

# RUSSIA'S DETERRENCE STRATEGY IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UKRAINE INVASION

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## Introduction:

In the 21st century, Russia has entered a period of intense geopolitical expansion, leaving behind the economic crisis produced by the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the subsequent periods of erratic foreign policy. This has led to not only a reinforcement of Russia's presence in countries such as Syria, Libya, and Mali but also to its involvement in open military conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine (Larson and Shevchenko, 2019: 187). These efforts have been directed at spreading Russia's influence over territories with a shared history in the USSR, which many Russians consider the country's legitimate zone of influence.

According to this view, Russia has historically played a key role as a mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Situated at the intersection of three great powers (Russia, Turkey, and Iran), the South Caucasus is subject to a multitude of political, cultural and religious influences, critically impacting its political and ethnic composition (Yamskov, 1991). Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, is mostly populated by ethnic Armenians, making it an ongoing factor in the region's instability. Although conflicts over its sovereignty have been frequent, the tension dramatically increased in 1988, when the region—legally part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic—tried to incorporate into the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1992, following the collapse of the USSR, Azerbaijan and Armenia went to war for control of the territory, producing thousands of casualties and hundreds of thousands of displaced people on both sides (Dehdashti, 2000). In that conflict, Russia's support for Armenia—directed to undermine the Azeri government of President Abulfaz

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Elchibey and spread its own influence—was vital to its victory of 1994, which implied control over not only Nagorno-Karabakh but also numerous surrounding territories mostly inhabited by non-Armenians (Krüger, 2010). Although the international community continued to consider this territory Azeri for decades, Armenia was capable of maintaining semiformal control over Nagorno-Karabakh via the legal denomination of the Republic of Artsakh and its resistance to repeated Azeri military efforts to recover the region.

However, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict completely changed the geopolitical scenario. In six weeks, Azerbaijan launched a military operation that decisively defeated Artsakh and Armenian forces, allowing it to take control of an extensive part of Nagorno-Karabakh (Rubin, 2020). This conflict not only implied a strategic victory for Azerbaijan but also severely weakened Armenia's future capacity to maintain control of Nagorno-Karabakh. This article analyzes the main reasons for Russia stopping its protection of Armenia and allowing extremely unfavorable ceasefire conditions, making the argument that Russia's decision was part of a large-scale strategy designed to increase its deterrence capacity in the region, prevent further advances of the Azeri forces, and stabilize the current borders. However, despite the initial moderate success, this strategy collapsed because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, severely undermining its geopolitical position in the South Caucasus and precipitating an extremely volatile regional conflict.

The paper is organized into three sections. The second section analyzes how Russia understood the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the key reasons why it did not intervene to support its historical ally, examining the strategy of stabilizing the conflict by deploying Russian peacekeeping troops. The third section describes how the Russian failure to obtain a quick victory in Ukraine severely deteriorated its deterrence capacity and increased its dependence on countries with antagonistic agendas concerning Nagorno-Karabakh. The article concludes by summarizing the study's main findings, emphasizing the unwanted consequences of Russia's strategy in Nagorno-Karabakh and its impact on Armenia and the region.

## Deterrence Theory

Numerous authors have studied the effectiveness of deterrence in international relations (Wolf 1991; Huth 1998; Rhodes 2000; Haffa 2018). Deterrence has been defined as “the threat of force intended to convince a potential aggressor not to undertake a particular action because the costs will be unacceptable or the probability of success extremely low” (Gerson

2009: 32). On a complementary fashion, Paul summarizes the three premises of deterrence: sufficient capacity, a credible threat, and an effective communication of the threat (2009: 2). In this sense, when a country can communicate a credible threat to another country if it acts in a particular way, this state will tend to behave rationally and restrain itself of acting in unwanted ways to avoid the costs (Haffa, 2018).

