

## *Nagorno Karabakh: A gordian knot in the middle of Caucasus*

### *Abstract:*

*Clashes between Azeris and Armenians over the Nagorno Karabakh enclave have recently been resumed. Although the conflict has been rooted since both states independence, the new global context may drag other actors as stakeholders. The situation is a real «Gordian knot» in the middle of the Caucasus, but its threads are intertwined with conflicts in other world regions. Possible crisis scenarios arising from Nagorno Karabakh include northern Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. For this reason, containing the conflict within its boundaries is considered of paramount importance meanwhile are sought solutions to reach long-term agreements, or at least maintain the status quo in the area.*

### *Keywords:*

*Nagorno Karabakh, Russia, Turkey, colour revolution, COVID-19.*

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

## Nagorno Karabaj: Un nudo gordiano en mitad del Cáucaso

### Resumen:

Recientemente se han vuelto a producir enfrentamientos entre azeríes y armenios por causa del enclave de Nagorno Karabaj. Aunque el conflicto se encuentra enquistado desde la independencia de ambos Estados, el nuevo contexto global puede arrastrar a otros actores como partes activas. La situación se configura como un auténtico «nudo gordiano» en mitad del Cáucaso, pero en el que sus hilos se entrelazan con conflictos en otras regiones mundiales. Entre los posibles escenarios de crisis derivados del de Nagorno Karabaj se encuentran el norte de Europa, el Mediterráneo Oriental y el Oriente Medio. Por este motivo, la contención del conflicto dentro de sus límites se considera de trascendental importancia mientras se buscan soluciones para alcanzar acuerdos resolutivos a largo plazo, o al menos mantener el *statu quo* de la zona.

### Palabras clave:

Nagorno Karabaj, Rusia, Turquía, revolución de color, COVID-19.

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## Introduction

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been going on for almost thirty years, since the fighting between 1992 and 1994, when Armenian rebel forces in the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh achieved a de facto independent government in a self-proclaimed republic with its capital in Stepanakert. The struggle for the independence of the enclave would not only end with its division, but also with the occupation of the areas adjacent to it, with a defensive glacier around the territory providing security<sup>1</sup>. The humanitarian consequences were catastrophic, with the death toll in the tens of thousands, and refugee numbers in the hundreds of thousands<sup>2</sup>.

The clashes between Azeris and Armenians officially ended with the “Bishkek Protocol”, partly thanks to the efforts of the “Minsk Group”<sup>3</sup>. Since then, hostilities and skirmishes have been a constant feature of the Line of Contact, and it is estimated that since 2015 there have been more than 300 major incidents, in which casualties have been recorded<sup>4</sup>.

In 2016, a major confrontation took place, which led to the beginning of the reversal of superiority in the confrontation in favour of Azerbaijan, as Azerbaijan made some territorial gains which, although not significant, proved that its opponents were not invincible and that the Azeris had established a significant military capacity thanks to their oil revenues<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> We suggest the following document for a general understanding of the situation in the whole Caucasus region and in particular of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: CABELLO RODRIGUEZ, José Luis. El Cáucaso, en: Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2017, *Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*. Ministry of Defence. Madrid. 2017. pgs. 85-109.

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch. Azerbaijan, Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Helsinki. 1994. pg. ix. [https://www.hrw.org/reports/AZER%20Conflict%20in%20N-K%20Dec94\\_0.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/reports/AZER%20Conflict%20in%20N-K%20Dec94_0.pdf) Consulted on 15/10/2020.

<sup>3</sup> This group was created, within the OSCE, at the outset of the hostilities. It is co-chaired by Russia, the USA and France, while Armenia and Azerbaijan participate together with Turkey, Belarus, Germany, Italy, Sweden and Finland.

<sup>4</sup> International Crisis Group. “De-escalating the New Nagorno-Karabakh War”. 2 October 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/containing-violence-south-caucasus> Consulted on 16/10/2020.

<sup>5</sup> BROERS, Laurence. The Nagorny Karabakh Conflict. Defaulting to War. *The Royal Institute of International Affairs*. Chatham House. London. 2016. pgs. 5, 17.

Throughout 2020 there have been relatively significant clashes, both in the summer and autumn, in which new technologies have emerged in the area of the use of remotely piloted air vehicles (RPAS) and precision guided weapons. This has suggested a qualitative leap in the conflict, given the origin of the weaponry, the strategy developed, the planned operations and the tactics employed.

In addition to the usual interests of the traditional actors involved in the region, new ones have been added due to the changes in the global geopolitical situation and that of the region in particular. Moreover, the entry on the scene of these new actors, both global and regional, has reconfigured the landscape of this conflict in which all points of view must be taken into account.

The unexpected pandemic caused by COVID-19 has been an element in the restructuring of an area that is very sensitive to everything related to the extraction and transport of hydrocarbons.

