



Russia and Nagorno Karabakh: a study of the evolution of Russian foreign policy in the eternal frozen conflict.

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Abstract

This project is based on the exploration of a question that arises from observing the evolution of ethnic conflicts resulting from the end of the Soviet Union. The beginning of the Russian state as we know it today had to face a new way of relating to the new nations that for seven decades remained as Soviet republics subjugated to Moscow's decisions.

Within this context, the Caucasus represented a particularly problematic region for Russian interests due to the presence of powerful regional players such as Turkey and Iran, a closer proximity to the West as well as several ethnic and nationalist conflicts that were frozen, although not solved, with the arrival of the Bolshevik forces. Some of these outbreaks involved the Islamic communities of Dagestan, the Russian-speaking regions of Abkhazia and Ossetia in present-day Georgia, but the major flashpoint was always the struggle between Armenians and Azeris for control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. This dormant war was one of the first signs of the end of the USSR and has remained for 30 years a problem with no apparent solution for the Russian area of influence.

Therefore, the research question that has shaped this study is *how has the Russian Federation's foreign policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict changed and for what reasons?* This question, of course, will explore the evolution of the three countries involved, Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan and how they relate to each other, focusing on Russian foreign policy and its interventions on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict within different paths.

1.Problem formulation

The Nagorno Karabakh conflict is an ethnic, political, economic and social problem that affects the entire South Caucasus. Two peoples who have lived together for generations and centuries in peace have become irreconcilable enemies. Armenia and Azerbaijan, Christians and Shiite Muslims, have been at loggerheads since 1988, when after the fall of the Soviet Union, the territory known as Nagorno Karabakh, a mountainous enclave located between the two countries, became embroiled in a struggle for its control.

The territory belonged to Azerbaijan since 1920, when it officially passed into Azerbaijani hands while the vast majority of the population was mostly ethnic Armenian. This, added to the collective memory of the impact of the Armenian genocide by the Turks, silently forged an unprecedented hatred. In this context and after the dissolution of the Soviet republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the struggle began in a fierce manner. At that time, the new Russia was the only actor that could intervene to stop the war.

Russia's approach to this region has been difficult to decipher. It has been the linchpin of diplomacy to curb conflicts, but has never intervened directly with any of the actors involved. It needs to protect a strategic region such as its southern border with Europe, but has remained equidistant with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. And after 26 years of a fragile peace, war has returned to the Caucasus. And with it, Russia once again demonstrated its true intentions towards the peoples of the south.

This project aims to analyze all the events surrounding these two wars with an eye always fixed on Russia, to try to understand what were the reasons that made it change its mind between the first and the second Nagorno Karabakh war.

2. Methodology

In this section I seek to explain the methodological considerations that will shape this work. This process of selection, search and objectives of the information used will introduce the research design as well as the research approach. Thus, an explanation of the data collection process used will also be given, together with reflections on the limitations that this system may have caused.

2.1 Descriptive and explanatory research

Since my research question expects to arrive at an answer based on the observation of behavior, in this case, the foreign policy response to the evolution of a multi-vector conflict, the most appropriate approach will be a combination of descriptive research and explanatory research. In this way, descriptive research can help to provide a basis for explaining the changes in policies and reactions that the Russian state has adopted in the wake of events in its area of influence. Meanwhile, explanatory research will be able to explain the reasons behind the series of phenomena that will be used as the basis of the study. (Dawson, 2002)

The integration of these two types of research will provide a more complete investigation and a better understanding of the phenomenon to be studied. In addition, the multi-faceted study that this combination of research typology allows will adapt to the type of data that will be combined during the analysis by using historical, political and economic features. In this way, the study of Russian foreign policy towards Nagorno Karabakh will have a broad theoretical framework, which can deconstruct the causes that shape it (bilateral relations, national identities and geopolitical interests) through a descriptive process but will be able to find a conclusive meaning that gives shape to these premises. (Bhattacharjee, 2012)

2.2 Inductive approach

Given the nature of this project, in which the exposition of different facets of international politics and geopolitics of the Caucasia region seeks to make sense of the phenomenon of Russian foreign policy and its evolution over the Nagorno Karabakh war, the research approach will be inductive.

The inductive approach is characterized by being driven by the information that has been obtained during data collection and, based on it, establishing a theory. This perspective fits the qualitative

method used in this work, since the final goal is to understand and interpret a complex reality through its context and the data that configure it. (Somekh and Lewin, 2005)

Although the use of the theories of international relations detailed in the fourth section of the project could be considered a deductive approach to the subject to be dealt with, since they start from already established premises on how Russia's behavior in the international system will develop, I believe that it would not be correct to adduce this to an abductive approach, in which the inductive and deductive processes meet.

In this case, the theory of defensive neorealism will serve more as an approach to the study of foreign policy behavior than as a hypothesis about it. Through the study of these perspectives to understand the evolution of Russia's geopolitical outlook towards Nagorno Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan, I hope to find a theory that will provide an explanation for these trends.

2.3 Case Study approach

This paper aims to explain the changes in Russian foreign policy towards Nagorno Karabkh, therefore, the South Caucasus region and bilateral relations between the countries at the origin of the conflict, Armenia and Azerbaijan, will be studied in depth. For this purpose, the use of a case study will be an optimal method to analyze the data collected through the inductive approach.

This methodology is particularly effective for this purpose because of its implicit qualities. The in-depth study of a social and political phenomenon seeks to understand questions such as why, beyond trying to catalog the phenomenon as such. The analysis of events related to the Nagorno Karabakh territory will attempt to reach this type of conclusion. The heuristic objective and the possibility of taking advantage of different methods of approaching the object of study, added to the different branches of knowledge that can be brought together in search of a complex and specific understanding of the event to be analyzed, makes the case study the most appropriate tool for dealing with a multi-problematic event such as the ethnic war in Karabakh. (Somekh and Lewin, 2005)

2.4 Data collection and limitations

For this paper I have used a secondary data collection method. Secondary data refers to all information that has been collected, analyzed and transmitted by a previous researcher for a specific purpose, which does not have to be the same as that which is to be explained through this data. (Bhattacharjee, 2012) The use of this method provides great benefits in terms of the cost-effectiveness

of obtaining it, as well as the time required to process it and apply it to the current study. It is thanks to this that the size and variety of the sample can be increased since the type of data obtained can be much more varied by using studies from different fields with the intention of creating an interdisciplinary and multicultural comparison. (ibid.)

In order to increase the effectiveness of this secondary data, it is recommended to follow a process that starts from the subject from which the analysis will be made, in this case, international relations and political science, and continues with an expansive search towards other complementary areas of knowledge that may point out new nuances. (Dawson, 2002) In this case, although the vast majority of the data have come from studies in the area of international relations, I have also added economic and social analyses, as well as books more focused on history and legal documents or specific dissertations on phenomena that affected the political evolution of the conflict.

