

TÜRKİYE-RUSSIA RIVALRY IN THE FIRST KARABAKH WAR: ANKARA'S HANDICAPS*

BİRİNCİ KARABAĞ SAVAŞI'NDA TÜRKİYE-RUSYA REKABETİ: ANKARA'NIN HANDİKAPLARI

СОПЕРНИЧЕСТВО МЕЖДУ ТУРЦИЕЙ И РОССИЕЙ В ПЕРВОЙ КАРАБАХСКОЙ ВОЙНЕ: ТРУДНОСТИ АНКАРЫ

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ABSTRACT

The Caucasus holds a significant place in Türkiye's foreign policy due to its deep-rooted history and close ties with the region. Azerbaijan is among the countries to which Ankara attaches particular importance. Russia, another key actor in the region, shares similar ambitions with Türkiye. Moscow's determination to maintain its presence and influence in the region fuels a Türkiye-Russia rivalry in the Caucasus. At the heart of this rivalry lies the Karabakh issue. This study aims to analyze the Türkiye-Russia rivalry during the First Karabakh War in light of the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism. In this context, the study focuses on the parameters shaping the rivalry between the two countries during the 1992–1993 conflict. Drawing on the theoretical propositions of neoclassical realism, the analysis is conducted using unit-level and system-level variables. The findings reveal that the rivalry during the First Karabakh War was systematic in nature, with military and political dimensions at its core. Furthermore, Türkiye's role in the Karabakh issue was at times constrained by its material power capacity and systemic factors. This study examines information, documents, and reports issued by official authorities of direct or indirect parties to the Karabakh issue, as well as statements from leaders and administrators involved in the conflict.

Keywords: Türkiye, Russia, First Karabakh War, Rivalry, Neoclassical Realism.

ÖZ

Kafkasya, köklü tarihi ve bölgeyle olan yakın ilişkileri nedeniyle Türk dış politikasında özel bir öneme sahiptir. Azerbaycan, Ankara'nın bölgede özel önem atfettiği ülkelerden biridir.

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Rusya ise Türkiye ile benzer hedeflere sahip bir diğer bölgesel aktördür. Moskova'nın bölgedeki varlığını ve etkisini sürdürme isteği, Kafkasya'da Türkiye-Rusya rekabetine zemin hazırlamaktadır. Bu rekabetin merkezinde Karabağ sorunu yer almaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Birinci Karabağ Savaşı'nda Türkiye ve Rusya arasındaki rekabeti neoklasik realizmin teorik çerçevesi ışığında analiz etmektir. Bu bağlamda, çalışma 1992–1993 yıllarındaki savaş sırasında iki ülke arasındaki rekabeti şekillendiren parametrelere odaklanmaktadır. Neoklasik realist teorinin öngörülleri temel alınarak yapılan analizde, iki ülke arasındaki rekabet, birim ve sistem düzeyindeki değişkenler çerçevesinde ele alınmıştır. Sonuç olarak, Birinci Karabağ Savaşı sırasında iki ülke arasında sistematik bir rekabetin bulunduğu tespit edilmiştir. Bu rekabetin odak noktasını askeri ve siyasi unsurlar oluşturmuştur. Ayrıca, Türkiye'nin Karabağ konusundaki rolünü bazı dönemlerde sınırlayan faktörlerin maddi güç kapasitesi ve sistemik faktörler olduğu gözlemlenmiştir. Çalışmada, Karabağ meselesine doğrudan veya dolaylı taraf olan aktörlerin resmi makamlarınca yayımlanan bilgi, belge ve raporlar ile ilgili lider ve yöneticilerin söylemleri analiz edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Rusya, Birinci Karabağ Savaşı, Rekabet, Neoklasik Realizm.

АННОТАЦИЯ

Кавказ занимает особое место во внешней политике Турции благодаря её глубокой истории и тесным связям с регионом. Азербайджан — одна из стран, которой Анкара придаёт особое значение. Россия, другой ключевой актор региона, преследует схожие с Турцией цели. Стремление Москвы сохранить своё присутствие и влияние в регионе порождает соперничество между Турцией и Россией на Кавказе. Основным камнем преткновения в этом соперничестве является карабахский вопрос. Цель данного исследования — проанализировать соперничество между Турцией и Россией в Первой Карабахской войне в контексте теоретической концепции неоклассического реализма. Исследование сосредоточено на параметрах, которые определили соперничество двух стран в войне 1992–1993 годов. Основываясь на теоретических положениях неоклассического реализма, соперничество анализируется через призму переменных на уровне систем и на уровне отдельных акторов. Анализ показывает, что соперничество во время Первой Карабахской войны имело систематический характер с акцентом на военно-политические аспекты. Также отмечается, что в определённые периоды роль Турции в карабахском вопросе была ограничена её материальными ресурсами и системными факторами. В исследовании рассматриваются информация, документы и отчёты, опубликованные официальными властями, а также высказывания лидеров и администраторов, вовлечённых в карабахский конфликт.