### **Current situation**

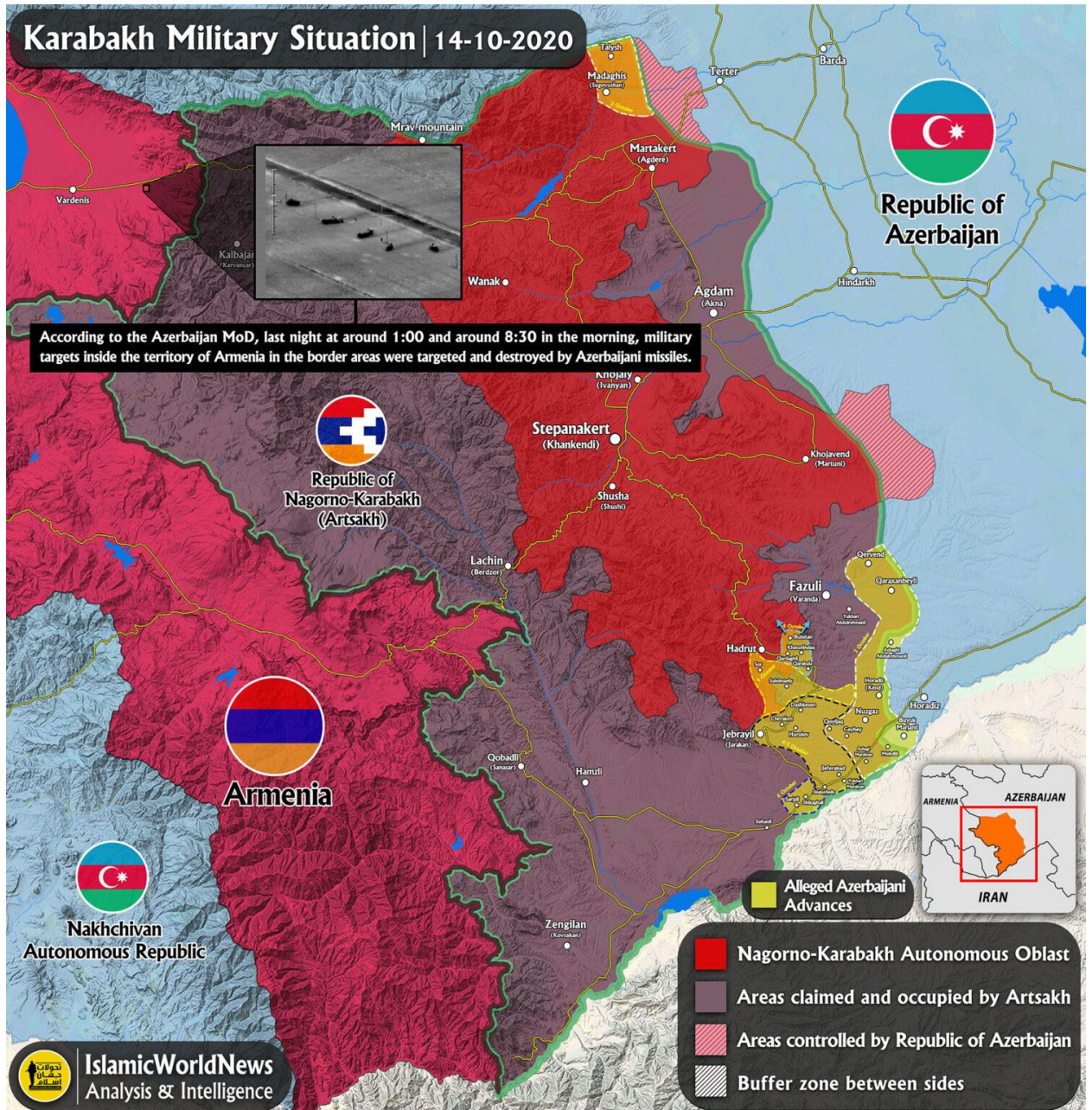
At the end of September 2020 a series of border skirmishes took place, which finally led to an attack by Azerbaijani forces on the 27th.

The Azeri advance into the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh was achieved through the combined application of armoured vehicles and light infantry, supported by helicopters, plus the use of drones in close combat on the ground on a front of more than 200 kilometres. High-precision guided rockets and longer-range drones were used in the deep combat, accurately beating a large part of the critical infrastructure of the disputed territory<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> KRAMER, Andrew E. "Fighting Between Armenia and Azerbaijan Risks Drawing in Bigger Powers". The New York Times, 28 September 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/28/world/asia/azerbaijan-armenia-nagorno-karabakh.html> Consulted on 15/10/2020.





**Figure 1: Map of the conflict situation in Nagorno-Karabakh.**

Source: Islamic World News. Latest Updates on Karabakh Clashes, 14 October 2020 (Map Update) Wednesday, 14 October 2020. <https://english.iswnews.com/15758/latest-updates-on-karabakh-clashes-14-october-2020-map-update/> Consulted on 18/10/2020.

Azeri sources claim they were forced to preemptively attack targets in Armenia itself. Armenians had reportedly placed “Elbrus” ballistic missiles near the border, and these threatened Azeri security<sup>7</sup>. At the operational level this could be considered part of a battle space interdiction operation, but at the strategic level it could lead to an extension of the conflict between a greater number of actors.

Although both sides are accusing each other of the outbreak of hostilities, it appears that the Azeri operations had been previously prepared. Following the lifting of travel restrictions due to the pandemic, many Turkish representatives were in Azeri territory. In addition, Azerbaijan’s Internet servers had been blocked to prevent the flow of information through information networks. Finally, the skirmishes of the previous days along the line of contact could be interpreted as reconnaissance fights<sup>8</sup>.

