



Geopolitical Implications of Nagorno Karabakh War for Georgia: Expectations from Great and Small Powers

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno Karabakh region culminated in a fierce military confrontation in October 2020. Dubbed the “Second Nagorno-Karabakh War”, the fighting ended with the November Agreement, according to which Armenia returned a part of the disputed enclave to Azerbaijan; this was then followed by internal political destabilization in Yerevan. The 2020 Nagorno Karabakh War unveiled the complexity of the long-running conflict and the interests of the major powers: Russia and Turkey emerged as the regional power brokers, while the West – i.e. the EU and the USA – showed themselves to be decidedly inactive.

In this altered geopolitical environment, Georgia managed to maintain its regional neutrality towards its neighbors. However, post-war discussions about possible formats for negotiations and regional recovery requires action from Tbilisi. Georgia was challenged by the suggested 3+3 format of regional cooperation (with the involvement of the three big interested parties of Russia, Turkey and Iran). On his visit to Turkey, the foreign minister of Georgia, David Zalkaliani, stated that Georgia is not going to get involved in the suggested platform due to its complicated relations with Russia. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated that Ankara respects Georgia’s position, which is cautious and still neutral.

At the request of the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), a selection of experts from different countries responded to the following questions:

- *Given the increased presence of Russia and Turkey in South Caucasus after the Nagorno Karabakh War and the absence of the USA and the EU, should we conclude that the West is losing interest in the region? What should be done to avoid this?*
- *How do you see the role of Georgia in the post-war regional shift? What are the challenges and opportunities for Georgia after the conflict? And what should Tbilisi do to mitigate any risks?*



**Dr. Tom de Waal, a Senior
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The second Karabakh war of 2020 was a tragedy for the thousands who died. It was also a defeat for those who tried and failed to forge a peaceful and just solution to the conflict through multilateral diplomacy. Western disengagement was a factor. In the past decade, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict had fallen down the Western diplomatic list of priorities, and France and the United States – the other two co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group – had allowed Russia to set the agenda. But first of all, Armenians and Azerbaijanis should ask themselves why they failed to take advantage of international diplomacy and ended up with a Russian-brokered deal to end the conflict.

Russia, and to a lesser extent Turkey, look like the new regional power-brokers. Can the West find a way to be relevant again? For sure, the EU remains a strong development and economic actor. It just needs to harness that economic potential to a better political strategy.

As for Georgia, there should be no cause for panic. The Russian peacekeeping force in Karabakh looks more menacing than it really is. The Russians are much more constrained there than they are in Abkhazia or South Ossetia. The challenge to Georgia is principally economic, as new transport routes are planned for the region. But in the longer run that should be a healthy challenge: for Georgia to raise its game, it needs to work on its own regional transport strategy and prove its relevance as a transit country.

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The 2020 Karabakh war and its resolution clearly showed the disinterest and ineffectiveness of both the US, France and the European Union (EU), the failure of the Minsk Group, as well as the remaining power of Russia, and Turkey's increased ambitions. After the resumption of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, neither the US nor France – the co-chairs of the Minsk Group – were willing or able to offer anything more than strongly worded political statements that had little impact on the ground. Ultimately, it was Russia, with Turkish involvement, that took the lead on mediation and implementation of a ceasefire. Russia's renewed regional dominance poses a challenge for Georgia, although this can perhaps be balanced by Turkey's growing presence in the South Caucasus.

The West remains distracted by the ongoing pandemic, along with concerns over the apparent rise of China and domestic politics, meaning that the South Caucasus has dropped further down the list of priorities. Meanwhile, Georgia continues to seek to act as a neutral bridge between Armenia and Azerbaijan and to facilitate constructive dialogue between the two states, and obviously is aware of the presence of sizable ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities within its own borders. The 2020 war accentuated the challenging neighborhood Georgia is located in. The country faces significant challenges at home, and Western vacillation over its role in the South Caucasus may lead to the strengthening of other foreign policy possibilities for Georgia, pushing it further from the path of Euro-Atlantic integration.



Dr. Maia Otarashvili, a Research Fellow and Deputy Director of the Eurasia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute

The whole of 2020, and especially the autumn, was exceptionally chaotic – for US domestic politics in particular – so it was not surprising that Washington did not pay sufficient attention to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, if we look at Trump’s foreign policy doctrine during his entire presidency, it borders on isolationist in many respects, so leaving a vacuum in the region and allowing for Russia and Turkey to step in was entirely in character for the Trump administration. Of course, this was a huge missed opportunity for the United States. In the aftermath of the ceasefire, we have seen a more active and increasingly ambitious Turkey in the Caucasus. Erdogan has since proposed a “six country cooperation platform” in which long-time enemies – namely Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkey – would gather to form a regional alliance.

