

# Turkey Loses Superordinate Games in Armenia's Defeat to Russian Foreign Policy in Nagorno-Karabakh

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**Abstract:** The Second Karabakh War of 2020 can be analysed as five state actors all playing different geopolitical games. Republic of Azerbaijan, Republic of Armenia, and the unrecognised Artsakh Republic all played different but local-level strategic games. Russian Federation and Republic of Turkey though both played higher ordinate games in the conflict, dependent on but external to the localised conditions. We apply a geopolitical ordinate hierarchy of motives approach to assessing the five state actors' roles in the conflict. We examine the geopolitical outcomes for each state actor, while exploring the ideological meta-ordinate NeoOttomanism and wider historicism in contemporary Republic of Turkey foreign policy, Republic of Armenia's treaty-institutionalised loss, the Russian Federation's cynical political win characterised by shadow institutions and their agency. We discuss how conflicting institutions such as statist ideologies, a form of shadow functionalism in international, and both regional and historicist political discourses of legitimacy create an interlocking institutional system which is persistent but which is not a source of rules-based constraint. We argue that both Russia and Turkey's tools of state power form international legal prisms which are sub-ordinate forms of legitimacy in a region dominated by historicism, hard power and power projection.

**Keywords:** South Caucasus, Geopolitics, Historicism, Legitimacy, NeoOttomanism, Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, Armenia, Artsakh

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## Introduction—Games beyond the Game

The Second Karabakh War of 2020 for the direct belligerents demonstrated a new balance of power in the South Caucasus, and a new technological supremacy manifested in the Bayraktar TB2 armed drone. However the conflict also highlighted two starkly different geopolitical forms of the indirect belligerents, Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation. At the lowest level of analysis, this was a war defined by Azerbaijan as territorial. However the higher-ordinate conflict between Russia and Turkey was a political game of conflicting narratives and discourse control amid wider realist regional ambitions. Using Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) data collection approaches, this paper first examines ordinated games in geopolitics in a Luttwakian sense, arguing that the nominal victory of Azerbaijan in open warfare was subsumed by higher order games won or lost by differing agents, centred on differentiated outcomes. Examining Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Artsakh as five nominal state actors engaged in superordinate, ordinate or subordinate games, we construct a framework for assessing the relative outcomes of these state institutions.

This war was not a both-sidesist descent into inter-ethnic violence, this was a sophisticated, planned and coordinated attack by state powers. This was not legal under any aspect of international law. This was a test of hard power by the small states, and a utilisation of differing theoretical approaches to regional power games by the regional powers. The idea that this conflict was an isolated, microregional, ethnic-based, historicist-determined outburst of violence is unsatisfactory. All these elements were present, but were any one of them the actual cause for initiating conflict? And were any of these sufficiently weighted for either of the regional powers Turkey and Russia to green-light hostile operations? The international legal aspect is arbitrary and subjunctive in this case. This was not a localised inter-ethnic or post-soviet border conflict - it was systematic part of Republic of Turkey's new expansionist agenda laying perpendicular to Turkey's secondary concerns with European integration, regional economic integration, international law, European law, and Turkey's place within the future of European functionalism and modern economic development. The seemingly complete ability to put aside concepts integral to the European Union and NATO processes to embark on rank nationalism is strategically significant foreign policy.

While Turkey all but claimed participation and yet still maintains officially no ground fighting or air command, we explore the contrasts between the neutrality stated to the international community and NATO partners, and the pan-Turkic agenda and triumphalism, with its obvious incongruities with maintaining the falsehood of non-participation in a war so clearly tied to Turkey's wider regional policies. We examine the Russia-Armenia nexus from the position that while Armenia's actions in the nominal political unit of Artsakh were dependent on Russian support, that in practice the withholding of any material support from Russia in fact created a shadow dependency. The legitimacy of assuming Russian support bolstered Azerbaijan's Operation Iron Fist invasion preparation, while in reality Russia left the Armenia side to take losses alone, and by implication used the political leverage of compelling inaction to force a geopolitical outcome favourable to Russia. We contrast these two Turkey and Russia strategies, discuss some implications of the development of these shadow policies, and argue that the

creation of new forms of institutional negative space has created new political risk scenarios which are not being adequately theorised or examined. We argue that the 19th Century state games of the direct belligerent nations in a perennial South Caucasus conflict were not adequately co-opted into the 21st Century games of the regional powers.

The paper first examines the structure position of superordinate games, asserting the relative games played by the five major state actors in the war. We then compare the two super-state ideological structures which competed through the materiality of the war, Turkey's NeoOttomanism and Russia's Third Rome thesis, and the role of historicism in these narrative construction systems which has resulted in patterns of greater regional military interventionism. We then ascribe the Armenia loss to Russia's inaction, arguing that the Russia policy both committed Armenia to a material loss, while extracting a policy victory from Turkey's lowered position in the international system. Ultimately, we argue that the regional war resulted in a political stalemate but strengthened the ideological positions of the two regional powers Russia and Turkey, hardening the path-dependencies of both states' ideological policy structures and ideology deployment structures. for the coming decade of advancing 19th century statist positions in the Black Sea and Caucasus region through 21st Century means of advanced weaponry warfare, information technology discourse command and control, and ideological structuration.

