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ANKARA, MOSCOW CAN COOPERATE IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH, DESPITE CHALLENGES: EXPERTS - DAILY SABAH - 23.11.2020

Şeyma Nazlı GÜRBÜZ

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Over the past few weeks, with the liberation of Nagorno-Karabakh from 30 long years of Armenian occupation, the feud between Baku and Yerevan entered a new, more constructive stage, signaling a fresh start for the region. Turkish and Russian troops have been deployed to the region to keep peace and security in the region. The deployment has provided a new space for Turkey and Russia to test their cooperation following their joint experience in Syria. According to experts, both Ankara and Moscow are well aware of each others' aims and security interests, enabling them to act together, even though challenges and disagreements continue to persist while trying to maintain a sensitive balance between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

With the Minsk Group failing to find a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Turkey and Russia had to take the initiative, said Eşref Yalınkılıçlı, a Moscow-based Eurasia analyst. "The process and the talks on the nature of their presence in the Nagorno-Karabakh still continues," he added.

Although Russia initially seemed hesitant to support Turkey's involvement in the peace process, Azerbaijan's advocacy for the partnership seemed to solve that problem, Yalınkılıçlı said.

Relations between the former Soviet republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia have been tense

since 1991 when the Armenian military occupied Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent regions, a territory internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan.

Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a Russian-brokered cease-fire on Nov. 9 after six weeks of fighting over the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh. Under the agreement, Baku will regain control of three districts that have been ruled by Yerevan's forces since the 1990s.

Turkey and Russia signed an agreement for establishing a joint center to monitor the cease-fire in Nagorno-Karabakh on Wednesday morning, and the two countries will work together there, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said on Nov. 11. Still, since then there has been speculation about the nature of the deal. Some claim that Russia is, in fact, still not in favor of sharing peacekeeping responsibility with Turkey.

Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, an analyst at the Ankara-based Eurasian Studies Center (AVIM), said that although the two countries' historical conflicts in the region make it reasonable for Russia to be uneasy about Turkey's presence in the southern Caucasus, the latest developments seem to indicate that Russia values Turkey's role in the peacekeeping process.

"The latest statements from the Russian authorities and the two countries agreement on forming a peace protection center signals that Russia has acknowledged the fact that Turkeys presence in the region is critical for the peaces establishment," Tulun said.

Baku is reclaiming its territories and is within its rights to choose any advisers, including Turkey, Russian President Vladimir Putin said in an interview with the Russia 24 news channel last week. Turkey did not violate international law by supporting Azerbaijan, he said. We have agreed upon establishing a joint center where drones will be used to observe the contact line, where we will get information and make analysis together, he added. Putin also admitted that Russia and Turkey often have different policy positions but have been able to reach compromises through diplomacy.

Failed Minsk parties blur waters

Putin also praised the U.S. and France for their role in the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement, saying the Minsk Group co-chairs have no reason to be offended over not being involved in the final agreements.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group co-chaired by France, Russia, and the U.S. was formed in 1992 to find a peaceful solution to the conflict but to no avail.

"Media outlets of the Minsk countries that were excluded from the peace process, namely the U.S. and France, aim to create an atmosphere as if Turkey and Russia are confronting each other over Nagorno-Karabakh. However, despite these types of provocations, just like the balance in Syria between Turkey and Russia, I expect a similar balance between the two in Nagorno-Karabakh as well," Tulun said.

Around 2,000 Russian peacekeepers have been deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh under the terms of the deal and are expected to stay in the region for at least five years.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Saturday they had secured the return of 7,000 refugees, who were displaced during the recent fighting.

The Turkish Parliament, on the other hand, last week overwhelmingly approved the deployment of Turkish peacekeeping troops to Azerbaijan. The mandate will allow Turkish forces to be stationed at a security center for one year as part of an accord between Ankara and Moscow to monitor the implementation of the cease-fire, which locked in territorial gains by Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan has been pushing for its close ally Turkey to play a central role in the implementation of the agreement, as Ankara pledged full support for Baku during fighting in the region. Turkey has welcomed the truce, which is a result of Baku's military successes that gave it an upper hand over Yerevan in the resolution of the three-decade dispute.

