

Russia's Policy During the 44-Day Karabakh War

NAZİM JAFAROV* and **ARAZ ASLANLI****

* Azerbaijan State University of Economics, Azerbaijan

ORCID No: 0000-0002-7480-4680

** Academy of the State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan

ORCID No: 0000-0001-6573-4660

ABSTRACT *The 44-day Karabakh War seriously affected the international balances in the Caucasus in terms of security, politics, and economic dimensions. The attitude of international actors during the war was important to define the fate and consequences of the war. Among these international actors, Russia's attitude was of special importance. The policy followed by Russia during and after the 44-day Karabakh War had four main and parallel pillars: The first pillar of Russia's policy was maintaining the status of its traditional ally Armenia. The second pillar was maintaining its mediator role for the resolution of the conflict. The third pillar of the policy pursued by the Kremlin was not harming the strategic partnership relationship with Azerbaijan, which had been specially developed during Vladimir Putin's tenure. The fourth pillar of the policies pursued by Russia was not disrupting the multidimensional profound relationships with Turkey, which had advanced in recent years. The first two dimensions of this policy followed by the Putin Administration during the 2nd Karabakh War represent Russia's conventional Caucasus policy and the last two dimensions embody a policy change.*

Keywords: Karabakh War, Russia, South Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey

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Introduction

The 2nd Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan, lasting from September 27 until November 9, 2020, is of critical importance in the South Caucasus in terms of its military results and effects on the regional balance of power. The attitude of international actors, as well as that of Azerbaijan and Armenia during and in the aftermath of the war, constituted a significant dimension for the solution of this conflict. Russia's attitude among the international actors was critical, considering its attitude towards analogous conflicts in the former Soviet geography. The importance of Russia's position stems from its strategic role, both in the emergence of the Karabakh conflict itself and in resolving the conflict. This strategic role was very influential because of Russia's position, first of all, as a mediator in a political resolution to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, as well as its contributing role to altering the status quo through military means.

Russia, as one of the co-chairing states of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, played an active and leading role in conflict resolution. In military terms, the Russian army, with its 366th

regiment, took part on the Armenian side in the very development of this conflict in the early 1990s. In addition, some Russian officials displayed encouraging attitudes to Armenia during the 1st Karabakh War (1992-1994), and the Russian leadership had managed to halt the so-called 'Four-Day War' between Armenia and Azerbaijan in April 2016. The Kremlin's approach to the 2nd Karabakh War, however, deserves special attention in terms of Russia's roles in the other regional conflicts, namely in the continuation of the Transnistria con-

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flikt since 1992, its military attitude towards Georgia in 2008 regarding the Abkhazia and South Ossetia separatist regions, and the annexation of Ukraine's the Crimean Peninsula with its behavior in the Donbas region in 2014.

In this context, Russia's stance in the 2nd Karabakh War, which started with the breach of the ceasefire regime by the Armenian side on September 27, 2020, was unexpected by both Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as by international actors. With reference to previous experiences, the idea that Russia would not allow the war to start or would quickly stop it, in order to maintain the strategic balance kept between the parties, was dominant among the expert com-

munities both before and during the war. In this sense, the policy followed by the Kremlin during the 44-day war has been regarded by many experts with surprise and intrigue. In this article, Russia's role in the war and its efforts to achieve a truce will be evaluated by taking into account the historical dimension of the conflict.

Russia's First Ceasefire Attempts on the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict

Although the roots of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict go back to the second half of the 1980s, until 1991 the Moscow administration attempted to achieve a solution for the conflict rather than merely maintain a ceasefire. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, notwithstanding the skirmishes which increased at the frontline, attempts for a ceasefire and achieving peace continued. The acceleration of the independence process of the (now former) Soviet republics from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Armenia's zeal to annex the Azerbaijani lands set a gradually expanding new dimension to the conflict.

