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SHIFT IN THE REGIONAL BALANCE OF POWER AS A PRECONDITION FOR AZERBAIJAN'S MILITARY INTERVENTION IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH IN 2020

Abstract

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020 decisively influenced the regional security architecture of the South Caucasus and the fate of the protracted Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict over the status of this mountainous enclave. This paper aims to examine the circumstances that enabled Azerbaijan's military victory and the transformation of the regional order. The theoretical framework applied is neoclassical realism, which integrates structural factors and unit-level variables in the analysis of states' foreign policy. The paper argues that the altered regional balance of power constituted an essential precondition for Azerbaijan's armed intervention and subsequent triumph in the autumn of 2020. This shift resulted from a combination of interrelated factors. The first pertains to Russia's neutral stance toward the warring parties, accompanied by a gradual weakening of its regional supremacy. The second concerns the growing role of Turkey as Azerbaijan's ally, which particularly contributed to the rapid modernisation of Baku's

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armed forces. Finally, the passivity of Iran and the West, along with the deepening military cooperation between Israel and Azerbaijan, further strengthened Baku's regional position. These factors reshaped the regional order in the South Caucasus and made Azerbaijan's military intervention possible.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey, Nagorno-Karabakh, region, balance of power

INTRODUCTION

Amid the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, Europe's preoccupation with Brexit, and Russia's Navalny case, a local conflict between two relatively small states in the South Caucasus over an even smaller piece of territory failed to attract significant international attention (Hayrapetyan 2022, 83). Nevertheless, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, fought from September 27, to November 10, 2020, demonstrated a dramatic shift in the regional balance of power through one of the most destructive conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Azerbaijan's victory nearly annulled the outcome of the first war and paved the way for the complete reintegration of Nagorno-Karabakh into Baku's jurisdiction three years later. The dissolution of the Republic of Artsakh, as Armenians refer to the region, underlined the fragility of the decades-long status quo that had safeguarded Armenia's territorial gains achieved immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Throughout history, relations between the states of the South Caucasus have been largely shaped by the influence of surrounding empires. In this regard, local conflicts and shifts in the balance of power have often been direct consequences of changes in the power equilibrium among regional giants. This decisive impact of external actors on the peoples of the South Caucasus remains a historical constant, clearly visible even in the post-Cold War era. The diverse indirect involvement of multiple regional and international actors led to the portrayal of the conflict as a "local world war." At the same time, its outcome underlined that the use of force as an instrument of foreign policy remains relevant and, under certain conditions, can serve as an effective tool for advancing national interests (Hayrapetyan 2022, 84; Trapara 2021, 96).

The goal of this paper is to examine the circumstances, or more precisely, the preconditions, that enabled Azerbaijan's military intervention and triumph in the autumn of 2020. The central hypothesis is that the change in the regional balance of power created the necessary conditions for Azerbaijan's successful military campaign. The theoretical framework employed is neoclassical realism, whose capacity to integrate structural determinants with unit-level factors allows for a comprehensive examination of the key drivers shaping the strategic environment of the conflict. The opportunity seized by Baku resulted both from the interaction of the most powerful regional actors and from the perception of long-term shifts in the balance of power in the South Caucasus between the adversarial states. Unlike analyses of the conflict published immediately after its conclusion, the five-year distance allows this study to consider the broader implications of the war not only for the belligerents but also for the major powers invested in the region's fate.

The following sections define the foundations of the theoretical approach suitable for explaining the shift in the regional balance of power, which facilitated the "unfreezing" of the conflict and Azerbaijan's victory. The discussion then turns to the policy of the Russian Federation toward the warring parties, as a great power that views the South Caucasus as part of its "backyard" and natural sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, as well as to its key regional challenger, the Republic of Turkey. The paper subsequently examines the limited influence of other regional and global actors on the conflict, focusing on Iran, Israel, and the European Union. Finally, the conclusion summarises the key factors that contributed to Azerbaijan's victory and their implications for other states embroiled in territorial disputes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the study of international relations, the theoretical approach whose core is occupied by the balance of power – understood as a concept rooted in "common sense and obvious reasoning" – is realism (Hume 1994, 154–160). Within the broad realist tradition, structural realism, or neorealism, has traditionally held a dominant place in analysing this phenomenon, emphasising the distribution of power among great powers in the international system. For Kenneth Waltz, the founder of this school, "if there is a distinct political theory of international politics, it is indeed the theory of the balance of power" (Volec 2008, 130). For

structural realists, due to systemic incentives, “a balance of power tends to form regardless of whether one or all states consciously pursue its establishment and maintenance” (Volc 2008, 132). However, identifying patterns of interaction among the most powerful states in the international system is neither sufficient nor primarily intended to explain the foreign policies of individual states, for which regional dynamics often outweigh global ones. For small and medium-sized states, what matters more than the overall relations of the great powers is the ability of global actors to project power into the region, as well as the interests of specific regional actors that they promote and safeguard (Preradović 2024, 48). It is within the interaction of influential external powers and local states that a specific regional balance of power emerges. Conceptualising it requires clarifying the mechanisms by which systemic pressures are translated into concrete policies and strategies of individual actors.

