

Technological determinism or strategic advantage? Comparing the two Karabakh Wars between Armenia and Azerbaijan

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In 2020, the Azerbaijani army launched a massive attack on Armenian positions in Nagorno-Karabakh. After 44 days of fighting, Azerbaijan scored a major victory, forcing Armenian forces to retreat from the territories around Karabakh, followed by the deployment of Russian peacekeeping troops. While many analysts have focused on advanced technology to explain Azerbaijan's victory, this article argues that a comparative study of the First Karabakh War (1991-1994) and the Second Karabakh War (2020) points to differences at the strategic level, including political transitions, diplomatic policies, and military forecasts, to propose a comprehensive and strategic discussion of the two wars, away from technological determinism.

Why did Armenia win the First Karabakh War (1991-1994), and lose the Second Karabakh War (2020)? Or, to put it another way: Why did Azerbaijan lose the first war, but win the second? The 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan is important in contemporary international politics because it was a confrontation between two regular armed forces, unlike most contemporary conflicts, which tend to be asymmetrical struggles between regular armies and insurgent groups. In its aftermath, numerous analysts concluded that drones supplied by either Israel or Turkey to Azerbaijan played a decisive role in sealing the fate of the war. [1] The usage of drones and loitering munitions triggered a debate among military analysts whether or not tanks still have a place on the future battlefield. [2] One study went as far as to suggest that it 'was the first war in history that was shaped and primarily won by robotics systems'. [3]

Drones and other contemporary weapon systems undoubtedly played an important military role, enabling Azerbaijan to dominate the skies, destroying Armenian air defences, degrading armour and artillery, and eventually opening a breach in Armenian defences. Nonetheless, this article will avoid arguments of 'technological determinism' in the Second Karabakh War. [4] While thinking about technology, we often focus uncritically on 'novelty' or a 'radical break with the past', as David Edgerton has said, rather than looking more thoroughly about the interaction of technology with broader questions of social organization. [5] Though technology, and especially air power, continues to fascinate military historians, scholars have long stressed the importance of social context and studying the relationships between militaries and societies, rather than 'hardware'-centred arguments. Such scholars pay special attention to the interplay between technology, military institutions, organizational innovations, communications, and logistics, all in a larger social and economic context. [6] The debate about drones could be considered a continuation of the earlier debate about the place of airpower in modern warfare. [7]

A comparative study of the First and Second Karabakh Wars raises interesting questions about the relative place of technology in the larger strategic context of winning wars. There are numerous

cases of larger armies with armaments of a superior quality and quantity that failed to score victories on the battlefield. One case study that has attracted much scholarly attention is the 2006 Lebanon war, where the Israeli army failed to prevail over Hezbollah, a non-state-actor. Despite its evident qualitative and quantitative advantages, including total air dominance, Israel failed militarily and instead initiated a massive aerial and missile campaign against Lebanon's civilian infrastructure. [8] Nonetheless, studying Israeli shortcomings fails to give us the full picture. Israel's failure was just as much the result of Hezbollah's continuous efforts to learn and adapt its tactics, which it had already begun doing during Israel's long occupation of Southern Lebanon. That enabled Hezbollah to effectively confront the Israeli armed forces at a pitched battle in Bint Jbeil. [9] By acknowledging Hezbollah's capabilities during its anti-Israeli resistance (1982-2000), Israel's military failure in 2006 becomes more distinct.

Another interesting comparison can be made with Turkish military campaigns against guerrilla fighters from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Syria's Afrin district. While Turkish attacks, part of the 'Olive Branch' operation, had a similar tactical configuration, including airpower and the use of drones, Kurdish guerrillas lacked the heavy weaponry that Karabakh Armenians and the Armenian Armed Forces had. Despite this important difference, Kurdish guerrillas resisted the Turkish attacks for 66 days - that is, 20 days longer than the Second Karabakh War lasted - and suffered fewer losses. Moreover, Kurdish fighters managed to resist several Turkish attacks on the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq. A more detailed study comparing those two wars could prove interesting, both on the tactical level and by examining the different strategies used by the conflicting parties, as well as the policies of major powers, like Russia, Iran, and the United States, in setting the framework within which those conflicts took place. [10]

Closer to the region, a comparative study between the two Karabakh wars and the first and second Chechen wars could also yield theoretical conclusions about how and why Russia was defeated in the first war, while securing victory in the second. Likewise, a comparison between the Georgia-Russia War of 2008 and the Karabakh War of 2020 could prove fruitful, especially by focusing on how post-revolutionary, democratizing states strategically approached ethno-territorial questions. [11] The debate within strategic and security studies on approaches by weaker military actors against superior forces, including Russian tactics to confront the West and NATO, has produced a rich literature for the concepts of asymmetric warfare and hybrid warfare. [12] However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 poses a challenge to the hybrid warfare theories developed largely as a result of the earlier Russian invasion of Crimea and the Donbas region in 2014, as the Russian leadership in 2022 risked an outright invasion, instead of hybrid-type warfare, to achieve its long-term objectives, namely bringing changes to the military balance in Eastern Europe. [13]