In this context, the first ceasefire accord between Azerbaijan and Armenia in order to suspend the then-emerging crisis was concluded on September 23, 1991, with the mediation of Boris Yeltsin and Nursultan Nazarbayev, then presidents of Russia and Kazakhstan respectively.¹ The armistice declaration of September 23, 1991, stipulated the establishment of a ceasefire between the parties, the acknowledgment by Armenia of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) belonging to Azerbaijan, and the possibility of granting this region some opportunities to govern itself.² This declaration signed in the Southern Russian city of Zheleznovodsk was the first ceasefire document in the history of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. The Azerbaijani side mobilized Russian and Kazakhstani observers to the frontline region to prove that the ceasefire was not respected by Armenia.³ Shortly after, on November 20, 1991, a helicopter carrying members of the Azerbaijani government and security officials, two Russian generals, as well as Kazakh and Russian observers and famous journalists was shot down over the area under Armenian occupation.⁴ This attack once more caused the failure of the ceasefire process.

The years 1992 and 1993 were a period of intensification for the Armenian attacks and ceasefire attempts imposed from abroad. Following the occupation of the Kalbajar district of Azerbaijan, with the involvement of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in the process, the ceasefire efforts became more multidimensional. In particular, with the initiative of President Boris Yeltsin on May 3, 1993, Russia proposed an important peace initiative within the framework of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE)

Russian President Putin (C), Azerbaijani President Aliyev (L) and Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan (R) met in Moscow to discuss the Nagorno-Karabakh issue on January 11, 2021. Kremlin Press Service / AA



process. Azerbaijan, understanding the Russian pro-Armenian stance at that time, sought the U.S.' participation in the process to balance the situation with a country of equal weight. A trio of Russia, Turkey, and the U.S. was formed, marking the start of the involvement of Turkey in the peace initiative process. Although the proposals of the parties envisaging the evacuation of Kalbajar by the Armenian forces by May 14, 1993, and the continuation of peace negotiations within the framework of CSCE as of May 17, 1993, was accepted by Azerbaijan, Armenia did not agree. After the meeting of Boris Yeltsin and the then Armenian president Levon Ter-Petrosyan on May 27, 1993, Armenia changed its attitude and accepted all the offers of the mediators. However, the peace process was then blocked by Armenia claiming that the Armenians of the Nagorno-Karabakh region did not 'accept' the conditions. Armenia's subsequent overconfidence was probably conditioned by the internal turmoil, i.e., the coup process in Azerbaijan staged by Russian intelligence.

On June 3-4, 1993, a new document that would be a basis for the solution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict was prepared during the meeting of the representatives of nine OSCE member states (the U.S., Russia, France, Turkey, Italy, Germany, Czech Republic, Sweden, and Belarus) in Rome.⁵ Thus, an 'Emergency Action Plan' envisaging the implementation of the UN Security Council's Resolution 822 and the continuation of the negotiations within the framework of the CSCE was accepted by the CSCE's nine members and presented to the conflicting parties. According to the 'Emergency Action Plan,' as of June 15, 1993, the Armenian side should complete the full evacuation of

Kelbajar by June 20, 1993, and as of July 1, 1993, the OSCE's 50 observers had to be deployed to the conflict zone. Then, it was expected to resume the negotiations at the CSCE Minsk Conference, no later than August 7, 1993. Azerbaijan immediately accepted and signed this peace plan of the CSCE 'nines.' Armenia also endorsed this plan but alleged that some 'forces' in the occupied region were out of its control, and therefore demanded another month for the evacuation of Kalbajar district. However, with Armenia increasing its attacks afterward, as well as the internal turmoil intensifying in Azerbaijan, the peace process was undermined. Russian observers visiting the conflict region in June and July of 1993 witnessed the air attacks by Armenian forces over the city of Aghdam.

The Bishkek protocol briefly stated that the conflict in and around the former NKAO had harmed the Azerbaijani and Armenian peoples as well as other peoples of the region

Between June and November of 1993, Aghdere, Agdam, Fuzuli, Jabrayil, Horadiz, and Zangilan districts were completely occupied by the Armenian armed forces. In this context, the entire historical Karabakh region, including the former NKAO, had actually been taken over by Armenian armed forces and was out of Azerbaijani control. The UN Security Council adopted four resolutions (822, 853, 874, and 884) regarding the occupation of Azerbaijan's territories by Armenia. In each of the resolutions, the UNSC emphasized that the previous decisions should be implemented, and the Armenian occupation should be immediately and unconditionally ended.⁶

