

Operation Iron Fist:

Lessons from the
Second Karabakh War

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Introduction

Diplomatic and military tensions in the South Caucasus have been increasing over the last few years. In his "New war – New territories" (Kucera, 2019) statement in 2019, the former Armenian Defence Minister David Tonoyan, redefined Armenia's military doctrine and bolstered its irredentist tone. The border clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in July of 2020 represented a possible indicator of the first consequences of this redefined military doctrine, as well as the potential for larger-scale military confrontation in the region. While the July 2020 clashes did not immediately turn into a full-scale war, its aftershocks laid bare a powder keg that is ready to explode, once again.

Some ceasefire violations were expected after July, especially after Armenian provocations on the Karabakh contact line. However, another attempt by Armenian forces to break the ceasefire resulted in a full-scale response by the Azerbaijani army on September 27 on the Karabakh contact line, code-named 'Operation Iron Fist', taking Armenian forces by surprise. The fighting, the most significant since the 1990s, drew attention and concern from the global community. After 44 days of operations to re-take the occupied territories, Azerbaijan man-

aged to reinstate its territorial sovereignty in the region. International actors, namely Russia, Iran, and the US, tried to mediate a ceasefire, however, these attempts ultimately failed to stop the fighting. On November 10th, a mediation effort spearheaded by Russia came into effect, and a trilateral armistice agreement that put an end to active military operations was signed by Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

A few central lessons can be drawn from the Second Karabakh War. First, the military techniques, preparation and extensive use of new military technologies, such as drones, played a decisive role in the conflict. Secondly, global diplomacy was greatly tested throughout the course of the conflict. New alliances were formed while old ones were questioned, and traditional mediators, such as the OSCE, arguably lost a degree of prestige. An important takeaway relates to the notion of 'frozen conflicts'. The world witnessed a military solution - rather than a diplomatic one - to a frozen conflict, a reality that marks a new phase in discussions regarding the future of the region and co-existence between Azerbaijan and Armenia. This discussion paper analyses the contemporary background to the war and focuses on the lessons learned.



A commemoration ceremony held for Azerbaijani who lost their lives in fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, on December 4, 2020. (Azerbaijan Defense Ministry - Anadolu Agency)

Background

Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan steadily rose throughout the 1980s, with war breaking out by the beginning of the 1990s. By the end of 1993, Armenian forces had occupied the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which was autonomous during Soviet rule, along with seven adjacent districts. Armenia declared *de-facto* independence in Nagorno-Karabakh, resulting in the expulsion of almost one million Azerbaijani inhabitants. The 1994 Bishkek Protocol, which formed the basis of the ceasefire agreement, has been regularly violated in the past 26 years. The ceasefire agreement established a status-quo in which almost one million Azerbaijani IDPs were forced to live away from their homeland. Both countries' armies stood ready for any escalation in the contact zone. In the meantime, long and unfruitful mediation talks began.

However, this established status-quo worked to Armenia's favour. Occupying forces fortified their mountainous positions and kept the Azerbaijani army in check through periodic shelling. Even though the conflict was categorised as a 'frozen conflict', in reality, there were frequent skirmishes. In April of 2016, Azerbaijan responded to Armenian shelling with an offensive military operation, known as the Four Day War. Despite some strategic gains by Azerbaijan and significant casualties on both sides, the Four Day War remain limited, coming to a halt when Moscow put an end to the four-day long battle and strictly warned both sides to continue peace talks.

