The Second Karabakh War: Further Reflections

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In the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan stands at a critical moment in its history. The war has resolved many of the issues driving Azerbaijani grievances over the last three decades. Yet it leaves others both unresolved and entangled within a new regional configuration that more than ever hinges on the interactions of external great powers and the fractured local politics of the South Caucasus.

The regionalization of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict—meaning its transition to a Russian-Turkish condominium—ultimately links the conflict to the vagaries of what Pavel Baev and Kemal Kirişçi call the “serpentine” relations between Moscow and Ankara in the era of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin. The conflict is now one link in a string of conflict theatres where Russia and Turkey are involved, and across which Moscow and Ankara may negotiate trade-offs that have little to do with the interests of local parties. To be sure, Azerbaijan’s closeness to Turkey assuages concerns over Russian influence for now. And the strategic, rather than tactical, outlook on Azerbaijani-Turkish partnership means that few in Azerbaijan believe that Turkey would ever engage in trade-offs that cross Azerbaijani red lines. This belief is reflected in the experience of the Turkish-Armenian “football diplomacy” normalization initiative that took place in 2008-2009. Nevertheless, while the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is now seen by many in Azerbaijan as resolved, it has in fact been repackaged and embedded in a new, highly complex, and unpredictable web of linkages.

### Three Liberations

This is not to underestimate the significance of the war’s outcomes in Azerbaijan. Victory in the Second Karabakh War can be read in terms of three liberations for Azerbaijan. The first of these is territorial. Through the military advance along the southern flank in October and November 2020, and then in accordance with the terms of the November 2020 Russian-Armenian-Azerbaijani trilateral declaration, Azerbaijan restored control over all of the seven districts occupied by Armenian forces in 1992-1993, with the exception of a narrow corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. Azerbaijan thereby all but restored its territorial integrity.

Restoration of sovereignty over de-occupied areas translates into the personal liberations of hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani displaced from those territories in 1992-1993. The fate of this population has been a continual concern in Azerbaijan, with fears that the construction of new settlements would lead to a de facto integration of these communities and, by implication, acceptance of forced displacement. Although the challenges of rehabilitating and reconstructing the de-occupied territories are formidable, the prospect of return is now an attainable goal. A strategy for the “great return” has already been published, and working groups are elaborating its operationalization.

The third liberation is affective: emancipation from the humiliation of a devastating military defeat in 1994. No other conflict in the former Soviet Union featured such drastic overspill beyond the territory originally disputed. An equivalent scenario in Georgia, for instance, would have seen a swath of western Georgia at least as big again as Abkhazia itself occupied and its population driven out. Furthermore, as American journalist Thomas Goltz documents in his...
The Limits of Victory

Victory is of course intoxicating. Yet many—if certainly not all—victories contain within themselves the seeds of future defeats, whether on or off the battlefield. In 1905 Japan scored a stunning victory over Russia. In a set-piece sea battle at Tsushima in May of that year, a Japanese fleet under Admiral Togo destroyed a Russian expeditionary force, sinking eight battleships in two days. Over the following four decades, Japan’s naval doctrine centered on preparation for another set-piece confrontation, leading the country to construct the largest ever capital ships in the history of naval warfare: the super-battleships Yamato and Musashi. Yet despite the fact that they outgunned any possible rival, Yamato and Musashi never fought their Tsushima. Like the vast majority of ships in the Imperial Japanese Navy, they were sunk by American air power having never once engaged enemy battleships in battle. The paradigm had changed, and like the proverbial generals anticipating yesterday’s war, Japan had prepared for the wrong battle.

