

The tectonics of Middle Eastern geopolitics: Seismic signs in the Caucasus

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Throughout 2020, the geopolitics between the Middle East and its northern frontier have converged further. Russia, Turkey, and Iran not only compete for influence (as states and through non-state actors) in core countries of the Middle East and North Africa like Syria, Iraq, Libya, Egypt and beyond in the Gulf. They also happen to be the three former imperial powers in the Caucasus – the crucial link between the Black and Caspian Seas on the seam of Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. All three possess sprawling power ambitions underpinned by various interests, ideologies and imperial nostalgia, meaning even a minor move in one place can land any of them in tensions or conflict with another in a different area. With the West focused inward and often trailing events in the region, Russia, Turkey and Iran continue to feel emboldened in their influence-seeking while simultaneously carefully managing their trilateral relations in sometimes uneasy limited partnerships.

The most intriguing of these partnerships continues to be the one unfolding between Moscow and Ankara. As historical enemies and cold war adversaries, occasional and even severe tensions have not been absent in their ties, notably over Syria and Libya. But even Turkey's shutdown of the Russian Sukhoi-24 in 2015 and the assassination of Russian Ambassador Andrei Karlov in Ankara in 2016 did not derail President Vladimir Putin's attempts to loosen Turkey's traditional ties. Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system in 2017 was a case in point, as was the inauguration of the TurkStream gas pipeline early last year. When the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) went online at year's end, Turkey solidified its position as purveyor of Russian and Azeri gas. Struggling with energy security only a few years ago, Turkey is now a distribution hub itself. In a remarkable way, Turkey appears to have transitioned from having only an incumbent function at the edge of the West to become a central interface within changing geopolitics and geoeconomics.

However, the course of perceived geopolitical shifts is by no means certain, as the Karabakh war that erupted in September 2020 exemplifies. Surprised first by the sudden outbreak of this inaptly called 'frozen conflict', then by Azerbaijan solidly prevailing over six weeks, and finally by Russia ostensibly leaning back, two distinct views emerged. One school of thought concluded that Russia, despite its Soviet and nationalist nostalgia and discourse, was finally an empire in decay. It had been outmaneuvered, as it were, by an Azerbaijan whose oil and gas wealth provided it with cash for arms, aided by its cooperation with Israel and Turkey. This perception sees a geopolitical reconfiguration at work that transfers more of the political initiative and strategic importance to regional actors. At the opposing end, another school of thought views Russia's abrupt diplomatic intervention to end the Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict as an expression of a resurgent empire. With Armenia not completely defeated and Azerbaijan not entirely victorious, the Kremlin is seen as having seized the right moment to impose itself on both.

Such diametrically opposed interpretations are by no means new, but they add to the confusion. In fact, the discourse on 'Russia losing ground' may precisely contribute to obfuscating tendencies that work exactly the other way round. The views of those less concerned by Putin's conduct are thereby

reminiscent of views on Russia's actions elsewhere, notably in what Putin considers his country's legitimate 'sphere of influence' – no matter whether in the so-called 'near abroad' or in the neighboring Middle East. In September 2015, when Russia openly intervened in Syria in support of President Bashar al-Assad, politicians and pundits were equally divided. Would this be Russia's return, playing its traditional but now even more powerful role in parts of the Middle East? Or would this be the Kremlin's second Afghanistan? It was indicative of the West's mental detachment that more energy was spent over what the Kremlin's actions meant for Russia than what they were foreboding for the West and for those in the region pinning their hope on Europe and the US.

As the world entered 2021 with renewed lockdowns in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia has silently continued to open up new spaces. The specific entry point was Article 9 of the ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan published the day after it was brokered by Putin on Nov. 9, 2020. It stipulated that all economic and transport links in the region should be unblocked. And while Armenia undertook to guarantee the safety of transport links between the western regions of Azerbaijan and the latter's Nakhichevan enclave sandwiched between Armenia and Iran (and a strategic access to Turkey), the agreement importantly specified that it would be the Border Service of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) that would exercise control over the transport ways to ensure unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles, and cargo in both directions. The follow up to the final provision that new infrastructure linking Nakhichevan with mainland Azerbaijan be carried out came faster than expected. At their first meeting after the war on Jan. 10, 2021, President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan endorsed a four-point plan by Putin to set up a tripartite working group under joint chairmanship. It was agreed to hold a first meeting by Jan. 30, 2021 to draw up a list of primary tasks including rail, road and other infrastructure, for which expert subgroups would be established. These groups would produce by Mar. 1, 2021 a priority list and timetable of activities to restore or build new transport infrastructure necessary for initiating, implementing and providing for the safety of international traffic through Armenia and Azerbaijan for approval by the parties "at the highest level".

