Global Social Sciences Review (GSSR)
p-ISSN 2520-0348, e-ISSN 2616-793X
Vol. III, No. I (Winter 2018) Page: 1 - 17

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2018(III-I).01
DOI: 10.31703/gssr.2018(III-I).01

Russia's Role in Maintaining Status Quo in Nagorno Karabagh: A Successful Mediator and an Arms Dealer

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Abstract *In the post-Soviet era, the Nagorno Karabagh conflict has been a major source of tension in the South Caucasus. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia, the United States, and France have all been involved in the mediation process between Nagorno Karabagh, Armenia, and Azerbaijan over the resolution of the conflict. Russia, given its historical ties, economic interests, political clout, and military relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, appears to be the most influential and vital moderator in this conflict. This dates back to the outbreak of violence in early 1990s. Russia has tried to help the participants in the Nagorno Karabagh conflict to maintain the status quo, and has provided a framework of dialogue for Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia has been the main supplier of arms to both sides, which calls into question Russia's motive and goals in its role as a mediator, and its role is subject of much controversy in the Nagorno Karabagh conflict. This paper argues that Russia's role as a mediator is primarily focused on maintaining the status quo, and ensuring the equilibrium of military capabilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in order to discourage any military escalations between the two states. We assert that despite the fact that this strategy has been successful for Russia in maintaining the status quo, a different approach, which moves beyond military balancing, is required in order to reach a long-term solution for the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno Karabagh.*

Key Words:

Russia, Nagorno Karabagh, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Conflict

Introduction

In August 2017, the office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Yerevan suspended its activities after the OSCE participating states failed to reach consensus over the extension of the office's mandate. The office in Armenia's capital of Yerevan was the last representation of the OSCE in

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the South Caucasus. Prior to that, the OSCE had closed its office in Georgia in 2008, and in 2015 in Azerbaijan with the requirement of the Foreign Ministry of Azerbaijan, supposedly due to OSCE continued criticism of elections and human rights violations in Azerbaijan. OSCE is not only the world's largest security-oriented intergovernmental organization, operating in three continents but also the only organization that is institutionally involved in the regulation of the Nagorno Karabagh issue. In 1992, the OSCE Minsk Group was created with the co-chairmanship of France, Russia, and the United States. The Minsk Group was founded as an effort to reach a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno Karabagh conflict, by creating a negotiation platform for Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, the Nagorno Karabagh side dropped from the group's negotiation process in the late 1990s. Various meetings have since taken place during different years with the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan and Minsk Group representatives, to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the conflict, and to prevent the resumption of hostilities. The closure of the OSCE offices in Yerevan and Baku not only negatively impacted the role of the Organization and Minsk Group in conflict resolution, but also left an influence void amongst the Group's individual members, and for other regional actors helping Russia to emerge as the most influential regional actor.

The fact that Russia is the most vital regional actor in the South Caucasus, and the leading moderator in the Nagorno Karabagh conflict negotiation process can hardly be understated, and it is crucial to the understanding of the negotiation process. Russia remains the sole great power with a powerful military presence in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Russia had also maintained its military bases in Georgia and Armenia, as well as a radar station in Azerbaijan. Despite decreased Russian military presence in the region, due to the withdrawal of military bases from Georgia in 2007, and closure of Gabala Radar Station in Azerbaijan, Russia still maintains a strong military presence through their 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, Armenia, and the Russian 3624th Airbase in Erebuni Airport near Yerevan, Armenia. Moreover, Russia maintains military bases in the disputed Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This gives Russia overwhelming regional power and clout, which no other regional actor can compete with. Armenian membership in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CTSO), as well as its strategic alliance with Russia, further Legitimizes and bolsters Russia's role as an influential player in the region.

