



Azerbaijani soldiers march in a parade dedicated to Victory in the Patriotic War at the Azadliq Square in Baku, Azerbaijan, 10 December 2020. (Photo courtesy of the Office of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan)

# Nagorno-Karabakh and Lessons for Ukraine

Glenn Corn

**I**n late September 2023, the armed forces of Azerbaijan launched a highly successful military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK), defeating the remnants of armed ethnic Armenian separatists who

continued to occupy part of NK three years after the Azerbaijanis liberated most of their lands in the South Caucasus in the Second Karabakh War, conducted between September and November 2020. The September



Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan, 20 April 2022. (Photo courtesy of the State Duma of the Russian Federation via Wikimedia Commons)

2023 offensive against the separatist regime in NK was the culmination of Baku's (the capital of Azerbaijan) twenty-five-year struggle to regain territories it lost to Armenian forces during the first Karabakh War in the first half of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Baku would likely have been unable to successfully remove the separatist forces from NK without essential military and technical assistance from Türkiye and Israel, along with Russia's inability or unwillingness to intervene on the side of the Armenians, which the Russians had done in the past. It is also important to recognize the role the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan played in these events by refusing to provide Armenian military support to the separatists and accepting that NK is part of Azerbaijan. Baku's victory opens the door for a lasting resolution to a crisis that has plagued the South Caucasus since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but to capitalize on this development, the United States and its allies need to act decisively to ensure the safety of the Armenian population in the South

Caucasus and help Pashinyan demonstrate to his people that their country will benefit from a resolution to the conflict and their lives will improve as a result of new trade opportunities that can benefit Yerevan (the capital of Armenia). The United States also needs to make it clear to all parties in the conflict that Washington supports Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and accepts Baku's control over NK but expects the Azerbaijanis to respect the rights of the region's Armenian population and avoid taking any actions that threaten Armenian territory.

For most Americans, the long-running crisis in NK has been of little interest, save possibly the Armenian diaspora in the United States and U.S. oil and energy firms that were very interested in Azerbaijan's oil and gas industries. The U.S. government itself has been, for years, very interested in resolving the NK crisis, given the strategic importance of the South Caucasus but has been incapable of doing so due to domestic political realities in the United States and challenges created by the behavior of both the Armenian and Azerbaijani authorities for years. Of course, Russia has been the region's main player up until recently. Unfortunately, as in other regions of the former Soviet Union, Moscow showed little real interest in resolving the NK crisis over the years and, instead, appeared to value the existence of another "frozen conflict" that allowed Moscow to maintain undue influence in the Caucasus

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and deny competitors from getting too involved in the region. Moscow cynically benefited from hostilities in the region by selling arms to both Yerevan and Baku and by fueling and exploiting the Armenians' fears of the Azerbaijanis and, more importantly, of Türkiye, to sustain the conflict for an extended period.

interests and was actually using Armenia as a pawn in its own selfish policy of projecting influence abroad. While Russia had helped Armenia defeat Azerbaijan in the first NK war in the early 1990s, this assistance never resulted in any economic benefit or advantage for the Armenians, whose country continued to suffer from serious eco-

