

International Response to the Second Karabakh War

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The dynamics of power in the South Caucasus has recently been changed. The Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict has revealed a broader regional power struggle for influence in the South Caucasus. International responses to the Armenia–Azerbaijan war have varied from strong Turkish political support to the Azerbaijani side and gradually intensifying Russian intervention to a somewhat weak and neutral Western stance. While Turkey has gained a foothold in the region, Russia has also taken on a new, responsible role as a regional peacekeeper, which has reaffirmed Moscow’s presence in its sphere of influence. Western neutrality and disinterest in the South Caucasus’s affairs have opened a space for the prospects of future cooperation between Russia and Turkey and a better balancing of their possible disagreements. It is important to analyze the activities of foreign actors in local territorial disputes, because foreign actions can change or influence the course of conflicts and reveal a wider struggle for power. The Second Karabakh War has changed the balance of power in the South Caucasus. Turkey has become a more important foreign stakeholder in the region. Russian presence, although counterpoised by Turkey’s support to Azerbaijan, has remained strong in the South Caucasus, while the West has experienced a significant weakening of its influence in this region.

Keywords: International response, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan, dynamics of power, Turkey–Russia relations.



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Introduction

The Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict has taken a serious and violent turn recently. This was the first time in 26 years, except for several military skirmishes along the Line of Contact (LoC),¹ that the conflict had been unfrozen. The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan suddenly erupted on 27 September, proving once again that it cannot be defined as a “frozen conflict” but has remained in an active condition of hostility between two states, where Armenia sought recognition for the separatist Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan while Azerbaijan aimed to restore its territorial integrity from Armenian occupation. From an international politics perspective, the clash between Armenia and Azerbaijan is not simply a “territorial dispute” between the two ex-Soviet republics, but a conflict that reveals a broader regional power struggle for influence in the South Caucasus.² It is important to discuss the foreign policies of regional as well as global actors that can play an important role in the development of local disputes. Foreign diplomatic and military (non-)support may directly affect the involved sides, especially when international inertia has been adding to the already tense relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. More precisely, the reluctance of the leading members of the OSCE Minsk Group to be more proactive in resolving the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict had contributed to accumulated impatience among Azerbaijanis, who wanted to see their occupied territories liberated and celebrated within internationally recognized borders. The newly elected Armenian government became very nationalistic and populist oriented and made bold statements regarding the resolution of the conflict prior to the

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war. Official Armenian hard-line political rhetoric that called for the “unification” of Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan as well as the plan to make Shusha a new “capital of Nagorno-Karabakh” and building a new road from Armenia to the occupied Jabrayil³ district of Azerbaijan were

1 In 2016, there was a short episode of military clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan along the line of contact (separating military forces of both countries in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone) that resulted in minor territorial restoration for the Azerbaijani side. This conflict is referred to as the “Four-Day War”. Again, in mid-July 2020 a short outbreak of hostilities occurred in northwest Azerbaijan, but such skirmishes did not catch international attention as has the current full range war that has already caused serious military and civilian casualties on both sides.

2 Nikolova, M., “Nagorno-Karabakh is a territorial, not sectarian, conflict,” *Emerging Europe*, October 9, 2020, available at: <https://emerging-europe.com/news/nagorno-karabakh-is-a-territorial-not-sectarian-conflict/> (accessed: November 7, 2020).

3 Babayev, A., “Nagorno-Karabakh: Why did the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War Start?” *Leibniz Institute Hessian Foundation for Peace and Conflict Research*, November 5, 2020, available at: <https://blog.prif.org/2020/11/05/nagorno-karabakh-why-the-second-armenia-azerbaijan-war-started> (accessed: December 20, 2020).

