

Impacts of the Second Karabakh War on the South Caucasus Region: Iran-Azerbaijan Relations

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Introduction

The ongoing Ukraine War, which started on February 24, 2022, has affected global society immensely. One of the most severe security threats that emerged in the wake of the war is in the world's energy security realm. Economic sanctions against Russia have led to an energy resource shortage, particularly in Europe. Russia's War in Ukraine has changed the overall picture of the international security landscape.

As the war became protracted and NATO member states started to provide more weapons to Ukraine, world politics seemed to be witnessing a revival of the Cold War. The competition between the U.S. and Russia has polarized the world into two major security wings. One is the allied members of NATO, and the other is those states which take a pro-Russian or neutral stance on the war.

In this "bipolar" world, Turkey and Azerbaijan pursued a balanced diplomacy toward the U.S. and Russia. Turkey is the only country that could directly talk to Russia. Azerbaijan signed a declaration on allied cooperation with Russia in January 2022 but has taken a position of neutrality after the war began. However, the state-controlled media in the country has generally expressed support for Ukraine.

Turkey and Azerbaijan have always been closer politically and diplomatically since the independence of Azerbaijan in 1991. The political and economic relationship between the two countries has steadily strengthened. They are well connected through a network of oil and gas pipelines that run through the Black Sea and other routes.

The alliance of Turkey and Azerbaijan became visible after the Second Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020. In this war, Azerbaijan became victorious in 44 days and liberated much of the formerly Armenia-occupied territories. However, the impact of the war was not limited to the internal politics of Azerbaijan. The war has also transformed the geopolitical situation of the surrounding countries of Armenia and Azerbaijan, especially in relation to Turkey, Iran, and Russia.

It is generally believed that Iran, an ally of Armenia in the past two decades, has less influence in the South Caucasus due to Azerbaijan's victory and its subsequent expansion of control in Karabakh region. However,

Russia, an ally of Iran in this historical conflict, played a significant role in the process that led to the Trilateral Statement signed by Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia on November 10, 2022.

The existing literature on the impacts of the Karabakh War on the relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan primarily deals with the period up to the ceasefire on November 10, 2020. However, the Ukraine War has transformed the regional power balance as Russia has been preoccupied with Ukraine, making the relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan also somewhat tenser. What is the background for the increasing tension between the two countries since the fall of 2022? What is the implication of Russia's war in Ukraine for the Iran-Azerbaijan relationship?

The objective of this article is first to assess the geopolitical changes in the Caucasus which took place after the 2020 Karabakh War and the ongoing War in Ukraine, with a particular focus on the relationship between Azerbaijan and Iran, which are home to ethnic Azerbaijanis. By so doing, the author attempts to demonstrate the roots of the increasing tension between Iran and Azerbaijan from a geopolitical perspective.

This article is composed of three sections. The first section identifies key characteristics of the Karabakh War. The second section examines the effect of the war on Azerbaijan, and the implication of reconstruction of the Karabakh region in the South Caucasus. This section also assesses the impact of Russia's War in Ukraine on the Caucasus. The final section will examine the current geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus as a background for the emerging sensitivity between Iran and Azerbaijan. This article is partially based on the author's field research in Baku and some parts of the Karabakh region in early September, 2022.¹

1. The Second Karabakh War of 2020: Characteristics

Some scholars have identified a few factors that led Azerbaijan to victory in the Second Karabakh War. First, Turkey provided military assistance intensively from 2018 to 2020 (Yavs and Huseinov 2021: 107-108). Second, the Turkish military started to provide training for Azerbaijan's Special Operation Force in 2018. The training stressed as Erickson (2020: 227) analyzed, exercises in "mountainous terrain integrated with electronic warfare and precision munitions." Third, Turkey and Georgia joined in the joint exercises in 2019. The three countries conducted thirteen exercises in 2019, including the "Command-Staff War Game" training exercise with the special defense forces of these countries.

The other element is the modernization of Azerbaijan's weapons, missiles, and other military technologies starting around 2010. Witnessing Russia's invasion into South Ossetia in Georgia in 2008 is said to have led

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Azerbaijan to increase its military capability. By introducing these highly advanced weapons, the Azerbaijani Army increased the number of staff that could employ new technologies on the battlefield.

However, preparation is not the only element that led to Azerbaijan's victory in a short period. According to Erickson (2023: 230-233), the military campaigns had two phases. The first one is the heavy air strikes of Azerbaijan's military. As shown in Map No.1 below, Azerbaijan's Army mainly approached from East to West along the Aras River that flows along the border between Azerbaijan and Iran.

