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## RUSSIA AND THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT: A CAREFUL BALANCING

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February 2018 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Over the past three decades, the conflict has shifted from intercommunal and inter-republic tensions within a single state (the USSR) into a protracted confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with unclear resolution prospects. It would also be a mistake to call the conflict “frozen.” The military flare-up of April 2016, which later came to be known as the “four-day war,” showed that term to be inadequate. The conflict zone has no peacekeepers, and the ceasefire has so far lasted thanks only to a balance of forces, which may change in the future. Both Yerevan and Baku still stick to their maximum demands to agree to a pacific resolution of the conflict, while the three OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs mediating the negotiations – France, Russia, and the United States – lack instruments to coerce the parties into making concessions. Moreover, despite the ceasefire, there have been frequent violent incidents along the Line of Contact in Nagorno-Karabakh as well as the internation-

ally-recognized border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

For Russia, the tenuous political situation in the South Caucasus has been pushed out of the foreign policy agenda by the crises in Syria and eastern Ukraine. However, this region in general and the Nagorno-Karabakh issue in particular maintain strategic importance for Moscow. This is due to three basic factors.

First, unlike other conflicts in the former USSR and in the Balkans as well, the stances adopted by Russia and the West on the Nagorno-Karabakh confrontation are virtually identical. Today, the three countries that co-chair the Minsk Group continue to acknowledge the updated “Madrid principles” as the basis for a peaceful resolution of the situation, despite all the existing differences around Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Donbass.

The West supports Russia’s peace-making activities in Nagorno-Karabakh. Even today, with relations between Moscow and Washington at their lowest point since the USSR

dissolution, American diplomats positively assess the role that the Russian leadership played in de-escalating the military confrontation and in backing the three-party talks (Moscow-Baku-Yerevan). There is no Russian claim to reconsider interstate borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and no attempt to apply its “revisionist technique” there, while the role of Moscow in reaching the 1994 and 2016 ceasefires is really valued by the US and the EU. At the same time, Russia sees the trilateral format of negotiations as an additional diplomatic playground, not competing or challenging the OSCE Minsk format. The West does not object to it, so the three-party talks can go on, bolstered by the high level of informal trust between President Putin on the one side and the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan on the other side. In this context, any attempt to diminish Moscow’s role would go contrary to the American and European interests because a lot of diplomatic channels would be blocked.

Second, Russia’s role in the Nagorno-Karabakh process is fundamentally different from its engagement in the other Eurasian “hot spots”. Despite many see Russia as historically close to Armenia, today both parties to the conflict [view](#) Moscow as a desired intermediary (that was not the case in either Abkhazia or South Ossetia, at least during the early 2000s). Baku and Yerevan are interested in developing bilateral relations with Moscow outside the Nagorno-Karabakh context.

Russia considers Armenia as its strategic ally. Both countries share the same integration projects (CSTO/Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union). However, Moscow also values its partnership with Azerbaijan. In 2008, by recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia lost

whatever remaining influence it could exert over Georgia. There were fears that it would also lose influence in Azerbaijan, and that explains to some extent Moscow’s engagement with Baku. There are also the commercial motivations of selling weapons to Azerbaijan, which, unlike Armenia, pays full price for this weaponry (Armenia can buy Russian weapons at a discount).

Third, Moscow wants to avoid a further escalation in Karabakh, especially along the Armenian-Azerbaijani interstate border. The latter case would oblige the CSTO to intervene militarily to protect one of its members (Armenia), but key members such as Belarus and Kazakhstan have closer political and economic ties with Azerbaijan. Therefore, in case of any escalation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and especially in case of a resumption of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Astana or Minsk positions may be articulated with utmost precision. Leaning completely in favour of Armenia would also undermine Moscow’s ambitions for Russia-led Eurasian projects. Having a military and technical cooperation in place with both South Caucasus countries, Russia tries to ensure a balance of forces, preventing any side to achieve superiority and to undertake a full-scale “unfreezing” of the conflict.

The widespread [opinion](#) among Western analysts is that Russia is not interested in the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, aiming instead to preserve its influence on both Baku and Yerevan. This thesis could be adopted, if not for one important detail. True, Moscow is not undertaking its diplomatic efforts in the Karabakh conflict for altruistic reasons. Having lost a significant part of its influence on Georgia, Russia cannot afford to make a hard choice between Armenia and Azerbaijan. On one side of the scale,

there will be a military ally and a member in common integration projects; on the other, a neighbouring state and an important economic and political partner.

However, today Baku and Yerevan do not show any signs of reaching a compromise: their maximalist approaches determine their foreign policy, and Karabakh itself in the Armenian and Azerbaijani societies is perceived to some extent as sacred territory. In such circumstances, Moscow is not interested to accept exclusive responsibility and accelerate any solutions, especially due to the difficulty to implement any prospective agreements. In case such agreements failed, this would pose some extra risks to Moscow's reputation and might sour its security environment. [According to Sergey Lavrov](#), Russian Foreign Minister, the Karabakh problem "can't be solved once and for all in one document". This thesis is extremely important in

order to avoid artificial and overstated expectations in the future, as it was on the eve of the Kazan summit in June 2011. If the conflict has not been resolved for many years, and the basic negotiating ideas have already been expressed, it would be naive to believe that one or two forums will provide a positive breakthrough.

Therefore, from the Russian point of view, in the current conditions, the minimization of military incidents (as well as effective monitoring of the Line of Contact) is the main goal today, because it would help to move to the subsequent substantive phases in the negotiations. The peculiarity of Russia-West cooperation on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution process and the interests of both Yerevan and Baku in the mediation by Russia can become positive prerequisites in this direction.