

Armenian Dilemma: Entrapped

Posted on 24. September 2023 by Toros Sarian

Armenia is in danger of being the victim of the approaching Caucasian geopolitical End Game: beginning with the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020. Nevertheless, the present situation does not pose any geostrategic threat for Moscow.

The 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh war in autumn 2020 ended in a massive defeat for the Armenian armed forces. Mediation attempts – even from the US – failed on several occasions, and hostilities only came to an end after Putin, Erdoğan and Aliyev had reached an understanding. Considering the hopeless military situation, the Armenian government had no option but to accept the agreement.

Moscow sent a 2,000-man contingent to Nagorno-Karabakh to keep the peace and protect the Armenian population in an area cut off from the Armenian Republic. However, despite the Russian presence, exchange of fire and open hostilities has continued for the last two years with no apparent end to military activity.

On the 12th of September, the Azerbaijani army carried out massive attacks along the eastern Armenian border. It is clear that the victory in Nagorno-Karabakh was only the first part of Ankara's and Baku's plan to ensure permanent direct access to the province of Nakhchivan. At present, Nakhchivan is cut off from Azerbaijan by Armenian territory and achieving access is of great strategic importance for Baku as well as for Ankara.

Negotiate Peace and Simultaneously Attack

Aggressors as a rule deny any intention of military attack, or claim to have been provoked by their enemy. The Baku government explained their units were in action to counteract serious subversive Armenian activities. The Moscow correspondent of the Swiss newspaper „Neue Zürcher Zeitung“ wrote of the lack of credibility of this claim. “In the past weeks, Baku increased the number of troops on the eastern border of the Armenian Republic and raised the readiness of its troops. The Azerbaijani Defence ministry had justified this with possible Armenian provocation: evidence that he was preparing the ground for the escalation of military activities and winding up the propaganda machine.”

It is clear that a state feeling militarily strong could provoke a war. But in this case, it seems suicidal for a state which had just clearly lost a war to want to provoke a militarily superior neighbour.

The 44-day war had taken at least 4,000 Armenian soldiers' lives and left over 11,000 injured. For a country of only 3 million, this was a great loss, more so considering that one million Armenian citizens live outside Armenia in Russia, the EU and worldwide.

The actions of the Aliyev government follow the well-known pattern of the Turkish government. The necessity of peace was constantly proclaimed and discussed but, in the end, the military option was chosen to push through an expansionist agenda. That Baku – encouraged by its ally in Ankara – wishes to take advantage of a favourable moment and to build on its military success of autumn 2020 is obvious. Military experts also assess the actions as an Azerbaijani attempt to create “facts” under the cover of the war in Ukraine, and at a time when Russia is facing its first setbacks.

Protector Without Power

The stationing of 2,000 Russian soldiers in Nagorno-Karabakh was, and is, a difficult logistic exercise. Armenia has no land connection to Russia. There is only one road leading through Georgia but this road cannot be used for Russian military purposes. The railway connection from Russia through Georgia is, since the Georgian-Russian conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetian, no longer usable, which leaves only air transport to support and supply the Russian troops stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, the supply of the Russian Peacekeeping troops in Nagorno-Karabakh from the airfield is only possible along a road through mountainous terrain. Therefore, in the event of any escalation of the conflict in the region, Moscow would face challenges in supplying, let alone strengthening, its forces quickly. Considering these military and logistic considerations, it is hardly believable that Moscow's 2,000-man force can be seen as strengthening his military position in the region.

The agreement reached in 2020 foresaw the troops remaining in the area for 5 years, with a possibility of extension only with the agreement of Baku and Yerevan. This latest example of Azerbaijani aggression was directed not at the isolated Nagorno-Karabakh, the attacks concentrated on the border area between Armenia and Azerbaijan: almost within view of the Russian peacekeeping forces. The

leadership in Baku was relatively certain that, considering the setbacks of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, Moscow would be very unlikely to commit more resources to support Armenia, especially due to the logistic restraints.

Russia may be described in the Western media as the protective force of Armenia, but recently, it has become clear that the Armenians cannot rely on their “Protector”. The Russian Defence Minister, Sergej Schoigu, assured his Armenian counterpart, Suren Papikian, that “Moscow would take all steps necessary to protect Armenia’s interests and stabilise the situation.” However, in reality, none of the measures implemented in the past years have been able to prevent neither the 2020 great Azerbaijani attack on Nagorno-Karabakh nor the present attack on the Armenian Republic. It is most likely that Moscow was aware of the forthcoming attack and was either unable or unwilling to prevent it, or both.

After the attack on Armenian territory, the Pashinyan government requested help from the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation). Members include Armenia, Russia, White Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It was simply naïve to think that this loose alliance would rush to defend Armenia, and does not reflect the political developments in Central Asia. Because, only a few days after the Armenian appeal for assistance from the CSTO, two members of the alliance, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, began intense fighting. The CSTO is simply a mock alliance built and controlled by Moscow. The Armenian government was simply assured that a delegation would be sent to the area to provide an overview of the situation. When one considers that, except for Kazakhstan, all other CSTO members are involved in military conflicts, it is clear that this Moscow led alliance is simply not in the position to intervene militarily.