Even though it has been historically attached to nuclear dissuasion as part of the conflict between the US and the USSR (Lieber and Press, 2017; Wirtz, 2018; Osinga and Sweijts, 2021), particularly under the Eisenhower' policy of "Massive Retaliation", its efficacy to prevent conflicts started being questioned when the USSR obtained substantial nuclear power<sup>2</sup>. In this sense, other authors analyzed how different countries –both with and without nuclear armament–often employ conventional deterrence to dissuade other countries' pretensions (Knopf, 2010). Even though military power plays a key role in conventional deterrence, this strategy is not only based on military terms: in the calculation of benefits, risks and costs also political and economic factors may play a determinant role. For example, if a State is likely to face intense economic sanctions or a complete political isolation due to a military action, it may choose to restrain its attack.

According to Mearsheimer, who focused on the military sphere, deterrence is not determined by the type of weapons or by the balance of forces, but by the military strategy determining how a nation's armed forces are employed to achieve specific military goals (1983: 18). More concretely, States can develop three main strategies: attrition, aimed at annihilating the enemy; Blitzkrieg, based on quick massive attacks; or limited strategies, directed to obtain partial territory gains. As a result, a successful deterrence strategy necessarily must take into consideration the potential aggressor's interests and establish a context that increases the probable costs of the aggression until the point of preventing it.

However, conventional deterrence differs from nuclear deterrence in its contestability. While deterrent threats based on nuclear weapons cannot be contested, due to the magnitude of the risk, conventional deterrence may not be seen as a credible threat and, therefore, states could decide to ignore it. In Wirtz's words: "The contestability of conventional threats can raise doubts in the minds of those targeted by conventional deterrence concerning the capability of the side issuing deterrent threats to actually succeed" (2018: 58). Rhodes summarizes the reasons why a deterrence strategy can fail in three: the aggressor considers the cost as acceptable; it believes its capacity

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<sup>2</sup> Knopf (2010) describe this process as four waves of Deterrence Theory..

of avoiding the deterrent strategy or it behaves irrationally—because it does not perceive the deterrence or because it does not weight the threat correctly (Rhodes, 2000: 222).

Therefore, even though conventional deterrence can succeed in preventing unwanted actions from third countries, it requires very persuasive communications aimed at convincing other states of: a) the state's capacity and determination to actively intervene; and b) the consequences of acting inadequately.

## Russia's strategy towards Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020

Nagorno-Karabakh was formerly a part of the USSR, as were the mini-states Transnistria, Ossetia, and Abkhazia. As such, Russia has considered the region to pertain to its zone of influence, leading to increasing involvement in the enclave in recent decades (Larson and Shevchenko, 2019: 201). Concretely, Russia became Armenia's closest ally and protector (Sadri, 2003) in the early years after the USSR's disintegration, leading to Armenia's inclusion in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which guaranteed Armenia protection against any military aggression.

During the first Nagorno-Karabakh War, Russia co-chaired the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group—created to promote a stable solution to the conflict—and hosted the 1994 meeting that eventually led to the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan. From that moment on, Russia acted as an ally of both countries and arbitrator of the conflict, mitigating new escalations in 2010 and 2016. Nonetheless, according to Dalay (2021), Russia benefited from the instability in the region and did not aim to exert pressure on the countries to find a permanent solution.

Distinct from previous conflicts, the 2020 conflict accomplished relevant territorial advances for Azerbaijan, severely undermining the Armenian military forces and compromising Armenia's capacity to maintain control of Nagorno-Karabakh (Rubin, 2020). During this conflict, Russia adopted an extremely passive role: It avoided positioning itself with Armenia and entering any form of confrontation with Azerbaijan. For example, Russia ignored Azeri military actions, such as shooting down a Russian helicopter and bombing Armenia's anti-aircraft defenses (BBC, 2020; Galeotti, 2020).

After that attack against its anti-aircraft infrastructure, Armenia asked for the military mobilization of the CSTO members, insisting that its membership in the organization calls for any attack on its territory to receive

a military response from the other members, including Russia. In this sense, although the protection of the CSTO does not include the Nagorno-Karabakh territory—because the international community rejects Armenia's sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding areas (Dalay, 2021: 19)—any military attack on Armenia's uncontested territory should have activated the collective protection mechanism. Meanwhile, the OSCE Minsk Group, which includes the US and France alongside Russia, also avoided getting involved in the conflict, maintaining a neutral profile by asking for a ceasefire.

