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Abstract

In an operation taking less than 24 hours from the 19th to the 20th of September 2023, Azerbaijan took over the de facto independent ethnic Armenian polity of Artsakh a.k.a. Nagorno-Karabakh, and within two weeks, the entire ethnic Armenian civilian population of the polity fled to Armenia proper. This marks the swift but brutal end of a conflict that has been going on for 35 five years now, and also likely represents a reset for the geopolitics of the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan, relieved from the 35-year-long conflict on its de jure soil may take a more influential position in the region than it previously had. Armenia, abandoned by its ally Russia, seeks alternate partners, with the United States and Iran being the most willing applicants. The prospect of another war of Azerbaijan possibly attempting to open a corridor to its Nakhichevan exclave across the southern Zangezur panhandle of Armenia is still hanging in the air. In this fluid power vacuum, a scramble among great powers may soon start for the region, in which apart from Turkey of course, the United States may have better chances, than it would appear at first look.

Introduction

Taking advantage of Armenia's main ally, Russia being tied down in Ukraine, on the 19th of September 2023, Azerbaijan announced the launch of an "anti-terrorist operation" against the de facto independent, ethnic Armenian state of Artsakh, better known as Nagorno-Karabakh, within its de jure territory. Less than 24 hours later, on the 20th of September 2023, a ceasefire agreement was announced, however reading its terms, it could rather be categorized as the unconditional surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh. Within hours, a mass exodus of the ethnic Armenians started, and according to a report by BBC, by the 30th of September 2023, the entire ethnic Armenian population had already left Nagorno-Karabakh.¹ This marks a brutal end for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which has been going on for 35 years, and likely means a geopolitical reset for the international position of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. As we will see seemingly unlikely, but feasible solution for the power vacuum that emerged in the South Caucasus with the fall of Nagorno-Karabakh, may be the simultaneous NATO accession of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, following the example of the Greek-Turkish NATO accession of 1952. As unlikely as it may sound, Armenia and Azerbaijan are both already seeking Western alignment. The elimination of Nagorno-Karabakh eliminated the single most important factor that so far prevented the Western alignment of both countries. Azerbaijan sought NATO membership before but having a frozen conflict on its soil made it ineligible for it, but now this factor is gone. Armenia aligned itself with Russia because the Russian alliance enabled it to sustain Armenian rule over Nagorno-Karabakh, and because it trusted Russia as a protector against Turkey and Azerbaijan, but now Nagorno-Karabakh is gone, and Armenia no longer trusts Russia, and is already reaching out to the United States. Turkey, the most influential NATO member in the region also supports the Western alignment of Azerbaijan, which it views as a brotherly nation, and normalizing relations with Armenia and involving it in such a process may be the least of all evils for Turkey regarding Armenia. Russia on the other hand, with its forces tied down in Ukraine, seems to lack the means to prevent such a move. Last but not least, getting both Armenia and Azerbaijan into NATO would assure strategic access of the West to the crude oil and natural gas reserves of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia.

The present – The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its implications

Armenian efforts to persuade the Soviet government to assign Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia instead of Azerbaijan within the Soviet Union, and Azeri efforts to prevent it, culminated in violence in 1988. The subsequent war ended with an Armenian victory and a ceasefire in 1994. The Armenians took not only Nagorno-Karabakh, but also vast areas of Azerbaijan proper around it, and from those areas, about 630 000 Azeris had to flee, while the number of ethnic Azeris who had to flee from Armenia proper was 229 000. The number of Armenians who had to flee from Azerbaijan proper outside Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia on the other hand was 300 000.² Nagorno-Karabakh declared itself the Republic of Artsakh, also viewing the occupied areas of Azerbaijan proper as part of its territory. This arrangement lasted till the Azeri offensive of 2020.

Thus Armenian forces have controlled Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas of Azerbaijan ever since the ceasefire of 1994. For two and a half decades after the ceasefire of 1994, up until 2020, the situation remained a frozen conflict that seemed to have the perspective to last indefinitely, akin to cases such as Cyprus or Jammu and Kashmir. During these two and a half decades of frozen conflict, alignment around the conflict evolved in a way