Azerbaijan established a base for further operations by seizing the Aras Valley region. The supporting attacks came from the northeast toward the direction of Kalbajar. These two approaches mentioned above helped Azerbaijan's Army to contain the Armenian Army in the center of Karabakh, that is, the area of Susha/Sushi and Khankendi/Stepanakert (Erickson 2023: 238-242).

Map No. 1: Map of the way Azerbaijan's military campaigns progressed.



[Source: Yavz and Gunter, 2023, p.232]

Based on the careful and strategic planning of military actions, the Azerbaijan Army used artillery and strikes by Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) that Turkey and Israel provided. Among them are Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 and Israeli loitering munition Harop drones and other heavy artillery (Shahbazov 2020:1). In addition, Israel has assisted Azerbaijan in enhancing its cyber technological capacities, planning and implementing a series of complicated campaigns and logistical capabilities.

The combination of heavy artilleries, conventional weapons, and cyber weapons made it combat effective. Iskandarov and Gawliczek (2021: 92-93) maintained that “this tactic was similar to the one used by the Turkish Armed Forces in September 2018 in the Syrian city of Afrin in Idlib province,” yet that the scale of the case of Karabakh was immense in space and intensity.

The 2020 Karabakh War demonstrated Azerbaijan’s effective utilizations of UAVs and its strategic and logistical supremacy over Armenia. The UAVs are remotely controlled and can be highly effective in pinpointing attacks. However, this does not necessarily mean victory was achieved because of cyber warfare. The UAV strikes, in effect, are kinetic. In this sense, the Karabakh War was a kind of hybrid warfare, and the weight of the cyber domain was limited.

Regarding the last two days of the war, Hayrapetyan (Hayrapetyan 2022: 85). summarized the ending as follows:

On 9–10 November 2020, the war came to an end with a three-party agreement among Armenia and Azerbaijan, negotiated and brokered by Russia outside the agreed-upon OSCE arrangements. The Russian peacekeepers were supposed to be stationed in [the Nagorno-] Karabakh [Republic’s] Armenian populated area. Except for the five-kilometer-wide Lachin transit corridor between Karabakh and Armenia, which is now controlled by the peacekeepers.

Then, the question is, what has been the implication of Russia’s peacekeeping force for Azerbaijan and Iran that was stipulated in Trilateral Statement.² The agreement signed on November 10 mainly stated the following points:

1. The peacemaking forces of the Russian Federation shall be deployed concurrently with the withdrawal of the Armenian troops. The term of the forces is five years with an automatic extension unless no party expresses the intention of its termination six months before the expiration of the first term.
2. “The Republic of Armenia shall return the Kalbajar District to the Republic of Azerbaijan by November 15, 2020, and the Lachin District by December 1, 2020.” (Article 6)

² Statement by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, and President of the Russian Federation November 10, 2020. [<https://president.az/en/articles/view/50070>] (accessed November 25, 2022)

3. “The Lachin Corridor (5 km wide), which will provide a connection between Karabakh and Armenia while not passing through the territory of Shusha, shall remain under the control of the Russian Federation peacemaking forces.” (Article 6)

Map No.2: Map of Territorial Control



[Source: “Nagorno-Karabakh Control Map & Timeline: Artsakh Withdrawals - December 1, 2020, ” “Political Geography Now: Updates on the world’s countries and borders,

https://1.bp.blogspot.com/G3rnm9O235Q/X8ctv896HUI/AAAAAAAAADTU/a_J8SZKcE6Ub2GDnr_Qq4bE_SvP8AzBbwCLcBGAsYHQ/s0/2020-12-01_azerbaijan-armenia-nagorno-karabakh-map-artsakh-after-withdrawals.png]

Point 2 mentioned above was implemented almost on time. Thus, Armenia returned both Kalbajar and Lachin Districts to Azerbaijan as stated in the Statement, placing two significant districts in the northern half of the East Zangezur Economic Zone under the control of Azerbaijan. On the other hand, as map No.2 shows, the Qubadli and Zangilan regions that Azerbaijan liberated in the war in 2022 share the southern half of the East Zangezur Economic Zone. Consequently, Azerbaijan has consolidated its control over the four districts along the western borders with Armenia on the West.

One of the most significant achievements of Azerbaijan’s victory is, as many scholars maintained, that Azerbaijan was able to receive Armenia’s guarantee of the security of transport connections between Azerbaijan and its exclave of Nakhchivan (stated in Article 9 of the Statement). In this context, the consolidation of Azerbaijan’s control of East Zangezur has paved the way for the construction of the Zangezur Corridor that Turkey and Azerbaijan started immediately after the agreement. Map No.3 below shows Azerbaijan’s planned corridor directly connecting Azerbaijan’s mainland to Nakhchivan, which goes through southern Armenia.

