

The interests and role of Iran and Russia in the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Aftermaths of Karabakh war of 2020.

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Since 1994 Teheran has been showing very balanced approach towards the conflict, however the war which erupted in 2020 has brought its on corrections in its vision. Aside from the corrections which will be detailed below it's necessary to understand the unique role & position of Iran in the resolution of the conflict:

Iran, until recently, remained the only country which had a border with conflicting parties: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh. The status quo shattered by the outbreak of the war brought security issues to Iran. The presence of mercenary-terrorists[1],[2]deployed by Turkey[3],[4] poses a direct threat to Iran through the creation of instability pockets in its north-eastern borders. As a result of Ankara's unconditional support for Azerbaijan[5] Turkish-Azeri Tandem will develop unpredictable scenarios against Iran's interests in the region. It's very relevant to understand the role of huge Azerbaijani community in Iran (approx. 20 million) and the Shia religion that band together peoples of Iran and Azerbaijan in some kind of solidarity and brotherhood. That's one of the main reasons why Teheran throughout years supported territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, however keeping balanced relations both with Armenia and Azerbaijan. It's important to mention that Iran never tolerated any possible presence of trans-regional powers (e.g. USA, NATO) in the region. "Iran believes that the Karabakh crisis should also be resolved with the political will of Armenia and Azerbaijan"[6]. It is also among the rear countries, which supported specifically Russian mediatory actions and always supported regional powers for greater engagement in the settlement of the conflict. In this context Russia stays as a regional player. Nonetheless, the support of regional powers (in this case - Russia) and vivid attempts to prevent the diffusion of the further influence of Ankara brings on all the sensitivity and complexity of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Throughout years Iran has developed two-dimensional approach towards Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Internal dimension - "the importance of this question among the people of Northwestern Iran who call themselves Azerbaijani and feel an affinity with the Republic of Azerbaijan" and external dimension - "the importance of security and good neighborliness with northern borders"[7]. Teheran still is very careful and attentive about Azeri-Israel military cooperation.

Iran understands the necessity to have proactive South Caucasus policy[8]. Before the war "It has been elevating relations with Armenia without touching the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict while Azerbaijan had active contacts with the Western and Arab partners. It concerned also Israel-Azerbaijani contacts which according to Teheran could undermine its bilateral relations with Baku"[9]. Besides, the growing role and control of Turkey over Azerbaijan (through the victory in the war) pushes Teheran to have thoroughly calculated approach to the conflict. For the time being it seems that Iran will fully support Russian peacekeepers, excluding any potential military presence of Turkey in South Caucasus. In some way the reinforcement of Moscow in the region means that the coincidence of interests in one case might unite Iran

and Russia in greater diplomatic and political struggle against USA (generally West) in other regions.

It's important to understand that in 90's regardless of Iranian efforts to stop first Karabakh war- it lost the credibility specifically in the eyes of Azerbaijani people[10]. Currently Azerbaijan having reached success in the war thanks to Turkey, will be more loyal to her, which directly will threaten Iranian interests in the region. The presence of Armenian troops in Iran's northwestern borders played in the hands of Iran because the buffer zone between Azerbaijani community and the Republic of Azerbaijan was present[11].

Nowadays unstable situation in the northwestern part threatens national security of Teheran and makes her rethink of its relations with Baku not only because of the mercenary -terrorists and unconditional support of Turkey but also because of the direct links of Baku with Iranian region of East Azerbaijan.

The attractiveness of Russian position in the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict consists of good relations both with Armenia and Azerbaijan and step by step approach to the regulation alongside the consensus within the Minsk group[12]. The outcome of the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020 showed the dominant role of Russia both during peace and wartimes. Unlike Iran, Russia has shown the effectiveness of its mediator role at least trice: during the First Karabakh war, April escalation of 2016 and Second Karabakh war of 2020. Since 1994 "Russia has been willing to serve as a mediator and broker rather than supporter of one of the sides"[13].

The huge communities both of Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Russia, deep military and economic cooperation with Yerevan and Baku made the case for Russia to stay neutral. In addition, the presence of Russian peacekeepers proves the dominant role of Moscow in the conflict regulation while the mediatory actions of France and USA remain of secondary importance. It's important to understand the purposes and yearnings of Turkey which is the main opponent of Russia in the region. Ankara has entered the region after a long-period of absence and despite the membership in the joint Russian-Turkey monitoring mission in Karabakh couldn't reach the final goal of the war- **dominance in the region**. Moscow remained the main obstacle for her.

It is noteworthy to emphasize that nothing about Minsk group of OSCE is mentioned in Russian-led trilateral agreement of 10th November[14]. The total control of Russia over post-war period in Artsakh seems to show the irrelevance not only of the Minsk group format per se but also USA and France separately in the resolution of the conflict. Despite the existing competitiveness (between Turkey and Russia - *author's note*) there is the preference for bilateral coordination (in Karabakh- *author's note*) without Western states[15].

