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Military operation in Karabakh: the final battle?

Monday 2 October 2023, by [HAJIZADA Samir](#), [HUSEYNOV Rusif](#), [MAMMADOV Mahammad](#) (Date first published: 29 September 2023).

Azerbaijan refers to the 24-hour blitzkrieg as a triumph, which was done quickly and professionally. Having already become crippled and dysfunctional after the 2020 war, the “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic”, which had lost land connection with its long-term patron, Armenia, realised that it had no chance to resist the Azerbaijani advancement and accepted all of Baku’s conditions of surrender.

Editorial context: On September 19th 2023, Azerbaijan began what it has called an “anti-terrorist operation” in the Nagorno-Karabkh region – a breakaway republic which is internationally recognised as Azerbaijani territory but has had a population of nearly 150,000, 95% of which were ethnic Armenian. The operation took place after a 9-months-long blockade of the region and quickly came to an end as the authorities representing Nagorno-Karabkah surrendered to Azerbaijan, triggering a massive exodus of the ethnic Armenian population. To get a full picture of this situation, New Eastern Europe commissioned two essays from different perspectives. We present an Azerbaijani perspective below. To read the Armenian perspective [click here](#).

On September 19th 2023, the Azerbaijani leadership announced the launch of a military campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh, which was dubbed an “[anti-terrorist operation](#)” by the local media. Azerbaijan’s defence ministry said it was using “high-precision weapons on the front line and in-depth” as part of the operation, which it said was “of a local character”. The blitzkrieg lasted only a day, yet it produced an important, in fact the most important, outcome – the restoration of Azerbaijan’s full sovereignty in Karabakh.

What led to the escalation?

The [2020 Second Karabakh War](#), which ended with the triumph of the Azerbaijani side, enabled the latter to recover most of the territories formerly occupied by Armenia. Only two-thirds of Nagorno-Karabakh – the city of Khankendi (or Stepanakert as referred to by the local Armenia population – editor’s note), and its surroundings, where the Russian troops were deployed, remained outside Azerbaijan’s jurisdiction.

The authorities in Baku saw this situation as temporary – the Russian contingent on the ground received a term of five years – and announced its ultimate objective: the reintegration of the entire territory. This necessitated contact with the Armenian side. However, since the Republic of Armenia, a long-time patron of the Armenian community in Karabakh, quit the process, Azerbaijan had to engage directly with the local community.

Although the post-war dynamics included some meetings between the representatives of Baku and the Armenian residents, they were dedicated to purely technical issues (such as [water resources management](#)). Since March 2023, numerous invitations from the Azerbaijani side for direct talks in a

bilateral format were repeatedly [rejected](#) by de facto authorities in Karabakh.

With carrots being refused by the other side, Azerbaijan had to switch to sticks against the backdrop of alarming [news about the ongoing transfer of weapons and military personnel](#) from Armenia to Karabakh. On April 23rd, Baku installed a checkpoint on the Lachin road connecting Armenia with the separatist region. This tight measure however was seemingly insufficient as the provocations by the Armenian side, including what the Azerbaijani side refers to as [landmine terror](#), continued. According to reports from Baku, the Armenian-planted mines have already [killed 300 Azerbaijanis](#) since the war in 2020. The last of these tragic episodes took place on November 19th, claiming the lives of 11 Azerbaijanis, including civilians and police officers. The inspections revealed that the mines were produced in Armenia in 2021 after the signing of the November 10th ceasefire deal in 2020.

In this very context, it would be useful to understand the Azerbaijani perception of the conflict, which is predicated on the notion that all tangible changes within the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Karabakh mostly come about through coercive measures. It was the case during the First Karabakh War (1992-1994) when the Armenian side captured Azerbaijani territories and proclaimed an unrecognised state, having driven the Azerbaijani population out. Once the 25-year-long negotiations process, which was seen by the Azerbaijanis as a means for the Armenian side to prolong the status quo and cement their authority over Karabakh, did not produce any peaceful way out of the deadlock, the Azerbaijani side resorted to military means in 2020 and successfully liberated most of the occupied lands. Since 2020, Baku has kept pushing forward with diplomatic pressure on Armenia and eventually scored significant gains both politically and on the ground, gradually installing control over the entire Karabakh (the liberation of Lachin, the installation of the Lachin checkpoint) and forcing Armenia to finally recognise Azerbaijan`s territorial integrity, including Karabakh.

However, the latest moves by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, especially his September 2nd congratulatory message on the occasion of the independence day of the separatist entity in Karabakh, aroused Baku`s ire, dealing a huge blow to the negotiations process, and eventually increased the probability of a new round of clashes in Karabakh or along the Armenia-Azerbaijan undemarcated border. For Azerbaijan, the immediate trigger for the latest escalation was the death of several Azerbaijanis on the Fuzuli-Shusha road on September 19th. In recent months, Azerbaijani leadership repeatedly referred to Karabakh as a grey zone and said it would no longer tolerate the existence of Armenian armed formations in the region, calling for the dissolution of all structures associated with the de facto entity. Thus, Baku coined the September military measures as a [peace enforcement](#) operation.