As for the limitations I have used to define and narrow down the selection of data, I have used documents published in English. Although there are translation methods that could have helped me to study different approaches to the subject, I preferred to focus on the sample that would best suit my understanding, without having to worry about possible translation errors.

It should be noted that this can also generate an important bias. The Nagorno Karabakh conflict is a multi-vector phenomenon and is conditioned by several perspectives according to the study. The English-language data, for example, tends to focus on the relationship that the EU or the US has had in the peace processes or the effect the war has had on liberal economic institutions in the West. I have found a large number of studies from Russian think tanks that approached this event from a geopolitical prism or through the use of Slavic theories. The same has happened with several Turkish or Azerbaijani universities. Although I do not think that this is a problem when it comes to an objective approach to the outcome of the conflict and the study of Russian foreign policy, it is worth pointing out the possible drawbacks that this may cause to my analysis.

As far as sources are concerned, I have tried to opt for those that can be found in the online service of the Aalborg University Library. Although for some specific works I have had to use search engines and external documentary sources, I have tried to stick to the use of this tool in order to facilitate the verification of the origin of the sources and not to infringe any intellectual property rights that could harm the authors of the data used.

3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis of the theories that will shape the development of this project begins from a realist perspective of international relations. This is a starting point for understanding the context in which Russia has changed its view of the ethnic conflict in Nagorno Karabakh, as its main attributes will be used: the state as a first-tier international actor, the dismissal of the influence of international bodies or supranational entities as well as the rationality of the state leadership as a guideline for decision making. (Morgenthau, 1989)

3.1 Defensive Neorealism

Within the realist school, neorealism stands out as a refinement of this approach, especially in having to adapt to the conditions of a bipolar world during the cold war. The great emphasis this theory places on the behavior of states is based on the idea of the need for self-helplessness. Given the situation in which the state occupies the highest hierarchy as an actor in the international system and not being able to know in depth the intentions of the other contenders, the great powers assume that they and no one else can guarantee their security. This conclusion suggests that the powers, therefore, are in a constant search for balance against each other, as a way to ensure their strength and resistance to a possible rival offensive. (Parent and Rosato, 2015) However, the founder of this neorealism or structural realism, Kenneth Waltz, defines two visions of this school of thought: offensive and defensive neorealism. The former, more related to classical realist thought, states a constant quest for power and hegemony, while the latter offers a way of thinking more related to the pursuit of balance of power and stability. (Mearsheimer, 2019)

This updated current of realism relies on the effect of the international structure and its own capabilities on the behavior of states to the detriment of the power of isolated states. The specific perspective of defensive neorealism is built upon as a response to the security dilemma, an inescapable conflict in the system where a state's quest for security through increased military power or alliances can be perceived as a threat to other nations. The theory points out how the balance of material power, understood as the set of capabilities that allow a country to define and influence the system, including military force and technology, favorable geographical features or the development of the economic structure, will be the key factor that will shape the foreign policy of different states. Meanwhile, the domestic factors specific to each actor will have sufficient weight to limit and alter their actions on the international scene. (Taliaferro, 2001)

In short, this theory recognizes the problematic distribution of power among states of realism but intuitively that they will respond in a moderate way given the effect that the search for security and domestic politics can generate in the international system.

For this analysis, it has been chosen to use the view of defensive structural realism as a first step in understanding Russian foreign policy, as it fits most of Russia's actions internationally. Although for some authors, the Russian moves can be considered as a rupture of the principles of balance and an offensive and expansionist tactic, it does not have to be so, the major Russian military campaigns, the attack on Georgian sovereignty in 2008 or the annexation of Crimea in 2014, seem to respond to a mixture of internal fervor and reaction to a foreign threat. All these interventions were not aimed at expanding Russian hegemony (although both states are within its historical orbit of influence), but as a response to the expansion of NATO and the rapprochement of these nations towards European policies. In other words, a way to defend their borders and try to maintain a balance as a great power against their western neighbors. (Götz, 2016)

However, this theory is not without its critics, especially when used in the analysis of foreign policy in a multivectorial environment. Some of these attacks are based on the need to omit certain values or important aspects when working with neorealism, such as economic relations with other states or demographic and cultural factors. (Waltz, 2018) Overall, the theories of structural realism do not seem to be useful in explaining the behavior of a state with respect to its foreign policy, since they can ignore the rationality and strategy of states, especially in a context of warlike confrontation. Furthermore, Mearsheimer (2009) insists that although Waltz's structural theory contemplates the variable of domestic politics in the development of foreign policy, it does not sufficiently emphasize its importance and value, avoiding taking into account internal actors such as political institutions or public opinion.

Therefore, in order to complement this theory, the use of various aspects of other contemporary realist theory can help to create a better perspective on the study of a country's foreign policy.

3.2 Neoclassical realism

This aspect of realism is based on the balanced amalgamation of the two approaches to realist study, giving equal emphasis to external factors (threats, alliances or changes in the international system) and internal factors (institutions or power groups) of the state. (Rose, 1998). This theory is focused on

the study of foreign policy, so it perfectly complements defensive structural realism in understanding Russia's changes in this area.

Later, Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell (2006) divided the methodological variables of this theory into 3 main groups: independent, intervening and dependent. The first group relates to the effects of the international system on a state's decisions, which cover the nuances exposed in defensive structural realism. The value of this hybrid theory for this analysis lies in the intervening variables, those that point to the key points of a country's domestic policies in its foreign policy.

These variables are distinguished in the perception of leaders, that ideology or values shared by the members of the power groups in a state, the strategic culture, defined as the beliefs and perspectives on the exterior and expectation of a common future present in the society of that country. The third point would be the relationship between this society and the state, the link between the first and second variables, which include the degree of connection between the two actors on a political and cultural level or the support of the population in the field of national security. Finally, there are domestic institutions, all those national organizations capable of altering or modifying policy formation and development. (ibid.)

These elements add another layer of depth to the study of the evolution of Vladimir Putin's Russia's foreign policy towards the Caucasus territories. This is evident in how the move towards an autocratic policy has allowed for greater permeation of Putin's executive values such as the rejection of Western principles or the construction of a Eurasian identity in society as well as greater control over Russia's internal institutions. This change in the country's domestic relations has modified its national interests and the policies that enable them to be carried out, challenging in the process the United States regional dominance.(Korolev, 2021)

3.2 Geopolitics

Finally, in this section I would like to emphasize the value of geopolitical analysis for this project, given the spatial conditions and objectives pursued by the progressive development of Russian foreign policy in the Caucasus over the past three decades.

