Nagorno-Karabakh: Armenian Defeat Trades One War 4-Another

The outcome of the Karabakh war is turning me into more of a cynic. I keep hoping it's just a phase. However, based on the reality on the ground, not only in Azerbaijan and Armenia but the region as a whole, many questions are coming to mind.

Now is the time to reflect on what comes next, and how the political balance has been recalibrated for the region. Russia has played its hand well, and is perhaps the BIGGEST winner in this - as the outcome serves its foreign policy towards the two countries involved, Georgia and the entire region, including Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Israel.

However the outcome has caught much of the West by surprise, as Russia had a mutual defence treaty with Armenia. The terms of that pact did not cover NK, and I am sure NEO readers know all these things, but it was still expected that Armenia would be a tougher nut to crack, and that Russia with respond with violence rather than peacekeeping when roused.

Cut to the Chase

The Americans certainly knew in advance about the war, despite choosing to stand on the sidelines. The embassies in Yerevan and Baku issued travel warnings. So, if Washington was aware (maybe via Ankara), Moscow would have been too.

However any sort of instability in the neighbourhood, and the injection of a Turkish presence and Islamist mercenaries, all go against Russian interests. The war probably came as a surprise, and the efforts to broker ceasefires were probably genuine from the start.

As the Azerbaijani forces gained ground and the Armenian leadership was unwilling to cut its losses, the foreign ministers ended up in Washington. Both Biden and Trump issued statements to court the Armenian-American vote, as Armenians have been famous since Roman times for being behind the scenes influencers.

Both although both Biden and Harris have long-standing Armenian connections, the leadership in Yerevan is lacklustre. The Armenian cause didn’t live up to its billing, so letting the Russians patrol as peacekeepers rather than open supporters of Armenia was probably the least worst option at this time of US domestic turmoil.

Still in the Game

For Armenia, defeat has not brought the usual government collapse. The NK question is fundamental to Armenia’s own statehood, so maintaining the prewar status quo was the primary responsibility of any government. Burt so far Yerevan has managed to deflect the defeat onto the population as a whole, and beg for time to heal its wounds.

As one former Armenian diplomat shared,

The president of Armenia is a close buddy of Biden - do you remember when he accosted Biden to ask if he would run a year or two ago? But he is a figurehead.

There should be elections in Armenia. Not at the moment, though. Things are tense, the situation is volatile. There needs to be clarity on the ground in Karabakh, calm in Yerevan, a reduction in coronavirus, some boost to the economy - not voting amid a shouting match.

The Prime Minister has replaced senior figures, but he is not planning on stepping down. I hope things
do not turn violent. At the moment, Armenia seems like a subject or vassal of Russia as never before. But I wonder how to characterise Azerbaijan, and also Turkey. There are still too many question marks.

Turkish Gambit

The Turks, historical enemies of the Armenians, have a competitive advantage now. There is a Russian movie, Turkish Gambit, which describes best the Turkish way of doing things.

It is 1877, and war has broken out between Russia and the Ottoman Empire. Take a look and you will see just how pragmatic the Turks are; it ends with how others will come to their rescue when push comes to shove.

The Armenian regular forces were outgunned diplomatically as well as militarily. The Minsk Group, led by France and the United States, has lost any credibility it had. Whether it will survive or be restored to a new format is anybody’s guess. Like the League of Nations it has been overwhelmed by events it rendered itself powerless to prevent by being too diplomatic to have the principles on which that diplomacy should be based.

France lost its standing before the latest fighting by providing overt political support for Armenia. Azerbaijan has made its position clear - France must go. Turkey is delighted with this, Erdogan having stated that the French President needed "some sort of mental treatment" over his attitude towards Muslims in France.

Some have suggested that France be replaced by Germany as an even keel member of the Minsk Group. The same sources agree that “a new status quo has been reached, Russian peacekeepers are now deployed in the area and Turkey has emerged as a force of [contention] in the Caucasus.”

Turning Swords into Barrels

Russia has been involved in the Caucasus for centuries. I expect the region will just muddle along as it has always done, between influences from neighbouring countries.

The West will still be engaged, but perhaps not to the level of before. The diaspora will continue to support Armenia, and I expect there will be a push in the next US budget to support Armenians displaced from NK and for reconstruction in the war zone. There might even be a US funding bill in early 2021. But I don’t see any serious engagement on the horizon.

The big regional issue now will be oil. With Joe Biden coming in, I expect a return to the nuclear treaty, with most if not all sanctions on Iran lifted. This will make Iran a non-issue, but also provide more markets for increased Iranian oil production.

If some of the corona vaccines prove their billing, demand for oil will revive, as the international market will be able to handle more oil. All this improves the position of Iran and Turkey, who can then be used as a counterbalance to Russian influence, regardless of the irony.

