

Russia's Foreign Policy Toward the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis

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Abstract: Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus region has been so important to Russia that Moscow has defined this region in its foreign policy strategy as a "Near Abroad", and that is why Russia has not been disposed toward the presence of the other actors in the region. The emergence of such crises as the one in Georgia in the Caucasus region, the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in the South Caucasus, and the conflict of interests among other actors have endangered the stability, development, and cooperation in the region and paved the way for lasting security crises. With the resumption of hostilities between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia and the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020, threats against Russia's national interests increased in the South Caucasus which is considered as the defensive heart of Moscow. The purpose of this paper is to investigate Russia's approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020 and see what strategic objectives it has pursued? It is hypothesized that Russia has had a defensive approach to the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh crisis and has pursued the development of the geopolitical sphere, the continuation of its presence, the prevention of NATO expansion, and the prevention of Western influence.

1. Introduction

The South Caucasus region is one of the most important and strategic regions in the world and the main route of transferring the Caspian Sea's energy to Europe. The existence of strategic components in this region, which receives attention and competition from regional and supra-regional powers, has led to the formation of internal contexts of disputes between countries in the region and relatively stable crises and conflicts. Due to ethnic and tribal ties and conflicts in the South Caucasus region, the scope of conflicts has expanded and the grounds for the influence and intervention of foreign powers have also been provided. After a decade-old policy of non-interference in the external environment, Russia is one of the powers whose geopolitical codes have been strengthened again by Putin's coming to power. These codes have been revived following the Soviet Union's foreign policy and have been put on the agenda of Russia's foreign policy. The Caucasus, which is one of Russia's peripheral or so-called "near abroad" environments, is of great importance in Russia's foreign policy. Russia has sought direct and indirect intervention in this region to maintain its influence against the West, especially the United States. The formation of a power vacuum with the collapse of the Soviet Union paved the way for the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in the South Caucasus region between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is affected by the conflicting relations of the parties involved, the geopolitical rivalries, and the conflicting approaches of regional and international actors seeking to exert influence in the region. [1]

Seeking to regain its former position and hegemony after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has shown, with the formation of a crisis in its security zones that it will not be indifferent to the existing crises and will take the necessary steps given the circumstances and sensitivities of the crisis to maintain its current power. The Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, like the crises in Crimea, Georgia, and even Syria, has been associated with Russia's actions. However, the important point is that with the intensification of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in 2020 and the military conflict between the parties (Azerbaijan and Armenia), Russia's movements have been more than the previous periods in the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis. Among other things, the diplomatic actions and the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the conflict zone show the importance of the issue for Russia. The present study aims

to investigate approaches and strategic objectives pursued by Russia considering the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in 2020. A possible hypothesis is that Russia's approach to the escalation of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh crisis has been a defensive one to protect its national interests and security and to expand its influence in the region. It has also followed strategic objectives to prevent the West, especially the United States and NATO, from infiltrating the region, maintain its hegemony, achieve its economic and political objectives, maintain energy security, prevent the threat of Islamism, expand its geopolitical sphere, and prevent NATO expansion. Considering Russia's actions in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, the issue has been explained based on the theory of defensive realism in the present paper.

2. The Importance of the Caucasus for Russia

From the 19th century onwards, the South Caucasus was part of the territory of Russia (Soviet Union). The collapse of the Soviet Union placed the communist-era elites at the height of political power, leading to continued Russian domination over the region's economy and the dependence of regional economic structures on Russia. With the growing influence of Eurasianists in Russian foreign policy, who emphasized Russia's geopolitical approach, sensitivities about the role and influence of foreign actors in the former Soviet republics gradually intensified. The collapse of the Soviet Union plunged the countries of the South Caucasus region (Georgia, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Armenia) into crises and conflicts that threatened the stability of cooperation and development in the region and paved the way for the presence and influence of regional and international actors. The formation of territorial conflicts in the Caucasus region has brought about economic, political, and security changes that are influenced by the relations of the countries in the region with each other, geopolitical rivalries, and conflicting approaches of regional and international actors who seek to exert influence in the region.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has considered the need to maintain its influence in "near abroad" and has used various leverages to prevent Western influence. The Caucasus region is considered the strategic heart of Russia. That is why Russia's strategy towards the South Caucasus should be analyzed and evaluated as part of its macro strategy. The existence of huge energy resources in the South Caucasus region has led to the formation of the rivalry between the great powers, including Russia and the United States, who aim to secure their interests, influence, and domination in the region. Such rivalries and the formation of a space for global rivalry, which is defined as the great game in the Caucasus, have affected regional equations and crises. The strategic importance of the South Caucasus for Russia has led it to take a hegemonic approach to the region to be able to control and expand its vital interests, survival, and continued presence in the region. The doctrine of "near abroad" in the minds of Russian strategists means that the republics broken away from the former Soviet Union are at the top of Russia's foreign policy priorities, and according to this doctrine, Russia has special political, economic, and security interests in this region that other regional and supra-regional actors are forced to accept. [2]