Ключевые слова: Турция, Россия, Первая Карабахская война, Соперничество, Неоклассический реализм.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of theories in the literature of international relations is almost as old as the field itself. Realist theories have made a name for themselves in the field, both in terms of their place in the discipline of international relations and their place in the historical process. Since neoclassical realism is the most comprehensive model of realist theories, it is considered the most appropriate theory for this study. Another reason for choosing neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework is the predisposition of this theory to studies that examine cases that take place in a particular historical period. This theoretical model, which has a 'political-historical' perspective, combines the elements of system, structure, and domestic politics with material and intellectual factors to analyse international relations from a pluralist perspective (Kitchen, 2010). Scott Burchill and Andrew Linklater note that there

are different interpretations of the definition of the purpose of theorising international relations. Among these definitions, Martin Hollis and Steve Smith's interpretation of theory is quite remarkable in terms of the theoretical framework of this study. According to Hollis and Smith, theories attempt either to explain and predict the behaviour of actors or to understand the world 'inside their heads' (Linklater and Burchill, 2005: 12). Therefore, the use of theory in this study aims to utilise the explanatory aspect of theory based on Hollis and Smith's definition rather than assessing the theory.

Although the Karabakh issue has been on the agenda of the international community since February 1992, the events that took the form of tensions and periodic conflicts from 1987 to the end of 1991 turned into a hot conflict and war from January 1992. The Armenians, who were protected during the Gorbachev period, took advantage of the power vacuum left by the USSR to turn the Karabakh issue in their favour. Immediately after Ankara's recognition of Azerbaijan and its decision to change its alphabet, Russia chose the central actor of its Caucasus policy and on 29 December 1991 Russia and Armenia signed the "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Security", which included the establishment of a Russian military base in Armenia (Дипломатический Вестник, 1992). While the transition to the Latin alphabet might normally seem like a trivial development, history is replete with evidence of how Kazakhstan was dragged into civil war by Russia even nearly thirty years later when it dared to take a similar initiative (Walker, 2022). Indeed, Azerbaijan's preference for the Turkish Latin alphabet (with a difference of only 4 letters) over the Russian alphabet meant that the Kremlin preferred Türkiye over Russia, so much so that it decided to 'punish' Azerbaijan by heavily supporting Armenia.

2. THE FIRST PHASE OF THE WAR (FEBRUARY-MAY 1992)

One of Azerbaijan's main disadvantages during the First Karabakh War was the lack of a stable post-USSR government. The war, which began with the presidency of the pro-Russian Ayaz Mutallibov, was followed by a political vacuum in Azerbaijan after his resignation in March 1992, and the pro-Turkish Ebulfez Elchibey came to power in the June 1992 elections. In October 1993, Heydar Aliyev, who pursued a policy of balance by maintaining relations with Russia despite his pro-Turkish stance, came to power with almost 99% of the vote, despite the First Karabakh War resulting in the occupation of 20% of Azerbaijan's territory by Armenians.

2.1. Occupation of Shusha and Lachin: 'Securing the Land Connection of Karabakh with Armenia'

Due to its strategic location, Shusha was the Azerbaijani city that determined the fate of both Karabakh wars. Based on Brzezinski's chessboard, Shusha can be described as the 'heartland' of the Caucasus. In other words, throughout the history of the Karabakh conflict, whoever controls Shusha controls Karabakh, and whoever controls Karabakh controls the Caucasus. It is clear from the Karabakh policy that Russia is also acting with this awareness. The artificial environment of instability in Azerbaijan, planned and maintained by "Moscow's men" in Baku, facilitated Armenia's work, and the invasion plan, allegedly drawn up in Lyon, France, and in Tehran, the capital of Iran, at the end of April and the beginning of May 1992, was put into practice on 8 May. Zori Balayan, the leader of the Armenian terrorist organisation Miatsum (Unification) Movement and one of the main perpetrators of the Khojaly massacre, explained his insidious plan in an interview with the French newspaper *Le Progress* on 14 April 1994: "The first plan for Shusha was prepared in Tehran on 2 May. On 3 May, we already knew that Shusha would soon be ours" (Kəlbizadə, 2019). The occupation of Shusha aggravated the already unstable situation in Azerbaijan.

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This situation further emboldened Armenia, and 10 days later, with the occupation of Lachin, Armenia annexed the mainland of Nagorno-Karabakh to its territory.

Ayaz Mutallibov, who wanted to be rewarded after the occupation of Shusha, was reinstated as president on 14 May 1992. However, the Azerbaijani Popular Front immediately acted and seized power. After this unplanned situation, Mutallibov had to flee to Moscow (Qasımlı, 2021: 115). Taking advantage of this political turmoil in Azerbaijan, Armenia occupied another strategic Azerbaijani town outside the borders of Nagorno-Karabakh on 18 May 1992. The Armenians brutally killed 264 civilians in Lachin, captured 65 people and forced 64,000 people to migrate. The occupation of Lachin, which is about six times the size of Shusha (1840 km²), provided Armenia with a land border with Karabakh that did not exist until that day (Qasımlı, 2021: 119-120). The occupation of these two cities was the factor that determined the fate of the First Karabakh War at an early stage.