Great Britain emerged twice victorious in the world wars of the twentieth century. Yet as Irish journalist Fintan O’Toole argues in his book *Heroic Failure* (2018), the United Kingdom was alone among the winning parties of World War II in failing to find a new purpose or mission in the decades that followed. British identity remained attached to the “spirit of 1940” that merged over time with imperial nostalgia into a sense of especially English exceptionalism. To this day, wartime tropes and memes are embarrassingly trotted out in the tabloid press every time England plays Germany in international football, while the slogan “Keep Calm and Carry On,” accompanied by World War II symbols and artwork, is a staple meme in popular culture. This sense of exceptionalism, catalyzed by a multitude of other influences, led eventually to Brexit—a major strategic setback for the United Kingdom, the price of which we are only starting to understand now.

Armenia was also, in its own way, overwhelmed by victory in 1994. For a nation with a long history of military defeats, the outcome of the First Karabakh War was a stunning reversal. Through the trope of “victory for the victims,” that outcome was suffused with a sense of historical justice that became very difficult to interrogate internally. Over time, attachments grew to the wider territorial identity of what I call “augmented Armenia”—encompassing the Republic of Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the surrounding occupied territories. The latter were increasingly referred to by Armenians as “liberated territories” in an escalating scale of perceived territorial ownership. Armenia was increasingly dragged into a strategically unwinnable project of territorial aggrandizement in a context where Azerbaijan had resources to re-equip and re-arm. These dynamics provided the backdrop for the Second Karabakh War, in which Turkish support converted Azerbaijani preponderance into dominance.

Famous memoir *Azerbaijan Diary* (1998), Azerbaijan’s defeat derived as much from internal divisions and political turmoil in Baku that resulted in a disorganized war effort and the loss of several regions without a fight.

A pparent international indifference to Azerbaijan’s tragedy added insult to injury. Other conflicts consistently overshadowed the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, whether in the Balkans and Chechnya in the 1990s, South Ossetia/Georgia in 2008, Ukraine and Syria in the 2010s. Unlike these confrontations, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict never sustained prolonged international attention. American and European attention to the conflict has declined over time, amid the sense of fatigue palpable in U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry’s comments, made at the Atlantic and Aspen Institute in September 2016 just five months after April’s Four-Day War that killed more than 200: “you can’t quite see [a way forward] right now because the leaders [of Armenia and Azerbaijan] aren’t ready, because the tensions aren’t there.”

For many in Azerbaijan, there is now a sense that strategic patience has been vindicated over the diplomatic concessions expected of Baku in the Minsk Process mediated by the Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). International lip-service to the restoration of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity has been exposed for what it was, and Azerbaijan has achieved its goals its own way.
leading to what was for Armenia a devastating military defeat in 2020.

There is nothing inevitable about such processes and this is not to forecast a one-way trajectory to future military setbacks for Azerbaijan. It is, rather, to highlight that victories easily become fixed in the stories that nations tell about themselves, but the conditions that brought them into being do not always last. Even as the euphoria of victory continues, it is prudent for any winning party to ask itself whether there are risks of becoming too comfortable with a victor’s identity.

Segregation, Interaction, and Interests

Azerbaijan’s horizons following its late 2020 victory are in some ways very distinct from those of Armenia in 1994. Whereas Armenia’s outlook in 1994 accepted the long-distance segregation of Armenian and Azerbaijani communities as a condition of security, Azerbaijan’s outlook in 2021 presumes their interaction.

The November 2020 trilateral declaration is in many ways a strange hybrid between the minimalism of a ceasefire agreement and the expansive vision of a comprehensive peace settlement. It sets out a highly ambitious agenda for opening up the closed borders, blockades, and the contorted, work-around transit routes of the post-Soviet South Caucasus. Most significantly for Azerbaijan, the declaration mandates the construction of a new transit route connecting western Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave and by extension Turkey, across Armenia’s southernmost region of Syunik (known as Zangezur to Azerbaijanis). This transit corridor has potentially far-reaching consequences as a second east-west corridor that would recategorize Armenia as a transit state critical to the successful functioning of the corridor.