perceived as serious provocations that caused tensions to flare up and led to the Second Karabakh War. International political inertia was just adding to already tense relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In every military conflict, alliances and foreign support can have a significant effect on opposing parties and the outcomes of military clashes. That is why analysis of international responses to local conflicts must be considered when discussing seemingly insignificant consequences of disputes between smaller states in the context of world politics and affairs. Back in 1994, a provisional ceasefire agreement that was signed in Bishkek by representatives of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Russian Federation, which represented the OSCE Minsk Group, managed to maintain relative stability for more than two decades. This document aimed to prepare the ground for the withdrawal of troops from Azerbaijan's occupied territories and the return of refugees, but not to prolong the military status quo through unconstructive engagement. However, the Bishkek Protocol did not bring any permanent solution and it did not succeed in establishing a long-lasting, sustainable peace accord between the two South Caucasian neighboring states, but merely postponed another bloody conflict. Over the past two and a half decades, Azerbaijan's frustration increased to the point where it could no longer wait for international actors to finally break the status quo and allow Azerbaijan to fully enjoy its internationally recognized territorial integrity that includes the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

The Second Karabakh War ended with Azerbaijan's victory and the retrieval of many strategically important parts of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and all surrounding districts. The strong political support that Azerbaijan was receiving from Turkey throughout the recent conflict buttressed Azerbaijan's intentions and morale. On the other hand, Russia's initial weak reaction to conflict resolution showed that Azerbaijan's northern neighbor was more interested in preserving the status quo in the region. Some argue that the Kremlin, by not supporting the Armenian side during the recent war, wanted to punish the new Prime Minister of Armenia, who came to power through popular street protests but without open Russian support. Moreover, some analysts have interpreted Russian inertia as a sign of Russia's weakening influence in the South Caucasus. It should also be taken into account that the conflict was happening in the midst of a coronavirus pandemic and the U.S. elections, thus

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global and regional powers were preoccupied with their own internal affairs. This conflict has also brought a new regional power (Turkey) to the region. Turkey has proved that it wants to actively participate in regional affairs, thus somehow questioning Russia's traditional role as the major power in the South Caucasus. Although a Russian-brokered deal has stopped the bloody clashes in the Nagorno-Karabakh war zone, there are still concerns that the region might slip into another conflict if all involved and engaged sides do not continue fostering peaceful negotiations in order to maintain the newly achieved arrangements.⁴ It is necessary that Azerbaijan and Armenia, together with interested foreign stakeholders, work to ensure that this newly brokered ceasefire leads to a clear and sustainable peace.

An analysis of the international response to the recent Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict has revealed a new dynamic of power in the South Caucasus. Turkey has increased its political visibility in the region and, together with Russia, will probably be more engaged with future regional affairs. On the other hand, the war saw a weak Western response and questioned the purpose and effectiveness of the OSCE Minsk Group's mediation activities.

The Role of the OSCE Minsk Group

The OSCE Minsk Group was officially established in 1994 at the OSCE Budapest Summit with the sole purpose of finding a viable political solution to the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict.⁵ The Group is co-chaired by France, the Russian Federation, and the United States but also includes Belarus, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Finland, and Turkey, as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan, as its permanent member states.⁶ Over the years, the Minsk Group has been trying to find the most appropriate agreement that would bring a permanent solution to the bloody hostilities and regional instability in the South Caucasus. For instance, the Joint Statement proposed by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries in 2009, was an updated version of the Basic Principles from the Madrid Document of November 2007 that aimed to bring a final resolution of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict.⁷

4 International Crisis Group, "Getting from Ceasefire to Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh," November 10, 2020, available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/getting-ceasefire-peace-nagorno-karabakh> (accessed: November 25, 2020).

5 OSCE, "Osce Minsk Group", available at: <https://www.osce.org/mg> (accessed: November 7, 2020).

6 OSCE, "Who we are," Available at: <https://www.osce.org/minsk-group/108306> (accessed: November 8, 2020).

7 According to the Joint Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries from 2009, "the Basic Principles call for inter alia: return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control; an interim status

Even though the Basic Principles called for the return of the occupied districts surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh region to Azerbaijani control, the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, and the deployment of peacekeeping forces, they still have not succeeded in realizing any of the suggested actions. The Minsk Group's activities have failed to bring to the table a comprehensive solution to the crisis and have constantly been encountering negotiation deadlocks. Some argue that the co-chairs of the Minsk Group are divided and biased, and thus unable to come to a final resolution. France has openly supported the Armenian side, Russia has been interested in securing the status quo, while the U.S.A. has not been showing particular interest in resolving the issue.⁸ Moreover, the OSCE might be limited in its activities as it is an intergovernmental organization with no supranational powers that requires absolute unanimity when deciding on important issues.⁹ Such ineffective diplomacy has brought more frustration to the Azerbaijani side and has been one of the culprits for the recurring fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁰ The mediation process under Minsk Group might have arranged a partial ceasefire, but it has not ensured a long-lasting solution or prevented a resurrection of the conflict over the past three decades.