2.1.1. Türkiye's Position

After the occupation of Shusha and Lachin with the help of the 'Moscow men' in the Azerbaijani administration, Türkiye tried to maintain its neutral attitude and instead tried to put the issue on the agenda of the international community as much as possible. However, the fact that these attempts did not deter Armenia will become clearer as the war progresses. After the occupation of Shusha, Ankara for the first time 'verbally' expressed its firm stance. On 10 May 1992, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, in his strongest statement to date, underlined Türkiye's position on the status of Karabakh. The Prime Minister declared that Karabakh was Azerbaijani territory and stressed that "Türkiye will never allow this legal fact to be changed by force" ("Demirel'den Sert Uyarı," 1992). Despite Demirel's statements that 'our desire to act together with the international community should not be perceived as a weakness', it became clear that Ankara's 'policy of approaching Armenia and Azerbaijan at the same distance' until the fall of Shusha had not yielded results, and this attitude was perceived as a weakness (Milliyet, 1992). Demirel's ambiguous statement 'Türkiye's intervention in Nakhchivan based on Türkiye's guarantorship over Nakhchivan would put Türkiye in the same situation as in Cyprus' in his interview with Swedish Central Radio on the same day, although belated, suggested 'in a low voice' that Türkiye might engage militarily in case of an attack on Nakhchivan ("Şahinler-güvercinler Nahcivan'a Müdahale Liderleri Böldü," 1992). Demirel's statement in the same interview that 'the Soviet state has disappeared, but its mechanisms and cadres remain' indicated that Türkiye had not completely abandoned the nightmare of the Soviet threat.

It would not be wrong to say that the course of the rivalry in the process that prepared the occupation of Shusha and Lachin developed against Türkiye. In fact, the occupation of the two Azerbaijani cities was the product of Russia's long-term planning. Demirel's comment that "the Soviet state has disappeared, but its mechanisms and cadres remain" is a correct observation, but it was analysed from the wrong perspective and led Ankara to adopt a passive attitude. If we read Demirel's statement backwards, it is understood as 'Soviet cadres and mechanisms remain, but the state is gone'. In other words, although there was no more threat from the USSR, the right attitude could have supported the replacement of the Soviet cadres and mechanisms in Azerbaijan by those with a Turkish consciousness. After the occupation of Kelbajar, Ankara was able to achieve the above-mentioned national consciousness.

2.1.2. Russia's Position

Russia, which is not in favour of leaving the Caucasus under the influence of another power in the region, has sought to exert control over the region by supporting Armenia and

exploiting the Karabakh issue. During the occupation of Shusha and Lachin, the Kremlin, which was engaged in indirect competition with Türkiye, employed a range of strategies to advance its interests in the region. On 6 March 1992, because of the demonstrations by those in favour of Türkiye, Ayaz Mutallibov, who was regarded as a representative of Moscow, and Elmira Gafarova, the President of the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan, both resigned. Yakup Mammadov subsequently assumed the role of President of the Supreme Soviet. In the wake of the resignation of its own appointed official, the Russian Federation acted. On 17 March 1992, at the insistence of Pavel Grachov, then Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, Yakup Mammadov appointed Rahim Gaziyeu as Minister of Defence of Azerbaijan. This resulted in the occupation of Shusha and Karabakh. It is noteworthy that Moscow identified Gaziyeu's potential. In March 1992, following the resignation of Ayaz Mutallibov at the behest of the populace, Gaziyeu threatened to cede Shusha to Armenia in the absence of Mutallibov's resignation (Qaffarov, 2008: 247). Following the death of Pavel Grachev in 2012, the then-President of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, paid tribute to his predecessor, highlighting his role in the appointment of Rahim Gaziyeu as Azerbaijan's defence minister. Sargsyan also extended his condolences to the Russian government, emphasising Grachev's contributions to the region. Grachev will forever be regarded as a devoted ally and trusted confidant by the Armenian people ("Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan Expressed Condolences on Pavel Grachov's Death," 2012).

The most significant consequence of Rahim Gaziyeu's appointment as Azerbaijan's Defence Minister in March 1992 was that he demonstrated a comparable level of commitment to the occupation of Shusha and Lachin as the Armenians had previously displayed. On 30 April 1992, Azerbaijani Defence Minister Gaziyeu issued a ministerial decree that demilitarised Shusha and Lachin (Qaffarov, 2008: 246). This decree also saw the withdrawal of volunteer forces from the region. The regions of Shusha and Lachin were rendered 'defenceless' by the Minister of Defence, whose duty it was to defend the country, following the implementation of order. The occupation of these areas was completed within approximately ten days. The fall of Shusha marked the culmination of the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, while the occupation of Lachin created a corridor from Armenia to Karabakh, effectively concluding Gaziyeu's pro-Russian mission amidst the Russian-Turkish rivalry in Karabakh. Indeed, the loss of Shusha and Lachin, which resulted from Gaziyeu's strategic decision, also constituted a pivotal moment in the First Karabakh War. Armenia's actions did not end with the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor in 1992. The following year, Armenia entered the second phase of the war, occupying six additional Azerbaijani towns in the vicinity of Nagorno-Karabakh.

3. THE SECOND PHASE OF THE WAR (APRIL-OCTOBER 1993)

Türkiye's provision of military training to Azerbaijan produced some positive outcomes during the summer of 1992. However, this did not prevent Armenia from occupying the neighbouring towns of Karabakh. Furthermore, the expectation that Azerbaijan would turn towards Türkiye during Elchibey's tenure was not fulfilled. These reasons, originating from both the political elites in Azerbaijan and Türkiye and the international context, proved insufficient to avert the deepening of the crisis in Azerbaijan and the subsequent onset of the second phase of the war. Despite Elchibey's genuine affinity for Türkiye, the Moscow-aligned figures surrounding him thwarted his efforts. The fact that the Minister of Defence, Rahim Gaziyeu, who 'surrendered' Shusha and Lachin to Armenia, the Deputy Minister of Defence, Alikram Humbetov, who attempted to establish a so-called autonomous republic, and many others came from within the Azerbaijan Popular Front, of which Elchibey was the leader, lends support to this opinion. By the second quarter of 1993,

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Ankara had come to recognise that a policy of supporting only the oppressed was insufficient. It was necessary to oppose the oppressor as well. However, this realisation would unfortunately emerge only after the occupation of Kelbajar.