In spite of the fact that for several authors geopolitics is a study that can be encompassed within realism in International Relations works due to the shared aim in power, the unit of analysis and the definition of the international system as an anarchic scenario (Wu, 2017) and at the risk of being

redundant within this school with the theories exposed, I believe it is important to point out two points that lead me to highlight this tool of analysis. Within all the ramifications and applications of the study of geopolitics, I would like to apply Csurgai's (2021) definition in *Geopolitics and International Relations Grounding World Politics Anew* where he mentions:

Geopolitics can be defined as the examination of interactions between political processes and geographic spaces in which these processes take place. Geopolitics is not a separate social science but rather an interdisciplinary method of analysis [...] geopolitics is not the synthesis of the various disciplines in social sciences either. Geopolitical reasoning takes into consideration the geographical dimension that should be considered not only in its physical sense, but in terms of demographic, cultural and economic aspects as well.

Therefore, the appearance of geopolitics in this thesis will not be as an encouragement of realist theory, but rather as a tool of analysis that allows us to focus on the spatial and strategic factor that has motivated Russia to maintain such a characteristic foreign policy towards this conflict region.

It is also worth noting that the concept and use of geopolitics for the Russian state has become a form of identity and ideology after the demise of the Soviet Union. This lens through which the world is interpreted has provided a strategic vision for the Russian elite, which, rejecting theoretical Marxism as an identity theory, has turned to geopolitics as an explanation for its development. (Mäkinen, 2016)

4. Analysis

The aim of this project is to find an answer that explains the motives behind the evolution of Russian foreign policy towards the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. The analysis that will attempt to answer this question will be divided into three segments, so as to contextualize Russia's role as a great power and its use of foreign policy to its advantage. In the first, the concept itself of foreign policy in the context of a great power will be explored, using examples of how the United States, China and some regional powers have reconverted their foreign policy during the construction of the multipolar world we are moving towards.

In the second section, Russia's approach towards both countries involved in the ethnic and territorial conflict will be analyzed. In this way, it will be possible to find evidence to help justify the interpretation of the Caucasus for the Russian state and how it has changed during the last three decades. The third and last point will focus on the case study of Russian foreign policy and its

responses and interference in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The three outbreaks of the conflict and Russia's reaction to them will be analyzed. At the end, we will use this data plus the information seen in the last months regarding the changes in the war in the region to come to a conclusion that can explain and shape the Russian foreign policy towards the current situation.

4.1 Conceptualising Foreign Policy

The definition of foreign policy could take up an entire book, so much so that it is a mutable concept with great variations among the theories used as a prism to understand its objectives or study its behavior. Nevertheless, in order to establish a basic definition of this concept, we could use the definition of a *set of actions or rules governing the actions of an independent political authority deployed in the international environment*. (Jean-Frédéric Morin and Paquin, 2019).

Hudson and Day (2020) also define this term as *decisions taken by human decisionmakers with reference to or having known consequences for entities external to their nation-state*. The perspective from the foreign policy analysis seems clear about the first stance of definition, where this policies are the bond between a political actor with a specific porpouse and the effects the execution of these intentions cause at the international level. Yet, from the different theoretical perspectives of International Relations, the goals and subjects that shape foreign policies may change.

In the case of structural realism, analyzed in the theoretical section, Waltz establishes a substantial difference between the concept of foreign policy and international policy. For the author, foreign policy is only a subsection of international politics, so that the study of each of them has different objectives and provides different types of response. While foreign policy is expressed as a set of specific decisions (as noted in the previous explanations) it points out that its role is a small part of the big picture of international politics, which involves the systemic features that shape the behavior of a state on a global scale. (Waltz, 1979) With this clear differentiation, an implicit relationship between the neorealist perspective and the study of foreign policy is justified, so that the understanding of a state's behavior will define the capacity that this country will have to execute its policy. Therefore, the realist theory, although not based on foreign policy, will provide the keys to how it will be used in the pursuit of balance of power or stability in the system. (Telhami, 2022)

4.1.1 Russian foreign policy

1991-1999

Russian foreign policy has undergone several paradigm shifts since the establishment of the modern Russian state. Therefore, the first point to understand it is to find the key points that have shaped its presence on the international scene.

One of them, undoubtedly, has been and is its relationship with the hegemonic power after the Cold War. The US-Russia nexus has shaped Russian foreign policy from the very beginning. In fact, it sometimes seems to be forgotten that the Russian Federation maintained an ideological and economic rapprochement towards a Western model, making a qualitative leap towards liberal democracy and a capitalist market system. This economic structure, hand in hand with the large-scale privatizations guaranteed by Boris Yeltsin's executive, laid the foundations for a foreign policy oriented towards the West, especially the United States. (Leichtova, 2014) This first stage marked a weak foreign policy, as the Russian state focused on its internal reconfiguration, trying to sustain the new institutions that were born as a result of these changes in the economy and the control of the insurgent territories, with a special mention to the two Chechen wars in Dagestan. (Morrisette, 2010)

However, these financial reforms did not have the expected effect despite their rapid implementation. On a domestic level, this privatization process was carried out in a context of severe fraud and Russian inflation skyrocketed, reaching an increase of 875% in just one year. (Kasser, 1999) At the international level, the support of the Western community was limited and the perception in the Russian Federation, both by the population and the political elites, was of an absolute loss of its position as a hegemonic power. This not only translated into a pronounced distrust of Western promises that would set the course for the orientation of Russian foreign policy in later years, but also implied the discrediting of liberal ideology in the country. Thus, the new national ideology that would gain strength in the Kremlin and its intellectual circles was Eurasianism. (Leichtova, 2014)

Euro-Asianism consists of a political, religious and cultural doctrine based on Russia's geographical location as a unique and exclusive nexus between Europe and Asia. This privileged geopolitical location on the globe attributes to Russia an international responsibility and configures it as a unique entity, which must maintain a defined and independent international role. (ibid.) The implications of this philosophy are manifold, although in the environment of the end of the century and in the face of the rejection of the liberal order, it became an argument to move away from Western precepts. This, in turn, would imply a greater rapprochement with the People's Republic of China as a method to

counteract American hegemony in Europe, the search for the recovery of the image and international weight of the Russian Federation as a regional actor and great power, and the starting point for a readaptation of the values of Russian nationalism. (Lewis, 2018)

2000-2007

The arrival of Vladimir Putin to power inspired some confidence towards a possible improvement of bilateral relations between the US and the Russian Federation, thanks to the simultaneous change of government. In the beginning, the Russian president showed a friendly turn towards this idea thanks to several meetings between Putin and George W Bush, the ratification of the Start II treaty which implied the reduction of nuclear warheads stockpiles by both powers and especially, the support he showed during the 9/11 attacks on which Russia offered logistical and intelligence assistance for 'the war on terror'. (Nalbandov, 2016)

Even so, this was a facade that did not last long. The policy of rapprochement with the US gave way to a policy of balance between the West and Asia, in which, at the same time, it sought to penetrate international organizations that were in line with the liberal model, such as the G8 or the World Trade Organization, Putin presented one of his first 'Foreign Policy Concepts' where he presented the road map of the Russian Federation in the international arena. In it, he announced a rejection of the American unipolarity and declared as main interest the protection of the Russian national sovereignty and territorial integrity. (Simons, 2020) In this desire for a multipolar world, balance between the two geographical axes and the need to protect the Russian world, the first steps towards Eurasianism as a central doctrine in foreign policy can be found.

