FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 13.11.2020 | Felix Hett

The Nagarno-Karabakh war has ended. But the conflict continues

With the Nagarno-Karabakh war, Azerbaijan created facts by military means. But the larger conflict remains unresolved

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Azerbaijan has won the second war over Nagorno-Karabakh. ‘Almost all politicians told me that there was no military solution to the conflict," President Ilham Aliyev rejoiced on 10 November. ‘But we have proved that there is.’ This is precisely the problem for Europe’s security: After the bigger states, now the smaller ones no longer feel bound by principles of the CSCE Final Act such as renunciation of violence and peaceful conflict settlement. So far, the West has accepted it without complaining, and Baku is not threatened with sanctions.

Other states with unresolved territorial conflicts will have noticed that. As recently as 29 October, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas had said in the Bundestag: ‘A military solution to the long-running conflict will not be accepted by the international community. A better negotiating position cannot be achieved on the battlefield.’

The latter has now happened. Armenia has lost the war. The ceasefire agreement signed on 9 November is perceived as a surrender in the country. Baku has achieved by military means all that has not been achieved in the conference room since the end of the first war in 1994. Even more than that: by 1 December, the Armenian armed forces must clear all the areas around Nagorno-Karabakh that they have occupied as a buffer zone for over a quarter of a century.

Turkey and Russia cement their dominance

Of the former ‘Autonomous Region of Nagorno-Karabakh’, which broke away from the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991, only about two

thirds remain under Armenian control after Azerbaijani land gains. The 'Republic of Artsakh', as Armenians call it and which is not recognised internationally, is not granted a status under international law. The peace formula 'Status against Territories', which for years was on the negotiating table of the OSCE's 'Minsk Group', is therefore outdated. The ceasefire will be guarded by 1960 Russian soldiers for the next five years.

France and the US, which alongside Russia co-chairs the Minsk Group, clearly played no role in the crucial hours before the cease-fire. Conflict resolution in the multilateral framework of the OSCE has thus failed for the time being. In contrast, Moscow coordinated directly with Ankara. Turkey had massively supported its ally Azerbaijan – and not just rhetorically: Syrian mercenaries were sent to the Caucasus front by Turkish military personnel.

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The decisive factor in the war was above all drones of Turkish design, which inflicted massive losses on Armenian troops. In 2020, a picture suddenly emerged that reminded us of the time 100 years ago: Will Turkey and Russia decide the fate of the South Caucasus among themselves in the future? The US stayed far away, the EU seemed helpless, Iran was more of an onlooker.

By sending peacekeeping troops, Moscow is also underlining its claim to be the dominant power in the South Caucasus. There will be no way around Russia in the future either: Armenia is even more dependent on the Kremlin after the war than before and Azerbaijan agreed to the presence of Russian military forces on its territory. Baku had always tried to avoid the latter.

Armenia's external crisis turns into an internal one

In Armenia, the external crisis seamlessly turned into an internal crisis: Only minutes after the ceasefire was announced, an angry mob stormed parliament, the seat of government and the residence of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The President of the Parliament, Ararat Mirsojan, was beaten in the open street and had to be hospitalised.

All the opponents of the Pashinyan government, which came to power in 2018 as a result of a peaceful uprising against corruption and

mismanagement, are gearing up for their comeback. This calls into question the democratic progress achieved since 2018. Relations with the EU are severely clouded: Armenians see themselves as victims of a Turkish-Azerbaijani aggression to which Brussels only reacted with empty phrases.

The humanitarian catastrophe of the 44-day war could have been avoided. Once again, thousands of people have lost their homes. Hundreds of soldiers, often conscripts under 20, and dozens of civilians would not have had to die if the elites in Yerevan and Baku had been more willing to compromise – or if the international community had joined forces sometime between 1994 and 2020 to force the states that had been economically weak for a long time to compromise. The formula for that compromise was on the table – see above – at least since 2007. Under the name 'Madrid Principles', it had also been accepted in principle by both governments.

Back to the Madrid Principles

The Moscow ceasefire has not yet resolved the conflict. In fact, the previous starting position has been reversed: Azerbaijan, the loser of 1994, is now triumphant. Armenia may develop a comparable revanchism from its traumatic defeat, which led Baku to war in 2020. The EU, if it has any interest in the South Caucasus as a whole, must prevent this from happening. Violence must no longer be a political option in the South Caucasus.

The EU could develop a reconstruction programme here, restoring connectivity and the civilian infrastructure of the region destroyed in two wars.

The Minsk Group should come back into play. At least an attempt must now be made to turn the ceasefire into a peace treaty based on the Madrid principles. These principles not only focus on Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, but also on the renunciation of violence and the right of self-determination of the Karabakh Armenians. Russia's peacekeeping forces should be complemented by an OSCE civilian observation mission, which will independently monitor the respect of minority rights on both sides of the newly drawn line of conflict. The people remaining in the conflict area need humanitarian assistance, as do the refugees. Winter is approaching and the Covid-19 pandemic is raging in both countries.

Finally, the ceasefire also holds out the faint hope of a new course: Point

9 of the agreement provides for the restoration of all transport and economic links in the region. What now sounds illusory could, in the medium to long term, transform the region of conflict if Armenia's borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan are actually opened.

The EU could develop a reconstruction programme here, restoring connectivity and the civilian infrastructure of the region destroyed in two wars. This would also be a precondition for the return of hundreds of thousands of refugees that the Treaty also envisages. Last but not least, civil society peace initiatives remain important – 30 years of efforts to promote understanding and reconciliation have been crushed in 44 days of war.



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