The small-scale attacks, from January to March of 1994, were condoned with the mediation efforts of the OSCE and Russia. Although Russia was a member of the OSCE Minsk Group, Moscow's constant priority was its plan to regain its previous influence in the region through achieving a ceasefire and peace. The most important of Russia's initiatives in 1994 were: the meetings between the Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev and his Azerbaijani counterpart Hasan Hasanov, in Moscow on January 18, and later with his Armenian counterpart Raffi K. Richard Hovannisyan, on January 20; the meeting of the 'Minsk Nine' with the CSCE Minsk Conference's new chairman Swedish Yana Eliasson in Hungary on February 4; the signing of the protocol after the meeting of the Defense Ministers of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia in Moscow on February 18; the visits of Deputy Defense Minister of Russia and the President's Special Representative's to Baku and Yerevan from February 28 to March 1.⁷

Following this from March 31 to April 3, the President of the Kyrgyzstan Supreme Council, as a representative of the CIS Inter-Parliamentary Council and the Special Representative of the Russian President, visited the cities of Baku, Yerevan, and Khankendi in Azerbaijan. Shortly after, on April 9, Armenian

With the signing of the ‘Great Political Agreement,’ Russia aimed to deploy its army to the conflict zone and to re-strengthen its position in the entire Caucasus by keeping the efforts at conflict resolution under its control

forces launched an intense attack on Terter district, which lasted about a month.⁸ During the CIS’s Heads of States Summit held in Moscow on April 15, 1994, the Presidents of Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia together discussed the conflict, and afterward, the Summit issued a joint declaration on “events in the Nagorno-Karabakh region and its surroundings.”⁹

From May 4 to 5, 1994, the representatives of the Parliament of Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs brought the chairmen of the Armenian and Azerbaijani parliaments, as well as the representatives of the Azerbaijani and Armenian population of the former NKAO together in Bishkek within the framework of the CIS’ Inter-Parliamentary Council. During this meeting on May 5, the ‘Bishkek Protocol’ was signed as a step towards peace. Initially in this protocol, which would form the basis of the ceasefire agreement to be signed later, the names of the authorities of Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the mediator states, as well as the Armenian representatives (separatists) of the former NKAO were mentioned. Upon seeing this, the Vice-Chairman of the Azerbaijan National Assembly Afiyaddin Jalilov returned to Baku without signing the document, because Azerbaijan had been assured in advance that the protocol would be signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia only. After Jalilov’s return to Baku, Russian Foreign Ministry official (also President’s Special Representative on this conflict) Vladimir Kazimirov visited Baku and asked the Azerbaijani side to sign the protocol. After the negotiations in Baku, it was decided that the protocol should be signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia, while the representatives of Azerbaijani and Armenian communities of the NKAO could mark the document as an ‘interested party.’ The Chairman of the Azerbaijan National Assembly, Rasul Guliyev, signed the corrected version of this document.¹⁰

The Bishkek protocol briefly stated that the conflict in and around the former NKAO had harmed the Azerbaijani and Armenian peoples as well as other peoples of the region, supported the cessation of armed conflicts and the reconciliation achieved at the CIS Presidents’ Summit on April 14, 1994, as well as the efforts of the Inter-Parliamentary Council and the CIS in this direction. It emphasized that the decisions taken by the UN Security Council and the OSCE on the resolution of the conflict (mainly the UNSC’s resolutions 822, 853, 874, and 884) should be implemented and referred to the protocol signed in Moscow between the Defense Ministers of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia on February 18, 1994. Furthermore, it expressed the achievement of a con-

sensus on the cessation of fire from May 8 to 9, and urged the return of the refugees to their places, etc. On May 9, 1994, an armistice accord was signed between the Defense Ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the ceasefire regime started to be implemented from May 12.¹¹ With this document, the invading attacks of Armenia on Azerbaijani territories and the war between the two countries were officially suspended.

