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THESIS

**FACTORS INFLUENCING POST-SOVIET
RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE
NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT**

by

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March 2022

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IN THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT**

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ABSTRACT

The protracted Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has existed in the South Caucasus since the Soviet era. Throughout this decades-long war, more than 20,000 deaths have occurred and 1.5 million persons have been displaced. The Russian Federation remains a perennial mediator of the conflict as it seeks to further its special relationships with Armenia and Azerbaijan, consistent with its objectives in its entire near abroad. To that end, Russia continues to exercise its foreign policy in this deadlocked but intense territorial dispute over the mountainous region between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia's participation in multinational organizations, unilateral peace-brokering efforts, and bilateral relationships ensure that it maintains its hegemony in the region while also impeding international peace efforts. During the 2020 flareup known as the Second Karabakh War, Russia retained its role as the primary negotiator by unilaterally brokering a ceasefire and deploying nearly 2,000 Russian Federation peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh. However, complicating matters further is Azerbaijan's continual movement toward Turkey, Armenia's geopolitical isolation, and Turkey's increased, competitive role in the region. Factors in Russia's historical intervention, Armenian and Azerbaijani perceptions of Russia's intentions, and Turkey's increased role in the region continue to complicate and reinforce Russian foreign policy initiatives in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
A.	MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION.....	1
B.	SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION.....	3
C.	LITERATURE REVIEW	5
1.	Russian Priorities in Transcaucasia in the Historical Context.....	5
2.	Perceptions of Russia in the South Caucasus.....	7
3.	Turkey’s Role in Shaping Russian Policy.....	8
D.	RESEARCH DESIGN.....	9
E.	THESIS OVERVIEW	10
 II.	 RUSSIA’S POST-SOVIET CONSIDERATIONS TOWARD NAGORNO-KARABAKH.....	 11
A.	A CONTINUATION OF THE PAST	13
B.	SUMMARY OF RUSSIA’S POST-SOVIET PERCEPTIONS OF NAGORNO-KARABAKH	15
C.	RUSSIA’S ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO MEDiate THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT	18
D.	THE ROLE OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF INDEPENDENT STATES.....	19
E.	THE ROLE OF THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE	21
1.	CSCE to OSCE.....	22
2.	Minsk Group	22
F.	THE ROLE OF THE COLLECTIVE SECURITY TREATY ORGANIZATION	24
G.	RUSSIAN UNILATERAL INFLUENCE.....	25
H.	CONCLUSION	26
 III.	 ARMENIAN AND AZERBAIJANI PERCEPTIONS OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH.....	 31
A.	ARMENIAN PERCEPTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS.....	34
1.	Relationship with the European Union and Worldwide Diaspora.....	36
2.	2018 Armenian Velvet Revolution.....	39
B.	RUSSIA’S IMPORTANCE TO ARMENIA IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH.....	41
C.	AZERBAIJANI PERCEPTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS	42

1.	Military Spending and Buildup	46
2.	The BTC Pipeline and Energy Security	49
D.	RUSSIA AND AZERBAIJAN'S COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP OVER NAGORNO-KARABAKH.....	53
E.	CONCLUSION	55
IV.	RUSO-TURKISH COMPETITION IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH.....	59
A.	SOVIET, RUSSIAN, AND TURKISH HISTORICAL AND CURRENT COOPERATION	64
B.	CONFLICTING INTERESTS IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH	66
C.	INTERNATIONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING RUSSIAN AND TURKISH COMPETITION	70
D.	CONCLUSION	72
V.	CONCLUSIONS	75
A.	SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	76
B.	POTENTIAL FUTURE TRENDS	79
	LIST OF REFERENCES	83
	INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST	97

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	2013 Map of the South Caucasus (Transcaucasia)	2
Figure 2.	2013 Map of Nagorno-Karabakh	12
Figure 3.	2019 Map of Caucasian Energy Routes	50
Figure 4.	1780 Map of Caucasian Political Boundaries	60

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BTC	Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EU	European Union
GNA	Government of National Accord (Libya)
KGB	Komitet Gozudarstvennoye Bezopasnosti; the Soviet Union's Committee for State Security
LNA	Libyan National Army
LOC	Line of Contact
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NKAO	Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (Soviet era)
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
SAM	Surface-to-Air Missile
SOCAR	State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic
SSRs	Soviet Socialist Republics
UN	United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WWI	World War I
WWII	World War II

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Years before and since the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR/Soviet Union), the Republic of Armenia and Republic of Azerbaijan have engaged in recurrent armed conflict over territorial claims to the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the South Caucasus (Transcaucasia) (see Figure 1).¹ This struggle is an extension of territorial disputes predating the Soviet Union.² While the international community widely recognizes Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, the region comprises many ethnic Armenians aligned with sovereign Armenia to the west.³ Both sides claim historical dominion over the mostly forested and mountainous 5,000 square kilometer region, of which half is 900 meters above sea level.⁴ That same international community perhaps finds little reason for the two sides to quarrel over this isolated territory, but for Armenia and Azerbaijan, this conflict is existential.⁵ Until July 2020, the majority populace of Nagorno-Karabakh maintained close but unofficial ties to Armenia under the semi-

¹ Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6–7. De Waal informs the word “Transcaucasia” (Zakavkaz’ye) is more of a Russian-centric term for the region, while “South Caucasus” is politically neutral. “South Caucasus,” as the name for the region, has only existed since Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia gained independence in late 1991 at the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For this thesis, the author uses “Transcaucasia” and “South Caucasus” interchangeably.

² Farid Shafiyev, “The Forced Resettlement of Azerbaijanis from Armenia, 1948–1953,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 39, no. 2 (April 3, 2019): 178–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2019.1620002>; Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*, 10th-year anniversary ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2013), x, 8; Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 441. According to de Waal, the name Nagorno-Karabakh is a combination of the Russian word for “Mountainous” (Nagorno or Nagorny) and the Turkish-Persian fusion phrase for “Black Garden” (Karabakh or Karabagh), thus translating the name to “Mountainous Black Garden.” Martin Malia, however, claims this adjectival form of the name is more properly stated by the noun, “Nagorny Karabakh.” For purposes of consistency, the author uses “Nagorno-Karabakh” when referring to the region throughout this thesis, as taken from multiple sources of literature.

³ United Nations General Assembly, “General Assembly Adopts Resolution Reaffirming Territorial Integrity of Azerbaijan, Demanding Withdrawal of All Armenian Forces,” United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, March 14, 2008, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2008/ga10693.doc.htm>.

⁴ Christoph Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 152, 184.

⁵ de Waal, *Black Garden*, xiv–xvi.

autonomous governance of the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh Republic) before Azerbaijan regained overwhelming control of the capital, Stepanakert, during a forty-four-day war.⁶



Figure 1. 2013 Map of the South Caucasus (Transcaucasia)⁷

During the 2020 conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, intervention by the Russian Federation embodied Russia's policy on this persistent conflict since the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union. Russia's strategy and intervention in the South Caucasus

⁶ Cory Welt and Andrew S. Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, CRS Report No. R46651 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021), 1–2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46651>; Leila Alieva, "'Securitization/De-Securitization' and Attitudes in Azerbaijan in Reaction to the Karabagh Conflict," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 121 (May 2021): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3929/ETHZ-B-000489488>; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 289. Welt and Bowen note this flareup was, in large part, an extension of the Karabakh War of 1991–1994 (recently differentiated from the 2020 hostilities as the First and Second Karabakh Wars, respectively, and other times referred to as the "Forty-four Day War" or the "Autumn 2020 War").

⁷ Source: de Waal, *Black Garden*, xviii.

seems to play a significant role in influencing events in Nagorno-Karabakh, or at least in maintaining the status quo in the region. Thus, factors driving Russia to execute its foreign policy there have much to do with the stability, or lack thereof, in Nagorno-Karabakh.

This thesis seeks to analyze Russia's foreign policy in Transcaucasia and explain how its geopolitical strategy has evolved with respect to the Nagorno-Karabakh region. While Russia's policies have changed slightly since the Soviet Union dissolved to align with its leaders' geopolitical goals, its primary objectives have persisted. Moscow desires to maintain a mediating role and thereby influence the geopolitical balance of the region. This approach is in keeping with Russia's broader strategy in its near abroad.⁸ While Russia remains the hegemon in the region, the Republic of Turkey's gradual ascendancy to contest that supremacy has created new challenges to the status quo. As the South Caucasus becomes steadily contested by Turkey, Russia will have to adapt its policies to account for Turkey's presence and influence.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

This thesis investigates factors influencing Russia's foreign policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh. Investigating Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the instability of Nagorno-Karabakh is a micro-examination of Russian geopolitics in Transcaucasia. A better understanding of the factors that led (and might lead) to Russian policies in the South Caucasus enables a better understanding of Russia's perception of the region. And in this region, Russia has long-held insecurities not dissimilar to historical and modern secessionist movements inside its own borders.⁹

In addition to Russia's involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh impacting the present or future competition there among regional powers, Russia's involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh is historically relevant to other, frozen conflicts within Russia's borders and its

⁸ Andrew Radin and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, Research Report, RR-1826-OSD (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), ix, 11.

⁹ Albert Resis, ed., *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics: Conversations with Felix Chuev* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), 8; Benn Steil, "Russia's Clash with the West Is About Geography, Not Ideology," *Foreign Policy* (blog), February 12, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/12/russias-clash-with-the-west-is-about-geography-not-ideology/>; Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 28.

near abroad.¹⁰ Moreover, the onslaught of instability in Nagorno-Karabakh during the late 1980s and early 1990s played a significant role in the eventual dissolution of the USSR.¹¹ As it had in many parts of the world, including Russia, the international system had placed artificial borders around ethnically diverse populations while attempting to assign them rigid national identities.¹² These characteristics of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict exist in and around Russia's borders today. Understanding how Russia has dealt with Nagorno-Karabakh can reveal how the Kremlin employs its layered approach to its entire near abroad and how Russia perceives other areas of instability within its borders.¹³

Lastly, any enduring solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is likely to involve some degree of participation from a multinational group like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, which is co-chaired by Russia, the United States (US), and France.¹⁴ Russia has made maneuvers to take the lead unilaterally in the region, considering that it signed the November 2020 ceasefire agreement with Armenia and Azerbaijan without OSCE involvement. That agreement also enabled the deployment of nearly 2,000 Russian Federation peacekeeping soldiers to Nagorno-Karabakh, although reports suggest that Turkey expected to have an official peacekeeping

¹⁰ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 89–90; Alexandros Petersen, *The World Island: Eurasian Geopolitics and the Fate of the West* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2011), 87–89; Andrei A. Kazantsev et al., “Russia’s Policy in the ‘Frozen Conflicts’ of the Post-Soviet Space: From Ethno-Politics to Geopolitics,” *Caucasus Survey* 8, no. 2 (May 3, 2020): 142–43, 156–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2020.1728499>; Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 152.

¹¹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 174; Robert D. Kaplan, *Eastward to Tartary* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 324.

¹² Kaplan, *Eastward to Tartary*, 324.

¹³ Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, ix; Ronald Grigor Suny, “The Pawn of Great Powers: The East–West Competition for Caucasia,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 2010): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2009.11.007>.

¹⁴ RFE/RL’s Armenian Service, “Yerevan Eyes OSCE Role In Final Nagorno-Karabakh Settlement,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, March 16, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-osce-role-nagorno-karabakh-settlement/31153905.html>.

presence as well.¹⁵ Understanding Russia's investment in its near abroad, shaped by evolving factors, could play a part in any lasting resolution to the conflict, as well as how much long-term influence Russia maintains in the region.¹⁶

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to discuss sources concerning Russian foreign policy in the South Caucasus related specifically to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Much has been investigated and written about Russian foreign policy since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as well as about the evolving nature of Russia's relationships with its former Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs). To a lesser degree, but still profound, scholars, reporters, and practitioners have explored the root causes of the ongoing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan. They too have analyzed Russia's implementation of its strategy in the South Caucasus. This literature review focuses on sources that: provide understanding of Russian historical priorities in Transcaucasia, explain how regional actors perceive Russia as an aid or obstacle in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and elucidate the extent to which outside actors shape Russian policies in both the region and the conflict.

1. Russian Priorities in Transcaucasia in the Historical Context

There is a wealth of material analyzing Russian foreign policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh in a historical context. Whether openly supporting secessionist movements in the former SSRs, prolonging frozen conflicts to maintain political pressure, or exerting traditional hard and soft power, Russia has exerted continual influence in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict—in unison with its overall strategy in its near abroad—going back to

¹⁵ Thomas de Waal, "Unfinished Business in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict," Carnegie Europe, February 11, 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/02/11/unfinished-business-in-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-pub-83844>; Robert E. Hamilton and Anna Mikulska, "Cooperation, Competition, and Compartmentalization: Russian-Turkish Relations and Their Implications for the West," Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 8, 2021, 33, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/04/cooperation-competition-and-compartmentalization-russian-turkish-relations-and-their-implications-for-the-west/>.

¹⁶ de Waal, "Unfinished Business in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict"; Laura Kelly, "State Calls for Azerbaijan to Pull Back Forces from Armenia Border," The Hill, May 14, 2021, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/553648-state-calls-for-azerbaijan-to-pull-back-forces-from-armenia-border>.

the Soviet era, when Nagorno-Karabakh was an Autonomous Oblast (NKAO).¹⁷ The literature suggests that presently, Russia seems to devote significant strategic planning to the region, since it believes itself to have unique interests there related to a common history, proximity, and interconnectedness despite former SSRs' growing relationships with other regional actors like Turkey.¹⁸

As recently as late 2020, Russia asserted itself as a central mediator in the ceasefire of the Second Karabakh War, circumventing the OSCE Minsk Group and solidifying an agreement where the peacekeeping troops in Nagorno-Karabakh would be exclusively Russian.¹⁹ Furthermore, some reports suggest that Moscow is considering issuing Karabakh Armenians exclusive Russian passports, which exhibits parallels to Russian policy maneuvers in the greater Caucasus.²⁰ Russia's historical strategy seems to have worked in a broad sense, thereby giving the Kremlin significant influence in Armenia while remaining careful not to isolate Azerbaijan.²¹ The literature bears out that Russia has balanced these relationships, partly through its peacekeeping role, but while also holding firm its influence over the former SSRs in the South Caucasus.²²

¹⁷ Emil Avdalani, "Turkey Seeks to Counter Russia in the Black Sea-Caucasus Region," *The Turkey Analyst*, accessed May 13, 2021, <http://turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/652-turkey's-commitment-to-azerbaijan's-defense-shows-the-limits-of-ankara's-tilt-to-moscow.html>; Marlène Laruelle and Jean Radvanyi, *Understanding Russia: The Challenges of Transformation* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 98; Robert Coalson, "How Stalin Created Some of the Post-Soviet World's Worst Ethnic Conflicts," *The Atlantic*, March 1, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/03/how-stalin-created-some-of-the-post-soviet-worlds-worst-ethnic-conflicts/273649/>; Maximilian Hess, "The Realist Victory in Nagorno-Karabakh," Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 13, 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/11/the-realist-victory-in-nagorno-karabakh/>.

¹⁸ de Waal, "Unfinished Business in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict"; Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Spheres of Interest, Not Influence," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (October 2009): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600903231089>; Laruelle and Radvanyi, *Understanding Russia*, 101.

¹⁹ de Waal, "Unfinished Business in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict."

²⁰ de Waal; Anton Troianovski and Carlotta Gall, "In Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Deal, Putin Applied a Deft New Touch," *New York Times*, December 1, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/01/world/europe/nagorno-karabakh-putin-armenia-azerbaijan.html>.

²¹ Troianovski and Gall, "In Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Deal, Putin Applied a Deft New Touch."

²² Troianovski and Gall.

2. Perceptions of Russia in the South Caucasus

The primary regional stakeholders in the Nagorno-Karabakh wars are Armenia and Azerbaijan. Sources indicate varying degrees to which Armenia and Azerbaijan rely on Russia militarily, economically, and diplomatically, despite both becoming more self-determined and nationalistic over Nagorno-Karabakh since the fall of the Soviet Union.²³ The literature observes that while Armenia finds itself increasingly isolated as Azerbaijan moves closer to Turkey, Russia has also maintained political ties to Azerbaijan via arms sales and through what appears to be tacit approval of Azerbaijan's maneuvers in Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁴ Still, its historically enormous number of human casualties, displacements, and territorial uncertainties make the conflict very much an Armenian-Azerbaijani issue, for which the literature suggests both will seek international support wherever they can.²⁵

Expert perceptions of Russian presence in the region range from organized, vis-à-vis the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (which Armenia has hastily sought to invoke), to informal, via Russian Federation president Vladimir Putin's personal relationship with President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan.²⁶ However, the literature indicates that Azerbaijan is less reliant on Russia presently, evidenced by the fact Baku has spent billions on its armed forces while minimizing its dependence on Russia to transport

²³ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia: Development and Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16–17.

²⁴ Troianovski and Gall, "In Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Deal, Putin Applied a Deft New Touch"; Kavus Abushov, "Russian Foreign Policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Prudent Geopolitics, Incapacity or Identity?," *East European Politics* 35, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 72–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2019.1579711>; Joshua Kucera, "Armenia and Azerbaijan in New Border Crisis," May 14, 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-and-azerbaijan-in-new-border-crisis>.

²⁵ de Waal, "Unfinished Business in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict"; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 99.

²⁶ Avet Demourian, "Armenia Asks for Russian Help amid Tensions with Azerbaijan," Yahoo News, May 14, 2021, <https://news.yahoo.com/armenia-asks-russian-help-amid-173325113.html?guccounter=1>; Matthew Luxmoore, "In Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, Turkey's Involvement Could Be Russia's Nightmare," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, September 30, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/in-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-turkey-involvement-could-be-russia-nightmare/30866702.html>; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 277.

Azerbaijani oil from the Caspian — a move that Azerbaijan solidified partly through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Nabucco pipelines.²⁷

Finally, the literature asserts that the regional actors' perception of Russia is important to Moscow, just as it seeks both leverage and stability there to enhance its lines of communication with the former SSRs, as well as Moscow's relationship with Turkey and Iran, all while bypassing Georgia.²⁸ Russia uses its military presence in Armenia and its weapon sales to Azerbaijan to shape the regional perception of Russia and limit outside influences. In large part, Armenia and Azerbaijan's perception of Moscow's role in the region is significant to maintaining the current status quo of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.²⁹

3. Turkey's Role in Shaping Russian Policy

The ever-changing involvement of outside actors and forces in Nagorno-Karabakh is perhaps where the literature is the narrowest or most evolving. While the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict festers, global actors like the U.S., France, the European Union (EU), and the OSCE Minsk Group attempt to resolve the hostilities through varying degrees of intervention. However, the literature is mounting quickly regarding Russian competition with Turkey and what some experts consider Turkey's approach to the region more broadly.³⁰

²⁷ Mike Eckel, "Five Key Things To Know About Nagorno-Karabakh," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, October 15, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/30893222.html>; RFE/RL's Armenian Service, "Armenia Turns To Russian-Led CSTO Amid Border Standoff With Azerbaijan," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, May 14, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-azerbaijan-putin-troops-border-withdrawal/31254474.html>; Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia*, 126; Gubad Ibadoghlu and Crude Accountability, *The Empty Bucket of The State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan: Profits and Profiteering* (Alexandria, VA: Crude Accountability, 2020), 43–44, https://crudeaccountability.org/wp-content/uploads/The_Empty_Bucket_report_web.pdf.

