

Armenian-Azeri Tensions and the Nagorno-Karabakh Question

Part 1

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The unprecedented upsurge in violence along the Line of Contact between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh has raised universal concern that a larger conflict might be brewing, with some analysts seeing it as an outgrowth of Turkey's destabilizing anti-Russian policies over the past couple of months.

As attractive as it may be to believe such that Azerbaijan is behaving as a total puppet of the West, such an explanation is only a superficial description of what is happening and importantly neglects to factor in Baku's recent foreign policy pivot over the past year. It's not to necessarily suggest that Russia's CSTO ally Armenia is to blame for the latest ceasefire violations, but rather to raise the point that this unfolding series of militantly destabilizing events is actually a lot more complex than initially meets the eye, although the general conclusion that the US is reaping an intrinsic strategic benefit from all of this is clearly indisputable.

Instead of beginning the research from a century ago and rehashing the dueling historic interpretations that both sides have over Nagorno-Karabakh, the article at hand begins at the present day and proceeds from the existing on-the-ground state of affairs after the 1994 ceasefire, whereby the disputed territory has de-facto been administered as its own unrecognized state with strong Armenian support in all sectors. There's no attempt to advocate one side or denigrate the other, but rather to objectively understand the situation as it is and forecast its unfolding developments.

In keeping with the task at hand, it's essential that the point of analytical departure be an overview of Armenia and Azerbaijan's latest geopolitical moves in the year preceding the latest clashes. Afterwards, it's required that an analysis be given about the limits to Russia's CSTO commitment to Armenia, which thus helps to put Russia's active diplomatic moves into the appropriate perspective. Following that, Part II of the article raises awareness about the US' Reverse Brzezinski stratagem of peripheral quagmire-like destabilization along the post-Soviet rim and how the recent outbreak of violence is likely part and parcel of this calculated plan. Finally, the two-part series concludes with the suggested appeal that Armenia and Azerbaijan replace the stale OSCE Minsk Group conflict resolution format with a fresh analogue via their newly shared dialogue partner status under the SCO.

Not What One Would Expect

Over the past year or so, Armenia and Azerbaijan's geopolitical trajectories haven't exactly been moving along the course that casual commentators would expect that they would.

Before beginning this section, it's necessary to preface it with a disclaimer that the author is not referring to the average Armenian or Azeri citizen in the following analysis, but rather is using their respective countries' names interchangeably with their given governments, so "Armenia" in this instance refers to the Yerevan political establishment while "Azerbaijan" relates to its Baku counterpart. This advisory note is needed in order to proactively prevent the reader from misunderstanding the author's words and analyses, since the topic is full of highly emotionally charged elements and generally evokes a strong reaction among many, especially those of either of the two ethnicities.

Armenia:

✘ The general trend is that the prevailing geopolitical stereotypes about Armenia and Azerbaijan are not as accurate as one would immediately think, and that neither country adheres to them to the degree that one would initially expect. It's true that Armenia is a staunch and loyal Russian CSTO ally which maintains a presence of [5,000 troops](#), a handful of [jets and helicopters](#), a [forthcoming air defense shield](#), and possibly soon even [Iskander missiles](#) there, but it's been progressively diversifying its foreign policy tangent by taking strong strides in attempting to reach an Association Agreement with the EU despite its formal Eurasian Union membership.

This has yet to be clinched, but the resolute intent that Yerevan [clearly demonstrated](#) in May 2015 raises uncomfortable questions about the extent to which its decision-making elite may have been co-opted by Western influences. The author was so concerned about this eventuality that he [published](#) a very controversial analysis that month explaining the various ploys by which the West has sought to woo Armenia over to its side, including the shedding of crocodile tears for its genocide victims during their centenary remembrance commemoration.

