashinyan, to power, ousting the Kremlin-friendly Prime Minister Serge Sargsyan, who until 2018 had held the country's presidency. Although Armenia's relations with the European Union<sup>32</sup> and NATO began with the previous leaders, Pashinyan, from his very first moments in office, publicly showed his attempts at rapprochement with the Atlantic Alliance, the European Union and the United States<sup>33</sup>. This stance and Pashinyan's early decisions put the Kremlin on alert for the possibility of a change in Yerevan's relationship with Russia<sup>34</sup>. Pashinyan reportedly even stated his intention to revoke the extension of the treaty on Russian military deployment at

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28 INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES. "Russia and Eurasia." *The Military Balance 2020*. 120:I, 166-219, DOI: 10.1080/04597222.2020.1707966, p.170.

29 MINASSIAN, G., op. cit, p. 27.

30 In 1992, the Republic of Armenia became a member of NATO's North Atlantic Cooperation Council.

31 Cooperation between Armenia and NATO, within the framework of the biennially renewed IPAP, extends to the fields of defence, politics, security, democracy and the rule of law. On NATO's relations with Armenia: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_48893.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48893.htm) (last accessed 12/12/2020).

32 Armenia has been a member of the Eastern Partnership since 2009. On the occasion of Armenia's accession to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union in 2014, negotiations for an Association Agreement with the European Union were suspended. They were resumed in 2015 and the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement between Armenia and the European Union was signed in 2017.

33 In July 2018 Pashinyan attended the NATO summit in Brussels where he met with several European leaders, provoking backlash in the Russian media. See KUCERA, J. "Russian press portrays Armenia's Pashinyan as "carbon copy" of Poroshenko." *Eurasianet*. 23/07/2018. Retrieved from: <https://eurasianet.org/russian-press-portrays-armenias-pashinyan-as-carbon-copy-of-poroshenko> (last accessed 29/01/2021).

34 Among the decisions taken with Pashinyan at the head of the government were the opening of a criminal case against a subsidiary of the Russian gas company Gazprom for tax evasion; and the filing of criminal charges against Yuri Khachaturov, in 2018 secretary general of the CSTO. MEJLUMYAN, A. "In Moscow Pashinyan gets along with Putin, clashes with Russian-Armenian philanthropist." *Eurasianet*. 10/09/2018. Retrieved from: <https://eurasianet.org/in-moscow-pashinyan-gets-along-with-putin-clashes-with-russian-armenian-philanthropist> (last accessed 29/01/2021).

military bases in Armenia agreed between Russia and former Armenian Prime Minister Sargsyan<sup>35</sup>.

However, for the government in Yerevan and for Armenia's stability, understanding with Moscow is almost imperative. The Armenian dependency link is strong enough that the Kremlin has the capacity to strain the relationship and make it possible for Yerevan to accept concessions not favourable to Armenia's interests<sup>36</sup>. The strategic relationship between Russia and Armenia is marked by asymmetric dependence and lacks the parity of a true Russian-Armenian partnership<sup>37</sup>. "Armenia aspired to develop good relations with the EU in order to alleviate its asymmetric dependence on Russia"<sup>38</sup>.

The Azerbaijani government has implemented a multi-directional diplomacy, establishing bilateral relations not only with Russia, but also with Iran, Turkey and the United States, as well as with organisations such as the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance. Like Armenia, Azerbaijan is linked to NATO with an IPAP<sup>39</sup>. This strategy is seen by Moscow as not favourable to its interests<sup>40</sup>, but far from distancing the Kremlin from Baku, it fuels Russia's need for closer ties with the Caucasus.

Russia has not had a military presence in Azerbaijan since 2009. Until then, the Russian military had been in control of the Gabala radar station with about 900 troops<sup>41</sup>.