Both the 2018 Velvet Revolution and the influence of 'liberal and pro-Western winds' created hope for a constructive change in Armenia's domestic and foreign politics, which had the potential to reshape relations with neighbours. Nikol Pashinyan, a former journalist and politician known for his anti-Russian stance, became the Prime Minister of Armenia and put an end to the 'Karabakh clan'¹, which had ruled Armenia for two decades. However, over time Pashinyan's initial progressive and peaceful statements on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were replaced with aggressive and populist rhetoric. A breaking point came during a speech in the occupied Khankendi in 2019 where the PM stated "Artsakh is Armenia, and that is it" (Kucera, 2019). This was also regarded as an open call for *Miatsyal Hayastan*², an Armenian ethno-nationalist and irredentist ideal that informed the commencement of hostilities in Karabakh at the end of 1980s. On February 15th, 2020, PM Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev shared a platform at the Munich Security Conference. This meeting was the first of its kind for the two leaders. However, the event failed to prompt tangible results as the gap between the two parties appeared too big to reconcile. Furthermore, the illegal elections for the President of the *de-facto* Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in March of 2020 and the attendance of Pashinyan at the celebration of his inauguration ceremony in Shusha, which is considered a sacred town by Azerbaijanis, were harshly received by Baku.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (R) and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev (L) at the Victory Parade held to celebrate the Azerbaijani army's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, at Azadliq Square (Freedom Square) in Baku, Azerbaijan on December 10, 2020. (TUR Presidency/ Murat Cetinmuhurdar - Anadolu Agency)

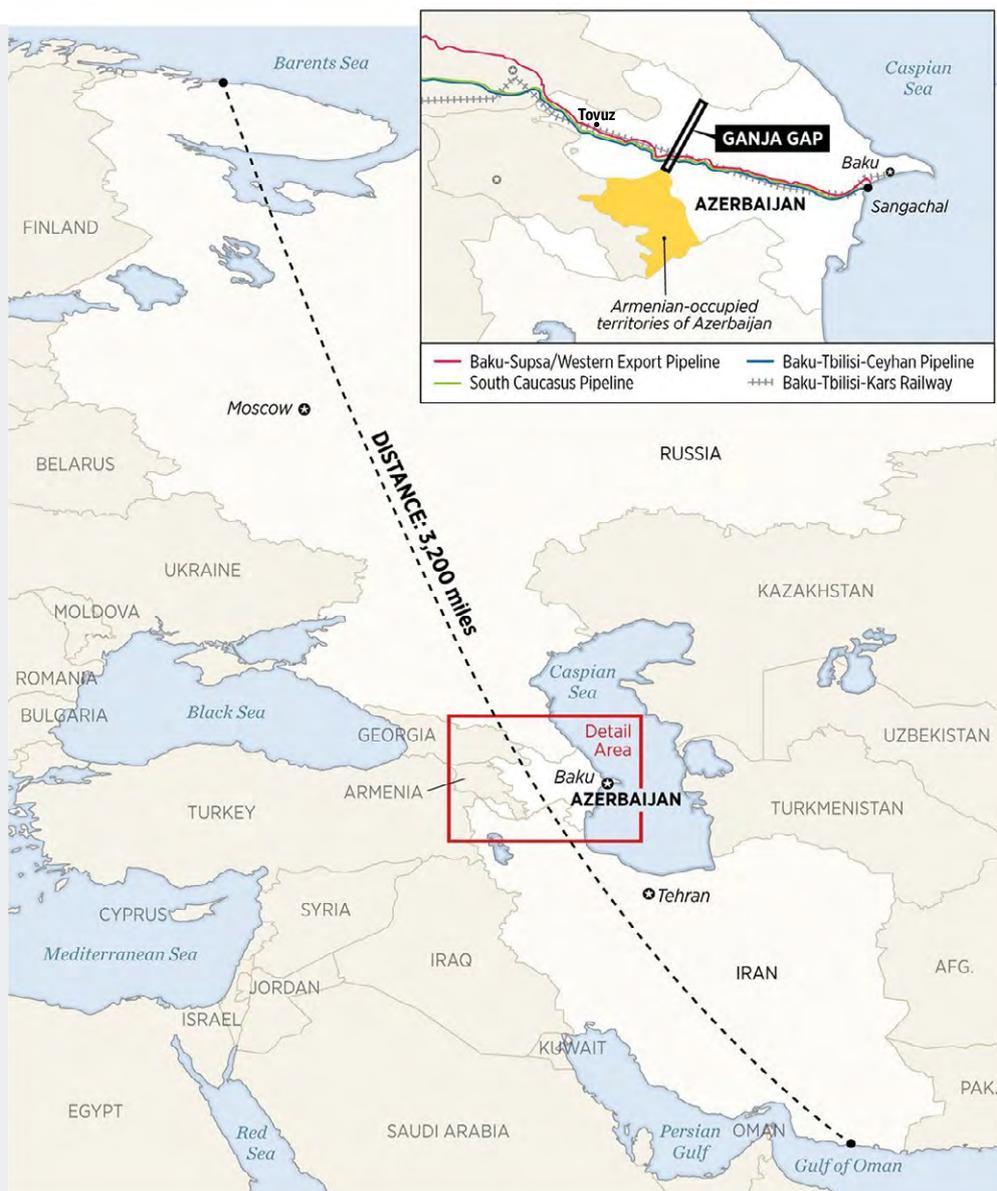
¹ Karabakh Clan: The term used for Karabakh-born high ranking government officials of Armenia in its modern history. Former presidents Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan are among the most notable members of the 'Clan'. For detailed info: <https://jam-news.net/armenian-nation-liberates-itself-from-karabakh-clan-reactions-from-azerbaijan-to-events-in-armenia/>