Map No. 3: Zangezur Corridor Map (planned)



[Source: <https://aze.media/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Zangezur-corridor-map.png>]

However, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stressed on September 14, 2022, that “Armenia would not allow Azerbaijan to have a corridor through Armenian territory” (Eurasianet, September 14, 2022). The establishment of the corridor is much contentious between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Moreover, the Zangezur Corridor will reduce Iran’s significance once completed. To secure its economic and strategic positioning, on September 15, 2022, Iran signed with Azerbaijan the framework of an agreement for “establishing a road between Naxcivan and Azerbaijan through Iran’s territory” (Tehran Times, September 23, 2022). As opposed to the idea of the Zangezur Corridor, Iran has aimed at constructing the “Azerbaijan-Iran-Naxcivan Corridor” (Ibid). On the other hand, Azerbaijan has already started preparing for the Zangezur Corridor by pressing Armenia to comply with guaranteeing security in southern Armenia.

The following section will review how the Azerbaijan government has been trying to strengthen the economic potential of East Zangezur as well as for rebuilding Susha as a symbol of Azerbaijan’s victory in the war.

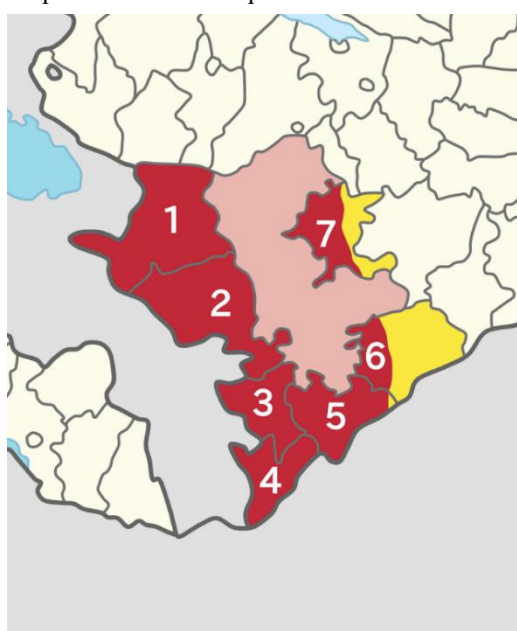
2. Politics and Economics of Reconstruction in the Liberated Territories

The Azerbaijan government launched its reconstruction processes in the liberated territories of Karabakh soon after the Trilateral Statement of November 10, 2020. The overall picture of the development plan is the integration of East Zangezur and Karabakh financial districts. Moreover, Azerbaijan aims at developing the

increased connectivity of Aghdam, Khankendi (Stepanakert), and Shusha (Sushi) as part of Zangezur Corridors. On the other hand, Khankendi is not under the control of Azerbaijan, as the 2020 Karabakh War did not liberate Khankendi. However, the liberation of Shusha was a decisive event that symbolized restoration of national pride.

In addition to establishing Aghdam-Khankendi-Susha Corridor in the future, the Lachin District is in the government's plan to integrate into the corridor. By so doing, the corridor can extend from the East to the West and would pass through the liberated territories entirely. The map below (Map No.4) shows seven districts that Azerbaijan liberated during the Second Karabakh War.

Map No.4: District map of the liberated territories.



1. Kalbajar, 2. Lachin 3. Qubadli 4. Zangilan 5. Jabrayil
6. Fuzuli 7. Aghdam

[Source: By Golden - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0,]
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=95220616>
<https://www.mfa.gov.az/en/news/no00422>

For the above-mentioned plan of the development of the territories kept in mind, the government decided to locate the headquarter of the development of the liberated territories in the Aghdam District. As early as November 24, two weeks after the Trilateral Statement of November 10, 2020, President Ilham Aliiev established a “Coordination Headquarters” and seventeen working groups to start the socioeconomic development of the liberated territories. The main office of the headquarters is today in Aghdam.

The objective of restoring the liberated territories is to provide the internally displaced persons (IDPs) with resettlement places. Regarding the number of people living in the occupied districts in 1990, according to Akif Musayev and others (2022) at the Institute of Economics at the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences at Baku in Azerbaijan, and other researchers, it was estimated to be about 460 thousand internally

displaced persons. The most significant number of residents formerly living in the occupied territories is located in Aghdam, estimated to be around 45.5 thousand, followed by Lachin, with 52.7 thousand persons.