## **Superordinate Geopolitical Games**

The dominant discourses in the scant analyses in English of the Forty-Four Day Second Karabakh War of 2020 have centred on either the inter-ethnic violence, simplistic geopolitical analysis of Russia and Turkey, or a demonstrated disinterest in region.<sup>1</sup> Against the simplicity of the territorial argument, contemporary theories of critical geopolitics do not see absolute control of territorial land as the highest order political game but rather that there exists a higher-ordinate plane of control of 'access'.<sup>2</sup> Alongside games of classical geopolitics such as control of territorial land we can see a hierarchy of motivations where access and control of non-material resources become more valuable than land.<sup>3</sup> Edward Luttwak's hierarchy of ordinality in geopolitical incentives and outcomes is a useful way to operationalise the multi-layered and multi-dimensional games states played in this microregional war with macroregional agents and global implications.<sup>4</sup> Superordinality is a concept proposed by Edward Luttwak for the analysis of 21st Century geoeconomic games.<sup>5</sup> Access to symbolic capital in particular is a superordinate motivation which allows for narrative formation and discourse control.

The Second Karabakh War called into acute the region's inverted symbolic capital of distrust. Symbolic capital is control of a narrative through language, symbols and the objects of culture in a social discourse.<sup>6</sup> In the shadows of the Azerbaijan-Armenia political-military conflict, a wrestle for control of access to symbolic capital in the Russia-Turkey negative space occurred. Conventional analyses of the conflict already accept that Azerbaijan sees the conflict as territorial while Armenia views the conflict as motivated as an attempt at ethnic cleansing. In this analysis of the five nominal state belligerents of the Second Karabakh War, we move political geography and critical geopolitics into the spaces of political discourse to allow for a matrix of

superordinate, ordinate and subordinate motivations and outcomes in the pursuit and operation of war.<sup>7</sup> While all state appealed to elements of international law and to historical legitimacy, the reality was that none of the actors were agencing international law as their primary source of legitimacy and none of the ordained games played were particularly dependent on international law.

At the lowest level of analysis, this was a war defined by Azerbaijan as territorial. However the higher-ordinate conflict between Russia and Turkey was a political game of conflicting narratives and discourse control. At this level of abstraction, Russia's Putin played and won the higher-ordinate game, and condemned Erdogan's Turkey to a series of sub-optimal future path-dependencies.<sup>8</sup> In descending order, we assess that Russia won the immediate superordinate games, Turkey lost the superordinate path to possible future gains by ceding legitimacy in the space of international law and geoeconomics.<sup>9</sup> We consider that Armenia lost the middle-ordinate game of civilisational integrity through the loss of territory, people, cultural heritage and the ability to defend against future losses, while Azerbaijan won the subordinate game of territorial acquisition, while Artsakh won the subordinate game of institutional survival.

Superordinate games in the Second Karabakh War			
State	Game	Result	Ordinality
Russian Federation	Access and control	Win	Superordinate
Republic of Turkey	Geoeconomic legitimacy	Lose	
Republic of Armenia	Civilisational integrity	Lose	Ordinate
Republic of Azerbaijan	Regaining territorial control	Win	Subordinate
Republic of Artsakh	Survival	Win	

**Figure 1. Ordinally scaled games in the Second Karabakh War.**

In this analysis, Turkey loses the most because its plausible deniability strategy has cost it access to discourse formation, and excluded it from future narratives centred on international law. Azerbaijan regains seven territories in a low-ordinate access game, ethnic Armenians retain and strengthen the possibility of international recognition for the state of Artsakh on the principles of self-determination of a peoples—a middle-ordinate game. But Russia wins control of the objects of symbolic capital and control of the negative space of discourse-control access denial. Anti-access Area Denial (A2/AD) is a reactionary expression to describe primarily China's weapons systems and maritime security theory for displacing United States dominance in Western Pacific. It grew into a lay buzzword to describe any such weapons system and security strategy which has a primary motivation of area denial, such as Russia's S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems. Here we apply the same concept to non-material symbolic capital in Russian security theory and ideology.<sup>10</sup>

However while the technological and regional power games were superordinate to the ordinate territorial games, there was a meta-ordinate game being played, between international law and

two conflicting forms of historicism. Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia and Turkey all have national foreign policies more characterised by historicism than by international law. All four seek to legitimise their foreign policy agendas by appeal to pasts characterised as historical 'wrongs.' Turkey has been deprived of its Ottomanism, Russia is constantly under threat of attack from NATO, Armenia is constantly under threat of attack, ethnic cleansing and cultural erasure, and Azerbaijan lost seven historical territories and its people suffered ethnic cleansing in the first war in the early 1990s. Historicism though is a well-worn race to the bottom in great power politics and international relations typologies of legitimacy.<sup>11</sup> Yet international law is largely inapplicable when inconvenient to higher-order state goals. In the meta-ordinate game of historical legitimacy, a new regional order is developing of conflicting ideologies, both are opposed to 'Western' international law.