Nevertheless, the biggest turn in foreign policy came towards the end of his first term. Already in 2004 and 2006, Putin expressed his concern about the possible interference that NGOs and international institutions could be having in the so-called color revolutions in post-Soviet countries such as Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) that raised leaders with a clear anti-Russian and pro-Western policy. (Güner, 2012) This situation was experienced as a direct attack on Russian sovereignty and the delimitations of areas of control defined in the Warsaw Pact as well as in NATO's alleged promises after the dissolution of the Soviet Union that it would refuse to bring countries delimited as Russian-influenced into the organization.

One of the breaking points with no turning back was the speech given at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. This plea by Putin laid the groundwork for what would be the next step in adopting a foreign policy based on direct confrontation to Western influence in the Middle East and the post-Soviet space by vehemently criticizing NATO enlargement in the Baltic countries and Eastern

Europe after the 2004 Istanbul summit and the establishment of missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic in 2007. (Putin, 2007) This speech generated a great deal of backlash in the West, a systematic direct attack on U.S. foreign policy and was interpreted as Russia's first direct and assertive opposition to the Western order. (Borozna, 2022)

2008 - 2012

The change of government under Medvedev inaugurated the beginning of Russian military campaigns outside its borders. Just 3 months after his arrival in the Kremlin, a military operation was launched on Georgian territory. This conflict had different edges and interests for Russia, but Mankoff (2012) points out the main ones: a show of regional power in the face of Georgia's attempt to join NATO, defense of Russian nationalism and security by recognizing the Russian-speaking regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and protecting their inhabitants (most of them with Russian passports), as well as ensuring its geopolitical objectives in the region, striking a blow on the international chessboard to show itself as an actor capable of influencing the system.

Shortly after the war, Medvedev recognized five basic points that would provide the basis for the Russian perspective in international affairs: the recognition of the laws of international law, the principle that the world should be a multipolar arena, the declaration that Russia does not wish to confront any sovereign nation, the protection of Russian citizens regardless of their location, and the maintenance of an area of privilege and interest around each great power. (ibid.)

Anyways, the recognition of these republics was one of the first measures that directly opposed international territorial recognition, as they were not recognized by the majority of UN member states. In addition, the rapid victory of Russian troops allowed the country to show itself as a state capable of protecting the post-Soviet area by military means and defending its security interests. (Leichtova, 2014) Despite all this, this period of governance, with the marked tendency against NATO expansion and the US unipolar vision, did not mean a total break with the principles of their foreign policy. Rather, he maintained the philosophy of his predecessor based on a belligerent discourse but pragmatism in his bilateral relations. Proof of this was the new START treaty that continued with the disarmament of nuclear weapons or the tactical support to NATO in its war against terrorist groups in Afghanistan. (Borozna, 2021)

2013 - 2020

Putin's return to the Russian executive implied the expansion of Russian foreign policy outside the historical Soviet area with the entry into the Syrian civil war of part of the forces of the formal

President Bashar Al-Assad in 2015 and in turn, the continuation of a policy of open hostility towards the regimes of an ideological approach towards the West, following a projection similar to the one adopted towards Georgia in 2008.

Regarding its presence in the Middle East, Russia had long been working on a political and economic rapprochement with Syrian elites. The abstention from the United Nations Security Council resolution to expel Syrian armed forces from Lebanon in 2004 or the signing of large contracts for the exploitation of Syrian oil by Russian companies were some examples of this. (Katz, 2006)

Nonetheless, direct participation in the civil war sought a multivectoral effect. While allowing for the continued growth of international influence, it secured an allied state in the Middle East, with whom it would not only sign million-dollar contracts in the energy sphere and arms sales, but also support a Russian naval base in the Mediterranean. At the same time, the fight against Sunni guerrillas brought Russia closer to Iranian diplomacy and allowed it to experiment with new models of financing and executing war through mercenaries, with the Wagner group as the main actor. (Souleimanov and Dzutsati, 2018)

As far as Eastern Europe was concerned, Ukraine was the game board between Russia and the West. The country was trying to maintain a balance in terms of proximity towards both axes. In 2013, the Ukrainian government of Viktor F. Yanukovych cancelled the association process with the European Union, a move that was widely associated with Russian pressure and interference in the Ukrainian executive, which ended up being oriented towards the Kremlin's interests. (Borzona, 2021) This drift in the relationship with Russia provoked a series of protests and demonstrations in Kiev known as Euromaidan, in which people demanded a return to a pro-European orientation and in favor of a liberal policy. This was perceived by the European Union as the true will of the Ukrainian people fighting against the despotism of the government while Putin's cabinet read it as a new infiltrated attack organised by the West on their national security. (Götz, 2016)

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according to Russia, totally favorable, so it proceeded with the annexation of the peninsula and the city of Sevastopol. (Lewis, 2018)

4.2 Rusia foreign policy in the South Caucasus

With the aim of understanding Russia's approach to the Nagorno Karabakh war, it is necessary to observe the bilateral relations it has with both states involved. This section will briefly analyze the geopolitical ties that these nations have maintained with the Russian Federation since their independence in 1991, being located in a strategic region of proximity between Russia and other regional actors of weight in the conflict such as Turkey, Iran as well as the influence of the European Union and the United States.

Given the neorealist perspective applied to this study, the main premises when analyzing these relations will be national security, geostrategic importance, military ties and economic connections between the Russian Federation and the two states.