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for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance; a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh; future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will; the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence; and international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation." OSCE, "Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries," July 10, 2009, available at: <https://www.osce.org/mg/51152> (accessed: November 8, 2020).

8 Sofuoglu, M., "Why the Minsk Group is unable to address the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict," *TRT World*, October 5, 2020, available at: <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/why-the-minsk-group-is-unable-to-address-the-azerbaijan-armenia-conflict-40306> (accessed: December 20, 2020).

9 Garibov, A., "Why the OSCE Keeps Failing to Make Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh," *The National Interest*, May 11, 2016, available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/why-the-osce-keeps-failing-make-peace-nagorno-karabakh-16161> (accessed: December 20, 2020).

10 Diab, A., "The Resumption of Conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh: Geopolitical Dimensions and Likely Scenarios," *The Emirates Policy Center* (EPC), October 4, 2020, available at: <https://epc.ae/whatif-details/34/the-resumption-of-conflict-between-azerbaijan-and-armenia-over-nagorno-karabakh-geopolitical-dimensions-and-likely-scenarios> (accessed: November 8, 2020).

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There were three failed attempts¹¹ to broker peace in the region but during that time the activity of the Group remained limited to issuing an official statement urging both sides to cease hostilities immediately and resume peaceful negotiations. Turkey also expressed strong criticism of the poor performance of the Minsk Group in the recent conflict. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that the co-chairs of the Minsk Group were stalling in dealing with the conflict.¹² The last statement leading to complete ceasefire that was signed by the presidents of Azerbaijan and Russia and Armenia's prime minister basically bypassed the Minsk Group from involvement in drafting or confirming the newly settled arrangements. However, Turkey has been publicly welcomed to participate in the peacekeeping process by Azerbaijan's president.¹³ Considering the current situation, the future of the Minsk Group is unpredictable, especially if the Group continues with a rather bland approach to solving the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Russia as a Peacekeeper

The deal arranged by Moscow has ended six weeks of intense fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, the region is still vulnerable and without a clear and stable peace.¹⁴ The signed trilateral statement excluded the Minsk Group and largely excluded the Western powers from future peace negotiations. A full ceasefire that came into effect as of midnight on November 10 includes important provisions that ensured the retrieval of several strategically significant territorial parts of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and all surrounding districts to Azerbaijan, a phased withdrawal of Armenian military forces from Azerbaijan's internationally recognized occupied territories, as well as the deployment of 1960 armed Russian peacekeepers in certain areas of the Nagorno-Karabakh region where ethnic Armenians were settled.¹⁵ The deal was

11 During the six-week long bloody conflict, France, the United States and Russia attempted to broker three separate ceasefires that failed as Armenia and Azerbaijan accused the other side of violations.

12 Butler, D., "Turkey's Erdogan says Minsk group stalling on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict," *Reuters*, October 14, 2020, available at: <https://ca.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN26Z1P8> (accessed: November 24, 2020).

13 BBC, *Nagorno-Karabakh: Russia deploys peacekeeping troops to region*, November 10, 2020, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/amp/world-europe-54885906> (accessed: November 24, 2020).

14 "Getting from Ceasefire to Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh," op. cit.

15 "The agreement's other provisions, also now being implemented, include a phased withdrawal of the Armenian military from territory outside its internationally recognized borders. This territory includes Nagorno-Karabakh

signed almost immediately after Azerbaijan's forces had taken the key city of Shusha, which is the second-biggest city in the enclave.¹⁶ Indeed, Azerbaijan waited for almost three decades to retake what was within its internationally recognized borders. With strong support from Turkey, Azerbaijan was ready to continue all the way in reclaiming all of its occupied territories.