Crucially, while the ceasefire agreement of 30 Nov. 2020 referred only to Azerbaijan and Armenia as 'the parties', Russia switched from acting only as a broker to officially becoming a party itself. This is stated explicitly in the second point of the tripartite agreement of Jan. 11, 2021. The accord on infrastructure must therefore be expected to be of far wider consequences than the initial ceasefire agreement itself, as it guarantees Russia the power to approve – or disapprove what is termed "international traffic". This is not a mere formality but an issue of strategic importance. When the armistice was announced in November, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to only Russian peacekeeping in the Karabakh area and the Lachin corridor, linking the core of what remained under Armenian control in Karabakh with Armenia within its internationally recognized borders. Turkey, whose diplomatic and military support to Azerbaijan had been highlighted during the fighting, had initially been left out and later had to content itself with participating in a joint armistice monitoring center outside Karabakh in

Aghdam. While this does mark the first time since World War I that Turkey has a sort of presence in the Caucasus, its role is rather symbolic. As is the case with the transshipment of Russian gas, Ankara appears to be manageable from Russia's point of view.

Moscow's ambitions thereby go far beyond settling the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict or providing peace dividends. On the face of it, the tripartite agreement leaves the impression of merely bringing the Karabakh conflict closer toward a somehow anticipated solution. The guarding of the Lachin corridor caters to Armenian concerns. The securing of Azerbaijan's passage through the southern Armenian province of Syunik to Nakhchivan is a key issue for Baku. However, with the security in both territorial segments being taken care of by Russia, there is a lot more rumbling in the background. What is in the making is not just an unblocking of local transport to provide the two countries with economic opportunities that would come with peace. What is on the horizon is rather the revival of a strategic line of communication that ceases being a bilateral issue between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Anything these two countries might envisage would need not only their but also Russia's approval. By redeveloping road and rail infrastructure, Moscow would ultimately be able to project its power all the way down the Moscow-Baku railway line to the Aras, the very river that used to demarcate the southernmost extension of the Russian Empire and its successor, the Soviet Union. When completed, infrastructure would allow transportation from Baku along the southern border of the former Soviet Union all the way westwards to Turkey. It could there connect with the railway line currently being built from Kars to the Dilucu border crossing situated on the short stretch where Turkey meets Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan. Rather than remaining isolated, the Nakhchivan area could turn into a transit hub. New lines of communication could then also open up the area from the town of Culfa / Jolfa to traffic towards Tabriz in Iran. Once established, a corridor of road and rail could be complemented by other installations. Another pipeline would not be impossible either, though it would have to compete with the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan or the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines. In any case, all this would come under the tripartite agreement by which Russia reserved the right to approve.

This largely unnoticed turn of events and the positioning of Russia in bilateral affairs raise geopolitical issues that are both old and new.

- First, over the past three decades, the **overall view of the Caucasus has primarily been one of an East-West connector**, allowing the independent states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia to connect with Europe and vice versa without being dependent on Russia. With conflicts unresolved in Karabakh, as well as with Russia's occupation of the internationally recognized Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the region has hitherto been an obstacle for proper North-South communication. With several places now possibly losing their cul-de-sac status, the South Caucasus may be on the verge of a directional shift. It could be a major

geopolitical landscaping exercise involving Central Asia, Iran, and China – with Putin holding the strings in his hands.

- Second, this renewed North-South axis has immediate implications for both **Armenia and Azerbaijan**. Though a push for peace will not immediately overcome the open enmity in the aftermath of the conflict, it may be a strategic choice. While Aliyev's popularity is high, Pashinyan is politically under siege. Yet he understands that responding to peace overtures around infrastructure development and economic cooperation is the only way to avoid personal collapse and to chart a way forward for the country. Pashinyan's expectation of a peace dividend follows certain assumptions. Economically, it would propel Armenia from being isolated and land-locked to becoming a transit country. Politically, this would entail more dependency on Russia than ever, but through the trilateral agreement the Kremlin could now exert more direct and legitimate influence on Azerbaijan, too.
- Third, this has important implications for **Georgia**. The territory now projected for revived infrastructure had originally been the preferred transport corridor, notably for oil and gas deliveries from the Caspian Sea toward Turkey and Europe. However, the Karabakh conflict in the 1990s was one of several main reasons that it was the northern tier of the South Caucasus that came to host the strategic installations. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipelines as well as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway underscored Georgia's geopolitical importance. Coupled with reforms commencing in 2004, these structures brought economic dividends as well as basic security guarantees not to be left alone at the mercy of Russia. It is not by chance that some Russian commentators now consider the opening of a new transport corridor through Azerbaijan and Armenia as a way of indirectly punishing Georgia for having pursued independent ambitions. Moreover, in the long-term Russia could effectively use such infrastructure to try and isolate Georgia for political reasons without necessarily compromising the position of its neighbors. For the immediate future, the Nakhchivan corridor will not compete with Georgia's sizeable transit function in terms of rail, road, and pipelines. But once constructed, this southern corridor would be the shortest way and could at least lead to reducing or losing not only transit fees revenues, but also an important supporting service industry.
- Fourth, Russia's initiative offers constraints and opportunities for **Turkey**. Just as Ankara was not part of the ceasefire agreement, it is not part of the tripartite agreement either. However, just as Turkey was in the end awarded a role in the joint ceasefire monitoring center, it now hopes for a role in developing the economic infrastructure. On New Year's Day 2021, Turkey's Defense Minister Hulusi Akar committed in Baku to participating in the construction of part of the railway track in southern Azerbaijan from the town of Horadiz westwards to the Armenian border at Zangilan. Connecting Baku with Kars in Turkey is therefore only a matter of time, even

