

Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: Analysis from the Present Situation and Geopolitical Meaning

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Introduction

It can be said that the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war¹ between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which recurred on September 27, 2020 and reached a cease-fire agreement on November 10, was a great victory for Azerbaijan, despite both sides suffering many sacrifices. It was not a complete win for Azerbaijan, however, and it's better to see that the real winners are Russia and Turkey. In addition, the Russian victory requires various reservations.

In this paper, an analysis from the present situation on the second Nagorno-Karabakh war is presented², and its geopolitical meaning is examined.

Background of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

The OSCE Minsk Group (co-chaired by the United States, France, and Russia) has been responsible for peace regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh war, which was a "frozen conflict". However, all proposals by the group have been rejected, and since it proposed the Madrid Principles (peace settlements) in 2007, it has not made any substantial peace efforts. On the other hand, there were frequent small skirmishes in the vicinity of Nagorno-Karabakh, and many soldiers and civilians died and were injured every year. In April 2016, a very large clash called the Four-Day War occurred in April 2016, and Azerbaijan reclaimed some land. The international community had little response to this movement. This seems to have had an impact on the re-ignition of the conflict in 2020.

In July 2020, there was a military collision in the border area around Tovuz in northwest Azerbaijan, which is near oil/gas pipelines and railway construction areas. Later, a joint military exercise was performed by Azerbaijan and Turkey in Nakhchivan (Azerbaijan's detached territory), causing tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia to further increase.

¹ Although the "second Nagorno-Karabakh war" is not the official name, the war that broke out in 2020 is called that name here in order to distinguish it from the conflict that occurred from the last phase of the Soviet Union up until immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Nagorno-Karabakh war is a Soviet-era conflict surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, an autonomous province which is home to many Armenians even though it is in Azerbaijan. During the Soviet era, Armenians desired a unification between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. However, under the crisis of Perestroika in the final days of the Soviet Union, there was a movement for the transfer of control of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia (eventually separation and independence), which then developed into mutual ethnic cleansing and armed conflict between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. It became a full-scale war between Azerbaijan and Armenia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but a ceasefire was agreed in the form of the victory for Armenia, which was supported by Russia. Occupying Nagorno-Karabakh and its neighboring regions, Armenians declared the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, which had been substantially independent until recently as an unrecognized state (a proclaimed state that has the outward appearance of a nation, but is not recognized by any other state; for details, see my book "Unrecognized State and World without Supremacy" NHK Publishing, 2014) without any sovereignty reached from Azerbaijan.

² For the history of this conflict since the Soviet era, and the outline and characteristics of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, see my paper "The structure of reignited Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: unchanged problem, different war", *Diplomacy*, Vol. 91, Nov./Dec. 2020. For the first Nagorno-Karabakh war, refer to my book "Countries in the Post-Soviet Space and Conflicts: Geopolitics over Oil, Nationalities and Terrorism" Keio University Press, 2005.

As a result, the second Nagorno-Karabakh war broke out on September 27 2020. Both Azerbaijan and Armenia claimed that the first attack was by the other nation, but the most accepted theory is that Azerbaijan carefully prepared and started the battle.

There are six reasons for the recurrence of the conflict at that time as follows.

First, during the ceasefire period, Azerbaijan was earning revenue from oil and natural gas, enhancing its national power and increasing its international presence. It used an ample military budget to prepare state-of-the-art weapons, and put an emphasis on military personnel training as represented by the special forces training carried out in Turkey and Pakistan. It also performed detailed research on NATO's tactics and enhanced its comprehensive military power.

Second, Azerbaijan had built-up discontent over Nikol Pashinyan, Prime Minister of Armenia. Pashinyan, who has served as Prime Minister³ since a political change in 2018 after 20 years of administration by Presidents hailing from Nagorno-Karabakh, was expected to take a moderate stance on the issue because he had nothing to do with Nagorno-Karabakh, but instead irritated Azerbaijanis with provocative behaviors.

Third, Turkey provided full support for Azerbaijan. In addition to the aforementioned joint military exercises, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan criticized Armenia as the biggest obstacle to long-term peace and stability of the region in the UN general debate just before the conflict recurred. It is highly likely that military assistance was promised.

Fourth is the state of affairs in Russia. Given the fact that the relationship between Russia and Armenia was close, and Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—a military alliance led by Russia, Russia should have participated in a war on the Armenia side, but it kept its neutrality on the second Nagorno-Karabakh. The reasons why Russia did not join the war on the Armenia side were that Russian President Vladimir Putin was distrustful of PM Pashinyan⁴, that Russia provided arms to Azerbaijan as well as Armenia⁵, and that Azerbaijan has been far more geopolitically important than before. The relative decline in Russia's hold in the post-Soviet space in recent years should also be an important background.