The extent to which such a transformation is seen as necessary in Azerbaijan is moot (and this author has not had the opportunity to visit the country since the onset of the global pandemic). Yet as the long history of Armenian-Azerbaijani security dilemmas shows, for communities in close proximity to one another real security can only be shared. There is an opportunity now to craft an integrative peace weaving the defeated party into a new regional infrastructure, meeting sufficient needs to remove a future basis for the contestation of that structure—thereby safeguarding the future of

The return of displaced communities to the areas restored to Azerbaijani jurisdiction will bring Armenian and Azerbaijani communities into their closest proximity for decades.
another generation of Armenians and Azerbaijanis from yet another devastating war.

The alternatives would appear to range from a kind of hard peace, implying a lowest common denominator of transactional interactions across the narrowest possible spectrum of issues, and a punitive peace, involving the kind of long-term humiliation that Azerbaijan itself had to endure for more than a quarter of a century. Yet when the interests and needs of the future generations that will live with the legacies of this moment are considered, surely neither of these scenarios can be seen as optimal. Surely, what we ultimately wish for is Armenian and Azerbaijani citizens who not only transact, but who trust one another.

Transforming the Relationship

No one expects an overnight transformation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani relationship. Across the divide, the losses are too great, the wounds too fresh, and identities shaped by the memories of violence and death too resilient. Yet if it may be too early to speak of conciliatory gestures, there are three moves that Azerbaijan can make now that can contribute at least to more nuanced relations that will ultimately also serve its interests better.

First, differentiated relations with distinct Armenian communities. Conflict discourses tend to totalize the adversary. Antagonistic rhetoric sets up hard self/other dichotomies, diminishing difference both within and across the conflict divide. A first move that Azerbaijan can make is to shift from a mythologized view of Armenians as a monolithic “enemy” to differentiated perspectives on a variety of real-world Armenian communities: the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, the Republic of Armenia, and the Armenian diaspora. Each of these communities presents a different set of challenges—and interests—for Azerbaijani policy.

It is ironic that the least developed of these relationships is with that community of Armenians that Azerbaijan claims as its own citizens. After the late-1990s, Azerbaijan largely eschewed dialogue with Karabakh Armenians for fear of tacit recognition of their self-determination claim. The only kind of dialogue admissible from Baku’s perspective was that between Karabakh Armenians and the Karabakh Azerbaijani population displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh in 1992. This format, in turn, was rejected by Karabakh Armenians as a negation of their self-determination claim and electoral majority. This impasse continued for years.

The context for this relationship has now changed immeasurably. A key outcome of the 2020 war from Azerbaijan’s perspective is that the status of Nagorno-Karabakh has been taken off the agenda—underpinning rhetoric to the effect that the conflict is over. It is difficult at present to envisage when or under what conditions the relationship between Karabakh Armenians and the Azerbaijani state—however we frame it—will again become a subject of dialogue, yet it remains the core underlying issue that is in contention. It is problems in this relationship that ultimately account for the turn of events of the last three decades, and which now provide the framework within which it is possible for a substantial Russian peacekeeping operation to be fielded in Azerbaijan. And the more problematic—indeed, conflictual—that this relationship is, the easier it will be to justify the continued presence of peacekeepers.

It is now more than ever in Azerbaijan’s interest to craft a distinct relationship with the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku now has the opportunity to do this without the fear of tacit recognition. The challenges are formidable—not least that the Karabakh Armenian wartime leadership have been charged in Azerbaijan in connection with war crimes, notably the missile strikes on Ganja and Barda that claimed the lives of dozens of Azerbaijani civilians. Yet it is crucial to differentiate between leadership and populace, between a political project in secessionist state-making, and a human community with fears, needs, and grievances, radicalized by the recent experience of war.

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and its own forced displacement. Submerging this population within a wider, singular narrative of hostile Armenians—or isolating it so that it has no choice but to depend on outside actors—does not ultimately serve the goal of transforming a relationship that has troubled Azerbaijan for more than a century. And in the new situation, the isolation of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh under conditions where Armenia’s capacities are radically weakened will by default advance their reliance on Russia.