'Armistice' and Russia following the 1994 Ceasefire Agreement

In the period after the ceasefire was signed on May 9, 1994, Russia's representative in the Minsk Group Vladimir Kazimirov regularly conducted meetings in Baku, Yerevan, and Azerbaijan's Armenian-occupied city of Khankendi in June and July of 1994.¹² Kazimirov stated that the purpose of these talks that he conducted was "to strengthen the ceasefire and to prepare the 'Great Political Agreement.'"¹³ With the signing of the 'Great Political Agreement,' Russia aimed to deploy its army to the conflict zone and to re-strengthen its position in the entire Caucasus by keeping the efforts at conflict resolution under its control. However, the western states opposed Russia's attempts to increase its influence in the Caucasus, and therefore, they strongly objected to the Russian demand to grant its military forces the status of 'UN Peacekeeping Forces.' The key reason for the tension between the CSCE and Moscow in the realization of the Russian-proposed 'Great Political Agreement' was that the OSCE did not agree to accept a 'single mediator' in the conflict resolution process (effectively Russia was trying to fulfill the sole mediation model to keep the conflict under its control).

Azerbaijan also opposed the deployment of Russian soldiers as sole peacekeepers within the framework of the peace plan 'Great Political Agreement.' Azerbaijan's then-President Heydar Aliyev in his statement made in July 1994 stated that they could accept the entry of Russian soldiers into the region within the framework of the CSCE Peacekeeping Forces or together with multinational peacekeepers.¹⁴

Failure to promote the negotiations regarding the 'Great Political Agreement' held in Moscow with the mediation of Russia between August and September of 1994 also implied the failure of Russia's attempts to mediate alone. In order to prevent Russia's initiative in solving this conflict alone and sending its own peacekeepers, the CSCE Senior Officials Committee adopted a decision on September 16, 1994, urging that multinational peacekeeping forces should be sent to the conflict area.¹⁵

The CSCE's special meeting convened on October 24, 1994, determined that the Minsk Group would assume all responsibility for conducting peace talks

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and sending peacekeepers to the conflict region. The first reaction to the idea of sending the CSCE Peacekeeping Force to the region came from Russia since it would have led to Russia losing control over the conflict resolution process and even excluded Russia from the issue. Andres Byurner, then Chairperson of the CSCE Minsk Group, visited Baku and Yerevan to discuss the form of peacekeeping deployment. However, although this plan was accepted by Azerbaijan it was once more rejected by Armenia.

In the CSCE's Budapest Summit held in December 1994, the existing structure of the Minsk Group was changed and instead of a single-presidency system, a co-chair system was established. In this meeting, while Russia was given the status of permanent co-chair within the Minsk Group, it was also decided that NATO and Russia should form a joint peacekeeping force to be placed first in the conflict zone between Armenia and Azerbaijan (that is in the Azerbaijani territories occupied by Armenia).¹⁶ With this decision, the CSCE gave Russia the permanent co-chairmanship of the Minsk Group to moderate the latter's reactions against the changes, and in parallel, the organization tried to prevent the solution of the conflict from going out of the CSCE framework and remaining within Russia's monopoly.

Another series of new meetings between Azerbaijan, Armenia, and former NKAO Armenians started in Moscow on February 6-11, 1995.¹⁷ However, the negotiations failed once again due to the divergences between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the issues of parties to the conflict, the structure of the peacekeeping forces, the evacuation of Shusha and Lachin district, and the new status for the former NKAO.

In fact, the true purpose of the ceasefires achieved in the past was constantly questioned due to the violation of the armistice regime almost every day since 1994 until the resumption of the war on September 27, 2020. As a result of the ceasefire violations, many soldiers and civilians on both sides were either killed or injured. Taking hostages from both sides became a regular practice. The frequent intensification of ceasefire violations suggested that war could begin at any time.

Especially, after Russia's intervention in Georgia in August 2008, it turned out to be more obvious that the 'frozen conflicts' were not frozen at all and that the



efforts to solve the conflict needed to be intensified as the existing (former) status quo posed a greater danger. Trying to keep the conflict under its control, Russian officials during their visits to Azerbaijan and Armenia reminded everyone to ‘learn from Georgia’s experiences.’ As a result of the meeting between the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia in Russia on November 2, 2008, the ‘Moscow Declaration’ was issued which emphasized that “no military means would be used for a solution.”¹⁸ The document signed at the Mein Dorf Castle near Moscow was expected to substantially guarantee the truce, but this declaration could not prevent violations of the ceasefire regime.