After facing inevitable defeat in the Second Karabakh War, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan called for help from Russia, the traditional Armenian ally, to intervene as a peacekeeper. The South Caucasus is still considered part of Russia's sphere of interest and Moscow has retained good relations with both southern neighbors, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia has a military alliance with Armenia and a military base in the Armenian town of Gyumri, but it is also interested in maintaining close ties with Azerbaijan. One explanation for the initial weak Russian response to the recent military clashes in its sphere of interest is that Moscow did not want to take sides and disturb the status quo in a region that was bringing more leverage to this regional hegemon. During previous serious military hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia continued to sell weapons to both countries.¹⁷ Even though this might define Russian foreign policy as unprincipled, the continuation of hostilities in the neighborhood can be turned into lucrative business.

Russia has been closely observing the dynamics of power in the South Caucasus. The Kremlin is well aware that Azerbaijan has become a strong, independent country with much more resources and power, especially military, compared with Armenia. Encouraged by a massive influx of energy revenues, Azerbaijan's defense budget has increased immensely and it is currently three times the size of Armenia's, which has undoubtedly shifted the balance of power in favor of Azerbaijan.¹⁸

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itself, but also Lachin, Kelbajar and Aghdam, the three adjacent areas where Armenians still held land. Some 2,000 Russian armed peacekeepers are deploying to Nagorno-Karabakh, excepting those areas of the enclave under Azerbaijani control. A corridor, patrolled by Russian peacekeepers, will connect Armenia to Stepanakert. Russian border police will also secure a new transit route between Azerbaijan and its exclave of Nakhichevan, through Armenian territory. The Russian mission is envisioned as a series of self-renewing five-year terms; renewal will not occur if any party so notifies six months prior to a scheduled extension," *ibid.*, op. cit.

16 AlJazeera, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia sign deal to end Nagorno-Karabakh war*, November 9, 2020, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/9/armenia-pm-says-signed-painful-deal-to-end-nagorno-karabakh-war> (accessed: November 25, 2020).

17 Mirovalev, M., "What role is Russia playing in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?," *Al Jazeera*, October 19, 2020, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/19/is-russia-reduced-to-a-secondary-role-in-nagorno-karabakh> (accessed: November 25, 2020).

18 Gabuev, A., "Viewpoint: Russia and Turkey - unlikely victors of Karabakh conflict," *BBC*, November 12, 2020, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54903869> (accessed: November 26, 2020).

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The newly elected Armenian government showed a high level of inflexibility and intransigence in the conflict negotiations.¹⁹ Since then, the Kremlin has been closely observing developments in Armenian domestic politics, which has become increasingly populist with a strong irredentist background. Russia's postponement of more intense diplomatic activity toward the recent clashes in the region might be a result of Moscow's distrust of and irritation towards the outsider Armenian prime minister, who has not been accepted as loyal and trustworthy in elite

Russian political circles.

Russian political inertia is also seen as a sign of Russia's weakening influence in the South Caucasus. Turkey entered the traditional Russian sphere of influence the moment it decided to give strong political support to the Azerbaijani side in the recent fighting. Such a bold move by Turkey has shown that Russia has lost a bit of its hegemonic power over the Caucasus. As Philip Remler points out, "Russian interests themselves are not yet seriously threatened, but expansion of those interests has been blunted."²⁰ Still, Russia has benefited from the peace deal since it was the only foreign signatory of the ceasefire that placed Russian troops as the only peacekeepers responsible for monitoring the implementation of the agreement.²¹ Even though Russian soldiers are accustomed to peacekeeping missions, especially in neighboring countries, their presence in eastern Ukraine, the Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria has been such that a newly assigned role as an unbiased peacekeeper is something that Russia might not be prepared for.²² However, Russia, through this new role, has to again win over both sides and work more on its regional diplomatic strategy in order to maintain stability, prevent future clashes, and, of course, boost its leverage in the region.

19 Popescu, N., "A captive ally: Why Russia isn't rushing to Armenia's aid," *European Council of Foreign Relations*, October 8, 2020, available at: https://ecfr.eu/article/a_captive_ally_why_russia_isnt_rushing_to_armenias_aid/ (accessed: December 21, 2020).

20 Remler, P., "Russia's Stony Path in the South Caucasus," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 20, 2020, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/20/russia-s-stony-path-in-south-caucasus-pub-82993> (accessed: November 27, 2020).