that Russia became and remained the main supporter of Armenia, which made Armenia one of the most loyal allies of Russia alongside Belarus and Kazakhstan, as a member of Russia's military bloc, the Collective Security treaty Organization. Azerbaijan on the other hand, formed the pro-western GUAM group with three other former Soviet states, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, probably due to both its conflict with Russia's ally, Armenia, and its close ethnocultural ties with NATO member Turkey. Most Western countries however, probably due to cultural ties with Armenia, the first Christian nation in the world, as well as the presence of the influential Armenia diaspora, took a rather neutral stand, with only Turkey and Israel being clear supporters of Azerbaijan. Oddly enough, Iran also became a strategic partner of Armenia, most likely due to its strategic rivalry with Turkey in which Azerbaijan is an ally of Turkey, and the fact, that more Azeris do live in Iran, than in Azerbaijan itself, concentrated in its northwestern provinces, with Tabriz as an epicenter, thus Azeri nationalism threatens with the possibility of breaking away the northwestern part of Iran. An additional interesting actor on the scene is India. India building close ties with Armenia is possibly due to the fact that it maintains good relations with the United States, Russia, and Iran simultaneously, while seeing Azerbaijan and Turkey as strategic partners of its archenemy, Pakistan.³

Things changed radically during the autumn of 2020, when Azerbaijan defeated Armenia in a 44-day war, retaking roughly half of the Armenian-held areas outside Nagorno-Karabakh, and one-third of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. Armenia couldn't stop Azerbaijan's advance, Azeri forces were still on the march, at which this point Russia intervened and pressured Azerbaijan to accept a ceasefire in which Armenia gave up that part of the territories held outside Nagorno-Karabakh, which was still under its control, in exchange for being allowed to hold that two-thirds of Nagorno-Karabakh that was still under its control. The ceasefire restored Azeri sovereignty over the territories between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, making the strategic position of the latter undefendable, completely surrounded by Azeri-held territory. It retained only a narrow corridor linking Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, supervised by Russian peacekeepers. This ceasefire left Nagorno-Karabakh close to undefendable, as it became surrounded by Azeri-held territories from all sides, connected with Armenia only by the Lachin corridor, controlled by Russian peacekeepers under the agreement. This enabled Azerbaijan to blockade the territory for nine months before the takeover, from the 12th of December 2022, paving the way for the offensive that came in September 2023, by exhausting both the civilian population and the military of the breakaway province.

Of course, the main question is, why didn't Russia help? Under the Collective Security Treaty Organization, of which Armenia was a member, Russia would have had the obligation to intervene, if Armenia was under attack. The main Russian excuse for this was that Nagorno-Karabakh was not part of de jure Armenia. However, thinking in practical terms, Russia would have still shown strength, intervening in defense of the de facto dependency of its ally, also reaffirming Armenia's commitment as an ally, while by not doing so, it showed weakness, and risked alienating its ally, Armenia. Moreover, from 2021 on, Azerbaijan launched attacks on the border areas of Armenia proper, for which the CSTO treaty did apply de jure as well, and Russia still didn't intervene. Of course, the obvious reason for the lack of Russian action regarding the Azeri invasion of 2023, is that Russia's military was tied down in Ukraine, and probably wouldn't even be capable of intervening without risking a defeat in Ukraine. This however, obviously was not the case in 2020 or 2021. Had Russia intervened in 2020, to sustain the 1994 demarcation line, Armenia would have been in a much more advantageous position in 2023, possibly enabling it to defend Nagorno-Karabakh, and Russian intervention in 2020 may have even deterred Azerbaijan from attacking in 2023 in the first place. So why didn't Russia help back in 2020? The most plausible explanation is that Russia chose to punish Armenia's leader, Nikol Pashinyan this way. Pashinyan got to power in 2018 through an event

close to a color revolution. It may not be fully justified to categorize the 2018 Armenia events as a color revolution, as Pashinyan's government maintained the alliance with Russia, however, it did start a cautious rapprochement with the West and a more independent foreign policy from Moscow. Therefore, Russia's decision not to help may have been a punishment because of that.⁴ If that was the motive behind Russia's move however, the result became nothing it may have wished for: Eventually, this move enabled Azerbaijan to march into Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, which seems to have alienated from Russia its key ally in the South Caucasus, Armenia, and also deprived Russia of the leverage it had over Azerbaijan by having a frozen conflict on its soil.