### **Armenia Treaty-Compelled to Defeat by Russian Alliance**

The Second Karabakh War was won and lost within Moscow's foreign policy community which crafted and wielded a security policy of calculated inaction. The eventual truce arrangement was a Russia-Azerbaijan-Armenia trilateral agreement. But there were five key belligerents. Turkey was a direct belligerent in the conflict, and the distinction between Republic of Armenia and Artsakh Republic is important in both operational and political analysis. Russia played a hard hand to isolate Armenia by not defending Artsakh, not providing material support and effectively leaving Artsakh alone against a coalition of a Turkey-Azerbaijan combined operational force, Syrian mercenaries and Pakistan's opaque support. Knowing of Russia's strategic non-interference emboldened the Azerbaijan offensive. Where Turkey lost reputation and international standing, Russia gained in hard power and post-conflict forward deployment of peacekeeping operations on Azerbaijan territory, completing the trifecta of troops deployed in all three South Caucasus nations. Russia did not hide behind a proxy in this war, Russia is now openly militarily deployed in all three South Caucasus states. Pre-war peace negotiations under the *Madrid Principles* had established that the seven occupied territories were never to be kept by Armenia, but by handing them back in this peace deal, Armenia has now lost any leverage it once had for recognition of Artsakh as a *de jure* state.<sup>12</sup> But the final result allows Russian peacekeepers onto territory which under the *Madrid Principles* would have been within the territory that Azerbaijan had legitimised claims to under four United Nations resolutions before breaking this legitimacy on September 27 through the use of force.<sup>13</sup>

Russia Federation is treaty-bound to defend the Republic of Armenia under the CSTO framework.<sup>14</sup> The international security law dynamics of this latest conflict is that Russia interpreted Artsakh Republic as outside the framework, as simply ethnic Armenians within the territorial sovereignty of Azerbaijan.<sup>15</sup> This was a reversal of a non-binding policy position which had previously expressed the Russian security umbrella extending over Artsakh Republic.<sup>16</sup> This forced Republic of Armenia to admit that this war would not be covered by CSTO obligations.<sup>17</sup> But even without Russia's direct security guarantee to Artsakh Republic, the implied calculus from both sides of the conflict was that Russia would provide material and operational support to Armenia Republic and turn a blind eye to Armenia supplying and providing security to Artsakh,

which is a *de facto* independent state but *de jure* within the territorial sovereignty of Azerbaijan.<sup>18</sup> The parallels between Nagorno-Karabakh and Kosovo are in this sense difficult to ignore.<sup>19</sup>

But this implied calculus did not play out. There is a growing understanding that Russia's politicisation of security provision to Armenia had resulted in a clandestine *sine qua non* whereby Russia had forbidden Republic of Armenia to provide material support to Artsakh Republic at the threat of removing security provision to Republic of Armenia, which would leave Armenia open to direct attack from Republic of Turkey. Four weeks into the six-week war, Russia established a small base adjacent to the Lachin corridor, a very meagre show of support.<sup>20</sup> This withholding of security constitutes Russia utilising the shadow threat of force against Artsakh Republic by the Turkey-Azerbaijan coalition. It also utilises the shadow threat of implied force from Republic of Turkey to Republic of Armenia. This meant that operationally the Artsakh Defence Army as a military security unit was alone against the Republic of Turkey-Azerbaijan coalition forces, and as both a security unit and a political unit was abandoned to endure an enforced loss, for the political gain of Russia. This would be an extraordinary ploy on behalf of Russia. However it is rational and demonstrates the playing of a higher-ordinate game.

Through the Second Karabakh War, the Artsakh Defence Army received no reinforcements or material support, neither from Russia but also in a strategic oddity not from Armenia Republic either. Frontline troops were not rotated, meaning that Artsakh finished the war with the same men as had started 44 days earlier. This makes little sense without a *sine qua non* from Russia. Republic of Armenia only partially mobilised its military and even then very slowly.<sup>21</sup> Ethnic Armenian frontline troops on the actual line of control were mostly volunteers who crossed into Artsakh to mobilise. This means that there was virtually no transfer of military force from Republic of Armenia to Artsakh Republic. The terms of engagement of the war was thus a political decision, not a military one. Russia removing support for Artsakh Republic in the multiple trilateral meetings during the war explicitly communicated to President Aliyev that Russia was giving Azerbaijan *carte blanche* in military operations in Artsakh. In doing so, Putin seems to have been manipulating Pashinyan's acquiescence to Russia's ideal. Azerbaijan could agree to the truce terms unilaterally because its coalition partner Turkey was not at the final diplomatic table to play its higher-ordinate game. Thus the prize of the lowest-ordinate goal of reversion of the seven territories occupied by Armenia Republic since the close of the first war was enough short-term motivation for Azerbaijan to hamper both the mid-term goals of Azerbaijan and the longer-term goals of Turkey by allowing Russian troops to deploy directly into Azerbaijan. Russian peacekeeping troops and increasingly more sophisticated pieces of military hardware are now stationed in both territories of the previously occupied regions and in Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast borders proper.<sup>22</sup> This has occurred with the written acceptance of both Turkey and Azerbaijan. If Russia had openly backed Armenia, then Russian troops would likely be in exactly the same positions that they are now, except by force and against the will of Turkey. In this strategic victory for Russia, Turkey welcomed the deployment of the Russian troops through international diplomacy.