In the area of Strategic Communication, it seems that the messages were clear and well aligned. Prior to the attack, Azeri President Ilham Aliyev stated that an occupation of more than 30 years, during which ethnic cleansing had taken place, should be ended. In contrast, the Azeri position offered a multicultural environment of tolerance and coexistence<sup>9</sup>. Once the operations were launched, Aliyev ordered the partial mobilisation of his armed forces<sup>10</sup>. The Azerbaijani Ministry of Defence underlined its president’s statements by saying that “Azerbaijani units are carrying out combat operations to destroy the enemy and liberate our occupied lands”<sup>11</sup>. The Azeri

<sup>7</sup> Islamic World News. “Latest Updates on Karabakh Clashes”. 14 October 2020.

<https://english.iswnnews.com/15758/latest-updates-on-karabakh-clashes-14-october-2020-map-update/> Consulted on 18/10/2020. This type of missile is a variant of the Scud-B and Armenia has been accused of having used it against civilian populations, such as Ganja, outside the conflict zone.

<sup>8</sup> STRONELL, Alexander. “Renewed fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan: what makes it different this time?” International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 5 October 2020 <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/10/armenia-azerbaijan-clashes> Consulted on 18/10/2020.

<sup>9</sup> Anadolu Agency. “Peace can only be achieved by ending occupation: Aliyev”. 25.09.2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/azerbaijan-front-line/peace-can-only-be-achieved-by-ending-occupation-aliyev/1984967> Consulted on 19/10/2020.

<sup>10</sup> Президент Азербайджанской Республики Ильхам Алиев. “Распоряжение Президента Азербайджанской Республики об объявлении частичной мобилизации в Азербайджанской Республике”/ President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev “Order of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the declaration of partial mobilisation in the Republic of Azerbaijan.” 28 September 2020. <https://ru.president.az/articles/41026> Consulted on 19/10/2020.

<sup>11</sup> AZERTAC. “Defense Ministry: Azerbaijan conducts combat operations to liberate its lands.” 28.09.2020. [https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Defense\\_Ministry\\_Azerbaijan\\_conducts\\_combat\\_operations\\_to\\_liberate\\_its\\_lands-1597193](https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Defense_Ministry_Azerbaijan_conducts_combat_operations_to_liberate_its_lands-1597193) Consulted on 19/10/2020.



determination materialised through General Mayis Barkhudarov, who stated that “the Army Corps under my command will fight to the last drop of its blood, to completely destroy the enemy and defeat”<sup>12</sup>.

In view of the recent military operations it seems that the Azeri forces could make some significant territorial gains only in the flat areas south of the enclave, because the terrain is extremely mountainous and fighting through it could cause them unbearable wear and tear. For their part, the Armenian and self-proclaimed Republic of Artsaj forces have no capacity to carry out offensive actions of importance beyond the positions they hold. Therefore, the search for external support is fundamental for both actors<sup>13</sup>.

Following the limited Azeri conquests, there have been several attempts at ceasefires, which have been broken on several occasions. Finally, a humanitarian agreement was reached on 17 October at the request of the Minsk Group<sup>1415</sup>. This time it seems that with the help of France it was possible to achieve what had not been achieved before by Russia’s mediation<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> AZERTAC. “Major General Mayis Barkhudarov: We will fight to destroy the enemy completely” 28.09.2020.

[https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Major\\_General\\_Mayis\\_Barkhudarov\\_We\\_will\\_fight\\_to\\_destroy\\_the\\_enemy\\_completely-1597225?\\_cf\\_chl\\_jschl\\_tk\\_=8aaaa213958559cc927b0134137242758550edcf-1603104426-0-AXYNWQ6v-e9d8UdLCmjvk0wk69jlk0n6KrbwKV3K4ZdUluhvEWKpRO3lc-Qg-2IZYiqzbX3d5FNwk-Bma0pxYVPNU2qdVaN0y4ETYsjtDX21t5\\_u6LaL\\_hPF1fI7S7h13GnxJ\\_xb9m4TpFozOeXhImtdThBZExcX\\_YwovavMXNJ3OiaHJWfOwSzom2C6T5hzjv2AptkBgsgLudV2XPdBcMYodyUVkUWfRzQNiVehKBiCr9jWzJ9612hhoBWXFLGv73WDt1Ds4rQ6vq4RFqsuGv9IFfYWH5KzngDPvejDqYqZ9RpfBPm\\_0RfWmV3Wr2n\\_rUHL18m3u47jCdYda\\_kozIb5UoBb8Gw5q3RshA62FQSE9fM-\\_J1IGqWSXL3mg1CSj1dMR6m9QkszyF1WKEqTS9Q](https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Major_General_Mayis_Barkhudarov_We_will_fight_to_destroy_the_enemy_completely-1597225?_cf_chl_jschl_tk_=8aaaa213958559cc927b0134137242758550edcf-1603104426-0-AXYNWQ6v-e9d8UdLCmjvk0wk69jlk0n6KrbwKV3K4ZdUluhvEWKpRO3lc-Qg-2IZYiqzbX3d5FNwk-Bma0pxYVPNU2qdVaN0y4ETYsjtDX21t5_u6LaL_hPF1fI7S7h13GnxJ_xb9m4TpFozOeXhImtdThBZExcX_YwovavMXNJ3OiaHJWfOwSzom2C6T5hzjv2AptkBgsgLudV2XPdBcMYodyUVkUWfRzQNiVehKBiCr9jWzJ9612hhoBWXFLGv73WDt1Ds4rQ6vq4RFqsuGv9IFfYWH5KzngDPvejDqYqZ9RpfBPm_0RfWmV3Wr2n_rUHL18m3u47jCdYda_kozIb5UoBb8Gw5q3RshA62FQSE9fM-_J1IGqWSXL3mg1CSj1dMR6m9QkszyF1WKEqTS9Q) Consulted on 19/10/2020.