It is with the Republic of Armenia that the conflict has played out over the last quarter-century. Decisively defeated in the Second Karabakh War, Armenia’s doctrines of deterrence, strategic depth, and military self-reliance in Nagorno-Karabakh have been routed and the country’s military capacity devastated. As of this moment it is difficult to imagine how Armenia might ever challenge Azerbaijan again. Yet it is worth noting the experience of another notorious and asymmetric rivalry. Despite successive defeats in actual wars, including a crushing defeat in 1971 that led to the loss of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Pakistan has sustained its rivalry with India. Scholar T.V. Paul has indeed identified Pakistan as suffering from what he terms the “geostrategic curse”: the capacity to live off the rents provided by external actors due to location and geostrategic importance in the wider foreign policy goals of great powers. In Pakistan’s case, the geostrategic curse generated rents for a military elite, underpinning their domestic political dominance and Pakistan’s identity as a “warrior state.”

Armenia does not depict itself as a warrior state, yet particularly with regard to the borrowing of Russian power there are aspects to the resourcing of a long-term rivalry that resemble the geostrategic curse. In the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War, Armenian society is debating what lessons it is most appropriate to draw from the defeat. One side in this debate concludes that Armenia should become a “garrison state,” privileging the allocation of resources to a new domestic military-industrial complex capable of producing advanced weaponry. This would presumably entail substantial external support.

This debate raises critical questions for Azerbaijan. What kind of Armenia does Baku want to see? Through its actions, what kind of influence can Baku exercise now over the internal debate in Armenia in ways that best serve Azerbaijani interests? Does Azerbaijan want to deal with a revanchist Armenia committed to renewed military competition, or to facilitate a transition to a different kind of bilateral relationship? Clearly, a totalized rivalry heightening insecurity will fuel the arguments of those advocating the pathway of building a “garrison state” in Armenia. Weaving Armenia into a new regional economic structure generating development, opportunity, and interdependencies for all will weaken those arguments.

Consider India’s other major rivalry—namely, the one with China. Despite the fact that the two countries fought a brief war in 1962, continue to contest more than 135,000 square kilometers in three different locations, and compete for control over natural resources, trade between them has grown steadily since the 1990s to the point where China is India’s leading trading partner. Their rivalry persists with regular but localized bouts of violence, yet India and China have a multifaceted relationship in which these issues do not preclude mutually beneficial cooperation on other issues. Even India and Pakistan trade and work together to manage natural resources.

At the third layer, the Armenian diaspora is of course not one community but many, each with its own specific experience. In the Azerbaijani imagination, the Armenian diaspora has played a very significant role in facilitating secessionism in Nagorno-Karabakh—by both supporting it with material resources and promoting it through a diasporic nationalism that is seen in Azerbaijani debates as alien to the South Caucasus. In Azerbaijani perspectives, diasporic Armenian nationalism is also seen as the most challenging variety of Armenian identity.
the pragmatics of prospective every day encounters. Instead it is seen, in Benedict Anderson’s famous formulation, as a “long-distance nationalism” to be neutralized rather than engaged with. Competitive dynamics in the communal relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in various diaspora theatres reached new lows in 2020 with clashes, vandalism, and street violence in both July and October-November 2020. This amplification of local struggles in the South Caucasus into a globalized rivalry—implicating all Armenians and Azerbaijanis wherever they live in a hardened identity politics—serves the interests of neither nation-state. While such horizons may seem beyond the scope of what is possible at present, there are other examples from across the world where diasporas have contributed towards reducing such trends, for example through economic investment in inclusive and sustainable development initiatives or through the initiation of “post-national” debates seeking to deconstruct the hard identity politics fueling conflict.

