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# The role of Turkey in the second Armenian-Azerbaijani armed conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh as a reflection of continuity and change in its foreign policy

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**Abstract:** The article examines Turkey's role in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh that erupted between Azerbaijan and Armenia in September 2020. It analyses how changes and continuity in Turkey's foreign policy have influenced the conflict's outcome, as well as the extent to which it has been exploited to fulfil Turkey's foreign policy objectives. Thus, unlike most research on Nagorno-Karabakh, this article focuses on the role of one external actor, and not on the conflict itself or possible hypotheses for its resolution. The article's special focus was influenced by the fact that Turkey's participation resulted in a change in the long-standing status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh, allowing the situation to turn dramatically in Baku's favour. Turkey, along with Russia, has emerged as one of the most important regional players in this conflict. This is the result of Turkey's emphasised foreign policy ambitions, which were influenced by changes in its international security environment as well as changes in the country's domestic policy. In any case, with its role in the second conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey has once again shown its determination to pursue its foreign, and especially regional, policy independently and in accordance with its national interests, despite being a member of NATO.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia.

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## Introductory remarks

The unresolved territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh is not only interstate but also interethnic, with clear international ramifications. Disputes over this land began in 1988, and after the fall of the Soviet Union, they took on an international dimension, culminating in the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1992. The conflict ended in 1994 when a truce was reached through Moscow's mediation (Jović-Lazić and Lađevac 2013, 62-63). The diplomatic effort led by the OSCE Minsk group failed to persuade the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia to accept admissible compromises. Despite extensive conversations and many alternatives having been provided to the opposing parties during this process, a mutually acceptable agreement could not be achieved (Jović-Lazić, Jelisavac-Trošić and Jazić 2011). Resolving this issue is hampered by ethnic nationalism in both countries, which have sharply opposed views on how to resolve it, as well as competition from other regional actors, particularly Russia and Turkey, both of which have geopolitical interests in the region. As a result, this conflict has long been regarded as one of the most complex and difficult to resolve in the post-Soviet region (Jović-Lazić 2021, 212).

In this dispute, Turkey plays the most complicated and contentious role. Due to Turkey's cultural and linguistic ties with Azerbaijan, which are reflected in the nationalist and pro-Turkish mood in domestic politics as well as historical animosity towards the Armenians, the country's policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has always been pro-Azerbaijani. However, during the first armed conflict, Ankara tried to remain restrained in official statements. Even after the end of hostilities, Turkey's entire foreign policy relied primarily on soft power instruments, using cultural proximity and regional economic engagement to change regional dynamics in its favour (Kutlay and Öniş 2021, 3055).

There were legitimate concerns when the hostilities started in September 2020 that they might be internationalised, especially taking into account Russia's military presence in Armenia and Turkey's support for Azerbaijan. Despite Russia's decision to remain neutral, Turkey, unlike in the previous conflict, chose to take an active role, clearly siding with Baku. Furthermore, Turkey's political, intelligence, logistical, and military support, particularly the delivery of advanced armaments and drones, is credited with Azerbaijan's decisive victory in Nagorno-Karabakh (Kınık and Çelik 2021, 169). Turkey also indirectly got involved in this conflict by recruiting Syrian mercenaries to fight on the side of Azerbaijan. As a result, Turkey has once again shown that its foreign policy has changed significantly and that it now relies on the instruments of hard power.

The outcome of this armed conflict altered the power balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan on a local level. Also, it influences the regional one, demonstrating that Russia is no longer the region's only unchallenged power. With that in mind, the purpose of this article is to assess Turkey's policy, activities, and interests in Nagorno-Karabakh as well as to examine the reasons that led Ankara to openly support Baku, unlike in the previous conflict, and the possible consequences of such a decision.

A quick recap of Turkey's policy during and after the first armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is provided before looking deeper into Turkey's role in the renewed armed conflict. Following that, it is examined how historical changes have influenced Turkey's domestic policy and, as a result, the continuity and changes in its foreign policy. In that context, the article briefly looks at the influence of the Ottoman heritage, the formation of the republic, the Cold War period, the 1990s, as well as the period from 2002, i.e., since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power. Special attention is paid to changes in Turkey's domestic and foreign policies over the last few decades, which have influenced its foreign policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, among other things.