As is the established pattern which was most clearly proven by Ukraine, the more intensely that a geostrategically positioned country flirts with the West, the more susceptible that it is to a forthcoming Color Revolution attempt, so it's unsurprising in hindsight that the "[Electric Yerevan](#)" destabilization was commenced just one month after the Armenian President was publicly hobnobbing with so many of his Western "partners". That anti-government push was a proto-manifestation of what the author later described in [an unrelated work](#) as "Color Revolution 1.5" technologies which seek to use "civil society" and "anti-corruption" elements as experimental triggers for testing the catalyzation of large-scale regime change movements. The geopolitical end goal in all of this, as the author wrote in his "Electric Yerevan" piece cited above, was to get Armenian nationalists such as Nikol Pashinyan into power so that they can provoke a continuation war in Nagorno-Karabakh that might conceivably end up dragging in Russia. They thankfully didn't succeed in this, and the sitting Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan has repeatedly underscored that Armenia does not want to see a conflict escalation in the disputed territory.

Strangely, despite the regime change attempt that the West tried to engineer against Armenia, Sargsyan still [declared](#) in early 2016 that "Armenia's cooperation and development of relations with the EU remain a priority for Armenia's foreign policy" and "expressed gratitude to the EU for their assistance in carrying out reforms in Armenia." Also, the EU's External Action Service [reports](#) that the two sides formally relaunched their negotiation process with one another on 7 December with the aim of reaching a "new agreement (that) will replace the current EU-Armenia Partnership and Cooperation agreement."

An EU analyst [remarked](#) in March of this year that he obviously doesn't believe that it will be identical to the Association Agreement that the EU had offered to Armenia prior to its Eurasian Union ascension, but that of course doesn't mean that it couldn't share many similarities with its predecessor and create geopolitical complications for Yerevan's economic alliance with Moscow. It must be emphasized at this point that while the Armenian state is still closely linked to Russia on the military-political level and formally part of the Eurasian Union, it is provocatively taking strong economic steps in the direction of the EU and the general Western community, disturbingly raising the prospect that its schizophrenic policies might one day engender a crisis of loyalty where Yerevan is forced to choose between Moscow and Brussels much as Kiev was artificially made to do so as well (and possibly with similar pro-Western urban terrorist consequences for the "wrong choice").

Azerbaijan:

On the other hand, while Armenia was bucking the conventional stereotype by moving closer to the West, Azerbaijan was also doing something similar by realigning itself closer to Russia. Baku's relations with [Washington](#), [Brussels](#), [Ankara](#), and even [Tel Aviv](#) (which it supplies [40% of its energy](#) to via the BTC pipeline) are well documented, as is its geostrategic function as a non-Russian energy source for the EU (particularly in the context of the [Southern Corridor](#) project), so there's no use regurgitating well-known and established facts inside of this analysis. Rather, what's especially interesting to pay attention to is how dramatically the ties between Azerbaijan and the West have declined over the past year. Even more fascinating is that all of it was so unnecessary and had barely anything to do with Baku's own initiative.

What happened was that Brussels started a soft power campaign against Baku by alleging that the latter had been violating "human rights" and "democratic" principles, which resulted in Azerbaijan [boldly announcing](#) in September 2015 that it was cancelling the planned visit of a European Commission delegation and considering whether it "should review [its] ties with the European Union, where anti-Azeri and anti-Islam tendencies are strong." For a country that is stereotypically seen as being under the Western thumb, that's the complete opposite of a subservient move and one that exudes defiance to the West. Earlier that year in February 2015, Quartz online magazine even exaggeratedly [fear mongered](#) that "Azerbaijan is transforming into a mini-Russia" because of its strengthening domestic security capabilities in dealing with asymmetrical threats.