Fifth, Russia needed to direct its people's discontent toward the outside, or Armenia, in order to maintain stability as an authoritarian state. In 2020 in particular, not only was there social instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but there may have been an impact caused by a long-lasting act of protest in Belarus, another authoritarian state of the post-Soviet space.

Sixth, since countries around the world were under pressure to handle the pandemic and U.S.

³ The highest form of authority was changed from President to Prime Minister so that the former President Serzh Sargsyan could stay in power even if his position changed.

⁴ Центр «Досье», “Как Кремль вмешивается во внутреннюю политику соседних стран ~ Часть четвертая: «Борода» из Еревана и мягкая сила в Баку” (<https://dossier.center/azerb/>): David Batashvili, “Nikol Pashinyan’s Russian Problem,” *Security Review*, 2019 (<https://www.gfsis.org/publications/view/2684>), etc.

⁵ Russia claimed its legitimacy, stating that it sells weapons at low prices or for free to Armenia but at high prices to Azerbaijan.

diplomacy was weak because of the presidential election, it may have been thought that a war or recapture of territory would not be interrupted easily.

The combination of these elements is thought to have led to the recurrence of the conflict.

Characteristics of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: Difference from the First

The second Nagorno-Karabakh war was different from the first in many ways, and these differences were what made the second war unique.

First is engagement with regional powers.

During the first conflict, Russia supported Armenia, and Iran also supported it by providing supplies, but Turkey only supported Azerbaijan politically.

In the second conflict, however, Russia remained neutral and took the position of not joining the war in accordance with CSTO unless Armenian territory is attacked. Iran, which is home to many Azerbaijan people, was also afraid of the impact by the conflict and supported Azerbaijan by demanding Armenia to withdraw from the occupied territory⁶. In addition, Turkey provided its full support for Azerbaijan both militarily and politically.

Second is that the battle has turned into a "modern war", with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), cyberwar, and information warfare playing a major role. The latest UAVs purchased from Israel and Turkey were used to destroy Armenian air defense systems, and ground troops and special forces coordinated an attack after threats were eliminated that targeted UAVs, such as short-range anti-aircraft missiles and anti-aircraft artillery positions, and other threats including ground forces such as tanks. This strategy produced a huge result in particular.

Ceasefire and Result of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

Two humanitarian ceasefires by Russia and one by the United States were broken almost instantly and the war seemed to be getting bogged down, but it reached a complete ceasefire through the intermediation of Russia on November 10. The bargaining chips used to get the countries to accept the ceasefire were believed to be the fall of an important place, Shusha, and the accidental shooting of a Russian military helicopter by Azerbaijan on November 9.

With this ceasefire agreement⁷, Armenia returned all of the locations it had occupied up to that point back to Azerbaijan, and approx. 40% of the land that Azerbaijan secured during this battle, and Russian peacekeeping forces were deployed to the remaining Nagorno-Karabakh territory. A peacekeeping center was established and is jointly managed by Russia and Turkey. Armenia acquired a transportation route between mainland Armenia and Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, by way of the Azerbaijan territory. In exchange for this, Azerbaijan acquired a transportation route connecting the

⁶ Iranian media supported Armenia, however.

⁷ For the ceasefire agreement, see the Kremlin website (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>).

mainland of Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan, a detached territory, by way of Armenian territory (under peacekeeping by the Federal Security Service (FSB)). A revival of a railway which played a major role in the Soviet era has been planned for the latter, which also means that Turkey will not only be able to reach the mainland of Azerbaijan but also Central Asia by land by way of the Caspian Sea.

It is said that the gist of this proposal had been presented unofficially by Russia as a "Lavrov plan" for approx. 3 years, but Azerbaijan had been determined to refute the development of peacekeeping by Russia⁸.

Geopolitical Meaning of the Result of This War

This conflict ended with the victory of Turkey, which supported Azerbaijan, and Russia, which won a significant presence in the ceasefire agreement while maintaining its neutrality, not to mention Azerbaijan, the winner of this battle. I would like to point out that the geopolitical significance from the results of this conflict is extremely significant⁹.