The approach that enables such an integration of external and internal variables, by revisiting certain postulates of classical realism, is neoclassical realism (Rose 1998, 146). “While grounded in the primacy of power, it builds upon three fundamental assumptions of the realist tradition: that individuals” owe their security to collective organisation within political communities; that the essence of politics lies in the “perpetual struggle of such groups for power and security in a world of scarce resources; and that the relative distribution of power constitutes the fundamental currency of politics” (Taliaferro 2012, 77). A crucial distinction between neoclassical and structural realism lies in their operationalisation of the balance of power. Unlike neorealists, who view balancing as an automatic process steered almost by Smith’s “invisible hand”, neoclassical realists consider it the product of deliberate choices made by states that consciously adopt balancing policies. This distinction leaves room for blunders, miscalculations, and absent or delayed responses (Živojinović 2008, 374). In this sense, the quasi-natural law is replaced by the uncertain politics of balancing. The distinction arises from the fact that the two approaches ultimately aim to explain different phenomena: whereas neorealism, as a theory of international politics, seeks to explain outcomes of systemic interactions, neoclassical realism aims to explain the foreign policies of individual states – thus constituting a theory of foreign policy (Živojinović 2008, 157).

Furthermore, when analysing regional balances of power, it is necessary to define the region and regional order within a realist

framework – an aspect often neglected. For realists, a region is primarily an expression of material determinism, that is, a shared geographic space that pushes states to interact with one another more frequently than with external actors (Merom 2003, 111). Within this vortex of interactions, states perceive themselves, and are perceived by others, as constitutive parts of the region (Merom 2003, 111). The *differentia specifica* compared to other approaches lies in the exclusion of cultural, social, or linguistic identities from the definition, owing to realism's focus on the distribution of power and interests that determine the frequency of interstate interactions (Merom 2003, 111).

Based on this definition, it is clear that any analysis of regional order rests upon the distribution of power. Systemic power is transferred into a region when two cumulative conditions are met: a systemic actor, typically a great power, must possess greater capabilities than regional states and hold a strategic interest in the region (Merom 2003, 112). When both criteria are fulfilled, two basic patterns of influence are possible. The first entails the dominant influence of a single power, which enjoys a hegemonic position and an exclusive sphere of influence (Merom 2003, 112). One of the most salient examples of such control is the position of the United States in the Western Hemisphere following the implementation of the Monroe Doctrine. The second pattern is more complex and involves competition between two or more powers for regional influence, where they vie for the allegiance of regional states by supporting local clients in disputes. In such cases, the regional order may be characterised as contested or competitive (Merom 2003, 112). During the Cold War, for instance, the two superpowers sought to boost their positions in the Middle East by supporting different local actors and their specific interests.

Based on these criteria, in the South Caucasus, Russia and Turkey emerge as the two actors whose posture most decisively shaped the regional balance of power and therefore constitute the primary focus of this analysis. On the eve of the 2020 conflict, the regional order was in a prolonged state of transition, from one characterised by the decisive influence of a single power to one increasingly defined by the competition of at least two. Over time, this process reshaped the regional balance of power. When coupled with the dramatic modernisation of Azerbaijan's military and technological capabilities, it decisively influenced the outcome of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war.

RUSSIA'S POLICY TOWARDS THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

Since the early 19th century, when the “poet of the Caucasus,” Mikhail Lermontov, portrayed the region as an exotic mountainous periphery of the vast empire and a sanctuary for exiles, the South Caucasus has been an integral part of Russia’s geopolitical space. The temporary discontinuity caused by the revolution and the dissolution of the Russian Empire was soon resolved through the reintegration of the entire Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia included, into the Soviet Union (Britannica 2025). Following the collapse of the communist giant, the statehood of the Caucasian republics was reaffirmed. However, at the same time, the longstanding conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly Armenian-populated enclave formally under Baku’s sovereignty, was intensified. The first war ended in 1994 with Armenian territorial gains, mediated by Russia, which led to the signing of the Bishkek Protocol and the establishment of the OSCE Minsk Group, tasked with finding a long-term solution (Jović-Lazić 2021, 216). While formally co-chairing the Minsk Group with the United States and France, Moscow pursued its own independent engagement with the conflicting parties, thereby retaining a pivotal role in regulating the conflict (Abushov 2019, 81).