Turkey, Russia understand each other

"I believe both Russia and Turkey understand each others purposes in the region," said Salih Yılmaz, an academician at Ankara's Yıldırım Beyazıt University and the head of the Russia Studies Institute, adding: "Both countries provide space for each other in accordance with their bilateral interests."

According to Yılmaz, however, there are too many ambiguities within the peace deal that might emerge as a challenge later on.

"The definition of the Russian peacekeeping force is also not determined in the deal. There are also other questions. For instance, will the Armenian Army continue to stay in the region? Will Armenians leave their weapons? Who will provide local security and a police force in the region? Will Azerbaijan have its army in the region? If these questions are left unanswered, Armenians will continue to keep their weapons where they are now and the military system in the region would continue as it is," Yılmaz warned.

"I dont think it is possible to prevent the Turkish troops from having patrols in the region once they get there," Yalınkılıçlı said. In spite of some possible conflicts of interest, he said, Russia prefers Turkey over the West as a partner it can communicate and work with.

"Russia and Turkey are currently in agreement on Turkeys military presence in Azerbaijani territories outside Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia probably assumes that Turkeys presence in Karabakh would create indignance within Armenia, and Russia would be the one which is blamed for it, forming an anti-Russia stance. So, Turkeys presence in Karabakh is a sensitive issue for Russia, and in order for Moscow to be convinced of it, a harsh negotiation process between the two would be needed," Tulun said, highlighting the sensitive balances that need to be preserved in the region.

Ankara has multiple options

Yet, in Yılmaz's opinion, it would be unwise for Russia to exclude Turkey from the process given that Ankara could alternatively act on its own.

"Russia wants Turkey to control the cease-fire from afar. However, if Turkey activates its alternative plans, Russia's decision may backfire. According to a military agreement signed between Turkey and Azerbaijan back in 2010, Turkey can send troops to anywhere in Azerbaijan and establish military bases. Russia does not have this opportunity," Yılmaz said. He added that if Turkey is represented by only a few officers in a control center outside Karabakh, its presence in the region would be the same as not being there at all.

"Russia wants to keep Turkey away from Armenian settlements and wants to take the initiative itself. However, if Russia insists on this stance, Turkey may activate its own strategy by establishing military bases in regions such as Kalbajar, Shusha, Lachin and Zangilan, all of which encloses the Nagorno-Karabakh region," he said.

When it comes to Russia's aims in the region, experts believe Moscow wants a balance between Azerbaijan and Armenia while preserving its strong presence in the southern Caucasus.

"Russia has always had more or less good relations with Azerbaijan," Yalınkılıçlı said. "However, in recent years, a pan-Turanism ideology has started to grasp Azerbaijan. With the reemergence of the Karabakh as a problem, the pro-Turkey stance of Baku has become more and more apparent. Since Russia is aware of this shift, it wants to use Armenia as a balancing power."

Pan-Turanism is a nationalist cultural and political ideology that emerged in the 19th century against pan-nationalist movements such as pan-Slavism.

Turkey and Azerbaijan share only a sliver of a land border, between eastern Turkey and the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, but the two countries have strong cultural links and their people can understand each other's languages without interpreters. The enthusiasm Azerbaijanis display for the Turks appears mutual as hundreds have been driving around Istanbul in organized rallies and flying the two Muslim nations' flags since the latest Nagorno-Karabakh hostilities resumed on Sept. 27. The phrase "one nation, two countries" has become the mantra of top politicians in both states in the past weeks.

Russia is stable in the southern Caucasus

"Russia has never left the region, nor will it ever," Yalınkılıçlı said.

Referring to Moscow and Yerevan's 100-year ties which revolve around Russia's role as a protector of the Orthodox world, Yalınkılıçlı said that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia was left as the only state that remained under Russia's umbrella in the region. Currently, Moscow has two military bases in Armenia, in Gyumri and Yerevan.