In short, differentiating among Armenian communities is critical to a more nuanced appreciation of distinct interests vis-à-vis each of them. This is an important first step towards transformed relations with each of them—and preventing contested issues in one of these relationships spilling over into the others. It goes without saying that a more critical and differentiated view of “the other” is needed across the divide. The sublimation by Armenians of Azerbaijanis and Turks, and also of various Azerbaijani stakeholder communities—such as refugees from Armenia and Karabakh Azerbaijanis—into a single overarching and antagonistic identity category of “the Turk” represents a similarly problematic identity practice.

Second, constructing Azerbaijani identity in ways that mitigate, not aggravate, conflict. Azerbaijan can, entirely unilaterally, project a vision of itself that is compatible with the plans afoot for regional development and, over time, transformed Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. Azerbaijan prides itself on its inclusive civic nationalism. Azerbaijanism (Azerbaycançılıq) is the state’s formal identity doctrine. It is an idea focused on the territory of the republic, thereby differentiating an Azerbaijani nation-state space from the wider Azerbaijani ethno-space that reaches deep into Iran. As an idea focused on territory, Azerbaijanism frames an inclusive approach towards the citizenry living on that territory—whether Muslim (Shia or Sunni) or Christian (Orthodox or otherwise) or Jewish; or ethnic Azerbaijani, Talysh, or Russian.

Since the mid-2000s, however, Azerbaijanism has increasingly co-existed alongside another geopolitical tradition that I call “wide Azerbaijanism.” This tradition articulates a lateral widening of the space identified as “Azerbaijan” to the west and argues that Armenia is actually a recent and artificial construct on what had previously been Azerbaijani lands. Visible in cartography, historical textbooks, and some touristic products, this tradition also made its way into the speeches of political elites, who have evoked historical geographies to suggest that areas in the east and south of the Republic of Armenia in particular can be identified as Azerbaijani.

It is important to acknowledge that claims on the territory of the Republic of Armenia are not part of any formal doctrine or state strategy. President Ilham Aliyev’s foreign policy advisor, Hikmet Hajiyev, has recently spoken of the need for Armenia and Azerbaijan to re-establish relations “within their sovereign borders.” Yet President Aliyev included references to Zangezur (roughly Armenia’s southernmost Syunik province) and even Yerevan in his speech at the November 2020 victory parade. Opposition politician Ilgar Mammadov also proposed the idea that Armenia might cede Syunik to Azerbaijan by way of reparations. Instability in defining an Armenian-Azerbaijani border has become an aspect of political rhetoric. Political elites, of course, perform speech acts according to occasion, audience, and interests. Yet “wide Azerbaijanism” as a theory of the recent arrival of Armenians in the South Caucasus is also taught in schools, narrated in museums, and subtly visualized in maps. It has become part of the nation-building process, and as such may not be straightforward to control.

“Wide Azerbaijanism” is both a product of the conflict and a feedback loop reinforcing the conflict dynamic. It reflects back to Armenians their own geopolitical vision of an “augmented Armenia” comprising the Republic of Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the surrounding occupied territories. “Augmented Armenia” was never formalized as a doctrine of Armenian statehood, yet it was tolerated and encouraged both symbolically in cartography and popular culture and structurally in new infrastructure and development projects. Public usage of its corollary—namely, the conceptualization of occupied territories as “liberated territories”—moved...
over time from indicating a radical position to a mainstream one. Geopolitical constructs can assume their own momentum over time. Moreover, both “augmented Armenia” and “wide Azerbaijanism” are dangerously associated with recursive practices of cultural erasure that are highly incendiary for Armenian-Azerbaijani relations.

