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Russian Ceasefire Deal in Nagorno-Karabakh Marks Slow, Painful End of Empire in the South Caucasus

Azerbaijan is triumphant — but its triumph, while recognized by Russia, was really delivered by Turkey.

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AP / TASS

Does the Russian-brokered ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan represent a victory for Moscow? The tragic coincidence with the shooting down of a Russian helicopter suggests that this is really about the Kremlin's efforts to manage its decline.

The trilateral deal essentially fixes Baku's recent territorial gains. Armenian forces have to withdraw from regions such as the politically-significant eastern district of Agdam and the strategically-crucial Lachin region, through which runs the main road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.

That road, the so-called Lachin corridor, will remain open, a lifeline guaranteed by 1,960 Russian peacekeepers, who will also monitor the new line of contact. These troops, from the combat-experienced 31st Independent Guards Air Assault Brigade, have already arrived in-theatre.

While there is massive popular dissatisfaction in Armenia about Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's acceptance of the deal — he himself admitted it was "incredibly painful both for me and for our people" — this is essentially a fait accompli. It was also made all but inevitable by the fall of the strategic town of Shushi to Azerbaijan's forces, the gateway to Karabakh's main city, Stepanakert.

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For Armenia, this at least staves off a more comprehensive defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh. For Azerbaijan, whose forces had taken heavy losses to get this far, President Ilham Aliyev has been able to crow that this represented Yerevan's "capitulation."

But what does it mean for Moscow? The Kremlin has long regarded the South Caucasus as part of its "Near Abroad" sphere of influence. Not an empire as such, but a region in which it has to be acknowledged as regional hegemon.

Its inability and seeming unwillingness to control this six-week war had become increasingly problematic, especially as Armenia — unlike Azerbaijan, still a member of the CSTO, Russia's increasingly-threadbare answer to NATO — was suffering attacks even on its own territory.

This was all the more serious given Turkey's extensive and evident support for Azerbaijan. It is not just that the Azerbaijanis were deploying Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones to deadly effect, but Ankara has deployed F-16 fighters to Ganja airport, presumably to deter Armenian attacks, and according to admittedly contested reports have also sent Syrian mercenaries and command personnel.

This represented a clear challenge to Russian regional hegemony. In that context, it is noticeable that the ceasefire deal was a trilateral one, concluded between Moscow, Baku and Erevan (although Aliyev also claims that Turkey will play a role in monitoring the deal).

So is this Moscow finally asserting its role as regional hegemon? Not so much.

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Armenia, which put its faith in Russia's protection against larger, richer and far better armed Azerbaijan, has in effect been forced to accept defeat. While some might see it pleased also to undermine Pashinyan, as a liberal elevated by one of the infamous 'color revolutions' that so exercise the Kremlin, it is hard to see that any alternative government would be any more friendly, now. Armenians do not appear to be considering the Russians as their saviors.

Azerbaijan is triumphant — but its triumph, while recognized by Russia, was really delivered by Turkey. Aliyev makes no bones about this, and in his speech about the ceasefire referred to Putin in neutral terms while thanking "my dear brother Recep Tayyip Erdoğan."

Managing decline

Russia may have the role of peacekeeper, but it is worth noting that this is an additional burden on its military and treasury. It does bake a role for itself into the geopolitics of the region, to be sure, but this was a part of the world in which it was already meant to be dominant? When you have to escalate your commitment to retain your position, that does not seem a sign of progress so much as laboring to hold back decline.

Whether or not Turkish officers do end up working in the new peacekeeping center for ceasefire control is in many ways irrelevant. In a pattern reminiscent of the changing orientation in Central Asia — where Moscow retains the overt trappings of hegemony, while behind the scenes Beijing's economic power is increasingly dominant — so too in the South Caucasus, Russia is having to accept new players in what was once its unquestioned backyard.

The irony is that it is not that Russia did not have the political and military muscle to act more quickly and decisively, had it wanted to.

The response to the shooting down of its aircraft in many ways demonstrates a decay in Moscow's will, its capacity to maintain its imperial pretensions that has been evident for some time.

On the same day as the ceasefire agreement, an Azerbaijani surface-to-air missile shot down a Russian Mi-24 helicopter gunship well in Armenian airspace as it was escorting a Russian military convoy to its 102nd Military Base in Gyumri. Two crewmen were killed.

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Baku has extended its apologies, after a fashion. Although the action was well away from the conflict zone, the Azeris highlighted that it was flying at night and at low altitude — hardly surprising for a convoy escort — and "in the context of these factors and in light of the tense situation in the region and increased combat readiness in connection with possible provocations of the Armenian side, the duty combat crew decided to open fire to kill."

An immediate parallel has been drawn with the shooting down in November 2015 of a Russian Su-24 bomber that was involved in combat operations in northern Syria when it cut across Turkish airspace. Then, a clearly furious Putin denounced the act as a "stab in the back by terrorist accomplices." Sanctions were then imposed on everything from package holidays to Turkish tomatoes.

Moscow's bluster ended up masking weakness. Eventually, Erdoğan delivered his condolences, carefully framed not to be an apology. Nonetheless, the Kremlin chose to pretend that this is exactly what had been offered, and the sanctions were lifted.

Moscow pretended that honor had been satisfied. In fact, Erdoğan had outstared Putin.

Likewise, this time the Russian Foreign Ministry expressed its satisfaction that "Baku immediately admitted its guilt... We also note the assurances given by the Azerbaijani side that an operative investigation of this incident will be carried out."

In other words, the matter is over, and the two dead pilots will not be avenged or likely even remembered.

This is neither mature statecraft not self-confident hegemony. This is managing decline, a Russia that in regional terms is strong in capacities, weak in will, trying to make the best of a situation, and in the process disappointing its allies and doing nothing to deter its challengers. All one can say is that at least the guns are silent now — but for how long?

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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