²⁸ de Waal, "Unfinished Business in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict"; Neil Hauer, "Bitter Military Losses Lead to Power Struggle In Nagorno-Karabakh," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, April 10, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/karabakh-power-struggle-haratiunian-balasanian-russia-armenia-azerbaijan/31196526.html>.

²⁹ Shamkhal Abilov and Ismayil Isayev, "The Consequences of the Nagorno-Karabakh War for Azerbaijan and the Undeniable Reality of Khojaly Massacre: A View from Azerbaijan," *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 45 (December 12, 2016): 301, <https://doi.org/10.15804/ppsy2016022>.

³⁰ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 147–48.

Current sources focus heavily on Turkey as a major player in Nagorno-Karabakh, ranging from tactical involvement to influencing Russian policy decisions. As Armenia draws closer to Russia, Turkey increasingly supports Azerbaijan overtly and covertly to marginalize Armenia and leverage Baku as a tool in Turkey's competition with Russia globally.³¹ The literature indicates that Turkey and Azerbaijan's relationship could create more friction in the future between Russia and Turkey.

D. RESEARCH DESIGN

This research uses process tracing as the analytical approach to investigate the causal mechanisms of factors shaping Russian foreign policy in Nagorno-Karabakh.³² In accordance with David Collier's account, this thesis conducts "the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator."³³ Through process tracing, the author will analyze the links between hypothetical explanations and observable phenomena within the single case study of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.³⁴

This research methodology is appropriate because it enables the evaluation of causal claims while seeking to explain social, political, and historical observations.³⁵ Within the single case study exploring factors influencing Russian foreign policy in Nagorno-Karabakh, this analysis can explain much of the protracted nature of the conflict. That said, because of the characteristics of the war and numerous political variables

³¹ Bechev, 162; Michael Kofman and Leonid Nersisyan, "The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Two Weeks In," War on the Rocks, October 14, 2020, <http://warontherocks.com/2020/10/the-second-nagorno-karabakh-war-two-weeks-in/>; Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. R41368 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020), 1, 24–25, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R41368>.

³² Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, *BCSIA Studies in International Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 177, 223–26.

³³ David Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing," *Political Science & Politics* 44, no. 04 (October 2011): 823, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511001429>.

³⁴ Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg, eds., *Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory*, *Studies in Rationality and Social Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 13.

³⁵ Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing," 823.

impacting the region, analysis of Russian involvement will only be a single explanation of the overall conflict, albeit an important one.

The research comprises a comprehensive evaluation of events and decisions framed by multiple actors, decades, geography, and outside influences. To ensure comprehensiveness, the author uses primary, secondary, and tertiary sources of factual events, observations, and analytical explanations. Primary source material will consist of published interviews and first-person historical accounts, as well as information from various databases. Secondary and tertiary sources consist of published analysis, opinion, editorial, and media releases to capture ground truth and geopolitical context. The author uses additional information from periodical records, journals, and contemporary analysis in the public domain.

The author analyzes patterns of change over three decades, including those in Russian foreign policy, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict itself, and relevant world events to compare the geopolitical changes in the region. By assessing similarities and differences across time and through other variables, like Russian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani leadership, the author evaluates which factors were most instrumental in influencing Russian foreign policy in Nagorno-Karabakh.

E. THESIS OVERVIEW

The remaining chapters examine how the Kremlin views its role in Nagorno-Karabakh and how it determines which foreign policy stances to undertake. Chapter II examines Russia's historical foreign policy in Nagorno-Karabakh, beginning with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Chapter III discusses Russian foreign policy from the perspective of Armenia and Azerbaijan, as Russia seeks to leverage its hegemony over the two former SSRs separately and comprehensively. Chapter IV examines the emerging foreign policy decisions Russia has made in the recent past, to counter Turkey's growing influence in the South Caucasus.

II. RUSSIA'S POST-SOVIET CONSIDERATIONS TOWARD NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Among numerous unresolved conflicts in the former SSRs, the one in contested Nagorno-Karabakh, between Armenia and Azerbaijan (see Figure 2), is arguably the hottest. While the violence has taken on various levels of intensity in the last three decades, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was a domestic problem during Soviet times too. In fact, Moscow's lengthy mediation of the unrest in Nagorno-Karabakh dates from the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution and extended well into the 1980s and up to the fall of the USSR.³⁶ Furthermore, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has executed its Transcaucasian foreign policy in parallel, yet with more nuance to that enacted by the USSR. Russia's goal there remains mostly unchanged since the dissolution of the Soviet Union: to maintain hegemony within Transcaucasia and implicit control over Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Nagorno-Karabakh affairs, as part of its larger, layered near abroad strategy.

Concurrently, Armenia and Azerbaijan have each sought to further their control over Nagorno-Karabakh as part of their individual self-determination, grounded in nationalism. The decades-long Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has resulted in over 20,000 deaths and 1.5 million persons displaced.³⁷

While past actions and policies do not necessarily indicate how Russia will execute its future foreign policy objectives in Nagorno-Karabakh, Putin's consolidation of his political longevity suggests that Moscow will likely maintain or increase its influence in the South Caucasus. Therefore, understanding Russia's historical involvement in Armenia and Azerbaijan provides insight into why Russia might be undertaking a certain sequence of actions relative to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

³⁶ Welt and Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, 2; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 56, 174–77.

³⁷ Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, 2005, 47, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/lib/ebook-nps/reader.action?docID=235370>; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 99.



Figure 2. 2013 Map of Nagorno-Karabakh³⁸

Of particular relevance is what Russia desires out of its relationship with Armenia and Azerbaijan within the context of Russia's global aims for great-power status.³⁹ From the Russian perspective, the South Caucasus remains part of its near abroad, regardless of other international designs or influence.⁴⁰ Within this sphere, Russia's perception of its position implies that it also expects special rights in its entire near abroad unique to the international community, including the freedom to mediate disputes, cooperate with other

³⁸ Source: de Waal, *Black Garden*, xix.

³⁹ Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, 17.

⁴⁰ Radin and Reach, 10–12.

powers, and exercise a degree of autonomy without international approval or criticism.⁴¹ In 2008, then Russian Federation president Dimitri Medvedev said as much, claiming, “Russia, just like other countries in the world, has regions where it has its privileged interests. In these regions, there are countries with which we have traditionally had friendly cordial relations, historically special relations.”⁴²

In addition to these “privileged interests,” the Kremlin expects its unique position to include providing leadership to nations within its sphere, thereby enabling Russia to shore up its near abroad against regional competition from actors like Turkey and Iran.⁴³ With Vladimir Putin at the helm, Russia also expects its “special relations” with the former SSRs to limit the West’s and other international involvement in the greater Caucasus region, such as limiting North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alignment with Georgia. Putin’s post-Soviet worldview perceives Russia as a “normal great power.”⁴⁴ Therefore, he seeks geopolitical relationships that further this narrative while also increasing opportunity for economic growth in the former SSRs and Eurasia.⁴⁵ Considering Russia’s desire for a special relationship in its near abroad, one could draw parallels of Russia’s policies in Nagorno-Karabakh to how the U.S. might implement its policies in regions like the Caribbean or Central America.

A. A CONTINUATION OF THE PAST

When examining Russia’s perception of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the post-Soviet world, it is important to acknowledge that Russia inherited a contested South

⁴¹ Radin and Reach, 17.

⁴² Radin and Reach, 17; Paul Reynolds, “New Russian World Order: The Five Principles,” BBC News, September 1, 2008, BBC News edition, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7591610.stm>.

⁴³ Tom O’Connor, “Armenia Wants Iran’s Help, Azerbaijan Says U.S., Russia, France Not Doing Enough to End Conflict,” *Newsweek*, accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/armenia-iran-help-azerbaijan-us-russia-france-not-doing-enough-1540734>.

⁴⁴ Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Preserving Influence in a Changing World,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 58, no. 2 (December 8, 2014): 40–41, <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216580203>.

⁴⁵ Tsygankov, 40–41; Olga Oliker et al., *Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), 87; Anne L. Clunan, “Historical Aspirations and the Domestic Politics of Russia’s Pursuit of International Status,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47, no. 3–4 (December 1, 2014): 283, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2014.09.002>.

Caucasus in large part because of former Soviet policies. The underlying causes of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are complex, but the Soviet Union contributed to the animosity between ethnic Armenians and Azeri Turks, who had previously coexisted peacefully most of the time.⁴⁶ As it had in many Soviet spheres of influence in the bipolar Cold War era, the international system established artificial borders around diverse populations while global powers forced rigid national identities upon them.⁴⁷ For his part, Joseph Stalin left the NKAO's borders undefined on purpose, to engender a unified and politically-aligned socialist client under Soviet leadership and to lessen the effects of external dissent.⁴⁸ It was not until later that the Soviet Union acknowledged Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijani territory, thereby only placating Turkey.⁴⁹ Therefore, Soviet policy in Transcaucasia was an attempt to change or maintain the geopolitical landscape to its own benefit.⁵⁰

Post-Soviet Russia was initially too weak to have any real effect on geopolitical matters in the South Caucasus, even though the Soviet Union had deployed or stationed thousands of soldiers in the region by the end of the 1980s.⁵¹ This reality, combined with more pressing negotiations with Washington about how to manage the nuclear-armed former SSRs of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, pushed Nagorno-Karabakh farther down the international agenda.⁵² Meanwhile, Nagorno-Karabakh continued to devolve into a struggle similar to frozen or unresolved conflicts within Russia's borders and its

⁴⁶ Coalson, "How Stalin Created Some of the Post-Soviet World's Worst Ethnic Conflicts"; Robert D. Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy* (New York: Random House, 1997), 169.

⁴⁷ Kaplan, *Eastward to Tartary*, 324.

⁴⁸ Coalson, "How Stalin Created Some of the Post-Soviet World's Worst Ethnic Conflicts"; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 75.

⁴⁹ Coalson, "How Stalin Created Some of the Post-Soviet World's Worst Ethnic Conflicts."

⁵⁰ Albert Resis, ed., *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics: Conversations with Felix Chuev* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), 8; Benn Steil, "Russia's Clash with the West Is About Geography, Not Ideology," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed May 5, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/12/russias-clash-with-the-west-is-about-geography-not-ideology/>.

⁵¹ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 178–79.

⁵² Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 38.

newly-recognized near abroad.⁵³ This unrest led to a waning of Russian influence in its Transcaucasian sphere of control, previously considered by Stalin the Soviet Union's soft underbelly.⁵⁴

B. SUMMARY OF RUSSIA'S POST-SOVIET PERCEPTIONS OF NAGORNO-KARABAKH

President Boris Yeltsin inherited the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the immediate post-Soviet era while instability in the South Caucasus partially contributed to the fall of the USSR.⁵⁵ Yet, long before then, in the 1960s, Karabakh Armenians had made their discontent about control over Nagorno-Karabakh public, one of the first titular nationalities to challenge Kremlin policies.⁵⁶ The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that Yeltsin inherited foreshadowed additional frozen conflicts inside the Russian Federation's new borders while Yeltsin dealt with other pressing matters, including his attempted impeachment.⁵⁷ Not only did Yeltsin's decentralization contribute to a weakened Russian Federation on the domestic front, but he relaxed Moscow's former inclination to resolve regional conflicts through coercion or force. Partly because of this shift, Yeltsin's Russia was simply unable or unwilling to resolve the dispute between nascent sovereign Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁵⁸ As a result, under President Yeltsin, Russia's policy towards Nagorno Karabakh devolved into a looser Russian influence, which Armenia and Azerbaijan were able to exploit in conducting military operations, raising volunteer (and mercenary) armies, and negotiating separate agendas with each other and without the oversight of Moscow.⁵⁹

⁵³ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 89–90; Petersen, *The World Island*, 87–89; Bechev, *Rival Power*, 28.

⁵⁴ Steil, "Russia's Clash with the West Is About Geography, Not Ideology"; Resis, *Molotov Remembers*, 8.

⁵⁵ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 174; Kaplan, *Eastward to Tartary*, 324.

⁵⁶ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 154.

⁵⁷ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 89–90; Petersen, *The World Island*, 87–89; Bechev, *Rival Power*, 28; David E. Hoffman, *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia, Revised and Updated* (Oxford: Public Affairs, 2011), 461.

⁵⁸ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 309.

⁵⁹ de Waal, 175–80, 296.

The early 2000s witnessed a transformation in Russia's perception of Transcaucasia. This shift coincided with Putin's election to the presidency and a shifting Russian perception of its near abroad, including its economic interests in the Caucasus region.⁶⁰ While it can be argued that Russia had the same uneasiness about its near abroad ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, the 2000s brought about a change in global geopolitical security matters while Russia dealt with acts of terrorism in its own sphere. Putin could be credited with creating a large amount of the domestic and economic stability that allowed Russia to focus outward.⁶¹ However, Putin initially exhibited a lack of interest in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict during his first stint as president, only meeting with the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents once in 2004 to shore up Russian economic interests.⁶² More important to the Kremlin during the early 2000s was creating a wedge between Western powers in the Caucasus and limiting Western influence over the colored revolutions in former SSRs.⁶³ Although Nagorno-Karabakh was not part of these revolutions, the Kremlin's desire to maintain hegemony in the greater Caucasus region contributed, in part, to the Russo-Georgia War of 2008, whereas progress stalled in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Russia would have been hesitant at that time to undertake a unilateral option in Nagorno-Karabakh while the OSCE pursued its multinational effort to resolve the South Caucasus conflict as conflict emerged in the North Caucasus.

After the Russo-Georgia War, and as Russia's revanchism in Eastern Europe has increased over the last decade, so too has Russia's interest increased in playing a central role in the mediation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. During Medvedev's term as president of the Russian Federation, he took an active role in the Nagorno-Karabakh

⁶⁰ Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia*, 105.

⁶¹ Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 279–81.

⁶² de Waal, *Black Garden*, 277, 295–96; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 130.

⁶³ Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia*, 133–34.

⁶⁴ Suny, "The Pawn of Great Powers," 11; Laruelle and Radvanyi, *Understanding Russia*, 52; Sabine Freizer, "Nagorno-Karabakh - A Frozen Conflict That Could Boil Over," Crisis Group, January 31, 2008, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan/nagorno-karabakh-frozen-conflict-could-boil-over>.

negotiation process, including personally editing drafts of negotiation terms between the two belligerents.⁶⁵ And although little lasting progress was made then, the Kremlin's increased involvement in the resolution process, deepened by an increasingly interested Putin, has reinforced the status quo of Russian leadership in a possible conclusion.⁶⁶ Russia's intent to "impose" what Thomas de Waal terms a "Pax Russica" during the last decade has enabled Russia to maintain its base in Gyumri, Armenia, reduce Western diplomats' role in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, and limit Azerbaijan's willingness to antagonize Russia via hostilities with Armenia, at least until the recent 2020 war commenced.⁶⁷

Intertwined in this brief history is also a theme of Russia's economic and political cohesion with former SSRs. While Armenia's and Azerbaijan's independence solidified during the dissolution of the USSR, their full divorce from political and oligarchical influence has yet to be fully achieved. Oligarchs from the former SSRs play a role in the Kremlin today, including some of Armenian and Azerbaijani descent, who grew wealthy in the post-Soviet decades.⁶⁸ Moreover, early Armenian and Azerbaijani governments were formed by former Soviet bureaucrats and strongmen like Azerbaijan's Heidar Aliyev (Heydar Aliev), whose son Ilham Aliyev remains in power today.⁶⁹ In 2001, Putin traveled to Baku to present Heidar Aliyev his 1949 graduation certificate from the Komitet Gozudarstvennoye Bezopasnosti (KGB) Academy, a symbolic gesture of friendly alignment with Azerbaijan.⁷⁰ Thus, numerous official, and likely unofficial, personal and

⁶⁵ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 296.

⁶⁶ de Waal, 296.

⁶⁷ de Waal, 296; Suny, "The Pawn of Great Powers," 20.

⁶⁸ News.am, "Russian Oligarch of Azerbaijani Origin Ordered to Pay His Ex-Wife £453million," News.am, January 2, 2018, <https://news.am/eng/news/434203.html>; MassisPost, "Three Russian-Armenian 'Oligarchs' Included in U.S. Treasury 'Kremlin Report,'" *MassisPost* (blog), January 31, 2018, <https://massispost.com/2018/01/three-russian-armenian-oligarchs-included-us-treasury-kremlin-report/>; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 186.

⁶⁹ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 171, 173.

⁷⁰ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 277; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 183; William J. Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action and the Presidency* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), xvii; James Nichol, "Azerbaijan," in *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Country Studies*, ed. Glenn E. Curtis, 1st ed (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1995), 94, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Armenia_Azerbaijan_and_Georgia/B2W1YOG3N10C?hl=en&gbpv=1.

political ties have an impact on the geopolitical makeup, of which play a role in today's mediation process over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Finally, it must also be observed that the Kremlin likely sees little choice but to involve itself in the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh hostilities and regional instability. Whether Moscow increases its influence or not, Nagorno-Karabakh remains a volatile geopolitical situation in Russia's near abroad that opens the possibility for outside influence from regional neighbors like Turkey and Iran, as well as international interest and involvement from Western-backed multinational organizations.⁷¹ Therefore, Russia's foreign policy could broadly be a two-pronged approach: increase its geopolitical leverage while also limiting the leverage of others. Accordingly, Russia's involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh can be seen in its involvement in international organizations and unilateral persuasion when Moscow finds it necessary to achieve its aims in the South Caucasus. At least in 2020, Russia was able to achieve both goals, even if the ceasefire breaks down over the coming months or years.⁷²

C. RUSSIA'S ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO MEDIATE THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

Although Russia has paused the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through its brokered ceasefire it is not the only actor in the peace process. Consequently, Moscow has sought membership in and the employment of a few international organizations and treaties over the last thirty years to place it firmly in the middle of most of the issues in its near abroad. Although some of these international organizations were not founded with Nagorno-Karabakh specifically in mind, they helped Russia extend its foreign policy influence in that part of the world nonetheless. Consequently, the Commonwealth of Independent States

⁷¹ Steve Blank, "Iran's Latest Misadventure Destabilizes the Caucasus," War on the Rocks, June 18, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/irans-latest-misadventure-destabilizes-the-caucasus/>; Benyamin Poghosyan, "Opinion: Armenians Misjudged Iran's Calculations in the South Caucasus," KarabakhSpace.eu, June 7, 2021, <https://karabakhspace.commonsplace.eu/opinion/opinion-armenians-misjudged-irans-calculations-south-caucasus>.

⁷² Bernard Kouchner, "Bernard Kouchner: On Karabakh, Putin Can Be a 'Good Boy,'" *USC Institute of Armenian Studies* (blog), April 27, 2021, <https://armenian.usc.edu/bernard-kouchner-putin-can-be-a-good-boy-in-karabakh/>; Stephen Sestanovich, "Has Russia Ended the War Between Armenia and Azerbaijan?," Council on Foreign Relations, November 18, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/has-russia-ended-war-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan>.