4.3.1 Russia and Armenia

Armenia is a small state entrenched in the heart of the South Caucasus. Its eastern and western borders border Azerbaijan and Turkey respectively, Georgia to the north and Iran to the south. This enclave therefore represents a strategic territory for the movement of Russian troops on the southern border of the state. Historically, the Soviet Union used the position of the Soviet Republic of Transcaucasia to secure these borders and this is still the case, given the presence of the 102nd Military Base of the Russian Forces located in Gyurmi, near the border with Turkey. The first treaty on the presence of Russian troops on Armenian territory was established in 1992, but it was not until 1995 when Protocol No. 5 was signed, establishing the right to transport troops, weapons and aviation within the Armenian space, as well as the handover of the Gyurmi military base without any debt or payment until 2044. (Paronyan and Elamiryan, 2021) In 1997, a treaty of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance was signed, which defined the bilateral responsibilities of the two countries, especially the protection of Armenia from external threats. (Coyle, 2019)

In addition, Armenia was one of the first six countries to join the Collective Security Treaty (CST), a NATO-style defense and cooperation pact that ensured mutual protection among all member states. This treaty served for the reorganization of Soviet troops after the birth of the modern Russian state and the maintenance of the Soviet area of influence from a military point of view. This evolved into

what is now known as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which was reconfigured as a full-scale organization with the inclusion of Azerbaijan, Belarus and Georgia. (Nalbandov, 2016) These treaties have been extended, as happened in 2011 with Protocol No.5 or the extension of the treaty of friendship and cooperation in 2015, where the defense of Armenian airspace was included. Everything shows the interest for Russian national security on the ground, so that it can control the stability of the region in case of an upsurge of Turkish and Azeri threats outside the context of Nagorno Karabakh. (Teryzyan, 2018). This just shows the interest for Russian national security on the ground, so that it can control the stability of the region in case of an upsurge of Turkish and Azeri threats outside the context of Nagorno Karabakh. (Gomólka, 2017)

The presence of an expansion of pan-Turkic ideology by its Muslim neighbors as well as the West's rapprochement towards the Caucasus has also made the region a key venue for Russia's security perception of this area of influence. Armenia, despite its efforts to balance its economic foreign policy between Europe, China and the United States, has become the state most dependent on Russian defense, making it its most stable ally in protecting its interests. (Terzyan, 2022) It would also be fair to say that Armenia not only depends on Russia when it comes to ensuring its national security in a military sphere, but also forms a key part of its economy.

Markarov and Brusov (2018) claim that even after the 'velvet revolution' (protests that brought the current Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian to power in 2018) Russia remains the largest investor in the Armenian economy, considering that only a year earlier China provided Armenia with military assistance valued at \$1.5 billion. In addition, Armenia has been part of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) along with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus and Russia since its official establishment in 2014. This membership has allowed access of large Russian corporations to the Armenian market with an economic growth of 4% of total GDP per year. (Matevosyan and Vahram, 2017)

These are some examples that clarify Russia's interests for the sake of its foreign policy towards Armenia. Despite being a small country that has little to contribute to the bulk of the economy or natural resources, its dependence on the Russian Federation in the field of security and trade makes it a submissive state to its designs in a region with interests increasingly close to the West.

4.3.2 Russia and Azerbaijan

In the case of Azerbaijan, military ties are rather weak with Russia. Despite joining the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 1993, it left in 1999. This was in response to its multi-vector vision in its foreign policy where the proximity with Russia could compromise with some allies, in

particular Turkey, after the support shown in favor of the Tatar population during the Chechen war. Turkey latter has become one of the major guarantors of its security, especially with regard to Nagorno Karabakh and the Nachijevan enclave, which are two of the major challenges to its national security. (Valiyev and Mamishova, 2019) It has also rarely rejected the possible accession to the EUEA that Russia has proposed, on the premise that such a move would damage its agricultural sector (which accounts for 40% of the country's employment), would cause it to lose a large part of its autonomy in its energy strategy and would not represent a disproportionate benefit, taking into account that its main trading partners in terms of hydrocarbon imports are Turkey and the European Union. In fact, the latter generates 50% of the total annual profit of its energy trades with its purchases. (Kuchins, Andrew et al, 2016)

This multipolar foreign policy has led to several tense moments in Russian-Azerbaijani bilateral relations. After three years of economic embargo by the Russian Federation on the Muslim country (1993-1996) for its alleged strategic assistance and arms sales to the Chechen insurgents, these accusations were revived with greater force at the second outbreak of the conflict in 1999. Following this, the possibility of building a NATO-related base on Azeri territory was considered, as was the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline project, supported by the US, which Russia interpreted as a threat to its monopoly of energy logistics to Europe. (Abilov and Isayev, 2015)

Although the coming to power of Putin in Russia and Ilham Aliyev in Azerbaijan in 2003 greatly improved bilateral relations despite the fact that the latter was not lukewarm in his decisions to maintain the balance between Russia, the United States and Turkey. (ibid.)

The 2008 war in Georgia was a turning point for Azerbaijan's view of Russia. This show of force alienated investors and Western-funded schemes, while the indefinite stationing of Russian troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was interpreted as a potential threat to the pipelines that cross Georgia to connect Azerbaijan to Turkey and from there to the European market. In fact, for several weeks the Baku - Supsa pipelines and the BTC itself were closed as a precaution. (Roberts, 2011) However, the situation between the two nations improved significantly through several energy cooperation operations. In 2011, Russia committed to the annual purchase of 2 billion cubic meters of gas and between 2014 and 2017 the construction and logistical organization of the International North-South Transport Corridor was carried out which would allow an India-Russia connection without having to rely on the sea route through the Suez Canal, saving time and money, as well as avoiding possible Western sanctions. (Gürçan, 2020)

This strategy has further enhanced the bilateral relationship and trust between the two nations. Both deals intentionally benefit both players economically (with Azerbaijan selling gas at a similar price that Russia will then ask Europe to sell). (Valiyev and Mamishova, 2019) As for the arms trade, Russia has become its second largest seller, behind only Israel, knowing that its potential enemies in the first instance, Armenia, and secondly, Iran, both nations being strategic partners of Russia. (ibid.)

4.3 Case Study

In the previous section a framework has been established on both sides of the neorealist analysis: the external causes coming from the international system that have regulated and oriented the national interests pursued in the Russian foreign policy as well as the internal factors that have influenced and generated such strategic interests.

This context will provide a solid basis for understanding the following case study where we will seek to answer the question that has given rise to this project "What are the motives behind the evolution of Russian foreign policy towards the Nagorno Karabakh conflict?". For this purpose, the outbreak of the 3 outbreaks of the conflict from the independence of Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1991 to the apparent end of the conflict at the end of 2023 and the Russian reaction to them, both in their beginnings and in their results, will be studied.

After the analysis of these circumstances and the use of neorealist and neoclassical realist theory, it will be possible to outline a road map on the change in Russian security interests on the ground and towards its partners in the Caucasus that will allow us to understand the motives behind their different ways of dealing with the conflict.