Given the immense leverage that Russia had over Armenia, and to a lesser degree, even over Azerbaijan, it is hard to believe that it couldn't have brokered peace process sometime during the 26 years between 1994 and 2020 if that was the aim. We can see a few reference points on how some kind of peace deal could have been brokered. While Nagorno-Karabakh had an overwhelmingly ethnic Armenian population, the lands surrounding it, and also conquered by Armenian forces by 1994, were majority Azeri areas. While international norms since 1945 reject annexation, they do recognize secession, however under the *uti possidetis* legal guideline, only do so within previous administrative boundaries. Therefore, under the current international norms, while annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh by Armenia would have been impossible, its independence would have been possible, and while independence along the line of control of 1994-2020 would have been impossible, independence within the administrative borders of Nagorno-Karabakh prior to the conflict would have been possible. Also, an independent Artsakh within the prior administrative borders of Nagorno-Karabakh would have covered areas that were overwhelmingly ethnic Armenian prior to the conflict but would have returned to Azerbaijan the bulk of those areas that had an Azeri majority at the start of the conflict. Therefore, the most plausible solution for the conflict until 2020, could have been a *de jure* independent Artsakh, but strictly within the administrative borders of Nagorno-Karabakh at the start of the conflict, returning to Azerbaijan the rest of the territory that Armenians took over in 1994. While such an independent Artsakh would have had no direct link to Armenia, Azerbaijan does have a similar problem with its Nakhichevan exclave, so part of such a peace deal could have been Armenia providing free passage between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan, in exchange for Azerbaijan providing the same between Armenia and Artsakh. The Madrid Principles drafted by OSCE in 2007, articulated very similar guidelines, with the exception that it didn't propose outright independence for Nagorno-Karabakh, but still left the door open for such an outcome by proposing the future status of it to be decided by a referendum. Russia would have had 26 years to broker a peace deal such as that or something similar, but it didn't. The fact that it didn't, strongly suggests that the aim was something else: The frozen conflict entrapped both Armenia and Azerbaijan in a way that was extremely convenient for Russia. After any kind of peace deal, both Armenia and Azerbaijan would have been free to choose their allegiances, and potentially even align themselves with the West, should they have found that the best option for themselves. As long as the frozen conflict was present however, this made it impossible for both of them: As Turkey is a NATO member with the second largest military of the alliance, it would have most likely vetoed Armenian NATO membership as long as Armenia held a large chunk of Azerbaijan under occupation. Azerbaijan on the other hand, while actively supported by Turkey, would not have had the chance of becoming a NATO member, as the rules of the alliance forbid the admission of any country with an ongoing military conflict on its soil. Moreover, being engaged in an ongoing military conflict with Azerbaijan, and with NATO membership out of reach due to that, Armenia had no option but to remain closely allied with Russia. The Azeri operations in 2020, however, tilted the balance in favor of Azerbaijan, and took away all incentives from it to agree on anything short of full victory: While returning Armenian-occupied lands outside Nagorno-

Karabakh in exchange for independence for Nagorno-Karabakh could have been a deal offering something for both belligerents up until that point, as the Azeri operations of 2020 returned to Azerbaijan not only all territory outside Nagorno-Karabakh, but even one third of the province itself, without having had to offer de jure independence for the province, or anything else in exchange, such incentives immediately evaporated. From this point, Azerbaijan could have gained nothing by de jure accepting independence or even any special status for the province, as Armenia had nothing left to offer in exchange.

The outcome raises the question, of whether this is the end of the conflict or not. On the one hand, Armenia and Azerbaijan haven't signed a peace agreement. On the other hand, however, the very reason for the conflict, Nagorno-Karabakh practically ceased to exist. Not only has its territory been taken over by the Armenian military, but also its entire ethnic Armenian population left by the 30th of September 2023. While the dissolution of the Republic of Artsakh will only come into effect on the 1st of January 2024, both its territory and its population already evaporated by the end of September. While Armenia and Azerbaijan still hold some minuscule chunks of each other's territory under occupation along their border, this means their reason to fight each other has ceased to exist. Armenia's reason to fight was to secure de facto statehood for the ethnic Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, and Azerbaijan's reason was to restore its sovereignty over the province. Now Azerbaijan's goal has been fulfilled, while with the flight of the ethnic Armenian population, Armenia's reason to fight for an independent state for them, has ceased to exist. As the minuscule chunks of each other's territories that Armenia and Azerbaijan now hold under occupation along their border, were not the aim of the war, just a mere side effect of it, and the real reason for the war ceased to exist, from now on, the two countries have little reason to continue this occupation.