Turkey's foreign policy is examined using the neoclassical realism theory. In his famous 1998 article, in which he coined the term "neoclassical realism," Gideon Rose wrote, "Foreign policy choices are made by... political leaders and elites, which is why their perception of relative power is important." (Rose 1998, 146). As a result, unlike neorealism, this theory of foreign policy is predicated on the notion that a country's foreign policy must take into account domestic variables, and since the analysis involves the concept of "perception," it contains constructivist elements. This can contribute to an understanding of Turkey's foreign policy and its position in the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Şahin 2020, 488).

Because the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is not a new one, it has been frequently discussed in scientific publications. However, most research focuses on the political situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is usually written about in the broader field of research on the dynamics of unresolved conflicts in the post-Soviet region, most often from the perspective of Russia and its foreign policy interests (Abushov 2019). There are also articles that discuss the factors that have prevented a possible resolution of this conflict for decades (de Waal 2010; Özkan 2008; Pokalova 2014; Babayev and Spanger 2020). Then there are articles that look at this conflict in the context of broader security challenges in the Caucasus (German 2012). Furthermore, because the subject of this research includes an analysis of the continuity and changes in Turkey's foreign policy, which subsequently resulted in changes in the long-term status quo of this conflict, books and articles on the country's foreign and domestic policies, in general, are important (Tanasković 2010;

Tanasković 2021; Cornell 2012; Aras 2014; Haugom 2019). There are also articles dealing with Turkey's relations with Eurasia as well as with the Caucasus (Aras and Fidan 2009; Aras and Akpınar 2011; Gajić 2013). These articles, however, only provide fragmentary or otherwise incomplete insights into the research issue because, despite the long-standing seriousness of the situation, only a limited number of scientific publications deal with Turkey's role in this unresolved conflict (Cornell 1998). Because Turkey has only recently emerged as a major player in this conflict, its role in the literature has received limited attention. In that context, the purpose of this article is to contribute to research on the specific framework of Turkish engagement in Nagorno-Karabakh.

### **The position of Turkey during and after the first armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh**

Analysing Turkey's positions in the first Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is key to identifying changes in its regional and foreign policies in general, as well as its role in the renewed conflict. At the same time, Turkish policy cannot be considered separately because this conflict is related not only to Armenian and Azerbaijani interests, but also to the interests and strategies of other geopolitical actors in the region. Because Nagorno-Karabakh was formerly part of the Soviet Union, Russia is unquestionably the most important of them.

Turkey's attitude towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is also influenced by the significant cultural and linguistic closeness Azerbaijan. This became noticeable in the second half of the 1980s, during the early Nagorno-Karabakh disputes. The Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF) was founded in 1988 in the Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan during Perestroika, which inspired national awakenings throughout the Soviet Union. Although Turkey tacitly supported the AFP, fearing retaliation from Moscow, official Ankara remained reticent, pointing out that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was solely an internal matter of the USSR (Souleimanov and Evoyan 2012, 16).

With the collapse of the USSR, Moscow's power was significantly reduced, which created the conditions for other regional actors to achieve their foreign policy goals and interests. In the case of Turkey, this interest is, above all, the result of a concern for its own security because it views the South Caucasus as a "buffer zone" towards Russia. Also, this region is important for Turkey because, through cooperation with Azerbaijan, it provides an opportunity for the realisation of energy projects and a new energy corridor for the transport of Caspian energy to the West.

Also, the South Caucasus connects Turkey with the countries of Central Asia. Finally, Turkey is interested in this region because of its cultural and linguistic closeness to the Turkophone peoples of the South Caucasus. As a result, as soon as the international order changed, Turkey tried to develop influence in the region, focusing its efforts on the building of comprehensive relations with the newly independent states. It did so with the full support of the West, which saw Turkey as a suitable counterweight to Russia's and Iran's regional influence (Cornell 2001).

With the disintegration of the USSR, this conflict grew into an armed conflict between two independent states, but Turkey, as part of NATO, sought to pursue a policy in line with that of its Western allies. Turkey has made important efforts to put this issue on the OSCE agenda by deploying shuttle diplomacy and portraying itself as an unbiased mediator. However, despite its best efforts, Turkey failed to keep an equal distance between the conflicting parties, which was greatly affected by the atmosphere in the country. With Armenia's military advance, pro-Azerbaijani sentiment, nationalism, and internal pressures from the general public grew in Turkey. Criticism of the government's attitude towards Armenia has become louder, claiming that it is contrary to Turkey's efforts to become a significant regional power. Large anti-Armenian protests erupted, and protesters demanded Turkish military intervention on the side of Azerbaijan. Unable to ignore public pressure, Ankara soon began, albeit passively, to support Baku. It also used its ties to draw Western governments' attention to the conflict and promote a pro-Azerbaijani stance. After estimating that the Armenian army was threatening the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan, Turkey claimed in May 1992 that the Kars Treaty (1921), which made it the guarantor state, required Turkey to protect it. A year later, the Russian Seventh Army was sent to the Armenian-Turkish border after Turkey had stationed troops on the Armenian border, which Russia saw as a direct military threat (Coyle 2021, 44).