The Second Karabakh War technologically had many 20<sup>th</sup> century elements, trench warfare, indiscriminate shelling of civilian settlements, targeted shelling of military hardware, tank and

armoured personnel carrier contested control of spatial operations, and particularly at the close of the war in the Battle for Shushi, brutal hand to hand fighting.<sup>23</sup> The war was also squarely focused on 20<sup>th</sup> Century strategic goals of territory control and control denial, whereas more sophisticated industrial and post-industrial states are increasingly engaged in cyber and asymmetrical warfare operations.<sup>24</sup> The Karabakh theatre was for Turkey though an excellent testing ground in a real-world combat theatre for the Bayraktar TB2 armed drone technology which could then be later deployed to other areas of Turkey's military adventurist-driven or Russian expansionist conflict-driven theatres.<sup>25</sup>

The value of TB2 technology was thus not simply against the weaker Armenian forces, but rather testing and expanding the combat use of TB2 operations had wider implications for future conflicts with Russia and with NATO forces such as France in North Africa.<sup>26</sup> This is problematic in the current global and regional security dynamic as technologically advanced states such as Canada and Germany provided intellectual property, components, and equipment to the TB2 program which was then used against NATO core values and European commitments to international law.<sup>27</sup> This has left Turkey increasingly isolated within NATO political structures, not only as a result of 2020's military adventurism but is also representative of a long-term bifurcation of shared values. Canada has since cancelled contracts of specialised military equipment contracts under NATO to Turkey Republic which were shown to have been used in TB2 operations in Karabakh.<sup>28</sup>

Turkey overseas deployment of TB2 drones and sales of TB2 drone technology								
Turkey Republic Deployments								
Theatre	Date	Drone Operator	Partner Institution	Partner Institution	Operational	Turkey Command	Code Name	
Libya	2019 May	Turkey and Libya GNA (later Libya GNU)	Libyan Ground Forces	GNA Libyan Air Force	Unknown	Allegedly mixed		
Cyprus	2019 December	Turkey	Cyprus Turkish Peace Force Command		At least 2	Yes		
Syria (Idlib)	2020 March	Turkey Republic			166			
Azerbaijan (Karabakh)	2020 June	Azerbaijan Republic	Azerbaijan Ministry of Defence	Azerbaijan Air Forces and Air Defence	At least 12	Allegedly mixed	Operation Iron Fist	
Iraq (Iraqi Kurdistan)							Operation Claw Lightning	
Somalia	2021 December	Somalia	Somali National Army		Unknown	Mixed		

  

International Arms Trade								
State	Date	Primary Partner Institution	Secondary Partner Institution	No. Promised	No. Delivered	No. Due	Tech Transfer	Turkey Command
Ukraine	2019 March	Ukraine Air Force	Ukraine Navy	59 (54 Air Force; 5 Navy)	7 (6 Air Force; 1 navy)	52 (48 Air Force; 4 Navy)	Planned	No
Qatar	2020 April	Qatar Armed Forces		6	6	0	No	No, but operators trained in Turkey
Morocco	2021 April	Morocco Royal Armed Forces		19	13	6	No	No
Poland	2021 May	Polish Armed Forces		24	0	24	No	No
Kyrgyz Republic	2021 October	State Border Guard Service	Committee for National Security	3	≥ 1	≥ 1	No	No, but operators trained in Turkey
Turkmenistan	2021 September	Ministry of Internal Affairs	Turkmen Air Force (Allegedly)	Unknown; ≥ 6	6	Unknown	No	No
Niger	2021 November	Niger Armed Forces	Niger Air Force	6	Unknown	Unknown	No	No
Iraq	2021 December	Iraq Ministry of Defense	Iraq Ground Forces	8 + option of 4	0	8	Planned in principle	No
Somalia	2021 December	Somali National Army		Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	No	Mixed. Turkey drones on base; Somalia operate own drones

**Figure 2. Turkey Overseas Deployment of NATO Technology Bayraktar TB2 UCAV drones and sales of TB2 drone technology<sup>29</sup>**

Just as the 20<sup>th</sup> century wars were not between people and states as much as they were between industrial systems, the Second Karabakh War was a smart-weapons war, where the technologically superior NATO forces were deployed against Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh

armed with ageing Russian equipment, remaining not resupplied through the war, and with a Russia perhaps hesitant to allow Turkey to test its new weapons on a genuine Russian military intervention which would have given Turkey information on the capabilities of the new drone warfare systems against the second and third tier Russian military systems which are expendable enough to be deployed in fringe wars in the Caucasus and Ukraine.

The policy to temporarily isolate Armenia for Russian strategic gain against Turkey is sophisticated enough that there must have been serious debate within the Moscow inner circle about how to play this superordinate game. The policy mechanisms behind the formation and deployment of this foreign policy ploy could only have been deeply embedded within intellectual and foreign policy circles of the Moscow establishment.<sup>30</sup> However, to achieve this, President Putin, through the policy inaction, implicitly threatened Prime Minister Pashinyan with the cleansing of ethnic Armenians in Stepanakert.<sup>31</sup> While the war in the occupied territories did involve some limited civilians, the continuation of the war into the more densely populated territory of Artsakh on the old Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast carried with it an implicit threat of ethnic cleansing whether in the form of organised civilian murder or forced relocations. The front extending into Artsakh proper meant for Armenia the prospect of watching this unfold, while for Russia it changed no calculus in CSTO deployment as Artsakh remained entirely outside sovereign Armenian territory. This entailed significant political risk and thin margins for operational risk error on Russia's part. The result cements a Russian diplomatic victory alongside an Armenian military defeat, within the framework of a codified security alliance relationship. The trilateral peace treaty gives Russia significant access and control in the South Caucasus, for only the loss of narrative control within Armenia's domestic political space.<sup>32</sup> While Turkey was entirely excluded from the diplomatic process to conclude a war in which it was a direct belligerent.