Besides Karabakh, another source of political tensions is the issue of the Azeri exclave of Nakhichevan. The shortest way between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan is across Armenia's Zangezur panhandle. Azerbaijan repeatedly expressed its interest in territorial exchange or obtaining extraterritorial rights in order to get a corridor linking Nakhichevan to it across Zangezur, and some peace proposals during the conflict did propose a territorial exchange of a corridor through Zangezur to Nakhichevan for a corridor linking Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. During the war, Armenia unsurprisingly blocked access through the corridor. The ceasefire agreement of 2020 did oblige Armenia to guarantee the security of transport connections between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan across Zangezur, but it didn't grant extraterritorial rights to Azerbaijan.⁵ Thus in theory at least, the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan should be sufficient to assure this. Still, the gravest risk of war after the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict lies in the question of this issue. However it may not be worth a war for any of the two sides, and merely a normalization of relations, and transport connections for Azerbaijan provided by that may be the best for both: As a member of the GUAM group, and having close ethnocultural links to NATO member Turkey, Azerbaijan has been seeking alignment with the western bloc ever since the 1990s. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been a major obstacle to these aspirations, however, that was something Azerbaijan couldn't simply let go of, as a large chunk of its territory, even outside Nagorno-Karabakh was under Armenian occupation. While the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was something worth delaying proper Western alignment, the issue of the desired corridor across Zangezur is hardly such, if the security of transport connections with Nakhichevan can be arranged by a mere normalization of ties instead. Moreover, as Iran and Armenia are also strategic partners of each other, an invasion of Armenia could trigger Iranian intervention as well. For Armenia, while the right of self-determination of the ethnic Armenian population was something worth international isolation, denying the security of transport connections between Azerbaijan and Zangezur doesn't seem to be such. Therefore, both sides seem to have more

to lose than to win with a war, and settling for the normalization of ties and the security of transport connections assured by that may be the best solution for both.

The past – How did Armenia and Azerbaijan get their geographically insane borders?

How did history get to the geographically insane borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan, including the issues of Nakhichevan and Nagorno-Karabakh? The main reason behind this is the fragmentation of the Armenian ethnic area. Throughout history, while ethnic groups following the same religion, traditionally assimilated more easily to each other, as both intermarrying and being members of the same local religious community was much easier, assimilation arguably tended to be less common between ethnic groups of different denominations. This means that when geographically mingling, in the case of ethnic groups of different religions, instead of mass assimilation, often myriads of pockets surrounding each other got formed. Such has been the case in Bosnia between orthodox Christian Serbs, Roman Catholic Croats, and Muslim Bosniaks, in Transylvania between Hungarians, who are Catholic and Protestant, and Romanians, who are orthodox Christians, between the different groups of Lebanon, as well as in Northern Ireland between the Catholic native Irish, and the protestant settlers from England and Scotland. Such territories can be the hotbed for the most brutal ethnic conflicts, as the present ethnic groups all retain their ethnic identity due to their distinct religions, preventing them from assimilating with each other, however this lack of assimilation with centuries of cohabitation usually results in a complex geographic mosaic of their settlements, where partitioning the territory into ethnic polities of each, usually becomes an impossible task, leading to brutal violence and ethnic cleansing when they try to do so.

Unluckily for Christian Armenians and their Muslim neighbors, mainly the Turks, the Kurds, and the Azeri, historical Armenia and adjacent areas became in the environs of Europe, perhaps the largest of such geographic mosaic of cohabiting ethnic groups with distinct identities and political ambitions. Historical Armenia covered besides modern Armenia roughly the western half of modern Azerbaijan, the eastern one-third of modern Turkey, and around Lake Urmia, the northwest corner of modern Iran. This formed a compact Armenian ethnic area roughly up until the battle of Manzikert of 1071 AD, marking Turkic conquest of the region, after which a massive influx of Muslim groups, representing the ancestors of Turks, Kurds, and Azeris started flowing into the area. However due to the above-described phenomenon of geographic mingling of ethnic groups with different religions, instead of merely the shrinking of the Armenian ethnic area, this process led to the formation of a complex geographical mosaic of the settlements of these groups.

By the turn of the 19th century, the once compact Armenian ethnic area degraded into a patchwork of pockets covering⁶ roughly the triangle between Adana at the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea, Trabzon at the southeastern corner of the Black Sea, and Baku on the southwestern coast of the Caspian Sea. In most of its vast area, Armenians comprised a share of the local population larger than 20%, but seldom reached 50%. This massive population was geographically highly scattered and fragmented however, and the demographic structure of the core area fell into a tragic equilibrium: It was too dense for a diaspora, but too low to function as the core of a future state. Up until the Armenian Genocide during the First World War, the territory that became modern Armenia didn't really have a prominent position within this patchwork of Armenian settlements. First, while as of 1897, 1 million Armenians lived in Russian Transcaucasia, (the region that became modern Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) the number of Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the 20th century was estimated somewhere between 1,3 million (Ottoman census figures) and 2,7 million