However, as Cornell noted, Turkey's support did not mean a threat of military intervention or open assistance in supplying Azerbaijan with weapons or financial resources that would enable it to buy them. Turkey, like its Western allies, feared that its direct military involvement would provoke an armed conflict with Armenia, potentially escalating into a Turkish-Russian war. As Cornell further pointed out, Turkey's response to the first conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was shaped by its complicated relations with the West and Russia, as well as the Kemalist philosophy, which emphasised avoiding foreign conflicts. Furthermore, Turkey's ability to pursue a truly independent policy in the region was hampered by the fact that it had to consider the positions of NATO, the EU, and Russia in this conflict (Cornell 1998, 60-68). All the more so since, when Russia and Armenia signed a collective security pact in Tashkent in 1992, they promised mutual support in the event of a

third-party attack. As a result, Turkey's military engagement would have major ramifications for the country, impacting not just its relations with Russia but also with NATO, the US, and Europe (Coyle 2021, 44).

However, Turkey, a member of the OSCE Minsk Group, has expressed complete solidarity with one of the conflicting parties. Simultaneously, it took every opportunity to promote Azerbaijan's perspective on the conflict in international forums, closed the border, and refused to normalise relations with Armenia until that country returned the occupied territories to Azerbaijan (Cheterian 2017). Ankara, in collaboration with Baku, blocked Yerevan's participation in all major regional projects, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, both of which were launched in 2006. Azerbaijan saw any change in the network of regional ties as undermining its policy of pressure on Armenia, given that it had isolated Armenia and expected to be forced to compromise. As a result, it was deeply opposed to attempts to open the borders between Turkey and Armenia. In particular, in October 2009, Armenia and Turkey signed two agreements in Zurich that were expected to lead to the normalisation and opening of Turkey's and Armenia's borders. Due to the majority of the ruling class's attitudes, as well as Azerbaijan's reaction, which threatened to withdraw from energy cooperation projects with Turkey, these protocols were never ratified by the Turkish parliament. With Turkey wanting to use its geostrategic position to build more oil and gas projects in order to become a critical Eurasian energy corridor, Erdogan promptly warned that relations with Yerevan could not be mended unless its forces withdrew from Azerbaijan's occupied territories. This demonstrated that Azerbaijan can obstruct the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border and that Ankara cannot shape its policy in the region without an agreement with Azerbaijan. Turkey has continued to keep Armenia out of all major energy and transportation projects in the region, including the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline, which started operations in 2018, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line, which has been functional since 2017. Furthermore, because Turkey interpreted the countries' common tragic past in different ways, Armenia first postponed ratification of the protocols, and then the Armenian National Security Council officially annulled them (Görgülü 2012, 283-284; Babayev and Spanger 2020, 293). For years, a terrible historical legacy, decades of animosity, and divergent perspectives on crucial regional problems have impeded Turkish-Armenian relations (Janković and Lazić 2021, 355).

Following its defeat in the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan has devoted its entire foreign policy agenda to the issue, investing billions of dollars in military forces and improving its military capabilities (Souleimanov and Evoyan 2012, 8). Military cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan began with the signing of a

military cooperation agreement in 1992, but with the decision to sign the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support in 2010, it developed into a form of defence pact, offering mutual support in the event of a third-party attack. Thus, according to this agreement between Turkey and Azerbaijan, the parties, as neighbouring and fraternal states, will closely cooperate in ensuring and protecting mutual independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and border inviolability. This pact lays the legal groundwork for future military and military-technical cooperation. If one of the parties is subjected to an armed assault or military aggression by a third state or group of nations, it mandates that all relevant measures, including the use of military force, will be taken. The parties will make all necessary efforts to establish military infrastructure, complete armed forces training, and transfer key weaponry and military equipment according to the agreement (Resmi Gazete 2011). As a result of the deal, Turkey and Azerbaijan became free to strengthen their military relations. In recent years, the frequency of joint military exercises between the two countries has grown, with drills taking place in Azerbaijan's interior and the Nakhichevan exclave (Branch 2018, 54).