By making a comparative analysis between the First Karabakh War and the Second Karabakh War, this paper starts from the observation that, in both instances, Azerbaijan had superior numbers of troops and armament. Even on the technological level, Azerbaijan enjoyed superiority not just in the Second Karabakh War, but also in the 1990s. At that time, Azerbaijan had a relatively important air force, while Armenia had practically none, and only limited air defence capabilities. Instead of placing too much importance on technology and armament, this article will look at the strategic dimension of the Armenian-Azerbaijani rivalry through a comparative study of the First Karabakh War and the Second Karabakh War, to argue that it was *strategic advantage* that decided the outcome of the conflicts, reversing the roles of victor and loser in a space of under 30 years. [14] By 'strategic advantage', I mean the set of structural configurations that gives a party to a conflict the possibility of concentrating forces, enabling it to subdue its adversary on the battlefield. The concept of 'strategic advantage' as derived from management theories, where it is expressed as 'comparative advantage', is widely used in management and human resources literatures, often to define the organizational forces of a given industry against its rivals. From a strategic perspective, this

comparison is much more pertinent than narrow discussions of technology, training, tactics, organizational efficiency, logistics, size of armies and types of armaments deployed, all as separate, yet determinant, factors. This article, therefore, will not focus only on the 44-day war of 2022, but will also discuss larger strategic considerations that decided the fate of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Determinant factors: political transition versus elite cohesion

A determinant factor in the two Karabakh wars was elite cohesion. During the First Karabakh War, Armenia had completed its transition from a Soviet to post-Soviet elite and had stable leadership throughout the war. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan had a later elite transition, simultaneously going through its transition while being at war. [15] Conversely, during the Second Karabakh War, Armenia was going through an inter-elite struggle following the 'Velvet Revolution' of 2018, while Azerbaijan had established stable, authoritarian leadership with clear command structures.

In its initial phase (1988–1991), the Karabakh conflict was an internal conflict that developed within one state, the Soviet Union. Soon, it became a triangular struggle between Soviet Armenia, Soviet Azerbaijan, and the central Soviet authorities. [16] The conflict created conditions for the formation of proto-state institutions, such as armed forces and foreign policy structures. The presence of a 17,000-strong Soviet army largely kept the tense situation in Karabakh from exploding. [17] Once the Soviet authorities decided to opt for preserving the status quo, they put the Soviet Armenian leadership in a difficult position, stuck between a popular movement demanding change and the Soviet leadership opposing it. Security challenges, amplified by Armenians' existential fears after a series of anti-Armenian pogroms in major Azerbaijani cities (namely Sumgait in 1988, Kirovabad in 1989 and Baku in 1990), led Armenian public opinion to abandon any hope in the Soviet system to provide basic security to their co-nationals. Armenian public opinion radicalized and triggered elite transformation, and the Soviet-era leadership abandoned its hegemony without a fight to the new Armenian nationalist movement led by Soviet-era intellectuals. The security challenges that emerged alongside the Karabakh conflict, especially the anti-Armenian pogroms in Azerbaijan and the incapacity of the Soviet leadership to address the security dilemma and resultant Armenian political demands, led the emerging Armenian leadership to conclude that sovereignty was necessary to achieve a favourable resolution to the Karabakh issue and to ensure the security of the Armenian nation. [18]

The Soviet authorities tried to use the conflict to advance their own political aims of getting rid of the Leonid Brezhnev-era elite and replacing them with reformists. [19] The side effect of this policy was that it further destabilized the Armenian and Azerbaijani Soviet republics. In Armenia, it facilitated regime change, bringing the national movement to power in 1990. Meanwhile in Azerbaijan, the Soviet-era nomenklatura clung to power with support from Moscow. As independence-minded forces in power in Armenia clashed with the central Soviet authorities, Mikhail Gorbachev supported conservative Azerbaijan, including militarily in 'Operation Ring' (Kol'tso) in April-May 1991, which led to the deportation of several thousand ethnic Armenians from 24 villages in Soviet Azerbaijan. [20] As Armenians came under the combined military pressure of Soviet troops and the Azerbaijani authorities, they were forced to develop their own local self-defence forces, which later served as the nucleus of the national army. Armenia went through a power transfer from the old Soviet nomenklatura to a new elite largely composed of academics ready to lead the country to independence. According to Gerard Libaridian, 'by the end of 1990, Armenia was functioning as a sovereign state . . . independent of Moscow'. [21] At the time the Soviet Union collapsed in the last months of 1991, Armenia had already taken the initial steps towards statehood. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, being in favour of maintaining the status quo, relied on Soviet support and so did not need to develop its own state capabilities in the first three years of the conflict (1988–1991). As a result, when the Soviet Union collapsed and the Karabakh conflict turned

into total war, Azerbaijan not only went through a destabilizing power transfer from the old Soviet nomenklatura to the nationalist intelligentsia and back, but also lacked the necessary institutions for an independent state, including independent armed forces.