(Armenians church figures)⁷ therefore a figure of 2 million in between these two extremes can be a conservative estimate.⁸ Thus at the time, approximately 3 million ethnic Armenians were living in the Ottoman Empire and Russian Transcaucasia combined. The number of 3 million doesn't seem much in today's demographic context, but as at the time, the entire population of Russian Transcaucasia numbered only 4,5 million,⁹ the entire Ottoman Empire including not only Turkey, but also Iraq and Syria only about 20 million,¹⁰ and Iran only about 10 million,¹¹ this means that the 3 million Armenians formed such a significant share of the population of Southwest Asia, that would be equivalent to more than 20 million people today as opposed to the population of modern Armenia, which is just 3 million. Thus at the time, two-thirds of Armenians lived in the Ottoman Empire, and only one-third in the entire Russian Transcaucasia. Moreover, even out of that one-third living in Russian Transcaucasia, only half lived in the territory, what is modern Armenia, equivalent to merely one-sixth of the total including those who were living in the Ottoman Empire. What makes the story even more complicated, is that the dynamics between the territory that became modern Armenia, and Nagorno-Karabakh were quite the opposite of what one would expect: Nagorno-Karabakh remained under the rule of Armenian feudal lords known as Meliks throughout most of the early modern era, who served as vassals of the Persian Empire, with only a brief direct Muslim rule of only a few decades before the Russian conquest. Due to this, Nagorno-Karabakh continuously remained a compact ethnic Armenian area up until the modern era, one of the very few regions of historical Armenia that survived as such.¹² In the region around Yerevan that became the core of modern Armenia on the other hand, Armenians declined into being a minority during the early modern era and became an Azeri majority area by the end of the 18th century. At the time of the Russian conquest in 1828, in the Yerevan Khanate which largely overlapped the territory of modern Armenia except for the Zangezur panhandle, the share of ethnic Armenians was only around 20%, with the majority being Azeris, and a significant Kurdish minority was also present.¹³ The region around Yerevan started to gradually rise to prominence after being conquered by Russia in 1828, making it a safe haven for Armenians persecuted in regions under Ottoman and to a lesser extent under Persian rule, thus triggering a constant inflow of Armenian migrants from these regions for the upcoming decades.¹⁴ As a result, by 1897, the area became Armenian majority again, but this Armenian majority was still slim: What we can view as the core of modern Armenia within Imperial Russian administration was the core area of the Yerevan Governorate, except for Nakhichevan that is the exclave of Azerbaijan today, and the Surmalu district, that is the part of Turkey today. This also lacks the Zangezur panhandle, so it basically overlaps modern Armenia without the panhandle, and also by and large overlaps the former Yerevan Khanate. In 1897, this area had a population of 639,730, out of which 59,3% were Armenians, 32,5% were Azeris, and 4,6% were Kurds.¹⁵ On the other hand, the western half of Azerbaijan outside Nagorno-Karabakh, and Zangezur which became the panhandle of modern Armenia, were still a complex mosaic of Armenian and Azeri settlements: In 1897, the area what is the Nakhichevan exclave of Azerbaijan today, was 66% Azeri and 34% Armenian,¹⁶ while the Zangezur district of the Elizavetpol governorate what mainly overlaps today's Zangezur panhandle, was 52% Azeri and 46% Armenian.¹⁷ The patchwork of Armenian pockets continued outside Nagorno-Karabakh, further northeast beyond it, into areas that are today western parts of Azerbaijan proper, as these areas reaching the Kura and Araxes rivers were also parts of historical Armenia before, with a particularly high concentration around the modern city of Ganja, called Elizavetpol during Imperial Russian times: In the Elizavetpol district of the Elizavetpol governorate, 26,4% of the population was still ethnic Armenian in 1897, as opposed to 63,9% Azeri.¹⁸

As premodern dynastic empires turned into nation-states, this led to tragic consequences, out of which the Nagorno-Karabakh war was only the last episode. As we can see, to carve out a

state from somewhere within the Adana-Trabzon-Baku triangle, to have both an Armenian absolute majority above 50% within its borders, and at the same time containing the absolute majority of ethnic Armenians above 50% of their population in the region would have most likely been physically impossible. Any territorial delimitation small enough to have an Armenian majority above 50% within it, would have most likely left more than 50% of ethnic Armenians outside its borders, and any territorial delimitation large enough to have more than 50% of the ethnic Armenian population within its borders, would have most likely had an ethnic Armenian share of less than 50% within it. Thus even if the Armenian Genocide hadn't happened, the creation of an Armenian state would have most likely been marked by mass population exchange between it and its Muslim neighbors, probably akin to the Greco-Turkish population exchange of the early, 1920s, to assure ethnic Armenian majority within the new state, and also place a majority of ethnic Armenians of the region inside its borders. Although in this case, such an Armenian state would have most likely been significantly larger than modern Armenia became, most likely also including a significant part of Ottoman Armenia as well.