In addition, Russia has economic, historical, cultural, and political ties with Armenia and Azerbaijan dating back to pre-Soviet period. These factors have given and continue to give Russia an exceptional amount of advantage in the negotiation process of the Nagorno Karabagh conflict. Russia tried to play a constructive role in conflict resolution from the very beginning, by maintaining neutral position, while restraining other players from entering into the game. The

Russian behavior with regard to Nagorno Karabagh conflict could be interpreted as a part of Russian grand strategy in the post-Soviet region. The Russian way of maintaining its influence over the former Soviet republics and territories was a deliberately manufactured strategy to assure Moscow's pivotal role in those areas concerned. This would allow Russia to intimidate the Turkish and to prevent either the NATO or the US to be involved into covertly. Hence, Russia was involved into the Nagorno Karabagh issue primarily following the classical geopolitical game. One of the earliest examples of such exclusionary behavior includes the case of Turkey, which declared its intentions to protect Azerbaijan (Waal, 2013). Turkey was anxiously waiting to get involved in the conflict to support of Azerbaijan in the 1990s, after a successful Armenian offensive against Azerbaijan troops. In response to Turkish enthusiasm, Russian Marshal, Yevgeny Shaposhnikov, simply warned in 1993 that, "If another side [i.e. Turkey] gets involved […] we will be on the edge of World War III" (Huntington, 2011). Before that, Pavel Grachev, the newly appointed Russian minister of defense, had visited Armenia as a sign of warning to Turkey, due to the clashes on the border of Azerbaijan's exclave of Nakichevan, which borders Turkey and Armenia. Turkey is, of course, a member of NATO, and the involvement of any NATO member state could have brought unprecedented consequences far beyond this regional conflict. Thus, Russia displayed a distinct willingness to protect the sovereignty of Armenia against third side attacks, preventing the possible escalation of the conflict with the involvement of regional powers such as Turkey, who were willing to protect their fraternal ally, Azerbaijan. Subsequently, Iran had concentrated troops on the border of Armenia and Azerbaijan, displaying a willingness to intervene in case any one of the sides would violate borders with Iran. Moreover, Iran expressed its willingness to protect the Persian speaking population of southern Azerbaijan, in case Armenian militia would go beyond the borders of Nagorno Karabagh.

Russia's role as a stabilizer was undisputedly strong both during and after the war. During the war, Russia carefully tried to maintain the balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in order not to give more advantage to either side. For this purpose, Russia abstained from supplying weapons to both sides during war, and Russian Defense minister Pavel Grachev maintained good personal relations with the defense ministers of both sides. However, in the beginning of the war, Azerbaijan appeared to have gained advantage over Armenia in terms of conventional weapon capabilities, as a result of the 1992 Tashkent meeting, in which Armenia and Azerbaijan were both allowed to inherit the Soviet weaponry in their territories. Due to its common border with NATO member Turkey, for military purposes, the Soviet Government had concentrated much less weaponry and military personnel in Armenia than in Azerbaijan. For example, during Soviet era Armenia had only three divisions and no airfields while Azerbaijan had five divisions and five military airfields. Moreover,

Armenia had 20 times less ammunition on its territory than Azerbaijan (Waal, 2013).

Russia as Stabilizer in the Region

The balancing goals pursued by Russia were very evident in the end of war when Nagorno Karabagh forces took the initiative, freed the territory of Nagorno Karabagh from Azerbaijani forces, and advanced into the territory of Azerbaijan. In May 1994, the situation was of critical threat to Azerbaijan. At this point, both sides were exhausted from the war, which had lasted many years, had taken of thousands of lives from both sides, and caused more than a million people (on both sides) to flee their homes. Nagorno Karabagh forces fought for the roads to the second largest city of Azerbaijan, Ganja and the northern-eastern region was under threat of isolation from the rest of Azerbaijan (Kazimirov, 2009). According to Vladimir Kazimirov, the head of the Russian mediating mission, and the special representative of the Russian President on the resolution of Nagorno Karabagh conflict, who served from 1992-1996, Azerbaijan was more interested in ceasefire in May 1994 as than any time before (Kazimirov, 2009).