In the context of the defence reform process, the Russian Federation has developed a system of strategic military exercises that allows it to implement its combat readiness, as well as providing an opportunity to showcase the capabilities of its military force and its alliances against potential adversaries. In September 2020, it conducted the Kavkaz-2020 exercise, aimed at assessing the Southern Military District's ability

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35 MUKHANOV, V. "The Kremlin's message to Yerevan: Have your power shift, but remain our loyal vassals." Interviewed by Jaanus Piirsalu. *Diplomaatia* n.o. 178/179. International Centre for Defence and Security. June 2018. Retrieved from: <https://icds.ee/en/the-kremlins-message-to-yerevan-have-your-power-shift-but-remain-our-loyal-vassals/> (last accessed 29/01/2021).

36 In addition to arms supplies, military support, energy supplies and being Russia's main trading partner, Armenia's dependence also takes the form of remittances from the Armenian diaspora in Russia. GIRAGOSIAN, R., op. cit.

37 Ibid.

38 SHAPOVALOVA, N. "La Unión Europea en el Cáucaso Sur." *El gran Cáucaso*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. Strategy Paper 156. 73-110. June 2012. Retrieved from: [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE\\_156\\_Gran\\_Caucaso.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_156_Gran_Caucaso.pdf) (last accessed 29/01/2021), p. 76.

39 In 2015 Azerbaijan and NATO agreed on the first IPAP covering economic, scientific, political, defence and security issues. The fifth cycle of this Action Plan ended in 2019. On NATO's relations with Azerbaijan: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49111.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49111.htm) (last accessed 12/12/2020).

40 MINASSIAN, G., op. cit, p.27.

41 Ibid.

to ensure the security of Russia's south-east. Alongside the 8,000 military personnel and the Russian Black Sea and Caspian Sea fleets, Iranian naval units and military formations from Armenia, among other guests, also took part in the manoeuvres. The government in Baku decided not to send troops to the exercises due to the increased tension in Nagorno-Karabakh; it finally came as an observer<sup>42</sup>.

Moscow has always avoided direct involvement in the confrontations between the two former Soviet republics, choosing instead to defend its decisive role as chief mediator, facilitating contact between the two under the umbrella of the Minsk Group. Armenia's stability is not a minor issue for Russia<sup>43</sup>, but the stability of Armenia and the rest of the region does not necessarily depend, from Russia's point of view, on resolving the roots of the Armenian-Azeri conflict. Russia's chosen position involves maintaining a difficult balance between the mutually exclusive Armenian and Azeri positions. But even as Russia was the most relevant external actor, its ability to control the conflict had been limited<sup>44</sup>, at least until the September 2020 crisis. The 10 November agreement opens the door to Russian control of any possible outbreaks of violence in both the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave and the South Caucasus region.

Turkey has been the main external supporter of Azeri interests in Nagorno-Karabakh both at the beginning and during the development of the 27 September crisis, backing Azerbaijan with political, military and economic support<sup>45</sup>. As in 2016, Ankara has defended Baku's claim to recover the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave and all districts in Azerbaijani territory under Armenian control. The Turkish president, who is maintaining a very tough discourse in his public speeches, has even accused the co-chairs of the Minsk Group (Russia, the United States and France) of supplying weapons to Armenia and of acting in their interests, thus fuelling the escalation of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The dispute between Turkey and Armenia over the massacre of the Armenian population by the forces of the Ottoman Empire in 1915<sup>46</sup> is an obstacle that is difficult to overcome and does not contribute to reducing tension in the area. The attempt to normalise diplomatic relations between the two countries with the agreement signed

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42 DALY, J. "Russia's Kavkaz 2020: International Participation and Regional Security Implications." *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol.17, no. 126. 14/09/2020. Retrieved from: <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-kavkaz-2020-international-participation-and-regional-security-implications/> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

43 MUKHANOV, V., op. cit,

44 MANKOFF, J. "Why Armenia and Azerbaijan Are on the Brink of War." *Foreign Affairs*. 01/10/2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2020-10-01/why-armenia-and-azerbaijan-are-brink-war> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

45 The Azeri population is mainly ethnic Turkic, but mostly Shia Muslims, while the Turks are Sunni.

46 The Turkish government has not recognised as genocide the massacre of Armenians carried out between 1915 and 1917 by the forces of the Ottoman Empire.

in 2009 was broken off by Armenia in 2018, citing disagreements with Ankara precisely in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh situation.