This situation at the turn of the 20th century also sowed the seeds of the feud between Armenia and Azerbaijan: As we can see, their ethnic areas mingled geographically to a degree, that drawing a just border between them would have been close to impossible, and both had reasons to view large areas as their own that were viewed by the other as such as well. Armenians could have viewed the western half of the territory that became modern Azerbaijan reaching the Kura and Araxes rivers as their own, on a historical basis, as these territories were part of medieval Armenia, and used to have a compact Armenian population back then, and to a certain extent, also on a demographic basis, as Nagorno-Karabakh and Zangezur still had Armenian majority, and Nakhichevan as well as the Ganja region still had substantial Armenian minorities. Azeris on the other hand could have viewed not only all the territory that became modern Azerbaijan, but even all the territory that became modern Armenia as their own, as the latter had a period in its past at the turn of the 18th-19th century, when it had an Azeri majority, and even at the turn of the 20th century, it still had a substantial Azeri minority.

This chaotic situation ended brutally during the First World War, the Russian Civil War, and the formation of the Soviet Union. During the First World War, the Ottoman Empire exterminated and expelled virtually all of its ethnic Armenian population, virtually eliminating what had represented in demographic terms two-thirds of the Armenian ethnic area up until that point. Fleeing the genocide, roughly 500 000 ethnic Armenians moved to the territory that soon became modern Armenia, doubling the number of ethnic Armenians living there, and solidifying the ethnic Armenian majority there against the Azeri minority. Thus, while at the start of the First World War, out of the Armenian population living in their historic ethnic area, only about one-sixth lived in the territory that later became modern Armenia, this figure became two-thirds of the whole by the time the dust settled. Then came the Soviet decision to finalize the border between modern Armenia and modern Azerbaijan, assigning Nakhichevan to Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh as well, albeit the latter as an autonomous ethnic Armenian province. This led to an exodus of Armenians from the Nakhichevan exclave, and the exodus of Azeris from modern Armenia, forming the situation that became the basis of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, with ethnic Armenians becoming an overwhelming majority in modern Armenia and Azeris vanishing from there, Armenians vanishing from the Nakhichevan area on the other hand, and the area becoming an Azeri exclave in the rear of Armenia, and Nagorno-Karabakh remaining an overwhelmingly ethnic Armenian autonomous province in Azerbaijan.¹⁹

The future – NATO accession of Armenia and Azerbaijan as the unlikely solution?

With Russia de facto abandoning it, refusing to intervene not only when Azeri forces marched into Nagorno-Karabakh, but also when Azerbaijan advanced into de jure Armenian territory along the border, the strategic situation of Armenia became untenable unless it found another protective great power as soon as possible. Armenia's recent diplomatic moves, with an Armenian-US joint military exercise, show that it views the United States as the primary candidate for that role. Azerbaijan on the other hand has long sought NATO membership, however, the presence of a frozen conflict on its soil made it ineligible to join according to NATO rules. Until now Armenia was unwilling to align itself with the US, but now it is more than willing to do so. Until now Azerbaijan was ineligible to join NATO, but now it is eligible. Also, until now Armenia had Nagorno-Karabakh to lose, had it sought an alliance with the US. Now, after not only the fall of Nagorno-Karabakh but also the tragic flight of its civilian population into Armenia however, it ceased to be something to lose for Armenia, which in turn left Armenia with nothing to lose with an alliance with the US. The influential Armenian diaspora in the Western world is supportive of Armenia's recent efforts to align with the US, while NATO member Turkey is a close ally of Azerbaijan.