<sup>13</sup> Stratfor. “Armenia and Azerbaijan Intensify Their Border Battle”. 29 Sep 2020.

<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/armenia-and-azerbaijan-intensify-their-border-battle> Consulted on 18/10/2020.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan. No:357/20, Information of the Press Service Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan. 17/10/2020. <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/6973/view> Consulted on 19/10/2020.

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. Statement by the MFA of Armenia on the establishment of humanitarian truce. 17 October 2020. <https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2020/10/17/cf/10537> Consulted on 19/10/2020.

<sup>16</sup> Elysee. “Trêve humanitaire Arménie – Azerbaïdjan Publié” Le 17 Octobre 2020.

<https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/10/17/treve-humanitaire-armenie-azerbaïdjan> Consulted on 19/10/2020.

## **A new geopolitical context for an entrenched conflict**

The new global order has caused a reconfiguration of the influence of the great global powers, constituted by the United States, Russia and China, while at the same time it has opened up scenarios for regional powers, such as in this case Turkey and Iran. Faced with this adaptation, the local actors in the Southern Caucasus composed of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are forced to orient their positions to ensure their stability.

## ***Geopolitical trends of global powers***

The South Caucasus is caught between several global geopolitical trends, consisting of the Atlanticist orientation, the Eurasian stance and the OBOR initiative<sup>17</sup>. As for “Atlanticism”, the US stands out as its most faithful representative, although it is in recession in the area, taking into account the US retreat towards its traditional orientation as a naval aviation power and to the “Indo-Pacific” strategy.

The Caucasus is therefore too far removed from the scenarios of primary interest to the Americans. However, they must leave some kind of counterweight to contain Russian expansion by supporting open conflicts in their vicinity. In this respect, the situation in Georgia is significant, as its opposition to Russian influence could be exploited. Similarly, the exploitation of the discrepancies between the Russians and Turks could be used to curb the Russian extension<sup>18</sup>.

The other major trend is “Eurasianism”, which is led by Russia and sees the Caucasus as part of its immediate periphery, which should be under its control. Furthermore, the region is on its geopolitical axis of projection towards the south, which seeks relations and spaces of power expansion in the Greater Middle East.

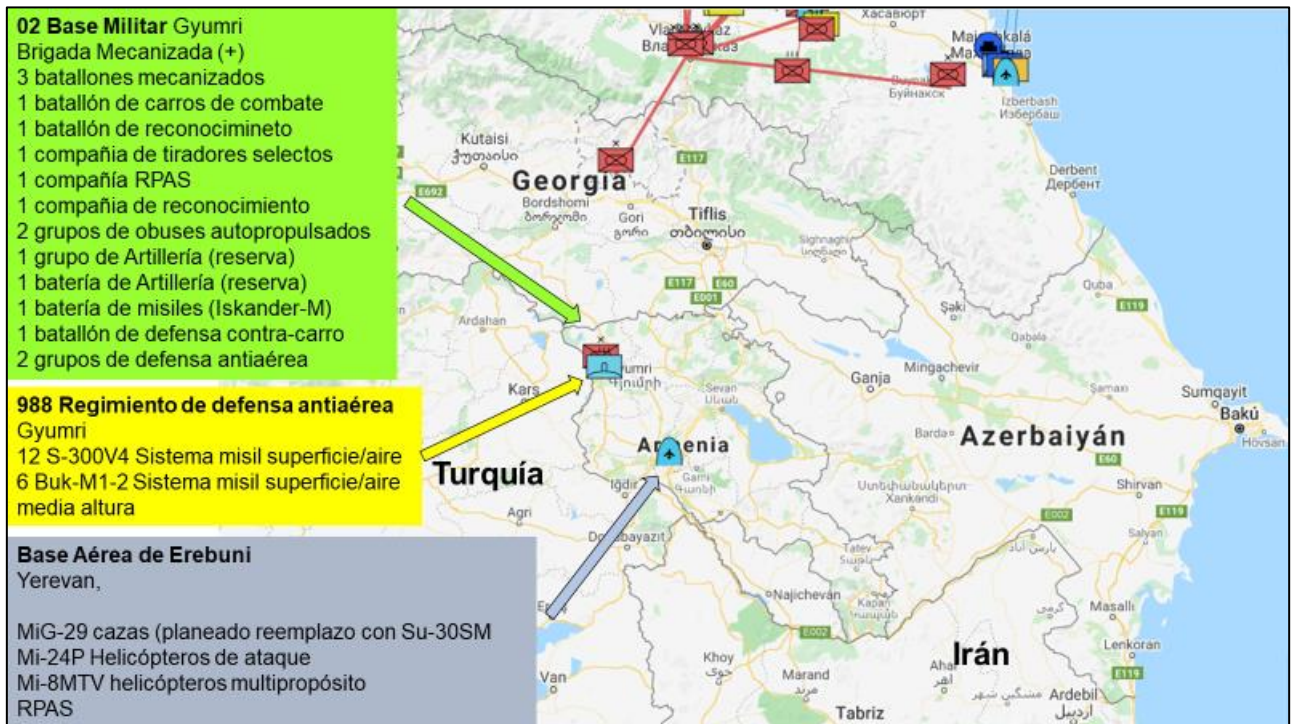
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<sup>17</sup> It corresponds to the Silk Road and Strip initiative, which in the English language is translated as “One Belt, One Road”.