The only side capable of pressuring the Armenian side to stop the military campaign was Russia. According to Kazimirov, the Azerbaijani side during high level meeting with Russian officials multiple times asked simply: "Can't Russia stop the hostilities" (Kazimirov, 2009). The Azerbaijani side didn't bring in any prerequisite for the ceasefire, such as the returning of the territories outside of Nagorno Karabagh, controlled by Nagorno Karabagh forces (Kazimirov, 2009).

The Russian mediated ceasefire was acceptable to Armenian and Nagorno Karabagh sides alike. The security of Nagorno Karabagh had been guaranteed by taking over the territory surrounding Nagorno Karabagh, needed for the strategic defense of the Nagorno Karabagh, as well as for securing safe communication corridor between Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh. The Russian side had been actively working on cessation of hostilities with the Russian foreign ministry actively working with both sides. The signing of the so called, "Bishkek Protocol", on May 8th 1994 in Bishkek, by Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) parliamentary delegations, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno Karabagh, was mainly a result of Russian efforts to put an end to the hostilities. A few days later, the ceasefire agreement was signed, with the mediation of Russia. As a result, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno Karabagh put an end to hostilities, without signing a peace treaty. The Russian side was the main organizer of negotiations, as all three sides in the conflict did not have diplomatic relations, due to the immense hostilities. In fact, Russian diplomats were the authors of ceasefire that put an end to the conflict.

Russia, however, had more far-reaching goals than the simple the cessation of hostilities. The Russian Defense Ministry suggested that all sides locate Russian peacekeeping troops on the frontline to back the ceasefire. The

suggestion, which was refused by all sides, could have given Russia a tremendous leverage over Armenia, Azerbaijan, and newly declared the Republic of Artsakh. Nagorno Karabagh, which is mostly mountainous, has a geographically strategic position over the surrounding areas bordering with Iran, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, this strategic geographic position is of crucial importance in understanding Russia motives for involvement in this conflict. The debate of locating Russian or other peacekeeping forces has been much alive since the signing of the ceasefire and especially since after the hostilities in April 2016 on the frontline. Although, there has been no official announcement by Russia, or any other country about sending peacekeeping forces. The issue of peacekeeping has been widely discussed in Russian political circles, and it seems Russia hasn't given up the idea of locating peacekeeping forces in the frontline. Without evaluating Russia's real motivation of its involvement as a mediator in the process and active negotiator of status quo, Russia can be said to have widely contributed to the maintenance of status quo, and has used its diplomatic influence in the region repeatedly for this purpose.

Moscow as a Benign Broker

The Russian mediating mission continued after the signing of ceasefire mostly within the framework of the OSCE's Minsk Group. In November 2008 President of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, and President of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, met in Moscow in order to discuss settling The process of Nagorno Karabagh conflict. As a result, a declaration was signed by the three sides, commonly known as the Moscow declaration, where the sides expressed their readiness to settle the conflict by political means, through the continuation of dialogue under the mediation of Minsk Group, according to the principles of international law, and in accordance with the Madrid principles within the established frameworks (Policy Forum Armenia, 2008). This meeting established a format of trilateral talks with the mediation of the Russian President that continued in the following years. In 2012 the tenth meeting was held with the mediation of Russia.

Later meetings have since continued with Russia, the traditional mediator, establishing a new negotiating framework along with the OSCE's Minsk Group to settle the conflict. The Russian framework, along with the framework within Minks Group, has curved out some fundamental principles and elements for the resolution of the conflict. The basic principles include non-use of force and threats to use force (by both sides), and the right for self-determination (i.e. to the Republic of Artsakh) and territorial integrity (i.e. of Azerbaijan). The elements included (but were not limited to) self-determination of Nagorno Karabagh and its international recognition, deployment of international peacekeepers, and the return of territories (the Armenian controlled territories surrounding Nagorno

Karabagh) (Tadevosyan, 2016). In 2011, at the Russian mediated meeting between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the two sides failed to agree on these common principles, due to the refusal of Azerbaijan.

