A GAME OF GO IN THE CAUCASUS: ARMENIA

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This article proposes a hypothesis explaining events in the Caucasus and the greater region since the mid-2010s. No right or wrong, good or evil, is assumed, only interests.

Understanding any strategic geopolitical arena is daunting. Without critical understanding and information, the best one can hope for is a leading hypothesis to explain seemingly isolated events or possible outcomes from a series of events. The strategic geopolitical landscape is an intricate system with shifting levels of state interests.

Each microcosm possesses internal and external goals and objectives, yet they all remain profoundly interconnected, even to varying degrees. The interplay among these often seemingly conflicting forces results in complexity and unpredictability. Perceptions can be deceiving, and the dynamics are subject to constant change. Many aspects may seem enigmatic.

In essence, the strategic environment closely resembles the chaos and complexity of interlinked physical systems. A strategic analyst must understand intimately the past and present and continually study the strategic environment. Navigating and succeeding in this complex realm requires a blend of art and science. One must look back at events with as unbiased an eye as possible, determine who benefited from each scenario, and connect what may appear to be mutually exclusive or disjoint events over time; the international arena is a bazaar governed by the law of the jungle.

A Hypothesis

Of interest is the disposition of the region of Nagorno-Karabakh (see the map above) relative to, at a minimum, Armenia, Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Israel. The region known as Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh in Armenian) was inhabited by an absolute Armenian majority for millennia. It wasn't until the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the onset of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and the discovery of hydrocarbons along the Caspian Sea that the Armenian disposition of this rich agricultural region was challenged. For multiple reasons, in 1923, Nagorno-Karabakh was assigned to Soviet Azerbaijani jurisdiction by Joseph Stalin. A quick history can be read here. As the Soviet Union disintegrated, demands for Nagorno-Karabakh's integration into the emerging Republic of Armenia resulted in a war between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces, known as the First Karabakh War. 1994, Armenians secured jurisdiction over Nagorno-Karabakh, declaring itself a republic while never achieving international recognition.

Ever since 1994, Azerbaijan demanded the relinquishing of Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenian rule. Decades of negotiation were fruitless. As Azerbaijani oil production created wealth and corruption, it also procured expensive weapons of advanced technology — considerably more than Armenia. Azerbaijan engaged in a massive international lobbying effort given the moniker Caviar Diplomacy. Azerbaijan drew upon NATO military expertise in a "One Nation, Two States" alliance with Turkey.

Relations between Azerbaijan and Israel began warming early in the post-Soviet Azerbaijan era, with Azerbaijan supplying about 40% of Israel's crude oil and, in return, Baku purchasing many billions of dollars of Israeli high-technology weaponry. Israel uses Azerbaijani territory as a forward intelligence platform against Iran.

Some have suggested that it was only a matter of time before Azerbaijan would feel comfortable enough to conquer Nagorno-Karabakh militarily. In September 2020, Azerbaijan launched a massive attack on Nagorno-Karabakh and, after 44 days, conquered most of the territory it considers its own. Three years later, in September of 2023, Azerbaijan began a military offensive under the ludicrous pretext of an anti-terrorist operation, which resulted in the forced exodus of nearly all of Nagorno-Karabakh's 120,000 Armenian population, most escaping to Armenia.

To gain insight into these seemingly isolated events, one must consider the broader geopolitical forces at work that go beyond the South Caucasus. The South Caucasus is, in fact, not isolated and disjoint from the world arena; in fact, the scenarios we see unfolding are a direct reflection of the machinations in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and the Far East.

After Ukraine's Western-inspired 2004 Orange Revolution and 2014 Euromaidan Revolutions, it soon became clear that Russia needed a non-enemy in Turkey; Moscow knew things would begin militarily in Ukraine given the failure of the Minsk Agreements. These agreements foresaw autonomy for eastern Ukraine's Russian-speaking citizens. In reaction, Russia annexed Crimea as Ukrainian forces shelled these Russian-speaking eastern regions. To complicate relations, in 2015, the Turks shot down a Russian SU-25 over Northwestern Syria. After a short period of tension, however, relations began to warm between Russia and Turkey, especially after Russian President Vladimir Putin warned Turkish President Erdogan of an impending 2016 coup in Turkey moments before it began. Work resumed on the Rosatom's Akkuyu Nuclear Plant, and by May 2017, construction began on the Turkstream gas pipeline from Russia to Turkey. Turkey eventually purchased a Russian S400 antiaircraft system, much to the dismay of the US and NATO. What might Turkey have asked from Russia in return, or what may Russia have offered Turkey? We may never know, but we can speculate by looking back in time. Given the right circumstances, Turkish President Erdogan could have hinted to Putin (or vice versa) that the Nagorno-Karabakh question needs to be addressed in Azerbaijan's favor, Armenia being a thorn in everybody's side, including the US.

For many reasons, Armenia's second president, Kocharyan, and third president (and twice prime minister, Sargsyan) would not agree to place any part of Nagorno-Karabakh under Azerbaijani jurisdiction. This situation changed in 2018 when Nikol Pashinyan became prime minister. The show stopper was when pro-Moscow Sargsyan got up and left the stage in resignation, a surprising event that appeared to be an ominous portent.