After the Second Karabakh War, “wide Azerbaijanism” no longer confronts “augmented Armenia.” A post-war poll conducted in Armenia in February 2021 by MPG/Gallup International (with a sample of 801) suggests a dramatic decline in popular attachments to the expansive space of “augmented Armenia.” Whereas in 2017 86.4 percent of those surveyed supported a maximally defined Nagorno-Karabakh within the de facto boundaries created by the First Karabakh War and were opposed to any territorial concessions, in the 2021 poll only 30.7 percent supported such a definition of Karabakh—a drop of nearly 56 percent. This is a highly significant shift away from overlapping and incompatible conceptualizations of homeland.

Yet the persistence of “wide Azerbaijanism” obstructs and delays a final stabilization of borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan in three ways. First, its questioning of Armenian statehood can inevitably only add to insecurity and strengthen arguments in Armenia on the need for a “garrison state.” Building a sense of self that underlines a neighboring state’s right to exist will deepen, rather than assuage, Armenian-Azerbaijani security dilemmas.

Second, in its projection of a Turkic unity stretching from Anatolia to the Caspian—powerfully reinforced by the joint Turkish-Azerbaijani effort to win the Second Karabakh War—there is a risk of importing elements of Turkish identity politics into the already complex negotiation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani relationship.

In a third and related point, “wide Azerbaijanism” undermines the potential for new pathways to Armenian-Azerbaijani relations to be found in the framework of Azerbaijanism. Introduced by Heydar Aliyev in 1993 as a pragmatic approach to rebuilding the fragmented Azerbaijani state (and containing the scope for Azerbaijani irredentism focused on Iranian Azerbaijan), Azerbaijanism emphasizes both civic inclusiveness and a defined territoriality with clear borders. As a national project it offers a more promising horizon for the re-negotiation of relations with distinct Armenian communities, and offers more space to alternatives to a “garrison state” in Armenia itself.

Resonant though the idea of “one nation, two states” may be, especially in the glow of victory, Azerbaijani problems should be resolved through the framework of Azerbaijani statehood, rather than an expansive Turkic ethno-space submerging local detail, nuance, and difference.

Third, open up to dialogue. This last move that Azerbaijan can make in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War centers on dialogue beyond the state. This is without any doubt one of the most important prerequisites to a transformation of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, yet it had all but died out in the years preceding the war. Research conducted by the Yerevan Press Club and Yeni Nesil in 2019 found that informal dialogue between the parties to the Karabakh conflict had reached its lowest level since the conflict began in 1988. Dialogue and people-to-people contacts fell into sharp decline from the early 2010s. Track-II initiatives were increasingly securitized, as cross-border visits became very rare and highly choreographed events. Already in decline, dialogue never recovered after the April 2016 Four-Day War.

Azerbaijan has historically regarded Track-II peacebuilding with concern as potentially leading to acceptance and normalization of an unacceptable status quo. Yet diplomatic summits in distant capitals have emphatically failed to appreciably challenge Armenian-Azerbaijani security dilemmas. Elite-level interactions have not been able—and will remain unable—to achieve a lasting breakthrough for as long as the strategic culture of rivalry persists. There is of course the riposte that war has resolved what dialogue could not, but this both assumes that the underlying conflict is resolved and exaggerates the extent to which Armenia and Azerbaijan engaged in serious and potentially productive dialogue—especially over the last 15 years. But as already noted, for new regional development plans to be both viable and sustainable for communities on the ground their participation will be necessary—
both through vertical dialogue with their own authorities and horizontal dialogue across the divide.

Face-to-face contacts between Armenians and Azerbaijanis are crucial to breaking down the security dilemmas that fuel the conflict between them. What has effectively become a state monopoly on dialogue needs to be opened up to a wider interface across a wider cross-section of Armenian and Azerbaijani societies. Negotiating mutually acceptable and beneficial outcomes requires the trust and confidence that can only come from personal encounters. As historical experience has shown—for example in work facilitated by the peacebuilding NGO Saferworld between populations along the Tovuz/Tavush border in 2011—local communities can often demonstrate a pragmatism informed more by immediate needs and interests than national-level discourses and rhetoric. This kind of pragmatism will be necessary if the communities that will be living along multiple new contact lines established by the November 2020 tripartite agreement are not to live in multiple new micro-security dilemmas defined by fear and suspicion towards one another.