What were the main directions of Russian involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh? They followed the overarching objectives of Russia’s grand strategy after President Vladimir Putin consolidated power: the restoration of great power status and the establishment of regional dominance in the “near abroad,” that is, the post-Soviet space (Marange 2019, 51). The South Caucasus, as a former part of the USSR, remained strategically important for Moscow, a fact exhibited most clearly in its military intervention in Georgia in 2008 and its persistent attempts to act as the indispensable mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. To understand the impact of the Kremlin’s policy on the regional balance of power, it is necessary to examine its posture towards both Armenia and Azerbaijan, before and during the 2020 war, as well as the long-term consequences of the conflict for Russia’s presence in the South Caucasus.

Armenia has traditionally been Moscow’s closest regional ally. As an active CSTO member, hosting a Russian military base on its territory and Russian troops stationed along its borders with Turkey and Iran, cooperation with Moscow has been an essential pillar of

Yerevan's security and defence policy (Minasyan 2013, 1). Moreover, in the decade preceding the 2020 war, Russia was by far Armenia's most significant arms supplier (SIPRIa 2021). These allied connections and military cooperation boosted expectations of at least implicit Kremlin support in the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh's status. However, since Putin's rise to power, Russia's rhetoric toward the conflicting parties became increasingly balanced, emphasising Moscow's mediatory role and ruling out the possibility of direct intervention (Hayrapetyan 2022, 87). These tendencies amplified after Armenia's "Velvet Revolution" of 2018, which brought Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to power and made him more open to cooperation with Western countries from which he expected financial and diplomatic support (Jović-Lazić 2021, 225–226). The overthrow of a pro-Russian government through mass protests revived old Kremlin fears of Western-orchestrated "colour revolutions." Despite Pashinyan's attempts to preserve political and security ties with Moscow, Armenia's allegiance became questionable in Russian eyes (Jović-Lazić 2021, 225–226).

By contrast, Russia's relations with Azerbaijan after the USSR's collapse fluctuated, shaped by the asymmetry of power and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Following the first war, Baku's perception of Moscow was dominated by scepticism, believing that Russia's rhetorical support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity masked *de facto* military assistance to Yerevan and the absence of real pressure on Armenia to withdraw from the occupied territories (Abushov 2019, 73). Nonetheless, mutual recalibration ultimately promoted a new dynamic. Two factors were decisive. The first, more superficial, was the growing trust between leaders, particularly between Putin and the Aliyev political dynasty, represented by Heydar and later Ilham Aliyev (Valiyev and Mamishova 2019, 4–6). The second, more significant, was the broader reorientation of both states' strategic outlooks. Azerbaijan gradually shifted from its initial pro-Western course to a more cautious approach, combining balancing and bandwagoning with Russia (Valiyev and Mamishova 2019, 2–3). Unable to ignore Moscow's role in a conflict of such high stakes as its territorial integrity, Baku reassessed its policy toward Russia. Simultaneously, Moscow began perceiving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as an obstacle to closer ties with Azerbaijan (Abushov 2019, 81). Thus, adopting a more neutral position toward the warring parties allowed Russia to maximise its regional influence. The frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh enabled Moscow to strengthen its position

not only in Armenia but also in Azerbaijan. Between 2011 and 2020, alongside being Armenia's primary arms supplier, Russia also accounted for nearly two-thirds of Azerbaijan's arms imports (SIPRI 2021a) – a striking indicator of this policy shift.

How did these relations affect Russia's position during the 2020 war? On the first day of hostilities, September 27, Putin urged Pashinyan to de-escalate and cease military action (Kremlin 2020). Moscow also joined the Minsk Group co-chairs in "calling for an immediate ceasefire and a return to negotiations" as the only path to a sustainable settlement (OSCE 2020). However, beyond rhetorical commitments to peace, most of the war was marked by the absence of any tangible Russian intervention. Despite Yerevan's appeals, stressing that the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh threatened Russia's national security, the Kremlin refrained from siding with either party (Miarka and Łapaj-Kucharska 2021, 3). This stance echoed Putin's earlier position, reiterated in early 2020, "that Russia did not recognise Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Armenia," and therefore an attack on the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh would not constitute an attack on a CSTO member (Antal 2022). Russia engaged more energetically in diplomacy only near the war's end. This raised suspicions that Moscow had earlier expressed its red lines to Baku regarding the advance of Azerbaijani forces (Askerov and Ibadoghlu 2023, 248). The timing reinforced such speculation: President Aliyev repeatedly underscored that victory would be incomplete without capturing the symbolically important city of Shusha (Shushi in Armenian), and Russia assumed diplomatic initiative immediately after Azerbaijani troops entered the city on November 8 (Askerov and Ibadoghlu 2023, 248). Negotiations initiated on November 9 under Moscow's auspices quickly resulted in a ceasefire agreement (Askerov and Ibadoghlu 2023, 248). The following day, the trilateral declaration signed by Pashinyan, Aliyev, and Putin officially ended the war and mandated the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the conflict zone (Askerov and Ibadoghlu 2023, 256). Additionally, Russia and Turkey agreed to establish a joint monitoring centre in Azerbaijan's Aghdam district in 2021 (Jović-Lazić 2021, 219). Crucially, the agreement did not refer to the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Despite Russia's initial inactivity, its role in halting hostilities and deploying peacekeepers was widely perceived in early postwar analyses as a diplomatic success that would consolidate Moscow's long-term regional influence (Askerov and Ibadoghlu 2023; Tučić 2021;