(CIS), the OSCE and its Karabakh-focused committee Minsk Group, and the CSTO have all played some part in either attempting to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict or bending regional influence toward individual stakeholders. Specifically, Russia has sought to use its membership in these groups, and unilateral efforts outside these organizations, to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

D. THE ROLE OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF INDEPENDENT STATES

Formed almost immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the CIS is one of the few multinational organizations in which Armenia and Azerbaijan are both active members, despite the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute.⁷³ For then Russian Federation president Boris Yeltsin, the CIS was an opportunity to do what he described as “ensure the preservation of the political, legal, and economic space built up over the centuries but now almost lost.”⁷⁴ Putin’s echo of this sentiment in 2014 revolved around his hope that the CIS “would become a new form of joint sovereignty,” although Putin’s focus was more on Ukraine than other former SSRs (and still is today).⁷⁵ Currently, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains on the CIS agenda, but it can be perplexing why the CIS has been unable to make lasting progress on an issue it should have wide incentive to resolve if truly in the interest of all members. One could presume that a multilateral organization comprising nothing but former SSRs, one in which Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan all have relatively equal standing (in theory), is the ideal organization to resolve the decades-long conflict. While it can be simplistic to blame Russia for this lack of resolution, Russia is the primary stakeholder in the CIS and wields the most influence, even if the CIS’s significance as a multinational mediator is in name only.

The CIS did make an attempt at a Russian-led multinational effort to create peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. On 4–5 May 1994, delegations from CIS member states and a representative from the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic met in

⁷³ Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, New and Expanded (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 33–35.

⁷⁴ Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 323.

⁷⁵ Plokhy, 323–24.

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan for discussions in what would come to be known as the Bishkek Protocol.⁷⁶ While there, members of the Armenian and Karabakh delegation signed an agreement for a ceasefire, but the Azerbaijani delegation waited days to seek approval from then president Heidar Aliyev, a foreshadowing of numerous future stalling attempts to come by both sides.⁷⁷ That brokered ceasefire did not endure, but it did establish the approximately 150-mile Line of Contact/Line of Control (LOC) separating Armenian-backed and Azerbaijani fighting units, lasting as an artificial boundary until the Second Karabakh War (and remains intact in some parts of Nagorno-Karabakh).⁷⁸

However, as the CIS failed to generate a lasting peace in the region, its attempts gave way to those of other multinational organizations, with Western membership, which had also sought to create peace in Nagorno-Karabakh after the Soviet Union dissolved. This maneuvering from the West did not deter Russia over the decades though. Even outside of the CIS, Russia maintained close economic and political alignment with as many former SSRs as possible, and oligarchs from the SSRs gained more power in Moscow over the years. The situation in Armenia and Azerbaijan was no different, even as Russia kept troops in Armenia to apply tacit political pressure when necessary.⁷⁹

The CIS's involvement has endured over the years with varying degrees of success. For example, the recent but fragile ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh was reinforced in a CIS virtual summit in December 2020. There, President Putin lauded Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh but cautioned about the increased presence of "terrorism," as those troops provided ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh access to the Armenian mainland

⁷⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 250; Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 170.

⁷⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 250–51.

⁷⁸ Erin Blakemore, "How the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Has Been Shaped by Past Empires," National Geographic, October 15, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/10/how-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-shaped-by-past-empires/>; Welt and Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, 4; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 294.

⁷⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 175–77.

through a five-kilometer-wide corridor.⁸⁰ Seizing the opportunity to solidify the recent Azerbaijani military success with political reinforcement, Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, commented the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia is "history," and therefore, it should be referred to in the "past tense."⁸¹ Aliyev was also quick to exonerate Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan (Pashinian) of the responsibility for Armenia's poor performance in the 2020 flareup, as Aliyev claimed that previous Armenian leaders' policies and actions in Nagorno-Karabakh had contributed to Azerbaijan's overwhelming success.⁸² Aliyev likely did this as an attempt to compel Pashinyan to accept the new reality in the conflict without protest.

Despite the duplicitous nature of Aliyev's comments, the context of them occurring in a CIS meeting 30 years after the CIS formed is relevant to the CIS's role in the conflict. The increasing and decreasing effectiveness of the CIS in Nagorno-Karabakh can be further elucidated by Azerbaijan's initial reluctance to join the CIS upon gaining independence, citing disenfranchisement with Moscow's leanings toward Armenia, dating back to Soviet times.⁸³ Additionally, Putin's neglect to challenge Aliyev's assertion not only limited Armenian recourse to retake lost territory in Nagorno-Karabakh but also planted Russia firmly as the primary guarantor of peace, regardless of how involved the CIS is.

E. THE ROLE OF THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Alongside the formation of the CIS, the dissolution of the USSR led to attempts by the international community to mediate peace in the First Karabakh War. These attempts occurred mostly through unilateral and multilateral efforts, thereby sowing the seeds for both Armenia and Azerbaijan to both seek the type of resolution that they thought would

⁸⁰ RFE/RFL, "CIS Virtual Summit Focuses On COVID, Nagorno-Karabakh, Cooperation," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 18, 2020, sec. News, <https://www.rferl.org/a/cis-virtual-summit-focuses-on-covid-nagorno-karabakh-cooperation/31007883.html>; Hess, "The Realist Victory in Nagorno-Karabakh."

⁸¹ RFE/RFL, "CIS Virtual Summit Focuses On COVID, Nagorno-Karabakh, Cooperation."

⁸² RFE/RFL.

⁸³ Alex Marshall, *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 133, 188, 284.

favor their cause the most.⁸⁴ It also prodded the Kremlin to get involved in these new initiatives, lest it precipitously lose its influence in the South Caucasus (among other geopolitical flashpoints). One such organization is the OSCE, which evolved over the years from the earlier Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).⁸⁵ The committee within the OSCE bearing the most relevance to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the Minsk Conference, so named in 1992 after the newly independent Belarusian state offered to hold Karabakh peace talks in its capital, Minsk.⁸⁶

1. CSCE to OSCE

The CSCE emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union as the U.S., Turkey, and Western European nations maintained interest in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.⁸⁷ However, involvement of Western powers also endangered the peace process insofar as Nagorno-Karabakh became a pretext for Western engagement with Russia and thereby Moscow's overall influence in Transcaucasia.⁸⁸ But the overall effectiveness of the CSCE was limited by its massive agenda, such that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict competed against other pressing international issues. As a result, the CSCE organized the Minsk Conference to focus solely on the protracted war in the South Caucasus. Concurrently, the nations involved in the CSCE's temporary nature decided to form the OSCE to deal with recurring issues on a more permanent basis. The Minsk Conference was absorbed into the OSCE as a new permanent subcommittee named the Minsk Group in 1992.⁸⁹

2. Minsk Group

Even though Moscow has had growing suspicions with the broader OSCE's focus since Russia's Crimean incursion in 2014, the Minsk Group has had some success in

⁸⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 240–41.

⁸⁵ de Waal, 241.

⁸⁶ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 124.

⁸⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 241.

⁸⁸ de Waal, 241.

⁸⁹ de Waal, 241.

Nagorno-Karabakh while enabling Russia to maintain a significant role as mediator in the conflict.⁹⁰ The Minsk Group consists of permanent representation by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Finland, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Turkey.⁹¹ However, the routine participants in any Nagorno-Karabakh progress are Armenia and Azerbaijan, along with the co-chairmanship of Russia, France, and the U.S., in place since 1997.⁹² Noticeably absent from the current construct is Turkey's role as cochair.

Initially, the Minsk Group was plagued by political jockeying between Azerbaijan and Armenia as hostilities ensued at the Nagorno-Karabakh LOC. These maneuvers stalled any real progress up to the end of the century.⁹³ Some peace advancements have been made through multilateral efforts. However, de Waal notes that the process is mostly broken, because the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan have enough political pull within the organization to stall any meaningful progress if they desire.⁹⁴ Because of this seemingly broken process, de Waal also asserts that the last few years of negotiations have resulted in "Karabakh fatigue," with little optimism among diplomats that the OSCE Minsk Group will have any real power to resolve recurring hostilities.⁹⁵ Perhaps Russia is aware of the OSCE's ineffectiveness (or partly responsible), giving Moscow more leverage to settle Karabakh issues with resolutions that are favorable to itself or to block Western diplomatic efforts through the OSCE.

⁹⁰ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 74; Amb. (Ret.) Richard E. Hoagland, "Does the Minsk Group Still Have a Role?," *International Conflict Resolution Center* (blog), March 26, 2021, 74, <https://icrcenter.org/does-the-minsk-group-still-have-a-role/>.

⁹¹ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 124–123; Welt and Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, 3, Footnote 5.

⁹² Hoagland, "Does the Minsk Group Still Have a Role?"; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 318.

⁹³ Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 399, 468.

⁹⁴ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 318.

⁹⁵ Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia and Turkey in Nagorno-Karabakh: A Recipe for Long-Term Instability," *Middle East Institute*, October 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-and-turkey-nagorno-karabakh-recipe-long-term-instability>.

F. THE ROLE OF THE COLLECTIVE SECURITY TREATY ORGANIZATION

The CSTO has increasingly become Russia's lever for influence over most of the former SSRs. Alexandros Petersen claims "The CSTO is Moscow's preferred vehicle for safeguarding its sphere of influence in Eurasia."⁹⁶ Members include Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, after Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Georgia left the organization over the last couple of decades.⁹⁷ This NATO-like allegiance affords all CSTO members the luxury (or burden) of collective security against belligerents.⁹⁸ When Azerbaijan moved away from CSTO membership as its orientation towards Turkey and the West grew in the early 2000s, it also gave up any dependence on Russian-owned railways and telecommunications equipment included in the CSTO agreement.⁹⁹

However, for Armenia, the CSTO is critical.¹⁰⁰ Armenia's inclusion in the CSTO and Azerbaijan's departure puts Russia in a precarious position if Armenia invokes the collective security obligation of the allegiance against Azerbaijani hostilities. For now, Putin has cleverly sidestepped this possibility in Nagorno-Karabakh by asserting that during 2020, Russia had no obligations with respect to the conflict under the CSTO, considering that Nagorno-Karabakh was part of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territory.¹⁰¹ However, it is almost certain that Russia would intervene on the side of Armenia if fighting were to spill over into the Republic of Armenia, lest Russia's only true

⁹⁶ Petersen, *The World Island*, 89.

⁹⁷ Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, 48, Footnote.

⁹⁸ NATO, "Collective Defence - Article 5," NATO, accessed November 11, 2020, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm; Collective Security Treaty Organization, "Collective Security Treaty, Dated May 15, 1992," February 23, 2012, https://en.odkb-csto.org/documents/documents/dogovor_o_kollektivnoy_bezopasnosti/.

⁹⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 296–97.

¹⁰⁰ Esther Ademmer et al., "Interdependences with External Actors and Regime Persistence in Eastern Partnership Countries," *East European Politics* 37, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 89–109, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1828871>.

¹⁰¹ Moscow Times, "Russia's Security Guarantees for Armenia Don't Extend to Karabakh, Putin Says," *Moscow Times*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/10/07/russias-security-guarantees-for-armenia-dont-extend-to-karabakh-putin-says-a71687>.

ally in the region be overrun by Azerbaijan or Turkey.¹⁰² Therefore, the CSTO agreement has the potential to draw Russia's military into a role exceeding peacekeeping, one where it would have to maneuver possible engagements with Azerbaijani or Turkish forces.¹⁰³ Still, Russia could diplomatically circumvent this likelihood while the existence of the CSTO could deepen Azerbaijani suspicion of the aligned nations and compel Baku to decline future Russian-brokered peace agreements under the guise of CSTO interests.

G. RUSSIAN UNILATERAL INFLUENCE

Outside the CIS, OSCE Minsk Group, and CSTO, Russia can and has used its unilateral influence to broker ceasefires in Nagorno-Karabakh. That is, Russia has taken it upon itself to engage directly with Armenia and Azerbaijan without other nations or multinational groups. In both the 2016 four-day flareup and the 2020 Second Karabakh War, Russia intervened unilaterally to pause hostilities despite failed international attempts after Russia and the West were both seemingly caught off guard by the escalations.¹⁰⁴ Russia maintains this ability as a unilateral mediator in Transcaucasia because it remains what de Waal terms "the most important foreign actor in the region," despite its lack of "instigating or controlling the conflict" directly.¹⁰⁵ In addition to its military alliance with Armenia within the bounds of the CSTO, Russia also uses its weapon sales to Azerbaijan to pursue its interests in the South Caucasus without taking ownership of the conflict.¹⁰⁶ The clearest manifestation of this is that Russian peacekeepers are the only foreign forces on the ground in Nagorno-Karabakh today, at least overtly.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Hamilton and Mikulska, "Cooperation, Competition, and Compartmentalization," 31.

¹⁰³ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 120, 127; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 294, 297.

¹⁰⁴ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 129, 131, 182; Vladimir Socor, "Russian 'Peacekeeping' in Karabakh: Old Model, New Features, Mission Creep (Part Two)," The Jamestown Foundation, January 22, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-peacekeeping-in-karabakh-old-model-new-features-mission-creep-part-two/>; Sergey Markedonov, "Q&A with Sergey Markedonov on Russia and Karabakh," *USC Institute of Armenian Studies* (blog), May 27, 2017, <https://armenian.usc.edu/qa-with-sergey-markedonov-on-russia-and-karabakh/>.

¹⁰⁵ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 130.

¹⁰⁶ de Waal, 130.

¹⁰⁷ International Crisis Group, "Post-War Prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh," International Crisis Group, June 9, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/264-post-war-prospects-nagorno-karabakh>.

It is possible unilateral action is both desirable for and required of Russia to achieve any lasting peace in Nagorno-Karabakh. As the West focuses on the Kremlin's revanchism in other parts of Russia's near abroad and multinational organizations fail to achieve anything more than a stalemate in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia might see its leadership as a necessity to ensure that it remains what de Waal calls "the most active mediator of the conflict."¹⁰⁸ Only because it has significant influence would the Kremlin consider issuing Russian Federation passports to Karabakh residents to avert further bloodshed.¹⁰⁹ Certainly, this is a tactic Moscow has used before in places like Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transdniestria to assert control.¹¹⁰ To maintain this dominance, Moscow might look to sustain a peacekeeping presence on the ground, while also using organizations like the CIS to advance its unilateral actions under the auspices of regional stability.

H. CONCLUSION

As an initially internal Soviet conflict that evolved into a post-Soviet war, Nagorno-Karabakh is a lucid example of what Christopher Zurcher dubs "a showcase of what happens when the central state loses both legitimacy and coercive power."¹¹¹ The fall of the Soviet Union did not cause the Nagorno-Karabakh wars per se, but Soviet policies contributed to the mistrust and nationalism that likely did. Nagorno-Karabakh hostilities can be viewed, in part, as a result of the Kremlin's plan to intermix ethnic groups to reduce attempts by the titular nationalities to separate from the Soviet Union.¹¹² The Soviet Union's dissolution contributed heavily to the resulting vacuum, which has begotten hostilities and deep political unrest in the South Caucasus.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Cordelia Buchanan Ponczek, "With Friends Like These," *CEPA* (blog), October 13, 2020, 130, <https://cepa.org/with-friends-like-these/>.

¹⁰⁹ de Waal, "Unfinished Business in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict."

¹¹⁰ de Waal.

¹¹¹ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 154, 180–81.

¹¹² Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth*, 169.

¹¹³ Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "The Myth of Russian Decline," *Foreign Affairs*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2021-10-19/myth-russian-decline>.

Russia's foreign policy designs in Transcaucasia can be viewed through several different lenses. Whether Russia has maintained a continuation of past Soviet policies in Nagorno-Karabakh, purposely fomented a shaky peace to drive a wedge between the South Caucasus and the West, or taken a leadership role out of necessity, it has become the primary arbiter of peace, however temporary peace may be.¹¹⁴ De Waal terms this preeminence in the region a "First among Equals" status.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, Russia has learned that direct intervention (at least militarily) might not be as beneficial as assuming the role of unilateral mediator while diplomatically and politically exerting its will and abundance of soft power.¹¹⁶

Moreover, if Moscow chooses not to intervene in Nagorno-Karabakh unilaterally, the CSTO gives it a second option to exert its will while also blocking other multinational organizations. Claims of "terrorism" in any one area of its near abroad establish a baseline pretext in all of Russia's backyard for intervention to protect its interests. Whether the claims are valid or not, Putin has used this antiterrorism stance before as a pretext to intervene in the North Caucasus and, as recently as early 2022, in Kazakhstan.¹¹⁷ In fact, the collective defense inherent in the CSTO construct enabled Russia to include Armenian troops deployed to Nur Sultan to quell the upheaval there.¹¹⁸ The importance of Armenia to Russian interests in Transcaucasia, the necessity of the CSTO as an effective bulwark against Western interests in the Caucasus, and Putin's increased proclivity to defend

¹¹⁴ Richard Giragosian, David G. Lewis, and Graeme P. Herd, "Russian Crisis Behavior, Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkey?," George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, January 2021, <http://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/perspectives/russian-crisis-behavior-nagorno-karabakh-and-turkey-0>.

¹¹⁵ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 238.

¹¹⁶ Emil Avdaliani, "Russian Foreign Policy: The Kremlin Has Learned to Bide Its Time," *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies* (blog), April 18, 2021, <https://besacenter.org/russian-foreign-policy-the-kremlin-has-learned-to-bide-its-time/>; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 98.

¹¹⁷ Frida Ghitis, "Putin Has Turned Russia Into Autocracy's Defender of Last Resort," *World Politics Review*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/30246/russia-s-putin-is-now-autocracy-s-defender-of-last-resort>.

¹¹⁸ Hal Brands, "Putin Is Shoring Up the Global Alliance of Autocrats," *Bloomberg*, January 14, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-01-14/in-kazakhstan-putin-is-shoring-up-the-global-alliance-of-autocrats>.

autocratic regimes such as Azerbaijan's means that Russia is likely to continue its intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh indefinitely.¹¹⁹

Ultimately, the failure of multinational organizations to create a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was, and is, symptomatic of global organizations' inability to intervene in any of the former SSRs' frozen and hot conflicts.¹²⁰ The involvement of these organizations' councils (including the United Nations (UN) and various Non-Governmental Organizations) whether acting independently or under the auspices of the Russian Federation, often create more interference than resolution.¹²¹ To the delight of Moscow, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict cannot be resolved without Russia, as the Kremlin prefers what Petersen calls "the stability of instability."¹²² That notion also exists in public opinion in former SSRs, expounded upon by Marlene Laruelle and Jean Radvanyi when they write, "The Kremlin was viewed [by the former SSRs] as being responsible for prolonging 'frozen conflicts' in order to maintain political pressure on its neighbors."¹²³

However, that does not mean that Russia particularly desires to be engaged in this conflict extensively, especially when it cannot produce a definitive solution or has varying degrees of control over what other actors might do. Moscow is engaged because it has little choice if it desires to keep Armenia and Azerbaijan close and the West detached. Even though it is involved in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Kremlin has had little lasting success in achieving a peace that would ensure that it is not drawn deeper into a future flareup. Although true a brokered ceasefire is better than open warfare in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia, like the rest of the international community, has lacked the necessary amount of control over the belligerents to produce a lasting truce. Because peace remains elusive,

¹¹⁹ Ghitis, "Putin Has Turned Russia Into Autocracy's Defender of Last Resort."