## **Turkey Active Belligerent Status a Foreign Policy Loss to Russia**

In contrast with Russia's shadow security backing of Armenia, a growing body of evidence supports widespread claims that Republic of Turkey directly participated in Azerbaijan's military command structure during the war. Under customary and international law Turkey was clearly a direct belligerent in the Second Karabakh War. The exposure of Turkey as a direct belligerent comes at significant risk of loss in the superordinate games of discourse control and legitimacy in international law. Turkey President Erdoğan has spent much domestic political capital since the Gülen coup attempt to create and manage a series of domestic crises and international conflicts in order to ride a swell of managed nationalism.<sup>33</sup> Turkey's persistence with the Azerbaijan foreign policy alliance of 'One nation, two states' now seriously limits Turkey's multilateral and international law positions in the region.<sup>34</sup> The military operational competencies from the conflicts in Libya and Syria have also given Turkey a regional military operational apparatus, which was skilfully deployed in the Second Karabakh War. This was essentially Turkey exporting its developing operational capacity from its ongoing wars in Libya and Syria's Idlib to a new geography, effectively fighting the war directly for Azerbaijan, while being cautious about appearing openly in command of operations in order to preserve some legitimacy in future diplomacy.

In Libya, Turkey transferred and commanded Syrian mercenaries under joint command with Tripoli in the recent conflict with Tobruk's France and Russia-backed Libyan National Army.<sup>35</sup> The clandestine nature of Turkey's deployment of Syrian mercenaries in Libya had been an underlying cause of the more public tensions between Turkey and both Russia and France. This is also the underlying political motivation for Erdoğan's rhetorical exploitation of the terrorist attacks on French cities throughout the Karabakh war.<sup>36</sup> Russia's response to Turkey's use of Syrian mercenaries in Libya was to more openly target Turkey-backed Syrian groups on Syrian territory in the ongoing Idlib conflict. However the functional outcome of Turkey's deployment of Syrian mercenaries in Libya was an understanding that there would be no serious repercussions to deploying the same mercenaries in its other foreign wars. In the Second Karabakh War, the presence of Syrian mercenaries on the battlefield is now undeniable.<sup>37</sup> Turkey was able to deploy Syrian fighters to take the brunt of Azerbaijan's front-line losses in Fizuli and Jebayil. Azerbaijan's human losses of the war are not public, but the aggressor force in such a conflict is expected to take around three times the losses of the defending force.<sup>38</sup> Armenia's official losses are around 2,425 and we could expect Azerbaijan losses of around 7,500 and speculation is of between 10,000 and 12,000.<sup>39</sup> A buffer of 1,000-2,000 Syrian mercenaries to take the heaviest casualty rates on the line of contact is naturally beneficial to Azerbaijan regular force morale.

In addition to mercenaries, Turkish and Israeli produced drones were used extensively and effectively in Karabakh. As with mercenaries, Turkey drone-use assisted the Turkey-Azerbaijan coalition by taking pressure off ground soldiers by hastening advances and reducing frontline casualties.<sup>40</sup> The drone operational doctrine was near identical to Turkey's in Libya and Syria, meaning that the drones were likely either operated directly by Turkey or with substantial supervision from Turkish officers.<sup>41</sup> In the first few days of the war, Armenia claimed that Azerbaijan had handed control of its air space operational theatre to Turkey's direct command.<sup>42</sup> On September 29, a Turkish Air Force F-16 downed an Armenian Su-25 over Republic of Armenia while operating over Azerbaijan airspace.<sup>43</sup> President Aliyev denied accusations that the Turkish F-16 had been based in the Azerbaijan city of Ganja.<sup>44</sup> Satellite imagery though suggests that Turkey clandestinely operated air force command directly from Azerbaijan territory.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout the war, credible intelligence emerged of the presence of senior Turkey generals directly commanding both air and land operations of the Azerbaijan armed forces. These include Turkey Air Force Major General Göksel Kahya, and Major General Irfan Ozsert, as well as Turkey Land Forces General Bakhtiyar Ersay, General Umit Dünder and Lieutenant General Seref Ongay. The clearest command structure separation is that Turkey Land Forces Major General Bahtiyar Ersay directly supervised the Azerbaijan General Staff and Turkey Air Force Major General Göksel Kahya command Azerbaijan's air operations.<sup>46 47</sup> Göksel Kahya was formerly the head of Turkey's drone operations in Libya.<sup>48</sup> He also served as General Director of the Ministry of National Defence Management Services and as deputy undersecretary of Turkey's Ministry of National Defence. He is considered instrumental in Turkey's command of the Azerbaijan Air Force.<sup>49</sup> Major General Irfan Ozsert was also identified as having taken over command of Azerbaijan's drone operations. Ozsert is a former Turkish intelligence official who served with Kahya on the Turkish drone operation centre in Libya.<sup>50</sup> Land forces are to have fallen under the command of General