The question is whether the current IDPs can be repatriated to the territories. According to the survey that Akif Musayev and others (2021: 12), conducted through September to November, 2021, 46.2% of the registered IDPs among 2208 respondents answered that they would repatriate as soon as possible. Therefore, whether or not Karabakh IDPs will return to the liberated territories massively remains uncertain. However, it is to be noted that the rapidly progressing reconstruction holds symbolic meaning for Azerbaijan's nationalism.

There is another critical development in the liberated territories. Azerbaijan government started to build three airports in the region. Two airports were built in the south of Karabakh. One is Fuzuli Airport completed in 2021. The other is Zangilan Airport which was completed in 2022. These two sites of airports were critical zones for Azerbaijani forces to approach Susha where its liberation marked a decisive moment in the Second Karabakh War.

Fuzuli Airport is designed to facilitate a hub for providing all necessary goods from Baku to reconstruct Susha. Zangilan Airport is located in a highly strategic spot, only 10 km from the border with Iran, and is proximate to a corridor that is expected to be built to connect the mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan—the Zangezur Corridor. Another airport, Lachin Airport, is under construction at the time of the author's writing this article on January 10, 2023, and will be completed in the spring of 2024.

What is the implication of Azerbaijan's establishment of the three airports in the region? These airports are geopolitically significant. First, Zangilan Airport will increase the connectivity between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan before the corridor is built. Given the ongoing and occasional military frictions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it would take at least five years until the corridor is constructed. Meanwhile, air connectivity will boost Azerbaijan's economic activities with Nakhchivan. Second, by building Lachin Airport, Azerbaijan will have better access to the surrounding area of the Lachin Corridor, which is controlled by the Russian Peacekeeping Forces at the time of this writing. Third, as the Lachin Corridor area is a base to reach Susha, the center of the liberated territories of Karabakh, Lachin Airport will be a strategic point to solidify the control over the liberated territories.

Monastiriakos (Geopolitical Monitor, January 6, 2023) thus observed one of the outcomes of the 2020 Karabakh war for the region, analyzed as follows:

Israel accounted for more than 25% of all arms transfers to Azerbaijan between 2011 to 2020. In exchange, Azerbaijan provides Israel with access to airfields near the roughly 420-mile-long border with Iran. If war were to erupt between Tel Aviv and Tehran, this access would enable Israeli fighter jets to bypass Jordanian, Syrian, and Iraqi airspace and reach military targets in Iran more easily.

What this also means is that the rapidly reconstructed East Zangezur Economic Zone with newly built airports enables Israel, in theory, to launch its military attack on Iran if it wishes. However, geopolitical situations in the region have been dynamic, particularly after Russia's War in Ukraine started in February 2022. The following section will examine the impacts of the War in Ukraine on the relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan.

3. The War in Ukraine and Its Impacts on Iran-Azerbaijan Relations

Before the War in Ukraine started, Iran had shifted its policy toward the East. Iran strengthened its relationship with China by signing the 25-year strategic cooperation agreement between the two countries in March 2021 (Vaisi 2022). The agreement was ratified in January 2022. With the worsening of its relationship with the U.S. and nuclear negotiations have reached a deadlock in 2021, Iran decided to strengthen its economic relations with China. Iran also officially joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in September 2022.

As a background for Iran's membership in the SCO, Iran has been pursuing a "look East policy" to counter the U.S. sanctions that the Biden administration continued to impose. Iran's policy also shifted toward Russia after the Ukraine War. As the war intensified, Putin visited Tehran on July 19, 2022, and indicated Russia was going to enhance its cooperation with Iran. Putin's visit also took place against the background of increased Turkish military activities in Northeastern Syria.

In early October 2022, Iran's representatives from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and an official from the Supreme National Security Council visited Moscow. Subsequently, the two countries agreed that Iran would sell more drones and surface-to-surface missiles to Russia (Reuters October 19, 2022). The closer cooperation of the two countries signified that Iran's diplomacy has shifted from a relatively neutral position toward Russia in the early stage of the War to an overtly strategic alliance with Russia.

The two Eurasian states, both of which are under Western sanctions, are thus collaborating against the U.S., or more precisely, NATO. Neither Iran nor Russia expects normalization of relations with the West anytime soon. Thus, both countries could cooperate against NATO's ambition toward Eastern expansion. Therefore, they see their cooperation as the most rational policy in their effort to counter NATO's purported ambition for Eastward expansion.

What did Iran's closer tie with Russia mean for Iran's relationship with Azerbaijan during the War in Ukraine? As indicated above, Russia played a significant role in the ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia and in deploying the peacekeeping forces along the Lachin-Khankendi Road. It has been stipulated in the peace agreement that Russia's peacekeeping force would complete its mission by 2025.

