

# Eurasia's Pivotal Change

*Armenia's brief new war with Azerbaijan changed everything for both states, and for Nagorno-Karabakh, but it also substantially altered the Eurasian balance.*

**H**OW QUICKLY THE FATE OF NATIONS and their leaders can become transformed by a single mis-judgment was demonstrated with the latest phase of the Armenia-Azerbaijan dispute and war which came to a sudden conclusion on November 9, 2020.

The geopolitical shape of much of Eurasia was significantly impacted by the brief episode of a long-frozen conflict between the two states and the unrecognized, Armenian-backed Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh).

The conclusion to the immediate fighting did not entirely resolve the long-standing territorial disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, the long logjam was broken.

The fighting, which essentially began with a July 12-13, 2020, initial set of clashes<sup>1</sup> — which turned out to be mis-steps by Armenia — transformed into a unique set of opportunities for Azerbaijan to reverse its territorial losses of almost three decades earlier.

At its interim conclusion, Azerbaijan had regained much lost territory, including overland secure access — guaranteed by Russia and Armenia — to its territory of Nakhchivan. The Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan had for three decades existed as an exclave territory, accessible from metropolitan Azerbaijan only by air via Iranian airspace, or through Turkey, with which Nakhchivan has an 11-mile (17 km) border.

Quite apart from the psychological impact the Azerbaijani military victory over Armenia had on the Azerbaijani population, the reality now is that metropolitan Azerbaijan now has a viable land access to Turkey and to Europe. Its great pipeline link for energy extracted from the Caspian at Baku has until now traveled across Northern Azerbaijan and into Georgia before transiting

down to the Turkish Mediterranean port at Ceyhan. Now, conceivably, gas lines could be routed from Baku through Nakhchivan to Turkey, bypassing Georgia.

This suits Russia, as well, which may be why it brokered the new deal to ensure Baku's landbridge to Nakhchivan. Russia values the ability to apply pressure on Georgia, with which it has had differences since the end of the Cold War (and ensured that Russia supported the independence of Georgia's provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia). And yet there was speculation that the latest conflict had been encouraged by Moscow to threaten the not-yet-completed Southern Gas Corridor pipeline, which in somewhat follows the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. The Southern Gas Corridor, to supply natural gas to Western Europe, will compete with Russia's sales of gas to Western Europe, and any delay in the completion of the new gas corridor, with pumping stations in north-western Azerbaijan — where Armenian attacks began — would conceivably have been to Moscow's benefit.

And yet Moscow brokered the peace deal, largely at the insistence of the Armenian leadership, saving some of Armenia's position and preserving the continued existence of the Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) enclave. That Russia was able to dominate the unfreezing of this conflict was enhanced by the fact that the US was embroiled in the final stages of its most bitter national election in living memory.

There will be casualties from the war. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pash-

inyan, who was swept to office on a popular wave some two years earlier, now seems unlikely to last in office even until mid-2021. Whether Armenia would return to the older, corrupt political framework of the pre-Pashinyan age is the open question going forward.

Armenia showed that it had shot down more than one Israeli-made unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) (and apparently Turkish-built UAVs) in the latest fighting. But both Azerbaijan and Armenia engaged each other with Russian-supplied artillery, either the D-20 or D-30 systems. But this had become, by the end of October 2020, a profoundly multi-layered and historically intertwined feud. By the end of October 2020, too, Azerbaijani forces had made major inroads into areas of Azerbaijan occupied for decades by Armenia. That included the seizure of some territory of the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, but also territory in seven other districts occupied by Armenian troops.

To the south-east of Stepanakert, the Nagorno-Karabakh capital, Azerbaijani forces were fighting in late October 2020 for a low-lying river valley and foothills in the districts of Ceyrayil/Jrakan and Fuzuli/Varanda. These areas, when they were taken over by Armenian forces in the 1990s, saw the displacement of several hundred thousand Azerbaijani citizens, many of whom sought, as a result of the 2020 fighting, to return to their homes. Meanwhile, statements from both Yerevan and Baku at the end of October 2020 confirmed heavy fighting directly north of Stepanakert, in the divided district of Tartar and in parts of Nagorno-Karabakh's northern district of Martakert.

On October 27, 2020, Pres. Arayik Harutyunyan relieved Artsakh Defense Minister Jalal Harutyunyan of his duties after the Minister was wounded in fighting against Azerbaijani forces. That was only a week after the President

1 See: "Turkey and Russia Inch Closer to Conflict Over Gas Lines", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*, 10/2020.

had promoted him to the rank of lieutenant-general and then, a day later, Mr Harut-yunyan had invested him the title of Hero of Artsakh.

A critical phase in the fighting was reached on the weekend of November 7-8, 2020, when Azerbaijani troops, after a three-day battle, seized control of the one-time mountain resort of Shusha (Şuşa) which commanded the heights over the NK capital, Stepanakert. It was clear at that point that Stepanakert would be lost within days. Armenia, and by default Nagorno-Karabakh, sued for peace. Shusha had been, since May 1992, administered by the Republic of Artsakh — Nagorno-Karabakh — as its Shusha Province.