The Biden administration offers new hope for those who wish for greater US engagement. President Biden is an experienced politician who is surrounded by people in his administration who have a very sober understanding of Putin’s Russia and the dangers it poses to US strategic interests in the Black Sea region, as well as around the world. It is reasonable to expect greater US, NATO, and European involvement in the South Caucasus. I think the Biden administration understands the significant strategic losses the US experienced in the South Caucasus during the Trump years and will work to regain some competitive advantage there.

This is a crucial time for both the government and civil society organizations in Georgia. It is their responsibility to present Georgia as an able and willing partner with pro-Western values and a steady, reliable, successful domestic political scene. This is not an easy task; as significant work is needed in order to restore Georgia’s reputation. The government’s poor handling of the pandemic, the ongoing political crisis and constant civil unrest have all contributed to tarnishing Georgia’s image in the Western capitals. The government needs to work more seriously and consistently to resolve domestic economic difficulties: it must strive to more closely engage with the Western partners to get their aid and attention, and most importantly, it must come up with a way to rebuild Georgia’s reputation as a beacon of democratic reform and stability in a region that has otherwise been marred by chaos.

Georgia previously enjoyed “sweetheart” status with its Western allies for many years, which helped it get a rather outsized amount of attention from Washington and Brussels. Now more than ever it is crucial for the Georgian government to reassure its Western allies and show itself as a stable, reliable partner in helping reestablish peace and prosperity in the region. The Georgian government must become more consistently active with its Western partners by pushing harder to achieve a free trade agreement with the US, join the Three Seas Initiative, and deepen its partnership with NATO, especially in matters of Black Sea security.

Georgia has a chance to show itself as an oasis of stability and democracy against the backdrop of instability in Nagorno-Karabakh. Not long ago, its Western allies used to refer to Georgia as the “fourth Baltic State.” This implied that Georgia was without a doubt a natural part of Europe and a rightful member of the transatlantic community.

Unfortunately, that image has suffered a great deal of damage and requires immediate restoration to help Georgia survive a very difficult geopolitical reality.



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The conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh has become frozen once again, yet it remains fundamentally unresolved. Arguably, the conflict is currently as much a time-bomb as it had been before the 2020 war. From the point of view of general post-Soviet geopolitics and generic international relations, as well as law, two principal issues seem paramount regarding the search for a solution of the conflict.

Firstly, the absent or incomplete international reception of the Armenian narrative about Nagorno-Karabakh has little to do with Armenia, Karabakh, the Caucasus and post-Soviet geopolitics. Armenian commentators' picking of certain historical facts in favor Karabakh's independence or inclusion into Armenia is a strategy that can be applied by other nationalists in different regions around the world to suit their own agendas. There are a number of territories across the globe which are, like Karabakh, in view of their history or/and demography politically "misplaced". An international acceptance of the Armenian justification for breaking up Azerbaijan or for even enlarging Armenia could thus open something of a Pandora's box. Therefore, there is little prospect for the Armenian quest for the

"liberation" of Nagorno-Karabakh ever becoming broadly accepted. Instead, the Armenian government, people and diaspora need to find – together with, rather in opposition to, Azerbaijan – a solution to this dilemma via direct negotiations with their supposed enemy.

Secondly, on the Azerbaijani side, there may today be a time of pride and celebration regarding Karabakh. Yet the current geopolitical constellation around the Southern Caucasus could change. The main regional actors – Russia, Turkey and Iran – all have authoritarian governments prone to abrupt leadership or even regime transitions. As a result, there may in the future be also radical changes in the foreign policy preferences of Moscow, Ankara and Teheran in store. The entire region is geopolitically undetermined, organizationally underdeveloped, and potentially unstable.

In the same way in which Baku was in 2020 able to exploit a peculiar geopolitical alignment for a successful military campaign, Yerevan may, in the future, be tempted to accomplish yet another territorial revision, if it believes that the situation in Ankara, Moscow and Teheran has changed to its advantage. Therefore, Azerbaijan should not repeat Armenia's mistake of merely focusing and relying on powerful outside actors. The solution of the conflict lies in direct negotiations between Baku and Yerevan rather than in mere propping up of domestic mobilization, military capacities, and geopolitical alliances. Ideally, Armenia and Azerbaijan should become more deeply embedded in old and new multilateral international and regional organizations that would include both countries and provide more effective platforms for conflict solution than such organizations as the Council of Europe or OSCE currently do.



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Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

This publication was produced in cooperation with the **Heinrich Boell Stiftung Tbilisi Office – South Caucasus Region**. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Heinrich Boell Stiftung Tbilisi Office – South Caucasus Region and Georgian Institute of Politics.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

“Geopolitical Implications of Nagorno Karabakh War for Georgia: Expectations from Great and Small Powers”, Expert Comment #18, Georgian Institute of Politics, July, 2021.

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