Welt and Bowen 2021). However, behind this façade of triumph lay a more profound transformation of the regional balance of power to Russia's disadvantage. Some cautious Russian analysts recognised this immediately. Konstantin Makiyenko, co-founder of the Moscow-based Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (TSAST), argued that "the geopolitical consequences of the second Karabakh war are a disaster not only for Armenia, but also for Russia," in a new reality marked by a "sharp decline" of Russian influence and the strengthening of Turkey's role (Макиенко 2020). He posed the key question: "Why should Baku now continue its balanced policy of manoeuvring between the three imperial nations – Russia, Turkey, and Iran – that have dominated this region for the past three centuries?" (Макиенко 2020). Having regained the territories lost in 1994 and secured a direct land connection to Turkey, Azerbaijan "can now speak to Russia in a completely different tone" (Макиенко 2020). For this reason, Makiyenko described the outcome as a "tragedy" for Moscow (Макиенко 2020). In retrospect, this seemingly pessimistic assessment proved accurate. In September 2023, while Russia's attention was focused on the war in Ukraine, Azerbaijan launched a swift offensive that brought the entire Nagorno-Karabakh under its control, effectively ending the decades-long conflict (IISS 2023). Consequently, Baku's need to accommodate Russian interests diminished, evident in the rising tensions between the two countries in late 2024 and throughout 2025 (Al Jazeera 2025).

The sources of this development lie in Russia's neutrality before and during the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. This stance encouraged Azerbaijan to resolve the conflict militarily. While necessary, it was not sufficient to explain the altered regional balance of power that enabled Baku's military success in 2020. The following section turns to the policy of a state that was anything but neutral, a state whose unequivocal support for one party significantly strengthened its influence and positioned it as the principal challenger to Russia's presence in the South Caucasus.

TURKEY'S POLICY TOWARDS THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

In the process of conflict resolution, alongside Russia as the dominant actor in the South Caucasus, Turkey gradually assumed an increasingly prominent role, bolstered by its expanding material

capacities and political ambitions within its regional environment. The country's economic rise at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Jarosiewicz 2013) enabled Ankara to develop and pursue a more proactive foreign policy, the strategic orientation of which was primarily shaped by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in power since 2002. During the first conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Ankara maintained a neutral position, assessing that direct involvement could generate more damaging than positive consequences, particularly in terms of potential confrontation with Russia (Yavuz 2023, 292). The closure of the Armenian-Turkish border and Azerbaijan's severe military and political defeat further sapped Turkey's regional influence. However, Ankara's carefully managed and long-term policy in the following decades, based on the systematic strengthening of Azerbaijani capacities, led to a significant reshaping of the regional balance of power in its favour. This very transformation created the first and most important precondition for Azerbaijan's offensive in 2020.

With the rise of the Justice and Development Party, Turkish foreign policy underwent a profound transformation. A focus on foreign policy goals that enjoyed broad public approval, coupled with the replacement of the existing diplomatic corps with new structures far more loyal to the party and its assertive approach (Giannotta, Suha Cubukcuoglu, and Al Qutbah 2024), had three key implications for Turkey's policy toward the South Caucasus, directly influencing Azerbaijan's strategic calculations.

The first change was domestic political pressure, which compelled the new Turkish leadership to abandon its previously neutral stance toward the conflict. Public opinion in Turkey, which in the new political framework acquired far greater influence over foreign policy decision-making than in previous decades, perceived the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh as a national defeat, attributing responsibility for the lack of adequate support to Baku to the Turkish authorities of the time (Yavuz 2023, 286). The idea of unity between Turks and Azeris, encapsulated in the slogan "two states, one nation," further reinforced a sense of historical and moral obligation within Turkish society, stemming from the perception of Ankara's insufficient engagement in supporting Azerbaijan during earlier conflicts (Antal 2022, 9). This change in the political atmosphere meant that Baku was no longer alone in any potential conflict—it now stood backed by a regional power of more than 80 million people, which regarded its success as a matter of national prestige.