## **Changes and continuity in the Turkish foreign policy**

Turkey's role in the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is part of a larger picture of Turkey's regional foreign and security policy. As a result, before assessing Turkey's policy, activities, and interests in this conflict, it is necessary to consider the continuity and changes in its overall foreign policy.

Turkey's foreign policy has shifted dramatically in the last decade, from the belief that good neighbourly relations are essential, i.e., the doctrine of "zero problems with neighbours," to numerous tensions, open disagreements, and conflicts with neighbours. As a result, it appears that Turkey is rejecting its previous foreign policy approach and is attempting to expand its regional sphere of influence by altering the status quo. The questions are: what has caused such shifts, how did they occur, and why is Turkey's foreign policy the way it is? Is it related to a shift in global security risks or the rise of Turkey's regional power, or is it, above all, a result of the internal political situation or Erdogan's policy? Is it related to Ankara's perceived national interests, and if so, what are they?

Changes in foreign policy are always the result of changes in the domestic political situation and international relations in general. In the case of Turkey, its more assertive foreign policy is caused not only by security risks such as the Arab Spring, Syria, Iran, and the Middle East power vacuum caused by the United States' withdrawal from

numerous international obligations, but also by efforts to divert domestic attention from the unenviable political and economic situation in the country (Keyman and Gumuscu 2014, 72). Also, Turkey's foreign policy has always been shaped by other factors, of which the geostrategic position is certainly one of the key ones. Some argue that due to its location at the crossroads of Europe, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Central Asia, Turkey cannot afford to be isolated from international relations (Altunişik and Tür 2004, 88). Aside from that, Turkey's imperial past, i.e., its status as the Ottoman Empire's successor, has always influenced its foreign policy. The historical legacy includes memories of glory, which serve as the foundation for the belief that Turkey can reclaim its place as a global power, but it also includes memories of imperial defeat in World War I. Also, various historical events that occurred during and after World War I, as well as various interpretations of those events, including Turkey's denial of the Armenian genocide in 1915, are at the root of Turkey's deeply strained relations with Armenia (Vali 1971, 4-28; Haugom 2019, 208-209).

The issue of Turkey's national security has always been associated with the country's unique geostrategic position, which is inextricably linked to the interests of the great powers (*Ibidem*). Turkey adopted an isolationist foreign policy since the fall of the Ottoman Empire until 1952 when it became a member of the transatlantic community. Due to its critical geostrategic position, Turkey was an important NATO border country during the Cold War, playing a role in containing the Soviet Union. Its foreign policy was essentially passive and defensive, with a strong pro-Western stance at its foundation. Despite its vulnerability to Soviet expansionism and regional instability, Turkey has attempted to maintain the status quo by focusing its policy on the republic's national independence and secular orientation (Arda 2015, 222).

The conclusion of the Cold War brought about considerable changes in Turkey's security environment, affecting both its internal and international political situation. In this new environment, Turkey has concentrated on prospects for trade, investment, and regional cooperation in order to increase its economic and political strength in the region. Turkey's foreign policy involvement has grown significantly since the AKP took office in 2002, with the country first aiming to establish regional leadership using "soft power" tools. In his book, then-government adviser Ahmet Davutoglu, who was named foreign minister in 2009, outlined the groundwork for Turkey's new foreign strategy. The book outlines and discusses the notion of Turkish national interests' "strategic depth." It is proposed that Turkey should take on a new international role as a key factor and guarantor of regional stability, guided by concepts such as "zero problems with neighbours." It reminds us of Turkey's unique geographical location and historical factors that allow it to be active in different regions at the same time. As a result, Davutoglu advocated a foreign policy that



would enable Turkey to become a regional leader by strengthening ties with its southern and eastern neighbours. This was based on the belief that Turkey, as a key country, possessed the ability and responsibility to actively participate in the region's diplomatic, political, and economic affairs (Haugom 2019, 208-209). Also, this strategy was supposed to contribute to the improvement of Turkey's relations with the countries that were in the area of the former Ottoman Empire. As a result, at the time, Turkey sought to play an active role in the region's stability, interdependence, and prosperity, prioritising dialogue as the best way to resolve disputes while strengthening economic and political cooperation (Keyman and Gumuscu 2014, 78). However, this new foreign policy approach, as well as efforts to restore and deepen relations with the Islamic world, has resulted in deteriorating relations with Israel and a series of disagreements with the US (Đurković 2013, 128).