<sup>18</sup> BOYAJIAN, David. “Why Russia Needs Armenia and Vice Versa”. The Armenian Weekly, 5 February 2019. <https://armenianweekly.com/2019/02/05/why-russia-needs-armenia-and-vice-versa/> Consulted on 20/10/2020.



According to this geopolitical theory, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could become an “Atlanticist trap” of the Western powers, since a major escalation would weaken Russia’s position of good relations with both Armenians and Azeris. Eurasian theorists believe that if the Atlanticist powers were to achieve a confrontation between Russians and Turks because of this conflict, they would be weakened in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, where the two actors have conflicting interests<sup>19</sup>.



**Figure 2: Situation of Russian units in the Southern Caucasus** (note the importance of Armenia as an anchorage point against Atlanticist penetration). Source: Prepared internally from RONDELLI FOUNDATION. Russian Military Forces: Interactive Map. <https://www.qfsis.org/maps/russian-military-forces> Consulted on 18/10/2020.

For Chinese interests, a conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh could damage the continental initiative of the “Silk Road and Strip” that runs through the Caucasus and from which the states of the region would benefit, constituting a complementary route to those through Russia, Turkey and Iran. Beijing has invested too much capital to risk losing it to an escalation of the conflict and must therefore seek solutions that will allow it to continue

<sup>19</sup> Геополитика.ру. “Escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh: A Eurasian Point of View.” 29.09.2020 <https://www.geopolitica.ru/es/article/escalada-en-nagorno-karabaj-un-punto-de-vista-eurasiatico> Consulted on 19/10/2020.

its investments in Azerbaijan. At the same time, Armenia's position would provide it with alternatives to other trade routes<sup>20</sup>.



**Figure 3. OBOR initiative to shorten Georgia's route.** Source: INAN, Feride; YAYLOYAN, Diana. New Economic Corridors in the South Caucasus and the Chinese One Belt One Road. *The Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV)*. 2018, pg. 42.

It is worth reflecting on France's role in the conflict, given that it leads the European position through the Minsk Group. France has good relations with both rivals, although President Emmanuel Macron has shown a pro-Armenian tendency after declaring that it was Azerbaijan that started a disproportionate offensive and that the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh with the support of Turkey should not be admitted<sup>21</sup>. To understand this position one has to consider the significant divergence of interests between France and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean and the presence in France of a large Armenian community<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> COURMONT, Barthélémy. "Le Haut-Karabakh, un enjeu pour Pékin". IRIS, 8 October 2020. <https://www.iris-france.org/150434-le-haut-karabakh-un-enjeu-pour-pekini/> Consulted on 19/10/2020.

<sup>21</sup> Reuters. "Macron criticises Turkey's "warlike" rhetoric on Nagorno-Karabakh". 30 September 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-azerbaijan-france-idUSKBN26L19R> Consulted on 19/10/2020.

<sup>22</sup> SOYLU, Ragip. "Tensions between Paris and Ankara: « La France est irritée par sa perte d'influence »". Middle East Eye, 15 July 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/decryptages/france-turquie-macron-erdogan-tensions-diplomatie-libye-islamisme> Consulted on 19/10/2020.

Similarly, Israel's good relations with Azerbaijan are noteworthy, as both states are important trading partners, exchanging oil for armaments. The important role of the Azeri Jewish community should also be taken into account<sup>23</sup>.

### ***The interests of regional powers***

In this new distribution of cards among the big players, the regional powers close to the area enter the game. Many of the territories in the Caucasus belonged to the Persian Empire, and those that now constitute Armenia and Azerbaijan were among the last to be lost by the Persians after the humiliating treaties of Gulistan and Turkmenchay, imposed by the Russian Empire in the 19th century<sup>24</sup>.

Iranian descent on the Azeris is very important, as they share the population on both sides of the border and Shiism is the majority religion in Azerbaijan, a fact that the authorities in Baku view with great fear. Iran is not interested in an internal conflict with its own population of Azeri origin, so the traditional good relationship with the Armenians is understood, thus preventing them from supporting the Azeri movements inside Iran<sup>25</sup>. The Iranians also have an interest in keeping a good relationship with Azerbaijan, as it is an ally of Turkey and predisposing Turkey against it could harm the Iranian interests in Syria and Iraq, apart from that it could encourage the US to support the Turks to reduce the Iranian power<sup>26</sup>.

The Iranians established an alliance of convenience with Russia after the Iranian Islamic revolution, and have been in conflict with the Americans throughout the Middle East ever since. Both benefit through Russian companies collaborating in Iran's nuclear

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<sup>23</sup> AHMED, Omar. "It's a challenge to support Azerbaijan when its government is pro-Israel". Middle East Monitor, 8 October 2020. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201008-its-a-challenge-to-support-azerbaijan-when-its-government-is-pro-israel/> Consulted on 18/10/2020.