The second key change was the establishment of economic ties, which gave Turkey a material incentive to support a shift in the territorial status quo. Ankara's strategic aim to reduce its dependence on Russian energy dominance, while simultaneously meeting the growing needs of its economy and population, found expression in the development of infrastructure projects enabling the transport of oil and gas from Azerbaijan (Hafizoglu 2016). The construction of the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, along with accompanying energy infrastructure during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, provided Turkey with transport and energy links to Azerbaijan without the need for transit through Armenia as a hostile state. However, Georgia's intermediary role in this network, coupled with its pronounced vulnerability to Russian political and security pressures, highlighted for both Baku and Ankara the necessity of an alternative route excluding potentially problematic third parties. The Zangezur Corridor emerged as the only viable solution – a transport and energy route traversing the southernmost part of Armenian territory, connecting Azerbaijan with its exclave of Nakhchivan, and subsequently with Turkey. However, the realisation of this project remained impossible as long as Yerevan retained control over the disputed area. This economic imperative created circumstances in which Turkey was no longer a neutral observer but an interested party with direct stakes in Azerbaijan's military victory.

The third change concerned the systematic strengthening of Azerbaijan's military capacities, which created the material preconditions for a successful offensive. In order to assist its close ally in reclaiming the disputed territories and to "correct the mistake" of the 1990s, when Turkey had offered Azerbaijan only diplomatic support, Ankara decided to employ the growing capacities of its armed forces and defence industry to train and equip the Azerbaijani military. Baku's intention, following its defeat in the war with Armenia, to transform its armed forces along the lines of NATO member states, further facilitated this process and opened space for more intensive cooperation with Turkey (Sumerinli 2010, 145). In the early 2000s, a process of security cooperation between the two countries was launched, reaching a new level with the signing of the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support in 2010 (Huseynov 2020, 1). This document outlined the framework for military cooperation, with particular emphasis on military education and the organisation of joint exercises (Abasov 2011). Such an approach enabled Baku to rapidly abandon its Soviet military legacy (Erickson 2023, 225),

especially in the field of doctrinal principles and operational planning, while simultaneously creating a need for the procurement of weaponry adapted to the requirements of the new doctrine.

Revenues from energy exports to Turkish and European markets allowed Azerbaijan to embark on an extensive process of modernising its weapons and military equipment, a process far beyond the reach of Armenia's considerably more modest economy (CIA 2021). According to available estimates, between 2010 and 2020, Baku invested between 28 billion USD (SIPRI 2021b) and 42 billion USD (Antal 2022, 8) in the acquisition of modern armaments, with Turkey playing a key role as a supplier of a significant number of armored combat vehicles (APA 2012) and Bayraktar TB-2 unmanned combat aerial vehicles (Rehimov 2020), which would prove decisive in the subsequent conflict (Hecht 2022, 33). Cooperation between Turkish and Azerbaijani armed forces during this period steadily intensified, particularly in terms of the frequency and scale of joint military exercises (Gurbanov 2019). The culmination of this process occurred in the months preceding the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War: in July and August 2020, a joint military exercise was conducted involving as many as 11,000 Turkish troops, aimed at testing the combat readiness and operational efficiency of units designated for direct engagement in wartime conditions (Huseynov 2020, 1). This exercise sent a clear signal that Baku could count on immediate Turkish support in the event of renewed conflict, radically altering assessments of the likelihood of success in a military operation.

The outcome of a quarter-century of systematic Turkish policy was the redefinition of Ankara's position in the South Caucasus and the significant disruption of the regional balance of power in a space long marked by Moscow's dominance. By developing economic cooperation with Azerbaijan, Ankara achieved several strategic goals: it secured access to a new source of energy as an alternative to Russia, succeeded in bypassing and isolating Yerevan from key regional initiatives, and expanded its geopolitical influence to the shores of the Caspian Sea, thereby establishing direct contact with the Turkic states of Central Asia. The most significant achievement of Turkey's policy in its eastern neighborhood was the complete alignment of Azerbaijan with Ankara, accompanied by a substantial reduction of Russian influence in the region, which created the conditions under which Baku could undertake military action without fear of isolation.

NEUTRALISING OPPONENTS: HOW ARMENIA'S TRADITIONAL SUPPORTERS BECAME PASSIVE OBSERVERS

Turkish support was a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the Azerbaijani offensive. A second key element of the altered regional balance was the neutralisation of actors who had provided significant support to Armenia during the first conflict. This shift did not result from their backing of Azerbaijan, but rather from their decision to remain on the sidelines once hostilities began.