4.3.1 First Nagorno Karabakh War (1988-1994)

The territory of Nagorno Karabakh consists of a mountainous region located between southern Armenia and southwestern Azerbaijan. Consisting of an area of 4,800 square kilometers, it had a population of approximately 200,000 inhabitants at the beginning of the first outbreak of war, with a large ethnic Armenian majority (140,000) and the rest of Azerbaijani origin. This ethnic disparity of the population was one of the first reasons for the conflict. (Coyle, 2018)

As Stebher (2022) comments, the animosity between Armenians and Azerbaijanis is not so old. Beyond the trauma born of the Armenian genocide in the early 20th century by the last remnants of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the new Turkish state, Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived together in

peace on the blurred border dividing the two nations. It was not until the arrival of the Bolsheviks and especially Joseph Stalin control, who established poorly defined boundaries for the territory of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) with the aim of ensuring their loyalty in a key area for the protection of the borders with Turkey and the Imperial State of Iran. In 1923, the NKAO's membership in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic was ratified, possibly as an offering of trust and cooperation with Turkey, Azerbaijan's strategic regional ally. (ibid.)

In the late 1980s, nationalist movements in both Armenia and Azerbaijan began to resurge strongly. In 1987 Armenia's SSR officially requested the reunification of the NKAO from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union with the support of several military officers of the Autonomous Oblast, which the former president Gorbachov ignored. This frontal rejection provoked several demonstrations in Yerevan as well as in Stepanakert, capital of the NKAO. This independence movement within the Azeri territory generated a reaction of its own on the part of its nationalist movements which resulted in confrontations in different cities of the region. In the Armenian-majority city of Askeran, two Azeri demonstrators were killed in a brawl between two protest marches. These are considered the first official deaths associated with the conflict. (Coyle, 2018)

These struggles led to the beginning of a series of massacres against the civilian population living in the opposing territory. In 1988 there was the massacre of Sumgait, a coastal city near Baku, where a pogrom against Armenian workers resulted in 26 Armenians and 6 Azeris being killed. It is estimated that on the same day about 14,000 Armenians fled the region. (De Waal, 2019) At this point, the Soviet Politburo had hardly acted in defense of either side and terror began to set in among the civilian population. This further inflamed the pro-independence paramilitary groups in both regions, with special mention of the Armenian National Army and the Azerbaijan Popular Front. This drift exploded again in January 1990, with a pogrom in Baku where 90 Armenians were killed. The Popular Front took the streets and so in this case, the Politburo did respond by sending in the army in an attempt to stop these killings at any cost in order to regain effective control over the Azerbaijani capital. The result was 131 civilians and 21 Soviet soldiers, an episode remembered as 'Black January', an image that generated a total rupture of the Azerbaijani population against the Communist Party. (ibid.)

In this situation, conflict was already inevitable. Azeri citizens felt that no one would protect them from the secession of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian reaction to the Azerbaijani minority in the Oblast. On the other hand, the Armenians, after years of insisting on annexation or independence, had lost faith that the Supreme Soviet would give its approval, so that the already forged Armenian independence would go through the recognition of the independence of Nagorno Karabakh. (Ghaplanyan, 2018)

With the victory in the 1990 elections by Levon Ter-Petrosian and his Armenian Pan-National Movement party, the first government of a Soviet Socialist Republic that was not part of the Communist Party was formed, which implied a rapid orientation towards the construction of Armenian institutions autonomous from the Kremlin and arming the insurgent groups of the NKAO. (ibid)

This weakening of Soviet power in the Armenian executive as well as the inaction in Azerbaijan was seen as a prelude to the collapse of the USSR in the area and thus the imminent independence of both nations as new sovereign states. This would leave the NKAO as an Azeri province since it was, de facto, within its borders even though it was largely controlled by an Armenian majority. In September 1991, the Armenian population of NK held a referendum by which they declared themselves an independent state outside Armenia and Azerbaijan, although control of the republic would be in the hands of ethnic Armenians. (De Waal, 2019)

With the advent of the dissolution of the Soviet Union following the failed coup d'état and Gorbachev's resignation on December 25, 1991, Soviet troops withdrew from Karabakh. This power vacuum led to a chaotic situation in which ethnic hatred, accumulated tensions and the rush to take control of terrain and military equipment by both nations involved was the breeding ground for the start of the conflict on a larger scale. At this point, Armenia had a great advantage: while Azerbaijan had remained militarily linked to the Soviet troops, Armenia had had two years to organize and arm the Karabakh Armenian groups, while Armenians remained a majority population in the region, especially after a large part of the Azeri population fled for fear of reprisals. (Coyle, 2021)

The development of the war in 1992 consisted of small skirmishes in which Armenian forces, joined by former Soviet fighters previously stationed in NK and guerrillas of the newly declared Artsakh republic were seizing and securing villages. The objective was to conquer Stepanakert as soon as possible, for which it was necessary to control the airport near Kholaji, a village close to the capital. At that time, the sense of victory and resentment over the pogroms in Azerbaijan gave way to the largest recorded massacre of the war, where Armenian troops killed 485 Azeri civilians fleeing in retreat. This gave the Armenian forces an advantageous position to bombard Stepanakert and Shusha, increasing the number of Azeri refugees. In turn, Lachin, a strategic town linking Armenia and Arstaj by a land corridor, was conquered, facilitating the access of vehicles and armaments to the interior of the region. (De Waal, 2019) (Steber, 2022) From this point on, the war was lost for the Azerbaijani side. Most of the troops fled along with the inhabitants of the cities as the Armenians continued to advance. By the end of 1993, it was estimated that 10-15% of Azerbaijan's population had been

displaced (about 900,000 people) and Armenia counted 360,000 Armenian refugees arriving from Azeri territories. (Atkinson, 1995)

On May 12, 1994 an armistice was signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group with Russia, the United States and France as co-chairs. The dialogue was carried out previously and through the Bishkek Protocol and although it ended the war as such, it did not resolve the conflict at all, which has remained frozen ever since. The result of these agreements was the maintenance of the facto independence of the Republic of Arstaj, although it was not recognized internationally. (Özkan, 2008)

4.3.2 Russian foreign policy reaction

As noted, the Nagorno-Karabakh war broke out after decades of ethnic tension, thanks to the weakening of Soviet control over the socialist republics of the Caucasus. Therefore, as the first conflict outside the borders of the new Russian Federation and at a time of deep political and economic crisis it . Even so, the USSR was neither defeated nor captured by its enemies. The communist leadership became the leadership of the reborn Russian state and its geopolitical vision did not change in this process. In 1992, the Minister of Economy Shelov-Kovedyaye assured that "Russia must remain the leader of stability and military security on the entire territory of the former USSR". This situation introduced a new fear in the Russian elites, as their borders were considerably reduced and they were surrounded by new independent states, many of which, although still economically and politically dependent on Russia, had opened a new path of nationalism that could be exploited by other powers, especially the United States. This perspective gave the Russian Federation a concern about the control of space. (Sherr, 2017)