² United Armenia or Greater Armenia - an Armenian ultra-nationalist land claim against Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia. For detailed information on the official Turkish response to the Armenian claims, see: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/data/DISPOLITIKA/Ermenicidialari/ArmenianClaimsandHistoricalFacts.pdf>

The Ganja Gap

To bypass Russia or Iran for overland trade between Asia and Europe there is only one option: Azerbaijan's territory means that there is only a narrow 60-mile chokepoint for trade. This is the Ganja Gap.

Note
Pipeline locations are approximate



Source: Heritage Foundation Research

The July 12th attack on Azerbaijan's border toward Tovuz, which is remarkably close to the Ganja Gap, a strategic energy and transport corridor for Azerbaijan³, was a noticeable first step in Armenia's "new war - new territories" doctrine. While the Ganja Gap is far from the Nagorno Karabakh region, the Tovuz attack was considered a deliberate attempt to provoke Azerbaijan. If Baku had retaliated against Armenian territory, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and its leader Russia, would have been drawn into the conflict, due to the treaty of common defence between CSTO and Armenia. In the meantime, Armenia's attack against the important energy corridor threatened European energy security as well as Turkish economic interests. In other words, the provocative action by Armenia had the potential to transform the conflict into

a wider proxy war with international involvement. However, the Tovuz clashes did not trigger the CSTO's collective defence clauses. If anything, the clashes resulted in closer military collaboration between Turkey and Azerbaijan. The Turkish-Azerbaijani joint military drills that were conducted from July 29th to August 10th were among the largest exercises in the South Caucasus, including land and air forces. It is interesting to note that before the Turkish-Azerbaijani joint exercises, Russian and Armenian armed forces also held joint exercises that focused on defence techniques that could be used against drones in a possible war. However, the Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu assured his Azerbaijani counterpart that the drills were not conducted with Azerbaijan and its UAV assets in mind (AzerTAC, 18 Jun. 2020).

³ The Ganja Gap is a strategic 60-mile-wide corridor connecting the Caspian Region with Europe while bypassing Russia and Iran. With the deterioration of relations between the West, Moscow, and Tehran, the Ganja Gap is the only viable route for trade between the West and the Caspian region. The Ganja Gap is the passageway for the following routes and pipelines: Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, Baku-Supsa pipeline, South Caucasus pipeline, Vital fibre-optic cables, E60 (E-road) Motorway, -Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway

A New Age of Military Operations

Azerbaijan's defence budget was triple that of Armenia's in 2019. The proceeds of Azerbaijan's oil and natural gas wealth have been used to acquire the latest military technologies over the last several years. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or drones, significantly impacted the outcome of the Second Karabakh War. The heavy and synchronised use of UAVs has even inspired military strategists of global superpowers to redefine their tactics. Drone warfare created a new military reality for Azerbaijan in 44 days, and for some experts, can be cited as the main factor that forced Armenia to surrender. During the war, Turkish, Israeli and locally manufactured drones helped Azerbaijan decrease its casualties while rapidly increasing Armenian losses. Furthermore, drones recorded strikes, which also opened a new chapter in war propaganda and helped calculate the damage inflicted on opposing forces with precision.