Therefore, it can be argued that this new situation offers a convenient opportunity for the US to offer NATO membership for both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and such a move would also be the best way to stabilize the region, and prevent further war between the two countries. Of course, relations will likely be terrible between Armenia and Azerbaijan for the foreseeable future, but with the Karabakh question gone, they no longer have an outright territorial dispute. History serves as a similar precedent: The joint NATO accession of Greece and Turkey back in 1952. Greece and Turkey arguably hated each other as much back then, as Armenia and Azerbaijan do now. However both Greece and Turkey had their own reason for seeking an alliance with the US, and so do Armenia and Azerbaijan have now. Greece and Turkey had massive territorial disputes and war before, which was already over by then however, and due to their conflict culminating in genocide, massive ethnic cleansing, and flight of minorities, euphemized as population exchange, there were no significant Greek or Turkish minorities left on each other's territory, thus the two had little to no reason left, to raise territorial claims directly against each other. (Except for the case of Cyprus, which is technically a third country however, not even a member of NATO, and was not part of the previous Greco-Turkish wars, therefore, is a rather atypical element in the story.) The situation basically became the same between Armenia and Azerbaijan now. The US knew that Greece and Turkey could only be admitted to NATO together because if one got admitted before the other, it would have certainly vetoed the admission of the other. Again, this factor is also the same in the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Unlike in the case of Finland and Sweden, where Turkey was the harshest opponent of their NATO membership, things would be greatly different in this case: As Turkey views Azerbaijan not even simply as an ally, but a brotherly nation, it would most likely be the most enthusiastic supporter of its NATO membership. And if in such a case, the US would make it clear to Turkey, that Azerbaijan's NATO accession can only occur jointly with that of Armenia, Turkey would have little reason to resist such a deal, especially that since the fall of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia no longer controls Azeri territory. Therefore, as counterintuitive as it sounds, without a Turkish veto, the joint NATO accession of Armenia and Azerbaijan could in fact take place in a much swifter and smoother way than that of Finland and Sweden, and once the US and Turkey agree on such a decision, it could therefore occur in mere months. And if such a move takes place before the end of the war in Ukraine, as Russia is tied there, it could do as little against the NATO accession of Armenia and Azerbaijan, as it could against

that of Finland and Sweden. NATO accession of the two countries would stabilize the region by assuring Azerbaijan's security against neighboring Russia and Iran, while oddly enough, assuring the security of Armenia against Turkey and Azerbaijan as well at the same time, and making another Armenian-Azeri war impossible, as it did between Greece and Turkey.

Azerbaijan as a member of NATO would have immense strategic significance. In his book, *The Grand Chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzezinski identifies Azerbaijan as one of the two geopolitical pivots of the post-Soviet space alongside Ukraine. He does so, as besides having significant crude oil reserves on its own, Azerbaijan also represents the gateway between Russia and Iran to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, therefore an access point to Central Asia's oil and natural gas reserves as well.²⁰ Indeed, securing Azerbaijan as a member of NATO would not only secure its position as a major crude oil and natural gas supplier of Europe alternative to Russia but also the potential of access to crude oil supplies from Kazakhstan and natural gas supplies from Turkmenistan, especially if pipelines are to be built connecting them to Azerbaijan across the Caspian Sea. Thus having Azerbaijan in NATO would greatly enhance the energy security of Europe, and reduce its dependence on Russia.

If Azerbaijan joins NATO, it would be vital for Armenia to do so as well, because abandoned by Russia, only NATO membership would be able to secure its long-term survival between the two hostile NATO members of Turkey and Azerbaijan. Apart from humanitarian concerns however, the US would have its own practical reasons as well not to take Azerbaijan without Armenia: First, Armenia left out from such a NATO enlargement would break the geographical continuity between NATO member Turkey and Azerbaijan. Second, the prospect of an invasion of non-NATO Armenia by NATO member Turkey and Azerbaijan would be a constant destabilizing factor, with a constant threat of some unpredictable incident occurring on the southeastern border of NATO. Therefore, if Azerbaijan becomes a NATO member, peace between Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan would be in the best interest of the US, which could however be assured only if Armenia also becomes a member at the same time. Fourth, if Armenia is left out, it could reach out to powers hostile to NATO. If Armenia is left out of NATO, despite the current collapse of trust, having no other choice, after a while it could again reach out to Russia, or if Russia is unwilling or unavailable, it could even reach out to Iran, an outcome even worse for the US. Such nightmarish scenarios can also only be avoided if Armenia gets admitted to NATO together with Azerbaijan. Fourth, Armenia can serve as a second layer of US influence in the region. While being a NATO member, Turkey is also building its own middle power agenda, and as a brotherly nation, Azerbaijan serves as its sidekick in this. Armenia on the other hand, is opposed to these Turkish aspirations, so as a NATO member, it would be a more docile US ally in the region, outside Turkey's influence, and with no similar ambitions. Therefore if Armenia as a NATO member state would for instance host a major US base on its soil, this would not only assure the security of Armenia but also enable the US to have an alternate foothold in the region without having to solely rely on the duo of Turkey and Azerbaijan within NATO.