The Arms Dealer

One of the most controversial issues of Russia's mediation in the Nagorno Karabagh conflict settlement process is that of Russia's supply of weapons to both sides. Russia's action of selling weapons to both sides after war has been largely transparent. The supply of weapons to both sides has been intense since the turn of the century, due to the intensification of an arms race between two sides. Azerbaijan, which started to have increased revenues from its oil sector, started to arm itself, and since the early 2000's Azerbaijan has increasingly increased its military budget, becoming one of the largest arms importers in Europe. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Azerbaijan has been the second largest importer of major weapons in Europe in the periods between 2004-2008 and 2009-2013, followed after the United Kingdom. Azerbaijan has increased its imports by 378% between 2004-2008 and 2009-2013 (International Arms Exports, 2009-2013). According to SIPRI estimates, the solid majority of the imports (80-85%) were from Russia. Azerbaijan was the third largest importer of Russian weapons in 2014 after China and India while the overall import estimates as $0,6 billion (Wezeman and Wezeman, 2014).

In 2010 Azerbaijan purchased two Russian S-300 missile systems, a deal worth of $300 dollars. Russia's S-300 systems are one of the most sophisticated anti-aircraft defense systems in the world. In response to Russia's sale of the S-300 to Azerbaijan, Armenian Defense Ministry confirmed that Armenian army operated S-300 systems purchased from Russia. The S-300 systems aimed to neutralize the effects of Armenian operated Scud B ballistic missiles, from which Azerbaijan was defenceless until the import of S-300s.

In the middle of 2013, Russia started the delivery of $1 billion arms package to Azerbaijan, signed in a series of contracts between 2011 and 2012. The package included nearly 100 T-90C tanks, Smerch and TOS-1A multiple rocket launchers, Msta-A, and Vena artillery cannons (Grove, 2013).

Russia continued delivery of weapons into Azerbaijan, and the fulfillment of all contracts up until 2017. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, at a 2013 press-conference proceeding a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, declared that, "as of today, military and technical cooperation with Russia is measured at $4 billion and it tends to grow further (President of Russia 2013).

According to the UNODA's Register for Conventional Arms, as of 2014, the result of Russian sales to Azerbaijan has led to 137 tanks, more than 500 artillery systems, 1800 missiles and missiles launchers, many attack helicopters and

armored combat vehicles armored vehicle being sold to Azerbaijan from Russia (UNODA, 2013-2017). The data provided by the UNODA's Register for Conventional Arms is based on government reports, and may not provide fully accurate totals of weapons and equipment delivered, while the actual amount of weapons exported into Azerbaijan during mentioned time period cannot yet be verified.

Truce violations as a result of the arms race took place frequently. In 2014 both sides had at least eighty-eight casualties compared to only eighteen in 2013 (Bellal, 2016). According to the data from the UNODA's Register for Conventional Arms, the ceasefire regime in 2014 has been violated more than 000 times, compared to 13 000 in the previous year (UNODA, 2013-2017). 2014 was marked by escalations resulting from the situation over the downed Armenian helicopter by the Azerbaijani side.

In the post-Soviet era, Russia has been the main arms supplier of Armenia. On various occasions, Russia has given Armenia loans on purchasing weapons from their contractors'. Some recent loans of this type include a $200 million loan in2015 that was used to purchase the Smerch multiple-launch rocket system, TOS-1A rockets, and other weaponry, followed by another $100 million loan in 2017. In 2013 Armenia purchased 35 battle tanks, 110 armored combat vehicles, 200 missiles and missiles launchers, another 300 in 2016, and in 2017 6 large-caliber artillery systems (UNODA, 2013-2017). In 2016 it became known that Armenia had purchased Russian Iskander (SS-26 Stone) short-range ballistic missile systems, making Armenia the first foreign country to receive such systems from Russia. This move caused much anger in Azerbaijan.