Bakhtiyar Ersay, who was also present during the joint Azerbaijan-Turkey military exercises in July 2020.<sup>51</sup> Ersay serves as Chief of Operational Directorate of the Ground Forces of Turkey and was previously imprisoned for 31 months for his alleged role in a 2003 coup attempt.<sup>52</sup> He likely served in Libya during the early days of the 2011 civil war. Prior to his command in Azerbaijan, he was in charge of several operations against PKK forces within Turkey.<sup>53</sup> Lieutenant General Seref Ongay, commander of the 3rd Field Army of the Turkey Land Forces is also reported to have directly served in Azerbaijan alongside General Ersay. General Ongay has experience fighting Kurdish militia in mountainous Eastern Turkey, similar operational terrain to Karabakh.<sup>54</sup> He previously served as the head of the Education and Doctrine Command of the Turkey Army.<sup>55</sup>

It is likely that the Turkey-Azerbaijan July 2020 joint military exercises were used as a cover for technical capacity transfer and preparation of Azerbaijan Armed Forces for Turkish command.<sup>56</sup> Major General Göksel Kahya is identified at a meeting of top officials during the joint exercises.<sup>57</sup> Kahya was pictured with Azerbaijan President Aliyev in Baku during the war.<sup>58</sup> At the end of the war Telegram channel Razminfo noted from photographic evidence of a diplomatic meeting that both Kahya and the commander of the Turkish Land Forces Umit Dündar were in Baku for a November 8 inter-ministerial meeting, two days before the truce was signed.<sup>59</sup> The level of command structure coordination required to achieve the Turkey-Azerbaijan coalition military objectives is significant. In October, Azerbaijan Chief of the General Staff Najmeddin Sadikhov was arrested for treason. His insubordination derived from dissatisfaction with allowing Turkey to take control of the Azerbaijan army.<sup>60</sup> He is accused of leaking prepared battle plans for the joint Turkey-Azerbaijan offensive on Karabakh to the Armenian side via a Russian intelligence contact and the location of Azerbaijan General Polad Gashimov who was killed by Armenia forces in the July 2020 border clashes.<sup>61</sup>

The risk of reputational damage in international law and loss of narrative formation control and discourse control for Turkey here is significant. While the immediate territorial gains for Azerbaijan are clear, less clear is Turkey's motivation for taking the risk of acting as a direct belligerent in a regional war with serious risks of escalation into war crimes and ethnic cleansing. The immediate short-term geopolitical gain which likely swayed Turkey's risk is the possibility of a direct link between Turkey and the Azerbaijan mainland through the Nakchivan corridor via a militarised corridor via Meghri, currently in Republic of Armenia. This subordinate geopolitical game for territorial acquisition also seems part of Russia's superordinate geopolitical calculus. For Russia, the Meghri corridor is an unguarded pin and a known variable in the negative space of any future Russia-Turkey conflict. Any Turkey move against Republic of Armenia in this space would only further strengthen Russia's position of legitimacy as a good international actor and security provider, a perverse inversion of the diplomatic calculus played by Russia in its security provision. A militarised corridor through Meghri would be a grand geopolitical prize for the Turkey-Azerbaijan coalition, but would come at the cost of further erosion of international legitimacy. In an interview after the truce, President Putin made implicit reference to Turkey's position in international law as a result of the settlement.<sup>62</sup> Putin has clearly condemned Turkey to a subordinate position in the legitimacy of the new status quo. This despite Russia's inaction in defence of its ally Armenia entailing significant political risk at the subordinate outcome level.

## Russia Shadow Ethnic Cleansing a Cynical Security Policy Tool

While Turkey's international standing is in freefall, Russia's access to narratives of legitimacy now proliferate: as responsible peacekeeper, as defender of regional stability in the absence of NATO action, and as legitimate defender of Orthodox cultural heritage.<sup>63</sup> Russia has thus received multiple paths to legitimacy formation without having fired a shot in the regionalised inter-ethnic conflict. While it was Russia's implied use of force threat against ethnic Armenians which achieved these goals, it was a shadow threat of allowing Turkey and Azerbaijan forces to be used against Armenia Republic in order to force a political concession from Prime Minister Pashinyan. These all benefit Russia's future narrative formation, and negate many of Turkey's avenues to narrative formation and discourse control, while still achieving the military goal of forward deploying Russian troops in Nagorno-Karabakh.

In a conflict between two armed forces over the seven Armenian occupied territories, this threat of ethnic cleansing is not motivation. However the capture of Shusha meant Azerbaijan-Turkey had the power to kill all the civilians in Stepanakert, and Russia would not intervene. This is what we mean by Russia wielding the threat as a policy tool of 'shadow ethnic cleansing'. It is enough that Russia wielded this policy weapon, the Azerbaijan-Turkey side need have no agency here at all, they might have had zero intention of committing ethnic cleansing in Stepanakert, the important part is that Russia through policy communicated to Armenia that it would allow this to happen. This is a powerful policy tool to use against a security ally. We argue that the Russian strategic goal was to use the implicit threat of ethnic cleansing of Artsakh to compel Pashinyan to accept the terms of loss. I.e Russia withheld all military support for Armenia and said 'look, watch your people die if you like, or sign this treaty'

The peace agreement that was eventually signed between Republic of Armenia, Republic of Azerbaijan and Russia Federation on November 10 was entirely of Russia's design.<sup>64</sup> It had become necessary for the Armenian side to capitulate to prevent further military losses and the imminent threat of ethnic cleansing in Artsakh Republic.<sup>65</sup> President Putin's willingness to use the shadow of ethnic cleansing as a threat to force Prime Minister Pashinyan to sign the surrender suggests that the deal had been on the table for weeks. The political deal itself is a modified version of the Lavrov Deal which has been Russia's preferred solution since at least 2016.<sup>66</sup> Russia had likely already written the terms in early October and offered both sides the same deal: with the daily moving line of contact being the variable of motivation. This means that Russia had internally worked out the political policy and military strategy already in September. The deployment of Russia's foreign policy was thus more akin to running a computer program than any reactionary or reactive policy formulation due to battlefield calculus.