In the summer of 1992, the Azerbaijani army demonstrated positive short-term outcomes in its recovery process. However, these results lacked sustainability. In April 1992, while the international community's efforts for peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia were ongoing, Armenia launched a surprise attack. Similarly, the Khojaly Massacre and the subsequent occupation of Shusha and Lachin served to distract the international community with promises of peace and a ceasefire, while simultaneously allowing Armenia to persist in its efforts to expand its occupation of Karabakh. The resumption of hostilities in 1993 was precipitated by the confluence of Russia's rivalry with Türkiye and Yerevan's ambitions.

The elevated status of Türkiye in foreign policy following Elchibey's tenure intensified Moscow's perception of threat in the Caucasus. The dismissal of Azerbaijan's Moscow-loyal Defence Minister Rahim Gaziyeu on 20 February 1993, approximately forty days before the occupation of Kelbajar, can be viewed as an attempt to diminish Russian influence within the military (Süleymanov, 2019: 132). However, the restricted outlook of Major General Dadash Rzayev, who was designated to succeed Gaziyeu, in interpreting the strategy and the international context paved the way for the occupation of Kelbajar. In early March, the brigade commander responsible for defending Kelbajar arrived in Baku by helicopter and met with Defence Minister Rzayev. During the meeting, the brigade commander stated that Kelbajar was, in theory, lost under the prevailing circumstances and that the troops stationed in Lachin should be urgently relocated to the region. In response, the Minister of Defence asserted that Armenia would be unable to attempt a new occupation, arguing that Armenia would avoid an international scandal since Kelbajar was a region that fell outside the administrative borders of Karabakh (Qənzadə, 2023). However, Robert Kocharian, one of the commanders responsible for the occupation at the time and later President of Armenia, outlined the strategic importance of Kelbajar in his autobiography as follows:

“For us, this high mountainous region of Azerbaijan was of exceptional importance due to its geographical location. Neighbouring Lachin from the north, it was located between Karabakh and Armenia. Control of Kelbajar allowed us to concentrate on all our forces in the east and north-east. In the north, mountain ranges separated Kelbajar from the neighbouring town. At an altitude of 3200 metres, the ‘Omer Pass’ was the only road through here, and we did not need to expend a lot of forces and resources to hold it. At the same time, the front line was shortened several times. In a word, the capture of Kelbajar became a military necessity for us. For this operation, which was one of our most important operations after Shusha during the war, we gathered our assault units from all regions and the central defence forces, our main offensive force.” (Кочарян, 2019: 122).

In this context, Ebulfez Elchibey, in an interview with Azerbaijan's ANS television channel on 1 April 2000, asserted that he was also culpable for the strategic misstep that resulted in the occupation of Kelbajar (Yenisey, 2014). Similarly, Armenia attacked Azerbaijan during the peace talks in Geneva, occupying Kelbajar on 2 April 1993. This was even though Kelbajar, which has a surface area of 3050 km², had been under the control of Azerbaijan since the Khojaly Massacre and the occupation of Shusha and Lachin. The massacre committed by Armenians in Kelbajar resulted in the deaths of 511 Azerbaijani Turks, the capture of 321 individuals, and the forced migration of 60,000 residents from the city (Qasımlı, 2021: 129). The occupation of Kelbajar, which was actively supported by

Russia, was the first development to which Türkiye reacted in a forceful and direct diplomatic manner during the First Karabakh War.

3.1. Closure of the Turkish-Armenian Border

Following the opening of a second corridor to Karabakh after Lachin on 2 April 1993, Minister of State and Deputy Prime Minister Erdal İnönü stated that Prime Minister Demirel was in contact with Azerbaijani President Elçibey and emphasised that Armenia would be held responsible for the negative consequences of the escalating tension. He further announced that Türkiye would not allow foreign aid to Armenia, stating: It should be understood that ease of passage for foreign aid should not be expected from Türkiye, which has always prioritised humanitarian values and has given concrete examples of this, when it has so demonstrated that it is capable of sustaining and operating a military force capable of destroying and destructing (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Tarihçesi, 1993). On the same day, Ankara issued a statement of support for Azerbaijan, resulting in the closure of the Türkiye-Armenia border, the termination of railway and air links with Armenia, and the cessation of transit trade to Armenia via Türkiye (Azer, 2011: 392). This marked the first occasion on which Türkiye imposed sanctions on Armenia during the First Karabakh War. It would be inaccurate to suggest that Türkiye did not offer any support to Azerbaijan during this period. The Karabakh issue constituted the most significant item on the agenda of Turkish foreign policy between 1992 and 1994. This was evidenced by a series of initiatives, including the presentation of proposals to international organisations, the training of the Azerbaijani army, the dispatch of humanitarian aid trucks to Baku and Nakhchivan, and the closure of the borders with Armenia. However, during the occupation of Kelbajar, Azerbaijan sought assistance from the Demirel government in the form of military resources. On the morning of 3 April 1993, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel informed reporters that a response to Elchibey's request was not possible due to logistical constraints. He stated, "There is a big problem. I met with Elchibey last night. They demanded a helicopter from us. It is not easy to take a helicopter there. It is not practical. It is not easy to go and come if the road is long." (Eliş, 1993).