¹²⁰ Johanna Popjanevski, "International Law and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," in *The International Politics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict: The Original "Frozen Conflict" and European Security*, ed. Svante E. Cornell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 23.

¹²¹ Laruelle and Radvanyi, *Understanding Russia*, 98.

¹²² Petersen, *The World Island*, 130.

¹²³ Laruelle and Radvanyi, *Understanding Russia*, 98.

Moscow must remain engaged. It must wield the influence it has, regardless of its larger foreign policy desires. There are other pressing foreign policy matters for the Kremlin, but it simply cannot walk away from the South Caucasus while the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict persists.

This is the analysis of the result of Russian intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh from the Russian perspective. However, Armenia and Azerbaijan could feel varying degrees of dissent or agreement vis-à-vis Russia's impact on peace in Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia's unilateralism could make all stakeholders suspicious of irredentism, considering that the 2020 brokered ceasefire had no international backing and allows Russia to act without oversight.¹²⁴ Therefore, Armenia and Azerbaijan likely perceive Russia's intervention in a different light and base their stance on broader relations with Russia and other nations in the region. Indeed, the next chapter focuses on Armenia and Azerbaijan's perceptions of Russian foreign policy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

¹²⁴ Vladimir Socor, "Russian 'Peacekeeping' in Karabakh: Old Model, New Features, Mission Creep (Part One)," The Jamestown Foundation, January 21, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-peacekeeping-in-karabakh-old-model-new-features-mission-creep-part-one/>.

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III. ARMENIAN AND AZERBAIJANI PERCEPTIONS OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

While Russia's involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh is one of many interventions at the international level, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the most important matter to Armenia and Azerbaijan, especially since the reemergence of war between them in 2020.¹²⁵ Even lingering Armenian consternation surrounding the 1915 Armenian genocide remains an aspect in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict where, ethnic Azeris maintain close ties to Turkey. Although there are regional and even global geopolitical implications of the protracted war, Nagorno-Karabakh is still very much a Caucasian ordeal, with high stakes for both Armenia and Azerbaijan: The Second Karabakh War in 2020 resulted in over 6,000 combat-related deaths, more than 150 noncombatant deaths, and over 10,000 displaced persons.¹²⁶

The ever-evolving war in Nagorno-Karabakh has been a reality for Armenians and Azerbaijanis alike since 1987, when Armenian farmers refused to comply with the Azerbaijani transfer of land from one collective farm (kolkhoz) to another.¹²⁷ From the Azerbaijani perspective, the ordeal began when Soviet Armenians demanded the transfer of the NKAO to the Armenian SSR in 1988.¹²⁸ Yet Armenians argue, the conflict did not spiral out of control until 1988, when Azerbaijanis massacred Armenians in the Caspian Sea town of Sumgait, thereby demonstrating Moscow's inability to protect Soviet Armenians living near Baku.¹²⁹ Conversely, Azerbaijanis claim to have been victims of an Armenian pogrom themselves, during the 1992 Khojaly Massacre inside Nagorno-Karabakh.¹³⁰ This event even included support from remnants of the Soviet 366th

¹²⁵ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 60, 232.

¹²⁶ Welt and Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, Summary.

¹²⁷ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 152.

¹²⁸ Zürcher, 155; Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule*, Studies of Nationalities (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1992), 117; Nichol, "Azerbaijan," 93–94.

¹²⁹ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 155, 160; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 33–38; Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy*, 441–42.

¹³⁰ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 182–84.

Regiment.¹³¹ The disagreement over what caused the escalation has pushed the legitimacy benchmark deeper into the past, to the point that the two sides disagree over who was first to settle the mountainous terrain or whom Moscow intended to be the rightful occupants of the NKAO during the Soviet era.¹³² Even though it began as a local dispute, the escalation of atrocities in the NKAO intensified numerous other regional quarrels in the USSR, leading to the Soviet Union's eventual unraveling.¹³³

Today, layered elements of ethnonationalism, socioeconomics, religious differences, and claims of historical ties to the land motivate self-determined Armenian and Azerbaijanis to fight in Nagorno-Karabakh, even if those motivations are based on what Johanna Popjanevski calls "mistaken assumptions."¹³⁴ The protracted conflict persists, despite the war not being fought specifically over resources inherent to the terrain (other than the high-altitude, fortified city of Shushi [Shiska]).¹³⁵ Ronald Grigor Suny elucidated this proclivity to quarrel when he wrote about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that, "The nationalist representation of an essential if concealed national consciousness, ever present and ready to emerge when opportunity knocked, seemed borne out by subsequent events and was easily read back in to an earlier age."¹³⁶ The modern nature of the conflict encompasses this idea on a very local and intimate level. Claims of sovereignty from both Armenia and Azerbaijan are as valid today as they were before and throughout the Cold War era, considering that the fractured LOC is the only effective border that they recognize.¹³⁷

¹³¹ de Waal, 183; Domitilla Sagramoso, *Russian Imperialism Revisited: From Disengagement to Hegemony*, Contemporary Security Studies (New York: Routledge, 2020), 1903.

¹³² Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 155.

¹³³ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 4.

¹³⁴ Popjanevski, "International Law and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," 24.

¹³⁵ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 183–84; Hess, "The Realist Victory in Nagorno-Karabakh"; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 9; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 99.

¹³⁶ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 20.

¹³⁷ Kucera, "Armenia and Azerbaijan in New Border Crisis."

Although Nagorno-Karabakh is at times considered a “frozen conflict” by experts, the 2020 hostilities place it firmly back into the category of a hotly contested warzone, with an increasing amount of interest from regional players including Russia, Turkey, and Iran.¹³⁸ Besides annual local skirmishes, the conflict had effectively been frozen since 1994 along the heavily-militarized LOC, with a small but deadly outbreak in 2016.¹³⁹ However, it is the six-week flare-up in 2020, brought back down to a simmer by Russian unilateral intervention, that makes this region into a potential foreign policy snare for Moscow.

To understand Moscow’s foreign policy decisions in Nagorno-Karabakh, it might be tempting to only view the Russian response to the conflict from the Kremlin’s perspective. After all, Russia maintains a military base in Armenia’s second largest city, Gyumri, with nearly 4,000 troops employed in three motor rifle battalions, one tank battalion, a squadron of Mig-29 fighters, attack and transport helicopters, and air defense systems.¹⁴⁰ However, that presence alone has not been enough to deter Armenia and Azerbaijan indicating that Russian presence is not the only variable.

Even during the Soviet era, the NKAO was one of many flashpoints among local nationalities, which Mikhail Gorbachev often struggled to suppress without igniting more political unrest.¹⁴¹ In fact, his policies of glasnost and perestroika stoked momentum for the Armenian and Azerbaijani SSRs to openly challenge each other over the NKAO, while Armenian militias conducted partisan warfare against the Soviet military sent in to bring

¹³⁸ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 120; Thomas D. Grant, “Frozen Conflicts and International Law,” *Cornell International Law Journal* 50, no. 3 (September 22, 2017): 362–65, <https://doi.org/10.31228/osf.io/8jued>; Welt and Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, Summary, 1; R. Craig Nation, *Russia, the United States, and the Caucasus* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2007), 14, <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS80338>.

¹³⁹ Grant, “Frozen Conflicts and International Law,” 371, 374; de Waal, “Unfinished Business in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict”; Moscow Times, “Russia’s Security Guarantees for Armenia Don’t Extend to Karabakh, Putin Says”; Hess, “The Realist Victory in Nagorno-Karabakh.”

¹⁴⁰ Welt and Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, 6; Kendrick Foster, “Armenia’s Velvet Revolution: Lessons from the Caucasus,” *Harvard International Review*, May 29, 2019, <https://hir.harvard.edu/armenias-velvet-revolution/>.

¹⁴¹ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 88.

the seized oblast back into Azerbaijani control.¹⁴² Martin Malia documents the common slogan in both Yerevan (Erivan) and Stepanakert in 1988: “Karabakh is the test of perestroika.”¹⁴³ As a result, Armenians felt little hesitation to establish the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in December 1991, citing the failure of perestroika as the Soviet Union disintegrated.¹⁴⁴

Thus, Armenia and Azerbaijan’s perspective of Soviet, and eventually Russian, intentions in Nagorno-Karabakh mattered locally then and now more than Moscow’s perception of the former SSRs’ aims under Soviet rule.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, the Soviet Union’s fluctuating policies of assigning the NKAO to Armenia and then Azerbaijan could provide a historical backdrop for their suspicions about Moscow’s intentions today.¹⁴⁶ To understand Russia’s opportunity to mediate the conflict, one must also consider Armenia’s and Azerbaijan’s differing perspectives of Russian involvement. Furthermore, while perceptions of Russian intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh might differ among locals on the ground, one can draw reasonable similarities between how Armenia and Azerbaijan perceive Russia’s involvement through parallel analysis of how Yerevan and Baku view Moscow’s presence in the South Caucasus as a whole.

A. ARMENIAN PERCEPTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Although Nagorno-Karabakh is located in UN-recognized, sovereign Azerbaijani territory, it is geographically situated among historically Armenian-populated lands and is only five kilometers from the Republic of Armenia at its narrowest point, near the disputed

¹⁴² Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 171–72; Abilov and Isayev, “The Consequences of the Nagorno-Karabakh War for Azerbaijan and the Undeniable Reality of Khojaly Massacre,” 292.

¹⁴³ Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy*, 441.

¹⁴⁴ Edmund Herzig and Marina Kurkchian, *The Armenians: Past and Present in the Making of National Identity* (Richmond: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 121, 169, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=201239>; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 99–100. Like Martin Malia, Herzig and Kurkchian label the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as “Nagornyi Karabakh” (in Russian) and “Lernayin Gharabagh” (in Armenian). The term “Republic of Artsakh” is widely used today.

¹⁴⁵ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 232.

¹⁴⁶ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 73.

Lachin Corridor.¹⁴⁷ Emerging as a pre-historic civilization, Armenia has mostly survived as a homogeneous population (over 95% are ethnic Armenian) under perpetual subjugation from major empires, including the Persians, Ottomans, and Soviets.¹⁴⁸ However, as Suny explains, “The principal threats to the Armenians came from their ethnic and religious enemies, the Ottoman Turks and Azerbaijanis.”¹⁴⁹ But that is not to say, Armenians have not coexisted or even thrived alongside its Caucasian neighbors in the past. Suny follows up by noting, “Baku oil was pioneered by Armenians, and the economic growth of the Ancient Georgian capital, Tiflis (Tbilisi), was largely an Armenian enterprise.”¹⁵⁰

As a modern state, Armenia gained independence immediately in 1991 when the USSR dissolved.¹⁵¹ Though Yerevan retains some of its Soviet era features today (political corruption and Soviet-style architecture), it has become freer than Russia.¹⁵² Armenia has emerged over the last three decades as a mostly democratic yet highly nationalistic nation, with constant wariness of conflict with Turkey and Azerbaijan.¹⁵³ To be sure, the 1915 Armenian Genocide remains a pervasive strain in Armenian society, considering that many Armenians see the Second Karabakh War as an extension of similar ambitions by a Turkic population.¹⁵⁴ Because of this perpetual caution, and because its geography places it between Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia relies heavily upon Russian support. In return,

¹⁴⁷ United Nations General Assembly, “General Assembly Adopts Resolution Reaffirming Territorial Integrity of Azerbaijan, Demanding Withdrawal of All Armenian Forces”; Glenn E. Curtis, ed., *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Country Studies*, 1st ed (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1995), 96; Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 152; Joshua Kucera, “Armenia and Azerbaijan Suspend ‘Corridor’ Talks,” Eurasianet, June 4, 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-and-azerbaijan-suspend-corridor-talks>.

¹⁴⁸ Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 17–18, 21–22; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 31.

¹⁴⁹ Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 75.

¹⁵⁰ Suny, 61.

¹⁵¹ Welt and Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, 3.

¹⁵² Vladimir Gel'man, *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 43.

¹⁵³ Foster, “Armenia’s Velvet Revolution”; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 234.

¹⁵⁴ Freedom House, “Armenia: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report,” Freedom House, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/freedom-world/2021>; Hess, “The Realist Victory in Nagorno-Karabakh”; Lela Gilbert, “Armenia, Artsakh And Turkey’s Neo-Ottoman Dream,” October 22, 2020, <http://www.hudson.org/research/16455-armenia-artsakh-and-turkey-s-neo-ottoman-dream>.

Yerevan often submits to Moscow's influence inside Armenian government institutions or manifests it in Yerevan's domestic policies.¹⁵⁵

Central to Armenia's perception of Russia is Armenia's involvement in the CSTO and participation in bilateral military contracts. In 2010, Moscow and Yerevan signed an agreement to keep Russian Federation troops stationed in Gyumri until 2044.¹⁵⁶ The terms of the CSTO guarantee Russian military support in the event that Armenia's sovereign territory is attacked.¹⁵⁷ This alignment of militaries can be traced back to the Soviet Union and the First Karabakh War, when numerous Armenians serving in the Soviet military immediately coalesced into the military of the newly formed Republic of Armenia.¹⁵⁸ However, Russia's current military base in Gyumri not only serves as an alignment mechanism; it also enables Russia to balance Azerbaijani (and Turkish) control of Transcaucasia while preventing Armenia from drawing closer to the West.¹⁵⁹ This relationship simply could not be achieved without the complicity of Yerevan. In fact, Armenia has been the most supportive of Russia out of all the former SSRs.¹⁶⁰ However, Armenia has also pursued self-deterministic paths in recent history, taking it out of Moscow's strict orbit from time to time.¹⁶¹

1. Relationship with the European Union and Worldwide Diaspora

The existential nature of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict compels Armenia to seek support abroad as a counterbalance to Russian influence while it simultaneously lauds its Russian alliance.¹⁶² Although most of Yerevan's backing comes from Moscow, Armenia somewhat diversifies its position when able, including by alignment with countries like

¹⁵⁵ Yasar Yakis, "Russia Tightens Its Grip on Armenia," Arab News, March 7, 2021, <https://arab.news/6n6d7>.

¹⁵⁶ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 294; Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 127.

¹⁵⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 294.

¹⁵⁸ de Waal, 176, 209, 296.

¹⁵⁹ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 127.

¹⁶⁰ Lo, 127.

¹⁶¹ Lo, 127.

¹⁶² de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 97–98.

Iran and China.¹⁶³ The West is an obvious option for Armenia, even if that might frustrate Moscow and Turkey. For a time over the last two decades, an Armenian lobby in the U.S. Congress ensured that Armenia was the largest global recipient of U.S. aid dollars per capita.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, in 2021, the U.S. formally acknowledged the 1915 Armenian Genocide, more than a hundred years after it occurred. While the US's nod towards Armenia does not mean that it explicitly sides with Yerevan with respect to Nagorno-Karabakh, it can be perceived as growing support for an isolated Armenia in the context of shifting relations between the U.S. and Turkey, which backs Azerbaijan in the conflict.¹⁶⁵ It can also be perceived as a U.S. counter to Yerevan's growing dependence on Moscow or to Turkey's increased autocracy on the world stage.

The EU is another option for Armenian outreach, although their relationship is mostly economic. Armenia's geography gives it an opportunity to play a role in the EU's East-West transport corridor as Yerevan develops a more Western-oriented economy.¹⁶⁶ To integrate developing nations like Armenia, the EU's Eastern Partnership framework seeks to diversify its trade corridors to areas where Moscow has had mostly exclusive influence over commerce.¹⁶⁷ Whether fundamentally or hypothetically threatening to Russian interests in Armenia, the West's allure gives Armenia more choices for how it can thrive. With Nagorno-Karabakh in mind, de Waal asserts most starkly:

The Soviet Union's legacy recedes year by year, and with it so does the use of the Russian language and the influence of Moscow. Russia is still important, but not as important as it thinks it is. This region is still "Russia's neighborhood," but it is also the neighborhood of many other countries, including Iran, Turkey, and the European Union. This is a reality that many commentators who still see the countries of the former USSR through a

¹⁶³ de Waal, 98.

¹⁶⁴ de Waal, 3.

¹⁶⁵ Ryan Gingeras, "The U.S. Formally Recognized the Armenian Genocide. Why Now, a Century Later?," Washington Post, April 24, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/04/24/us-formally-recognized-armenian-genocide-why-now-century-later/>; Petersen, *The World Island*, 129.

¹⁶⁶ Petersen, *The World Island*, 130.

¹⁶⁷ Petersen, 133; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 5.

Russian lens or, even more narrowly, through the lens of Vladimir Putin fail to grasp.¹⁶⁸

Weighing on Yerevan as much if not more is the enormous Armenian diaspora around the globe, including those living in France and the US.¹⁶⁹ Almost two-thirds of ethnic Armenians live outside the Republic of Armenia.¹⁷⁰ For many of the millions of educated and successful Armenians around the world, the division between the borders of the Republic of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are indistinct.¹⁷¹ The disputed seven territories inside the Karabakh region are simply considered “occupied” or “liberated” to many Armenians who are citizens of other countries, according to de Waal.¹⁷² Furthermore, the global diaspora are key providers of revenue for both Armenia and the Republic of Artsakh through remittances or donations to historically important causes.¹⁷³

However, in the Republic of Armenia, some see a distinction between what de Waal terms “Eastern” Armenians living in the country and “Western” Armenians living throughout the world.¹⁷⁴ Among those not involved in the day-to-day nuances of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, their donations and support filter more toward charities and churches as they pursue recognition for sacrifices their forebearers made during the 1915 Armenian Genocide.¹⁷⁵ Of course this is a generalization, with some individuals likely committed to supporting military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁷⁶ This support may have also increased since the Second Karabakh War, although data is lacking as of this writing. Indeed, the recent defeat of Armenia in the Second Karabakh War could incite

¹⁶⁸ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 225.

¹⁶⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 4, 6, 21.

¹⁷⁰ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 29.

¹⁷¹ Petersen, *The World Island*, 130; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 289.

¹⁷² de Waal, *Black Garden*, 290.

¹⁷³ de Waal, 289; Petersen, *The World Island*, 129.

¹⁷⁴ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 240.

¹⁷⁵ de Waal, 240; de Waal, *Black Garden*, 78.

¹⁷⁶ International Crisis Group, “Digging out of Deadlock in Nagorno-Karabakh,” December 20, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/255-digging-out-deadlock-nagorno-karabakh>.

more dispersed Armenians to travel to Nagorno-Karabakh and fight against Azerbaijani elements as many did during the First Karabakh War.¹⁷⁷ Until then, the Republic of Armenia would likely rather pursue more material support from a partner like Russia, which has shown a willingness to provide military equipment, weapons, and collective security agreements.

2. 2018 Armenian Velvet Revolution

In contrast to Armenian international engagement, its changes on the domestic front suggest that Moscow's influence could be weakening in some circles of the Armenian government. The 2018 Armenian Velvet Revolution was another of the colored revolutions in former SSRs that irritated the Kremlin, as this uprising was viewed by experts to be an extension of the earlier revolutions in Georgia (Rose), Ukraine (Orange), and Kyrgyzstan (Tulip).¹⁷⁸ Led by former journalist and then-member of parliament Nikol Pashinyan, Armenians peacefully ousted the Moscow-leaning regime of Serzh Sargsyan as Sargsyan's second presidential term concluded.¹⁷⁹ In the aftermath, and to the dismay of the Kremlin, newly declared Prime Minister Pashinyan called his rise to power a "Velvet Revolution," thereby linking Armenia to the 1989 Czechoslovak uprising bearing the same name.¹⁸⁰ Playing a large part in the country-wide dissent were remnants of the 2015 "Electric Yerevan" protests, concerning rising electricity tariffs by a Russian-owned power company.¹⁸¹

As one of his first orders of business, Pashinyan vowed to finally make Nagorno-Karabakh part of the Republic of Armenia, and Sargsyan's refusal to crack down on protests was attributed by analysts to the notion Azerbaijan could use the domestic turmoil

¹⁷⁷ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 258–61.