The challenges of the Arab Spring, particularly the instability in Syria, have called into question the viability of Davutoglu's doctrine of "strategic depth," which aimed, among other things, to create "zero problems" with neighbours, one of whose basic principles is that foreign policy goals can be achieved only in a peaceful and stable environment (Aras 2014). Furthermore, the South Caucasus area has reaped no benefits from this doctrine, since Turkey and Armenia have been unable to achieve an agreement on a number of vital issues. This is seen to be the result of strong ethnic ties between Turkey and Azerbaijan, which exerted internal pressure on Ankara, as well as Baku's pressure, which demanded unequivocal assistance from Ankara in the conflict with Yerevan (Osakanian 2011). With the Arab uprisings, Turkey's foreign policy has grown more active, viewing the dramatic upheavals as a chance to strengthen its regional and international position (Kutlay and Öniş 2021, 3055). At the same time, Turkey's military cooperation with some of the region's countries has grown dramatically, including not only military equipment assistance, but also various training programs and military coordination (Sözen 2010).

In terms of domestic policy, a serious crisis occurred in May 2013, when the AKP government used violence to quell peaceful protests by the democratic opposition in response to the government's decision to rebuild Istanbul's Gezi Park. After being elected president in 2014, Erdogan began strengthening his internal political position and control over political life in the country, particularly after the June 7, 2015 elections, which indicated a growing democratic atmosphere in the country (Yılmaz and Turner 2019, 694). Turkey announced a state of emergency in July 2016 after a failed coup attempt, with the Fethullah Gulen movement recognized as the main organiser.<sup>2</sup> After Gulen was declared an enemy of the state,

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<sup>2</sup> It's worth noting that the state of emergency was extended seven times before being lifted in July 2018.

the Turkish authorities' fears and distrust of domestic political opponents, as well as the fight against the coup, became the main features of the country's domestic policy. This prompted a constitutional referendum in 2017, which replaced parliamentary democracy with an executive presidency. This presidential system has given Erdogan broad executive powers, including control of parliament and the courts, as well as the authority to conduct foreign policy (Yilmaz 2020, 268-277). As a result, the process of nearly complete centralization of all important decisions was formalised. The AKP's coalition with the ultra-right nationalist party (the Nationalist Movement Party) to establish an executive presidency paved the way for the formation of a more pronounced nationalist government (Kesgin 2019, 8). All of these changes in domestic policy were mirrored by changes in Turkish foreign policy. All of these internal political changes coincided with changes in Turkey's foreign policy (Kuşku-Sönmez 2018).

The coup attempt has severely strained Turkey's relations with the West, and Erdogan, openly dissatisfied with the West's attitude toward Turkey and him personally, used this as an opportunity to consider radical tactical moves in regional and foreign policy. In addition, Turkey has formed several bilateral and multilateral fronts in a short period of time, on the one hand, and opened itself to the influence of non-traditional partners, particularly Russia and China, on the other. In such circumstances, foreign policy fell under the dominance of Erdogan's populist pragmatism (Kesgin 2019, 8).

In light of these developments, Turkey's foreign policy has shifted significantly, with a greater emphasis on national security challenges and national interests, to which it has responded with assertive regional policies and open aspirations for greater strategic autonomy in transatlantic relations (Haugom 2019, 210). So, fundamental changes have occurred, resulting in the rise of unilateralism, which culminated in the militarization of foreign policy, as evidenced by increased military engagement abroad, allowing it to conduct military operations in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, as well as open military bases in Qatar and Somalia. This, together with tactical collaboration with Russia and China in the areas of security, energy, and infrastructure, should have made possible Turkey's emergence as a globally respected power (Kutlay and Öniş 2021, 3054; Mehmetcik and Çelik 2021, 26). From this perspective, Turkey's support for the second armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is entirely consistent with the country's recent shift in foreign policy, which is mostly attributable to domestic political and economic challenges.

## **Turkey's role and aspirations in the second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict**

The rise in military tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which peaked in July 2020 in border clashes, has increased Turkish weapons exports and military cooperation between Ankara and Baku. Turkey has also said that it intends to accelerate the delivery of combat drones. Azerbaijan is estimated to have spent more than 120 million dollars in the first nine months of 2020 on defence equipment and planes from Turkey, including drones, rocket launchers, ammunition, and other armaments (Toksabay 2020). Also, in the middle of these significantly tense relations, Turkey and Azerbaijan conducted a two-week military training exercise involving both ground and air forces. The exercises' official goal was to evaluate their capabilities to respond, their readiness to undertake military operations and to define matters of military headquarters cooperation (Huseynov 2020a). The 2020 military exercises were unusual not only because they were the largest, but also because Turkey shared experience with Azerbaijan in the deployment of multi-launch missile systems (MIRS), air defence systems, and the Turkish-made attacking drone Bayraktar TB2 (Huseynov 2020b).