21 Gabuev, op. cit.

22 Foy, H., "Russia faces peacekeeping challenge in Nagorno-Karabakh," *Financial Times*, November 18, 2020, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/ecb89877-6fd8-44b1-bfb1-2c3276967696> (accessed: November 27, 2020).

A New Player in the Region

The recently signed ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan has introduced a new balance of power in the Caucasus.²³ Moscow and Ankara shared interests and actively participated in the resolution of the recent clash between the two ex-Soviet republics. Azerbaijan came out as an unquestioned victor from the Second Karabakh War and restored its territorial integrity and earned geostrategic gains from the conflict. Apparently, Russia is no longer the major foreign actor in the region. With active Turkish political support, Azerbaijan has managed to successfully use its military endeavors in the occupied areas and reshape the regional balance of power. The Azerbaijani defense minister openly praised Azerbaijani–Turkish friendship during a meeting with his Turkish counterpart.²⁴ Such behavior from Azerbaijani officials has clearly shown that Baku has started exercising a new approach in regional relations, thereby leaving more space for other foreign powers, besides Russia, to participate in the realization of Azerbaijan’s geopolitical goals.

With active Turkish political support, Azerbaijan has managed to successfully use its military endeavors in the occupied areas and reshape the regional balance of power.

Undoubtedly, Turkish foreign policy has become very assertive and competitive. Turkey has been seeking ways to expand its regional role and influence. In order to ensure the security of its borders and close vicinity, the country is currently military present in Libya, Syria, and Iraq; this is the first time since the establishment of the modern republic in 1923 that Turkish forces have been engaged with so many regional conflicts.²⁵ Turkey has also been active in the eastern Mediterranean, a region where France wants to establish itself as a major actor, which has provoked strong tensions.²⁶ Turkey has been the most vocal critic of the Minsk Group because of its ineffective mediation of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. France, after Turkey’s active political support to Azerbaijan, at the expense of losing its impartiality as an OSCE Minsk Group co-chair, voiced a position favoring Armenia’s stance during the war. On the other hand, France has asked for international supervision of the conflict²⁷ in order to compensate for the damaged reputation of the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Turkey’s increasingly assertive foreign policy,” *Strategic Comments*, 26:6, iv-vi, September 30, 2020, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2020.1830557> (accessed: November 26, 2020).

²⁶ Zhigao, H., “France-Turkey disputes roiling European and Mediterranean affairs,” *Global Times*, October 28, 2020, available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1204992.shtml> (accessed: November 27, 2020).

²⁷ Aljazeera.com, *France calls for international supervision of Nagorno-Karabakh*, November 20, 2020, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/20/france-calls-for-international-supervision-of-nagorno-karabakh> (accessed: November 28, 2020).

Even though the deal has confirmed Russia's role as a regional arbiter only, Turkey has been recognized as a new, serious geopolitical player in the Caucasus.

OSCE Minsk Group after the vocal support of Turkey to Azerbaijan that rendered the public image of the OSCE Minsk Group less relevant.

The official stance of the U.S. government, particularly in the case of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, is that foreign powers should not get involved in the local conflict but should limit their role to diplomatic calls for a ceasefire.

Even though the deal has confirmed Russia's role as a regional arbiter only, Turkey has been recognized as a new, serious geopolitical player in the Caucasus. Turkey's popularity has grown immensely in Azerbaijan, especially after the latter's successful military operation in the occupied territories that was openly supported by the highest Turkish officials. The Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has openly expressed his full support to "friendly and brotherly Azerbaijan," stressing that Turkey would be open to helping through all of its means and its heart.²⁸ The outcomes of the Second Karabakh War have revealed more than one winner. Azerbaijan's victory after almost three decades of frustrating status quo has been a huge success in the contemporary politics of this country. However, Turkey and Russia have benefited greatly from the Karabakh war as well.²⁹ Turkey has managed to gain a foothold in the South Caucasus and entrenched its friendly and prosperous diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan.