About the Second Karabakh War, the experience of fully independent Türkiye demonstrates that the length of the road is not a significant obstacle when there is a clear political will, and that it is indeed possible to create a solution if there is no precedent. In this context, the distinction between the two Karabakh Wars lends further significance to the emphasis placed by Neoclassical Realism on the pivotal role of leadership. Conversely, it is also a fact that the issue is the consideration of Russia's reaction rather than practice. Indeed, approximately one year ago, in May 1992, when Türkiye's intervention as a guarantor was under consideration, Armenians created tension on the Nakhchivan border in May 1992. In response, Marshal Yevgeni Shaposhnikov, the Commander of Russia's CIS Combined Armed Forces, warned that if Türkiye intervened, a third world war would ensue. Additionally, the United States cautioned Ankara against intervening, citing concerns that such actions could potentially lead to a NATO engagement (Abushov, 2010).

3.2. Attitude of Türkiye and Russia During the Occupation of Five Azerbaijani Cities in Four Months

Türkiye's stance during the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani cities in August 1993 was to deter Armenia by drawing the attention of the international community to the region. Nevertheless, it can be argued that this initiative, which lacked a deterrent effect, including the verbal support of the international community, was ignored by the Armenians. This is also referenced in the written statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on

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19 August 1993, which states: "In the event that Armenians persist in disregarding the response of the international community and the Security Council, which serves as the interpreter of this response, we anticipate that the United Nations will not only reiterate its resolutions but also impose the requisite sanctions on the aggressor." (Dışişleri Bakanlığı Tarihçesi, 1993). The most compelling evidence that these "silent cries" without sanctions failed to deter Armenia is the occupation of two additional Azerbaijani cities within four days of this statement. Nonetheless, the provision of humanitarian assistance by Türkiye, amounting to 34 million 262 thousand dollars as of 31 August 1993, and the country's active engagement with relevant governments and international aid organisations through its diplomatic missions, characterised Türkiye's approach to the Azerbaijani conflict during this period. Conversely, apart from the concern that providing military aid to Azerbaijan might precipitate a third world war with Russia, Ankara's decision not to do so can also be justified. The ongoing chaos in Azerbaijan meant that there was a risk that the weapons would be diverted to the wrong parties. Considering Elchibey's confession, the argument that it is inadvisable to assist the political authority in an environment where it is evident that even its own personnel are engaged in activities on behalf of other nations, and instead provide humanitarian assistance to the Azerbaijani people, can be substantiated.

Regarding Russia's conduct, it is notable that Russia was engaged in direct competition with Türkiye during this period. Moscow was, unfortunately, the more profitable party in this competitive balance. In contrast to Türkiye, Russia provided Armenia with unconditional military assistance¹ by deploying its own forces, instigated unrest in Azerbaijan by compelling its allies to defy Elchibey, and deterred Türkiye from intervening through the threat of a potential third world war. In this context, if it is possible to encapsulate the essence of the Türkiye-Russia rivalry during the First Karabakh War in a single sentence, it could be as follows: In the context of the First Karabakh War, Türkiye was unable to assume the role of the primary mediator. In Friedberg's view, this period represented a period of 'maturing for competition' for Ankara. Indeed, the arrangements that Türkiye will establish during this period will prove beneficial in the Second Karabakh War.

4. POLICIES OF INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL ACTORS DURING THE WAR

Throughout the First Karabakh War, Türkiye persisted in its rivalry with Russia within the broader international context of the conflict. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the process, it is also essential to examine the policies of regional powers and structures, as well as the key international actors with an interest in the conflict throughout the course of the war. It is significant that international actors collectively aligned with Armenia, at least during the First Karabakh War, to gain insight into the rationale behind Türkiye's reluctance to extend military assistance to Azerbaijan. In this context, the United Nations (UN) Organisation is the pre-eminent international organisation that took sides in the First Karabakh War, either directly or indirectly.

4.1. UN

¹ From 1992 to early 1994, Russian heavy cargo aircraft transported in excess of 1,300 tonnes of military equipment, weapons and ammunition to Armenia. This played a pivotal role in Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territories. For further information, please refer to the following sources, Qaffarov (ed.), *Azərbaycan Tarixi. Yeddi cildə. VII cild (1941-2002-ci illər)*. Bakı: Elm, 2008.

Taking direct steps after the occupation of Kelbajar, Türkiye intensified its efforts towards the international dimension of the Karabakh Issue. In fact, four binding resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council in 1993 are the fruits of these efforts. On 8 April 1993, six days after the occupation of Kelbajar, Ankara sent a letter to the President of the UN Security Council signed by its Permanent Representative Ambassador Mustafa Akşın, urging the Council to take urgent action (UN Security Council, 1993). As a result of a three-week struggle between Turkish and Azerbaijani diplomats, on 30 April 1993, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution No. 822, which stipulated the withdrawal of Armenians from the occupied territories (UN Security Council, 1993). In the text of the resolution issued by the UN Security Council, the signs of Russia-Türkiye rivalry again manifested themselves in diplomatic meddling. In this context, in the text of Resolution 822, Armenia was again partially left out of the issue by emphasising that Kelbajar was occupied by local Armenian forces, and by calling for ‘unhindered access to humanitarian aid’, Türkiye, which had closed its borders with Armenia (including the passage of third parties), was meant.