In order to understand why Russia has a dominant role in the conflict generally and post-war peace process regulations specifically we should look at the following facts:

- 1) Karabakh Armenians existence is fully secured by Russian peacekeeping contingent.
- 2) Armenian borders both with Turkey and Azerbaijan are policed by Russian 102th military base and FSB respectively.
- 3) The safe trip via Lachin corridor to Karabakh is provided by Russian peacekeepers. The hostage exchanges have been organized by Moscow, which has become first among many future possible dialogues between Yerevan and Baku on certain issues. The large postwar restoration of civil infrastructure in Artsakh alongside humanitarian loads are organized and provided by Russian government.

For Azerbaijan:

- 1) No chance to violate status-quo as it did by initiating the war. Besides, the growing authority in the conflict resolution Moscow has all mechanisms to prevent any kind of aggression or violation of current peace processes.

2) The final status issue of Artsakh, despite Azerbaijani President I. Aliyev's permanent statements[16],[17] isn't resolved. That leaves room for maneuvering. The occupation of Hadrut region and city of Shushi by Azerbaijan gives Armenian party good ground to negotiate alongside Russia within Minsk group. If negotiated well Yerevan can demand the return of Hadrut and Shushi which have been occupied by Baku in result of the war.

3) The Nakhichevan corridor which will pass through the territory of Armenia will be controlled by Russian FSB.

By cooperating with two sides Russia seeks to provide firstly balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan and to neutralize the influence of the West[18].

"Russia has played its hand skillfully and reasserted its role in the region in a decisive manner. How would Russia perceive such an initiative from Turkey?"[19]. Uncertainties about future role of Turkey give food for thought. How acceptable will be for Russia the possible opening of the border between Turkey and Armenia? Will Russia tolerate future development of Turkish-Azeri tandem in South Caucasus? Many questions remain unanswered.

To sum up Iran and Moscow have their specific roles in the conflict:

1) Geographical proximity coupled with geopolitical interests increases the necessity in having stable region. The ex-status-quo totally played into their hands because of the stable relations with Armenia and Armenians of Artsakh. The same is not true for Azerbaijan due to the mercenaries and the return of Turkey to the region, which is considered by both of them (i.e. Iran and Russia) as a **geopolitical rival**.

2) The experience in Syrian Civil War accompanied by the mutual interests showed that: "Teheran and Moscow have also feared the spread of Sunni fundamentalism and support mutual goals regarding energy routes in the region. In 2016, Moscow obtained permission to use Iranian air-bases, as the Hamadan air-base, to launch airstrikes against rebel forces in Syria"[20]. The dialogue continued in Karabakh war of 2020 when both sides acted in unison.

3) Iran and Russia remain the only countries which have good relations both with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Their constructive & stabilizing role in the conflict alongside the balanced & equidistance approach[21] reaffirms the paramount role of both sides in peace-keeping processes.

4) Both of the parties see each other's approach to the conflict as mutually reinforcing. Iran considers the direct interference of Turkey as one of the main threats[22] because it will lead to the presence of great powers in the region (i.e. USA) and will discredit Iran's role as a regional authority. Iran sees the regulation of the conflict only within the internal players of the region[23]. This is unacceptable also for Russia due to the main contradictions which it has with USA not only in the South Caucasus but in other regions also.

5) The trilateral agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia cools off the Azerbaijani community both in Iran and Russia, which throughout decades have demanded full support for Azerbaijan.

6) Both Russia and Iran have been expressing their adherence to the territorial integrity of Baku without clarifying their position of the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh. Thus, room for maneuvering still remains.

7) Moscow and Teheran fully understand that the deblocking of communication, apart from practical difficulties of its implementation, between Yerevan and Baku will lead to the diminishment of their leverage on both parties. It remains uncertain what will happen after the possible regime change in Armenia will take place. Meanwhile Aliyev's regime, which is at its apogee, leaves predictability in actions in the positive way.

8) Iran and Russia seek to more intensive policy in the South Caucasus to deepen their relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan so their influence and leverages grow in numbers.

9) For the time being there are three blocks in postwar period: EU-USA, Armenia-Iran-Russia and Turkey-Azerbaijan.

Both parties (i.e. Iran and Russia) understand that key to dominance in the region is the control over Nagorno-Karabakh and mediation role in its resolution. For now, Russia holds that position, having full support of Iran. The outbreak of new war is less likely in mid-term; however, some serious geopolitical changes are to come. The main goals for both Russia and Iran are:

- 1) Preserving status-quo
- 2) Minimizing the role of West in the conflict solution
- 3) Keeping an eye on Turkey not to let her become strong and influential in the region.

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