In November 2016, Russia's new foreign policy was published. This document clearly clarifies Russia's national security strategy and military doctrine until 2020. According to the document, Russia seeks to maintain its former influence in "near abroad" and tries to adopt policies to demonstrate its superiority once again to use it to re-impose dependence on the South Caucasus states through economic, military, and strategic instruments. In relation to the factors affecting the changes in the Caucasus region, the following four factors can be mentioned as those with the greatest impact on the security in the Caucasus:

- (1) Transformation of the concepts related to the international relations, especially redefinition of the concepts of security and threats by the West after the end of the Cold War;
- (2) Russia's internal political and economic unrest and its effects on the international position and foreign policy of this country, one of the consequences of which is the inactivity of Russia and inefficiency of its policy toward the Caucasus;
- (3) Westernization and being influenced by Western models in the republics of the South Caucasus, especially the Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia;

(4) Increasing the role of transportation and energy equations in the Caucasus, which is also a product of the formation of an economic, political, security space. [3]

3. The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

During the Soviet period, the conflict between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region did not go beyond the protests of the two parties. Gorbachev's reforms provided the grounds for presenting old demands on Nagorno-Karabakh. From the beginning of 1988, the differences between Armenians and Azeris in the South Caucasus gradually became apparent. On June 12, 1988, the Parliament of Nagorno-Karabakh voted for the complete secession of Nagorno-Karabakh from the Republic of Azerbaijan and its accession to Armenia. The conflict between the two states of the South Caucasus actually began in 1988 when Armenia made its territorial claims against the Republic of Azerbaijan. The presence of Russia in the strategic scene of the Caucasus region is such that Russia's policy at the international level requires maintaining regional stability and preventing the influence of foreign actors in the Caucasus region. The Caucasus region is the most important defensive stronghold for Russia to maintain its national security and provide the energy it needs to compete with the West in the region. In fact, Russia aims to put pressure on coastal states and Western countries to transfer energy resources from its territory. [4]

4. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis; Russia's Foreign Policy Approach and Objectives

The approaches and objectives pursued by Russia in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh crisis have stemmed from the security threats in the Caucasus region for Moscow. Based on the realist theory, the survival of the countries is the main objective, and the defensive realists state that countries' actions or approaches are based on the threat they face. Russia has also faced threats in the crisis of Nagorno-Karabakh as a security zone for Moscow, including the influence of other actors in the Caucasus region, the danger of Armenia's inclination to the West and NATO, NATO expansion, threats to energy security, and strengthening Islamism. Accordingly, Russia's objectives in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh crisis can be considered as preventing the spread of threats and maintaining Russia's regional and defensive power, which are discussed below.

One of Moscow's political objectives in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh crisis is the role of the Russian leadership in ending the conflict and imposing a ceasefire. The Nagorno-Karabakh crisis ended temporarily on November 9, 2020, when Armenia was on the verge of defeat and the parties to the conflict agreed to a temporary ceasefire while Azerbaijan took the control of the city of Shusha, both sides of which are of great importance strategically and historically, and the seven adjacent cities. At the same time, the peace agreement acknowledges Russia's dominant role as a mediator of power and peacekeeper in the region. The United States and France, the two remaining members of the Minsk Group, which failed to play a role in the peace talks were marginalized. In addition, for the first time since 2012, when Russia's lease on the Gabala radar station expired, Russian forces were stationed in Azerbaijani territory. In general, what Russia pursues in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and seems to be very serious about it has been to play a key role in resolving the crisis and to prevent the active involvement of other actors in this process. Following the escalation of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, other threats to Russia include the strengthening of Islamism and the presence of proxy jihadist terrorists that were stationed by Turkey in Azerbaijan. In this regard, Sergei Naryshkin, head of Russia's SVR, stated that Turkish-backed proxy jihadist terrorists should not be stationed in Azerbaijan and Russia. [5]