The decision taken by the UN Security Council was of significant consequence in terms of officially placing the Armenian occupation on the international agenda. Furthermore, in the period preceding the adoption of Resolution 822, Ankara demonstrated its solidarity with Baku before international organisations through the enactment of the ‘Law on the Approval of the Ratification of the Cooperation and Solidarity Agreement between the Republic of Türkiye and the Republic of Azerbaijan’. This law was being discussed in the Turkish Grand National Assembly at the time. Article 6 of the law, which directly addresses the issue of disseminating information about the Karabakh conflict on a global scale, defines the related solidarity as follows: In the event that either party is confronted with aggression by a third state, the other shall render the necessary assistance in order to prevent such aggression in accordance with the principles and objectives set forth in the United Nations Charter and within the framework of the mechanisms provided for in the CSCE (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Resmî Gazete 21578, 1993). However, on 23 July 1993, Armenia invaded the Azerbaijani city of Aghdam, thereby demonstrating that it did not recognise the UN Security Council resolutions. Consequently, on 27 July 1993, Türkiye and Azerbaijan jointly submitted a letter to the President of the UN Security Council, requesting that the organisation take action to terminate the Armenian occupation in accordance with the article of law. Because of this initiative, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 853 on 29 July 1993, two days later (UN Security Council, 1993).

While the UN Security Council’s reiteration of the importance of Aghdam and other previously occupied cities was a notable development, the wording of the resolution once again highlighted Russia’s involvement. It is notable that the resolution did not explicitly identify Armenia as the occupying power. Instead, the term ‘local Armenian forces’ was repeated. Although the Turkish government appeared to be acting in opposition to the prevailing international consensus by attempting to halt the occupation of Armenia, which is under the security protection of Russia, the United States of America, and France, it was constrained by the prevailing geopolitical circumstances. However, despite the binding nature of the UN resolutions, which were far from a deterrent, Armenia proceeded to occupy a further three Azerbaijani cities in the following month.

In the wake of the Armenian occupation of the towns of Fuzuli, Jabrayil and Gubadli on 14 October 1993, the UN Security Council adopted a further resolution, reiterating its previous resolutions on the matter. Additionally, Resolution No. 874 addressed the occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenian forces and their subsequent withdrawal. However, it did not formally recognise Armenia as a party to the conflict (UN Security Council, 1993). As Türkiye intensified its diplomatic initiatives on this issue, Russia used its

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position in the UN Security Council to advance the interests of Armenia. Indeed, in order to safeguard Armenia, Russia thwarted the UN's ability to fulfil its fundamental purpose of 'maintaining international peace'.

In response to UN Security Council Resolution 874, Armenia proceeded to occupy the city of Zengilan and the town of Horadiz. The failure of the Council resolutions to characterise Armenia as an occupier was a significant factor in enabling Armenia to continue its actions without facing effective opposition. Resolution 884, adopted on 12 November 1993, emphasised the evacuation of Zengilan and Horadiz, along with other occupied Azerbaijani towns (UN Security Council, 1993). Even though these resolutions were adopted because of Türkiye's intensive efforts, they did not contribute to peace in the region.

4.2. OSCE

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is the inaugural European international organisation to include Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan and Armenia became members of the Conference on 30 January 1992. The accession documents were signed at the summit held in Helsinki on 8-10 July 1992 ("Relations Between Azerbaijan and OSCE," n.d.). At the outset of the Armenian occupation of the Caucasus, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was addressed at an additional meeting of the OSCE Council of Foreign Ministers in Helsinki on 24 March 1992, approximately one month after the Khojaly Genocide. Because of the negotiations, it was resolved that a conference should be convened in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, to address the Karabakh issue. The conference, which was convened with the participation of eleven countries, including Türkiye, had two principal items on the agenda: the cessation of hostilities and the status of Nagorno-Karabakh (Qasımlı, 2015: 9). In the Azerbaijani literature on the Karabakh issue, Türkiye's efforts, and role in the formation of the Minsk Group are held in high regard (Qasımlı, 2015: 161). Nevertheless, as in any forum, Russia will view Türkiye's contributions to the OSCE as a potential source of competition and will seek to prevent Ankara from assuming a role within the Minsk Group through a restructuring of its internal dynamics.

Despite Armenia's refusal, the ceasefire resolution adopted on the eve of the OSCE Summit in Helsinki on 9-10 August 1992 constituted the only significant implementation of the organisation during the Karabakh conflict. The Western perspective of Azerbaijan as outlined by Elchibey, who attended the Summit, would serve to further increase Russia's support for Armenia and ultimately result in the occupation of other Azerbaijani cities. Armenia invaded Kalbajar on 2 April 1993, encouraged by the support of some of the Minsk Group countries. In response, the Elchibey government announced its withdrawal from the process, citing the OSCE Minsk Group's inability to facilitate a resolution. On 6 April, Ankara expressed its support for Azerbaijan's decision and emphasised that the process was not a deterrent:

"The Government of Azerbaijan has withdrawn from the CSCE peace process in the face of Armenia's continued aggression against its country. Türkiye understands and supports Azerbaijan's decision... The CSCE peace process has not deterred Armenia from its aggression, and in fact has shown that it does not have a minimum deterrent effect on Armenia... It is time for the Security Council, which has the primary responsibility in this field according to the UN Charter, to act and take measures to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, a member of the organisation." (Dışişleri Bakanlığı 1992 Tarihçesi, 1994).