The emergence of the Karabakh movement created shockwaves in Azerbaijan and triggered two reactive political processes: one, increasing conservatism among the ruling elite, and two, an anti-systemic mass mobilization on a nationalist agenda. The Azerbaijani nomenklatura managed to survive largely because Moscow pushed to maintain the status quo in Karabakh, a policy that reinforced the power of conservative forces in the Azerbaijani party leadership. The central Soviet authorities also protected the local elite from internal dissident movements. This reactive position of the Azerbaijani ruling nomenklatura, as well as the emerging mass movement there, conditioned its anti-democratic nature. The Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF), which was set up by Azerbaijani intellectuals in 1989, demanded keeping Karabakh within Azerbaijan. Yet there was another topic that differentiated the Azerbaijani intelligentsia from the nomenklatura. After the January 1990 anti-Armenian pogroms in Baku, the local Soviet authorities collapsed, and the APF seemed to be taking political control. Soviet troops intervened and reimposed Ayaz Mutallibov's rule, making him even more dependent on Moscow to maintain his authority. The disintegration of the Soviet Union led to an independent Azerbaijan with a weak ruling class and a radicalized opposition. The country had to face simultaneously internal power struggles between two antagonistic political forces and a complex security situation in its western regions and in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO). [22]

From an Azerbaijani elite perspective, the greater prize was not in Karabakh, but in Baku. For Abulfaz Elchibey, 'the debacle in Karabakh was of lesser import than the opportunity Mutallibov's departure presented for reworking an essentially colonial relationship with Russia'. [23] In 1992-1993, there was a severe power struggle in Baku, and every major Azerbaijani military defeat in Karabakh brought a change of leadership to the capital. Elchibey describes the situation prior to the APF taking power as follows: 'Illegal armed units were very active in the country. The situation in Baku was going out of control, shooting was heard at nights. Azerbaijan was on the verge of civil war'. [24] Heydar Aliyev expressed a similar idea, although he placed the responsibility on the opposition: 'In pursuing their own ends, the opposition leaders are prepared to sacrifice the national interests of Azerbaijan. In this lies the cause of our setbacks in the past. This explains why Armenia could occupy part of our territory. Instead of banding together and defending their land, they squabbled with one another'. [25]

At the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Armenian side had the political initiative and strategic advantage. Despite having a smaller army, it could challenge Azerbaijan on the battlefield because of its dynamic policies, made possible by relative institutional advantages. [26] Armenia already had its proper armed forces, the local self-defence units in Karabakh. It also had favourable diplomatic relations with Russia, the West and Iran, albeit while having no relations with its western neighbour, Turkey. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, while having a larger army and more weaponry and ammunition, had internal tensions between the Soviet-era elite and nationalist popular forces, as well as poorer relations with Russia, Iran and the West, the latter because of Azerbaijan's undemocratic system of government. It had good relations only with Turkey. Azerbaijan also lacked the command and control of its own military forces, which still needed to be reformed and, at the time, relied largely on Soviet-era interior ministry paramilitary formations. Various studies have underlined that, in the Soviet army, Armenians occupied important positions within the officers' corps, while Azerbaijanis were largely delegated to non-combat related functions. That enabled Armenia to build rapidly a professional army out of former Soviet officers, while Azerbaijan did not have this capability. [27]

In the Second Karabakh War, we see the opposite situation: a cohesive leadership in Azerbaijan

under the authoritarian rule of Ilham Aliyev, contrasted with a severe power struggle in Armenia following the 'Velvet Revolution' two years earlier. In the period between the two wars, Azerbaijan developed a centralized, authoritarian system, where the power vertical was concentrated within the Aliyev family. In 2003, Ilham Aliyev succeeded his ailing father, becoming the new leader of Azerbaijan. In 2017, Mehriban Aliyeva, his wife, was nominated first vice president. [28] Although his source of legitimacy was limited to that of dynastic rule, opposition attempts to overthrow him in a 'colour revolution'-type mobilization failed. The dominant position of hydrocarbon revenues consolidated both authoritarian rule and the consensus of Azerbaijani elites. [29] A wave of repression against opposition activists, independent religious movements, human rights activists, journalists and independent academics further consolidated the Aliyev family's rule. [30] In July 2020, weeks before Azerbaijan went on the offensive, he fired his foreign minister and longtime Karabakh negotiator, Elmar Mammadyarov, replacing him with the unexperienced Jeyhun Bayramov.

While the power structure was consolidating in Baku, Armenia went through a severe internal power struggle starting in 2018. The revolution, which had taken place under the slogans of democratization and anticorruption, had triggered a harsh struggle between the new administration, led by Nikol Pashinyan, and the two former presidents of the country, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan. The struggle concerned not only the economic sector, but also the state bureaucracy, including the armed forces and diplomatic corps. Two years after the revolution, war erupted at a time when Armenia was going through administrative restructuring, massive changes of top cadres and a political struggle between the new and old political elites. Those changes created uncertainties within Armenia's state institutions, reducing the country's political, military, and diplomatic capabilities.

Caspian oil, shifting geopolitics, and the military balance

During the 26 years separating the two Karabakh wars, the military balance evidently shifted in favour of Azerbaijan, but it did not tilt totally to give Azerbaijan military dominance. Azerbaijan's leadership was the revisionist side, meaning the party that aimed to change the status quo that emerged from the 1994 ceasefire ending the first war. With petrodollars flowing on a large scale into the country's state treasury, Azerbaijan made important investments in modernizing its army. Yet the authoritarian nature of the regime, and its total dependence on petrodollars, also created vulnerabilities.