The Four Day War in 2016 demonstrated that the Azerbaijani army had initiated a modernisation of its strategy and tactics by focusing on drones. The Armenian armed forces, on the other hand, have relied on their successes of the early 1990s, namely, heavily depending on their mountainous positions as an impenetrable defence. Armenian arms procurement has not always been judicious. For example, Yerevan has made some questionable strategic purchases, such as acquiring a squadron of SU-30SM, highly expensive Russian-made fighter aircraft. Russia supplies weapons to Armenia at extremely favourable rates and sometimes fills the Armenian arsenal for free. However, these sales reflect Moscow's defence priorities. Russia's competition with the US air force means that Moscow still heavily relies on fighters and multi-purpose aircraft for airspace superiority. As such, drone warfare was not high on its agenda. In the Karabakh conflict, with its smaller, heavily defended airspace, fighter jets had little use. Yerevan needed to find alternative drone suppliers, such as China. However, Beijing did not offer advantageous terms to Armenia to acquire Chinese drone systems. Moreover, China was one of the few global players that tried to keep its distance from the conflict.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan's strategic command made the right choice by building up its air force through cheaper and more reliable UAVs, rather than more costly and riskier fighter aircraft. The maintaining of an air force is expensive, especially compared to drone squadrons, and relies upon human pilots. Azerbaijan's 'drone army' decreased the risk of casualties in air and land forces, increased intelligence gathering and overcame the enemy's defences without heavy losses. According to pro-Armenia accounts, the capability gap was wide. 20th-century rifles were up against 21st-century drones (Zurutuza, 2020), and soldiers used shovels to dig trenches more than weapons to fight (Mgdesyan, 2020).

The main drone used in Karabakh was the Bayraktar TB-2, a Turkish-made unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV), which was mainly used to destroy Russian-made Armenian artillery, tanks and infantry sites. In June of 2020, Azerbaijani Minister of Defence Zakir Hasanov announced Baku's decision to buy the Bayraktar UCAVs (Rehimov, 2020). However, the purchase was not confirmed until Ilham Aliyev's interview on October 5th, in which he stated that Baku owns "some" Turkish drones (MEMO, 6 Oct. 2020). Roketsan-made Turkish missiles fired from TB-2 had previously demonstrated their usefulness in destroying Russian-made military armament in Syria and Libya. They were also used to destroy the Osa surface-to-air missile system, *Strela-10* short-range surface-to-air missile system and two *S-300* long-range air defence systems (GDC, 8 Oct. 2020) (GDC, 11 Oct. 2020) in Karabakh. Furthermore, the highly developed cameras of TB-2 have filmed the strikes and the videos were then used to demonstrate Azerbaijani superiority during the war.

Israel and its major defence companies were another main drone supplier for Azerbaijan, working alongside local Azerbaijani companies to co-produce some UAV models. Some of the included Israeli drones were the *Heron TP*, *Hermes 4507*, *IAI Harop*, and *Sky Striker*, which were all used to destroy targets and collect surveillance, intelligence, and reconnaissance. Israeli-Azerbaijani common

Armenian military hardware destroyed by the Azerbaijani Army

53 anti-tank weapons, 4 "Smerch" heavy multiple rocket launchers, 2 "Elbrus" tactical-operational missile systems, 97 "Grad" truck-mounted multiple rocket launchers, 2 "Uragan" self-propelled multiple rocket launchers, 1 "TOS" thermobaric weapon, 7 "S-300" anti-aircraft missile system launchers, as well as 5 "TOR" air defence systems, 40 "OSA" air defence systems, 14 "ZASTAVA" air defence systems, 22 unmanned aerial vehicles, 5 radio-electronic warfare systems, 5 Su-25 attack aircraft, 287 tanks, 69 infantry fighting vehicles, 28 self-propelled artillery installations "Acacia" and "Carnation", 315 cannons of various calibres, 63 mortars, 252 trucks, and 10 specialized vehicles, as well as 7 command posts and 11 ammunition depots.