Post-Soviet Era

The military buildup by both countries, which continued to divert huge financial resources into the arms race, has resulted in the pair being two of the most militarized countries in the world. In 2017 Armenia was ranked as the third most militarized county in the world, after Israel and Singapore, while Azerbaijan ranked 11th according to the Global Militarization Index (Mutschler, 2017). The military buildup had been accompanied by a sharp increase in the numbers of ceasefire violations on the frontline. A 150% increase in ceasefire violation by 2014 raise concerns among international observers even higher, as international observers were already concerned by increased militarization of the conflict, and continued arm race in the region.

The prediction of the international community was proved in the beginning of April, 2016. During the night of April 1st and 2nd, in southern, southeastern and northeastern directions with the use of artillery, heavy armoured weaponry, and air forces, large-scale military actions outbroke on the Nagorno-Karabagh-Azerbaijani frontline. Both sides blamed each other for the outbreak of the

violence. In the morning of April 2nd Nagorno Karabagh's defence army announced the downing of Azerbaijani MI-24 helicopter, which was later confirmed by the Azerbaijani sources. According the estimates of Nagorno Karabagh's Defence Army, from April 1st to April 2nd, more than 200 Azerbaijani soldiers were killed, four tanks, and a few drones were demolished (although, the data has not been confirmed by the Azerbaijani side). Russian-produced BM-21 "Grad" rocket launchers were recorded to have been used against Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army (Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army, 2016, April 2).

After four days of military operations, which saw unprecedented violence since the ceasefire in 1994, again a ceasefire was achieved by the two sides, despite continuous onward violation of the ceasefire. This time it was not simply a ceasefire violation, but rather a large-scale military operation included battle tanks, rocket launchers, artillery, and air forces (Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army, 2016, April 2). Nagorno Karabagh's Defence Army recorded the use of not only BM-21 "Grad" systems by the Azerbaijani side, but also TOS-1A "Solntsepyok" Heavy Flamethrower Systems and BM-30 Smerch heavy multiple rocket launchers (Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army, 2016, April 2). Both TOS-1A "Solntsepyok" and BM-30 Smerch systems were supplied by Russia to Azerbaijan in recent years based on the arms trade contracts signed between the two countries (Himshiashvili & Nikol'skij, 2013).

The Spark

The events in the beginning of April of 2016 were not only unprecedented from the perspective of weapons used in the frontline, but also from the perspective of casualties and technical losses. The Defence Ministry of the Republic of Armenia in April 13th reported 92 causalities among military personnel and civilians (Defense Ministry of Armenia, 2016). The Azerbaijani side had reported 31 killed. According to unofficial sources Azerbaijani casualties totalled over 100 ("Survey", 2016) while Karabagh authorities claim more than 300 Azerbaijani soldiers killed and 2000 wounded ("Azerbaijan holds body of a killed Armenian serviceman", 2016). As of April 5, the Azerbaijani side has lost 26 tanks and 4 infantry fighting vehicles, as well as 1 BM-21 Grad multiple rocket launcher, 1 engineering vehicle, 2 military helicopters ,and 14 unmanned aerial vehicles. The Azerbaijani side has admitted the losses of 31 fighters, 1 helicopter, 1 unmanned drone, 1 helicopter, and 3 UAVs. According Nagorno Karabagh Defence Army statistics, their side had lost 14 tanks since April 2 ("Azerbaijan holds body of a killed Armenian serviceman", 2016).