After a difficult year marked by numerous military armed incidents, exacerbated by decades of inefficiency in the peace process and fuelled by economic difficulties and growing nationalism, both inside the country and from Turkey, Azerbaijan launched an offensive on Nagorno-Karabakh on September 27, 2020. Although the conflict was brief, it was strong and significant in that it called into question Nagorno-Karabakh's territorial authority. The defeat of Armenia significantly shifted not only the local but also the wider regional situation in favour of Azerbaijan and Turkey (Jović-Lazić 2021, 218).

When armed conflicts erupted, Erdogan said that Turkey would continue to stand by Azerbaijan with all its resources and heart (Reuters 2020). Due to the statement of the Turkish president, as well as the increase in military cooperation, delivery of weapons, and drones in the months before the continuation of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, it is believed that Turkey and Azerbaijan planned war together. There are opinions that Turkey's support for this conflict was aimed at diverting attention from open internal issues, thus creating a certain populist benefit for the country's ruling political establishment (Kutlay and Öniş 2021, 3059). In this context, Turkey is thought to have heavily influenced Azerbaijan to take more decisive action "in the territories occupied by Armenia."

As a direct consequence of the purchase of advanced weapon systems, the Azerbaijani military forces' capacity has improved significantly. Azerbaijan's military

arsenal included a high number of drones, which greatly benefited the country's success. Drones and other modern military equipment received from Turkey were extensively utilised throughout the battle to find, target, and assault Armenian defensive positions and armoured formations, helping Azerbaijan to swiftly seize, establish superiority, and overpower Armenian troops. Also, the military and logistical support and assistance of Turkish experts were important for the successful deployment of drones, intelligence gathering, and precise artillery attacks that were key to Azerbaijan's victory. Azerbaijani troops damaged Armenian air defences at the start of the conflict before using drones to target Armenian armoured and infantry units on the front lines (Welt and Bowen 2021). Aside from the fact that the tactics used were very similar to those employed by the Turkish army in Syria, Syrian mercenaries were also involved in the conflict (Il'inyh and Romanyuha 2021, 106; Clark and Yazici 2020). The operation, which was supported by Turkey and made considerable use of drones and technology, had an influence not only on the military losses of Armenian troops, but also on their general morale. The fact that about 6,700 people were killed in the fight, including soldiers and civilians, underlines the intensity of the conflict. (Davis 2021). Azerbaijan reclaimed much of the territory lost in the previous conflict, while its forces advanced deep into the breakaway region and conquered Sushu, the region's second-largest and most strategically important city. Following the loss of Shushu in early November 2020, it appeared that Azerbaijani troops would capture Stepanakert in hours rather than days, putting pressure on Armenia to accept a cease-fire agreement. (Jović-Lazić 2021, 213, 218).

The direct military support for Azerbaijan provided by Turkey and Syrian mercenaries threatened to endanger Russia's vital role in resolving post-Soviet territorial disputes. Despite Turkey's rising influence, thanks to Moscow's diplomacy, a cease-fire between Armenia and Azerbaijan was reached on November 9, 2020, and all hostilities were halted, with both sides' forces staying in their positions. In some ways, this allowed Russia to keep a vital position in the continuing Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict resolution process (Avetikyan 2020, 185). There have also been claims that an unsaid agreement was built on Russia's implicit consent to allow Turkey a stronger role in shaping the dynamics of the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, after which Ankara accepted to let Moscow act as a mediator in the conflict settlement (Valiyev and Gafarova, 2020). Some argue that Russia tried to remain neutral during the Second War in Nagorno-Karabakh, hesitant to take the political risk of publicly supporting Armenia because its Velvet revolution in 2018 initiated a political shift in the country, affecting both its foreign policy and relations with Moscow. In addition to the loss of Moscow's trust in Yerevan, Russia's narratively neutral stance during the outbreak of the Second War

in Nagorno-Karabakh was influenced by the improvement of relations between Moscow and Baku, which was primarily the result of increased Russian weapon exports to Azerbaijan (Jović-Lazić 2021, 222-225).

In any case, the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan was mediated by Russia. A deal was made to deploy Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh to monitor the ceasefire along the line of contact and the Lachin corridor, which connects the region to Armenia. The mandate of these peacekeepers will be automatically extended after five years unless one of the countries notifies the other, at least six months before the anticipated expiration date, that it wishes to opt-out of this provision's implementation. The parties also agreed to build additional transport links between the western regions of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic (NK 2020).