The Nagorno Karabakh war, therefore, occurred at a time of uncertainty and concern about the new reconfiguration of the post-Soviet republics. But at the same time, Boris Yeltsin's executive found itself unable to manage Russia's internal and external problems, so its first stance was inaction. Wait to see where the conflict was headed and once the balance was tipped to a particular side, try to stabilize it from there. (Steber, 2022) The complex status-quo of the context showed a number of characteristics that gave a clue that the conflict would not have a quick solution: homogeneous societies, more focused on establishing strategic positions vis-à-vis each other rather than building civil societies or institutions that could approach the West. In this light, Yeltsin understood that if the conflict did not escalate, Russia would be the greatest beneficiary, as both actors would have to continue to rely on it to manage the conflict and their nations as such. (Özkan, 2008)

Still, while Russia was interested in observing the conflict without tipping the balance, it was also mindful that it would have to be part of the diplomatic process in order not to lose effective control of a strategic region. In September 1991 it went to NK with a cease-fire initiative followed by elections in the territory. But the two sides did not trust each other sufficiently and cross accusations over various incidents and pogroms made a rapprochement impossible. (M. Hakan Yavuz and Gunter, 2022)

From 1993, the war began to favor Armenia. On the one hand, it is known that there were several key shipments of tanks, combat vehicles and long-range artillery into Armenian territory from former Soviet military bases on Georgian territory to Armenian territory. Some investigations seem to indicate that a much larger quantity was shipped than was acknowledged at the time by Russia, which could indicate a veiled aid to the conflict. (SIPRI, 1998) In 1994, with the end of the war in sight and Armenia's victory on the table, Russia together with the newly formed Minsk Group, managed to define a cease-fire through the aforementioned Bishkek process. Russia was appointed as permanent chairman in 1996 and although the US and France entered as co-chairs in the following years, this was a great victory for the Federation. Russia thus achieved its goals of stabilizing the region without having to commit itself to either of the two contenders. The international community was pleased with the Federation's non-belligerent reaction, which served as a sign of the change of direction that the state born from the ashes of the Soviet Union was to adopt in its foreign policy. Boris Yeltsin created an image of a hero of democracy by resolving the possibility of a regional war and surviving the pro-Soviet coup d'état of 1993. (Cornell, 2017) (Coyle, 2019)

His chairmanship of the Minsk Group would also allow him to monitor and control the actions taken once the war was over, knowing that this would not imply the end of the conflict. At this point, Russia's foreign policy focused on a passive strategy that, regardless of the outcome of the conflict, would allow it to save its status as a key player in the region and, at the same time, maintain Armenia as a strategic ally. The 1995 and 1997 treaty on the establishment of stable troops on Armenian soil would allow it to continue to have a presence on the ground, while initiating a commercial rapprochement with Azerbaijan who was at a record low after the defeat. (Sherr, 2017)

Admittedly, this pragmatism could not be interpreted as defensive realism, at least in terms of a search for balance with any of the countries involved, much less with the republic of Asrtaj. But the asset of regional control and protection of a space considered strategic for its national security, allowed it to maintain unparalleled power throughout the South Caucasus in the face of a future Western rapprochement and to maintain its status as the first force in the post-Soviet region between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea.

4.3.3 Second Nagorno Karabaj War (2020)

After the 1994 armistice and its subsequent confirmation in 1995, the conflict did not reach a solution. The main problem was that although the newly independent Republic of Artsakh had found a de facto autonomous status superior to the one it had maintained during its time as an Autonomous Oblast, neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan saw this solution as a way of resolution. Armenia even raised the possibility of effectively leaving the Azeri territories occupied during the war, but demanded the right of the citizens of Artsakh to decide their future status, knowing that the inhabitants were Armenians who would support, independent or not, the country. Even so, the new republic was still not officially recognized by Armenia. (Boban and Blažević, 2022) From the Azeri prism, NK independence was an impossible premise. In the first years after the war, a series of measures were hinted at that would give unparalleled autonomy to the territory of Azerbaijan, but always with the inclusion of the region within the Azeri borders.

The accession of President Ilham Aliyev to the Azeri executive in 2003 intensified the Azerbaijani position on Artsakh. He withdrew any possibility of agreement until Armenia withdrew its troops from the disputed territory. In response, Armenia (ruled at the time by Robert Kocharian, who had been de facto president of the Artsakh republic until 1997) was presented with two options: recognize NK as an independent state or accept an uncontested union between Artsakh and Armenia. This became an immovable position on both sides, both of which had strong support from the citizenry of each nation. (Sagramoso, 2020) Seeing that the bilateral meetings were not progressing towards any beneficial position, the Minsk group organized the 'Prague process', a series of official meetings between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan under the control of the three members of the Minsk Group OSCE group. (Cornell, 2017)

In 2009 they established six basic points called “Basic Principals” for the pacification of the conflict. These objectives consisted of returning the territories occupied beyond Artsakh in the war to Azerbaijan, establishment of a status that would ensure Artsakh's self-governance and security, creation of a corridor between Armenia and NK as well as the right of all persons displaced during the war to return to their homes. Regarding the future of the region, it was proposed to establish a peacekeeping operation controlled by the OSCE until a 'legally binding expression of will' to define the status of the independent republic. (OSCE, 2009)

During the following years there were no major advances. The Basic Principles again clashed directly with the demands of Armenia and Azerbaijan, especially the former, since the question of

independence remained up in the air while it would mean losing much of the territory gained during the war. Meanwhile, Russia increased relations with both countries in different matters between 2010 and 2014. As noted in the previous point, Armenia and Russia increased their bilateral pacts related to defense and modernization of military technology while it established with Azerbaijan succulent deals on arms sales and diversification of oil and gas. (Sherr, 2017)

The first major escalation towards the second war occurred in 2016, where after a few months of breaking the line of contact with small skirmishes from one side and the other testing the adversary's response, a 4-day military operation was unleashed on a large part of the border. 64 people died between April 1 and 5, days in which Azerbaijan demonstrated not only a strategy that allowed to defeat the Armenian defense in the north and south, but also deployed a superior technology than Armenia possessed. After the cease-fire, the tables were turned. Azerbaijan managed to regain some villages near the border and demonstrated its ability to fight on equal terms with Armenia. (Boban and Blažević, 2023) (Coyle, 2021)

Following this escalation after 22 years of tension, both parties were left waiting for a new dispute. This led to a large number of military exercises on the line of contact, both individually and with other forces in the region, mainly Armenia with Russian troops and Azerbaijan with Turkish troops. Nevertheless, the second Nagorno Karabakh war would start on September, 27 of 2020.