The strategic partnership between Turkey and Azerbaijan is defined by the slogan “two states, one nation” used by Baku and Ankara. Both countries share historical, linguistic, religious, cultural and even political factors and similarities. “There is also an asymmetric model, according to which Azerbaijan could be integrated into the Turkish political space”<sup>47</sup>.

Turkish political and military support for Azerbaijan has been constant and growing. However, Turkey is not currently the main Azeri arms supplier. In the period 2015 to 2019 it was behind Israel and Russia, the first and second largest arms suppliers respectively<sup>48</sup>. In line with its diplomatic strategy, Baku has expanded its range of suppliers in recent years (Israel, Ukraine, Belarus and the Czech Republic)<sup>49</sup>. In this way it continues to increase and improve its military capabilities, while diversifying its acquisitions and thus reducing its dependence on other powers.

In the months leading up to the September conflict, Turkish arms purchases and military cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan reportedly intensified. In this sense, new acquisitions such as combat drones; the mobilisation of forces; or the growing military cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan since 2019<sup>50</sup> are indicators that the latest escalation of tension over Nagorno-Karabakh may have been prepared in advance<sup>51</sup>.

Two weeks after the Line of Contact clashes last July and within the scope of the 2010 Partnership and Mutual Assistance Agreement between Turkey and Azerbaijan, they conducted joint military exercises involving the ground and air forces of the two countries<sup>52</sup>. In addition to equipment and assistance from Turkey, drones and other weaponry of Israeli origin acquired by Azerbaijan in recent years have been instrumen-

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47 RUSSETSKY, A., op. cit, p. 35.

48 WEZEMAN, P., FLEURANT, A., KUIMOVA, A., et al. “Trends in international arms transfers, 2019.” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. March 2020. Retrieved from: [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs\\_2003\\_at\\_2019.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs_2003_at_2019.pdf) (last accessed 12/12/2020).

49 ALIYEV, N. “Russia’s Arms Sales: A Foreign Policy Tool in Relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia”. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 15, no. 47. 28/03/2018. Retrieved from: <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-arms-sales-foreign-policy-tool-relations-azerbaijan-armenia/> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

50 GURBANOV, I. “Azerbaijan’s Military Exercises Send Defiant Message to Armenia”. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol.16, no. 99.11/07/2019. Retrieved from: <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbajjans-military-exercises-send-defiant-message-to-armenia/> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

51 CLARK, M. AND YAZICI, E. “Erdogan seeks to upend Kremlin-backed status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh”. *Institute for the Study of War*. 12/10/2020. Retrieved from: <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/erdogan-seeks-upend-kremlin-backed-status-quo-nagorno-karabakh> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

52 HUSEYNOV, V. “Azerbaijan, Turkey Hold Large-Scale Military Drills Amidst Escalation of Tensions with Armenia”. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol.17, no. 121. 14/08/2020. Retrieved from: <https://>

tal in Azerbaijan's recent victory, as they were in the tactical and operational successes around the Line of Contact in 2016<sup>53</sup>.

A conflict in the region, extended in time and intensity, has the potential to jeopardise European energy supplies and is not in the interests of either Russia or Turkey. Crude oil and liquefied natural gas flows from the Caspian Sea and Russia to Turkey, Georgia and Europe via pipelines through Azerbaijan. The Caspian Sea has oil and gas fields under Azerbaijan's jurisdiction.

In addition to the region's known natural resources, Erdogan announced on 21 August the discovery of a 320 billion cubic metre natural gas field in the Black Sea, which could be exploitable from 2023<sup>54</sup>. This discovery would allow Turkey to reduce its heavy dependence on energy resources from Iraq, Iran and Russia. But it would also allow Ankara to limit Turkey's growing dependence on Azeri energy<sup>55</sup>. The Black and Caspian Seas are vital for Moscow in defensive, strategic and energy terms. In fact, Russian fleets in both seas have seen their surveillance capabilities increase since 2007<sup>56</sup>.