¹⁷⁸ Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia*, 133–34; Foster, "Armenia's Velvet Revolution"; Miriam Lansky and Elspeth Suthers, "Armenia's Velvet Revolution," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 2 (April 2019): 85, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0027>.

¹⁷⁹ Foster, "Armenia's Velvet Revolution"; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 234.

¹⁸⁰ Foster, "Armenia's Velvet Revolution."

¹⁸¹ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 236.

to seize Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁸² Therefore, Armenia's necessity to keep an allied Russia close did not change much, even in the aftermath of the 2018 Velvet Revolution. For its part, Moscow mostly abstained from influencing the outcome of Yerevan's revolution, other than deriding Armenia's desire for reform.¹⁸³ The Kremlin rightfully assessed that any resulting Republic of Armenia regime would need Russian support in the future and would therefore remain susceptible to Russian demands.¹⁸⁴ As a second-order effect, Russia now enjoys increased Armenian media polarization brought about by the Velvet Revolution and Pashinyan's bungling of the outcome of the Second Karabakh War.¹⁸⁵

Azerbaijan's Karabakh success in 2020 gave Pashinyan little choice but to surrender Armenian military forces and evacuate many ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. This move drew sharp criticism by senior Armenian officials and veterans of the First Karabakh War, who maintain an important role in Armenian society but are not consistently pro-government.¹⁸⁶ Although Pashinyan likely made the right tactical decision in Nagorno-Karabakh, it also deepened Armenia's dependence on Russian involvement. This reality does not sit well with everyone in Armenia. For example, Armenian analyst Richard Giragosian explained, "There [is] only one point of agreement between Baku, Yerevan, and Karabakh. They [are] all opposed to Russian peacekeepers...Which is prudent, because there [is] no such thing as Russian peacekeepers: Once deployed, they never go home."¹⁸⁷

Now, more than ever, Pashinyan needs Putin as a strategic partner to ensure that his ascent to power is not short-lived at the behest of Armenians angry over the result of the

¹⁸² Foster, "Armenia's Velvet Revolution"; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 237; Welt and Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, 5.

¹⁸³ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 238–39.

¹⁸⁴ de Waal, 238–39.

¹⁸⁵ Reporters Without Borders, "Armenia: Diversity but Not yet Independence," RSF, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/armenia>.

¹⁸⁶ Hess, "The Realist Victory in Nagorno-Karabakh"; Cloudburst Group, The, "Civil Society and Media in Armenia," USAID, January 2019, 7, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TJWV.pdf.

¹⁸⁷ Luxmoore, "In Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, Turkey's Involvement Could Be Russia's Nightmare."

Second Karabakh War.¹⁸⁸ Making matters more perilous for Pashinyan, the Kremlin might even prefer a new leader in Armenia, one who does not voice the need for liberal reform.¹⁸⁹

B. RUSSIA’S IMPORTANCE TO ARMENIA IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Russia is Armenia’s biggest ally. Even though Yerevan must often concede to playing by Moscow’s rules, this does not mean that the relationship is necessarily undesirable to Armenia. Primarily because of Russia’s collective security agreement with Yerevan under the CSTO, Armenia is almost assured that Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Iran would not invade the Republic of Armenia without severe consequences from the Kremlin. This reality at least guarantees the survivability of Yerevan, despite Russia’s reluctance to commit troops to fight alongside Armenian-aligned forces in Nagorno-Karabakh or within the Armenian-termed “security zone” in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁹⁰

Indeed, the presence of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh is more of a thorn in the side of Baku and Ankara than Yerevan. Having brokered a ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow ensured that Yerevan has some say in the future of the disputed territory. Without Russia’s intervention, Azerbaijan would have almost assuredly taken full control of Nagorno-Karabakh and possibly continued into the Republic Armenia, to end at any number of self-determined boundaries. Russia (and Russia’s leverage of the CSTO) is likely the only entity standing in the way of Azerbaijani forces reconnecting the Republic of Azerbaijan to Aliyev’s homelands in the Nakhichevan exclave or even Mount Ararat on the Turkish-Armenian border.¹⁹¹

In return for this protection, Moscow is assured to maintain significant sway in Yerevan. The special relationship sought by Medvedev and Putin is alive in Armenia, as is Russia’s ability to block the West from interfering too much in South Caucasian affairs. Connected to this relationship are loans of hundreds of millions of dollars to support

¹⁸⁸ Hess, “The Realist Victory in Nagorno-Karabakh.”

¹⁸⁹ Hess; Joshua Kucera, “Russia Sitting Out Armenian Elections,” *Moscow Times*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/06/18/russia-sitting-out-armenian-elections-a74261>.

¹⁹⁰ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 99.

¹⁹¹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 86.

Armenia's infrastructure and military.¹⁹² By design, the military alliance between Russia and Armenia also guarantees economic ties favorable to Moscow and necessary to Yerevan.¹⁹³

Therefore, Armenia's engagement with the West and domestic governmental reform, while likely annoying to Moscow, is not indicative of Yerevan's intentions to sever ties with Moscow. Instead, Armenia sees engagement with the West, continued support from the global Armenian diaspora, and even a liberalizing of the Armenian government as broader strategic maneuvers to ensure that it has not risked everything on the success of its relationship with Moscow.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, the Kremlin likely understands Armenia's dependence on Moscow. For Armenia, Russia is welcome to maintain its presence as guarantor of the status quo.

C. AZERBAIJANI PERCEPTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Though no less important to Azerbaijan than it is to Armenia, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict generates a somewhat different perception of Russia's involvement for the Republic of Azerbaijan. To the authoritarian-leaning government in Baku, Russia's presence in Transcaucasia is a tolerable (even beneficial) reality, yet not necessarily desirable or indispensable.¹⁹⁵ Azerbaijan's economic and military survivability does not depend on assurances from Moscow to the extent that Armenia's existence does. For one, Baku has a more reliable economic source than Yerevan (Caspian Sea hydrocarbons). It also has virtually the same collective security assurances from Turkey that Armenia enjoys from Russia, such as the June 2021 "Shusha Declaration" for military cooperation between

¹⁹² de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 239.

¹⁹³ de Waal, 239.

¹⁹⁴ Alexander Bratersky, "Will Russian Arms Sales Survive the Azeri-Armenian Conflict?," *Defense News*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2020/10/15/will-russian-arms-sales-survive-the-azeri-armenian-conflict/>.

¹⁹⁵ Pavel Baev, "Russia and Turkey: Strategic Partners and Rivals," May 2021, 24–26, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/baev_turkey_russia_2021.pdf.

Baku and Ankara.¹⁹⁶ However, a lingering Soviet past, intermeshed with current Russian relations, keeps Azerbaijan in Russia's sphere, to a degree. The Kremlin desires the same special relationship with Azerbaijan as it does with Armenia and the rest of the Russian near abroad.¹⁹⁷ Furthermore, Azerbaijan's economic relationship with the West and geopolitical alignment with Turkey present Russia with a seemingly more important geopolitical priority than it has with Armenia, which is quick to concede to Russian pursuits in the region.

Azerbaijan's national identity formed in the late 19th century as Azeri Muslims amalgamated into a group distinct from Armenians and Georgians.¹⁹⁸ In fact, historically, Baku was more influenced by Persia than by Russia or Turkey.¹⁹⁹ But deepening the Azeri ethnic identity were ties to the broader Turkish language and similarities with Persia's Shiite Muslim sect among numerous Azeris currently living in modern northwest Iran.²⁰⁰ Even though Azerbaijan's rural areas were some of the least industrialized before Soviet times, the abundance of hydrocarbons in its Absheron Peninsula made Baku a cosmopolitan metropolis by its first oil boom of the late 19th century.²⁰¹ And although it was short-lived, by 1918, Azeris had founded the first democratic Muslim republic in the world, where women's suffrage existed before it did in the United Kingdom.²⁰²

The Soviet Union and Persia had divided Azeri lands in 1828 in a way that made little historical or geographical sense for Azeris, who had occupied that part of the world

¹⁹⁶ Aslan Doukaev, "Turkey Breaches Russia's Sphere of Influence," The Jamestown Foundation, June 28, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/turkey-breaches-russias-sphere-of-influence/>; Kirill Krivosheev, "Third Condominium. How Karabakh Will Change Relations between Russia and Turkey," Carnegie Moscow Center, September 10, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82932>.

¹⁹⁷ Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, 11.

¹⁹⁸ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 19; Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, 49.

¹⁹⁹ Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth*, 171.

²⁰⁰ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 19; Kaplan, *Eastward to Tartary*, 260; Zanoliti and Thomas, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, 24.

²⁰¹ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 19; Kaplan, *Eastward to Tartary*, 268; Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth*, 167; Vaclav Smil, *Oil*, 2nd ed. (London: Oneworld, 2017), 108–10.

²⁰² de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 52, 64, 227.

for generations.²⁰³ Although Azeris shared a language and religion, the number of ethnic Slavs and a degree of Soviet influence in Baku divided the locals rather than uniting them into a national identity.²⁰⁴ Undeniably, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was the modern catalyst for Azerbaijanis to eventually coalesce into their shared national identity, even though Baku had little means to initially counter the stronger Armenian nation.²⁰⁵

During the immediate post-Soviet aftermath, Azerbaijan once again tried its hand at democracy when it gained independence alongside Armenia in late 1991.²⁰⁶ However, this democratic experiment was also short-lived, as former Soviet politburo member and Nakhichevan-born strongman Heidar Aliyev deposed Abulfaz Elchibey.²⁰⁷ Aliyev, having been exiled from Moscow years before for corrupt tendencies, used the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to help consolidate power among the seemingly directionless post-Soviet Baku political circles after Aliyev had represented the Azerbaijani SSR off and on since 1969.²⁰⁸ Expanding upon Paul Huth's idea, Andrei Tsygankov proposes, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict helped Azerbaijan become a more centralized, authoritarian state because "when there is a territorial threat, even competitive systems become more centralized."²⁰⁹ The lingering effects of this phenomenon explain the commonalities that Azerbaijan currently shares with Putin's Russia and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey, as both Putin's

²⁰³ Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth*, 165.

²⁰⁴ Kaplan, 167.

²⁰⁵ Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy*, 442; Kaplan, *Eastward to Tartary*, 260, 269; Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth*, 165–66; Philip G. Roeder, *Where Nation-States Come From: Institutional Change in the Age of Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 312, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=827795>.

²⁰⁶ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 227; Kaplan, *Eastward to Tartary*, 257–58.

²⁰⁷ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 171, 173; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 14, 175, 227.

²⁰⁸ Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, 65–66; Kaplan, *Eastward to Tartary*, 256, 258; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 175.

²⁰⁹ Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia*, 16–17; Paul K. Huth, *Standing Your Ground: Territorial Disputes and International Conflict* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 51.

and the elder Aliyev's association with state security organs show through their actions on the world stage.²¹⁰

Today, Heidar's son, Ilham Aliyev, has thrived as an autocrat since 2003 and tightened his grip on power over the years.²¹¹ Formerly a senior executive of Azerbaijan's nationalized oil company, he inherited Baku's economic ascent when Western oil companies partnered with Azerbaijan to develop its Caspian Sea energy infrastructure.²¹² However, his popularity is fading. In 2009, Aliyev backed a referendum to extend presidential term limits, without which he would have been forced to relinquish power.²¹³ Much to the chagrin of his political opposition, which boycotted the referendum, Aliyev prevailed with a reported 90% of the vote and has remained president since.²¹⁴

For the younger Aliyev, the Second Karabakh War has served as a timely distraction from increased domestic dissatisfaction over persistent economic inequality, mismanagement of Azerbaijan's hydrocarbon wealth, and government kleptocracy.²¹⁵ Therefore, to some extent, Aliyev's recent lopsided victory over the Armenian-backed Artsakh government is either coincidental or a convenient distraction from domestic woes.²¹⁶ If planned, this is a strategy to which both Putin and Erdogan can relate.

However, authoritarian commonalities alone might not be enough to keep Baku from moving further from Moscow. Although Russia's presence in the South Caucasus is still a stark reality for Azerbaijan, Baku has taken maneuvers to solidify its military's effectiveness by buying and using weapons from Turkey and Israel to gain the upper hand

²¹⁰ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 120; Antonio J. Mendez and Jonna Mendez, *The Moscow Rules: The Secret CIA Tactics That Helped America Win the Cold War* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 38.

²¹¹ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 128; Michael L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 89.

²¹² de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 175.

²¹³ Ross, *The Oil Curse*, 89; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 227.

²¹⁴ Ross, *The Oil Curse*, 89.

²¹⁵ Djene Rhys Bajalan, Sara Nur Yildiz, and Vazken Khatchig Davidian, "What's Really Driving the Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflict," *Jacobin*, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/10/azerbaijan-armenia-conflict-nationalism-colonialism>.

²¹⁶ Bajalan, Yildiz, and Davidian.

in the Second Karabakh War.²¹⁷ What is more, Azerbaijan's use of unmanned, tactical drones against conventional military targets effectively made the Second Karabakh War a foreshadowing of the next generation of warfare.²¹⁸ As an effect of this posture and Baku's perceived miscommunication with Moscow, Azerbaijan's military also shot down a Russian attack helicopter (conducting an escort) in late 2020, killing two crewmembers; Baku later claimed that it was a mistake.²¹⁹ But the increased capabilities and guile of the Azerbaijani military reiterated the importance of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, despite Russia's presence. This increased military prowess is very different from the early 1990s Azeri militias conducting operations for a fledgling Baku government.²²⁰ Azerbaijan's military buildup is likely a result of, and an example of, its wariness of depending on Moscow to consider Baku's interest in Nagorno-Karabakh.

1. Military Spending and Buildup

Deepening the imbalance between the burgeoning Azerbaijani and Armenian militaries of the 1990s was the reality the Soviet army had produced generations of Armenian military officers while Azeris, and other Muslims of the titular nationalities, were given noncombat roles in the USSR military.²²¹ Armenia had far more proficient former Soviet soldiers, considering that non-Muslims generally received better training and promotion opportunities.²²² If this variance were not decisive enough, during the First Karabakh War, Russia intervened to help Armenia more than a few times according to

²¹⁷ Zanoliti and Thomas, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, 24; Simon Ostrovsky, "Armenia's Miscalculations in Nagorno-Karabakh," Pulitzer Center, 2020, <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/armenias-miscalculations-nagorno-karabakh>.

²¹⁸ Ostrovsky, "Armenia's Miscalculations in Nagorno-Karabakh"; Mike Eckel, "Drone Wars: In Nagorno-Karabakh, The Future Of Warfare Is Now," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 9, 2020, sec. Features & Blogs, <https://www.rferl.org/a/drone-wars-in-nagorno-karabakh-the-future-of-warfare-is-now/30885007.html>.

²¹⁹ David Gauthier-Villars and Ann M. Simmons, "Azerbaijan Shoots Down Russian Helicopter in Armenia," Wall Street Journal, November 9, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/azerbaijan-shoots-down-russian-helicopter-in-armenia-11604954107>.

²²⁰ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 179.

²²¹ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 118.

²²² Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 169.

claims by late-century Azerbaijani officials.²²³ And even though Azerbaijan also acquired Soviet weapons when the Soviet military dissolved in Transcaucasia, historians attribute those transactions to opportunistic former Soviet military officers making a quick monetary gain more so than a stated Russian policy.²²⁴ In this same regard, former Soviet soldiers simply remained in Transcaucasia as mercenaries, including former members of the Soviet 7th Army and special forces.²²⁵ These soldiers of fortune were acting independently of Moscow's direction but often supported the highest bidder.²²⁶

Even though both sides claimed that Russia intervened for the other during the First Karabakh War, Russia's supporting roles are presently more defined, with Armenia receiving more Russian support and Azerbaijan receiving assistance from Turkey. For example, Baku purchased over \$120 million of military equipment from Ankara in 2020 alone.²²⁷ Subsidized by oil revenues from its late-1990s second oil boom, Azerbaijan increased its military spending in the early 2000s by 50% one year, and 82% the next.²²⁸ Baku purchased weapons including multi-role aircraft, artillery, and tanks from both Moscow and Western nations in an attempt to make Azerbaijan's 2007 military spending equal to Armenia's entire national budget.²²⁹ It also sought to further professionalize its military by sending its officers to Turkey for training, since it had partnered with Turkey as early as 1992.²³⁰

²²³ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 209.

²²⁴ de Waal, 210–11.

²²⁵ de Waal, 213–14.

²²⁶ de Waal, 213–14.

²²⁷ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 168–69, 172, 178–79; Welt and Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, 5–8; Ece Toksabay, “Turkish Arms Sales to Azerbaijan Surged before Nagorno-Karabakh Fighting,” Reuters, October 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/armenia-azerbaijan-turkey-arms-int-idUSKBN26Z230>.

²²⁸ Freizer, “Nagorno-Karabakh - A Frozen Conflict That Could Boil Over.”

²²⁹ Freizer.

²³⁰ Carlotta Gall and Ivor Prickett, “Roots of War: When Armenia Talked Tough, Azerbaijan Took Action,” *New York Times*, October 27, 2020, https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.nps.edu/docview/2454451529?rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo; Nicole Thomas et al., “What the United States Military Can Learn from the Nagorno-Karabakh War,” *Small Wars Journal*, April 4, 2021, https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/what-united-states-military-can-learn-nagorno-karabakh-war#_edn7.

However, that is not to say Moscow and Baku have not deepened their economic relationship too. Over the last decade, Azerbaijan has agreed to buy nearly \$10 billion worth of weapons, ammunition, and military equipment from Russia, coinciding with roughly 5% of Russia's exports during a five-year span.²³¹ Undeniably, this trade relationship benefited both sides, seeing how Putin and Aliyev sought to cooperate in the energy sector and Azerbaijan needed to buy more weapons to compete with Armenian military capabilities.²³² But Moscow is lucidly aware that Baku's need for weaponry is tied directly to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and therefore uses weapons sales to keep its influence pervasive, while also stalling Baku's desire to retake Nagorno-Karabakh.

For its part, the U.S. has also provided Baku with military equipment and training, albeit to strengthen Baku's ability to combat transnational issues like terrorism and to augment the protection of Caspian Sea energy infrastructure.²³³ The U.S. military's partnership with Azerbaijan goes back to early-century Global War on Terrorism initiatives and remains in place partly as a bulwark against deteriorating U.S. relations with Iran.²³⁴ The U.S. has equipped Baku with radars, all-terrain vehicles, and high-speed maritime vessels, amounting to an average of \$3 million per year since the early 2000s.²³⁵ However, the U.S. House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly to suspend 2022 fiscal year foreign military funding and assistance to Baku because of Azerbaijan's increased hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh.²³⁶ This decision was made not to side specifically with Armenia in the conflict but likely as a prudent measure to reassert American neutrality in the region.