After the escalation of the conflict in April 2016 the Russian weapon sales to Azerbaijan came under much media scrutiny, even the President of Armenia openly criticized Russia for selling weapons to Armenia. Two years after the

2016 events, Konstantin Kosachev, Chairperson of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Russian Council of the Federation, declared in Yerevan, hat Russia had to continue selling the weaponry to Azerbaijan, because it was the art of the contracts signed long before 2016 April:"[But] Russia fulfills the contracts that were signed before April 2016, and we [Russia] are obligated to do so in accordance with the provisions of those contracts. But this is the situation that existed until that moment; and according to the information I have, in the future it will not be implemented at the current scale" ("Russia MP says sale of arms…", 2018). The Russian view of the weapon sales has been different from Armenian official stance. For Russian officials the arms trade is just business, with Russia being one of the largest arms exporters in the world. Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev in the aftermath of April events simply stated that,"If we imagine for a minute that Russia has given up this role (of arms seller), we will understand that this role will not stay vacant…They will buy weapons in other countries, and the degree of their deadliness won't change in any way…But at the same time, this could ... destroy the existing balance of forces in the region" (Ali, 2016). Medvedev then further added, "I believe weapons may and should be bought not only to be used one day, but to be a deterrent factor…This aspect must be considered by both sides of the conflict" (Ali,2016). Medvedev visited both Yerevan and Baku immediately after hostilities of four days, in efforts to persuade both sides to stick to the path towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict. After the events, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, paid a visit to Azerbaijan. It's important to note that Lavrov's visit was planned months previous and was of a trilateral nature, including the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs. In the interview in Baku, after the meeting with Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan and Iran, Lavrov said that, "The issue is that not all member-states of CIS have joined to CSTO and EAEU, including Azerbaijan. We hope that this can change" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, 2016). After the outbreak of hostilities, Russian President Vladimir Putin had phone talks with the Presidents of both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Due to the joint efforts of the Chiefs of General Staffs of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia with the latter's mediation, hostilities ceased. This makes one to believe that Russia had an tremendous influence in the conflict, and in the coming years observers can expect rapid, effective responses from Russia as its influence in the region will surely continue to increase.

The Great Power

There are a few factors that make Russia more influential in the conflict and make us to believe that the Russian role in the conflict will only increase. First and foremost, as mentioned earlier Azerbaijan distrusts France and the U.S. as mediators, due to a large number of Armenians in these two countries, even

though Russia's Armenian community is far larger than the ones in France and the U.S. The reality is that the Armenian community in Russia has little to no influence on Russian foreign policy towards Armenia and Azerbaijan, while the Armenian American community and Armenian French communities have been very active in promoting Armenian interests. In fact, pro Armenian lobbying efforts in the United States has helped influence the passage of legislating not favorable to Azerbaijan, such as Section 907 of Freedom Support Act in early 1990s, which banned Azerbaijan from receiving American government aid till 2000s. Moreover, the United States and many European states have long criticised Azerbaijan for its human rights violations, persecution of political opponents of the regime, constitutional reforms allowing President Aliev be a life long president, among many other calls of criticism directed towards Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's democracy score, according to Freedom House report, has dropped from 6.25 in 2009 to 6.93 in 2018, with the country being classified as being a consolidated authoritarian regime, which restricts freedoms (Freedom House, 2018).

The above mentioned closure of OSCE mission in Azerbaijan could have been interpreted in this context. Armenia has long had better democracy scores than Azerbaijan, and classifies as a partly free country with a score of 5.43 in 2018 (Freedom House, 2018). The 2018 report was made before Armenia's revolution in April, which was viewed as a very positive event by the international community, and it is expected that Armenia's democracy score will improve considerably in response to Armenia's Velvet Revolution. The perception of Azerbaijan as an authoritarian regime in the West, and continued criticism by the international community (including the United States) towards Azerbaijan, makes Azerbaijan's cooperation with EU and the U.S. difficult and problematic. Russia, on the other hand, is also a consolidated authoritarian regime, with no acute problems in bilateral relations. One of the factors that might cause distrust towards Russia from Azerbaijani side is the Armenian-Russian strategic alliance, and Armenia's involvement in the Russian led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). This involvement; however, has been of less importance during recent years due to Russia's increased military cooperation with Azerbaijan. Russia's mediating role in the conflict, and the openness of the CSTO and the EAEU to Azerbaijan's membership show that these factors don't give grounds to mistrusting Russia's claimed role as a neutral mediator in the conflict.