On November 9, 2020, Pres. Harutyunyan gave his consent for Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to sign the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia.

Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia on November 9, 2020, signed an agreement to end military conflict over the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh and other Azerbaijani territories occupied by Armenia, ending the six weeks of fighting between Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh forces on the one hand, and Azerbaijani forces (supported by Turkey) on the other. The agreement was, in fact, a ceasefire accord rather than a resolution of the territorial dispute, however, and a considerable amount of Azerbaijani territory remains occupied by Armenian forces. The ceasefire accord was signed by Russian Pres. Vladimir Putin, Azerbaijani Pres. Ilham Aliyev, and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and took effect on November 10, 2020, at 01.00 hrs local.

The ceasefire confirms that Azerbaijan would retain control over the areas of Nagorno-Karabakh which it had retaken during the 2020 conflict, and Armenia would withdraw from several other adjacent areas over the coming weeks. What this meant was that Azerbaijan, by retaining control of Shusha, would also retain a *de facto* ability to dominate Stepanakert. Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan said that the ceasefire was “incredibly painful both for me and both for our people”.

Pres. Putin, meanwhile, said that Russian peacekeepers would be deployed to patrol the front line, and that 1,960 personnel would be involved. By November 10, 2020, Russian Air Force

transport aircraft with some of the peacekeepers and 90 armored personnel carriers had left an airbase at Ullanorsk for Karabakh. Part of their mission would be to guard the Lachine corridor, which links Stepanakert to Armenia, and the Russian troops would take up their positions as the Armenian troops withdrew from them. Turkey would also take part in the peacekeeping process, according to Azerbaijani Pres. Aliyev, who was with Pres. Putin during the address.

Pres. Arak Vladimir Harutyunyan of Artsakh said that the ceasefire had been unavoidable after the loss of Karabakh's second biggest town, Shusha. By that time, too, fighting had already been underway in the outskirts of Stepanakert, and it was clear that the entire Nagorno-Karabakh enclave could fall to the Azerbaijani forces. Artsakh authorities said that nearly 1,200 of its defense forces had died in the fighting, and civilians had also been killed or injured. Russian sources put the death toll on all sides at more than 5,000.

Under the ceasefire agreement, the Agdam District was to return to Azerbaijan before November 20, 2020. The Armenian Republic was to return the Kalbajar District to the Azerbaijani Republic before November 15, 2020, and the Lachine District by December 1, 2020. The Lachin Corridor (5km [3.1 miles] wide), which would ensure Nagorno-Karabakh's connection to Armenia and at the same time not affect the city of Shusha, would remain under the control of the Russian Federation's peacekeeping contingent. A plan was to be determined in the next three years to construct a new traffic route along the Lachine Corridor, providing a connection between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, with the subsequent redeployment of the Russian peacekeeping contingent to protect this route. The Azerbaijani Republic would guarantee the safety of traffic along the Lachine Corridor of persons, vehicles, and freight in both directions.

Internally displaced persons and refugees were to be able to return to the Nagorno-Karabakh territory and adjacent areas under the supervision of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The Kelbajar [Qarvachar] district which the ceasefire awarded to Azerbaijan, meanwhile, is the source of 85 percent of Armenia's water supply.

Of perhaps the greatest significance to Azerbaijan was the clause of the

ceasefire treaty which said that all economic and transportation links in the region were to be unblocked. The Armenian Republic would provide transportation links, and guarantee the safety of transportation links between the western regions of the Azerbaijani Republic and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to organize the unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles, and freight in both directions. Units of the Russian Federal Security Service's Border Service would monitor these transportation links. The agreement provided for the construction of new transportation links connecting the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan with western regions of Azerbaijan.

What was significant throughout the brief conflict phase was the fact that many Iranians cheered the advances being made against the Armenians by Azerbaijani troops, despite the reality that Armenia is a key ally of Iran. But underlying this is the other reality that more than 60 percent of Azeris live in Iran, and less than 40 percent in Azerbaijan. The historical identity ties remain profound.

## Conclusions

The fighting resulted in a watershed advance for Azerbaijan; it can now begin to “feel whole” in terms of identity (although the process remains incomplete), and it now has access to its former exclave, Nakhchivan. This will profoundly impact trade from Europe to the Caspian, and Baku's ability to deliver energy to the West.

Georgia is potentially one of the greatest losers, because the new geopolitical realities could strip it of its status as a key transit state for energy, and therefore jeopardize its revenues.

Armenia, initially seen as the main loser in the war, could now get back to normalization with Azerbaijan, and perhaps focus on political restructuring. Indeed, a rational basis of coexistence could be negotiated between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan. Turkey gained in the situation because it was seen to have taken steps to support Azerbaijan. Israel, too, provided critical support to Baku, but avoided publicity.

Russia may have gained political dominance in the region at the expense of the US, which was preoccupied with elections, but it was not able to forestall the reality that it could no longer control Caspian gas exports to Europe. ★