Western responses to the Karabakh conflict

The Trump administration has been mostly absent from the conflict. The official stance of the U.S. government, particularly in the case of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, is that foreign powers should not get involved in the local conflict but should limit their role to diplomatic calls for a ceasefire. United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently explained the rationale behind the rather quiet response of the U.S. administration to the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict: "We're discouraging internationalization of this. We think outsiders ought to stay out. We're urging a ceasefire."³⁰ The U.S.A. proposed a peace agreement after the two previous deals

28 Aljazeera.com, *What's Turkey's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?*, October 30, 2020, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/features/2020/10/30/whats-turkeys-role-in-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict> (accessed: November 28, 2020).

29 Gabuev, op. cit.

30 Safi, M. and Borger, J. "US silence on Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict reflects international disengagement," *The Guardian*, October 4, 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/04/us-armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh> (accessed: November 27, 2020).

brokered by Russia had failed. However, the U.S.-brokered ceasefire also failed to bring a truce to the conflicting sides. The weak involvement and lack of interest of U.S. representatives in this conflict might have reflected the specific circumstances existing in the U.S.A. in parallel with the Karabakh hostilities. Owing to the fact that the U.S.A. was preoccupied with its own presidential elections and with a serious health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the U.S. administration decided not to take a strong stance in another foreign crisis but to focus on domestic politics.

EU states have remained reluctant or even uninterested in debating the recent developments in their neighborhood that have led to a change of the military map in the South Caucasus.

Although France has shown an interest in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, mainly because of Turkey’s involvement, other EU states have remained reluctant or even uninterested in debating the recent developments in their neighborhood that have led to a change of the military map in the South Caucasus. The Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict and its geopolitical consequences have not been discussed seriously in political circles in Brussels.³¹ Failing to come forward with any viable proposition for resolving the Armenia–Azerbaijan hostilities, the EU missed out on an opportunity to become a relevant actor and a peace agent in its eastern neighborhood.³² European foreign policy answered this crisis with a few statements that called for peaceful negotiations and continuation of the peace process through the OSCE Minsk Group that has already shown its ineffective diplomatic role in the resolution of the almost three-decade-long conflict.³³ Once again, the EU has remained neutral and distant from the power dynamics in the South Caucasus, thus leaving Moscow and Ankara to share interests and power in the region.

Conclusion

The Second Karabakh War has ended with a clear victory for Azerbaijan. From a wider geopolitical perspective, Russia and Turkey have also benefited from interventionist foreign policies in the recent Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. A recalibrated balance of power in the

31 Judah, B., “Europe stands by as borders are redrawn by Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire,” *Politico*, November 11, 2020, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/nagorno-karabakh-a-little-war-that-will-shake-europe/> (accessed: November 28, 2020).

32 Grgic, B., “The EU suffered a major loss in Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Al Jazeera*, November 23, 2020, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/11/23/the-biggest-loser-in-nagorno-karabkh-is-not-armenia/> (accessed: November 27, 2020).

33 *Ibid.*

South Caucasus has come about as a result of active Turkish support to the Azerbaijani side, while Russia's, although delayed, intensified diplomatic activities have managed to broker a ceasefire that has enabled Russia to act as a major peace guarantor in the region. So far, the agreed terms still stand, and Russia has deployed its peacekeeping forces to guard the "Lachin Corridor" that provides a link between Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. The peacekeeping clause of the latest agreement will last for the next five years, with a renewal option.

In the past three decades, the mediation process that was assigned to the OSCE Minsk Group had not shown any positive change or brought a sustainable peace to the region. The conflict remained open and a source of frustration for an Azerbaijani nation that wanted to fully restore its territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders that Armenian occupation had been preventing ever since 1994. The retrieval of several strategically important parts of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and the surrounding districts can be an overture to future Azerbaijani diplomatic campaigns aiming at complete control of all parts of the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region.

The case of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict has revealed not only a wider regional power dynamic between Russia and Turkey, but also Western indifference toward the recent crisis in the Caucasus. Moscow and Ankara have taken opposite sides in different ongoing conflicts in Syria and Libya that actually make these two powerful countries competitors in their foreign-policy approaches. However, recent developments in the South Caucasus have made Russian–Turkish relations closer where the weak presence and lack of interest of the West in the region have brought to this newly established regional relationship a flavor of a partnership that will overcome any major disagreements.