In August and November 2014, December 2015, and in some other periods, whenever there were high-level meetings, the ceasefire violations started to intensify, causing significant human losses on both sides, and the war scenario became more and more likely. However, in all these incidents after a few days of tension, the status quo was restored.

The biggest tension at the frontline, after the 1994 ceasefire agreement, was experienced in the early days of April 2016. During the intense clashes between April 2-5, both sides suffered serious losses. However, the Azerbaijani army liberated some of its territories occupied by Armenia, and upon this development, popular protests against the Armenian administration and Russia intensified across Armenia. Meanwhile, the Azerbaijani public expectation that “the Azerbaijani army would liberate its whole territories from occupation by en-

Turkish-Russian Joint Observation Center continues its activities in Nagorno-Karabakh. 60 Turkish and 60 Russian soldiers, including UAV personnel, are on duty in the center, which is established on an area of 4 hectares that includes 65 prefabricated living and service areas in Merzili village of Agdam. RESUL REHIMOV / AA

larging the scope of its attacks” had not been realized with the ‘Russian factor,’ i.e., with the initiatives of Russia. The April fighting, dubbed as the ‘four-day war’ was suspended by another ‘ceasefire’ with a verbal agreement between the Chiefs of General Staff of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Moscow under the mediation of Russia.

44-Day Karabakh War and Russia

The policy followed by Russia during and after the 44-day Karabakh War had four main and parallel pillars: The first pillar of Russia’s policy was maintaining the status of its traditional ally Armenia. The second pillar was maintaining its mediator role for the resolution of the conflict. The third pillar of the policy pursued by the Kremlin was not harming the strategic partnership relationship with Azerbaijan, which had been specially developed during Vladimir Putin’s tenure. The fourth pillar of the policies pursued by Russia was not disrupting the multidimensional profound relationships with Turkey, which had advanced in recent years. The first two dimensions of this policy followed by the Putin Administration during the Second Karabakh War represent Russia’s conventional Caucasus policy and the last two dimensions embody a change in policy.

Russia as Armenia’s Ally

The allied stance of Russia in relation to Armenia during the 44-day Karabakh War can be summarized under four dimensions: the first dimension of Russia’s policy towards Yerevan during the War was providing intense arms supplies to Armenia shipped via Iran or directly by civil aircraft.¹⁹ Even the aircraft of the Armenian foreign minister during his Moscow visit was allegedly used for the shipment of weapons.²⁰ Russia’s new arms shipment to Armenia, notably after the war, is one of the most fundamental issues of bilateral talks between the two countries.

The second dimension of Russia’s policy towards Armenia during the war was the emphasis of the Russian authorities on their allied commitments between the two countries. Russian President Putin and other Russian officials, during and after the war, consistently expressed their commitment to the 1997 Russia-Armenia alliance agreement and assured their determination to fulfill their obligations against any possible threat to Armenia’s territorial integrity and border security.²¹ Likewise, the Russian authorities emphasized that Russia is bound to CSTO obligations, while they, especially Putin, stated the condition that their role concerned Armenia’s security only, but not that of ‘Karabakh.’²²

The third dimension of Russia's policy towards Armenia during the war was the supporting behavior in relation to the Armenian allegations that "there were foreign fighters in Karabakh." In fact, there were three different and parallel approaches in the attitudes of Russia concerning these allegations repeated by the President of France and the Armenian authorities during the war: That is to say, in the statements made by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the emphasis supporting Armenia's 'claim of foreign fighters in Karabakh' was more obvious.²³ On the other hand, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Chief Sergei Narishkyn in his statements made on the 'foreign fighters' demonstrated a more balanced approach by supporting the theses of both Armenia (on 'Syrian Turkmen fighters') and Azerbaijan, and Turkey (on PKK terrorists), and demonstrated his concern on this issue.²⁴ In the statements of Russian President Putin and his spokesman Dmitry Peskov, it is observed that neither of the sides, especially Armenia, are credited for their claims.²⁵ Perhaps, such contradictions of the Russian authorities might be either a reflection of the different approaches among the Russian decision-making institutions regarding their attitude towards the Karabakh War or the balancing policy that Russia tried to implement during the war.