Turkey got involved in the second conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh indirectly, primarily trying to undermine the status quo in the region, as well as to provide a place at the table where negotiations on the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan would take place (Isachenko 2020). Since the beginning of the negotiations, Turkey has demonstrated its preparedness and desire to participate in monitoring the agreement's implementation. Thus, Russia and Turkey signed a memorandum laying the basis for establishing a joint ceasefire monitoring centre the day after a tripartite armistice deal was achieved. In January 2021, the centre opened in Azerbaijan's Agdam district. It was decided that the centre would be in charge of providing and analysing information on compliance with the ceasefire regime in Nagorno-Karabakh. This information is gathered through unmanned aerial vehicles and other control sources (Sputnik 2021).

Even though the Armistice Agreement was signed with the most direct involvement of Russia, whose peacekeeping forces are the agreement's main guarantor, the renewed conflict provided Ankara with an opportunity to expand its regional power (Il'inyh and Romanyuha 2021, 101). Simultaneously, it was given the opportunity to strengthen its military-political clout in Azerbaijan, which it would most likely use to strengthen its position in regional energy projects. Also, according to the agreement, Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan region will be connected by a land corridor, which implies that Azerbaijan will be connected to Turkey by land for the first time.

In June 2021, Turkey and Azerbaijan signed the Declaration of Partnership in Shusha, which expresses Baku's gratitude to Ankara for its support and assistance during the second war in Nagorno-Karabakh. In the Shusha Declaration, Turkey and Azerbaijan clearly reassert their commitment to the 1921 Kars Treaty. It is also mentioned that the declaration builds on previous agreements, particularly the

Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support Agreement signed in 2010 between Azerbaijan and Turkey, which stated that in the event of a military invasion or aggression on either side, both countries would provide unconditional support to the other. But the contents of the declaration go further than military help and assistance for Azerbaijan's actions in regions acquired during the last conflict. According to the declaration, the parties would increase military cooperation and continue to work together to enhance their armed forces in order to meet modern demands. The declaration also underscored Azerbaijan and Turkey's roles in the building of the critical Southern Gas Corridor, which will assist in securing energy security in the region and across Europe. The parties will continue to collaborate to strengthen the competitiveness of the East-West Transport Corridor, which passes through their respective countries. In that context, it is also very significant that the Zangezur corridor would link Nagorno-Karabakh with Turkey's eastern Kars region via a railway line that would pass through Nakhchivan. Finally, it stated that the two sides would combine their efforts in supporting collaborative regional and international actions targeted at the Turkic world's stable development (SD 2021).

During the signing of this agreement, there were growing rumours regarding the possibility of establishing a Turkish military base in Nakhichevan, which would be a significant geostrategic achievement for Turkey. Russia is keeping a close eye on events in Azerbaijan surrounding an eventual Turkish military base, which might push it to take action to preserve its very own strategic interests (Reuters 2021). Ankara has once again posed as an opponent to Moscow in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as it has done in Libya and Syria. However, for the first time, Turkey was directly involved in the post-Soviet region's armed conflict, which had previously been regarded strictly as a Russian priority zone. Thus, Turkey indicated an aspiration to enhance its political and military presence in the region. Given that this tends to result in a change of regional balance at the expense of Russia, the second conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh underlined the entanglement of relations between Turkey and Russia. It is because Russia realized that Turkish-Azerbaijani military supremacy and significant changes in the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh were irreversible, hence why Turkey was contacted throughout the peace negotiations, although it failed to become a party to the agreement (Fatih 2021, 177). For its part, Turkey has also shown its readiness to accommodate Russia's interests in this conflict. Furthermore, despite accepting Turkey's greater role in the region, Russia has prevented Turkey's power from growing significantly, as its representatives are only expected to contribute to the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Centre's work. As a result, Turkey's ability to achieve its regional foreign policy ambitions will be dependent on Russia's interest and willingness to open the door to cooperation in monitoring agreement compliance, which would be broader than

cooperation within the centre. This can be expected if Russia estimates that it would enable it to achieve its strategic priorities on other fronts.