"Russia has been planning to place its own peacekeeping force in Karabakh since 1994," Tulun said. "When you consider that Armenia acts as a 'police station' for Russia in the southern Caucasus and Azerbaijan is the strongest and richest state of the region, it is more clear to see why Moscow tries to form a balance between these two states."

Armenia is an open-air prison, and its guardian is Russia, Yalınkılıçlı underlined, indicating that Russias plan is to hold Armenias hand while not estranging Azerbaijan.

Moscow punishes Pashinian

As the conflict intensified, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian, who is known for his not-so-well-established ties with Russia, turned to Moscow and asked for help, using the defense agreement between the two countries as leverage.

Pashinian sent a letter to Putin last month saying that the clashes were approaching the Armenian border. He requested Moscow's help, invoking the two countries' close ties and a 1997 treaty on friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance. Russia, however, had already made it clear previously that its defense pact with Armenia did not extend to the occupied region of Nagorno-Karabakh and it stuck with this stance till the very end of the conflict.

As a result, Armenia had to face total defeat and Pashinian's government has come under pressure to quit, with thousands of demonstrators demanding he go following the signing of the cease-fire.

Still, the Armenia prime minister called Saturday for greater military cooperation with Russia, a day after Azerbaijani troops began moving into Nagorno-Karabakh.

"We hope we can reinforce cooperation with Russia not only in the security sector but also in military and technical cooperation," Pashinian said, according to his press service. His remarks came following a visit from a Russian delegation to Yerevan.

Yalınkılıçlı stated that although it may seem as if there currently is some divergence between Russia and Armenia, it is strictly in relation to the Pashinian government that is more West-friendly. He expressed that Pashinian turned to France more than Russia, which led Moscow to simply observe the conflict with Azerbaijan without fully supporting

Armenia, resulting in a total failure for Yerevan.

"However," Yalınkılıçlı said, "Russian-Armenian ties transcend governments, they are more institutional."

According to Tulun, the turning point in Moscow-Yerevan relations started back in 2016, with the Four-Day War.

The Four-Day War, also known as the 2016 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was started on April 1, 2016, with Azerbaijan's attempt to prevent constant Armenian shelling of Azerbaijani civilian settlements. The conflict lasted for four days, with no conclusive results, although Azerbaijan claimed victory.

"The fact that Russia sold weapons to Azerbaijan, which prevailed in the war, caused a lot of anger and disappointment in Armenia," he said. A similar situation took place in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as Russias relatively "neutral" stance played an important role in Armenias ultimate failure, he added.

"Many analysts think that with the most recent war, Russia punished the Pashinian government. Armenian people are aware of the fact that Russia provides critical military aid to Armenia and that is has a great influence over its economy. Thus, the Armenian public, although angry at Russia, knows Moscow is still the guarantor actor against Azerbaijan and Turkey, which both are seen as enemies," he said.

Still, in Yılmaz's opinion, if Pashinian somehow manages to survive this process, he will probably try to hold Moscow accountable for the outcome. "He may even try to blame Russia for the defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh," he surmised.

Yılmaz added that Russias upcoming policy in the region is to "give an autonomous status to Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan, normalize ties between Turkey-Armenia and Azerbaijan-Armenia and enable the region to be economically active."

For Yalınkılıçlı, when it comes to geopolitics, the rational thing for Armenia to do is to keep good relations with both Russia and Turkey.

"Yet," he said, "Armenia acts against its own existence (by fueling tensions with regional countries), which is why today it is dealing with these problems. That (southern Caucasus) region is a collective security complex, meaning that any conflict between the regional countries causes them to be a proxy of world powers."

https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/news-analysis/ankara-moscow-can-cooperate-in-nagorno-karabakh-despite-challenges-experts

About the author:

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Süleyman Nazif Sok. No: 12/B Daire 3-4 06550 Çankaya-ANKARA / TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 (312) 438 50 23-24 • **Fax**: +90 (312) 438 50 26
@avimorgtr
https://www.facebook.com/avrasyaincelemelerimerkezi
E-Posta: info@avim.org.tr
http://avim.org.tr

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