Tehran provides the most illustrative example of such a transformation. During the first war (1988–1994), Iran served as Armenia's most vital link to the outside world and was therefore perceived as Yerevan's most loyal ally (Moniquet and Racimora 2013, 3). From Tehran's perspective, the frozen conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan constituted an issue of considerable importance for the security of its northern territories, for two reasons that directly shaped its regional strategy.

The first reason concerned the ethnic structure of northern Iran. The northern provinces are predominantly populated by Azeris, who, following numerous wars between the Russian Empire and Persia, were left divided between the two states. With Azerbaijan's independence, the status of some 20 million Azeris (Eschment and von Löwis 2022, 31) residing within Iran emerged as a pressing issue. This demographic distribution fuels concerns that, in the event of internal instability, large numbers of Azeris could pursue secession. Although such fears appear to be overstated given the high degree of integration of the Azeri population into Iranian society (Дудайти 2024, 568), they persist – especially in scenarios where an external actor, such as Israel or Turkey, might support demands for secession by the local population or by Baku (Ravandi-Fadai 2024, 161).

The second reason why Nagorno-Karabakh is of strategic importance for Tehran is the possibility of other powers penetrating the region in the event of an ill-conceived or poorly managed policy, above all, Turkey and Israel, and potentially the United States. Rejecting or undermining Baku's position by Iran could encourage the Azerbaijani authorities to seek foreign support even more openly. On the other hand, the weakening of U.S. influence in the region following Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008 (Talebi 2025, 41) placed Azerbaijan's

President, Ilham Aliyev, in an unfavourable position, creating the need for a process of normalisation of relations with neighbours, including Iran.

For these reasons, Tehran and Baku initiated a gradual rapprochement, despite persistent mutual distrust and the existence of contentious issues (Дудайти 2024, 572). About Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran's policy remained relatively ambiguous: on the one hand, there was intense pressure from the Azeri community in Iran to end cooperation with Yerevan in the name of Shiite solidarity and support for the "friendly state" (Ravandi-Fadai 2024, 162); on the other hand, Iran viewed Armenia – with the occupied territories – as a counterbalance to a rising Azerbaijan. The decisive moment came during the 2020 war itself, when fear of escalation, pressure from the local Azeri population, and the possibility of other states – above all, Turkey – becoming involved, influenced Tehran not to provide significant assistance to Yerevan. This Iranian passivity represented a dramatic shift compared to the first conflict and created the conditions under which Armenia lost one of its key regional supporters precisely at the moment when support was most needed.

Simultaneously with the neutralisation of Iranian support for Armenia, cooperation between Baku and Tel Aviv intensified, providing Azerbaijan with a decisive military advantage. Between 2011 and 2020, Israel was the second-largest supplier of weaponry to Azerbaijan's armed forces (after the Russian Federation). In the last five years of that period, it became the largest exporter (SIPRI 2021b). Although economic motives are often highlighted as the primary driver of such extensive trade cooperation (SIPRI 2021b), the security-strategic dimension of the partnership also plays a significant role, within which Baku occupies a specific place in Israel's national security policy. Tel Aviv perceives Azerbaijan, as well as the large Azeri community in Iran, as potential allies in the context of weakening Tehran's influence (Askerov and Ibadoglu 2022, 255). This is confirmed by the statement of former Israeli Brigadier General Oded Tira about the possibility of intensified military cooperation with Baku and support for the Azeri minority within Iran (Lauria 2012).

For Azerbaijani strategists, cooperation with Israel meant access to the most advanced military technologies, which provided a decisive advantage over Armenia's armed forces. The combination of Israeli unmanned systems, Turkish Bayraktar TB-2 drones, and the new military doctrine created the conditions under which Baku could count on a swift

and efficient military victory – crucial for the political decision to launch the offensive. At the same time, the threat that the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict might escalate into a broader confrontation involving Iran and Turkey (and likely Israel, in an indirect way), as well as the risk of internal Azeri secessionism fueled by the idea of national liberation, convinced Tehran to remain on the sidelines in the coming war.

The third element of the altered regional balance of power was the position of the Western powers, above all the European Union, which displayed a significantly lower level of direct interest in the outcome of the crisis compared to its approach to other similar conflicts. This passivity was not neutrality but effectively signalled that Azerbaijan would not face significant Western sanctions or interventions in the event of military action against Armenia.