## Concluding remarks

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict erupted in September 2020, demonstrating that Turkey's previous policy of relative restraint had given way to open support for Azerbaijan. This reflected the country's ongoing efforts, among other things, to increase its regional and international political clout by becoming more involved in regional conflicts. Despite the fact that Turkey's foreign policy has entered a new phase since the AKP took power, as evidenced by debates over a potential shift in the country's foreign policy orientation, significantly different foreign policy practices have taken place in recent years. Until 2010, Turkey implemented a strategy to promote dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but in 2020, Ankara became an openly pro-conflict player, aggressively helping Baku. Turkey's changed attitude towards the Second War in Nagorno-Karabakh is primarily the result of domestic policy shifts and attempts to redirect public attention away from internal political and economic difficult issues. It also reflects broader changes in Turkey's foreign policy, including the alteration of Turkey's strategic goals, as well as the rise of the military sector and the militarization of foreign policy, as a result of the pursuit of strategic autonomy (Köstem 2019, 114). Thus, Nagorno-Karabakh has become another front on which Turkey is trying to undermine the current political order, showing its ambition to become a more independent player, achieving its geopolitical goals even when they are contrary to the interests of its Western allies.

Even though Turkey's influence in Nagorno-Karabakh is constrained by complex regional ties, its importance cannot be overstated, as it has the potential to significantly influence regional power distribution and balance, as well as wider international affairs. Cornell once pointed out that Nagorno-Karabakh can in some ways be taken as a test of Turkey's ability to act as a regional power in the Caucasus and Central Asia (1998, 67). In this context, it can be concluded that Turkey's involvement in the renewed Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has strengthened its position in Azerbaijan and reshaped the geopolitics of the South Caucasus, which Russia considers its sphere of influence.

Although it has successfully maintained its role as a mediator in the region, Russia must be aware of Turkey's strong political and military presence and formulate its policy with Ankara's interests in mind. It seems that this is not so

difficult to achieve since Russia and Turkey, despite being on opposite sides in Nagorno-Karabakh, have once again shown their readiness to cooperate. This is largely attributed to Turkey's growing ambition to conduct its foreign policy independently from the West. Cooperation with Turkey is a risk that Russia is willing to accept, particularly if it means removing the US and the West from a region crucial to Russia's national interests. As a result, Turkey's ascent at the expense of Russia might have global consequences rather than just regional ones.

Finally, it is worth noting that this conflict needs special attention since, notwithstanding the cessation of hostilities, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh remains a tough unresolved question. Because of that, there is a high risk the conflict may flare up again, with far-reaching consequences, not just in the South Caucasus region but also beyond, if other regional powers become involved. Even if hostilities do not resume, the unresolved status of Nagorno-Karabakh will continue to have a negative impact on regional security. Together with Russia, Turkey can play a vital role in bringing Azerbaijan and Armenia's positions closer together and reaching an agreement.

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**ULOGA TURSKE U DRUGOM JERMENSKO-AZERBEJDŽANSKOM ORUŽANOM  
SUKOBU OKO NAGORNO-KARABAHA KAO ODRAZ KONTINUITETA  
I PROMENA U NJENOJ SPOLJNOJ POLITICI**

**Apstrakt:** Članak istražuje ulogu Turske u sukobu oko Nagorno Karabaha koji je izbio između Azerbejdžana i Jermenije u septembru 2020. godine. Analizira se kako su promene i kontinuitet u spoljnoj politici Turske uticali na ishod sukoba, kao i u kojoj meri je on iskorišćen za ispunjavanje spoljnopolitičkih ciljeva Turske. Dakle, za razliku od većine istraživanja Nagorno-Karabaha, ovaj članak se fokusira na ulogu jednog spoljnog aktera, a ne na sam konflikt ili moguće hipoteze za njegovo rešavanje. Na poseban fokus članka uticala je činjenica da je učešće Turske dovelo do promene dugogodišnjeg status-a quo u Nagorno-Karabahu, što je omogućilo da se situacija dramatično preokrene u korist Bakua. Turska se, uz Rusiju, pojavila kao jedan od najvažnijih regionalnih aktera u ovom sukobu. To je rezultat naglašenih spoljnopolitičkih ambicija Turske, na koje su uticale promene u njenom međunarodnom bezbednosnom okruženju, kao i promene u unutrašnjoj politici zemlje. U svakom slučaju, Turska je svojom ulogom u drugom ratu u Nagorno Karabahu još jednom pokazala odlučnost da, uprkos tome što je članica NATO-a, svoju spoljnu, a posebno regionalnu politiku vodi samostalno i u skladu sa svojim nacionalnim interesima.

**Ključne reči:** Turska, Nagorno-Karabah, Azerbejdžan, Jermenija, Rusija.