- \$4.008 billion worth of losses included captured equipment. The sum exceeds the \$4 billion state budget of Armenia for 2020, while it is also more than six times the amount of the country's 2020 military expenditure (\$634 million).

manufactured reconnaissance drone *Aerostar* and 'kamikaze' drones *Orbiter1K* and *Orbiter-3* – which are known to perform 'kill dives' – were also used to target infantry and spread fear among Armenian soldiers. The videos released by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defence during the war showed that drones operated over Armenian armed forces with almost no serious obstacles and attacked discretely.

The drones were not the only factor that determined the fate of the war. However, they were the most innovative, also contributing to the ongoing psychological tactics

in the conflict by showcasing the inferiority of Armenia's outdated air defence systems, tanks and infantry tactics. In fact, the China State Shipbuilding Corporation carefully analysed the Second Karabakh War and praised Bayraktar TB-2's success, while calling upon the Chinese military to draw inspiration from this chapter of the conflict (Huang, 2020). While Ukraine already purchased the TB-2 last year, Kazakhstan, Georgia and Great Britain have also become interested in investing in military drone technology after their demonstrated success in Operation Iron Fist.



A military truck carries Bayraktar TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) at the Victory Parade held to celebrate the Azerbaijani army's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh on December 10, 2020 in Baku, Azerbaijan. (Mustafa Kamacı - Anadolu Agency)

Diplomatic Manoeuvres / International Winners and Losers

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev did not hide his willingness to solve the conflict by military means. However, he pointed out that the military option was only viable if the diplomatic channels failed to reach an appropriate solution. One of the main problems throughout the history of this conflict has been the passive stance of mediators, especially international organisations that were mandated to create an artificial compromise. The Minsk Group of the OSCE, co-chaired by Russia, France and the US, once the principal mediator, became one of the biggest losers of the war due to their failed attempts to find a solution. The Minsk Group came under heavy criticism for preserving a problematic stalemate for two and a half decades. As such, the Azerbaijani elites have little interest in returning to the Minsk Group's failed mediation, especially given the recent success of Baku's military operations.

However, the Minsk Group was not only criticised because of its highly bureaucratic and unfruitful mechanisms. Despite being one of the co-chairs, France openly took sides in the conflict. The French President Emmanuel Macron has adopted a staunchly anti-Turkish position, positioning France in opposition to Turkish interests and allies. There are also powerful pro-Armenian lobbies in France. Combined, these factors have heavily impacted France's position, which opposed Baku's military operation. On the second day of the war, Macron stated his concern over Turkish support for what he called the Azerbaijani 'reconquest' of Nagorno-Karabakh (Daily Sabah, 30 Sept. 2020), contradicting France's official position of at least nominally supporting the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. During the war, Macron increased his accusations against Ankara and Baku, while not mentioning Karabakh's occupying

forces. The Armenian press even claimed that Macron also inquired whether France should stay in the Minsk Group to assist the negotiations or push to recognise the illegal regime in Nagorno-Karabakh and leave the Minsk Group altogether (News.am, 26 Dec. 2020). Furthermore, the French National Assembly also passed a resolution that recognised Nagorno-Karabakh as a separate entity, which further placed France's neutrality in question (Ozcan, 2020). While the French diplomatic bureaucracy emphasised that the Parliament's actions did not change Paris' official stance, it is possible that Macron sees an opportunity to regain France's lost 'valour' in international diplomacy by pursuing an aggressive stance against Turkey and Azerbaijan.