First of all, the position of Azerbaijan, which won against Armenia, in the post-Soviet space in particular has improved significantly. It should be emphasized that the victory increased respect for Azerbaijan, which is near Central Asian countries and professes Islam. Since 2021, the deepening of the relationship between Azerbaijan and Central Asian countries has been evident. For example, Kazakhstan announced plans to significantly expand the port function of Port Aktau in order to promote export to Turkey and Europe via Azerbaijan. The most emblematic case was the agreement between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan on joint oil field exploration. Both of the countries had been disputing over an oil deposit for many years, which Azerbaijan called Kepez and Turkmenistan called Serdar, but they replaced the names with a common name, Dostluk, meaning "friendship" in the Turkic languages, and decided to cooperate for the development of the deposit. This means a resolution of concerns between Azerbaijan and Central Asia. In addition, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan agreed to develop a region linking Afghanistan and Turkey via Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, known as the "Lapis Lazuli corridor". In this way, Azerbaijan has taken a central position in regional development with the victory. Russia and Iran are wary of the expansion of Azerbaijan's influence. Both countries do not welcome Azerbaijan and Central Asia to deepen trade and political relations in such a way as to circumvent the two nations. Russia and Iran conducted a military exercise in the Caspian Sea in October while the Nagorno-Karabakh war was in progress, which was seen as a check against the strengthening of the relationship between Azerbaijan and Central Asia.¹⁰

⁸ Thomas de Waal, "A Precarious Peace for Karabakh," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 11 Nov 2020 (<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83202>).

⁹ For Armenia, the United States, France, and Iran, which lost in the geopolitical game, read my paper "The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: Analysis of the Present Situation", *International Affairs Journal*, Vol. 91, 2021.

¹⁰ Paul Goble, "Growing Azerbaijani-Central Asian Ties Likely to Trigger Conflicts With Russia and Iran," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 18, Issue: 28, 18 February 2021 (<https://jamestown.org/program/growing-azerbaijani-central-asian-ties-likely-to-trigger-conflicts-with-russia-and-iran/>).

Turkey's geopolitical victory is obvious. Azerbaijan's victory, which Turkey backed entirely, was a strong indication of Turkey's influence. First of all, the creation of a corridor connecting the Azerbaijan mainland and Nakhchivan means that Turkey has become more influential not only in Azerbaijan but also in Central Asia through the Caspian Sea. The power of Turkish UAVs attracted attention from around the world, and Ukraine and other countries strengthened their military cooperation with Turkey and bought Turkish UAVs in bulk. While the Nagorno-Karabakh war carries the nuance of a substitute war for the Middle East and with some expected Middle East countries to join the conflict¹¹, Turkey strengthened its position in the Middle East by winning the battle. Iran officially supported Azerbaijan, but since Azerbaijan was supported by Israel and Turkey—two countries Iran had tension with, it provoked awareness in the country that it lost in the war.

Russia is often regarded as the true winner of the conflict. Russia definitely gained a lot of benefits, but quite a few people also argue that it actually suffered in a significant way; it can be said that both positive and negative effects occurred.¹²

On the positive side, it was significant that Russia was allowed to deploy peacekeeping forces in the territory of Azerbaijan, which is not a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and prohibits stationing of foreign forces in its domestic laws. This allows Russia to watch Georgia, which is in conflict with the country, from the south. At the same time, it also means that Russia can put Nagorno-Karabakh, which was the only post-Soviet unrecognized state that Russia could not influence, under its pressure. Another positive outcome is that Russia not only prevented full intervention by Turkey, but it also means that it can keep a watchful eye on Turkey, which will likely extend its influence on the post-Soviet countries of the Turkic peoples, with the presence of its peacekeeping forces. Also, while Russia's declining centripetal force has been pointed out¹³ due to serious turmoil in the post-Soviet space, it was a good opportunity to show the influence of Russia to the world by leading a cease-fire agreement. Furthermore, the United States and France, the co-chair countries of the OSCE Minsk Group (which are almost synonymous with Europe and the United States and NATO), completely lost their presence in the Caucasus region. This also allowed Russia to make the world re-recognize that the post-Soviet space is under its influence. If the Nakhchivan-Azerbaijan

¹¹ Qatar also supported Azerbaijan because of close relations between Qatar and Turkey, according to an interview with an Azerbaijan diplomat conducted by the author on November 17, 2020. On the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit held on January 5, 2021, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other countries agreed to cancel a break-off with Qatar which had continued since June 2017, but Qatar was deepening its relations with Turkey and Iran meanwhile. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported Armenia from an anti-Turkish position (Jonathan Fenton-Harvey, "How the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict could spiral into a proxy war," *The New Arab*, 6 Oct 2020 (<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/10/6/could-the-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-spark-a-proxy-war>), and Alessandro Bruno, "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and Gulf States' Stakes," *Gulf International Forum*, 20 Oct 2020 (<https://gulffif.org/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-and-gulf-states-stakes/>)).

¹² For more information on the meaning of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war for Russia, refer to my paper "Nagorno-Karabakh War and Russia", *Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. 69 No.2, 2021.