Moscow and Ankara coincide in their desire to seek and secure maximum influence and control over a region on the doorstep of the Middle East whose destabilisation could provoke the outbreak of a major conflict with international intervention. Turkey's aspirations in the region are also framed in a period in which Ankara, under Erdogan and nationalism, is straining relations with Western powers and NATO, of which it is a member, bringing Turkey closer to international isolation.

While the channel of communication between the Kremlin and Ankara has been open throughout the Caucasus crisis, Russia has protected its central role in the negotiation process and the establishment of post-conflict conditions, relegating Turkey's involvement to the background.

Despite existing rivalries, Moscow has incentives that encourage it to keep its relationship with Turkey within the bounds of cordiality and pragmatism. The connection between the two capitals is ensured on the basis of the agreements established in

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[jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-turkey-hold-large-scale-military-drills-amidst-escalation-of-tensions-with-armenia/](https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-turkey-hold-large-scale-military-drills-amidst-escalation-of-tensions-with-armenia/) (last accessed 12/12/2020).

53 GURBANOV, I. "Azerbaijan Deepens and Expands Its Partnerships with International Arms Suppliers." *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol.16, no. 5. 21/01/2019. Retrieved from: <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-deepens-and-expands-its-partnerships-with-international-arms-suppliers/> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

54 "Erdogan announces the discovery of Turkey's largest natural gas reserve". *Europapress*. 21/08/2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.europapress.es/inernacional/noticia-erdogan-anuncia-descubrimiento-mayor-reserva-gas-natural-turquia-20200821153304.html> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

55 CLARK, M. and YAZICI, E., op. cit.

56 INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES. *Russia's military modernization: An Assessment*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020, p.93.

different areas. Using contractual ties, for example in the energy sector, as an instrument to establish medium- and long-term ties is a procedure repeated by Moscow in its bilateral relations with various states, such as Egypt in the Mediterranean. However, Turkey's geostrategic position at the exit from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean seems to be a relevant motive that justifies Moscow's efforts to maintain a bilateral relationship with more than a few edges, as can be seen on the ground in Syria.

### Implications for the Syrian scenario

The system of interests and strategic objectives created by Russia and Turkey extends across several scenarios. At the same time as the ambitions of the two powers meet and clash in the Caucasus, they also do so in other arenas such as Syria and Libya. The relationship between Moscow and Ankara balances between partnership and confrontation in the diplomatic arena; and in the military, between collaboration and preparation for potential confrontation.

In the present circumstances, the events in Nagorno-Karabakh appear to have been linked to developments in Russian and Turkish positions in Syria. The most descriptive connection between Syria and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has come from Turkey. There are indications that around 1,500 Syrian National Army troops<sup>57</sup> have been sent to fight alongside Azerbaijani forces in Nagorno-Karabakh and in the border area with Iran<sup>58</sup>.

Iran's political and economic leverage in the Caucasus and Syria is of no small interest to Moscow. In both scenarios, considering its regional and international interests, Iran is in a position to strengthen positions and be a relevant counterweight.

In Syria, where it has bases of operations, Iran has been instrumental in sustaining Assad since the beginning of the conflict. Moscow and Tehran, with different objectives, are directing their efforts towards the survival of the Damascus government. In doing so, however, they have established a competition of forces rather than cooperation between the two<sup>59</sup>. Not to mention the fact that Russia needs Iran to secure its bases in Syria, essential for the pursuit of its plans on Europe's and NATO's southern border<sup>60</sup>. The Kremlin has announced military cooperation with Iran as the inter-

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57 The Syrian National Army (SNA), created in 2017 with Turkish backing, is a coalition of armed groups opposed to the Assad regime. In October 2019 the National Liberation Front (NLF) joined the SNA under the control of the so-called Syrian Interim Government.

58 CLARK, M. and YAZICI, E., *op. cit.*

59 CAFARELLA, J. and ZHOU, J. "Russia's Dead-End Diplomacy in Syria". *Institute for the Study of War*. November 2019. Retrieved from: <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/russias-dead-end-diplomacy-syria> (last accessed 12/12/2020), p.15.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

national arms embargo and economic and political sanctions on the Iranian regime expire on 18 October 2020.