²³¹ Ibadoghlu and Crude Accountability, *The Empty Bucket of The State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan: Profits and Profiteering*, 43–44.

²³² de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 184.

²³³ Fuad Shahbazov, "The Pallone Amendment and U.S. Military Assistance to Azerbaijan in Context," The Jamestown Foundation, August 11, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-pallone-amendment-and-us-military-assistance-to-azerbaijan-in-context/>.

²³⁴ Shahbazov.

²³⁵ Shahbazov.

²³⁶ Shahbazov.

Consequently, Russian and Western military equipment sales and training have not been enough to satisfy the Aliyev regime. Between 2009 and 2019, Azerbaijan spent \$24 billion on its military, while Armenia spent \$4 billion.²³⁷ As Baku transitioned deeper into Ankara's sphere, it capitalized on the opportunity to buy weapons from both Russia and Turkey, whereas Armenia could only rely on Russia. While its buildup over time has gone from gradual to steep, Azerbaijan's Turkish-backed military capabilities are now overwhelmingly superior to Armenia's, at least when on display in 2020 based on reports out of Nagorno-Karabakh.²³⁸

Azerbaijan's massive investment in military equipment has further polarized its relationship with Armenia. This shift has pushed Yerevan closer to Moscow and Baku closer to Ankara.²³⁹ However, Baku's ability to make larger weapons purchases is directly tied to its ability to provide Turkey and the West with Caspian hydrocarbons. Without crude oil and natural gas, Azerbaijan might be less inclined to chance harming its security relationship with Russia or be prompted to align itself with the CSTO. Azerbaijan's energy security plays an important role in its ability to counter any support Russia provides to Armenia.

2. The BTC Pipeline and Energy Security

The Asian part of Eurasia begins at the doorstep of Azerbaijan.²⁴⁰ As the only modern nation to share a border with both Russia and Iran, Azerbaijan is at the center of Central Asia's western energy flow (see Figure 3).²⁴¹ It is also the hub for the eastern flow of Western energy investment, as well as the US's quickest route to Central Asia outside of Pakistan.²⁴² Therefore, Azerbaijan represents to the West what Petersen terms a

²³⁷ Hamilton and Mikulska, "Cooperation, Competition, and Compartmentalization," 32; Sam Bhutia, "Armenia-Azerbaijan: Who's the Big Defense Spender?," Eurasianet, October 28, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-azerbaijan-whos-the-big-defense-spender>.

²³⁸ Kofman and Nersisyan, "The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Two Weeks In."

²³⁹ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 264.

²⁴⁰ Petersen, *The World Island*, 160.

²⁴¹ Petersen, 123, 160.

²⁴² Petersen, 123.

“geopolitical ‘swing state.’”²⁴³ This reality evolved over the last three post-Soviet decades, and in large part because of Baku’s access to Caspian Sea hydrocarbons.



Figure 3. 2019 Map of Caucasian Energy Routes²⁴⁴

Azerbaijan’s new post-Soviet independence created the necessity for it to find allies, since Armenia was eager to seize Nagorno-Karabakh entirely.²⁴⁵ Centered in the oldest oil-producing region in the world, Baku had plenty of international interest in its resources, yet it was unable to capitalize on them due to its collapsing economy in the early 1990s.²⁴⁶ Thus, Azerbaijan would enter into a 1992 agreement with Turkey, which provided military aid, and again in 1999, to pursue shared economic goals.²⁴⁷ Azerbaijan,

²⁴³ Petersen, 123.

²⁴⁴ Source: de Waal, 172.

²⁴⁵ Thomas et al., “What the United States Military Can Learn from the Nagorno-Karabakh War.”

²⁴⁶ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 170, 174.

²⁴⁷ Thomas et al., “What the United States Military Can Learn from the Nagorno-Karabakh War.”

Turkey, and Georgia completed the 1,100-mile long, \$4 billion BTC oil pipeline in 2006, thereby connecting the Caspian, Black, and Mediterranean Seas and solidifying Baku's second oil boom.²⁴⁸ Almost immediately, the BTC pipeline made Azerbaijan the fastest-growing economy in the world and increased its income to a peak of \$7,190 per capita in 2011 compared to Armenia's \$3,526 per capita.²⁴⁹ In sum, Azerbaijan's access to hydrocarbons enabled its gross domestic product to grow from \$1.3 billion in 1994 to \$75.2 billion in 2014.²⁵⁰

The BTC pipeline also empowered Azerbaijan to diversify its international relationships to include the West, considering that Moscow increasingly competed for energy resources in the Caspian.²⁵¹ Turn-of-the-century assessments estimated the Caspian Sea to contain reserves equivalent to over 200 billion barrels of crude oil.²⁵² This abundance made Azerbaijan a prime investment darling of U.S. companies including Exxon-Mobil, Chevron, and Halliburton in the early 2000s.²⁵³ It also diluted Azerbaijan's reliance on Russian pipelines to connect buyers, since it could transport its crude through the American-backed BTC pipeline.²⁵⁴ Little doubt remains that Heydar Aliyev's decision to bring Western oil giants into the South Caucasus was successful in helping Baku reduce its need to rely on Moscow.²⁵⁵

²⁴⁸ Thomas et al.; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 173–74.

²⁴⁹ Thomas et al., "What the United States Military Can Learn from the Nagorno-Karabakh War"; World Bank, "GDP- Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia," World Bank, August 30, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=AZ-AM-GE>; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 174.

²⁵⁰ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 184.

²⁵¹ Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia*, 125–26.

²⁵² Novosti Ria, "Caspian Basin and Central Asia-Outlook for Russia," Johnson's Russia List, March 29, 2005, <https://www.russialist.org/archives/9107-19.php>; Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia*, 126.

²⁵³ Ria, "Caspian Basin and Central Asia-Outlook for Russia."

²⁵⁴ Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia*, 126; Ria, "Caspian Basin and Central Asia-Outlook for Russia"; Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 119–20.

²⁵⁵ Mahir Khalifa-Zadeh, "The South Caucasus: Obama's Failed Russia 'Reset' and the Putin Doctrine in Practice," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (Online); Herzliya 18, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 32–45, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1615787558?parentSessionId=egFbNyfWHJJrnN%2Flyf8LwYtxVC4vmWSf3cd90D7gaVE%3D&accountid=12702>.

Today, the BTC pipeline helps Baku export 84% of its oil extraction to the EU (and Turkey), leaving Azerbaijan's energy sector somewhat exposed to Western economic policies.²⁵⁶ It also makes Azerbaijan vulnerable to price fluctuations, considering that 90% of its revenue comes from hydrocarbons, and helps it annually import over \$340 million in grain to feed its population and livestock.²⁵⁷ However dependent on the West the BTC pipeline remains, it still offers Baku an outside option other than possible Russian demands in Nagorno-Karabakh. And the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the most important issue for Azerbaijani elites and non-elites alike, tied even to Aliyev's political survival.²⁵⁸

Making matters more precarious for Baku the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has plenty of potential to disrupt its energy relationship with the West.²⁵⁹ At its closest point, the BTC pipeline runs just eight miles north of the LOC in Nagorno-Karabakh, making it vulnerable to Armenian-backed sabotage if Yerevan were to disrupt its operation out of desperation.²⁶⁰ Therefore, the 2020 flareup in Nagorno-Karabakh had economic implications for Baku as much as political ones.

Considered by the UN as an "Economy in Transition" and achieving "observer status" in the World Trade Organization, Azerbaijan continues its Western economic shift.²⁶¹ Still, another wrinkle in its self-determination is its nationalized oil company, the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR). SOCAR has pursued its own economic interests in the region, investing \$18 billion in Turkey with Aliyev's blessing.²⁶²

²⁵⁶ World Trade Organization, "World Trade Organization-Trade Profiles 2020-Kazakhstan," Kazakhstan, 2020, https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/status_e/daily_update_e/trade_profiles/KZ_e.pdf.

²⁵⁷ World Trade Organization; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 227.

²⁵⁸ Petersen, *The World Island*, 124.

²⁵⁹ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 4.

²⁶⁰ de Waal, 182.

²⁶¹ United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, "World Economic Situation and Prospects 2020," 2020, 165–66, https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/WESP2020_FullReport.pdf; World Trade Organization, "WTO 2016 News Items - Azerbaijan Committed to 'Intensifying' WTO Accession Talks," July 22, 2016, https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news16_e/acc_aze_22jul16_e.htm; Petersen, *The World Island*, 124.

²⁶² de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 185.

However, Azerbaijan's oil glut might be declining, considering that Baku's crude production has plateaued since 2015.²⁶³ As of 2021, Azerbaijan's remaining proven crude oil reserves were estimated at 7 billion barrels, much less than its 1990s surplus.²⁶⁴ As Baku faces an energy dilemma, not only does Nagorno-Karabakh become a potential strain on Azerbaijan's economy, but Baku has recently begun extracting natural gas, bringing it in direct competition with Russia's Gazprom and the US's natural gas sector.²⁶⁵

D. RUSSIA AND AZERBAIJAN'S COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP OVER NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Russia's interest in Azerbaijan goes back well into the previous century. The Bolsheviks saw Baku's oil resources as the solution to restore Moscow's economy after the Russian Civil War.²⁶⁶ And presently, though Azerbaijan can be described as increasingly Western oriented, the West's judgement of Baku's autocratic leanings drive Baku to maintain close bonds with both Moscow and Ankara.²⁶⁷ For Moscow, ties with Azerbaijan represent a balancing opportunity against Turkish and Western influence. But for Baku, Moscow represents a lingering deterrent to Azerbaijan's regaining full control of Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁶⁸

Moscow recognizes that Baku has become increasingly non-aligned, resistant to Russian demands, and open to engagement from the West.²⁶⁹ Unlike during the 1980s, when Russian was the lingua franca in Baku, locals now increasingly speak Azeri, and over half only have a basic working knowledge of Russian.²⁷⁰ Politically, Azerbaijan

²⁶³ de Waal, 184, 186–87.

²⁶⁴ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Azerbaijan: Executive Summary," U.S. Energy Information Administration, September 13, 2021, <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/AZE>; Oil & Gas Journal, "Worldwide Look at Reserves and Production," December 7, 2020, 16, <https://digital.ogj.com/ogjournal/20201207?pg=1>.

²⁶⁵ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 183–85, 187–89.

²⁶⁶ de Waal, 171–73.

²⁶⁷ Petersen, *The World Island*, 124.

²⁶⁸ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 106, 120.

²⁶⁹ Lo, 119.

²⁷⁰ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 226.

recognizes that Russia uses the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute to keep its leverage over Baku's political self-determination and security. The Kremlin empathizes with Azerbaijan's secular authoritarian state, which is one of the more stable, albeit less free, of the former SSRs.²⁷¹ Moscow also realizes that Baku is likely taking a multi-pronged approach by expanding cooperation with the West but still aligns with most of Moscow's security interests.²⁷² For example, Moscow sells Azerbaijan Russian tanks, even though Russia is Armenia's primary guarantor of existence.²⁷³ Russia is Azerbaijan's third largest trading partner after Turkey and the EU and home to nearly two million Azerbaijani nationals working in Russia.²⁷⁴ Thus, "complicated" is an appropriate descriptor for Moscow-Baku relations.

But, as it does in the entire South Caucasus, Russia seems to care more about its special relationship being eroded by outsiders like the West or from maneuvers from regional actors like Turkey. From accusations of the U.S. meddling in Moscow's backyard arising from Washington's energy pursuits to a tenuous posture with the EU over European energy matters, Putin must keep Azerbaijan close to ensure that Moscow is not phased out of Transcaucasia completely.²⁷⁵ Moreover, Putin perceives the West's investment in Baku's energy infrastructure as a zero-sum matter for Moscow.²⁷⁶

On the other side of the complication argument, by selling Azerbaijan heavy weapons, Russia keeps Baku dependent on Moscow, at least partially.²⁷⁷ Even a partially aligned Baku is beneficial to Moscow, meaning that Azerbaijan can carry its own ambitions in Nagorno-Karabakh yet align with Russia on international matters. For example, Azerbaijan was a nonpermanent member of the UN Security council in 2011, assuredly to

²⁷¹ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 120.

²⁷² Lo, 120.

²⁷³ Lo, 120.

²⁷⁴ Lo, 120–21.

²⁷⁵ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 177; Elkhon Polukhov, "Contract of the Century (The Problem in an Historical Retrospective)," *Caucasian Regional Studies* 2, no. 1 (1997), https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/crs/crs_1997/crs97_poe01.html.

²⁷⁶ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 183; Borshchevskaya, "Russia and Turkey in Nagorno-Karabakh."

²⁷⁷ Freizer, "Nagorno-Karabakh - A Frozen Conflict That Could Boil Over."

the delight of the Kremlin.²⁷⁸ Finally, and maybe most importantly to Moscow, Azerbaijan has made repeated assertions that it is uninterested in joining NATO.²⁷⁹

E. CONCLUSION

Armenian and Azerbaijani perceptions of Russian foreign policy in their backyard differ to varying degrees. In one regard, Armenia is geopolitically isolated by its two biggest threats in the region: Azerbaijan and Turkey. Yerevan must rely on the collective security of the CSTO, anchored by Moscow. And while Russian peacekeepers patrol Nagorno-Karabakh, this presence is not necessarily negative for Armenia. Indeed, without Russian peacekeepers or the Moscow-brokered ceasefire in 2020, the Second Karabakh War could have ended in total territorial loss for the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh, or many more casualties.

Yerevan has also taken some actions that Moscow likely disfavored. The 2018 Armenian Velvet Revolution and the constant lure of EU economic opportunities give Yerevan a slight Western slant. This economic leaning, and the West's verbal commitments to resolve Nagorno-Karabakh, unsurprisingly give Moscow more incentive to play a unilateral role in the mediation process, including deploying boots on the ground. Regardless of Armenian democratic reforms, there is little chance that Yerevan will move out of Moscow's sphere anytime soon. It simply cannot shift while Azerbaijan increases its bellicosity, nor while Turkey takes an increased role in Nagorno-Karabakh. Yerevan needs Moscow, and because of this dependence, the Kremlin is likely to enjoy the fruits of its special relationship there while rebuffing efforts by other actors to gain geopolitical hegemony.

Presently, Armenia has little choice but to involve Moscow in Nagorno-Karabakh decisions because of Russia's size, strength, and influential benefits inherent in the CSTO relationship. However, there is still somewhat of a partisan divide in Yerevan as to how much the Kremlin should be allowed to determine Yerevan's actions in the region.

²⁷⁸ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 226.

²⁷⁹ de Waal, 184.

Armenia's Velvet Revolution suggests that not all Armenian powerbrokers feel that Moscow's puppeteering is desirable for the long-term self-determination of Yerevan. Nevertheless, necessity, suitability of the CSTO, and the crosspollination of Russian and Armenian oligarchs in both governments have harmonized Russo-Armenian relations to the overall benefit and survivability of Armenia.

Azerbaijan, however, is closer to Turkey militarily and to the EU economically than it is to Russia. The Kremlin understands that the EU's ability to support its energy needs through the BTC pipeline is an impediment to Moscow's bargaining power with European nations. However, the plateauing of Azerbaijan's crude oil exports since 2015 encourages Baku's ongoing shift to extracting natural gas (and the Nabucco pipeline) to reinvigorate the country's economy.²⁸⁰ This reality brings it closer to a competitive relationship with Russia, considering that gas remains an enormous economic resource for Moscow and its investment in the South Stream pipeline running from the Black Sea to Bulgaria.²⁸¹ Thus, Azerbaijan has increasingly become more of a possible liability to Russia in the South Caucasus. Potentially worse for Moscow, Baku's resource curse prods it to remain in the good graces of the international community.

Furthermore, Baku does not need Russian intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh, as Turkey is willing to augment Azerbaijan's military against their common Armenian enemy. Even as Baku continues to purchase billions in weaponry from Moscow, it lessens its dependence on those agreements by shoring up its military with equipment and training elsewhere.²⁸² Although Aliyev and Putin are kindred spirits, so too are Aliyev and Erdogan of Turkey. What is more, Aliyev's decrease in popularity and increase in autocratic measures make Nagorno-Karabakh an important political chess piece for his beleaguered regime. Therefore, Baku's interests might increasingly diverge from Moscow's as Yerevan's alignment with the Kremlin endures.

²⁸⁰ de Waal, 184–87.

²⁸¹ de Waal, 187–88; Petersen, *The World Island*, 134.

²⁸² Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 120.

The perspective of Armenia and Azerbaijan is vital to understanding Russian calculations in Nagorno-Karabakh. Although Russia pursues its interests in Transcaucasia, it has likely determined that Armenia and (to a lesser degree) Azerbaijan need its mediation, weapons sales, and restraint to allow both former SSRs to seek their own interests. However, the other competitor for regional hegemony, Turkey, might not see Russia as the most important stakeholder in Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁸³ And Turkey's role in the conflict is increasing rapidly. The next chapter explores how Russia and Turkey have growing competitive interests in Nagorno-Karabakh, adding an entirely new dimension to the protracted conflict.

²⁸³ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 226.

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IV. RUSSO-TURKISH COMPETITION IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

If the Russian Federation can claim Soviet historical interests in the South Caucasus as a reason to pursue its special relationship with modern nations, then so too can Turkey via its ties with historical Ottoman territories. Whereas those interests might not be as pronounced as Russia's in the recent past, Turkey never lost interest in the region to its east, even though it lost most of its ability to effect events there after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The Soviet Union replaced Turkey as the region's primary influencer, in large part because of Moscow's devotion to shoring up Soviet borders with Turkey and Iran.²⁸⁴ Before the Soviet Union, the Ottomans competed with the Russian and Persian Empires over similar political and economic allegiances, demonstrating that regional powers contesting each other in the South Caucasus is not merely a modern phenomenon.²⁸⁵ The late eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire's territorial gains connected its aligned khanates across the South Caucasus, incorporating modern-day Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh (see Figure 4).²⁸⁶ Therefore, Nagorno-Karabakh is as much in Ankara's backyard as it is in Moscow's and is more than just a new area for Russia and Turkey to compete in.

Turkey is Azerbaijan's most strategic ally, considering that they share ethnic and linguistic ties across the region.²⁸⁷ In fact, local leaders in pre-World War One (WWI) Azeri lands desired annexation by the Ottomans rather than Persia, despite lack of substantial interest from Istanbul.²⁸⁸ While the current allegiance between Ankara and Baku has mostly been economic, the Second Karabakh War saw Ankara increase its role

²⁸⁴ Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, 71.

²⁸⁵ Altstadt, 15–17.

²⁸⁶ Altstadt, 15–17; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 15–17.

²⁸⁷ Welt and Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, 7.

²⁸⁸ Michael A. Reynolds, "Buffers, Not Brethren: Young Turk Military Policy in the First World War and the Myth of Panturanism," *Past & Present*, no. 203 (May 2009): 168, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25580931>.

in Nagorno-Karabakh hostilities by orders of magnitude.²⁸⁹ Undoubtedly, Azerbaijan's success there in 2020 was a direct result of Turkey's thirty-year effort to bolster Azerbaijan in the region.²⁹⁰ Beneath the surface of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, this reality foments a broader opportunity for competition between Ankara and Moscow in much of Eurasia, considering that the two powers also compete in other regions of the world already.