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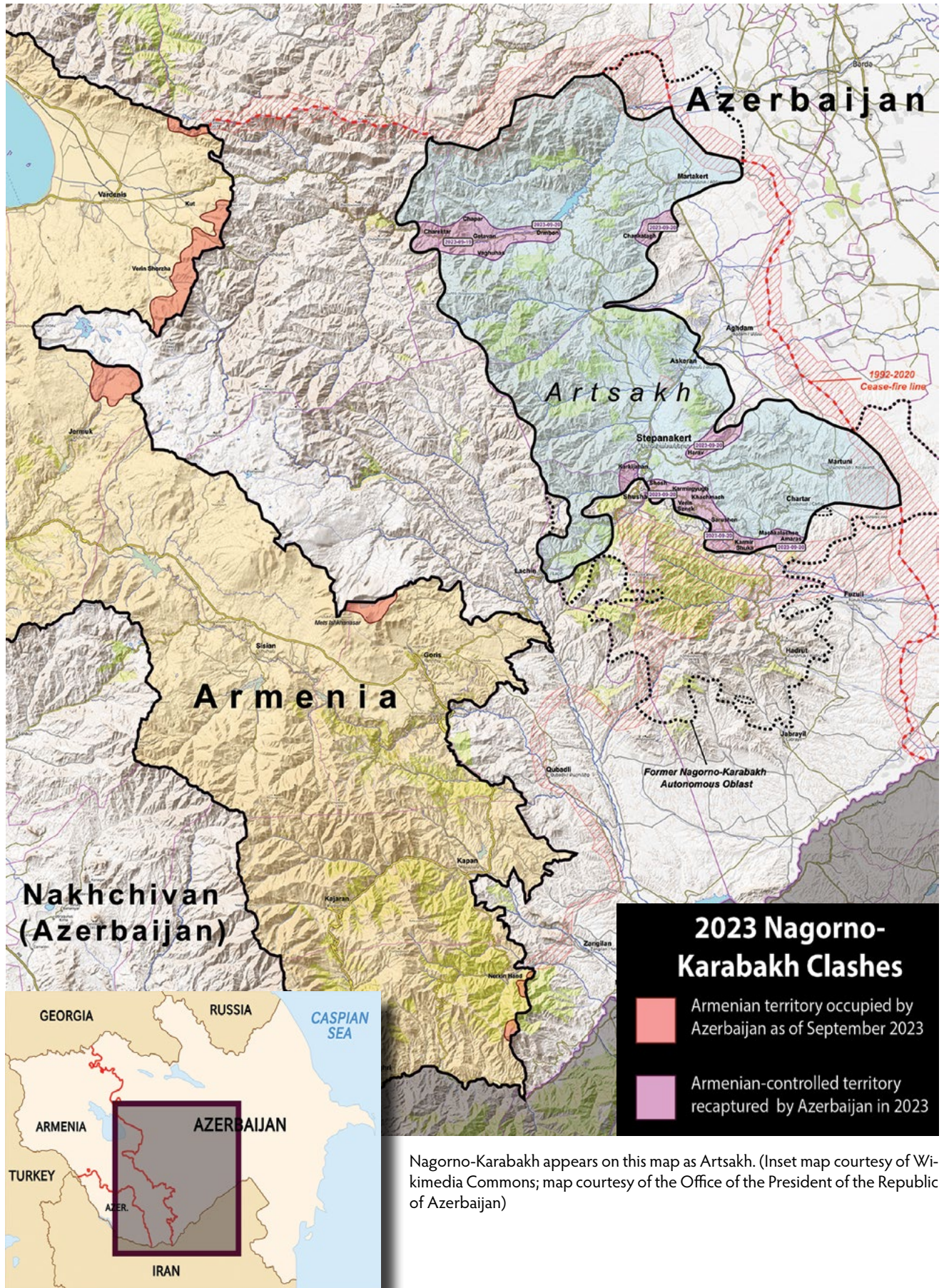
However, Moscow's traditional control over Armenia started to decline after the Armenian people elected Pashinyan in 2018, who was openly critical of Russia's monopoly on his country and expressed an interest in improving Armenia's ties with the West. As a result, Russian President Vladimir Putin tried to punish Pashinyan by reducing Russia's support for Armenia and failing to use its leverage over Baku to stop the Azerbaijanis from launching their 2020 offensive in NK. Putin again set out to punish the Armenian leader in September 2023, when the Azerbaijanis launched their second offensive to liberate all of NK, with Putin clearly hoping that the Armenian people would blame Pashinyan for the defeat of the separatist forces in NK and remove Pashinyan from power. To date, however, it appears Putin's betrayal of his traditional Armenian allies has only reinforced the view held by many Armenians that Moscow is not a reliable ally or partner. It also reinforced the sense among many in the region and throughout the former Soviet Union that Putin's failed war in Ukraine has significantly reduced Russia's power and made much more difficult for the Kremlin to use force to defend its interests internationally.