The European Union's position toward the conflict was shaped by a complex calculation balancing declarative support for territorial integrity with practical energy interests. On the one hand, support for Baku's efforts to restore the occupied territory could contribute to strengthening cooperation in the energy sector and to the affirmation of the principle of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, in line with United Nations General Assembly resolutions (UNGA, GA/10693). On the other hand, such an approach would entirely undermine the existing security order in the South Caucasus, based on Russian dominance. It could potentially draw the Union into complex geopolitical challenges.

The key factor shaping European policy was the intensive development of economic cooperation with Azerbaijan, which acquired special significance for the EU in the context of its strategy of diversifying energy supply sources. The growing importance of Azerbaijan within the EU is clearly reflected in the evolution of public statements by European officials regarding the state of human rights and democracy in the country, issues that the Union otherwise systematically emphasises in cooperation with other partners. For instance, in 2012, leaders of the European People's Party, the largest political group in the European Parliament, praised President Ilham Aliyev's political reforms and his "clear intention to build democracy" (Hale 2012), despite Azerbaijan continuing to be classified in relevant international assessments as an authoritarian state (Economist Intelligence Unit n.d.), comparable to the often-criticized Belarus (European Union Press Release 2012). This shift in approach was not accidental but reflected a conscious decision to prioritise energy interests over normative considerations and, indirectly,

over other political issues. Although there was an initiative to raise the issue of human rights protection in negotiations with Baku (Van Gils 2017, 261), Azerbaijan's strategic role in the EU's energy security led to the marginalisation of such demands. Despite occasional criticism from Azerbaijani officials regarding EU passivity in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh issue (Van Gils 2018, 750), as well as reactions from EU institutions to the arrests of numerous activists in Azerbaijan (Human Rights Watch 2018), the subsequent period was marked by further strengthening of bilateral cooperation, which increased Baku's importance.

The change of power in Armenia in 2018, when a pro-Western government led by Nikol Pashinyan came to power following the "revolution" in Yerevan, did not significantly affect the EU's position on Armenia's efforts to retain the occupied territories, even though it marked the end of two decades of pro-Russian political dominance. This fact is particularly significant, as it indicates that European policy toward the region was not driven by ideological reasons but by pragmatic interests. Nominal support for a peaceful resolution of the conflict through mediation, alongside declarative insistence on respecting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, remained the basis of European policy toward this issue in the South Caucasus. However, Baku's importance as a strategic partner in the energy sector effectively resulted in Brussels' tacit consent not to oppose a potential violent resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue actively. An additional factor that facilitated Azerbaijan's decision was the COVID-19 pandemic, which absorbed the attention of both the public and policymakers in Europe, thereby granting Baku even greater freedom of action without fear of international scrutiny or possible interventions.

Baku's decision to launch the 2020 war was the result of a complex combination of regional and international circumstances. Turkish support provided the necessary military and political foundation, Iran's withdrawal prevented the potential outbreak of a broader conflict, and the European Union's restraint removed the key obstacles that had existed during the first war. At the same time, intensified cooperation with Israel ensured Baku's technological and intelligence superiority, further reinforcing the Azerbaijani leadership's belief that conditions for a military solution were favourable. In such a security environment, the absence of strong international reactions or the threat of sanctions acted as a signal that military action would not encounter serious resistance

from the international community, thereby placing the altered regional balance of power entirely at the service of achieving Baku's strategic objectives.

CONCLUSION

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020 represents a watershed moment in one of the longest-standing disputes in the post-Soviet space. Azerbaijan's triumph paved the way for the enclave's full reintegration under Baku's sovereignty three years later, effectively ending the decades-long conflict with Armenia. The victory resulted from a combination of factors that decisively altered the regional balance of power and convinced Azerbaijan that conditions for military intervention were favourable.

First, the neutral stance of the most influential state in the South Caucasus – and Armenia's primary ally – Russia, both before and during the conflict, proved decisive. Moscow's aspiration to balance its relations with both sides ultimately favoured the stronger actor, Azerbaijan, which interpreted Russia's restraint as a green light for a military solution.

Second, the more active role of Azerbaijan's key strategic partner, Turkey, in building Baku's military capacities was crucial. Through its assistance, Ankara strengthened its own regional influence, directly challenging Moscow's previously unassailable dominance.

Third, the passivity of actors traditionally supportive of Armenia, such as Iran, the disinterest of the West, and Azerbaijan's intensifying military cooperation with Israel all contributed to Baku's military modernisation. The interplay of these factors created the conditions under which Azerbaijan could pursue military intervention without fear of international isolation or direct involvement by third parties in the conflict.