Azerbaijan's oil boom coincided with Ilham Aliyev succeeding his father as the leader of Azerbaijan. By acceding to power through succession, he had only limited political capital and legitimacy. His early years in power coincided with the construction of a major oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, enabling Azerbaijan to export large quantities of oil. The State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan, founded in 1999, increased its reserves from 0.3 billion USD in its first year to 13 billion in 2008 and 30 billion in 2014. [31] The military budget of Azerbaijan also increased twentyfold, from 213 million USD in 2003 to 1155 million in 2009 and to 2330 million in 2015. [32] By comparison, Armenia's military budget increased from 168 million USD in 2003 to 380 million USD in 2009 and to 461 million USD in 2015. [33] Moreover, Azerbaijan's 'caviar diplomacy' efforts and outright corruption bought it foreign support. [34] Azerbaijani rhetoric radicalized, becoming maximalist and increasingly threatening, making a negotiated solution increasingly unlikely.

The 2008 Georgia-Russia war reshuffled the geopolitical cards in the South Caucasus. For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's military was no longer in retreat, but rather on the geopolitical offensive. The two sides of the Karabakh conflict drew very different conclusions from the war. Armenia realized how its communication lines, mostly passing through Georgia as a result of the economic blockade imposed on the country by Azerbaijan and Turkey, were vulnerable.

The 'football diplomacy' attempts to normalize Armenia-Turkey relations that followed the 2008 war can be seen in this context. Regional geopolitical shifts made decision makers in Ankara revise their eastern policy as well and attempt to engage with Armenia. While those intense diplomatic activities led to the signing of the Zurich Protocols, they eventually turned out to be dead letters: Under heavy pressure from Azerbaijan, Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan refused to allow his parliament to ratify the protocols. [35] The failure of Armenian-Turkish normalization had a negative effect on conflict resolution in Karabakh. It hardened positions in Ankara, Baku, and Yerevan alike. Meanwhile, Turkey and Azerbaijan intensified their military cooperation. Thousands of Azerbaijani soldiers and officers were trained at Turkish military academies, increasing the military readiness of Azerbaijan's armed forces. After the Zurich Protocols were signed and then abandoned, the window of opportunity for diplomatic solutions became much narrower, and much effort was invested in the possibility of a second war in Karabakh.

Azerbaijan drew very different conclusions from the events of 2008: namely, it needed to enhance its military capabilities. That year, it organized its first military parade since 1992. At a 2011 military parade, Aliyev boasted, saying:

Our military expenditure is growing from year to year. Whereas in 2003 our military budget was \$160 million, in 2010 it reached \$2,150 billion and this year a further \$3,300 billion. The task I set a few years ago - to raise Azerbaijan's military expenditure to the level of Armenia's total expenditure - has been met. Today, the money Azerbaijan is spending on the military exceeds the entire budget of Armenia by 50%. We live in a time of war. [36]

Azerbaijan also attempted to re-balance its foreign policy, reacting to the post-2008 regional reality by distancing itself from the West and instead building closer military ties with Russia. In 2013, the two sides signed an agreement for Russia to transfer military equipment worth 4 billion USD to Azerbaijan. [37]

Yet, if one looks at the military balance, Azerbaijan had neither military dominance nor confidence that its armed forces could achieve an outright victory without putting regime stability at risk. Clashes became more deadly along the Karabakh line of contact and on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. Major clashes took place in 2010 and 2014. [38] The most dramatic escalation came in April 2016's 'four-day war', which saw Azerbaijan launch a major attack across all of Karabakh's line of contact, resulting in between 200 and 350 killed on both sides. [39] Azerbaijan's military onslaught had only limited success: Azerbaijan captured two hills of local military significance, and the operation 'was not as strategic as Azerbaijan claimed'. [40]

The other example that questions Azerbaijan's military dominance in 2020 is the outbreak of clashes in July of that year on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. Those clashes were limited in nature, and while Azerbaijan used advanced Israeli drones, it still lost more troops than the Armenian side did (12 Azerbaijani soldiers against 5 Armenian soldiers), including Polad Hashimov, a major general. His funeral triggered anger among the Azerbaijani public, and spontaneous demonstrations took place in several cities, including the capital. In Baku, some 30,000 demonstrators gathered in the city centre, shouting slogans like 'Karabakh is Azerbaijan' and calling for war. Some demonstrators entered parliament, smashing furniture inside, until the building was cleared by police forces. Azerbaijani civil society reawakened not to demand democracy, but war. This event was the most serious challenge to the rule of Aliyev, whose legitimacy was under serious stress, already weakened by a decline in oil revenues and the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Armenian side was now overconfident, with Pashinyan declaring: 'The victorious battles of July proved that our assessment of the military-political situation in the region and the balance of power are sober and accurate'. [41]

Regime types and international relations

Armenia was a democratizing state during the First Karabakh War, which was a source of strategic advantage. In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, dominant Western political value-systems of the time, including democratization and a market-based economy, were seen as positive. The Armenian leadership of Levon Ter-Petrosyan was viewed as democratic and reformist, while Azerbaijan under Ayaz Mutallibov and Heydar Aliyev was regarded as a relic of Soviet past. This brought much international support to Armenia from Western countries. Moreover, the new administration in Russia under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, surrounded by Russian democrats, shifted earlier Soviet policies, and led Moscow to support Yerevan against Baku.