Several factors led to the recent changes in the situation in NK. First, in 2018, the Armenian voters placed the former journalist and critic of Armenia's overreliance on bilateral relations with Moscow at the expense of its ties with other potential partners, Pashinyan, in office. Under Pashinyan's leadership, Yerevan started to turn away from its traditional dependence on Russia and seek better ties with the West.<sup>1</sup> Like many of his fellow citizens, Pashinyan realized that by encouraging the conflict in NK, Russia was not promoting Armenia's best

economic problems and a lack of stable development. Understanding that what was good for the separatists in NK was not necessarily good for all of Armenia, Pashinyan demonstrated incredible courage by seeking a resolution to the NK crisis and not taking his orders from Putin. To punish Pashinyan, Putin significantly reduced Moscow's assistance to the Armenians and failed to stop the Azerbaijanis from launching their offensive in September 2020 and again in September 2023. Putin's goal in failing to stop the Azerbaijanis was to create a political crisis for Pashinyan at home and use the crisis to remove him from power. As expected, since Pashinyan's coming to power, Moscow has regularly relied on pro-Russian Armenian opposition groups to protest and criticize the prime minister. Fortunately, however, the majority of Armenians have not taken Putin's bait and continue to support Pashinyan's efforts to remove their country from under Putin's control.

Another key factor in Azerbaijan's success in the 2020 and 2023 military campaigns has been Azerbaijan's economic development and associated investment in its defense capabilities. While Yerevan struggled economically and was stuck having to rely on Russian arms sales to support its armed forces, the Azerbaijanis were in a position to diversify their arms purchases. Thus, while Moscow cynically continued to sell both Armenia and Azerbaijan Russian-made weapons systems, the Azerbaijanis were also able to purchase Israeli and Turkish made systems, including advanced unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), long-range precision-guided artillery, and missile systems that were used with devastating effect in Baku's offensive campaigns against the separatists over the last three years.<sup>2</sup>









A Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 is displayed during a military parade in Baku, Azerbaijan, 10 December 2020. This remotely controlled unmanned combat aerial vehicle played a key role in Azerbaijan's successful campaign to defeat Armenian forces during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020. (Photo courtesy of the Office of President of the Republic of Azerbaijan)

Armenia's economic problems and the associated migration of military-age citizens out of Armenia was another factor in Azerbaijan's victory in NK. While the Azerbaijanis were able to recruit and mobilize a large number of military personnel, Armenia has struggled to sustain staffing of its armed forces and, in turn, the number of combat-capable fighters available to support the Armenian separatists in NK has dwindled in recent years. Thus, it can be said that demographics were another important aspect of Azerbaijan's victory.<sup>3</sup>

Baku also benefited directly from its close relationship with the government of Türkiye and Türkiye's own improved military capabilities. Ankara not only supplied the Azerbaijanis with advanced weapons systems but appears to have managed to deliver this equipment under Moscow's radar. In a prelude to what would later really catch the West's attention in the winter of 2022 in Ukraine, during the 2020 Second Karabakh War, Turkish Bayraktar-2 UASs played a significant role in the success of Azerbaijani operations against the separatists. Turkish military and intelligence officials understood the significance of using UASs for both intelligence collection and lethal operations, and the Azerbaijanis, with Turkish support, demonstrated an ability to exploit superior technological capabilities on

the battlefield to defeat well-entrenched and conventionally armed Armenian separatist forces. Some of the lessons learned during the second Karabakh war would be tested again in Ukraine during Vladimir Putin's failed attempt to conquer that country in February 2022 and continue to be used by both sides in the current Ukrainian conflict.

Turning back to Moscow, while the Kremlin certainly started out by trying to punish Pashinyan for his audacity in refusing to take direct orders from Putin before 2020, as of September 2023, Moscow's failure to take action to protect its traditional allies in NK, the Armenian separatists, also appears to be a result of Moscow's declining influence and its strained and over-extended military capabilities. In giving the Russians a bloody nose in Ukraine, Kyiv has forced the Russians to invest much more heavily in trying to stop a military and political disaster from becoming reality and helped Baku isolate the separatists in NK. In November 2020, Putin attempted to take advantage of Baku's military success and the West's inability to focus on helping to find a peaceful and effective resolution to the NK conflict by deploying Russian "peacekeeping troops" to NK as part of a negotiated ceasefire between Baku and Yerevan. But, as events have proven over the last three

years, the Russian forces tasked with keeping the peace in NK were either unwilling or incapable of fulfilling such a task and were in no position to stop Baku from launching its most recent offensive against the separatists in September 2023. To date, Russia is a net loser in recent developments in NK.<sup>4</sup>