Ultimately, Russia did not provide compelling assistance to Armenia, whether military or diplomatic, and enabled the imbalance of the conflict for the benefit of Azerbaijan and its allies. Finally, the 2020 ceasefire saw Armenia lose all its previously controlled territory in Nagorno-Karabakh (Agdam, Kalbajar, and Lachin), which included five cities, four towns, and hundreds of villages. That border reconfiguration meant that only a single corridor (Lachin Corridor) connected Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh via Azeri territory under the surveillance of Russia's peacekeeping forces, enabling any blockade of the corridor by Azeri forces to isolate Nagorno-Karabakh, a region that is fully dependent on Armenia, severely compromising the viability of any further conflict.

There has been intense discussion surrounding the reasons that Russia allowed this imbalance (e.g., Yavuz and Gunter, 2023). According to Minzarari (2021), one factor was the animosity between the Russian government and the Armenian government under Nikol Pashinian, who reached power in 2018 with a campaign critical of the influence of Russian oligarchs in Armenia. Minzarari also suggests that Russia's delay was due to an effort to improve relations with Azerbaijan, a key geopolitical ally, due to its increasing demand for armaments and its gas fields. Elsewhere, Modebadze (2022) argues that Russia wants the conflict to persist in weakening both countries and avoid the consolidation of powerful and autonomous powers in the region.

Meanwhile, different authors (Chupryna, 2020; Khan, 2021; Minzarari, 2020; Modebadze, 2021) have recognized how Russia benefits from the deterioration of Armenia, which has increased the country's dependence on Russia and consolidated the Russian influence in the South Caucasus via the military deployment of peacekeeping troops, stipulated for a period of five years according to the ceasefire agreement (Welt and Bowen, 2021). According to Anggraeni:

“Russia might have four goals in mind, which are to promote a more positive alliance with Baku to maintain the two countries strategic alliances, put Russian military presence in area of the conflict through the deployment

of peacekeeping forces, to extend Russia's influence and control over the border zones of Karabakh and Armenia, as well as ensuring that Karabakh will remain Russia's main leverage over Armenia and Azerbaijan" (Anggaeni, 2022: 350).

Specifically, the ceasefire agreement established that the Russian peacekeeping troops would include "1,960 troops armed with firearms, 90 armored vehicles and 380 motor vehicles and units of special equipment"<sup>3</sup> (Президент России, 2020). These troops, part of the 15th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade, started the deployment soon after the ceasefire's entry into force with the purpose of guaranteeing the fulfillment of the agreement, which also included the redeployment of Armenian troops from the Agdam, Kelbajar, and Lachin regions, the establishment and protection of the Lachin Corridor, and the safeguarding of communication between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. These efforts were aided by a monitoring center created in 2021 in the Agdam region and managed by joint Turkish and Russian troops and supported by existing Russian military bases in the Caucasus: the 102nd Military Base (Gyumri, Armenia), the Erebuni Air Base (Yerevan, Armenia), the 7th Military Base (Guaduta, Abkhazia) and the 4th Military Base (Tskhinvali and Java, South Ossetia).

From this perspective, Russia's military presence could act as a deterrent against further military aggressions from Azerbaijan toward Armenia and as a protector of communication between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. Furthermore, these developments meant that Russia could quickly interpose its military power to resolve any conflict and avoid any escalation that might eventually require more military involvement and potentially undermine Russia's diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Meanwhile, Armenia's territorial losses severely weakened its military position and made it even more dependent on Russia due to its desperate need for Russian protection of the Lachin Corridor to remain connected to Nagorno-Karabakh. According to Yildiz (2021: 2): "Russia consolidated its position as the dominant external power over Armenia, with the Nagorno-Karabakh war leaving Pashinyan domestically weakened".