Despite the military and cartographic truce being a victory for Russia's interests, the shadow threat of ethnic cleansing remains, including concern among ethnic Armenians for the safety of Armenian cultural heritage. Per the peace agreement, many churches, monasteries and other markers of Armenian culture are to be transferred to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has a demonstrated history of wilful destruction of Armenian cultural monuments, most notably the systematic destruction of the Armenian cemetery in Djurfa.<sup>67</sup> The ongoing attempts to characterise any

Armenian history in the region as 'Caucasian Albanian' is indicative of the intention to erase a people's history, language and culture. Armenia is effectively allied with Sunni Iran, with well-maintained mosques in Yerevan and Stepanakert. Armenia is not anti-muslim, to the extent it demonstrates vitriol it is anti-Turk. While mosques were allowed to fall into disrepair in the largely uninhabited occupied territories, Creating the narrative of Armenia as anti-mosque was a constructed narrative of the war. With the site of one supposedly desecrated mosque quickly bulldozed to make way for a new highway. It seemed to be a condition of entry for foreign journalists such as New York Times and BBC to have to comment on the supposed desecration of mosques. While Azerbaijan now controls all the territory where such desecrations would have taken place, the nationalist social media campaign during the war has not translated into documented evidence of Muslim cultural erasure on the Armenian side in the occupied territories.

While the current conflict has thus far been limited to cultural cleansing, the realities of ethnic cleansing of the past are real. During the First Karabakh war, Baroness Cox's Hansard testimony raised the issue of indiscriminate fire and ethnic cleansing of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>68</sup> Thomas de Waal, widely considered an objective historian, has detailed primary sources that demonstrate forced displacements and ethnic cleansing from both sides in the first Karabakh War.<sup>69</sup> The first war ended in 1994 with the never implemented Bishkek Protocol, meaning that internally displaced persons, particularly from the Azerbaijan territories occupied by Armenian forces, were never allowed to return.<sup>70 71</sup> The freezing of this 'territory for recognition' principle contributed to a growing hostility in Azerbaijan's official rhetoric and popular discourse.<sup>72</sup> The Artsakh capital and commercial centre Stepanakert was shelled indiscriminately from the first day of the war, in disregard of civilian life.<sup>73</sup> Egregious examples of ethnic violence have included a videotaped double execution in Hadrut and the mutilation of an elderly civilian by dismembering ears.<sup>74</sup> Chemical weapons were also used to deforest the area around Shusha.<sup>75</sup> The battle for Shusha itself was the last strategic holdout before Stepanakert would be vulnerable to ethnic cleansing operations. The painting of swastika on a destroyed car is indicative of the mentality of soldiers in the field.<sup>76</sup>

The ongoing conflict is not based solely on territorial issues. Its heart and soul is ethnic hatred. This means in an all-out war scenario where international law is absent and no chance for NATO protection was feasible, the fears of ethnic cleansing are manifest. Through the latest conflict, numerous acts went beyond the military action of territorial conquest, demonstrating a state policy advocating genocide. Long-time Baku mayor Hajibala Abutalybov was quoted as saying 'our goal is the complete elimination of Armenians'.<sup>77</sup> During the latest conflict, Qarabag FK football club public relations official Nurlan Ibrahimov was expelled from UEFA after writing 'we must kill all Armenians-children, women and the elderly. We need to kill them without making a distinction. No regrets. No compassion.'<sup>78</sup> In 2004 Ramil Safarov murdered an Armenian servicemen while both were attending a NATO-sponsored conference within European Union jurisdiction, earning praise from Azerbaijan's Human Rights ombudsman and a pardon after extradition.<sup>79</sup> However despite clear causes for mutual distrust and hatred, Azerbaijan maintains a state policy advocating genocide which is not replicated on the Armenia side. President Aliyev has repeatedly claimed that ethnic Armenians would be free to live in peace in Azerbaijan once

the transfer of the occupied territories was complete.<sup>80</sup> However the evidence that Baku pursues a deliberate, sophisticated and well deployed government policy advocating ethnic cleansing is substantiated.<sup>81</sup>