While Azerbaijan's resistance certainly has its pragmatic limits owing to the country's entrenched strategic and energy infrastructural relationship with the West over the past couple of decades, it's telling that it would so publicly rebuke the West in the fashion that it did and suggests that the problems between Azerbaijan and the West are deeper than just a simple spat. Part of the reason for the West's extreme dislike of the Azerbaijani government has been its recent [pragmatic and phased emulation](#) of Russia's NGO security legislation which aims to curb the effectiveness of intelligence-controlled proxy organizations in fomenting Color Revolutions. Having lost its influence over the country via the post-modern "grassroots-'bottom-up'" approach, it's very plausible that the US and its allies decided to find a way to instigate Nagorno-Karabakh clashes as a means of regaining their sway over their wayward Caspian 'ally'.

Amidst this recent falling out between Azerbaijan and the West and even in the years preceding it, Moscow has been able to more confidently position itself as a reliable,

trustworthy, and non-discriminatory partner which would never interfere with Baku's domestic processes or base its bilateral relations with the country on whatever its counterpart chooses to do at home. Other than the unmistakable security influence that Russia has had on Azerbaijan's NGO legislation, the two sides have also increased their military-technical cooperation through a surge of agreements that totaled [\\$4 billion](#) by 2013. By 2015, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [reported](#) that Azerbaijan's total arms spending for the five-year period of 2011-2014 had increased by 249%, with 85% of its supplies coming from Russia.

In parallel to that, it also [asserted](#) that Russia's weapons exports to Europe for 2011-2015 increased by 264%, "mainly due to deliveries to Azerbaijan". It's plain to see that Russia isn't treating Azerbaijan as though it were an unredeemable Western puppet state, but is instead applying a shrewd and calculated military balancing strategy between it and Armenia. While unconfirmed by official sources, the head of the Political Researches Department of the Yerevan-based Caucasian Institute Sergey Minasian [claimed](#) in 2009 that Russia was supplying its Gyumri base in Armenia via air transit permission from Azerbaijan after Georgia banned such overflights through its territory after the 2008 war. If this is true, then it would suggest that Russian-Azeri strategic relations are at their most trusted level in post-independence history and that Baku has full faith that Moscow will not do anything to upset the military balance in the Southern Caucasus, which of course includes the paranoid fear that some Azeri observers have expressed about Russia conspiring with Armenia to wage another war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Strategic Calculations and CSTO Limits

Russia And Armenia:

Everything that was written above likely comes as a complete shock to the casual observer of international affairs because it flies in the face of presumed "logic", but this just goes to show that the prevailing geopolitical stereotypes about Armenia and Azerbaijan are inaccurate and do not fully reflect the present state of affairs. The common denominator between the two rival states is their evolving relationship with Russia, which as was just described, appears to be progressively moving in opposite directions. Again, the author does not intend to give the impression that this reflects popular sentiment in either country or its expatriate and diaspora communities, especially Armenia and its affiliated ethnic nationals, since the general attitude inside the country (despite the highly publicized "Electric Yerevan" failed Color Revolution attempt) and for the most part by its compatriots outside of it could safely be described as favorable to Russia. This makes Yerevan's pro-Western advances all the more puzzling, but that only means that the answer to this paradox lies more in the vision (and possible monetary incentives) of the country's leadership than the will of its people. Still, the situation is not critical and has yet to approach the point where the pragmatic and trusted state of bilateral relations is endangered.

Russia And Azerbaijan:

That being said, to many conventional observers, Russia's close military cooperation with Azerbaijan might seem just as peculiar as Armenia's intimation of a forthcoming pro-Western economic pivot, but that too can be explained by a strategic calculation, albeit one of a much more pragmatic and understandable nature. Russia has aspired to play the role of a pivotal balancing force between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and truth be told and much to the dismay of many Armenians, it did approve of UNSC Resolutions affirming Azerbaijan's

territorial integrity along its internationally recognized borders, specifically the most recent [62/243](#) one from 2008 which “Reaffirms continued respect and support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan within its internationally recognized borders” and “Demands the immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of all Armenian forces from all the occupied territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan”.