Thus, there were three potential outcomes associated with allowing the conflict to continue until an unbalanced ceasefire benefiting Azerbaijan, apparently at odds with Russian interests: first, an increased Russian military

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<sup>3</sup> Translation from the original: "Объявляется о полном прекращении огня и всех военных действий в зоне нагорно-карабахского конфликта с 00 часов 00 минут по московскому времени 10 ноября 2020 года. Азербайджанская Республика и Республика Армения, далее именуемые Сторонами, останавливаются на занимаемых ими позициях".

presence in the South Caucasus; second, the deterrence of future military escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan via interposition forces; third, maintaining good relations with Azerbaijan by weakening Nikol Pashinyan's government and pressing Armenia for an eventual political shift.

## The Russian invasion of Ukraine and its effects on the deterrence strategy in Nagorno-Karabakh

As the previous section has explained, Russia severely depleted the strength of its historical ally Armenia to improve its geopolitical position in the South Caucasus. In theory, this regional shift should have made Russia capable of stabilizing the conflict using on-the-ground troops and preventing any military escalation of the conflict.

In fact, since the ceasefire in November 2020, numerous military clashes have taken place, mostly due to the lack of clarification concerning the new borders. For example, on 11 December 2020, a conflict regarding the status of two villages (Hin Taghe and Khitsaberd) on the southeastern border between Nagorno-Karabakh and the territories conquered by Azerbaijan led both Armenia and Azerbaijan to claim gross violations, with at least four casualties reported by Azerbaijan (Eurasianet, 2020; VOA, 2020). On 16 November 2021, conflict began along the eastern section of the border, causing multiple casualties on both sides, with Armenia reporting 15 deaths and 12 prisoners (no public reports made by Azerbaijan), and resulting in Armenia losing 41 square kilometers and requesting Russian military assistance via the CSTO (Eurasianet, 2021; OC Media, 2021; Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Armenia, 2021). In both cases, diplomatic pressure from Russia—including direct communication between the Russian president and his counterparts in Armenia and Azerbaijan—in conjunction with the military deployment of peacekeeping troops deterred an increase in hostilities and quickly brokered ceasefires.

Thus, Russia's military power, associated with its on-the-ground presence in the region and its diplomatic pressure as a big power, proved successful at deterring the escalation of the frequent clashes between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh. This meant that, during the first two years after the agreement, Russia was moderately capable of playing the role of arbitrator, consolidating its military presence in the region, and legitimating itself as a stabilizing regional factor. However, this situation would dramatically deteriorate after 24 February 2022, when Russia launched its military invasion of Ukraine. Although Russia had planned a quick in-

and-out operation designed to consolidate the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk and overthrow the Ukrainian government, it instead became involved in an exhausting conflict with unexpected consequences in both the national and international spheres. According to some commentators (e.g., Barany, 2023; Gioe et al., 2023; Gould, 2022; Kuzio, 2022), Russia made three key mistakes when it decided to launch the military operation: underestimating Ukraine's army, overestimating its own military capacity, and miscalculating the response from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Internally, Russia has faced increasing domestic opposition to the war, especially as the conflict intensified, requiring the implementation of conscription (Fischer, 2022). This phenomenon was aggravated due to the increase in casualties and the economic impact of the international sanctions implemented against Russia. Internationally, the Ukrainian war severely isolated Russia, with numerous countries opposing the war and even approaching NATO to obtain military protection. This isolation increased when Russia suffered several defeats and had to retreat from territories that it had previously conquered, despite its numerous assertions of the favorable evolution of the conflict. According to Dzhuraev, this deteriorated not only Russia's military power but also Vladimir Putin's image: "Putin is no longer the great invincible leader that everyone wants to meet (...). He has lost his aura" (New York Times, 2022). This image of strong leader was particularly questioned after the Private Military Group Wagner's leader Yevgeny Prigozhin entered in public confrontations with the Russian military leaders and eventually marched with his forces towards Moscow. Even though negotiation avoided a violent escalation of the conflict and Wagner's leaders died recently in a plane crash, this conflict was perceived as a proof of Putin's decreasing power in Russia (Parens, 2023; Strain and Goda, 2023).