Consequently, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia enjoyed broad foreign support, while Azerbaijan was largely isolated from the international community. In its early days of independence, Armenia cultivated positive diplomatic relations simultaneously with Russia, Iran, and the West. Active Armenian diplomacy managed to establish working conditions with the Yeltsin administration, including his defence minister, Pavel Grachev. On the other hand, Russian democrats not only looked down on the Soviet-era nomenklatura struggling to maintain power in Baku, but also disliked the leader of the Azerbaijani Popular Front for his pan-Turkic ideology. The West, too, supported Armenia and Armenians' struggle for selfdetermination in Karabakh, seeing them as a pro-democratic force oppressed by the Soviet system and the ethnic nationalism of Azerbaijan's rulers. In 1992, the U.S. administration introduced Section 907 of Freedom Support Act, which restricted most support to the Azerbaijani government for imposing an economic blockade on Armenia. [42] Finally, Armenia established normal working relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was angered by Azerbaijani nationalism and irredentism towards predominantly Azerbaijani-inhabited provinces in northwest Iran. It was only Ankara that refused to establish normal diplomatic relations with Yerevan, or even to open the closed Turkey-Armenia border, while supporting Baku politically, diplomatically, and militarily. Overall, during those years, Armenia had broad international support, while Azerbaijan was largely isolated, except for its strong support from Ankara. [43]

Democracy was an advantage for Armenia in the early 1990s, but not in 2018, when the 'Velvet Revolution' promised democratization and the fight against corruption. At that time, the events in Armenia were not part of a broader movement, but rather an exception. Neighbouring Azerbaijan's and Turkey's rulers had already been in power for 15 years; to the south was the Islamic Republic of Iran, putting down popular protests; and Russia's Vladimir Putin had been in power for nearly 20 years. The West was not in a very different situation, with the United States coming under the influence of Donald Trump's populism, and Brexit hitting the United Kingdom hard. Neither the European Union nor the United States showed any particular desire to help Armenia move out of its strategic dilemma, that is, being forced to 'submit to Russian patronage and the peril of surrendering to Turkish mercy'. [44] Even neighbouring Georgia, where an earlier revolution in 2003 promised democratization, was in a period of political stagnation. In this broader authoritarian context, it was democratizing Armenia that was isolated in 2020, not despotic Azerbaijan.

Foreign policy and strategic advantage

If one looks at the military balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the aftermath of the July 2020 clashes, one might conclude that, on the tactical level, Armenian forces were in a better position, while on the political level, the Azerbaijani president was in a delicate situation: After years of investing in the military and promising victory, his army had achieved a stalemate at best.

Yet, just a few months later, Azerbaijan achieved a crushing military victory. The explanation does not lie in the military balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan per se, but rather in Azerbaijan's

capacity to create strategic advantages through alliances and shifting the balance of forces in its favour. In the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan succeeded by securing the participation of the Turkish military and Syrian mercenaries, plus a constant supply of Israeli weaponry, while keeping Iran out and Russia waiting for 44 days. On the other hand, Russia, despite being Armenia's principal strategic partner, preferred to take a balanced position during the fighting, even while NATO member Turkey was directly participating in military operations in Russia's 'Near Abroad'. It was this configuration of forces that tilted the strategic advantage to the Azerbaijani side's favour in 2020.

The balance of forces in the Second Karabakh War was the result of strategic assumptions and long-term choices by both sides, as well as political contingencies of a more circumstantial nature. The long-term strategic imbalance was the result of Armenian overconfidence due to its victory in the First Karabakh War and its strategic choice to try to preserve the status quo. As Azerbaijan was rearming its forces, and its oil resources were helping to break the country's earlier diplomatic isolation, Armenia increasingly relied on Russia to preserve the regional military balance. By joining the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 1992, and by allowing the stationing of Russian troops on its soil, Armenia not only could avoid Turkish military threats, but also 'borrowed power' to balance Azerbaijan's growing military capabilities. [45] Yet, the CSTO was a structure that was untested and remained an ambivalent institution. CSTO member Belarus, for example, exported heavy weaponry to non-CSTO Azerbaijan, while Russia's 'pivotal deterrence' policy was shrouded in ambiguity, making it unclear how the Kremlin would react to a new war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. [46]

Armenia's strategic vulnerability was already evident in the aftermath of the 2016 clashes. That fighting revealed the lack of engagement by actors other than Russia in the South Caucasus. Moreover, Moscow did not interfere in any direct manner, but instead adopted a mediating position, despite its formal military alliance with Armenia. [47] Russia also made clear its wish to deploy peacekeepers to the Karabakh conflict area as part of a comprehensive plan for conflict resolution. Known as the 'Lavrov Plan', it underlined that the price of further military escalation would be the introduction of a 'third force' to the conflict zone. After 2016 it was evident in Yerevan and Baku that any new military escalation would come with a price tag: a direct Russian military presence in the Karabakh conflict zone. While Armenia remained under Russia's military umbrella after achieving independence, Azerbaijan had forced the last Russian troops to leave its territories by 2012. [48] The return of Russian troops could have been avoided if the two sides were ready to engage in sincere negotiations to limit the resolution of the Karabakh conflict to their bilateral relations.