<sup>24</sup> Президентская библиотека/Presidential Library. подписан туркманчайский мирный договор между Россией и Ираном. окончание русско-иранской войны 1826-1828 гг/ The Turkmanchay peace treaty signed between Russia and Iran. the end of the Russian-Iranian war of 1826-1828 <https://www.prlib.ru/history/619048> Consulted on 19/10/2020.

<sup>25</sup> EHRMANN, Maya; KRAUS, Josef; SOULEIMANOV, Emil The Iran-Israel-Azerbaijan Triangle: Implications on Regional Security. *Estudios Políticos Magazine*, 2013, vol. 4, no 7, pg. 218.

<sup>26</sup> CAFIERO, Giorgio. "Iran's dilemma in Nagorno-Karabakh". The New Arab, 15 October, 2020. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/10/15/irans-dilemma-in-nagorno-karabakh> Consulted on 20/10/2020.



programme and its weapons programme, which has created an Iranian dependency, which it is trying to balance by opening up to China.

Iran is interested in a balance of power in the Caucasus to maintain the North-South corridor project, which would link Russia with Iran and India (known as the INSTC project)<sup>27</sup>. If Russia were to opt for either Armenians or Azeris, the result for Iran would be that it would be disconnected from the corridor that links it to Russia and that the Caucasian state that left the Russian orbit would enter NATO's orbit, forming a threat to Iran from the north.



**Figure 4. An iranocentric vision of the crossroads between the INSTC corridor and the OBOR initiative.** Source: Saket. "India signs Ashgabat Agreement; trade and commerce to gain", 5 February 2018 <https://www.theindianwire.com/world/india-signs-ashgabat-agreement-trade-commerce-gain-46692/> Consulted on 20/10/2020.

<sup>27</sup> FAYEZ FARHAT, Mohammad North-South Corridor: The Limits of Iranian Power. *Journal for Iranian Studies*, Year 2, Issue 7, June 2018. pg. 26.



For its part, Turkey has been a supporter of Azerbaijan since its independence, following the concept of “one nation, two states”. Recently the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, stated that peace can only be achieved if Armenians withdraw from Nagorno-Karabakh and that Turkey will continue to support Azerbaijan in this conflict with all its means<sup>28</sup>.

Apart from the brotherhood ties, the truth is that the Turks benefit from this alliance through the “Strategic Partnership and Mutual Aid Agreement” which places the Azeris as important customers of the multifaceted Turkish armament industry, in which RPAS, missiles or electronic warfare systems stand out. In return, the Turks get much of the energy resources they lack<sup>29</sup>.

International media have accused Turkey of going beyond the agreements, getting involved in the conflict by sending pro-Turkish Syrians integrated in a unit called “Sultan Murad’s Division”, apart from members of the private security company SADAT<sup>30</sup>. It seems that these actions are aimed at putting pressure on the Russians in the scenarios of Syria and Libya, where Russia and Turkey are antagonistic actors. However, the Turkish strategy should have a limit, because if it exceeds its pretensions it could collapse the delicate system of balances between Moscow and Ankara built since 2015. The situation could revert to a direct confrontation, where both would lose to the Western powers, but where the Turks would be the main victims.

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<sup>28</sup> AVUNDUKLUOGLU, Emin. “Turkey to continue supporting Baku 'with all means'” Anadolu Agency, 01.10.2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-to-continue-supporting-baku-with-all-means/1992169> Consulted on 20/10/2020.

<sup>29</sup> GÖKSEDEF, Ece. Dağlık Karabağ: Türkiye, Azerbaycan'ın askeri kapasitesini geliştirmesinde nasıl rol oynadı?/ Nagorno-Karabaj: Did Turkey play a role in developing Azerbaijan's military capacity? BBC, 2 Ekim 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-54379105> Consulted on 20/10/2020.

<sup>30</sup> TASTEKIN, Fehim. “Syrian fighters add snarls to tangled south Caucasus”. Al-Monitor, 2 Oct 2020 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/10/turkey-russia-syria-fighter-transfers-azerbaijan-armenia.html#ixzz6bQhwxeqj> Consulted on 20/10/2020.

## The actors involved

### *Armenia fades the revolution of colour*

In 2018, Nikol Pashinian came to power after protests that led to Serzh Sargsyan's resignation. This change of regime, known as the "velvet revolution", would be a nightmare scenario for Russia, which feared a loss of ties with its Armenian allies<sup>31</sup>. It should be borne in mind that Russia at the time had enough problems with several open conflicts and the situation in Belarus, where Lukashenko was facing popular protests and Western pressures.

Pashinian could change the geopolitical orientation of the South Caucasus, because while he was in the opposition he was a member of the liberal parliamentary "Yelk" (exodus) alliance with a markedly anti-Russian character, even voting against staying in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, after Sargsyan's resignation, Pashinian tried to ingratiate himself with the Russians by assuring them that when he came to power he would not remove Armenians from the trade and defence blocks that linked them to Russia<sup>32,33</sup>.