In addition, international sanctions—which included embargos, economic blockades, the establishment of maximum prices, and limitations on the use of the SWIFT banking system—considerably impacted the Russian economy and necessitated the search for alternative trade partners outside of the European Union (EU) and the US. This tendency also increased Russia's dependence on countries such as Turkey or China, which became essential economic partners and were critical to mitigating the problems associated with the economic sanctions (Prokopenko, 2022).

Also relevant is that the unexpected development of the conflict required Russia to redeploy critical military hardware and troops from the Middle East, with reports suggesting that around 2,000 soldiers were sent from Tajikistan and between 1,200 and 1,600 were obtained from Syria (New York Times, 2022; Radio Free Europe, 2022). Furthermore, Azerbaijan

claimed that Russia temporarily removed its peacekeeping forces from the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan (JAM News, 2022a). Although this information has been denied by Russia, and its veracity remains disputed, it evidences the ways that the Ukrainian conflict has severely jeopardized Russia's capacity to quickly respond to the ongoing conflicts in Armenia, Syria, and Libya (Qaisrani et al., 2023).

In addition, the stagnation of the conflict with Ukraine also benefited Turkey, a country whose longstanding geopolitical agenda frequently requires it to address both Russian interests and US/EU interests, an agenda that includes the weakening of Armenia and the strengthening of Azerbaijan. In Malsin's words: "The war in Ukraine has thrown up an opportunity for Turkey to advance its growing defense industry while furthering its foreign-policy goals after pursuing a series of proxy wars with Russia in Syria, Libya and the South Caucasus region" (The Wall Street Journal, 2022).

Concerning the Russia-Ukraine conflict, during the year after the invasion, Turkey conducted a diplomatic balancing act, developing good relations with both blocs and, thus, successfully improving its geopolitical and economic position. On the one hand, Turkey refused to implement NATO-supported sanctions against Russia, instead doubling its trading (Cook, 2022). In particular, the agreement to pump more gas through Turkey, due to Russia's desire to reduce its dependence on the Nord Stream Baltic gas pipelines, represented a substantial benefit to Turkey, both economically and geopolitically (Reuters, 2022a). In addition, recent actions in Syria, a close Russian ally, could also be considered a diplomatic gesture favoring Russia (Meinardus, 2023). However, on the other hand, Turkey explicitly rejected the Russian annexation of Ukrainian territories as a violation of international law, supplied Ukraine with military equipment (including mine-resistant vehicles, precision-guided missiles, and *Bayraktar TB2s* drones), and called for an immediate resolution of the conflict (Defense News, 2022; Reuters, 2022b). In addition, Turkey played a key role in negotiating the Black Sea Grain Initiative, an intervention essential to ensuring Russia's return to the deal after its withdrawal in October 2022. Indeed, according to Prokopenko (2022), the speed of Russia's return—only two days after the withdrawal—evidenced Turkey's growing influence over Russia, an influence that is critical to understanding Russia's reluctance to get involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict again, with any action against Azerbaijan likely to deteriorate diplomatic relations with Turkey. In addition, intervening in the conflict would require mobilizing troops that are currently unavailable and imply the possibility of an eventual open conflict in the South Caucasus, requiring Russia to manage two extremely problematic crises simultaneously.

This geopolitical shift—an increasingly strong ally with the potential to avert any participation in a severe crisis—can be useful for understanding Azerbaijan’s growing pressure on Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh during 2022 and 2023. During this time, conflicts around the borders have become more frequent, including the occupation of Karaglukh Heights on 24 March 2022 and a full escalation in September of the same year that caused more than two hundred casualties (Asbarez, 2022; Swiss Info, 2022). One particularly controversial issue concerned the development of infrastructure connecting Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, with the ceasefire agreement only determining that Armenia should guarantee the free movement of citizens, vehicles, and goods, delaying to a future agreement the construction of new transport infrastructure (Президент России, 2020). As a result, Azerbaijan’s government requested the creation of a new corridor (Zangezur Corridor) through Armenian territory, which would allow Azerbaijan to fulfill one of its foremost geopolitical goals: the establishment of a direct route to Turkey. Armenia rejected this initiative, understanding that no such negotiation could coexist with Azeri military attacks on Armenian borders (Armen Press, 2021). The Azeri government responded to this decision by directing even more aggressive discourse toward Armenia. In President Ilhem Alyev’s words:

“Over the past year we have shown three times that no one can resist us. We achieve everything we want, and the patrons of Yerevan cannot help them. This is first. Second, the heights on the Azerbaijani-Armenian border provide us with a great strategic advantage. They make it possible to detect any potential danger and stop it in time. I hope that Armenia, which suffered military and political defeat three times in a short time, already understands that a peace treaty is inevitable. The sooner they understand this and find the strength to agree, the better it will be for our region” (JAM News, 2023).

This escalated on 3 December 2022, when Azeri “eco-protesters” blocked the Lachin corridor in response to alleged environmental damage caused by the Karabakh mines, cutting Nagorno-Karabakh off from Armenia. Although this was quickly resolved by the peacekeeping troops, other actions have *de facto* isolated Nagorno-Karabakh since 12 December 2022. This strategy, which has included intermittent cuts in the gas pipelines running through Azerbaijan, has led the region to experience severe shortages in food and medicine, producing what some experts have denounced as a humanitarian emergency. Notably, the peacekeeping troops that supposedly guarantee safe travel through the corridor have reportedly not only failed

to prevent Azeri demonstrators from blocking the road but also dissolved Armenians who prevented Azeri inspectors from visiting Karabakh mines (Krivosheev, 2022). In the words of Michael Zolyan, political analyst: “It looks like the Russian peacekeepers don’t control the territory. Either they agreed all this in advance or they don’t have the ability to respond harshly to Azerbaijan.” (Financial Times, 2023). Finally, Azerbaijan also developed a delegitimization campaign against Russia, which included accusations of conspiring with Armenia to harm Azerbaijan’s interests, accusations that intensified after Ruben Vardanyan, a Russian-Armenian millionaire, was appointed State Minister of Artsakh, a move perceived as a Russian effort to intervene in the conflict (Asbarez, 2023). This strategy was generally effective, weakening the Armenian military, increasing animosity between Armenia and its allies, and exerting increasing pressure on Russia and its peacekeeping troops, eventually rendering them powerless to control the conflict. “Defying the Russian presence, Azerbaijanis are testing whether Moscow is still able and determined to impose its will on other, smaller neighbors amid its struggles in Ukraine.” (New York Times, 2023).

In response to this increasing pressure, Armenia had few options. Azerbaijan proved its military superiority in 2020 by demonstrating its capacity to completely isolate Nagorno-Karabakh due to the border reconfiguration established by the ceasefire agreement. Furthermore, any military action could unleash a Turkish intervention because Turkey wants to consolidate the Azeri influence in Nagorno-Karabakh and weaken Armenia. Finally, an Armenian military response is not an option because of the difficulties it is experiencing obtaining military supplies because Russia—which, until 2020, provided 94% of Armenian weapons—needs these armaments for the Ukrainian conflict (JAM News, 2022b). This situation led to Armenia’s previously discussed unsuccessful attempts to obtain protection from Russia, which saw it call for not only the mobilization of Russian peacekeeping forces but also the activation of the CSTO protection mechanism in response to Azeri attacks across the Armenian border. Not receiving a satisfactory response to its demands, the Armenian government has repeatedly expressed its increasing disappointment with Russia and the CSTO. In Prime Minister Pashinyan’s words:

“The aggression against the sovereign territory of Armenia from May 2021 to September 13, 2022 was doubly painful because our security allies abandoned us, preferring to remain in passive observer status or offering active observer status as an alternative” (Azatutyun, 2023).