5. Geopolitical and Geo-economic Objectives

One of Russia's objectives in relation to the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh crisis is the Kremlin's geopolitical objective in the South Caucasus. Moscow is not interested in resolving the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan because it is in Kremlin's interest to freeze the Nagorno-Karabakh

conflict to weaken both Azerbaijan and Armenia and bring them back to Russia's orbit. Due to the very high strategic importance of the South Caucasus region as a bridge between Europe and Asia, Moscow intends to have full control over the South Caucasus. Moscow does not like the fact that foreign powers are trying to gain a foothold in this strategically important region, formerly known as "Russian backyard". [6]

The South Caucasus that includes energy-rich regions such as the Middle East, the Caspian Basin, Central Asia, and Europe's shortest route to Asia is of great importance to Russia. The South Caucasus is a very important transport corridor and a vital link between East and West. This region can play a very significant role in increasing trade and economic and commercial relations between Asia and Europe. By enforcing the ceasefire agreement, Russia was able to prove its position as a crucial and necessary trader. Russia used the peacekeeping operation as a mechanism for direct mediation between Baku, Yerevan, and the remnants of Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia now has military bases in all three states in the South Caucasus with more than 11000 troops and has expanded its economic power through its presence in policing transport corridors. The main goal of Russia's foreign policy in "near abroad" is to maintain its control and dominance over the former Soviet Union, a region where, as stated in various official documents, no foreign power has the right to have an active presence.

6. Preventing the Influence and Expansion of NATO

Russia knows that conflicts are a problem for the Caucasus states and prevents them from integrating into Euro-Atlantic structures. The Kremlin considers the expansion of NATO as a threat and intends to prevent the integration of the Caucasus states into this organization. Russia's main objective is to prevent NATO from expanding eastward. NATO enlargement and the transfer of military infrastructure near Russia's borders are considered foreign policy threats. Russia is aware that as long as the South Caucasus states are involved in ethnic conflicts and wars, the possibility of their integration into NATO and Euro-Atlantic structures is very low. Therefore, Russia is interested in maintaining political, economic, and social instability in the Caucasus to prevent NATO expansion and the integration of the Caucasus states into NATO.

Russia establishes its permanent military presence in Azerbaijan by sending peacekeeping forces to Nagorno-Karabakh. Besides, Russia finds the right to control the Lachin corridor crucial, which plays an important role in connecting Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh. By controlling this strategically important corridor, Russia has the opportunity to gain more leverage over Armenia. Isolated and impoverished Armenia will become more dependent on Russia and its sovereignty will be jeopardized. As Russia's influence in the region increases, Armenia and Azerbaijan may become Russian satellite states in the future.

Generally, the most important objectives that Russia is pursuing in the Caucasus can be summarized as follows: maintaining a strategic balance in the Caucasus and the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis; preventing the spread of Western influence in the region, especially the United States; preventing the spread of Islamism, especially political Islam, in the process of resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis; pursuing its geopolitical and strategic objectives in the South Caucasus, given the geopolitical and economic importance of the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

7. Conclusion

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's foreign policy has aimed to regain its former power. The Caucasus region, which was considered one of the territories of the Soviet Union, suffered a power vacuum with its collapse. The absence of a superior power in the region, the transformation of the geopolitical sphere from a regional to a supra-regional sphere, and the existence of vast energy resources have created a conflict of interests between local and international actors in the region. Conflicts of interest between regional and supra-regional actors in the Caucasus region have led to crises, including the crisis in Georgia and the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in the South Caucasus. The existence of crises in the Caucasus and South Caucasus has entangled the interests and conflicts of

other actors so that the competitions threaten stability and cooperation in the region and have created security crises.

Russia, which seeks to expand its influence after the Soviet period, has considered the South Caucasus region as its near abroad in its foreign policy strategy. The importance of this region for Russia is such that it considers this region as its former territory and does not accept any intervention and presence of other actors in this region. However, the emergence of crises and the definition of actors of their national interests in international politics will undoubtedly lead to the involvement of actors. The Nagorno-Karabakh crisis is one of the crises that has become an international crisis due to the conflicting interests of regional actors (Russia, Turkey, and Iran) and supra-regional actors (United States, European Union, and Israel).

In this crisis, Russia was able to comprehensively pursue its great strategic objectives. By not fully supporting Armenia, not allowing Turkey to participate in the peace talks, and the obsolescence of the peace talks within the framework of the Minsk Group, Russia was able to show its regional hegemonic role so that the regional crises could not be resolved without Russia. Geopolitically, Moscow was able to take control of the conflict zone by deploying 2000 peacekeeping forces in strategic areas of the conflict, which could guarantee Russia's continued presence in the region and impede NATO expansion in the region.

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