Moving the issue to the UN agenda based on Türkiye's statements also failed to solve the problem. The reason hundreds of meetings and negotiations held in both the UN

and the OSCE until the end of the First Karabakh War and the resolutions issued remained inconclusive was mainly since influential states in both organisations supported Armenia's position, albeit with different motivations. In 1994, Russia used its influence to change the structure of the Minsk Group and took over the permanent co-chairmanship together with the USA and France. This initiative, which is one of the Kremlin's important moves within international organisations in its rivalry with Ankara, will ensure that the decision-maker in the Minsk Process will side with Armenia in the following 28 years.

4.3. US

In the context of the First Karabakh War, which occurred at a time when discussions on the new world order increased following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was anticipated to exert its influence in favour of stability. The United States, which is regarded as the foremost international organisation with the objective of resolving the conflict, was unable to maintain its neutrality because of the influence exerted by the Armenian lobby. Furthermore, the necessity for the United States to maintain neutrality was highlighted during Prime Minister Demirel's visit to the United States, which coincided with a period of heightened tension in the Caucasus, approximately one week prior to the Khojaly Genocide (TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 1992).

In the First Karabakh War, the United States government sought to prevent Türkiye, a significant military power in the region, from becoming involved in the conflict to the greatest extent possible. For instance, President Özal's assertion that it was imperative to deploy troops to Nakhchivan without delay, made during his visit to the USA, was not well received by Washington. Conversely, Demirel's statements, which were not in favour of intervention, were endorsed ("Demirel'den Sert Uyarı," 1992). On 22 May 1992, US Spokesperson Richard Boucher made a statement at the US State Department, in which he referred to the statements of Özal and Demirel and set forth the position of the United States as follows:

"I have nothing to say about President Özal's statement. We recognise that Türkiye is playing a constructive role, and we are in close contact with the Turkish government. By the way, there is also a statement issued by Prime Minister Demirel. In his statement, Demirel said that they would not intervene in the conflict. We have taken note of this, and we consider this statement also as a helpful element." (Yavuz, 1992).

The United States conveyed a message to the Armenian lobby it supports by requesting that Türkiye refrain from involvement in the Karabakh War for electoral reasons. It can be argued that, in a comparable manner to other Western actors, Washington influenced the Türkiye-Russia rivalry in the Caucasus to Ankara's detriment during the First Karabakh War. Conversely, the United States' adoption of analogous strategies towards Russia constituted a distinctive aspect of the First Karabakh War. In a further instance of unexpected alignment, the United States adopted a pro-Armenian stance in relation to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

4.4. Iran

Despite Iran's efforts to establish itself as a key mediator in the First Karabakh War, its policy ultimately highlighted the inherent contradiction between its identity and interests. In the field of international relations, there are numerous studies that examine Iran's rivalry with Türkiye in the Caucasus, which is analogous to that of Russia. As this study is focused on the rivalry between Türkiye and Russia, the rivalry between Türkiye and Iran will not be discussed here. Nevertheless, the approach adopted by Iran, which Svante E. Cornell

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characterises as one of the 'severe constraining factors' for Türkiye's policy in the First Karabakh War, will be examined in the context of international factors influencing Türkiye-Russia rivalry (Cornell, 1998: 63).

In his address at the inauguration of the bridge over the Aras River, which occurred shortly after the occupation of Shusha by Armenia, the then Prime Minister and Vice President of Armenia, Gagik Arutyunyan, lauded Tehran's role in supplying Armenia with commercial goods during the war. He further asserted that the bridge would contribute to regional stability and enhance economic prospects by offering alternative transportation routes that had been disrupted by the conflict. Conversely, at the time of Armenia's occupation of Shusha, Iran, like many Western countries, articulated concern about the recent developments in Karabakh, eschewing any condemnation of Yerevan (Shaffer, 2017).

The Turkish-Russian rivalry in the Caucasus was adversely affected by the policies of regional and international actors, including Iran, to Ankara's detriment. As evidenced in the records of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, Victor Ostapchuk articulated Ankara's policy stance during the First Karabakh War as follows: "Türkiye's cautious and unassertive approach resulted in the loss of valuable time and the failure to capitalise on its potential. Notwithstanding its challenges, Türkiye retains significant economic and strategic influence. Ankara failed to capitalise on the opportunities presented to it, maintaining a passive stance, and ultimately failing to achieve a significant degree of influence in Azerbaijan" (TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 1993). Considering the aforementioned factors, it can be posited that Ankara's stance was shaped by the prevailing instability in Azerbaijan, Türkiye's comparatively diminished geopolitical standing vis-à-vis Russia, the Demirel Government's disposition at the time, and the unwavering backing extended to Armenia by the international community.