With regard to Nagorno Karabakh, the position of Pashinian turned out to be disconcerting, because on the one hand he advocated direct negotiations between Stepanaker and Baku, which provoked Azerbaijan's rejection. On the other hand, he criticised Robert Kocharian's position for having a good relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Kocharian had been successively Prime Minister of Armenia, leader of the self-proclaimed republic in the enclave and Armenian President. At the same time, Pashinian surrounded itself with Western liberal foundations and NGOs,

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<sup>31</sup> Deutsche Welle. "Armenia: Serzh Sargsyan resignation a blow to Russia foreign policy". <https://www.dw.com/en/armenia-serzh-sargsyan-resignation-a-blow-to-russia-foreign-policy/a-43504304> Consulted on 21/10/2020.

<sup>32</sup> Ազատություն. "Armenian Protest Leader Seeks To Reassure Russia", Ապրիլ 27, 2018. <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29196622.html#comments> Consulted on 21/10/2020.

<sup>33</sup> Joshua Kucera. "Armenia's "Velvet Revolution" keeps peace with Russia - for now". Eurasianet, 26 Apr 2018. <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-velvet-revolution-keeps-peace-with-russia-for-now> Consulted on 19/10/2020.

which infiltrated the administrative structures<sup>34</sup>. Pashinyan's position put Russia in the position of balancing the powers in the region if it did not want the situation to get out of hand. Furthermore, Azerbaijan could have interpreted that the time was approaching to recover territories, with maximum support from Russia and Turkey.

When the Azeri attack took place in 2020, Pashinyan had to declare martial law, while he watched in fear as Turkey became increasingly involved on Baku's side<sup>35</sup>. Meanwhile, the Armenians, without strong support from the West, were once again looking to Russia for help. On the other hand, the Russian public media have been pro-Armenian in this conflict, but maintaining a very critical stance towards Pashinyan. Putin took advantage of the situation to show through his press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, what can happen to those who try to leave the Russian sphere of influence. He stated on 7 October that "the obligations of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) do not apply to Nagorno-Karabakh, unlike Armenia"<sup>36</sup>.

Within Armenia itself, accusations have begun against Pashinyan, for having been "flirting" with the United States and Europe, instead of looking at a map where his country is located. The Armenian authorities have apparently begun to take steps towards Russia, starting with the removal of the anti-Russian head of the National Security Service, Eduard Martirosyan, for the young Argishti Kyaramyan<sup>37</sup>.

It is possible that the key to the rapprochement is based on the fact that "if Armenia weakens on the battlefield, Russia's influence in the country will increase"<sup>38</sup>. This makes sense of Pashinyan's recent statements in which he says he is convinced that, "if the situation demands it, Russia will fulfil its obligations". He has also shown his willingness

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<sup>34</sup> Геополитика.ru. "Escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh: A Eurasian Point of View." Op. Cit.

<sup>35</sup> HOVHANNISYAN, Nvard; BAGIRO, Nailia. "Armenian PM warns against any Turkish involvement in conflict with Azerbaijan". Reuters, 27 September 2020. <https://es.reuters.com/article/idINKBN26I0ND> Consulted on 22/10/2020.

<sup>36</sup> ЗАЙЦЕВА, Екатерина. "В Кремле заявили, что обязательства ОДКБ распространяются на Карабах/The Kremlin said that CSTO obligations do not apply to Karabakh" Газета.Ru, 07.10.2020. [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2020/10/07/n\\_15046537.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2020/10/07/n_15046537.shtml) Consulted on 26/10/2020.

<sup>37</sup> MEJLUMYAN, Ani. "Amid war, Armenians closely watching the signals from Russia". Eurasianet, 16 Oct 2020. <https://eurasianet.org/amid-war-armenians-closely-watching-the-signals-from-russia> Consulted on 22/10/2020.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

to make concessions to Azerbaijan if the Azeris are equally willing<sup>39</sup>. However, the Russian “obligations” are not beyond what the treaty specifies, so Pashinyan would have to approach Russia to the point where these obligations and their interests are convergent.

### ***Azerbaijan reaps the rewards of patient waiting***

The Azeri armed forces have been gradually improving, especially since the 2016 fighting. When the time was right in 2020, they were technologically and numerically superior to the Armenians. However, the lack of oil revenues due to the pandemic may limit this growth, so they must be cautious not to wear themselves out in the face of economic uncertainty<sup>40</sup>.

The Azeris have not only waited for their chance to improve their military capabilities, but have also shaped public opinion and the international environment in their favour. Their media have been reflecting the effects of the Armenian attacks on the Azeri civilian population, but the death in combat of General Polad Hashimov triggered a violent popular reaction in the streets of Baku, calling for revenge. Hashimov, very dear to the people, died in mid-July in a clash near the Tovuz energy corridor<sup>41</sup>.

Two days before the September attack, President Ilham Aliyev addressed the UN General Assembly saying that there had been no results from the Minsk Group-mediated talks. He also insisted that Azerbaijan should regain the territories adjacent to the enclave that had been taken from it, as well as the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh itself<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> Liberation. “Le Premier ministre arménien «convaincu» du soutien de la Russie en cas d'attaque”. 06/10/2020. [https://www.liberation.fr/direct/element/le-premier-ministre-armenien-convaincu-du-soutien-de-la-russie-en-cas-dattaque\\_119963/](https://www.liberation.fr/direct/element/le-premier-ministre-armenien-convaincu-du-soutien-de-la-russie-en-cas-dattaque_119963/) Consulted on 22/10/2020.