While Armenia developed strategic vulnerabilities with its overreliance on Russia, Azerbaijan succeeded in developing close military collaboration with Turkey, at the same time stressing that this arrangement would not lead to hostilities with its northern neighbour. While Aliyev was not ready to make concessions to Armenia, it was ready to make concessions to Russia: Baku promoted cooperation with Moscow not only with arms purchases [49] and by agreeing to a Russian military base in Karabakh, but also by agreeing to join the Russia-sponsored Eurasian Economic Space (EES), which 'would make both countries more dependent on Russia than is the case today'. [50]

On the question of the Karabakh conflict, the new Armenian administration that came to power as the result of the popular revolution of 2018 sent contradictory messages to Baku. It started with positive messages in January 2019, when the two foreign ministers, Zohrab Mnatsakanyan of Armenia and Elmar Mammadyarov of Azerbaijan, met in Paris within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group and agreed to 'concrete measures to prepare the populations for peace'. [51] This made sense from the perspective of both Armenian and Azerbaijani policymakers. The new leadership in Yerevan was starting a major programme of internal reforms, including the fight against corruption, democratization, and the redistribution of wealth. It therefore needed to free

resources away from the conflict with Azerbaijan. Diplomacy was the best instrument to keep relations with Azerbaijan stable during the period of internal reforms. Azerbaijan also needed to ease tension with its neighbour. Already 15 years in power, the administration of Ilham Aliyev was exhausted by top-down rule, corruption scandals [52] and farcical elections [53] that sapped its already limited legitimacy. The economic basis of Azerbaijan's stability was shaken by a twin drop in oil exports and hydrocarbon prices. For Azerbaijani public opinion, the 2018 events in Armenia were astounding: Their rival Armenians had succeeded in getting rid of their own corrupt, authoritarian system, while they, the Azerbaijani public, were stuck with dynastic rule. A democratizing Armenia was a serious challenge to Aliyev's legitimacy.

Yet, instead of preserving stability on the Karabakh issue, or capitalizing on his democratic credentials, Pashinyan made a rapid transition from talking about peace into demanding the participation of Karabakh in the negotiation process. This could have sounded like a new democratic discourse, but it was always going to receive a negative answer from Baku, eventually questioning the legitimacy of the negotiation process entirely. In August 2019, the Armenian Prime Minister put negotiations on ice by announcing in a speech in Stepanakert that 'Artsakh is Armenia, and that's it'. [54] Here, the only explanation for this hard-line turn could be internal politics: The former ruling elite, now out of power, initiated a massive campaign to discredit Pashinyan by accusing him of being ready 'to surrender lands'. This nationalistic wave reached a new level in the summer of 2020, when Armenian authorities commemorated the centenary of Sèvres Treaty with much pomp. [55] Raising the question of Sèvres, a traumatic reference for the Turkish political class, could only further antagonise Ankara in an already tense context. 'Adopting the Treaty of Sevres as an instrument of foreign policy Armenia placed the demand of territories from Turkey on its agenda' wrote Gerard Libaridian, in early September 2020, which, he said, was 'equivalent to a declaration of at least diplomatic war against Turkey'. [56]

Direct Turkish participation, late Russian intervention

As tensions were rising on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border in the summer of 2020, the Armenia-Russia alliance was experiencing serious tensions. While the new leadership in Yerevan did its best to assure Moscow that the events of 2018 would not lead to any geopolitical changes, there still were at least new elements of ambiguity added to Armenia-Russia relations. [57] In July 2020, two weeklong Azerbaijani-Turkish military exercises took place at different locations in Azerbaijan, during which large quantities of Turkish military personnel and equipment, including F-16 jets, Bayraktar TB2 attack drones and TRG-300 Kaplan missile systems, were transferred to Azerbaijan. [58] The equipment brought for the military drills did not depart afterwards and were used in the 2020 war in Karabakh. Turkey had also transferred Syrian mercenaries to the South Caucasus. [59]

War in Karabakh erupted once again in the morning of 27 September 2020, with a massive Azerbaijani attack along all the line of contact. Aliyev, while having an army with superior numbers, better equipment, and more advanced technology, still did not initiate this war alone: Alongside Azerbaijani forces were about 600 Turkish officers, who, according to Russian sources, manned the general staff of the military operations. [60] Turkish military participation ensured NATO-style systemic warfare by combining real-time imagery fed by satellites, F-16s and drones with precision firepower from attack drones and artillery systems. It was this coordination that destroyed Armenian air defences, as well as large numbers of tanks, military trucks, and artillery. Moreover, Turkey deployed several thousand Syrian mercenaries, who were largely used as cannon fodder, to serve as the first wave of attackers in the initial offensive. Azerbaijan's leadership, with fragile internal legitimacy, did not risk sustaining large number of casualties, which could have cost the regime stability. This explains the deployment of the mercenaries and the large number of casualties they suffered: According to one report, out of 2,580 mercenaries deployed, some 541 died fighting in the

war. [61]