What comes next?

The Azerbaijani side refers to the 24-hour blitzkrieg as a triumph, which was done quickly and professionally. Having already become crippled and dysfunctional after the 2020 Karabakh War, the "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" which had lost land connection with its long-term patron, Armenia, realised that it had no chance to resist the Azerbaijani advancement and accepted all of Baku`s conditions of surrender, including the withdrawal of Armenian armed forces in Karabakh and the disarmament/dismantlement of the local separatist entity.

The British expert Laurence Broers [likened](#) Azerbaijan`s military campaign to Croatia`s 1995 Operation Storm, which was the last major battle of the Croatian War of Independence and helped Zagreb restore its control over the majority of the territory of the secessionist Republic of Serbian Krajina.

The operation was immediately followed by a meeting on September 21st in the Azerbaijani city of Yevlax with authorised representatives of both sides addressing several issues. The Azerbaijani side offered its reintegration plans, urged the secessionist Karabakh authorities to disarm all Armenian armed units, and agreed to provide humanitarian assistance to the region. Even without these agreed items the meeting should have been qualified as constructive and historic: even though the parties had had some meetings in the past (as described above), this time the talks were put in the reintegration format.

The 2020 Second Karabakh War, which ended with the triumph of the Azerbaijani side and the liberation of most of the territories, had already crippled the self-proclaimed “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” and put its further existence as a viable entity under question. Many politicians and experts realised that the developments in Karabakh were going in one, [irreversible](#), direction: with its ambitious reintegration agenda Azerbaijan was preparing to restore its de facto authority over Xankəndi (Khankendi) and its surroundings sooner or later.

From now on it will be up to the negotiating parties to address a mountain of issues and overcome the mutual distrust which had accumulated over the decades. The anticipated series of meetings is expected to smoothen the reintegration and reconciliation process, which should end with the peaceful coexistence of both Armenian and Azerbaijani communities in Karabakh. Gradually taking control of the major towns, Baku assured the local Armenian residents and the international community of the safety of the civilian centres while resisting armed groups would be militarily neutralised with precision strikes.

The Azerbaijani leadership also guaranteed the safe movement of Armenian residents to Armenia proper through the Lachin road. For those who decided to stay and accept Azerbaijani passports, Baku promises the same rights other ethnic minorities already enjoy as citizens of Azerbaijan. On September 25th, Azerbaijani officials [held](#) another meeting with representatives of the residents of Karabakh in the city of Khojali where the sides agreed to establish a working group dealing with utility, health and other civilian services in the area, including the city of Khankendi. The Azerbaijani side also offered the organisation of the visits of civil society representatives of Armenian origin living in Karabakh to Baku or other cities of Azerbaijan, a small first step on the road to reintegration.

Such progress can also boost the normalisation efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan, effectively doing away with the key stumbling block on the way to sustainable peace in the region. Having accepted Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, Pashinyan decided not to interfere in the latest escalation. Thus, one can assume that Baku and Yerevan can return to the negotiation table and proceed with more constructive peace negotiations.

On September 26th, Hikmat Hajiyev, assistant to the Azerbaijani president, met the secretary of the Security Council of Armenia Armen Grigoryan in Brussels with the invitation of EU Council President Charles Michel and discussed possible concrete steps to advance the Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations on border delimitation, security, connectivity, humanitarian issues and a comprehensive peace treaty. The meeting can be characterised as a diplomatic breakthrough on the eve of the expected meeting of Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders in the framework of the third European Political Community summit scheduled for October 5th in Granada. Baku and Yerevan are expected to make a significant leap forward with regard to signing a peace agreement, a win-win scenario cemented with respect to the territorial integrity of each other.

Much will depend on the future direction of Armenia-Russia relations and the possible change of power in Armenia. Russia seems bent on weakening Pashinyan’s power base in Armenia which would only strengthen the hand of pro-Russian opposition groups who consider a peace treaty with

Azerbaijan under the current circumstances as unacceptable. If Pashinyan politically survives these pressures from both outside and within, the probability of signing an agreement will likely increase. On the one hand, such agreement would highly contribute to the peace and stability in the South Caucasus region. On the other hand, it will decrease Russian influence, depriving it of its ability to maintain “managed instability” in the region.

The 2023 September military operation, which most likely was the last major battle in Karabakh, thus, provided a historic outcome: by virtually surrendering and agreeing to disarm itself the secessionist regime in Karabakh agreed to speak to Baku about reintegration. On September 28th, the leadership of the separatist entity in Karabakh officially announced the [dissolution](#) of the so-called Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. The authorities recommended local Armenian residents familiarise themselves with the conditions of reintegration presented by the Azerbaijani government in order to make an independent decision on whether to stay in (or return to) Karabakh. Nonetheless, it looks as though the entire Karabakh saga has come to an end.

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