However the West still has to face the fact that it is not trying to counter a belligerent but the new guarantor of regional peace. Russia has turned the tables by becoming the party of peace and stability and making the West the war party, a geopolitical situation few thought could ever exist.

Enlisting Turkey and Iran to conduct an oil war with Russia, whilst retaining the traditional rhetoric against these countries, is probably the most likely way the West will try to regain its previous influence in the region. Whether it has the guts to pull off something like this is another matter, and the price it will have to pay to keep Turkey and Iran onside may also be too great.

Neither My Way or a Highway

The new oil realities bring Israel into the picture. The mass of Israeli oil comes through the Georgian ports, and its main strategic supplier for the last 20 years has been Azerbaijan, regardless of what it says on the shipment manifests.

Israel will remain a major US ally. Will it accept Turkish and Iranian supplies as part of some coalition agreement? This would imply it is second fiddle. So it is more likely to smuggle its oil, just like it smuggles its nuclear materials, thus becoming the very “haven for terrorists” it routinely accuses its neighbours of being, and which the US always claims to oppose.
Perhaps the biggest loser from this conflict has been Georgia, whose independence has been guaranteed by its pristine location as the middleman for so many countries. It is bound to receive offers of defence assistance from the new Biden administration, but these would be linked to abandoning any plans of regaining South Ossetia and Abkhazia by force in the wake of Azerbaijan’s victory.

In other words, this defence assistance will serve no military purpose. Its aim will be to neutralise Georgia, prevent it having any real independence, and make it a less reliable partner for anyone, as any advantages it can offer in the oil war would only make those who want those more indebted to the US, when they want them to achieve the opposite.

There aren’t any more Georgian ports, or even Turkish controlled ports in Georgia, which can smuggle oil. The US will still support terrorists in places such as Syria to get oil to Israel, but anyone wanting it legally will have to join with Turkey and Iran, who even now wield more clout than poor Georgia ever will.

**Freedom to Deprive**

Turkey has seen how things work on the ground, regardless of how they are supposed to work. It provided the most effective support to its Azerbaijani ally in the form of terrorists (or if you wish, call them “foreign combatants”, “hired soldiers”, etc.) Yet the Western media still talks about “Azerbaijani forces” and their “inevitable victory”, not wanting to admit that a successful terrorist operation, of the kind the West claims to be preventing, has taken place.

The West gets away with an awful lot – invasions, arms and drug smuggling, extrajudicial murder and detention, brazenly racist domestic policies – on the grounds that it is “fighting terrorism.” As we know, it openly funds and fights alongside its selected terrorists, but as long as people get their oil from countries the US likes, that’s OK.

It will be more difficult to play this game when Turkey and Iran are recruited to conduct an oil war against Russia, simply because Russia has diplomatically outflanked the West. Terrorists will still be part of that, whilst being officially vilified. But when governments which are routinely accused of being sponsors of terrorism are openly on the same side as their accusers, the West will have to find other justifications for its adventures.

Russia has profited for years by waiting for the US to act contrary to its own professed values and then calling its bluff. Now Turkey has done the same, and the US has lost further ground as a result.

The only way the US can regain that ground is to actually try and be what it claims to be – the guarantor of democracy, human rights and rule of law. But now the biggest factor preventing that will be that its own official agencies describe its own friends that way, or at least the ones it will rely on most to conduct its new policy.

**Choose your friends carefully!**

As Lord Palmerston once said, “there are no eternal allies, and no perpetual enemies.” Interests are eternal and perpetual however. The West may change its allies to suits its interests, but it won’t achieve its aims by doing that unless its interests are more attractive than those of its rivals.

Russia has interests, like any other country. It was not going to openly back Armenia and overtly get engaged into conflict with NATO member Turkey for the sake of a strategic defence partnership treaty which can be interpreted differently, like all the others are. But it is now furthering its interests by being in Karabakh what the US always claims to be, with the originator of these fundamentally good international rules unable to do anything about it diplomatically or militarily.

The pan-Turkish (or pan-Ottoman) ambition of the Turkish (or to be more precise – Erdogan’s) foreign policy goes far beyond Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey will rightly see this war as a stepping stone, which is why buying it off with oil war coalition is now imperative. But such a coalition then threatens further turmoil in the region, and the more time passes, the more Russia, the great enemy, will be the guarantor of all the things Americans hold dear.

British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour said more than 100 years ago, “I don’t care what they do to each other in that region, let them slice each other to pieces with long knives... as far as I am concerned, as long as the oil flows from Batumi.” The West still has that attitude, but now it will have to use the oil to do what the long knives used to do, even though it got the oil to protect us all from those long knives.

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