Nagorno-Karabakh map

Geopolitical Consistency:

What’s happening isn’t that Russia is “betraying Armenia” like some overactive nationalist pundits like to allege, but that it’s maintaining what has been its consistent position since the conflict began and is abiding by its stated international guiding principle in supporting territorial integrity. Key to this understanding is that the conception of territorial integrity is a guiding, but not an irreversible, tenet of Russian foreign policy, and the 2008 Russian peace-enforcement operation in Georgia that led to the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the 2014 reunification with Crimea prove that extenuating circumstances can result in a change of long-standing policy on a case-by-case basis. This can be interpreted as meaning that Moscow at this stage (operative qualifier) does not support the independence of the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, but to be fair, neither does Yerevan, although the Armenian state just [recently repeated](#) its [previously stated position](#) that it could recognize the Armenian-populated region as a separate country if the present hostilities with Azerbaijan increase. Therefore, the main condition that could push Armenia to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent state and possibly even pressure Russia to follow suit would be the prolonged escalation of conflict around the Line of Contact.

The Unification Conundrum:

As much as some participants and international observers might think of such a move as being historically just and long overdue, Russia would likely have a much more cautious approach to any unilateral moves that Armenia makes about recognizing the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. To repeat what was earlier emphasized about Russia’s political approach to this conflict, this would not amount to a “betrayal” of Armenia but instead would be a pragmatic and sober assessment of the global geopolitical environment and the likely fact that such a move could instantly suck Russia into the war. As it stands, Russia has a mutual defense commitment to Armenia which makes it responsible for protecting its ally from any aggression against it, however this only corresponds to the territory that Russia internationally recognizes as Armenia’s own, thereby excluding any Armenian forces and

passport holders in Nagorno-Karabakh.

If Armenia recognizes Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent state, it would likely initiate a rapidly progressing process whereby the two Armenian-populated entities vote for unification, which would then place Russia in the very uncomfortable position of having to consider whether it will recognize such a unilateral move by its ally and thereby extend its mutual defense umbrella over what would by then be newly incorporated and Russian-recognized Armenian territory. On the one hand, Moscow wouldn't want to be perceived as "betraying" its centuries-long Armenian ally and thenceforth engendering its unshakable hate for the foreseeable future, but on the other, it might have certain reservations about getting directly involved in the military conflict as a warfighting participant and forever losing the positive New Cold War inroads that it has made with Baku.

Russian-Azeri relations, if pragmatically managed along the same constructive trajectory that they've already been proceeding along, could lead to Moscow gaining a strategic foothold over an important Turkish, EU, and Israeli energy supplier and thus giving Russia the premier possibility of indirectly exerting its influence towards them vis-à-vis its ties with Baku. In any case, the Russian Foreign Ministry would prefer not to be placed on the spot and in such a zero-sum position where it is forced to choose between honoring its Armenian ally's unilateral unification with Nagorno-Karabakh and abandoning its potential outpost of transregional strategic influence in Azerbaijan, or pursuing its gambit to acquire grand transregional influence via Azerbaijan at the perceived expense of its long-standing South Caucasus ally and risk losing its ultra-strategic military presence in the country.

The Nagorno-Karabakh Question is thus a quandary of epic and far-reaching geostrategic proportions for Russia, which is doing everything that it can to neutrally negotiate between the two sides in offsetting this utterly destabilizing scenario and preventing it from being forced to choose a disastrous zero-sum commitment in what will be argued in Part II to likely be an externally third-party/US-constructed military-political dilemma. Furthermore, both Armenia and Azerbaijan want to retain Russian support and neither wants to risk losing it, which also explains why Azerbaijan has yet to unleash its full military potential against the Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh and why Armenia hasn't unilaterally recognized Nagorno-Karabakh or made an effort to politically unite with it. Conclusively, it can be surmised that the only actor which wants to force this false choice of "either-or" onto Russia is the US, which always benefits whenever destabilization strikes Moscow's periphery and its Eurasian adversary is forced into a pressing geopolitical dilemma.

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