**Partnership or Domination?**

Armenian-Azerbaijani relations are at a historical inflection point. As the winning party of the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan has scope to set in motion new dynamics in its relations with a variety of Armenian communities. There is a fundamental choice to be made between an approach that seeks to convert victory into a longer-term domination of Armenia, and an approach that seeks a transformation from the securitized rivalry of the last three decades to the prospects of partnership. Azerbaijan's choices at this juncture will interact critically with Armenia's own choices between rebuilding a revanchist "garrison state" or revising and, by implication, de-securitizing its relations with Azerbaijan. The choices are set out schematically on the next page.

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**Partnership (integrative peace)**
- Interactivity / interdependencies
- Bilateral relations
- Differentiated relations with distinct Armenian communities
- Azerbaijani nationalism
- Networked regionalism / regional suture
- Normalization

**Domination (punitive peace)**
- Segregation / zero-sum thinking
- Leveraging outside influence
- Monolithic enemy imagery
- Wide Azerbaijanism
- Hegemonic regionalism / regional fracture
- Securitized rivalry, future conflict?

These choices are too often submerged in the grander narrative of how great powers shape and re-shape South Caucasian geopolitics. The emergence of a Russian-Turkish duopoly over the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict only appears to affirm this narrative. But while only a multifactor analysis can explain this outcome, a crucial enabling condition is the tendency among protagonists in South Caucasus conflicts to leverage outside powers to sustain or win their struggles with one another. The resulting outcomes build external interests and power dynamics into new status quos that in their asymmetries cannot generate either inclusive or sustainable security arrangements. Rather, a new cycle of regional fracture begins, with the security of some of the region's actors depending on the insecurity of others. This in turn sets the stage for future cycles of violence.

There is little doubt that the rivalry mindset and associated zero-sum thinking patterns will continue in both Armenia and Azerbaijan in the short-term. The experience of the Korean peninsula shows that even in a context where it is different parts of the same nation that are in conflict, antagonistic mindsets can long outlast the structural context for their original emergence—Cold War polarity, in the case of divided Korea. The challenge for Armenia and Azerbaijan as distinct nations that since the restoration of their respective independence came to regard each other as "the other"
against which they defined themselves is all the more daunting. The worst-case scenario is a new spiral of threat perception, whereby each state continues to supply a \textit{Feindbild}—enemy image—for the other: an Azerbaijan intent on dominating Armenia and borrowing Turkish power to do so, and an Armenia intent on rebirth as a revanchist “garrison state.”

What, then, might be a best-case scenario? Progress might look like a shift from a totalized, identity-driven rivalry to more compartmentalized relations, still vulnerable to periodic crises—but not so total as to exclude a diversifying gradient of relations encompassing trade, shared resource management, and common regional infrastructure. Crises would not spill over into total lockdowns of relations, allowing interactions on specific issues to continue. These interactions over time could lead to cross-cutting networks acting for mutual benefit and disincentivizing escalation. Armenia and Azerbaijan would engage in dialogue across a broad spectrum of issues, without the obligatory presence of international mediators. Leaders and foreign ministers would visit the other country in an effort to bring the peace process home. Other kinds of visitors from across the border would become a regular and unremarkable phenomenon, and Armenian and Azerbaijani journalists would report on developments in the other country from the ground. Competitive commemoration of the traumatic events of the past would increasingly co-exist with acknowledgement of others’ losses. Homogenized conceptualizations of history and homeland would over the long term yield to more complex and multi-vocal traditions. Perceptions of outside actors as indispensable purveyors of security would recede, and new regional configurations would become more imaginable.

Although often framed as geopolitical pawns, especially by each other, Armenia and Azerbaijan have enough agency to make this scenario more than just a pipe dream. 

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