The fourth dimension of Russia's policy towards Armenia during the war was highlighting that there are "important variations on the issues related to Turkey and the South Caucasus, particularly to the resolution of the Karabakh conflict." In their statements, Russian officials have stressed that they are uncomfortable with Turkey's policy of active support to Azerbaijan in the war, and that like some other states they should not take sides due to their mission as mediator.²⁶

Russia as Mediator

During the 44-day Karabakh War, Russia's mediation attempts occurred on two parallel grounds: The first of these is the activities carried out during the war under the status of 'Minsk Group co-chair.' Russia with its co-chair status in the Minsk Group together with the other co-chair states' presidents (France and the U.S.) issued a statement on October 1, 2020, calling for the end of the war as soon as possible and for the parties to return to the negotiating table.²⁷ In addition, the Russian administration had intense contacts and

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dialogues with the other co-chair state France throughout the war. Although not as intense as communications with France, Russian foreign affairs officials and Minsk Group representative have occasionally maintained telephone exchanges with their U.S. counterparts throughout the war.

During the 44-day Karabakh War, the second dimension of Russia's mediation efforts was the initiatives that Moscow carried out alone. These efforts, which were more intense, active, and effective than the Minsk Group's mechanisms, have been mainly carried out at the level of the head of state and the foreign minister. The first example of Russia's sole mediation attempt during the war took place on October 10, 2020, when a humanitarian ceasefire was achieved following the meeting of foreign ministers of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia, held in Moscow with the initiative of Russian President Putin.²⁸ However, this humanitarian ceasefire was not realized because of the Armenian side's unwillingness to abide by the compromise in order to stop the war.

Despite this failure, the Russians continued their efforts to make the combatants agree to the ceasefire. In this context, Russia's second ceasefire effort resulted in the signing of a 9-point statement on November 10, 2020. In summary, the statement foresaw ensuring the ceasefire, the withdrawal of the Armenian armed forces from Azerbaijan's territories within the period specified in the document, the establishment of Lachin and Nakhchivan corridors, the deployment of the Russian peacekeeping forces to the in and around the city of Khankendi in Azerbaijan, as well as on the Lachin-Khankendi road for 5 years, the return of the internally displaced persons, and the opening of all transportation routes between Armenia and Azerbaijan.²⁹

Even though it has not been mentioned directly in the statement, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev declared that Turkey will take an active role in the process, and afterward in accordance with his declaration, on November 12, in Ankara, the Turkish and Russian Defense Ministries signed the memorandum of cooperation for the joint monitoring. After the necessary technical preparations, the monitoring started being implemented as of January 30, 2021.³⁰

Russia as Azerbaijan's Strategic Partner

During the 44-day Karabakh War, the main purpose of Russia's policy on Azerbaijan was to prevent disruption to the regional balance established in the South Caucasus under the tenure of Putin. Previously Russia's overall South Caucasus policy was mainly developed as being Armenia-centric. After Putin's arrival to power, Russia's efforts to stage its regional policy on more ra-

tional foundations concurred with Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy. During Putin's period, Russia-Azerbaijan relations were generally conducted as a multi-dimensional process. Despite the controlled tensions in political, economic, and military matters from time to time during Putin's Administration, the process of developing these relations still continued.

On the other hand, Russia's efforts, and pressures during Putin's period to include Azerbaijan in the integration models such as the Eurasian Economic Union, the Customs Union (CSTO) were met with resistance by the officials in Baku. The Azerbaijani administration has always stated that, along with the global and regional balances, the Karabakh problem is the most important reason for its resistance. The Putin Administration's latest approach in the 2nd Karabakh War can be considered generally as a part of this balanced policy. Three dimensions came to the fore in the discourse used by the Russian administration to maintain this balance during the war: The first is that the Kremlin took into account the sensitivity of both Armenian and Azerbaijani populations living in Russia in this process.³¹ The second discourse of the Kremlin has often built on the argument that Karabakh is a territory of Azerbaijan according to international law.³² Statements emphasizing the importance of Russia-Azerbaijan relations constituted the third dimension of the Kremlin's discourse.³³