5. CONCLUSION

During the war, it is evident that Russia's actions in competition with Türkiye were largely concentrated in Azerbaijan. This was achieved by ensuring the appointment of loyal cadres in the army and politics to senior positions. In this context, the pro-Russian proclivities of the inaugural President of Azerbaijan are evident. It was observed that he was compelled to resign by the populace following the Khojaly Genocide. It was widely believed in Moscow that this situation was perceived as a step by Türkiye. Gaziyeu was appointed with the specific request of Russian Defence Minister Pavel Grachev, and evidence exists to prove his role in facilitating the occupation of Shusha by Armenia. He was even tried for treason in this regard. It is important to consider that the fall of Shusha, which was a key strategic point in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, and its subsequent liberation by the Azerbaijani forces were pivotal moments in the Karabakh wars. During the ten-day occupation of Shusha and Lachin by Armenia with the assistance of Russia, Türkiye was unable to take a substantial action except for offering verbal support to Azerbaijan. Considering the statements made by the then Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, who asserted that despite the dissolution of the USSR, its primary apparatus and personnel remained intact, it is evident that Türkiye adopted a relatively reserved stance regarding military assistance to Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that this stance has served to embolden Armenia in its occupation of Azerbaijani territories.

It is evident that the primary areas of contention between Türkiye and Russia in the First Karabakh War were military and political. Indeed, the only benefit pro-Russian Rahim Gaziyeu brought to Armenia was his role in facilitating the occupation of Shusha and Lachin. Additionally, Gaziyeu contributed to the Moscow-Erivan bloc by signing the Tashkent Declaration, which weakened the Azerbaijani army in terms of inventory. From Türkiye's

perspective, this period can be viewed as a crucial phase in the process of 'maturing for competition'. The appointment of Brigadier General Halil Kalaycı as military attaché to Baku during the period of instability in Azerbaijan following the removal of Mutallibov from power can be considered in this context. It is also worthy of note that this action was taken at the request of Azerbaijan. Indeed, this was a significant factor motivating Azerbaijan, which undertook some of the most successful operations (Goranboy and Agdere operations) in the First Karabakh War. In fact, during this period, a development in favour of Türkiye in the Türkiye-Russia rivalry occurred, and Ebulfez Elchibey came to power in Azerbaijan on 6 June 1992.

In the second phase of the First Karabakh War, following the occupation of Kalbajar by Armenia on 2 April 1993, Türkiye responded in a direct and tangible manner by closing its borders with Armenia. However, it is evident that Azerbaijan was anticipating assistance in the form of military equipment. It can be argued that the response of Prime Minister Demirel, who replied to Elchibey's request for military assistance with the words, "It is not easy to take a helicopter there, there is no practice, the road is long," was due to a lack of deterrent will rather than logistical difficulties. Given that geographical conditions are unlikely to undergo a significant spatial change over approximately thirty years, it is possible to explain Türkiye's intensive support for Azerbaijan in the Second Karabakh War by reference to the difference in political will and material power capacity of the governments in the two periods. One of the key reasons for Türkiye's inability to intervene militarily in the First Karabakh War was the cautionary advice provided by Marshal Shaposhnikov, who was the Commander of the United Armed Forces of the CIS at the time. He warned that any intervention by Ankara would have the potential to escalate the conflict into a third world war. A comparable caution from the United States, a pivotal systemic variable, constituted an additional factor constraining Türkiye's capacity during that era.

The return of Heydar Aliyev, the highest-ranking Turk in the USSR, to Baku brought relative stability to Azerbaijan. The period, which resulted in the establishment of stability in Azerbaijan, was one of the developments that prompted Armenia to engage in peace negotiations and led to the official conclusion of the First Karabakh War with the signing of the Bishkek Protocol in May 1994. During this period, one of the factors that enabled Armenia to pursue its occupation of Azerbaijani territories with a high degree of audacity was the silence of the international community in conjunction with Russia's support. Despite the adoption of four resolutions by the UN Security Council in favour of Azerbaijan during the war, the absence of sanctions in relation to these resolutions enabled Yerevan to ignore them. While the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is frequently identified as a key actor in the Karabakh conflict, its reputation does not necessarily align with its actual contribution to conflict resolution. Russia's perception of the Minsk Group, which was established within the OSCE, as a source of competition has resulted in the loss of the functionality of this mechanism. Furthermore, it is evident that not only international institutions and organisations, but also the policies of states with interests in the region, have been positioned against Ankara in the context of the Türkiye-Russia rivalry. In this context, the pro-Armenian policies of the USA and Iran, the two states that assumed a prominent role during the war, were the factors that determined the extent of Ankara's influence in the Karabakh issue.

Considering the developments, which can be situated within the context of Russia's direct competition with Türkiye, it becomes evident that Moscow emerged as the dominant actor in the First Karabakh War. Russia sustained this competitive stance by furnishing Armenia with unreserved military assistance and by impeding any potential shift in Armenia's orientation towards Türkiye by instigating instability within Azerbaijan.

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Regarding Türkiye, the rivalry has been sustained through Ankara's written and verbal declarations of support and its policies in response to Russia. These include informing the international community about the Karabakh issue. Furthermore, the closure of borders following the occupation of Kelbajar, and the establishment of Ankara-Baku military cooperation can be regarded as supportive actions on the part of Türkiye, which can be viewed within the context of the 'ripe for competition' argument. In conclusion, it can be stated that Moscow played a pivotal role in the Turkish-Russian rivalry during the First Karabakh War. About the reasons for Türkiye's 'passive' support, it can be attributed to the lack of will to intervene on the part of the political power of the period, the significant discrepancy between the two rival actors in terms of material power capacity, the chaotic situation in Azerbaijan, the systemic variables that either openly or tacitly favoured Armenia to the detriment of Türkiye, and so forth. These factors collectively limit Ankara's ability to compete with Moscow.

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