Nevertheless, Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine might have hampered its enforcement of the peacekeeping forces in the Lachin road. When the author visited Baku and interviewed some foreign policymakers about the Karabakh territories in the first week of September, 2022, they stated that Azerbaijan might not eventually rely on Russian forces and would control the adjacent area of the Lachin Corridor by itself by the end of the first term in 2025. It is unclear if Russian forces have been deployed as much as was stipulated in the Statement, nor is the actual number of the forces yet known since the outbreak of the War in Ukraine.

As we indicated in the preceding section Azerbaijan's reconstruction of the liberated territories has so far progressed rapidly. Azerbaijan's hasty rebuilding of the liberated territories has also naturally expanded the areas of its control.

President Aliyev employed informational and psychological strategies to propagate its people's national unity and identity during and after the Second Karabakh War. In the post-war period, a series of his speeches emphasized the sense of pride of the whole nation as the victors of the war (Kösen and Erdoğan 2022: 14). In addition, President Aliyev has taken many initiatives to invest in building infrastructure in the territories. The economic development of the liberated territories has symbolized national identity and pride since the victory of the second Karabakh War.

As a reaction to the growing nationalism in Azerbaijan and the expansion of the reconstructed districts in the liberated territories, Iran conducted large-scale military exercises on the southern border of Azerbaijan from October 17 to October 19, 2022 (Caspiannews, October 19, 2022). IRGC appeared to have indicated the possibility of crossing the line if they wished. However, this war game of Iran did not lead to any confrontation with Azerbaijan. But this incident could be interpreted as Iran's warning to Azerbaijan. It was perhaps intended to indicate Iran's determination to defend its territorial integrity.

It is also important to note that as Russia's peacekeeping forces have been perceived to be weaker, there have also been reports of occasional clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. For example, on December 12, hundreds of Azerbaijani protesters started to block the Lachin-Khankendi road by claiming that Armenian and Russian soldiers had been stealing the region's natural resources. Reacting to this incident, on December 25, thousands of Armenians protested in the city of Khankendi in Karabakh against the blocking of the Lachin-Khankendi road, which is the only one that connects the contested region to Armenia (Mayadeen 2022).

The above examination of the impacts of the War in Ukraine shows that much tension has emerged between Iran and Azerbaijan after the Ukrainian War broke out. Moreover, Azerbaijan has taken advantage of the situation due to the perceived ineffectiveness of Russian power since February 2022 to establish an effective on the border with Armenia.

Conclusion

The Second Karabakh War was kinetic, even though UAVs were also employed to supplement the attacks with conventional weapons. However, the Karabakh War demonstrated the extent to which Turkey, the regional competitor of Iran, and Israel, Iran's perceived enemy in the Middle East, collaborated in their military assistance, including strategic, technical, and logistical support. Moreover, Azerbaijan's victory, which was achieved only in 44 days, indicated the direct and indirect presence of these two countries, which Iran has perceived problematic for its security in the South Caucasus.

This article has also demonstrated that geopolitical changes emerged in the post-Karabakh War period. Azerbaijan's political and economic power expanded in the South Caucasus, giving rise to a new threat to Iran's territorial integrity. The decline of Russia's power in the South Caucasus has also become detrimental to Armenia and Iran. In particular, the rebuilding of East Zangezur coincided with Azerbaijan's expansion in air connectivity with other states in the Caucasus and Turkey. The ongoing reconstruction in the liberated territories of Azerbaijan has paved the way for the consolidation of the people's national unity and thus sensitized its relationship with Iran where the larger population of Azerbaijanis live than in Azerbaijan.

However, Iran's strategy to make a stronger alliance with Russia is likely to impact the regional positioning of Azerbaijan. It appears Azerbaijan has, therefore, successfully expanded its control in the region in the post-Karabakh War and after the outbreak of the Ukrainian War. However, it is also true that Russia's reduced commitment in the South Caucasus has led to another conflictual relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as the Trilateral Statement contained elements of ambiguity regarding the size of territories Armenia would return to Azerbaijan as well as its timing.

There is no clear scope for a ceasefire in the War in Ukraine. Thus, Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine will prevail for some time in the future. At the same time, the international sanctions regime against Iran will likely remain in place. Therefore, Iran will continuously ally with Russia as long as both Russia and Iran are enemies of the US. Under the circumstances, it is inevitable that the South Caucasus will continue to be a region of tension between Iran and Azerbaijan. Yet, whether or not the tense relationship between the two countries will develop into a conflict needs to be seen.

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