Another factor which might cause Russia to have more influence in the region is the possible decrease of the U.S. influence, due to the Trump administration change in policy towards South Caucasus countries, which has decreased the U.S. support in the region. In the post Soviet era the U.S. has traditionally allocated huge financial aid to South Caucasian counties, since their independence under various foreign aid programs and especially Freedom

Support Act of 1992. The aid; however, has dropped drastically in the recent years. While that decrease is global, including many other countries too, this might have some direct implications for the regional politics and the role of the United States in the South Caucasus region. Consequently, Azerbaijan's aid has dropped substantially, from $69 million in 2014 to $ 4.3 million in 2018. While, Armenian aid for the specified period has dropped from $71 million to $ 4.2 million (USAID, 2018). It is unclear yet what impact this will have on American regional influence, but it's surely not something which will help to boost

American influence in the region, but only hurt American influence and interests. Russia has tried to play an increasingly active role in the region, and actions have been far more successful in this regard than compared to the Western powers. One of the most important forms of increasing the regional influence, has been the incorporation of regional states into a range of institutions, in order to boost interdependence and cooperation within the region. One of the first attempts included the Collective Security Treaty, which originally was signed by Georgia and Azerbaijan, but both Georgia and Azerbaijan later refused to renew the treaty obligation to the CST. In 2002 the CST was forged into an intergovernmental military alliance known as Collective Security Treaty Organization. From the South Caucasus region only Armenia became a member of the organization. Despite its weak structure, lack of policy coordination, and lack of common interests between many of its members, the organization has the potential of transforming the Russian military strategy in the region, along with providing other members states a powerful forum for intra-regional politics. One of the first implications of the organization on the Nagorno Karabagh conflict, was the formation of CSTO peacekeeping forces. This peacekeeping force might be one of the first options viewed by Russia in the event that Minsk Groups co-chairs, and the conflict participant would agree upon stationing peacekeeping forces on the frontline.

Another institutional project among Post Soviet states, especially relevant in the South Caucasus, has been the emergence of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), founded in 2015. Once again, the only member of the organization from South Caucasian states remains Armenia, while rumours continue to abound of Azerbaijan's possible inclusion in the organization. The perspective of Eurasian integration was what kept Armenia from signing the Association and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreements with the European Union in 2013. Armenia later signed The EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in November 2017 instead, aiming at improving civil society, improving the investment climate in Armenia, as well as emphasizing environmental cooperation, all issues considered separate from the Association agreement (European Union, 2017). While on the Azerbaijan side, it has not signed the Association agreement due to its own concerns related to Nakorno Karabagh. At the Munich Security Conference in 2017 during panel

discussions, the President of Azerbaijan simply declared that the main reason of not signing the Association agreement, "was that they [the EU] did not want to have a very precise wording about resolution of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, based on the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. They have these provisions in the agreement with Georgia, with Moldova, at that time Ukraine didn't have this problem. But when it comes to Azerbaijan it is a double standard.

Russia was sanctioned for what happened in Ukraine. Armenia was not sanctioned for what happened in Nagorno-Karabakh" (President of Azerbaijan, 2017). The concerns over non-democratic practices in Azerbaijan and the dissatisfaction of the government of Azerbaijan over the EU's position on Nagorno Karabagh, have raised tensions in EU-Azerbaijan relations. Despite the fact that EU-Azerbaijan relations are quite cooperative in the energy sector, especially regarding the buildup of oil and gas pipelines, these factors open the door for a more active role to be played by Russia.