Those combined factors shifted the balance of forces in favour of Azerbaijan. The direct participation of the Turkish military, with its advanced Western technology and military planning strategies, devastated the older generation of Armenian air defence and radar systems, and later took a heavy toll on Armenian armour and artillery. While Armenian forces succeeded in pushing back the attacking forces in the first two weeks, they failed to reform their defence lines once they were breached in the south near Jebrayil. [62] The Armenian military, just like its strategic thinking and diplomacy, was not ready to fight the kind of war machine that faced them in 2020. After 44 days of fighting, and as the Karabakh capital of Stepanakert was in danger of being encircled, a Russian-mediated truce was declared on 9 November 2020. The ceasefire statement included the deployment of Russian military units into the former NKAO, the withdrawal of Armenian troops, and an end to wide-scale hostilities.

At the start of Azerbaijan's attack, Armenian decision makers did not anticipate the scale of the attack and probably imagined a war of a more limited scale. Moreover, a few days before the start of the war, leading Armenian politicians did not think that Turkey would play a direct role in any possible new confrontation. [63] Only after three ceasefire agreements had failed to materialize, and Azerbaijani troops had advanced rapidly to the outskirts of Stepanakert, did they realize that this was the all-out war that Azerbaijani politicians had been threatening for years. Armenian forces used their most powerful short-range ballistic missile system, Iskander, only on the last day of the fighting, as the strategically located city of Shusha/Shushi had already fallen to Azerbaijan. The static Armenian military strategy of defending behind heavily fortified defence lines, called the 'Baghramyan line', proved to be insufficient against massive onslaughts. Azerbaijani forces started the war by attacking in several directions all along the line of contact, as if looking for weaknesses within Armenian defences. While Armenian positions in the mountainous north held fast, Azerbaijani attacks revealed weaknesses in the flatlands of the southeast. Once those defences were broken near Jebrayil, Armenian troops failed to reorganize a secondary defence line or to break the long Azerbaijani line advancing to Shusha/Shushi by mobilising light mobile forces.

The outcome of the war was a clear defeat for the Armenian military. Not only did the Armenian side suffer huge losses of men and equipment, but under the ceasefire, it was also forced to return to Azerbaijan the remaining Azerbaijani territories outside the former NKAO formerly under Armenian control. Since the end of the first war in 1994, those territories that had served as a 'security belt' for Armenians, meaning that in any potential future conflict, Armenian towns and villages both in Nagorno-Karabakh and in Armenia proper are now vulnerable to Azerbaijani artillery fire. The Armenian side also lost territories within the former NKAO, namely the district of Hadrut and the strategic town of Shusha/Shushi, areas that were not even considered for handover to Azerbaijan during the long years of diplomatic negotiations between the two wars. The long-term bet on postponing conflict resolution did not serve Armenian interests. Now it is no longer Yerevan that is the security guarantor of Karabakh Armenians, but Moscow. Moreover, Armenia is now even more indebted to Russia regarding its security concerns: Russia protects Armenia not only vis-à-vis Turkey, but also from Azerbaijani threats. Finally, the margin of manoeuvring available to Armenian diplomats in addressing their concerns with antagonistic states has shrunk further.

Azerbaijan in general, and Aliyev in particular, were the clear winners of the war. Not only did Azerbaijan manage to gain back territories lost in 1993-1994, but also, for the first time since coming to power 17 years ago, Aliyev gained his own legitimacy - not just the authority inherited from his family dynasty. [64] In the post-war period, Aliyev had the privilege of choosing a new policy direction, either to seek reconciliation with Azerbaijan's western neighbour or to follow the logic of confrontation. Aliyev chose to follow a maximalist policy, arguing 'there is no territorial unit called Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. The conflict has been resolved'. [65] Aliyev also rejected the

OSCE Minsk Group's mandate to continue serving as a mediator between the two parties at conflict. Azerbaijan's post-war hard-line positions have been contradicted by two of the three Minsk Group co-chairs, France, and the United States, as they all see a political resolution to the conflict as still being necessary. Moreover, Azerbaijan finds itself simultaneously under the military influence of Turkey and Russia. This twin influence is being managed at the moment, with Russia having the upper hand over Turkey. But what could happen to the stability of Aliyev's regime if Russian-Turkish relations deteriorate, like in late 2015, when a Turkish fighter jet shot down a Russian attack plane?

Conclusion

Armenia won the First Karabakh War not because of its military superiority, but rather despite its military inferiority. The conflict was the result of state collapse in the Soviet Union. During the First Karabakh War, Armenia enjoyed the strategic advantage - unified leadership and large external support - while Azerbaijan suffered from internal divisions and power struggles, as well as international isolation. In this context, the larger Azerbaijani army did not help the country secure a victory. The role of elite struggles is key to understanding military developments in the 1990s: Whenever Azerbaijan had a new leader capable of unifying public opinion and the disparate armed groups in the country, it managed to launch major offensives with deadly results. This was the case when Abulfaz Elchibey came to power and launched a major offensive in the summer of 1992 that succeeded in taking control of about 40% of Nagorno-Karabakh. Likewise, Armenian successes in the summer of 1993 were conditioned by the power struggle in Baku. When Heydar Aliyev took control of Azerbaijan in 1993, he once again launched massive attacks starting in November 1993, although with limited territorial gains. The ceasefire agreement of May 1994 reflected the exhaustion of the parties to the conflict, as well as the realization that a balance of forces had taken shape, making a military solution to the conflict even more difficult and costly.