Figure 4. 1780 Map of Caucasian Political Boundaries²⁹¹

The present escalation of Turkish support for Azerbaijan is a stark difference from when Turkey merely closed its borders to Armenia in 1993 in solidarity with Azerbaijan's

²⁸⁹ Welt and Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, 12.

²⁹⁰ Haldun Yalçinkaya, "Turkey's Overlooked Role in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War," The German Marshall Fund of the United States, January 21, 2021, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkeys-overlooked-role-second-nagorno-karabakh-war>.

²⁹¹ Source: de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 16.

plight over its claim to Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁹² This time, Erdogan seems committed to a lasting Turkish involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh that bolsters Baku, suppresses Yerevan, and increases Ankara's overall influence while weakening Moscow's role in the protracted conflict.²⁹³ As Kirill Krivosheev points out in language out of Ankara during late 2020, "this time Erdogan's ambitions go further - he bluntly declares that he wants to break the old and establish a new norm for Turkey to be present in the 'sahada ve masada' ('on the field and at the table') region."²⁹⁴ Taken at face value, one could reasonably assess that Erdogan will no longer give up bargaining power to Moscow, Yerevan, or the West when it comes to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Turkey's membership in NATO raises the stakes in the South Caucasus. And even though Nagorno-Karabakh is not a NATO enmeshment per se, Turkey has the second-largest military in the entire alliance.²⁹⁵ That membership at least dissuades Moscow from pushing Ankara around, implicitly emboldening Ankara in areas like the South Caucasus where Moscow might otherwise attempt to influence Turkish actions.²⁹⁶ It is unlikely, though, Turkey would attempt to bring other NATO members into this conflict. Doing so would give the West more influence that Ankara would also disfavor in the region. Moreover, the West would likely balk at using NATO to influence an outcome in Nagorno-Karabakh while its relations are already tenuous with Moscow over Eastern European matters.

²⁹² Ani Harutyunyan, "Two State Disputes and Outside Intervention: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," *Eurasian Economic Review*; *Heidelberg* 7, no. 1 (2017): 71, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1992195419/fulltextPDF/C60D57DDCF48473APQ/1?accountid=12702&parentSessionId=bBv%2FOySk32um43MScFvs416bM9DwiKXf5zSggSeU%2Fxm%3D>.

²⁹³ Baev, "Russia and Turkey: Strategic Partners and Rivals," 23, 25.

²⁹⁴ Krivosheev, "Third Condominium. How Karabakh Will Change Relations between Russia and Turkey."

²⁹⁵ Posture Statement: Statement of General Tod D. Wolters, United States Air Force, Commander United States European Command, before the Committee on Armed Services, 117th Congress (2021) (statement of General Tod D. Wolters), April 13, 2021, 6, <https://www.eucom.mil/document/41165/general-wolters-fy2022-statement-to-the-senate-armed-services-committee>.

²⁹⁶ Kemal Kirişçi, *Turkey and the West: Fault Lines in a Troubled Alliance* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2017), 22; Hamilton and Mikulska, "Cooperation, Competition, and Compartmentalization," 46.

Nevertheless, Turkey has been accused of providing over 1,500 militants from a proxy force in Syria to fight alongside Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁹⁷ Regardless of the motives behind any mercenary from Syria agreeing to fight in Nagorno-Karabakh, their employment nonetheless recalls soldiers from the recently dissolved Soviet military taking up mercenary services with the highest bidder (or supporting the former SSR that the soldier felt personally aligned with) in 1992.²⁹⁸ Alas, as few as 1,500 Syrian mercenaries in Nagorno-Karabakh could up the ante for both Yerevan and Moscow if they perceive the conflict is escalating into more than just a regional struggle among directly interested parties.

Much of this increased ambition from Ankara can be attributed to decades of Turkey's investment in its security sector.²⁹⁹ Its insistence that it should have been consulted to contribute members to the peacekeeping force maintaining the 2020 ceasefire, demonstrates that Ankara will not shy away from asserting itself, even though Moscow cleverly manipulated its unilateral peacekeeping force into a small geopolitical win that year.³⁰⁰ The Kremlin will likely have to include Ankara in the broader peace process going forward, lest Baku seek to assuage Ankara behind the Kremlin's back.

Lastly, Moscow and Ankara's relationship is also evolving in other parts of the world under complicated similarities to the South Caucasus. In one regard, the two powers compete in protracted disputes like Syria and Libya, while Turkey generally opposes Russia's annexation of Crimea, even if only for self-interested reasons.³⁰¹ Yet in another regard, Turkey purchased the S-400 Triumf surface-to-air (SAM) system (NATO reporting name: SA-21 Growler) from Moscow, despite protests from NATO, while Ankara cooperates with Moscow

²⁹⁷ Hamilton and Mikulska, "Cooperation, Competition, and Compartmentalization," 31–32; Liz Cookman, "Syrians Make Up Turkey's Proxy Army in Nagorno-Karabakh," *Foreign Policy*, October 5, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/05/nagorno-karabakh-syrians-turkey-armenia-azerbaijan/>.

²⁹⁸ de Waal, *Black Garden*, 213–14.

²⁹⁹ Hamilton and Mikulska, "Cooperation, Competition, and Compartmentalization," 30.

³⁰⁰ Hamilton and Mikulska, 33.

³⁰¹ Zanotti and Thomas, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, 35.

on nuclear energy and natural gas pipelines.³⁰² It stands to reason then that although Moscow and Ankara are at odds on some issues, Putin and Erdogan agree with each other more than they agree with the West.³⁰³ Maybe this alignment is nowhere more elucidated than in Putin's backing of Erdogan during the failed coup in Turkey in 2016, or in Erdogan's public silence over Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014.³⁰⁴

In Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow and Ankara have avoided open engagement with each other thus far, dissimilar to when Turkey downed a Russian jet near the Syrian-Turkish border in 2015.³⁰⁵ But that does not mean that Turkey could not do the same in Nagorno-Karabakh during future engagements, considering that Baku itself shot down a Russian helicopter in 2020 (likely with some sort of Turkish assistance).³⁰⁶ Competition in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could foment long-term instability or a lasting peace, depending to a large degree on how Moscow and Ankara act towards each other.³⁰⁷ In the extreme, Nagorno-Karabakh could be the catalyst for a proxy war between Moscow and Ankara, although neither side likely desires that at this point. Therefore, it is important to analyze the ways in which Russia and Turkey oppose one another and cooperate in Nagorno-Karabakh to determine if future interactions will stabilize, destabilize, or solidify the status quo in the region.

³⁰² Borshchevskaya, "Russia and Turkey in Nagorno-Karabakh"; Hamilton and Mikulska, "Cooperation, Competition, and Compartmentalization," 44–45; Zanolli and Thomas, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, 35.

³⁰³ Krivosheev, "Third Condominium. How Karabakh Will Change Relations between Russia and Turkey."

³⁰⁴ Hamilton and Mikulska, "Cooperation, Competition, and Compartmentalization," 43; Samuel J Hirst and Onur Isci, "Smokestacks and Pipelines: Russian-Turkish Relations and the Persistence of Economic Development," *Diplomatic History* 44, no. 5 (January 28, 2020): 856, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhaa046>.

³⁰⁵ Zanolli and Thomas, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, 35.

³⁰⁶ Hamilton and Mikulska, "Cooperation, Competition, and Compartmentalization," 62; Gauthier-Villars and Simmons, "Azerbaijan Shoots Down Russian Helicopter in Armenia."

³⁰⁷ Borshchevskaya, "Russia and Turkey in Nagorno-Karabakh."

A. SOVIET, RUSSIAN, AND TURKISH HISTORICAL AND CURRENT COOPERATION

Russia and Turkey have had a mostly mutually beneficial relationship since the Soviet era, despite past territorial disputes between the Russian and Ottoman Empires. Shortly after the end of World War Two (WWII), Moscow and Ankara sought to put aside their political differences to deepen economic cooperation for the benefit of both countries.³⁰⁸ The victors in post-WWII Moscow viewed Turkey as part of what Samuel Hirst and Onur Isci term, “the oppressed East,” which could become a bulwark against possible Western imperialism.³⁰⁹ Economic intervention at the state level quickly became necessary between Moscow and Ankara to bind their mutual interests and enhance development without capitulating to Western terms, which both had developed a heavy discontent towards.³¹⁰ Political cooperation followed economic codependence, at least to some degree.³¹¹

The economic disorder of the 1980s and 1990s deepened the interdependence between Moscow and Ankara as new gas pipelines were laid across the Black Sea.³¹² When the Soviet Union collapsed, Ankara’s continued economic cooperation with Moscow demonstrated that it viewed its northern neighbor more as a cohabitant of the same geographic region than a Cold War rival, even though Turkey also aligned itself with NATO for security reassurances.³¹³ At the turn of the century, Russia’s and Turkey’s governments became more centralized and expanded their collaboration to joint infrastructure projects, thereby giving special concessions to each other when economic times were less than favorable.³¹⁴ And even though Ankara was most likely never going

³⁰⁸ Hirst and Isci, “Smokestacks and Pipelines,” 835.

³⁰⁹ Hirst and Isci, 838.

³¹⁰ Hirst and Isci, 835–36; Samuel J. Hirst, “Anti-Westernism on the European Periphery: The Meaning of Soviet-Turkish Convergence in the 1930s,” *Slavic Review* 72, no. 1 (January 20, 2017): 53, <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.72.1.0032>.

³¹¹ Hirst and Isci, “Smokestacks and Pipelines,” 836.

³¹² Hirst and Isci, 836.

³¹³ Hirst and Isci, 853.

³¹⁴ Hirst and Isci, 836.

to become an all-out socialist ally in Soviet times, it still sought its own economic self-determination without having to settle strictly for terms dictated by the West.³¹⁵ That gave Moscow reason enough to consider it a partner.

Today, Putin and Erdogan have renewed their willingness to overlook some geopolitical differences for the sake of economic prosperity.³¹⁶ A nuclear power plant being built in Turkey's Mediterranean town of Akkuyu will create a Russian-owned joint enterprise, benefitting both nations, and also demonstrate their cooperation alongside their increasing bitterness towards the West.³¹⁷ In truth, the modern relationship between Moscow and Ankara is as much about the relationship between the two autocratic leaders as it is about Turkey feeling betrayed by the EU and Russia's distrust of NATO.³¹⁸ Widening the gulf between the West and Ankara is Turkey's 2017 purchase of Russian S-400 SAMs, giving the U.S. pause over how to incorporate Turkey into the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program.³¹⁹ This complexity sums up the intricate regional dynamics that exist outside of Russo-Turkish interests in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Finally, Russia and Turkey need to cooperate with each other both economically and politically, considering Turkey's geostrategic importance to Eurasian energy transport.³²⁰ As Turkey's largest trade partner outside of the EU, Moscow exports roughly \$20 billion in goods and services annually to Turkey, as well as over 50% of Ankara's natural gas.³²¹ Even though Turkey buys plenty of crude oil from Baku, its natural gas is provided from Russia's TurkStream pipeline, completed in 2020.³²² Politically, both states play off each other's scorn and victimhood when accusing the West of its hypocrisy over accusations of human rights violations and rampant corruption targeted at Moscow and

³¹⁵ Hirst and Isci, 837.

³¹⁶ Hirst and Isci, 857.

³¹⁷ Hirst and Isci, 858.

³¹⁸ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 191; Hirst and Isci, "Smokestacks and Pipelines," 856.

³¹⁹ Hamilton and Mikulska, "Cooperation, Competition, and Compartmentalization," 43.

³²⁰ Petersen, *The World Island*, 101.

³²¹ Hirst and Isci, "Smokestacks and Pipelines," 857; Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 191.

³²² Hirst and Isci, "Smokestacks and Pipelines," 857.

Ankara.³²³ The West would be much more likely to succeed in asserting its will over Russian and Turkish interests if Moscow and Ankara did not have each other to counter the West's narrative on numerous issues.

Hence, Soviet aid to and interdependence with Ankara both predated and survived the Cold War and was much more necessary to the developing Soviet and Turkish economies than choosing sides in Nagorno-Karabakh.³²⁴ Russia inherited the Soviet-Turkish relationship and deepened their codependence to the benefit of both of these European outsiders, which consider themselves civilizations instead of mere nation-states.³²⁵ However, Nagorno-Karabakh is a unique aspect of the present Russo-Turkish reality, which could alter their overall cooperation. Because of Putin's desire for a special relationship with the former SSRs, Turkey's historical quarrel with Armenia, and Baku's military buildup, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has the capacity to strain Russo-Turkish relations to a degree recalling the late nineteenth century.³²⁶ Making matters worse Russia and Turkey might have diminishing control over Armenian and Azerbaijani actions, respectively, after the 2020 flareup. Indeed, competition between Russia and Turkey could be driven by decisions outside their control. To curtail that possibility, Russia and Turkey have increased their willingness to control the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on their own terms as much as possible.

B. CONFLICTING INTERESTS IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Ankara has considered the parts of the world within Turkey's immediate sphere, including the Middle East, Balkans, and Caucasus, as part of its vital interests since the modern Turkish state came into existence and Turkey acquired part of the Soviet Union's Caucasian lands during the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.³²⁷ Ankara's interest in the

³²³ Hirst and Isci, 856; Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 191.

³²⁴ Hirst and Isci, "Smokestacks and Pipelines," 836.

³²⁵ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 191.

³²⁶ Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, 17.

³²⁷ Onur Isci, "The Massigli Affair and Its Context: Turkish Foreign Policy after the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact," *Journal of Contemporary History* 55, no. 2 (May 8, 2019): 281, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009419833443>; Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia*, 60.

Caucasus mirrors the modern Russian policy of the special relationship that Moscow seeks with its former SSRs, encompassing Russia's near abroad.³²⁸ However, Russia's and Turkey's interests overlap in the Caucasus over issues like Nagorno-Karabakh, potentially making it more difficult to cooperate given each country's desire to take (or uphold) the hegemonic role. Nagorno-Karabakh is the overarching military risk for Russia and Turkey in the South Caucasus, where each has a stake in maintaining a leadership role while limiting the leadership opportunity of the other.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Turkey asserted itself as a regional example for newly independent states in the Caucasus to emulate.³²⁹ Seeing an opportunity to develop a Turkish satellite in the Caucasus, Ankara portrayed itself as a Western beacon for Caucasian development.³³⁰ That regional interest inevitably brought it into the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, considering that its relationship with Armenia was already tenuous. As Moscow's influence waned in the 1990s, Turkey's interest increased due to historical ties to regional dynamics and brought Ankara into direct competition with Moscow.³³¹ Although Nagorno-Karabakh remained mostly a frozen conflict in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Armenia steadily moved closer to Russia with its membership in the CSTO and its firm commitment to allowing permanent Russian troops in Gyumri.³³² For its part, Turkey fortified its commitment to Azerbaijan through energy and military supply relationships.

However, 2020 could be the turning point in Russo-Turkish competition. The geopolitical stakes seem to be increasing in the conflict rapidly. Matching that increase are maneuvers like Turkey committing six of its F-16 Viper jets and a complement of troops to Azerbaijan for what Erdogan termed "joint military exercises" during the 2020

³²⁸ Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, 17.

³²⁹ Hirst and Isci, "Smokestacks and Pipelines," 854–55.

³³⁰ Hirst and Isci, 854–55.

³³¹ Hirst and Isci, 853.

³³² Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 127; Welt and Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, 6.

escalation.³³³ Telegraphing his intent even further, Erdogan asserted that Turkey could seek to build its own military base in Azerbaijan in the future.³³⁴ This announcement prompted a response from the Kremlin: spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said, “The deployment of military infrastructure by the [NATO] alliance countries near our borders is cause for our special attention, as well as a reason for us to take steps to ensure our security and interests.”³³⁵

Matching Turkey’s support for Azerbaijan is Russia’s commitment to Armenia, with the fragile ceasefire backed by 2,000 Russian soldiers deployed as peacekeepers.³³⁶ The Russian troops are as much of an assertion of Russian supremacy over Turkey’s interest vis-à-vis the conflict than they are a lasting mechanism for an eventual treaty. By playing the largest role in halting the 2020 hostilities, Moscow accommodated both Baku and Yerevan. However, it also kept Ankara out of the peacemaking process and thereby gave Moscow the largest stake in maintaining the status quo it desires.³³⁷

Although Turkey was shut out of peace negotiations in late 2020, Ankara successfully demanded the deployment of over 50 Turkish soldiers at the end of the year and deployed observation drones to a joint Russo-Turkish monitoring center in Agdam, Azerbaijan.³³⁸ While there, Russian and Turkish military peacekeepers and observers are likely to keep as close a watch on each other, as they are on the developments in Nagorno-Karabakh.³³⁹ It is also possible that each side will use that joint monitoring center as an

³³³ Joseph Trevithick, “Turkey’s Forward Deployed F-16s In Azerbaijan Have Moved To A New Base,” The Drive, October 26, 2020, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/37278/turkeys-forward-deployed-f-16s-in-azerbaijan-have-moved-to-a-different-airport>; Gall and Prickett, “Roots of War.”

³³⁴ Dmitry Antonov, Alexander Marrow, and Andrew Osborn, “Russia Monitoring Talk of Turkish Military Base in Azerbaijan, Says Kremlin,” Reuters, June 18, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-monitoring-talk-turkish-military-base-azerbaijan-says-kremlin-2021-06-18/>.

³³⁵ Antonov, Marrow, and Osborn.

³³⁶ Thomas et al., “What the United States Military Can Learn from the Nagorno-Karabakh War.”

³³⁷ Galip Dalay, “Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts,” German Institute for International and Security Affairs, April 8, 2021, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkish-russian-relations-in-light-of-recent-conflicts>.

³³⁸ Baev, “Russia and Turkey: Strategic Partners and Rivals,” 23.

³³⁹ Paul Goble, “Joint Russian-Turkish Karabakh Monitoring Center Opens Amidst Fresh Controversy,” The Jamestown Foundation, February 4, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/joint-russian-turkish-karabakh-monitoring-center-opens-amidst-fresh-controversy/>.

opportunity to collect intelligence or battlefield assessments on Armenian and Azerbaijani forces to report to its respective ally in the conflict.

Most importantly, Turkey signed the Shusha Declaration with Azerbaijan in 2021, solidifying their agreement to assist each other if attacked by a third country.³⁴⁰ In principle, this alliance matches Russia's commitment to Armenia inherent in the CSTO and gives Turkey explicit latitude to take military action to protect Azerbaijan. And since Nagorno-Karabakh is recognized as Azerbaijani territory by Turkey, Russia, and the UN, the Shusha Declaration essentially gives Turkey the ability to engage Armenia, or even Russia, inside Nagorno-Karabakh under this declaration.³⁴¹ Whether Ankara will do so remains to be seen. However, the Shusha Declaration between Ankara and Baku is likely to be a serious consideration for Moscow and Yerevan in the steps each takes in Nagorno-Karabakh. In that regard, Turkey has gained a relatively competitive advantage as an answer to Russia's unilaterally brokered ceasefire and deployment of Russian peacekeepers.