In September 2017 Russia, Turkey and Iran signed the Astana Agreement, which established a de-escalation zone in the north-western Syrian region. The signatories' aim was to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid and reduce fighting. But in February 2020, the Damascus government launched an offensive on the Idlib region, which provoked a Turkish reaction.

President Erdogan, in a speech on 4 February, issued an ultimatum for the withdrawal of the Syrian army to the so-called "Sochi Line", under threat of a Turkish military offensive. Meetings between Ankara and Moscow continued without reaching an understanding, and on 27 February, some 30 Turkish soldiers were killed in an airstrike and Ankara began its operation in Idlib, Operation Spring Shield. Finally, Russia and Turkey agreed on a cessation of hostilities in the Idlib de-escalation zone effective from 6 March 2020. Despite the agreement, Turkey continued to send troops to the region between April and October<sup>61</sup>.

At the time of writing, Russia and Turkey are vying for control of Idlib, the last rebel stronghold in Syria. Tension continues there, and while Russia is consolidating its control and influence in the south of the country, Turkey is trying, for its part, not to lose positions in the northern region<sup>62</sup>. In recent months, manoeuvres in the Caucasus and Syria have been aimed at gaining advantages for Moscow and Ankara at the negotiating table. Both continue to struggle for territorial control and influence, while the Islamic State threatens Turkish-controlled areas in the north and central Syria<sup>63</sup>.

As seen on the ground in Syria, Russia's conventional deployment has the potential to change the scenario and open up new options for Moscow, both in its negotiations with Turkey and in the possibilities for Syrian forces to advance<sup>64</sup>. Turkey thus seemed poised to exert pressure on Russia in the Caucasus. In principle, in such a scenario Moscow would be more constrained than in Syria to act and respond to

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61 GRECO, A. "Turkey reinforces positions in greater Idlib to pressure Russia into negotiations." *Institute for the Study of War*. 07/10/2020. Retrieved from: <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/turkey-reinforces-positions-greater-idlib-pressure-russia-negotiations> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

62 GRECO, A. and CHRISTOU, W. "Syria situation report: October 28 - November 10, 2020". *Institute for the Study of War*. 13/11/2020. Retrieved from: <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-situation-report-october-28-november-10-2020> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

63 GRECO, A. "Syria Situation Report: November 11- December 1, 2020". *Institute for the Study of War*. 03/12/2020. Retrieved from: <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-situation-report-november-11-december-1-2020> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

64 IVANESCU, I. "Russia may deploy conventional forces to Syria". *Institute for the Study of War*. 17/10/2020. Retrieved from: <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-may-deploy-conventional-forces-syria> (last accessed 12/12/2020).

Turkish pressure. Ankara reportedly sought an optimal position in Nagorno-Karabakh to contest Moscow's regional influence, while at the same time gaining advantages in Syria.

For Russia, an open conflict in the Caucasus is neither desirable nor convenient in the current domestic and international context of health and economic crisis, public discontent, uncertainty over the future of nuclear agreements or its growing tension with the West; but neither is it desirable in the future. The costs of disrupting stability with a confrontation do not outweigh the potential gains that Moscow could reap from a regional crisis.

## Conclusions and Final Considerations

After the agreement ending the armed clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the control of Nagorno-Karabakh, the underlying territorial and ethnic conflict has not been resolved and seems to be in a state of latency once again.

It is difficult to dissociate the tension in the South Caucasus from the energy component, as it gives Azerbaijan a comparative advantage over Armenia, but also as a pull factor in the region, as well as an element of pressure among the actors in the region.

In the aftermath of the September crisis, Moscow's relationship with Baku and Moscow's with Yerevan has redefined its balances, at least in the medium term. The distance between the Armenian prime minister and the Kremlin, despite public signs of collaboration and diplomatic connection, and Yerevan's difficult-to-save dependence on Russia have worked in favour of the Kremlin's ability to manoeuvre in negotiating the ceasefire necessary for regional stability and, therefore, for Moscow's interests in the region. At the same time, Russia has been able to move closer to Baku without breaking its ties with Armenia.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have different capacities to recover from weeks of fighting. Azerbaijan's energy potential provides it with economic development opportunities that Armenia lacks. The latter, the main loser, needs Russian support to guarantee the *status quo* established since 10 November and thus avoid further territorial and political losses.