The strategic considerations of the conflict parties during the long 26 years separating the two wars were diametrically different. Azerbaijan, dissatisfied by its earlier losses, aimed to change the status quo by pressuring Armenia economically (blockading the country), diplomatically (opposing normalization with Turkey) and militarily (rearming on a mass scale thanks to oil revenues). Ilham Aliyev, who succeeded his father in 2003, repeatedly said that Azerbaijan would regain its lost territories, if not through diplomacy, then through a new war. Yet, launching a new war was risky: Since Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union, two presidents had lost their positions after suffering setbacks on the Karabakh fronts. Despite bellicose rhetoric and increasingly common clashes on the frontlines, the Azerbaijani leader nevertheless ordered a massive attack only 17 years after coming to power. Armenia, on the other hand, adopted a static strategy aimed at preserving the status quo, which was in its favour. Armenia had succeeded in gaining control over much of Karabakh during the 1990s, plus occupying large parts of Azerbaijan proper. The Armenian victory in the First Karabakh War and the country's strategic choice to preserve the status quo led the Armenian side develop a conservative military culture and static strategic thinking. [66] While Yerevan initially sought to exchange Azerbaijani territories in return for Baku's recognition of the Karabakh Armenians' right to self-determination, the hardening of positions under Ilham Aliyev made such a trade-off increasingly unlikely. Instead, the Armenian-controlled territories outside the former NKAO were now considered a security zone, a buffer to protect Karabakh from possible Azerbaijani attacks. Yet, the strategic choice of preserving the status quo created passivity within Armenian political and military circles. Instead of seeking solutions, Armenian diplomacy tried to keep the status quo while the balance of forces was shifting. Instead of developing mobile and dynamic military tactics, the Armenian military kept reinforcing static defence lines. Azerbaijan's use of modern technologies and mobile elite forces corresponded to its strategic aim of changing the longheld status quo. Azerbaijan was actively attempting to find a military solution to the Karabakh conflict, pushing for a dynamic policy in both strategic thinking and in military tactics, as seen

during the 2020 war. Even though Azerbaijan's new military tactics and capabilities were revealed during the 2016 clashes, Armenian military planners failed to draw the necessary conclusions and take the needed countermeasures. [67]

Armenia found itself in a strategic dilemma: While relying on Russia for its security, a dangerous rupture had developed between Yerevan and Moscow on how to resolve the Karabakh conflict. Since 2015, Russia insisted that it wanted Armenia to return the territories outside the former NKAO, that Russian troops would be deployed to the conflict zone and that the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh would be postponed. Azerbaijan agreed to those terms, but Armenia did not. Armenia could not rely on Russian military support while rejecting Russian plans for resolving the conflict. It had to either shift its political position on the Karabakh issue to be closer to Moscow's or reduce its reliance on Russian military support by finding alternative security solutions. It did neither. It was this strategic chasm that enabled Azerbaijani troops to breach Armenian defences in 2020.

On 27 September 2020, the day Azerbaijan launched its military attack, it enjoyed direct Turkish military participation in the operations, assistance from Syrian mercenaries and regular Turkish and Israeli arms shipments. Armenia, on the other hand, found itself isolated, with its Western partners largely silent, while its security guarantor, Russia, chose to wait for 44 long days to intervene. It was this constellation of factors that gave Azerbaijan the strategic advantage, enabling it to concentrate massive forces and penetrate Armenian defences. What proved untenable in the long term was Armenia's attempts to preserve the status quo - all this while having a conflict with Azerbaijan and tense relations with Turkey, both with much vaster resources, and heavily relying on Russia for preserving the regional strategic balance.

Vicken Cheterian is a university lecturer, practitioner, and author, specialized in violent conflicts. He has done field work in most of post-Soviet and Middle East and North African countries. His academic research has included civil wars, transition, nationalism, sectarianism, jihadism, genocide. He has published in leading academic journals including *Survival*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, *Central Asian Survey*, *Journal of North African Studies*, *Relations Internationales*, *Nationalities Papers*, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, among others. He is a lecturer in history and international relations at the University of Geneva, and at Webster University Geneva. He is the author of *War and Peace in the Caucasus, Russia's Troubled Frontier*, published by Hurst and Columbia University Press, and his latest book is *Open Wounds, Armenians, Turks and a Century of Genocide*, published by Hurst and Oxford University Press. As a practitioner, he was involved in peacebuilding projects in the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. He is especially interested in the potential of development projects in peacebuilding. He has also advised a number of governmental agencies and international organizations, including the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, UNEP, UNDP, the World Bank, ICC, OSCE, European Commission's ECHO, etc. Moreover, he served as policy and media advisor on two UN Commissions of Inquiry. He has also published in mainstream media including in *Le Monde diplomatique*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Al-Hayat*, *Agos*, etc. His current research involves the evolution of sectarianism in the modern Middle East.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

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