¹³ The author does not fully agree with the view that the incident in the post-Soviet space in 2020 is due to Russia's declining centripetal force. For that matter, refer to my paper "Confusion among the Countries around Russia - Has Russia's Centripetal Force Declined?", *Peace Forum*, March 2021 (Vol. 27 No. 3).

corridor and railway is restored, Russia will be able to engage in large-scale exports to the Middle East via Turkey, and some point out that it could make Russia the biggest beneficiary¹⁴.

On the other hand, there were quite a few negative consequences for Russia. First, by maintaining its neutrality, the meaning of the CSTO was brought into question. Some criticize that maintaining neutrality is a betrayal against Armenia and that Russia has lost Armenia. The dispute completely destroyed Armenia's air defense system and exposed the weakness of Russian weapons, which could have been prevented if it supported Armenia. In addition, the breaking of two ceasefires through the intermediation of Russia brought the country's influence into question, and some say that the final ceasefire would not have been achieved if the accidental shooting of a helicopter did not occur. The reality created by the ceasefire could lead to the spread of Pan-Turkism and the expansion of Islam movements, which would not only adversely affect Russia's international position, but also stimulate Islamic radicalism in Russia; some argue the possibility of Russia's strategic defeat. Some also argue that the development of peacekeeping forces, which is considered the reason behind Russia's victory, is not worth the huge amount of expenses to deploy armies in South Caucasus. Finally, Russia would be concerned that Ukraine, which is hostile against Russia, is interested in recovering the territory it lost using the same method as Azerbaijan and strengthening its military cooperation with Turkey. The Black Sea distribution of power is likely to be disadvantageous for Russia.

Afterword

As described above, the conclusions of this war cannot be easily analyzed, and there are many future challenges.

First, it should be a cause for concern that the non-modern method of recovering territory that was taken in a war by means of another war was accepted by the international community. Under the confusion brought about by COVID-19, the international community only welcomed the ceasefire, and connived at the recovery by force. Of course, the reignition of the war is also attributable to the international community, which left the frozen conflict for many years, and it is difficult to criticize the fact that Azerbaijan has recovered its own territory that was Azerbaijan territory in the first place under international laws. The international community must firmly recognize that the method of "recovering territory by war" will not be a new reality in today's world.

Azerbaijan's technique highlighted the characteristics and meaning of a "modern war". Such war methods will be considered increasingly threatening to the world, and international countermeasures and preparations will be necessary.

It is no doubt that the consequences of this battle will largely affect the geopolitical distribution of power. Turkey's influence will definitely increase and that of the United States and Europe will

¹⁴ The argument is based on the fact that a huge amount of cargo was carried during the Soviet era in 1930-80s and the circumstance where Russia controls the Armenian railway system.

decrease, but the future trend of Russia's influence and the development of relations between Russia and Turkey are extremely important points and merit attention.

Finally, the international community should recognize that there are many remaining problems.

First is the problem of post-war reconstruction. This includes the reconstruction and preservation of buildings and cultural properties destroyed in the war, removal of mines, and restoration of houses and forests burned down by Armenians. The issue of mines is particularly serious, with many deaths and injuries already emerging, which is a major obstacle to the reconstruction.

Second is the problem of refugees in both nations. There is no doubt that many difficulties will arise in both evacuations and repatriation of refugees, as reconstruction is proceeding with difficulty.

Third is the need for humanitarian responses, such as compensation and care for many casualties, injured persons, and missing persons and their families.

Fourth is the fact that problems related to the status of Nagorno-Karabakh were postponed, and the cause of the conflict remains. This means that there is still a possibility that another war could occur. As it becomes more difficult for the OSCE Minsk Group to act as an intermediary and Russia is responsible for peacekeeping there, it is Russia that is responsible for peace. Russia wants to "freeze" the frozen conflicts, but an early settlement is unlikely. The international community and regional powers should commit to find a point of mutual agreement and achieve a complete settlement of the problem.

The Nagorno-Karabakh problem still has many problems even after reaching a full ceasefire, and it has been revealed that not all the relevant entities can accept the present situation.

On February 16, the Japanese government decided that it would provide 4.8 million dollars' (528 million yen) worth of free emergency aid as support for the humanitarian crisis caused by the military clash between Azerbaijan and Armenia¹⁵. The support was highly welcomed by Russia, which is responsible for keeping peace in the region, as well as Azerbaijan and Armenia. Although there are many issues left in relation to the war, Japan should deepen its commitment to the issues in the region and strengthen its presence in a period of geopolitical change so that a complete settlement can be achieved at an early stage.

¹⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/press4_008966.html).