This discourse has sometimes taken the form of criticism of Russia's peacekeeping troops, with Armenia even questioning the suitability of maintaining these forces, which have generated animosity from Azerbaijan but failed to prevent Azeri violations of the ceasefire agreement (Armenian Weekly, 2023). Meanwhile, after Armenia's veto of a CSTO resolution that it did not consider to suitably condemn the Azeri attacks, Pashinyan's government refused to host CSTO military exercises, further making apparent its disappointment with the organization. Despite this situation, Russia and the CSTO remain Armenia's best chance at deterring direct Azeri aggression, especially considering Turkey's potential involvement in the conflict and Armenia's substantially weakened geopolitical and military position following the ceasefire.

Concerning other possible allies, Pashinyan explored an approach to the US and to the European Union, but Armenia did not obtain substantial support from them. In fact, during the September military operation started by Azerbaijan, the US and the EU limited its involvement to formal rejections of the use of force but avoided to implement economic or political sanctions. This has been explained by different reasons, including the international recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as Azeri territory, the low strategic interest of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh or the increasing role of Azerbaijan as gas supplier to Europe (Avedissian, 2023; Ibadoghlu, 2023).

Ironically, even though this approach to the US and to the EU did not imply any direct benefit to Armenia, it did deteriorate the diplomatic relations between Armenia and Russia. The deputy chairman of the Security Council of Russia and former President and Prime Minister of Russia, Dimitri Medvedev, refer to Pashinyan in the following terms:

“Then he lost the war, but strangely he remained in place. Then he decided to blame Russia for his defeat. Then he gave up part of his country's territory. Then he decided to flirt with NATO, and his wife demonstratively headed to our enemies with cookies. Guess what fate awaits him” (Mediamax, 2023).

Finally, another possible ally could be Islamic Republic of Iran, as this country aims to halt the spreading influence of Turkey in the region. In addition, this conflict created concerns in Iran due to the involvement of Israel in Azerbaijan —mostly in intelligence and weapon supply—, as this country aim to balance the increasing influence of Iran in the region (Seifi and Hasanvand, 2023). As a response to the strengthening of the axis Azerbaijan-Turkey-Israel, Iran approached to Russia as a way of maintaining influence in the Northern-Caucasus. Concerning Armenia, Iran has been an historic trade

partner and energy and weapon supplier (Priego, 2007). However, when the 2020 conflict caused the loss of territory previously controlled by Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran lost direct communication with this region and could not avoid the blockade established by Azerbaijan in 2022.

This geopolitical context explains why in September 19, when the Azeri army started a military operation to regain control of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia decided to adopt a neutral position. Facing a stronger army—both in numbers and in technology—, with a potential foreign threat (Turkey) and with reluctant allies, Armenia could not afford another direct confrontation with Azerbaijan. Resulting of that, the Nagorno-Karabakh's forces faced an extremely unbalanced conflict and were forced to accept an unconditional surrender that implied the *de facto* loss of autonomy and its incorporation to Azerbaijan (Reuters, 2023).

Ultimately, this discussion reveals a tendency toward a weakening of Russia's geopolitical deterrent capacity, especially in the Middle East, and toward increasing dependence on Turkey, a country with antagonistic interests regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This implies that Russia's deterrence strategy generated an effect opposite to that intended: Because Russia's strategy to contain the conflict and deter further escalation required an active and permanent intervention in the region, its absence permitted a Turkish-backed Azerbaijan to increase pressure on Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. In addition, in 2020, Russia enabled a weakening of Armenia to increase its presence in the region, putting the country in an extremely precarious situation, especially concerning its connection with Nagorno-Karabakh. In this context, the invasion of Ukraine turned Russia's deterrence strategy into the mechanism enabling the accomplishment of Turkish-Azeri ambitions in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

## Conclusion

This article's main intention was to analyze Russia's strategy concerning the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. In 2020, Russia was in a period of geopolitical expansion and sacrificed Armenia's geopolitical position to amplify its presence in the South Caucasus. Despite weakening Armenia's military capacity to defend Nagorno-Karabakh, this strategy allowed Russia to deploy a deterrence campaign sustained via a military presence on the borders between Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Azerbaijan. Between 2020 and 2021, Russia's geopolitical influence and the interposition of its military forces prevented any escalation of the conflict, consolidating the

borders established by the ceasefire agreement. This meant that, provided Russia was capable of interposing its on-the-ground troops and applying its influence to constrain Turkish and Azeri ambitions, Armenia's weakness was compensated, generally limiting the conflict.