Another country that will lose influence if Baku and Yerevan can forge a long-term peaceful solution to the NK crisis is Iran. For years, both Azerbaijan and Armenia have had to rely on transportation routes through Iran to move commercial goods, but a resolution to the NK conflict could reopen the Turkish-Armenian border and eliminate Tehran's leverage over Baku and Yerevan.<sup>5</sup> This is not a pleasant reality for the Iranian regime, which has sought to destabilize the situation in the South Caucasus for years and will likely continue to support Russia in its efforts to undermine the governments in Baku and Yerevan and may want to reignite the NK conflict.<sup>6</sup>

While Azerbaijan, with clear support from Türkiye, appears to have been able to score another decisive military victory against Armenian separatist forces in NK and may have won the war, the political struggle in NK is far from over. And now more than ever, the United States needs to demonstrate real leadership in reinforcing a peaceful settlement to crisis. The recent U.S. announcement of joint military exercises with Armenian forces in Armenia was an important step toward signaling all players in the region that the United States is serious about seeing the end to the crisis. The Armenians have a complicated history with the Azerbaijanis and the Ottoman Empire, and many Armenians have a strong fear that Azerbaijan and Türkiye will start "ethnic cleaning" against all Armenians in NK and launch an invasion of Armenia proper. Therefore, it is critical that the United States reassure the Armenian population that the United States and its NATO allies will not tolerate any unproved attacks or hostilities against the Armenians. In delivering this message, the United States needs to remember that the Azerbaijanis themselves also have a history of facing atrocities committed by Armenian forces against Azerbaijanis during the first Nagorno-Karabakh war in the early 1990s and of being targeted in the past by Armenian terrorist groups. Therefore, it is important that the administration also reassure the Azerbaijanis that the United States fully recognizes

and supports Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and will use its influence in Yerevan to ensure that the Armenians do not revert to attempting to use force to dislodge the Azerbaijanis from NK or any other Azerbaijani territories.

With the ending of fighting in NK, Azerbaijan and Armenia have an opportunity to secure a long-term peace agreement that would benefit Yerevan, Baku, and other countries in the region. If past experiences tell us anything about the future, Moscow and Tehran will almost certainly use various active measures to destabilize Aliyev and Pashinyan's governments and instigate renewed hostilities in the region. While Baku is likely to continue to receive support from Ankara and Tel Aviv in the security realm, given Pashinyan's stance vis-à-vis Putin, his government will not only fail to receive support from Russia but will face continued pressure and interference from the Kremlin in its internal affairs. Thus, the United States and Europe need to invest quickly in helping the Armenians deal with security threats while also offering the same type of assistance to the Azerbaijanis in order to reinforce the message that the West, which recognized Azerbaijan's claims to NK for over twenty-five years, does not object to Baku's administration of NK and is committed to working with both Baku and Yerevan to maintain peace in the South Caucasus.

The United States and Europe must take immediate steps to grow trade and investment in the Armenian economy and support ongoing talks among Ankara, Yerevan, and Baku to reopen the Turkish-Armenian border to trade and transportation. This will not only benefit the Armenian population but will deny Iran its current leverage over both South Caucasus countries by giving them an alternative trade corridor outside of Tehran's control. The United States and its allies in the West need to recognize that to bring true stability to the South Caucasus, it is essential that the Armenians and Azerbaijanis can both benefit from much-needed economic development and prosperity.

Finally, while the Ukrainians appear to have learned some lessons on the battlefield from Baku's experience in the Second Karabakh War, Kyiv may also take some political and diplomatic lessons from the Azerbaijanis' experience. As the Ukrainians fight to secure the liberation of their occupied territories,

including Crimea, they should recognize parallels in Baku's experience between 1994 and 2023 and understand that even if an immediate victory is not achieved against the Russians, a focus on growing Ukraine's economy, modernization of the Ukrainian armed forces and intelligence services, and continued

diplomatic pressure on Moscow to return Crimea to Kyiv's control can result in the ultimate liberation of all of Ukraine's occupied territories. The Azerbaijanis never gave up their quest to return NK to Baku's control, and the Ukrainians should also never accept Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory. ■

## Notes

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4. Guy Faulconbridge, "Russia Tells Armenian PM: You Are Making a Big Mistake by Flirting with West," Reuters, 25 September 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-tells-armenian-pm-you-are-making-big-mistake-by-flirting-with-west-2023-09-25/>.

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6. Elis Gjevori, "Iran: What Are the Implications of Azerbaijan's Victory over Armenia?," Middle East Eye, 11 October 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-azerbaijan-victory-over-armenia-implications>.

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