The most important factor; however, has always been and will remain that of Russia's willingness and preference to play a greater role in the South Caucasus. The South Caucasus has long been a part of the Russian Empire and later on, all three South Caucasus states joined the Soviet Union. For the Russian political establishment, the South Caucasus is a region of primary interest to Russia, and the activity of any outside actors within the South Caucasus region is been viewed as a possible threat, detrimental to Russian interests in the region. The gradual rapprochement between the United States and Georgia have proved that the foundation of Russian interests in the region is not as solid as Russia would like, which might Russia become even more assertive in the future regarding regional matters, as it seeks to solidify its power and influence in the region. Georgian-Russian relations started to visibly deteriorate after Mikhail Sahakashvili took power in Georgia. Following the spying scandal and withdrawal of the Russian ambassador from Georgia in 2006, and closure of Russian military bases in Georgia, large scale war broke out between two countries in August 2008 and continued for four days. Georgia, on the other hand, has been closely working with the United States and European Union. With European Union, Georgia has signed the Association Agreement in 2016, and has expressed its willingness and commitment to becoming a full member of the EU. Furthermore, the United States and Georgia closely cooperate in military and economic fields. In 2007 the number of Georgian troops in Iraq reached 2000, ranking third after forces from the United States and the United Kingdom. As well, Georgia highly contributes to peacekeeping and Afghanistan. In 2018 the U.S. foreign aid to Georgia only dropped to $37 million, while compared to Armenia's drop to $4.2 million and Azerbaijan's drop to $4.3 million (USAID, 2018). In 2012 both countries started to work on a Free trade agreement, which could make Georgia the only European country having FTA with the United States.

The case of Georgia-US cooperation has the potential to make Russia more assertive in other regional issues of the South Caucasus, such as the Nagorno Karabagh conflict, the final resolution of which has the potential of significantly changing the landscape of regional politics with one of most likely scenarios being the appearance of new, internationally recognized state in the region, in the form of the currently de facto independent Republic of Artsakh.

Russia has been absolutely assertive in promoting the idea of a peaceful settlement to the conflict, as well as non-acceptance of hostilities between the participants of the conflict. However, Russia has been less assertive in imposing any form of solution on any of the participants. Russia has always declared that any form of the solution should be negotiated between the participants and that Russia doesn't want to solely bear the responsibility of the conflict solution. In the 2010 Validimir Putin, in his then role as Prime Minister, expressed the official Russian view on the conflict settlement, "We can't make the parties to make decisions or pressure them. Russia is ready to help, but Armenia and Azerbaijan should achieve compromise themselves" ("Putin", 2010). Furthermore, Putin stated that, "the final decision achieved should be acceptable for both sides" ("Putin", 2010).

Conclusion

Thus, Russia on one hand sold weapons to the conflict participants, and on the other hand tried to use its regional influence to prevent the major outbreak of hostilities. In this regard Russia with the help of other mediators has been successful in helping participants to maintain the status quo for decades. This strategy is a part of greater Russian South Caucasus strategy of expanding and maintaining its influence in the region through economic, military, and political ties. Russia's strategy of engagement focuses on bringing more regional states into Russian led institution building, in the Post-Soviet region, such as CIS, CSTO and EAEU. Despite this, the resolution of the conflict has not been achieved yet, and the Madrid Principles that seemed to suggest an acceptable solution for all sides has not yet succeeded. On the other side, in 2018 the opposition in Armenian led by Nikol Pashinyan, took power in Armenia after a so called "Velvet Revolution".

The new, post-revolutionary Armenian leadership made new claims regarding the negotiation process which, in its turn, does not contradict the Madrid principles. Pashinyan declared that Armenia will not negotiate on behalf of Nagorno Karabagh anymore, and that the Republic of Arsakh should be an equal party to negotiation process (a claim long rejected by Azerbaijan). On September 2018, during his speech at the United Nations General Assembly, Pashinyan highlighted his position on the conflict resolution: "Azerbaijan should change its behavior of disrespect toward the negotiations and abandon the idea of

any military solution and implement all the previous agreements. Furthermore, if Azerbaijan is truly committed to the peace process it should start talking to the main subject of this conflict – Nagorno-Karabakh" (Asbarez, 2018). The election of the new Armenian government has the potential to drastically impact on the negotiation process once they are resumed.

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