Armenia’s Prime Minister, Pashinyan, requested help from Putin and approached French President Emmanuel Macron and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Large numbers of Armenians live in the United States and France, and especially France has a long tradition of supporting Armenia.

A debate at a meeting of the UN Security Council focusing on the current acute situation in the South Caucasus took place on 16th September. As was expected, the Azerbaijani UN Ambassador denied all accusations of aggression and pushed the blame for any fighting onto the Armenians. The Armenian UN Ambassador accused Azerbaijan of intending to widen the scope of their military aggression and that intelligent reports indicated that an attack from Nakhichevan was already in preparation. The end goal of the Aliyev government is to create a corridor between

Nakhichevan and the rest of Azerbaijan, an extraterritorial corridor running through Armenian territory.

The fear that attacks could start from Nakhichevan are plausible. One look at the map of the region shows clearly that the southern province of the Republic of Armenia is threatened on two sides: on the eastern side where the attacks took place, there has been a build-up of Azerbaijani troops, in the West in the province of Nakhichevan an increase in military presence has been observed. In addition, Tukey has a border with Nakhichevan and in the past years, joint military manoeuvres have taken place with Turkish and Azerbaijani troops. Over the years, there have been regular exchanges of fire on this Armenian- Nakhichevan border. A main road from Yerevan running through the province of Syunik and connecting Armenia with Iran runs dangerously close to the Azerbaijani. To protect this vital highway, Armenia erected sand hill defences along much of the route, reflecting the tensions and fears in the area.

As the Armenian UN Ambassador said at the meeting of the Security Council, these attacks of the 12th of September could be merely the preliminary actions of a much bigger military exercise. The leadership in Baku has recognised the following: the Russian Protector of Armenia is acting very modestly, the CSTO will not support Armenia and the EU is contended to issue very timid warnings to both sides. Only Macron, all-be it with much pathos, supported the hard-pressed Armenians. Surprisingly, however, the President of the American House Representative, Nancy Pelosi visited Yerevan with several Democratic politicians and openly called the Azerbaijanis the aggressors. According to Pelosi the visit had been planned before the attacks on the 12 September.

Victim of geostrategic projects

In 2018, as Nikol Pashinyan was democratically elected in a “Velvet Revolution” many western observers expected a revolution similar to Georgia or Ukraine. In fact, it turned out to be something quite different. The Pashinyan government had neither the intention nor indeed the possibility of turning its back on Moscow and focusing its attention on the West. Armenia is militarily and economically dependent on Russia, and hundreds of thousands of Armenians work in Russia, sending back currency to support family members. But foremost, Russia is an indispensable protective force and strategic partner. The borders of Turkey and Iran are patrolled by Russian forces, and no other state in the Moscow led CSTO is as dependent on

Russia as Armenia. Sandwiched between Turkey and Azerbaijan, Russia offers Armenia a limited form of protection. This dependency is the guarantee for Moscow that Armenia will continue the partnership.

After their defeat in 2020, the trust in their Protector has fallen, but considering the threat from Turkey and more acutely from Azerbaijan, the Pashinyan government must see Russia as its security guarantee and strategic partner. However, at present Armenia has no alternative. Against all western expectations, the government of the Velvet Revolution maintained the Armenian-Russian alliance and continued the traditional close and friendly relations with Iran. The Pashinyan government concentrated on its task of passing laws to increase democracy and to curtail and stamp out the prolific corruption. Neither Moscow nor the West could be satisfied with the Velvet Revolution. For Moscow, the Armenian Model of democracy was a threat and the West was simply dissatisfied, as Yerevan did not follow on the example of Tbilisi and Kyiv by turning its back on Moscow and increasing ties with the West.

The hopes that the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh would remain frozen have turned out to be more than naive. Baku is not even prepared to give any sort of status to the remaining Armenians. Moreover, Armenia is not even in the position to defend its own borders against the Azerbaijani threat. In autumn 2020, as Aliyev, with massive Turkish support, began its war in Nagorno-Karabakh the regime in Baku could assume that the Russian Protector would not intervene and that the Pashinyan government would not be able to count on the help of the disappointed West. How often in history are the mistakes of the past only felt way into the future, and then all so more painful.

Armenia is in danger of being the victim of an approaching geopolitical endgame that began with the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020. The present situation does not pose any geostrategic threat to Moscow as it is on good terms not only with Baku but also with Ankara and neither Nagorno-Karabakh nor the southern Armenian province of Syunik are of high significant strategic importance to Moscow: certainly not sufficiently enough to invest in military intervention and put their relations with Baku and Ankara to a stress test. From a geostrategic standpoint, Moscow's relations with Turkey and Iran outweigh any advantages a weak and isolated Armenia can offer.

The situation imposes two important questions: firstly, has the Russian leadership has at all interested in investing weapons and money in Nagorno-Karabakh and

secondly, is Russia in the position to support and protect Armenia. Considering the changing political realities, Armenians will soon have to question this traditional alliance with Russia, which no longer provides adequate protection and seek dependable alternatives. The future existence of the nation depends on answering this question.

First published on 9.10.2022 on the website