The US did not demonstrate extended effort to solve the conflict either. The American-brokered humanitarian ceasefire on October 25th was violated hours after it came into effect (BBC, 26 Oct. 2020), once again marking Washington's weak position in the region. However, the timing of the conflict heavily influenced the US role. Firstly, the US was on the brink of the elections that would decide Donald Trump's fate as president. Secondly, the Covid-19 pandemic had hit the American society and economy so hard that foreign policy temporarily lost its priority among the government's agenda. Nevertheless, the US showed less interest in the war than expected and lost significant ground to Moscow and Ankara.

Iran also lost leverage in Karabakh. While Tehran paid lip service to the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, the Iranian authorities have been supportive of Yerevan and the illegal entity in Karabakh for some time. This support includes the fact that Armenian banks have been used to bypass American sanctions and smuggle food and arms to the region for several years[17]. Iran tried to broker a deal during the war but failed in convening Moscow, Ankara, Baku and Yerevan at the same time. The November 10th

agreement, however, brings new realities for Iran. Firstly, the Nakhichevan corridor proposed in the armistice will allow Azerbaijan to bypass Iran and have direct access to the autonomous region. Therefore, while the corridor will create an undivided road between Turkey and Azerbaijan, it may also change economic realities. Secondly, the armistice will strengthen the Russian and Turkish positions in the South Caucasus, which may be seen as competition by Tehran. Iran had already demonstrated that it felt threatened after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recited a famous Azerbaijani poem that pointed out the division between Azerbaijanis on both sides of the Aras River (Motamedi, 2020). Tehran now faces a dilemma with regards to the new reality in the region and will have to seriously consider a more cooperative approach towards Azerbaijan.

On the other hand, two major powers strengthened their positions in the region after the war. Until the Syrian Civil War, Russian-Turkish relations were relatively stable and mostly cooperative. However, the increasing power projection of Ankara and conflict of interest in Syria indirectly affected Karabakh. Turkey has increased its support to Azerbaijan in order to confront Russian-backed Armenia. Thus, the transformation of Moscow and Ankara's relations has contributed to the creation of stronger 'alliance and union' between Baku and Ankara.

Karabakh became the third theatre after Syria and Libya where Turkish and Russian policies both confront and balance each other. The arrival of Russian peacekeeping forces to Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian populated regions marked the Russian army's re-entrance to Azerbaijan after three decades. However, they will not be alone. After the war, Russia and Turkey will continue their policy of competitive cooperation in the South Caucasus. A Russian-Turkish joint supervision centre will be established in the liberated Aghdam starting from January of 2021 and will monitor the ceasefire's peacekeeping mission.



Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan give a press conference following a trilateral meeting on Nagorno-Karabakh in Moscow, Russia on January 11, 2021. (Kremlin Press Office - Anadolu Agency)

The Future of the Region

The future of the region and the conflict lies in the hands of the Azerbaijani and Armenian people. In his speech after the November 10 Armistice, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev spoke to the effect that there is no more Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and there will be no special status for the region. However, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that the status of Nagorno-Karabakh would be determined after the rights of residents in the region are clarified (HyeTert, 13 Nov. 2020). This move raises concerns over the 'passportisation' of local Armenians returning to Karabakh after the end of the war (Sheehan, 2020). Russian passports have previously been given to locals in frozen conflicts where Russian peacekeepers or armed forces were deployed, most notably in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and Eastern Ukraine. Russia often justifies its interventions with the notion of 'defending Russian citizens'. Therefore, a possible 'passportisation' of local Armenians in Karabakh has the potential to reignite the Karabakh powder keg once again, but this time, with Russia, as a more dangerous and powerful enemy for Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani government must insist on creating its own jurisdiction, enforcing Azerbaijani laws, and distributing Azerbaijani IDs to local Armenians in order to prevent the development of a *de facto* Russian enclave that could lead to a permanent Russian peacekeeping force. The return of Azerbaijani IDPs to their homelands under the government's and the UNHCR's supervision will provide further demographic justice in the region.