The OSCE Minsk Group co-chaired by Russia, United States and France was the nominal political authority underpinning the diplomatic arm of the security arrangement of the Karabakh conflict.<sup>82</sup> However in 2020, neither NATO nor France were willing to act in order to maintain the legitimacy of this security architecture. Similarly, United Nations institutions, international Human Rights law, and European Union statutory Human Rights law were all institutionally impotent through this conflict.<sup>83</sup> This left the international and European communities as onlookers to a conflict among five belligerents with the very real threat of ethnic cleansing. The international political calculus need not consider the threat of ethnic cleansing from Azerbaijan as a variable—this should be assumed as real and persistent threat, codified as state policy. But European Union and NATO onlookers should be considering the tools of leverage that Russia has used to achieve its goals in this conflict. By the act of inaction, Russia used negative space to engineer a political gain over Turkey through the use of an implicit threat of ethnic cleansing. While ethnic cleansing did occur in the sense of ethnic Armenians forcefully displaced from the area of Nagorno-Karabakh militarily lost, the implicit threat of an impending massacre of civilian towns and the city of Stepanakert did not occur. However, Russia wielded the explicit and real threat of ethnic cleansing as a shadow policy tool. By implicitly communicating to Azerbaijan that Russia would not intervene regardless of Azerbaijan actions towards ethnic Armenian civilians in Artsakh Republic, Moscow leveraged Yerevan into yielding the position that Russia now holds regarding Turkey, the placement of Russian troops in all three South Caucasus countries.

Armenia relied on Russia Federation as a security provider. For ethnic Armenians, the Karabakh Conflict is viewed as an existential threat and no nation outside Russia provides security guarantees proportionate to this threat. However Armenia was forced to rely on a one-sided security alliance which was easily politically abused by Russia to deepen the weakness of Republic of Armenia dependence. Russia has not lost any political capital with Azerbaijan, and Russia has entirely subverted Turkey's geopolitical and more importantly its geoeconomic ambitions in the region. Having served its purpose, Russia will likely seek to rebuild a dependent security relationship with Armenia. The Russian policy was cold political calculus.

## **Conclusion—Regionalised Conflict Stalemate with Advanced Supra-regional Ideological Positions**

There are few inter-ethnic conflict zones with clear political solutions. Returning the seven occupied Azerbaijan territories in return for sovereignty of Armenian Artsakh has been a clear solution for decades. The inability of the local belligerents to agree through negotiations is indicative of both their political localism, as well as the toothlessness of the OSCE Minsk Group process. However the inability of either international law or of institutionalised international relations through the regional powers of Russia and Turkey to negotiate a settlement short of

waging a 19th century-style territorial war in 2020 speaks to larger problems in the growing techno-security and interlocking regional security paradigms.

The Second Karabakh War barely involved either Republic of Armenia or Republic of Azerbaijan. The principal military conflict was between the Artsakh Republic and the Republic of Turkey, and the political victor was the Russian Federation. Republic of Armenia, isolated, and ignored by its Russia ally was eventually forced into a political deal which served other states' interests more than its own and which does not guarantee the long-term security of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. The disregard the European and North American powers took towards a hot conflict with NATO member Turkey which included the very real threat of ethnic cleansing and wider threats of spilling over into wider, protracted, regional conflicts with balance of powers implications is stark. In our analysis of superordinated strategic games, the biggest losers are the players who did not play the game, NATO's shared technology as a reactive force and the ability of international law to protect European human rights values have both taken credibility losses.

As a result of the terms of the truce, Azerbaijan enjoys a short-term domestic public relations victory based on similar political outcomes as were already on offer under the Madrid Principles which Azerbaijan had continuously rejected. However to achieve a similar political outcome by force using foreign mercenaries, Turkey's cross-border operations and direct command structures, chemical weapons in deforestation operations, and executions and mutilations of both civilians and prisoners of war, Azerbaijan has diminished its legitimacy to institutionally engage with regional and global trade, integration, and cultural actors and delegitimised its position in international law. There is no such idea in international law or international relations as 'brotherly support' for a Turkic neighbour, and the exact degree of participation of nuclear-capable Pakistan in the conflict has not been established.

While Azerbaijan was the nominal aggressor state in the Second Karabakh War, the war was led by, fought by, and won by Republic of Turkey's technology. The biggest losers in this conflict though have been the people of Turkey. Turkey's security position within NATO and market position on the edge of the European Union should have meant a domestic policy of projecting competence as a security and economic regional middle power. Instead, bizarre economic policies have destroyed the currency, the people beset with inflation, Turkey is in direct diplomatic conflict with France, its economic relationship with the European Union is again under question, its membership of NATO is becoming both a strategic and political liability, and its geoeconomic connections throughout the global economy are increasingly dubious. This institutional damage to Turkey's economic and political systems will likely play out over the course of the 2020s at great cost to individual Turkish citizens. For a 19th Century geopolitical gain, Turkey has sacrificed higher-ordinate future gains in 21st Century geoeconomic spheres.

In the macroscope, the tiny, regional, nominally ethnic-based land war in Nagorno-Karabakh has allowed for the direct or indirect friction of the four conflicting geoeconomic models of the region. Russia's complex blend of Soviet-inheritance legitimacy, realism, and neoEurasianism has strengthened. Turkey's Pan-Turkic neo-Ottoman world-view has been exposed as lacking operational or ideological depth. China's Belt and Road now stands at risk of dereliction as its

core economic partner Turkey directly faces Russian chokepoints on every trade route. While the European Union was absent and impotent in the face of a war of aggression and direct inter-ethnic violence. In South Caucasus security, both Europe and Turkey have now ceded legitimacy to Russia. The results of this Russian empowerment will likely play out in future superordinate games in the fields of Eastern Europe, Central Africa, the Middle East and the Western Indian Ocean.

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