Nikol Pashinyan, on the other hand, generally followed the footsteps of Armenia's first president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, who championed a brotherhood between states at the expense of self-

defense with Nagorno-Karabakh, a "monkey on the back" of Armenia. Neither had a national strategy or economic policy in detail. Indirectly, during his campaign and later tenure as prime minister, Pashinyan increasingly expressed more anti-Russian sentiment, leading many to speculate that he was a Western puppet. A question that might have been asked in Moscow is, could Pashinyan and his hand-picked government structure deliver Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan without losing a single Russian soldier? Such a conflict directed by the Turkish military could guarantee predictability against any immediate loss of Russian interests. Pashinyan could even appear to 'give a good fight' against Azerbaijani forces. From Moscow's perspective, why not use Pashinyan and facilitate (don't send weapons and ignore the CSTO alliance) a defeat of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh?

Even worse, Pashinyan appeared to be setting up the conditions that would lead to a defeat of Nagorno-Karabakh. An example includes Pashinyan's changing Directors of Armenia's National Security Service five times since 2018. It may now be a moot point if Pashinyan was intent on delivering Nagorno-Karabakh or if his government and military were not being run by the best and brightest, with Armenia (and Artsakh) outmaneuvered strategically and militarily.

Was Pashinyan told that to be considered welcome into the Western fold, Nagorno-Karabakh must be released? Perhaps Pashinyan was played by Moscow and Washington – delivering Nagorno-Karabakh and allowing free-reign of Western NGOs throughout Armenia. We don't know, but we do know that Turkey's and Azerbaijan's interests were fully served by the forced expulsion of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh in late September 2023. This expulsion was a tactical blow to Russia, losing its raison d'etre for its peacekeeping bases on what Azerbaijan considers its territory. Russia lost an immediate lever of influence against Azerbaijan.

With an increasing anti-Russia sentiment expressed by Pashinyan and his government, shunning CSTO military events, blaming Russia for the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, a small military exercise with US soldiers in Armenia, making claims that Moscow pays rent for their use of a Russian base in Gyumri, Armenia, ratifying the Rome Statute, and with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov claiming Armenia's government is a "temporary administration," time will only tell if Russia wishes to upgrade its presence in the Southern Caucasus by a mild coup in Armenia replacing Pashinyan's government with a clear pro-Moscow one. Such a coup will most likely take place at a peak in Western interest in Armenia, enacting maximum defeat for such efforts.

Again, all this is just conjecture; many unknown puzzle pieces still need to be included. It is interesting to note who has gained what in this international horse-trading. These four events have already happened.

– Azerbaijan conquered all of Nagorno-Karabakh, which is now absent of Armenians. It owes a lot to Turkey, who commanded the 2020 military operation against Nagorno-Karabakh.

– Russia facilitated an engineered defeat of Nagorno-Karabakh, perhaps as an element of quid pro quo with Turkey and Azerbaijan. What will Russia receive in exchange, even though Moscow may

not have envisioned the eventual exodus of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians?

– Turkey's and Azerbaijan's demand for a sovereign corridor through Southern Armenia, connecting rump Azerbaijan with its exclave Nakhichevan, has been superseded by a similar corridor through Iran. Thus, just south of Armenia's border with Iran, this corridor will now be co-sponsored by a NATO ally, Turkey. The US doesn't want Russia controlling any corridor through Armenia. Was the Iran route a contingency against any eventual Russian-controlled route across Armenia?

– Israel expanded its existing covert bases in Azerbaijan used against Iran on conquered Nagorno-Karabakh territory.

What might remain? A pro-Moscow government in Armenia can fulfill Russian interests, the final move in this Game of Go. We will likely not see tanks in the streets of Armenia's capital, Yerevan. Pressure towards ousting the Pashinyan government can be applied by an Azerbaijani military buildup on Armenia's borders – something that is not supposed to happen in a "brotherhood between states." Russia has many other levels of strategic influence in Armenia, and not just limited to gas, electricity, transportation, and control of remittances into Armenia from Russia.

The West won't attempt to project its military power in the region; it cannot and will not place soldiers in Armenia. In any case, Turkey is NATO's representative in the region. The EU is going through the motions to fill the perception of a power vacuum developing in Armenia – until it comes time for Russia's regional interests to be satisfied.

Two items to watch that can indicate an active Russian recovery in the Southern Caucasus region include:

1) Further success in the Republic of Georgia's continued attempts to find common ground with Moscow, as China is seriously interested in Georgian Black Sea ports. The potential upside for Georgia may be too high to ignore, considering Tbilisi seems to have realized that EU ascendancy and NATO membership are empty words.

2) If Ruben Vardanyan, the former state minister of the Republic of Nagorno Karabakh, who was arrested last month by Azerbaijan, slowly becomes a hero in the Russian media, this may be a sign of his ascension to a pro-Moscow government in Armenia. He may be one of many who could be in such a position.

One needs a strategy to play the Game of Go.

Yerevan, Armenia

Author: David Davidian – *Lecturer at the American University of Armenia. He has spent over a decade in technical intelligence analysis at major high technology firms. He resides in Yerevan, Armenia.*

There are no comments yet.