Of course, the issue of the Nakhichevan exclave of Azerbaijan, and how to link it with the rest of the country would remain. However, if Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are all NATO members with normalized relations with each other, that would probably soften the issue to a degree, which would probably make the transport connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan across Armenian territory secure enough even without extraterritorial rights.

Georgia of course had the closest ties with the West among the three former Soviet states of the South Caucasus, and the only one of the three that achieved the status of an Enhanced Opportunity Partner of NATO. Therefore the NATO accession of Armenia and Azerbaijan before that of Georgia would have seemed bizarre up until September 2023. The recent turn

of events however flipped everything upside down regarding the perspective of NATO membership among the three countries. Azerbaijan ceased to have a frozen conflict on its soil, while Armenia ceased to rely on Russia for its security. Georgia on the other hand, is still stuck with the frozen conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on its soil, both under de facto Russian rule. Therefore while the obstacles for possible NATO membership of Armenia and Azerbaijan have suddenly disappeared, the obstacles for the NATO membership of Georgia are still present. In the case of NATO accession of Armenia and Azerbaijan, of course, Georgia would most likely follow them in joining the alliance as soon as the frozen conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are solved in one way or the other, but no earlier than that.

Conclusion

The fall of Nagorno-Karabakh is the last tragic episode of a long story, and as such, in certain ways a highly symbolic one. The Armenian Genocide is often likened to the Holocaust, but analogies do not end here. The dynamics of how modern Armenia was formed are also in many ways analogous to the way modern Israel was formed. Some Armenians did of course live in the Yerevan region that became modern Armenia at the time of Russian conquest in 1828, but the vast majority of the population today consists of descendants of refugees who, seeking the relative safety of Christian Russian rule, arrived there throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, fleeing persecution in their ancestral lands that are today part of modern Turkey, and to a lesser extent of modern Azerbaijan and Iran as well. Meanwhile, on the other hand, ancient majority-Armenian pockets within the Adana-Trabzon-Baku triangle, remnants of the once compact medieval Armenian ethnic area, got eliminated one after another, most of them during the Armenian Genocide of 1915, but during other violent episodes as well. Thus while Armenian civilization is one of the most ancient ones in the world, modern Armenia is, in demographic terms, a relatively recent phenomenon, somewhat resembling the Zionist establishment of modern Israel, although in this case, this took place in a much more disorganized and spontaneous form, and much more gradually in time as well, taking one hundred years. Nagorno-Karabakh however, represented the last remaining intact ancient pocket of unbroken Armenian demographic continuity that miraculously managed to survive the storms of the 19th and 20th centuries, reaching back more than two millennia. Now this last pocket of ancient unbroken Armenian demographic continuity is gone, and its inhabitants became the last wave of refugees arriving in the safe haven of the Yerevan region, joining those descendants of earlier such refugee waves of the 19th and 20th centuries, who built up modern Armenia there. The other side of the same coin is the story of the Azeris who had to flee areas around Nagorno-Karabakh that the Armenians took over during the war of the early 1990s. They may now get a chance to return to their ancestral lands, but after having already built a life elsewhere for three decades, this may not be a smooth restart.

Regarding the future implications of the events, as unlikely as it may seem at first sight, the joint NATO accession of both Armenia and Azerbaijan seems to be the most plausible solution for the situation, akin to the Greek-Turkish NATO accession of 1952. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan seek Western alignment now, and as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict represented the main obstacle in doing so for both of them before, the road seems to be open now. Swallowing the pill of accepting each other as fellow NATO member states may be the least of all evils for both of them. For Azerbaijan, another war to forcibly establish a corridor across Zangezur may offer some gains but would lead to international isolation, and such an alternative to Western alignment would be a much less appealing one. For Armenia, the alternative of Western alignment would be international isolation as well, with the looming threat of a joint Turkish-Azeri all-out invasion, and with the Russian alliance practically dead, Iran as the only other possible regional partner. Not an appealing alternative either. Given what

a significant alternative to Russian sources the natural gas and crude oil of Azerbaijan represents for Europe, not to mention the oil fields of Kazakhstan and gas fields of Turkmenistan that could also be linked to Europe across Azerbaijan with pipelines under the Caspian Sea, the willingness of both Armenia and Azerbaijan to align themselves with the West is a game-changing opportunity for NATO.

Endnotes

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¹⁷ http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/emp_lan_97_uezd.php?reg=372

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