Russia as Turkey's Strategic Partner

Turkey was one of the other factors affecting Russia's attitude in the 44-day Karabakh War. The issues of the Karabakh problem and the relations with Azerbaijan were like an 'Achilles' heel' in nature for Russia's relations with Turkey, patiently crafted over the last 20 years. The statements of Turkey's authorities supporting Azerbaijan during and after the war also clearly described the sensitivity of this subject.³⁴ In this context, the statement voiced by the Kremlin made it especially clear that they are aware of and accept the special relationship of Azerbaijan with Turkey as reasonable.³⁵

In this context, the 44-day war also tested Turkey-Russia relations. During the war, Turkey and Russia, while supporting their allies by fulfilling all the requirements emanating from their respective allied relations, were however careful to avoid open confrontation. It is likely that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's warning on the 'red line' was also effective in this context.³⁶ Thus, the conflict that could have led to a profound crisis and perhaps to a very destructive war

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The deployment of the Russian peacekeeping forces to the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan after the ceasefire can be considered as the most important strategic achievement for Russia

between the two countries, as of November 10, 2020, in fact, created a new opportunity for cooperation. For the first time in the last 30 years, the results were in line with international law and the balance of power in the region. Moreover, Turkey and Russia, both of which are influential on both sides of the conflict and the region itself, formed a good dialogue.

Conclusion

The 44-day Karabakh War seriously affected the international balances in the Caucasus in terms of security, politics, and economic dimensions. The attitude of international actors during the war was important to define the fate and consequences of the war. Among these international actors, Russia's attitude was of special importance. Considering previous experiences, the prevailing opinion before and during the war was that Russia either would not allow the war to start or would quickly halt the war between the parties before the strategic balance deteriorated. However, the policy followed by the Kremlin during the 44-day war was met by many experts with surprise and intrigue.

In the 44-day Karabakh War, Russia implemented a 'four-hatted' strategy. The first element of this strategy was to act as Armenia's traditional ally. Within this framework, the Russian administration has always emphasized the alliance obligations and provided weaponry support to Armenia. In this context, Russian officials have provided partial support for the official thesis of Yerevan that "there are foreign fighters in Karabakh" and have expressed discomfort with the support of Turkey to Azerbaijan.

The second element of Russia's strategy during the war was maintaining its mediating role in resolving the conflict. In this context, Russia achieved the humanitarian ceasefire dated October 10, 2020, and the complete ceasefire dated November 10, 2020. The deployment of the Russian peacekeeping forces to the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan after the ceasefire can be considered as the most important strategic achievement for Russia.

The third element of Russia's strategy during the war is not harming the strategic partnership relationship with Azerbaijan, which was developed particularly during the period of Putin's Administration. To protect this relationship with Azerbaijan, the Russian administration has formed an attitude that

considers Karabakh as an Azerbaijani land according to international law and cares about the Azerbaijani population living in Russia and the bilateral relations. Consequently, Russia, while enabling Azerbaijan to liberate its occupied territories, on the other hand, had the opportunity to move the relations with the officials in Baku to a new stage in the context of establishing a new geopolitical balance in the South Caucasus and the post-Soviet geography.

The fourth element of Russia's strategy during the war was to prevent the Karabakh War from damaging relations with Turkey with an inevitable conversion into a new crisis. In this context, Russia was in constant dialogue with Turkey during the war at the presidential, foreign affairs, and defense ministerial levels. Likewise, the statements which came from the Kremlin made clear that they are aware of the special relationship of Azerbaijan with Turkey and that it is reasonable to accept them. Finally, Russia has seen the Karabakh War, and the statement signed on November 10 as a key opportunity for cooperation with Turkey. Joint monitoring of the ceasefire regime between Russia and Turkey, as well as the implementation of the planned regional economic projects, emerged as prominent examples of these opportunities. The regional dynamics, however, will determine the strength and continuity of the cooperation between Russia and Turkey, including the implementation of the ceasefire set on November 10, 2020. ■

Endnotes

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