Baku, for its part, has won a double victory: the moral victory of making Armenia the official loser in the conflict; and the victory of regaining control of part of its territory. Armenia's territorial renunciation brings the governments in Moscow and Baku closer together, to the detriment of Yerevan and also Ankara, especially if the new situation manages to reduce military tension. In this case Turkey would lose its ability to exert pressure on Russia in the region. If the Kremlin consolidates its role as an indispensable actor for stability and, therefore, its ability to break it should it deem it necessary, the space for other players in the region would be significantly reduced, allowing them little room for manoeuvre and limited influence over Moscow.

Whether territorial, ethnic or religious, keeping conflicts in a perpetual state of stalemate has become a way of ensuring tense regional stability – a more feasible alternative to addressing the fractures that give rise to them. Thus, the option of Russia or Turkey getting involved in the definitive resolution of the conflict seems distant and would have consequences for the stability of the region that would not compensate Russia, due to the economic, military and political cost; nor Turkey, which would lose negotiating capacity with Russia, both involved in a relationship of balances that are sometimes very complicated to maintain, but which neither would want to break.

Russia cannot afford to lose positions and influence in Syria or the Middle East, let alone the Caucasus. The Kremlin has advanced its control of the region and has managed to push its role as mediator to the end of the conflict, leaving Erdogan on the sidelines of the agreed solution.

With the November agreement Russia has secured its hitherto absent military presence on Azerbaijani territory as a peacekeeping force along the Line of Contact. Moreover, by deploying FSB members, the Kremlin gains a new capacity to monitor Armenian and Azeri movements likely to break the ceasefire; but it also allows it to monitor Turkish influence and presence in Azerbaijan, with implications for Russian decisions on other scenarios such as in Syria or Libya.

Turkey appears to have been no stranger to the escalation of military tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the months leading up to the outbreak of the September conflict. However, it is less clear that Ankara has emerged victorious in Nagorno-Karabakh, nor that it has been in a position to make a positive reading for Turkish interests of the success achieved by Azerbaijan. In the post-conflict scenario, it will depend on the Kremlin's interest and need to assert its presence in the area. It remains to be seen whether Russia will open the door to effective shared control of compliance with the agreement beyond collaboration at the joint monitoring centre; and how it will react if it does.

If Russia manages to maintain security control in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, while allowing for Turkey's controlled participation in monitoring compliance with the agreement, the Kremlin could be in a position to defuse this area and this conflict as a sensitive area of pressure on Moscow. By having the evolution of the new *status quo* under its control, it takes the room for manoeuvre away from interference by other actors such as Turkey. Moreover, Russia might have it in its hands that the direction this scenario might take does not depend on the state of the relationship between Moscow and Ankara.

In Syria, meanwhile, the competition continues, with Russia strengthened in the wake of Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia's role as mediator in the Caucasus can be adapted to the Syrian context and exploited as a complement to conventional military avenues. The nature of the Syrian conflict, more diverse than Nagorno-Karabakh in both the number and diversity of actors and interests involved, widens the options in the Syrian balancing game between Ankara and Moscow.

Russia's decision not to intervene directly in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and to focus its attention (and that of international public opinion) on its involvement as chief mediator has proved to be in Moscow's interests. The Kremlin's diplomatic approach, which has recently gained prominence on several stages, seems to indicate that the first stage of Russian expansion has come to an end and another of consolidation of the positions and advantages achieved, especially since 2014, has taken hold. This is partly coincidental and partly motivated by the combination of the uncertain international context and the current Russian moment. The difficult economic conditions in the Federation and growing social unrest favour the implementation of a more restrained foreign policy, at least in the short term. This repose does not rule out a new expansionary cycle in the Russian Federation in the medium term. Perhaps it rather announces it.

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