Theoretically, this case highlights the contribution of neoclassical realism to understanding regional security – often overlooked due to realism's traditional focus on great-power competition at the systemic level. For regional balances of power, what matters more than the overall systemic distribution of capabilities is the interest and ability of powers to project influence into specific geographic areas. This implies that small and medium states can also be "good realists" if, alongside their own capabilities, they accurately assess the interests and capacities of extra-regional actors. Azerbaijan's conduct before and during the Second

Nagorno-Karabakh War thus provides a valuable example for other states engaged in territorial disputes.

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ПРОМЕНА РЕГИОНАЛНЕ РАВНОТЕЖЕ СНАГА КАО ПРЕДУСЛОВ ЗА ОРУЖАНУ ИНТЕРВЕНЦИЈУ АЗЕРБЕЈЦАНА У НАГОРНО-КАРАБАХУ 2020. ГОДИНЕ

Резиме

Други рат за Нагорно-Карабах јесени 2020. године дубоко је преобликовао безбедносну архитектуру Закавказја и изменио ток дуготрајног јерменско-азербејџанског сукоба. Рад покушава доказати да је победа Азербејџана била исход значајних трансформација у регионалној равнотежи снага. Применом теорије неокласичног реализма, који интегрише системске факторе са варијаблама на домаћем нивоу, студија показује како су променљива усклађивања и спољни утицаји створили повољне услове за Бакуову војну офанзиву. Истраживање почиње смештањем рата из 2020. године у шири геополитички контекст. Упркос ограниченој глобалној пажњи, фокусираној на догађајима као што су пандемија COVID-19 или Брегзит, сукоб је показао да војна сила остаје ефикасан инструмент спољне политике. Азербејџанска победа преокренула је исход првог рата (1988–1994), поништивши јерменске територијалне добитке и утирући пут Бакуовом потпуном повраћају контроле 2023. године. Рад наглашава три одлучујућа фактора иза измењене равнотеже снага. Прво, неутрални став Русије означио је драматично одступање од њене историјске улоге као примарног безбедносног гаранта Јерменије. Иако је Москва одржала војну сарадњу са Јереваном, уздржала се од директне интервенције

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током рата 2020. године. Ова амбиваленција потекла је услед забринутости настале политичком револуцијом у Јерменији 2018. године, која је изнедрила прозападну владу, изазивајући сумње у Москви о поузданост Јеревана као савезника. Истовремено, Русија је настојала да продуби односе са Азербејџаном, снабдевајући га значајним количинама наоружања. Као резултат, руска пасивност створила је окружење повољно за азербејџанску војну акцију. Друго, Турска се појавила као одлучујући актер. За разлику од свог неутралног става у првом рату, Анкара је у потпуности подржала Баку политички, економски и војно. Турско учешће укључивало је обезбеђивање дронова, оклопних возила, војну обуку и заједничке вежбе. Симболични наративи као што су онај о „две државе, једна нација” ојачала је јавну и политичку подршку у Турској. Штавише, енергетски и инфраструктурни пројекти Анкаре, нарочито железница Баку-Тбилиси-Карс и планови за Зангезурски коридор, дали су Турској снажне материјалне подстицаје да подржи Азербејџан. Ово дугорочно стратешко партнерство кулминирало је трансформацијом азербејџанских оружаних снага, што се показало кључним 2020. године. Треће, остали традиционални јерменски савезници били су неутралисани према сукобу. Иран, раније кључни савезник Јерменије, остао је пасиван због страхова од унутрашњих немира међу својом великом азербејџанском мањином и забринутости због растућег турског и израелског утицаја. Запад је такође играо ограничену улогу. Европска унија дала је приоритет енергетској сарадњи са Азербејџаном, борби против пандемије и решавању унутрашњих проблема. У исто време, продубљивање израелско-азербејџанске сарадње обезбедило је Бакуу напредну војну технологију, посебно дронове, повећавајући његову надмоћ на бојишту. Рад закључује да је азербејџанска победа омогућена конвергенцијом ових фактора: руска неутралност, турска проактивна подршка, иранска и западна пасивност, и израелска помоћ. Заједно, они су одлучујуће померили регионалну равнотежу снага у корист Бакуа. Са теоријског становишта, случај илуструје вредност неокласичног реализма у објашњавању исхода спољне политике малих и средњих држава. Тачним процењивањем спољних прилика и ограничења, Азербејџан је успешно искористио регионалну конфигурацију снага да постигне своје дугогодишње националне циљеве. На крају, рат из 2020. године означио је крах крхког *status quo* који се одржавао од 1994. године, показујући

да замрзнути сукоби могу бити „одмрзнути” када се померања у регионалним односима снага ускладе са државним амбицијама.

Кључне речи: Азербејџан, Русија, Турска, Нагорно-Карабах, регион, равнотежа снага

* This manuscript was submitted on September 9, 2025, and accepted by the Editorial Board for publishing on April 1, 2026.