

Opinion **Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict**

Nagorno-Karabakh shows that Russia has lost control of its near-abroad

Moscow's ability to play the role of regional power broker has been hobbled by the invasion of Ukraine

ALEXANDER GABUEV



Refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh wait to be transported to cities in Armenia. Tens of thousands of people have been displaced after the enclave was seized by Azerbaijan last month © Diego Herrera Carcedo/AFP/Getty Images

Alexander Gabuev 13 HOURS AGO

The writer is the director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin

The tens of thousands of people who have fled their homes in Nagorno-Karabakh, a part of Azerbaijan with a predominantly Armenian population, are a powerful illustration of the sad reality that “might makes right” in the South Caucasus. Last month, Azerbaijan took by force the ethnic Armenian enclave which first claimed independence in 1991.

But the tragic exodus also reveals another truth: as a result of its brutal invasion of Ukraine, Russia can no longer protect the interests of even its closest partners.

Since Armenia won a war against Azerbaijan in 1994, capturing Nagorno-Karabakh and some surrounding Azerbaijani regions, the Kremlin has been the guarantor that this frozen conflict would not become another big war. Russia is Armenia’s ally through the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization and maintains a military presence in the country.

At the same time, Moscow has strong economic and security ties with Azerbaijan that provide significant leverage.

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...many, Russia worked closely with France and the US through the OSCE-mediated Minsk process, which sought to resolve the conflict via talks. Although the Minsk process failed to produce a negotiated solution, it was an insurance that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue wouldn't be solved by force.

When Azerbaijan seized control over the [Armenian-controlled Azerbaijani](#) territories and a third of Nagorno-Karabakh in a 44-day war in 2020, the Kremlin managed to turn the situation to Russia's advantage. President Vladimir Putin's diplomatic intervention positioned Moscow as the region's leading power broker, putting Russian peacekeepers on the ground to protect Karabakh Armenians and monitor the ceasefire.

But, in less than three years, Ilham Aliyev, the president of Azerbaijan, has managed to rewrite this arrangement at gunpoint with no pushback from Moscow. It is Putin's [aggression in Ukraine](#) that has allowed him to do so.

First, Russia's armed forces have no spare capacity for another regional war with a sophisticated adversary backed by Turkey, a leading member of Nato. Moscow cannot support Armenia should it decide to go to war with Azerbaijan. Russia's military weakness in the region was exposed for all to see last year when Azerbaijan launched a brief military assault on Armenia and the Kremlin stood by.

Since the start of the invasion of Ukraine, [Russia](#) has become more and more dependent on Azerbaijan and Turkey, which both play a vital role in shadowy financial and logistical schemes that help the Kremlin evade western sanctions.

This gives Aliyev and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan additional leverage, which they are not shy about using to change the facts on the ground. At the same time, the European Union has turned to Azerbaijan to replace the oil and gas it no longer wants to import from Russia. These ties give Baku confidence it will escape sanctions for using force in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Finally, Russia is no longer capable of working with the west. Instead of uneasy diplomatic co-operation with Paris and Washington over Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow is now in outright competition for influence in the South Caucasus. This duel creates space for Baku to use its military without fear of a co-ordinated pushback from three UN Security Council permanent members.

For now, the Kremlin has been trying to use the current crisis to overthrow Armenia's west-leaning prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan. Whether he survives or not, relations between Armenia and Russia have been badly damaged. Large parts of Armenian society, particularly young people, feel betrayed by Moscow and will probably drift

society, particularly young people, feel betrayed by Moscow and will probably drift out of Russia's sphere of influence.

However, it will not be easy for Armenia to find a way forward. It has few options: ties with Turkey are poisoned by history, Iran does not have the wherewithal to provide meaningful assistance, and the west's resources are stretched thin given commitments in Ukraine and elsewhere around the world.

One thing is clear: Russia's role as a provider of security in its near-abroad has been severely diminished as a result of its disastrous war against Ukraine. The destabilising effects will continue to be felt across the vast Eurasian landmass.

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