Thus, it remains open to multiple lines of analysis whose interests will win out in Nagorno-Karabakh, considering that both Moscow and Ankara have made gestures staking their claim to the South Caucasus region.³⁴² One could reason that Moscow and Ankara would compete there regardless of hot war between Yerevan and Baku. But it is the open hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh that create the possibility for Russia's and Turkey's militaries to come into direct contact with each other, not just the weaker Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. Nevertheless, Russia seeks to minimize conflict other than just that between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia desires to deepen its relations with both, but the 2020 reemergence of hostilities inserts the increasingly aggressive Turkey, thereby increasing regional competition in Transcaucasia, in addition

³⁴⁰ Doukaev, "Turkey Breaches Russia's Sphere of Influence."

³⁴¹ Moscow Times, "Russia's Security Guarantees for Armenia Don't Extend to Karabakh, Putin Says"; United Nations General Assembly, "General Assembly Adopts Resolution Reaffirming Territorial Integrity of Azerbaijan, Demanding Withdrawal of All Armenian Forces."

³⁴² Thomas et al., "What the United States Military Can Learn from the Nagorno-Karabakh War."

to the ongoing competition between Russia and Turkey in the Middle East and North Africa.³⁴³

C. INTERNATIONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING RUSSIAN AND TURKISH COMPETITION

Even though Russia and Turkey maintain cooperative economic initiatives while backing opposing sides in Nagorno-Karabakh, their broader competition outside the South Caucasus must also be considered an indicator of how they might act towards each other in the region. The two nations have conflicting security concerns and competing interests to control access to the Black and Mediterranean Seas via the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Strait.³⁴⁴ Despite their aforementioned mutually-beneficial relationship, constructed after WWII, Moscow's demands for control of territory on the Anatolian Peninsula helped push Turkey into NATO and an initially pro-Western security alignment that threatened to widen the geopolitical gulf between Moscow and Ankara.³⁴⁵

At the end of the Cold War, Russia worried that Turkey would assert its role as the source for Western influence in all of the Caucasus while also intentionally eroding Moscow's authority there.³⁴⁶ Russia's fears were perhaps heaviest in the North Caucasus, where the Muslim population already had a pre-WWI history of defying Moscow with support from the Ottoman Empire in regions like Chechnya.³⁴⁷ To counter this encroachment during the 1990s, Russia backed the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which threatened to violently overthrow the Turkish state (even though Putin has distanced the Kremlin from the PKK in modern times).³⁴⁸ Though the animosity is not as overt or critical today, many in Turkey still believe that Ankara has ample opportunity to counter

³⁴³ Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia*, 16–17; Zanotti and Thomas, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, 24; Welt and Bowen, *Azerbaijan and Armenia: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, 12.

³⁴⁴ Hirst and Isci, "Smokestacks and Pipelines," 837.

³⁴⁵ Hirst and Isci, 837–38.

³⁴⁶ Hirst and Isci, 855.

³⁴⁷ Hirst and Isci, 855.

³⁴⁸ Hirst and Isci, 855; Hamilton and Mikulska, "Cooperation, Competition, and Compartmentalization," 43; Bechev, *Rival Power*, 147.

Moscow's interests in the greater Caucasus region, including through subtle actions like Ankara facilitating NATO access to the Black Sea during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War.³⁴⁹

Then there is Russia and Turkey's ongoing competition in Syria. Paralleling Nagorno-Karabakh's importance to Moscow and Ankara is the disagreement about how to deal with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.³⁵⁰ Furthermore, if concerns about military engagements or political strain between Russia and Turkey are relevant in Nagorno-Karabakh, then it must be noted that both have already occurred over the Syrian conflict. Ankara's 2015 downing of a Russian jet over claimed Turkish airspace and the 2016 assassination of the Russian ambassador to Turkey in Ankara demonstrated that the two powers were not as closely aligned politically as they were economically.³⁵¹

Straining matters in Syria even further is Russia's concern over how NATO and the West handled regime change in Libya.³⁵² Moscow saw Turkey as complicit in the removal of Muammar Gaddafi, and therefore as an example of hypocrisy from the West.³⁵³ Since then, Ankara has incrementally increased its involvement in the resultant Libyan tribal conflicts, including making agreements about Mediterranean Sea boundaries with Libya's transitional Government of National Accord (GNA).³⁵⁴ Moscow has chosen to back the Libyan National Army (LNA), only to find the GNA supported by Turkish drones, military observers, and allied Syrian proxies in skirmishes against the LNA.³⁵⁵ Turkey's provision of lethal aid, drones, and proxy forces to Libya is eerily similar to Ankara's methods in Nagorno-Karabakh and was likely a proving ground for Turkey's decision on which techniques to use to support Baku in 2020.

³⁴⁹ Isci, "The Massigli Affair and Its Context," 286; Hirst and Isci, "Smokestacks and Pipelines," 856.

³⁵⁰ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 192.

³⁵¹ Hirst and Isci, "Smokestacks and Pipelines," 857.

³⁵² Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia*, 191.

³⁵³ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 94.

³⁵⁴ Zanolli and Thomas, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, Introduction.

³⁵⁵ Zanolli and Thomas, 20.

D. CONCLUSION

Russia and Turkey's regional competition and opposition in Nagorno-Karabakh can be summed up as aggressive ambivalence towards each other. Highlighting Bobo Lo's idea that Russia and Turkey consider themselves "civilizations" vice nation-states is apt, because it explains how each views its role in the South Caucasus as master and views itself as equal in its interactions with each other. While some analysts assess Moscow's and Ankara's increased activity in Nagorno-Karabakh to be an escalation from decades past, there is also the underlying assessment that they could be working together in the South Caucasus to exert their influence while also blocking intervention from the West.³⁵⁶ In the South Caucasus, Syria, or Libya, Putin and Erdogan might not agree completely, but both would likely rather pursue their interests alongside the other than with implicit strings attached from any significant Western intervention in these conflicts.³⁵⁷

Nevertheless, Turkey remains an increasingly aggressive variable in Nagorno-Karabakh. This involvement puts Moscow in an uneasy circumstance, as its position in a key near-abroad region is challenged by a NATO member operating outside of the NATO construct and without attempting to enlarge NATO's presence.³⁵⁸ Consequently, Nagorno-Karabakh's geopolitical situation could be a new frontier for Moscow, which has become adept at staving off NATO intervention. Nagorno-Karabakh is as much of a unilateral matter for Turkey as it is for Russia. And Moscow will have to acknowledge that if it has not done so already.

But Russia and Turkey's cooperation has been a motif since the Cold War. Their competition in Nagorno-Karabakh has also been present since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Nagorno-Karabakh has been so important to Moscow, that in 1992, a commander of joint forces under the CIS warned Turkey that its intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh

³⁵⁶ Asbed Kotchikian, "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Precipitates a New Regional Order," Al Jazeera, October 8, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/10/8/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-precipitates-a-new-regional-order>.

³⁵⁷ Krivosheev, "Third Condominium. How Karabakh Will Change Relations between Russia and Turkey."

³⁵⁸ Baev, "Russia and Turkey: Strategic Partners and Rivals," 23.

could trigger World War Three.³⁵⁹ Even though the likelihood of that happening today is slim, there is no question that continued interest in the conflict between Moscow and Ankara could spill over into kinetic engagements or weaken their willingness to cooperate in other parts of the world.

³⁵⁹ Bechev, *Rival Power*, 148–49.

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V. CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has discussed a protracted conflict in a part of the world that receives relatively little press from Western media outlets. However, there are organizations, academics, military members, and government officials all over the world who are well-informed and profoundly concerned with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This is for good reason, as the conflict has grown in geopolitical importance to the West.³⁶⁰ While Russia's intentions and activities in Eastern Europe are under constant scrutiny by the West, the decades-long war in Nagorno-Karabakh has nonetheless urged Moscow to take an active role in asserting its control there too. Russia's involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh provides a framework for how Russia might act in any of the contested regions in its sphere of control, making the conflict an important piece of Moscow's entire near abroad strategy. This study examined the factors Moscow considers when injecting its foreign policy in Transcaucasia as it seeks to maintain its hegemonic role there.

Important to understanding Russia's actions in the South Caucasus is the historical narrative embedded in Moscow's modern perception of its influence in the region. Although this study did not delve deeply into eras before the twentieth century, Russia's role in the Caucasus is much older than the Soviet Union. However, the conflict took shape under Soviet control and devolved, in large part, because of Soviet policies. Thus, history and historical context is important if one is to understand Russia's modern actions in Nagorno-Karabakh. Next, one should also consider that Armenia and Azerbaijan believe themselves to have existential stakes vis-à-vis the conflict. While some might not be able to envision Yerevan or Baku ceasing to exist in their present form as a second-order effect of Nagorno-Karabakh, that is very much the narrative that both societies tell themselves daily.³⁶¹ Because of this reality, both nations must abide Russia's interest in the South Caucasus in some regard. Finally, Russia is not the only regional power with interest in the South Caucasus. Turkey's increased audacity in Nagorno-Karabakh presents considerable

³⁶⁰ de Waal, *Black Garden*, xiii.

³⁶¹ de Waal, xiv–xvi.

foreign policy challenges for Moscow, not to mention that it further embattles Armenians against Azerbaijanis.

A. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

(1) Russia's historical factors in Nagorno-Karabakh

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has leveraged its historical role as mediator of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to its benefit. Although Moscow has had to carefully consider its role in multinational peace organizations like the OSCE Minsk Group, pursue its leadership in Russo-centric organizations like the CIS and CSTO, or assert unilateral control over frozen conflicts in its near abroad, the Kremlin has had more success in creating a favorable status quo for itself in Transcaucasia than has any other nation or organization.³⁶² Whether Moscow has done so out of necessity or in pursuit of Putin's desire to maintain Russia's special relationship with the former SSRs, Moscow's influence has gained it a lasting presence while also driving a wedge between South Caucasus nations and the West. All other actors, save Turkey, have lost what little political influence they once had over Nagorno-Karabakh since the Soviet Union fell. Russia has accomplished this geopolitical win by limiting direct intervention and exerting its soft power. Armenia's dependence on Moscow has never been more profound, whereas Azerbaijan continues to rely on Russian consent to stake Baku's claim to the territory. Russia will unquestionably play a role in any lasting peace in Nagorno-Karabakh because of its successful implementation of historical policies there.³⁶³ Unfortunately for the West, effective involvement from multinational organizations like the OSCE appears to be diminishing.

(2) Armenian and Azerbaijani perceptions of Russia's involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh

Russia's individual relationships with Armenia and Azerbaijan play a critical role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Both states pursue their individual interests with

³⁶² Kotchikian, "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Precipitates a New Regional Order."

³⁶³ Laruelle and Radvanyi, *Understanding Russia*, 98–99.

Moscow, as well as assert historical claims on Nagorno-Karabakh, dating back to when they were both SSRs.³⁶⁴ From Moscow's guardianship of Armenian existence to Putin's personal relationship with Azerbaijan's president Aliyev, Moscow has successfully navigated the conflict as the proverbial mediator and puppet master. However, Yerevan's relationship with Moscow is different from Baku's.

Even though Moscow looked on with disfavor during Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution, it was never in danger of losing Armenia as a client state. Yerevan's poor performance during the Second Karabakh War guaranteed that Moscow will maintain an active role in Armenia's geopolitical future and ensured that Yerevan will host forward-deployed Russian Federation troops into the future. The existence of Armenian oligarchs in Moscow and Russian ones in Yerevan also deepen Russo-Armenian ties, where official and back-channel dealings can guarantee that Yerevan keeps Moscow's interest in mind during its actions in Nagorno-Karabakh and elsewhere.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan has increased its political movement towards Turkey while appeasing Moscow. Because Baku has access to hydrocarbons, it has been able to shake off the necessity of Moscow's security guarantees, considering that it has built up its military significantly over the past three decades.³⁶⁵ However, Baku's decreasing access to crude oil and shift to natural gas exports threatens to put it into direct economic competition with Moscow.³⁶⁶ Moreover, Baku has gained security assurances from its ethno-linguistic sibling, Turkey. For Baku, Ankara has effectively matched Moscow's guarantee of Yerevan's interests in Nagorno-Karabakh with Ankara's 2021 Shusha Declaration. Accordingly, Baku's dependence on Moscow is much more subtle and therefore potentially at odds with Russia in Nagorno-Karabakh. Nevertheless, Moscow has demonstrated a shrewd adeptness at interjecting itself into Karabakh affairs via its individual relationships with the nations in Transcaucasia.

³⁶⁴ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 181.

³⁶⁵ Smil, *Oil*, 108–10; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 184–85.

³⁶⁶ Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 86; de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 187–88.

(3) Russia and Turkey's competition in Nagorno-Karabakh

Although the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is an Armenian and Azerbaijani one, Russia and Turkey's potential to broaden the conflict raises the stakes in a region where it is difficult enough to achieve peace already. Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis are attuned to this reality and possibly compelled to protract the conflict even more as Russia and Turkey assert their influence to the benefit of their respective devotees. Azeris, as secular Shi'ite Muslims, identify more in terms of their Turkic ethno-linguistic kinship than their religious affiliation.³⁶⁷ And while Armenians are Christians, they are compelled to fight Azeris not necessarily because Azeris are Muslims but because of Azeri ties to the same Turks who committed genocide against the Armenians in 1915.³⁶⁸ Thus, Ohannes Geukjian and Neil Robinson note, in the categories of "ethnicity, religious culture, and vernacular language," Azerbaijanis and Armenians are distinct nations with few similarities upon which to build diplomatic relationships.³⁶⁹ Russia and Turkey have the ability to exploit these widening issues, but they potentially do so at the cost of enmeshing Moscow and Ankara in another competitive front.

Convoluting matters further is Russia and Turkey's history of economic cooperation since WWII and similar shifts towards centralized authoritarianism over the past few decades. Putin and Erdogan's relationship and increased consternation towards the West play a role in how Russia and Turkey interact in Nagorno-Karabakh. The two powers' interests might not align perfectly in the region, but they mirror each other more than they do the interests of the West.

However, that is not to say that there is not increased opportunity for misunderstanding and miscalculation between Moscow and Ankara in Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey's supply of Syrian mercenaries and lethal military equipment to Azerbaijan increases its competition with Moscow's desire to control matters in the region, as does

³⁶⁷ Ohannes Geukjian and Neil Robinson, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in the South Caucasus: Nagorno-Karabakh and the Legacy of Soviet Nationalities Policy* (Ashgate Publishing Company, 2016), chap. 2, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781317140740>; Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth*, 270.

³⁶⁸ Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth*, 270.

³⁶⁹ Geukjian and Robinson, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in the South Caucasus*, 17.

ongoing competition in Syria and Libya.³⁷⁰ And though it is unlikely Moscow and Ankara will engage each other militarily in Nagorno-Karabakh, it remains the case that Armenian or Azerbaijani skirmishes with Turkish or Russian soldiers, whether mistaken or intentional, could draw the larger actors into a military engagement.

While competition is evident, cooperation in Nagorno-Karabakh is also a mutually beneficial reality for Russia and Turkey. Both governments have taken advantage of a persistently absent Western and multinational resolution, thereby making the Nagorno-Karabakh a regional conflict to be settled by regional actors.³⁷¹ Turkey remains aggressive in the region, but Moscow remains in charge. The ambivalence between the two is noteworthy, but possibly more a sign of their increased willingness to pursue their individual interests in the conflict than to seek out each other competitively.

B. POTENTIAL FUTURE TRENDS

As of early 2022, the Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire has held up for the most part. Even though the Second Karabakh War has redrawn the boundaries of Nagorno-Karabakh into undisputable Azerbaijani territory, the presence of Russian peacekeepers has effectively refrozen the conflict and enabled Armenia to save face despite an overwhelming Azerbaijani tactical victory. However, the fragility of the current ceasefire cannot be overstated.

Russia will continue to be the primary peace broker in many ways because its history of political leverage and its share of the global energy market gives it the most leverage over the region.³⁷² Although Baku has made considerable investment in other economic sectors, the majority of its revenue still depends on oil and gas.³⁷³ As of 2015, Azerbaijan's access to extractable crude oil has reduced significantly, thereby pushing it to

³⁷⁰ Cookman, "Syrians Make Up Turkey's Proxy Army in Nagorno-Karabakh."

³⁷¹ Kotchikian, "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Precipitates a New Regional Order."

³⁷² Angela Stent, "The Putin Doctrine," *Foreign Affairs*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-01-27/putin-doctrine>.

³⁷³ de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 227.

shift to gas extraction and placing it in more direct competition with Moscow.³⁷⁴ In some regards, corruption has never been higher in Baku, and the nature of its resource curse and authoritarian leader enable it to enjoy few political checks and balances.³⁷⁵ One could reasonably expect Moscow to increase its leverage over Baku's narrowing economic self-determination, at least to some degree. On the other hand, one could also expect Baku to seek closer security assurances with Ankara as Yerevan and Moscow draw closer to each other.

In Yerevan, the CSTO relationship is increasingly beneficial to both Armenia and Russia. In early 2022, Armenia supplied troops to Kazakhstan to help suppress protests in Nur Sultan, Kazakhstan and ensure regime survival for another authoritarian state.³⁷⁶ Surely, Yerevan has interest in supporting other members of the CSTO, but it also has its own matters to worry about. This maneuver suggests, in part, that Yerevan is doubling down on its contribution to the CSTO in case it needs the alliance in the future. However, whether the CSTO supports Armenia or not, Moscow has all but guaranteed that Yerevan will have some say in the future of Nagorno-Karabakh. Furthermore, if Baku or Ankara have designs on incursions into Armenia proper, Yerevan has gained confidence that Moscow will intervene. As Russia's English-language news channel RT quoted Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan in an April 2021 headline, "'An attack on Armenia is an attack on Russia' – Yerevan's PM Pashinyan claims Moscow is key to national security after bloody war."³⁷⁷ Thus, a refrozen Nagorno-Karabakh conflict might be best for all parties involved.

Finally, Russia and Turkey's competition in Nagorno-Karabakh is likely to increase, at least through political, economic, and military supply to its respective allies. Russia and Turkey understand that deeper enmeshment in Nagorno-Karabakh would be

³⁷⁴ de Waal, 184–85.

³⁷⁵ de Waal, 185.

³⁷⁶ Brands, "Putin Is Shoring Up the Global Alliance of Autocrats."

³⁷⁷ RT, "'An Attack on Armenia Is an Attack on Russia' – Yerevan's PM Pashinyan Claims Moscow Is Key to National Security after Bloody War," RT International, April 14, 2021, <https://www.rt.com/russia/521022-pashinyan-armenia-russia-security/>.

detrimental to both if it were to devolve into attacks on each other's militaries. Putin will continue to view Erdogan as a personal ally on the international stage, one necessary to reinforce Russian foreign policy in other affairs.³⁷⁸ In that regard, Nagorno-Karabakh need not become a reason for Moscow and Ankara to cease cooperation, regardless of how ambivalent their position on each other's presence is in the South Caucasus. For now, Russia maintains its hegemony in Nagorno-Karabakh. It will likely continue to do so because of its devotion to continuing its historical policies and practices in its near abroad, its maintenance of special relationships with Armenia and Azerbaijan, and its willingness to compete with Turkey. These factors have influenced Russia's foreign policy in Nagorno-Karabakh and have assured that the Kremlin will maintain its ability to reinforce the status quo.

³⁷⁸ Stent, "The Putin Doctrine."

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