Nonetheless, Russia's failure in Ukraine implied the total breakdown of this strategy. The unexpected Ukrainian resistance led to severe military losses to Russia and required the mobilization of Russian troops from the Middle East, decreasing its capacity to respond to ceasefire violations associated with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In addition, Russia's deteriorated image as a substantial military power and dependence on Turkey, a country with longstanding support for Azerbaijan and antagonistic interests regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, signaled the loss of crucial resources for deterring Azerbaijan. Because Russia could not afford to confront Turkey or mobilize its military power—currently needed in Ukraine—to dissuade the growing Azeri pressure over Nagorno-Karabakh, a weakened Nagorno-Karabakh was abandoned in a precarious position: virtually isolated from Armenia and without Russian military support or CSTO protection. However, the achievement of this historical claim on September 2023 not necessarily means the ending of the hostilities, as Azerbaijan is aware of the current favorable context and has other claims concerning Armenia (e.g., the establishment of a corridor to join both parts of Azerbaijan) which could try to obtain. In fact, Azerbaijan may be encouraged by Turkey to increase the pressure over the Zangezur Corridor, as it would imply a direct connection between Azerbaijan and Turkey, a necessary step in the economic relations among Turkey, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan (Eldem 2022: 5).

As previously explained, deterrence relies on a sufficient capacity, a credible threat and a good communication. Concerning deterring capacity, Russia put itself in a very precarious military position when it decided to get involved in the Ukrainian war, severely diminishing its military resources and its armed presence in Caucasus. In addition, its 2020 strategy also severely restrained the Armenian capacity to oppose the increasing Azeri pressure, as it tolerated Armenia's military weakening and the complete separation between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. In addition, the context of Azerbaijan's increasing influence, Russia's military and geopolitical weakening, an explicit animosity between Russia and Armenia and its growing dependence of Turkey—a close Azeri ally—, made less credible any possible Russian intervention in favor of Armenia.

Thus, Russia's deterrence strategy in Nagorno-Karabakh failed because it implied a very active guarantor role that Russia could not perform after the invasion of Ukraine. In this sense, it weakened Armenia's position

and indirectly encouraged Azeri aggressive behaviors towards Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh: this country is aware that, during a limited period of time, it will face less systemic opposition if it decides to achieve its historic territorial claims. Therefore, as long as Russia's military forces are stuck in Ukraine, and its influence deteriorates in the region, growing Azeri pressure over Armenia—particularly over the Zangezur Corridor separating the two parts of Azerbaijan— should be expected.

Future research should consider the impact of the weakening of Russia's geopolitical position on other situations where the country has had a historical presence, both inside and outside the Caucasus.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The article analyzes the two-part strategy Russia developed to address the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020. First, the country helped to weaken Armenia's position in Nagorno-Karabakh and consolidate Azerbaijan's. Second, the Russian military deployed peacekeeping troops to the border of the two countries to stabilize the conflict, deter any new Azeri military advance in the region and improve the Russian influence in the Caucasus. Although this strategy was initially successful, as it increased Russia's military capacity in the region, the unexpected complications Russia experienced during the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 severely weakened its role as peacekeeper and deterrence power. Russia's involvement in a highly demanding conflict has led to considerable suffering, increased international pressure, and a deteriorated perception of its military power, precluding it from deterring the expansion of a Turkish-backed Azerbaijan. As a result, Russia's deterring capacity failed as it was incapable of sending a credible threat to Azerbaijan and this country could achieve historic goals in the region. Consequently, Russia severely compromised its own position in the Caucasus, and increasing pressure over Armenia should be expected.

## **KEYWORDS**

Russia. Nagorno-Karabakh. Deterring. 2020 ceasefire. Caucasus.

*Received on April 23, 2024*

*Accepted on December 19, 2024*