



PERSPECTIVES

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Turkey's Win-Win Strategy in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has become an important component of Turkish foreign policy. Over the years, Ankara's support for Baku has grown exponentially. Diplomacy was an element of this support, but more significant was the dispatch of sophisticated weaponry. Greater support for Azerbaijan coincided with Turkey's more active foreign policy in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, and is now strikingly different from Ankara-Baku relations of the 1990s and even the early 2010s. The reason for Ankara's assertiveness could be access to energy and trade routes.

Turkey has always supported Azerbaijan on the basis of cultural ties and common geopolitical aspirations. Lately, however, as Ankara has grown more assertive in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, its policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh region has led it to bring Baku even closer.

Over the past several years there has been a tilt toward more robust Turkish military aid to Azerbaijan. Several factors caused this policy change. The first is energy flow. As Turkey's gas consumption increased, Azerbaijan gradually became its major gas supplier. In the first half of 2020, Turkey imported 20.4% more cubic meters of Azerbaijani gas than it had in the same period of 2019. Its gas imports from Russia, meanwhile, dropped by almost 62% compared to the same month in 2019. In May 2020, Azerbaijan officially became Turkey's top gas supplier.

This became possible after the launch of TANAP in late 2019. The \$6.5 billion project is part of the \$40 billion Southern Gas Corridor, a network of pipelines that connect Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz II field to the vast European market.

TANAP has the capacity to transport up to 16 billion cubic meters (bcm) of Caspian gas per year: 10 bcm to Europe and 6 bcm to the Turkish market.

Geopolitical thinking could be at play here, as Turkey has long worried that its aspirations in the South Caucasus and elsewhere could render it dependent on Russian gas. As differences with Russia over Libya and Syria multiplied, Ankara sought alternative ways to reduce its dependence on Russian gas. This created a perfect opportunity for Azerbaijan to become the region's major gas supplier—and in turn garner more support in the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Turkey wants an unhindered flow of Azerbaijani gas and is willing to show that it will defend that supply chain politically and even through the use of a limited military force if necessary.

This could explain Turkey's assertiveness in the July 2020 fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The violence took place in the Tovuz district of Azerbaijan—far from Nagorno-Karabakh, which is usually the center of large-scale fighting (as in 2016). What relates the fighting in Tovuz to the geopolitics of gas supplies is its location.

Tovuz is a vital land corridor for regional transport and energy export routes such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, the South Caucasus natural gas pipeline (SCP), and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway. This infrastructure is part of a larger trans-Eurasian east-west corridor that has been championed by the West since the end of the Soviet Union. But more importantly, the corridor allows Ankara to seek an alternative to Russian gas. Any military moves near those strategic routes would thus invite harsh Turkish action.

Indeed, Turkey's defense industry chief said after the July fighting that the country was ready to help its eastern ally. Joint military drills followed in Baku, Nakhchivan, Ganja, Kurdamir, and Yevlakh. The message was clear: active Turkish military involvement in the region might follow if any threat is posed to the pipelines.

Azerbaijani gas is thus set to play a central role in Turkey's evolving approach toward Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Increased Turkish support for Azerbaijan was visible in the September-October war between Azerbaijan and Armenia: Turkish-made drones spearheaded Azeri attacks, and Ankara was likely providing infrastructure and support for those weapons. According to Erdoğan, Ankara's support for Azerbaijan was part of Turkey's quest for its "deserved place in the world order." It fits into the overall pattern of the country's foreign policy in the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is an opportunity for Turkey at a time when the world's major powers are distracted by internal matters, the resurgent pandemic, ensuing economic problems, and most of all the lack of active leadership. In that environment, Turkey has been openly pushing to alter the status quo over Nagorno-Karabakh. In Ankara's opinion, France, the US, and Russia have led international mediation efforts for decades to no tangible result, as Yerevan has retained control of the enclave and adjacent territories. It is no wonder that when the leaders of France, Russia, and the US jointly called on Armenia and Azerbaijan to reach a ceasefire in the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, Erdoğan criticized the Minsk Group.

Ankara is betting that despite their differences over Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey and Russia will be able to find a lasting solution to the conflict. One important aspect will be Turkish involvement in the peace process. The Turkish leadership hinted at such a scenario when Turkish FM Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced Ankara's readiness to work with Moscow to resolve the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

Cooperation mixed with intense competition has been a hallmark of Russian-Turkish relations for several years. As the case of north Syria shows, they can work out durable solutions despite tensions between them. More broadly, they have cooperated in the sidelining of Western powers in both Syria and Libya, and a similar trend is emerging around Nagorno-Karabakh. The Russians, like the Turks, have expressed readiness to cooperate to de-escalate the tension.

The developing trend of Russia-Turkey cooperation/competition around Nagorno-Karabakh could be yet another theater in which the last remaining Western negotiating influence disappears. Russia and Turkey could be aiming at a condominium management of the conflict, much like the Black Sea management model advanced by Ankara after the Cold War in which Turkey and Russia would be decisive powers. It could also be similar to the way they brokered a relative peace in Syria by sidelining Western powers.

So far, as the dominant military power in the region, Moscow has served as the major negotiator between Baku and Yerevan. During the 2016 fighting, the Kremlin intervened after four days of intense clashes. The Kremlin's leading role was recently underscored by a diplomatic masterstroke: on October 9, 2020, the FMs of Azerbaijan and Armenia met in Moscow and managed to come up with a (shaky) ceasefire.

Russia has always tried to keep a military balance between the two South Caucasus states. One advantage it possesses is a military base in Armenia, near the Turkish border. The Turks are hesitant to make major military moves

so to avoid threatening Russia's top priority: the maintenance and defense of the status quo in the South Caucasus. This would mean the Russians could negate the active involvement of any foreign power.

Though it remains to be seen how far the Kremlin is willing to go in tolerating growing Turkish involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it recognizes that the status quo between Armenia and Azerbaijan has become untenable. First, Azerbaijan is the stronger militarily, a status it achieved through a vast, decades-long expansion of its military budget. Second, Turkey's military aid to Baku and general diplomatic support have pulled the two states closer together. If Turkey is denied a negotiating role and Azerbaijan does not receive some territories back, Ankara could ramp up its military support for Baku, potentially sparking another military standoff. Moscow's biggest fear could be that efforts to keep the status quo will alienate Azerbaijan from Russia and move it closer to its Turkic kin, and perhaps to the West in general.

In the end, Azerbaijan is no less geopolitically important for the Kremlin than Armenia. Hints in the Russian media indicate that a shift is taking place in Moscow in favor of a new balance of power around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict—so far without Ankara's presence, but still a win-win for Erdoğan.

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