Nevertheless, even if the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has ended, the more general Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict remains unresolved. Moreover, war crimes committed against civilians during the Second Karabakh War will not be easily forgotten. The shelling of Azerbaijani towns, such as Ganja, Barda and Tartar, where 94 people including children lost their lives, is still fresh in peoples' minds. However, co-existence must be learned in order to ensure a safe future for the region. This co-existence will require a major revision of approaches in both nations' rhetoric. The lack of desire to live together remains the major obstacle to a common future (Shafiyev, 2020). A new approach will require the side-lining of certain radical groups among the diaspora, the church and the Armenian polity. The Azerbaijani-Armenian co-existence policy's success will need to be decisive in order to keep Russia out of the region for good. Decreasing the Russian role in the

South Caucasus will prevent Moscow from using Armenia for their greater geopolitical interests, which have mainly been directed against Turkey. Furthermore, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed his belief to his Russian counterpart that the Russian-Turkish joint centre, as well as Russian peacekeepers, will create circumstances for Armenian-Azerbaijani co-existence, which will eliminate the future need for observation or peacekeeping forces (Xinhua, 14 Jan. 2021). This statement shows that Turkey is also interested to see Russian forces in Karabakh for a limited time only.

On the other hand, various economic and political interests will play a significant role in post-conflict reconstruction. Hikmet Hajiyev, the Assistant to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, noted the necessity of forming a new security and economic alliance in the region, or a *Pax-Caucasia* (Hajiyev, 2020). Bilateral and trilateral cooperation mechanisms have existed in the region for years; economic relations between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia are a great example of peaceful and beneficial politics built on interdependence. Therefore, the cooperation of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, Georgia, Russia, and Armenia has the potential to construct a durable peace. However, Tbilisi and Moscow's problems also need to be addressed in order to form a strong regional alliance. The proposal for such cooperation has already sent a clear message to certain states in the West since it excludes them from deciding the region's future. Azerbaijan has indicated its unwillingness to welcome French, Belgian and Dutch companies in to reconstruct Karabakh because of the previously demonstrated pro-Armenian approach of these governments both during and after the war. Instead, Baku offered new opportunities for Turkish and Italian investors to rebuild the war-torn infrastructure of Karabakh.

Possible Transport Routes in the South Caucasus in the aftermath of the war



Conclusion

Operation Iron Fist demonstrated to the world that a military solution to a frozen conflict, if diplomatically neglected, is a possible outcome. The years-long status-quo was a time bomb that has threatened the region's stability for decades. The 44-day-long conflict was full of lessons that will need to be analysed and studied in detail in the months and years to come, both with regards to their military lessons and how so-called 'frozen conflicts' should be approached by regional and international stakeholders.

On the military side of things, the recent conflict demonstrated that Armenian forces were stuck in 1990s-era warfare. Modern warfare tactics and the effective usage of the Turkish and Israeli-made drones proved that the trenches, tanks and infantry with conventional weapons are not enough to create superiority in today's world, particularly under the battlefield conditions present in Nagorno-Karabakh. The game-changing activity of drones in Karabakh drew global superpowers' attention and the Azerbaijani army showed that the effective usage of drones could control airspace and decrease offensive casualties.

Moreover, Azerbaijani success redefined the geopolitical and diplomatic realities of the conflict. The OSCE Minsk Group failed to demonstrate its usefulness in solving the conflict according to international law and respect for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. The US was busy dealing with domestic turmoil, while France openly sided with Armenia. Iran's unstable foreign policy did not allow Tehran to broker a deal to end hostilities. On the other hand, Turkey returned to the South Caucasus with greater support for Baku, a military footprint on the ground and in the air, and diplomatic activity to counterbalance Moscow. After three decades, Russia also gained access to Azerbaijan, placed peacekeeping missions in Karabakh and once again showed the West its superiority in the post-Soviet space.

The future holds vast opportunities for both Azerbaijanis and Armenians to learn peaceful co-existence and leave former hostilities behind. There is a massive economic potential in the region, which is rich in both natural resources and a youthful population. Regional cooperation that brings all interested states together has the potential to create economic interdependence and sustain durable peace in the South Caucasus.

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