though this would be contingent on approval by Moscow that could extract concessions and impose compromises elsewhere. Both Turkey and Azerbaijan would then have two alternative lines of communication, one running through Georgia, the other through Armenia. The political dividend is not less. With direct access to Azerbaijan, Turkey could reach the Central Asian republics more easily, create interdependencies and strengthen links between Turkic countries.

- Fifth, the **European Union** is once more faced with challenges. It was the EU (and the UK) who in 2014 conducted feasibility studies on rehabilitating railways in the South Caucasus. At the time, this included an assessment of a line from Kars via Gyumri to Nakhchivan and onwards to Meghri and Baku. A technical study was prepared, arriving at investment needs very close to the range quoted now in the wake of the tripartite agreement. Back in 2014, the consulting work served to explore a 'wider peacebuilding process' among the countries of the region that remained, however, elusive. Now that Putin has acted, will the EU be able to influence the redevelopment of infrastructure in view of not letting Moscow dominate the ways in which Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan interact with Europe? Having been sidelined and inactive during last year's conflict and in fact even before, will the EU develop a more political understanding of its interests and responsibilities, and will the EU if necessary, stand up to Russia?
- Sixth, the **United States** will need to remain seized of the South Caucasus. A look at the map shows that railways, once established, will not only allow Azerbaijan and Armenia plus Turkey (and possibly Iran) to move goods and passengers around. As students of the Middle East and the Caucasus know, railways in the region have historically had a particular connotation for conflicts. While last year's Karabakh conflict was maybe primarily a war of drones, conventional ways of warfare should never be discounted. Geopolitics as taught in Russian military academies, puts the heartland at the center. Controlling the airspace is necessary, but not sufficient. Land matters, as Putin has underscored in Ukraine and Georgia. Irrespective of who will ultimately rehabilitate or build new railways, any emerging network will clearly be a strong infrastructure for the potential deployment of Russian troops. In fact, Moscow could literally move its military forces overnight from southern Russia via Baku all the way to Turkey, almost encircling even Georgia.

As 2021 commemorates the centenary of the Treaties of Moscow and Kars, the notion of larger powers agreeing on arrangements at the expense of smaller ones is still part of collective memory across the region. A hundred years ago, great power diplomacy set the region on a path to subservience and isolation. It foreboded the practice of striking geopolitical compensation deals that ultimately led to Yalta in 1945. For this not to happen again, the requirements remain basic:

- First, the US with its renewed commitment to the world should closely monitor the new situation on the ground in the South Caucasus. It should not only counter any hard power

approach by Russia but also anticipate how even Moscow's soft power approaches can be inherently contentious and prone to conflict. Containment may be key.

- Second, both European and American NATO partners should therefore not only verbally reiterate their support for the territorial integrity of the countries in the South Caucasus but also implement practical steps. Inviting Georgia to immediately join NATO should be among the first ones. Deterrence is still a valuable concept.
- Third, the EU should strengthen its political relations and economic presence in the region. It must not let Russia take the lead of an economic cooperation that would ultimately advance Moscow's creeping annexation strategies that range from 'passportization' to moving border fences, and trying to seize control of how Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan interact with the world.
- Fourth, the EU should particularly remember that Armenia's revolution of 2018 came on the back of popular demands for political and economic integrity and accountability. Putin had no sympathy for either, nor for Pashinyan personally. Putin's handling of Karabakh must therefore also be seen as a punishment ultimately destined to push Armenia more firmly into the Kremlin's arms.
- Fifth, while recognizing the geopolitical constraints, the EU and the US must not turn a blind eye to authoritarian tendencies. Real stability is ultimately based on the rule of law, human rights, civil liberties, and strong and accountable institutions. Peace has higher chances to materialize in better economic conditions but for these to emerge the region needs freedom.

PLAN TO REVIVE OLD SOVIET RAILWAY



Source: Media reports