<sup>40</sup> RUSTAMOV, Rauf . “Impact of Armenian aggression and global crisis on Azerbaijan”. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/impact-of-armenian-aggression-and-global-crisis-on-azerbaijan> Consulted on 22/10/2020.

<sup>41</sup> SAMADOV, Bahruz. “Azerbaijan’s crowd reawakens with a fury”. OC Media, 17 July 2020. <https://oc-media.org/opinions/opinion-azerbajians-crowd-reawakens-with-a-fury/> Consulted on 23/10/2020.

<sup>42</sup> Президент Азербайджанской Республики Ильхам Алиев/President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev. “Ильхам Алиев выступил на общих дебатах в видеоформате 75-й сессии Генеральной Ассамблеи ООН/Ilham Aliyev spoke in the general debate in video format at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly”. 24 сентября 2020. <https://ru.president.az/articles/40937> Consulted on 22/10/2020.



Aliyev also wanted to get the Russians on his side. There is nothing better than reminding them of the “velvet revolution” in Armenia, accusing Pashinyan of acting in the interests of the multimillionaire George Soros, precisely at a time when the situation in Belarus is once again critical. At the same time he has tried to bias the Americans in his favour with the same argument, since the relationship of the tycoon with President Trump is clearly confrontational<sup>43</sup>.

It can be seen that the Azeri authorities have created a favourable environment for launching an offensive, gaining the support of public opinion and seeking an equally beneficial international situation. In addition, international reactions are expected to be less because States are imbued with the consequences of the pandemic.

## Conclusions

The armed tension in Nagorno-Karabakh is likely to continue, mainly on Baku’s side. This is because Azerbaijan’s efforts in the diplomatic field have not been successful, because Azerbaijan’s military potential has been increased and because its actions on the ground can lead to gains. Moreover, Turkey’s determined support provides the Azeris with additional security and strength.

On the other hand, the possible brake on the Azeri initiative may come in the event of significant human losses and economic uncertainty, due to the sharp drop in oil prices caused by the pandemic.

The Armenian side retains the strength offered by the mountainous terrain on which it sits, but does not possess the capacity to carry out significant offensive actions. Necessarily, their strategy must go through an all-out defence, breaking the Azeri offensive capability, if it leads to major losses.

At the international level, this conflict can lead to confrontation between major actors with conflicting interests. Russia, which is the main power in the area, does not seem interested in altering the *status quo* that had been achieved. In this way, it could continue to influence both contenders through a delicate balance of forces.

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<sup>43</sup> Геополитика.ру. “Aliyev: Pashinyan is a Soros guy” 1 October 2020  
<https://www.geopolitica.ru/es/news/aliyev-pashinyan-es-un-hombre-de-soros> Consulted on 22/10/2020.

However, this balance has been destabilised by the Armenian tendency to seek its own geopolitical space with greater autonomy from the Russians, who have shown it some of the consequences of moving away from its protective umbrella. Azerbaijan has not gone to the Armenian extremes, but gaining almost unconditional support from the Turks has put Russia on alert, which has a number of open disputes with Turkey, mainly in Libya and Syria.

If Russia perceives a threat to the control of its immediate periphery it may react, as it did in 2008 in Georgia and in 2014 in Ukraine. Moreover, the feeling of harassment that Russians may feel could be even greater, if one considers that the events in Belarus can be interpreted as part of this whole. The Russian reaction could not only be limited to the Caucasus region, but could also occur in some other scenario, mainly against Turkey's interests.

For its part, Turkey is in clear geopolitical expansion, increasingly influencing the territories over which it has a former ancestor. Turkish control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits could put the Russians in a tight spot, because of problems connecting their Black Sea and Mediterranean fleets. However, Turkey's position is very delicate, as its estrangement from the Americans and its NATO partners may lead it back into conflict with its historic Russian rival.

The Iranians share Russia's vision, not only because they are allies of convenience and have the United States as a common adversary. The reason for this is that Iran can be established as a north-south communication axis, relieving the pressure that the Americans have been putting on it. Beijing has a vision similar to that of the Russians and Iranians, desiring stability to open east-west communication routes, thus benefiting the land portion of the OBOR initiative.

The Europeans have not had a categorical reaction. One could highlight France's efforts to seek a position of convenience, ingratiating itself with Russia and straining relations with Turkey. However, the whole of Europe does not yet seem to be reacting to a conflict on its doorstep, as was once the case in the Balkans.

It seems that in all this dangerous pulse of tensions and instabilities the greatest beneficiary may be the United States, which sees with relative interest how its potential rivals are at odds with each other in a conflict that takes away their ability to concentrate their efforts on other scenarios. It also seems that in those conflicts where the Americans are not present they are letting others do their work, even though they are keeping an eye on them. In this way, the return to the traditional American position as a naval aviation power would be bearing its first fruits.

It is complicated to point out the possible solutions to the conflict, but all of them involve preventing the conflict from extending beyond its limits and dragging international actors into an escalation of hostilities, both in this and in other scenarios of confrontation. Once the possibility of extension is contained, formulas should be found again that could avoid confrontations, with territorial interdependence based on communication routes being a long-term solution. In any case, any result should be welcomed by Russia, which is a major power in the area and which will not allow its influence to be lost so close to its national territory.

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