

# War in Nagorno-Karabakh Is a Gamechanger in Russian-Turkish Relations

By [Paul Antonopoulos](#)

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*After Turkey downed a Russian jet operating in Syria in late 2015, there was a major risk that the Syrian War could explode into a greater conflict between the two Eurasian countries. The Turkish attack resulted in the death of two Russian servicemen and relations between Moscow and Ankara were again tested in December 2016 when Russian Ambassador to Turkey, **Andrei Karlov**, was assassinated by off-duty police officer **Mevlüt Mert Altıntaş**. Although Russian **President Vladimir Putin** accepted the explanation from his Turkish counterpart **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan** that the assassination was not ordered by the state, [Nordic Monitor](#) has published compelling evidence that Altıntaş had strong connections to the so-called Turkish deep state. Despite these major setbacks in Russian-Turkish relations, by the end of 2017 the two countries signed a \$2.5 billion agreement for Turkey to acquire the Russian-made S-400 air defence system, considered the most sophisticated of its kind in the world.*

As is well-known, this deal resulted in tense relations between Turkey and its NATO allies, and many speculated that with Russian encouragement Ankara would eventually leave the Atlantic Alliance. It is highly unlikely that Turkey will ever leave NATO willingly or be ejected from the organization. Turkey, as a key country connecting East and West and controlling Straits linking the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, knows that it is one of the most important geostrategic countries in the world and can afford to leverage both NATO and Russia to advance its own ambitions.

The Russian-Turkish partnership has seen Ankara acquire the S-400 system, Russia has a critical part in the construction of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, and cooperation on significantly reducing conflict in Syria. However, it now appears that Moscow is becoming increasingly frustrated and antagonized by Ankara's constant escalation of hostilities across Russia's southern flank and/or areas of interest. Despite Russia and Turkey cooperating in Syria, they support opposing sides in Libya, but this is not considered a major issue between them, or at least not enough to change the course of their bilateral relations. However, the war in Artsakh, or more commonly known as Nagorno-Karabakh, has exposed the fragility of relations between Moscow and Ankara.

Artsakh, despite being an integral part of the Armenian homeland for over 2,500 years and always maintaining an overwhelmingly Armenian majority population, was assigned to the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic in the early 1920's. However, in 1989 Armenians in Artsakh demanded unification with the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. This demand was ultimately rejected by Moscow. However, the final collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992 sparked a war in Artsakh. The Armenians achieved a decisive victory in 1994 and the Republic of Artsakh emerged, although it is still internationally recognized as a part of Azerbaijan.

The OSCE Minsk Group, comprising of France, Russia and the U.S., is the foremost international body attempting to end the decades-long conflict between the de facto independent Republic of Artsakh and Azerbaijan. Although minor wars and skirmishes have been commonplace since 1994, the current war is the most serious escalation, especially when considering the [internationalization of the conflict](#) because of Turkey's transfer of special forces, military advisers, and more importantly, Syrian jihadist mercenaries.

Many within the Syrian government and military have expressed frustration that Russia effectively prevented a Syrian Army offensive at the beginning of the year to liberate more areas of Idlib from Turkish-backed jihadist rule. It is likely that Moscow's push for a ceasefire in Idlib was to appease Turkey in the hope that it would slowly de-escalate and eventually withdraw from Syria. However, Erdoğan used the lull in the fighting in Idlib to transfer Syrian jihadist mercenaries to fight in Libya. These militants fight on the side of the Muslim Brotherhood Government of National Accords based in Tripoli. They are in opposition to the Libyan National Army, which is based in Tobruk and has ties to Russia.

The transfer of Syrian militants to Libya certainly concerned Moscow, but Libya is not as geopolitically crucial for Russia. However, the transfer of Syrian militants to Azerbaijan brings various terrorists and mujahideen forces right to the very doorstep of Russia in the South Caucasus. Whereas Syrian militants in Idlib and Libya were no real threat to Russia directly, bringing such forces can now easily put them in direct contact with Islamist terrorists based in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia in Russia's Caucasus region.

This will likely be a gamechanger in Russian-Turkish relations.

Moscow's reaction to Turkey transferring Syrian terrorists to Azerbaijan is beginning to reveal itself. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Wednesday that Moscow "has never considered Turkey as a strategic ally" and emphasized that Russian military observers should be placed on the line of contact between Artsakh and Azerbaijan. Although Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev repeatedly calls for Turkey to be involved in the Minsk Group or in negotiations, Russia has continually blocked Ankara from being involved in any negotiations.

Russia's frustration with Turkey can even be felt in the East Mediterranean now. As recently as September 5, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova angered many Greeks when she urged states to be "guided by common sense and take into consideration the geographical peculiarities of a region" when discussing Turkey's illegal claims against Greece in the East Mediterranean. Zakharova effectively adopted Turkey's arguments that if Athens enacts its international legal right to extend its territorial waters from six nautical miles to 12, then the Aegean will effectively become a "Greek lake," and therefore the Turks believe "common sense" has to prevail over this "geographical peculiarity."

However, only yesterday, it appeared that Moscow now indirectly supports Greece's position in the East Mediterranean, with the Russian Embassy in Athens [tweeting](#) that "Russia's position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council is the starting point. We consider the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea the 'cornerstone' of international maritime agreements. The Convention explicitly provides for the sovereign right of all States to have territorial waters up to 12 nautical miles and sets out the principles and methods for delimiting the [Exclusive Economic Zone]. This also applies to the Mediterranean."

It was also announced yesterday that Lavrov will be making a working visit to Greece on

October 28. Russia's repositioning on the East Mediterranean issue by firmly supporting a states' right to extend its territorial waters to 12 nautical miles as permitted by international law, something that Turkey has said would be a "reason for war" if Greece enacts its legal right, is likely part of its retaliation against Erdoğan's transfer of Syrian terrorists to the doorstep of Dagestan. Although Moscow tolerated Erdoğan's aggression in Syria, Iraq and Libya, by threatening war on Armenia, a Collective Security Treaty Organization member state, and transferring militants to the border of Dagestan, Turkey has overstepped Russia's patience and this can be considered a gamechanger in their bilateral relations.

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**Paul Antonopoulos** is an independent geopolitical analyst.

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