The war lasted 44 days (an appellation that nominated the name of it as 'the 44-day war') in which Azerbaijan again defeated Armenia on all fronts. The tables were completely turned since the war in the 1990s. This time, a trained independent military corps of other regional powers, albeit well trained by Turkey, overwhelmed all Armenian defenses and expectations. While Armenia traded an average of \$4 billion worth of armaments with Russia in the previous years, Azerbaijan is estimated to have done the same with Israel, Turkey and Russia, but with a value of \$24 billion between 2008 and 2018. (M. Hakan Yavuz and Gunter, 2022)

On the other hand, Armenian armament, artillery and defense systems came almost exclusively from Russia, much of it being modernized Soviet equipment whereas, if the war dragged on, they knew they would have to wait for the arrival of Russian troops to be able to offer a matched fight. On the other hand, Azerbaijan had a superior tactical and technological advantage thanks to a diversification of its purchases (Israel, Russia and Turkey mainly) and based its strategy on satellite detection systems, unmanned aircraft and drones. A technology that was far from the conventional artillery that Armenia used in response (Erickson, 2021) The military capabilities of each country also differed greatly. In 2019, Azerbaijan had an estimated 56,000 infantry, 2,500 in the navy and 8,500 in the air

force. Meanwhile, Armenia had 45,000 active soldiers of which 3,000 were from the aviation sector. (ibid.)

On November 9, an armistice was signed at Russia's urging to stop the war. Both sides signed without many tribulations but for different reasons. Azerbaijan, de facto, regained three of the seven provinces it lost in the first Karabakh war, including the city of Shusha, of important symbolic value after its fall in 1994. It also demonstrated its superior military capability and warned Armenia of what could happen if a full-scale war were to be repeated. On the other hand, Armenia feared that the Azeri victory would give them the idea to continue their assault as far as Stepanakert and close the Lachin corridor linking the republic to Armenian soil. Moreover, their only regional ally, Russia, did not come to their aid as they had hoped as they were members of the OSTC, so they were helpless in the face of a more powerful enemy with more allies. (Coyle, 2021) It is estimated that between 6500 and 7000 soldiers were killed in this operation, half of them Azeris and about 2800 Armenians and there were about 90,000 internally displaced persons, overwhelmingly Armenians who fled the Arstakh republic. (Karlinsky and Torrisi, 2023)

4.3.4 Russian foreign policy answer

As noted in section 5.1, Putin's arrival in the Kremlin marked a qualitative leap in the strategic approach to the region. With a progressive dissatisfaction with the promise of the West, the ruler began to embrace the geopolitical pragmatism that the Russian Euro-Assianist current had presented as a new road map for Russian affairs abroad. This thinking, emphasized by intellectuals such as Dugin, had a great impact on the mentality of subsequent governments. (Lewis, 2018) This paradigm shift made Boris Yeltsin rethink his position on Nagorno-Karabakh. Control of the region was indeed fundamental for Russian security, but it was not enough to secure a strategic position, since other regional players such as Iran or Turkey were achieving results, but it had to be established as a seamless power. Once Azerbaijan left the CSTO in 1999, the big question regarding the future of the conflict was whether a new attack on Armenia's de facto sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh could be categorized as an attack on its territory, since under that premise, Russia would have to be forced to defend its ally. This, as expected, was not the case. Russia's response was swift in terms of diplomatic cease-fire work, but it brazenly ignored Armenia's cries for help during Azerbaijan's unstoppable advance. (Boban and Blažević, 2023) Russia claimed that Artsakh, not having been recognized, does not count as a de facto Armenian territory, so the OSCT pact has no connection with the current situation. This strategy, while saving Russia a lot of trouble, has led to a very deep rift with a large part of the Armenian population. (ibid.)

Also, all these talks were sponsored by the OSCE Minsk group. Here it should be noted that while France and the USA, two states with a powerful international presence and both with a considerable Armenian diaspora, are co-chairmen for the peace processes in NK. Both have geopolitical interests in the Caucasus in the field of energy transport to Europe and in the strategic one, hence NATO's early approach towards Georgia. And even with this, Russia has been the one who has managed, individually and in isolation, to propose and make sign the ceasefire all Nagorno Karabakh and the line of contact. This is a powerful message to its European and American 'partners' as well as to all the actors involved. Russia is the only one within the Minsk Group that has real power and influence to significantly affect regional diplomacy. (Özşahi and Cenap, 2023)

There were three major changes in Caucasus-oriented policies. First, a re-approach to Azerbaijan. Although Azerbaijan had moved away politically from Russian precepts to rely on Turkey as an ally in the war, both in alliances and in arms purchases and the use of pipelines to extend its market to Europe as a strategy to maintain its independence, Russia did not punish this rapprochement as it might have done with Georgia in 2008. (Roberts, 2018) After the war, the armistice established by Russia without the presence of France and the United States in the agreement, allowed the provision of almost 2000 and 90 armed vehicles peacekeeping troops in the territories of Nagorno Karabakh. This was another tactical victory for the Russian Federation, which will now de facto control the management of the process from within while securing the Lachin corridor, so that Armenia will not lose its land connection with the Arstakh Republic. (Voskanyan, 2022)

The second point is to maintain the client network it has built up with Azerbaijan and Armenia. Regardless of the outcome of the conflict, Armenia will continue to need the vital support provided by Russia, especially in view of the great differences created in the last decade between Azerbaijan's military capacity and its own. Therefore, Russia had nothing to lose from an Armenian defeat in Nagorno Karabakh, as long as this did not imply an Azeri advance on Armenian territory. And while Azerbaijan has adopted Turkey as its regional security link, Russia's approval of its recovery of lost territory prevents the war from affecting relations with the Muslim country. (Steber, 2022)

Finally, this Russian advantage in achieving a quick armistice is a hard blow to the premises of Western institutions, which did little or nothing to stop a war that had been brewing for a long time in front of everyone. Russia has used this as a way of generating mistrust in territories with frozen conflicts or ethnic wars, where the human rights that Europe boasts of disappear when the supply of arms and energy continues unchanged. (M. Hakan Yavuz and Gunter, 2022)

Ultimately, Russia's foreign policy response to the challenge of the Second Nagorno Karabakh War was simply neutrality. This position does not imply disengagement by any stretch of the imagination,

but it seems that Russia has found a very cheap option to maintain effective strategic military control in the region, while at the same time not jeopardizing its bilateral relations with other regional actors or losing diplomatic prestige. As long as the war does not cross Armenia's borders and endanger Russian military bases in the area (which will not happen thanks to the Mutual Defense Treaty), Nagorno Karabakh can be for Azerbaijan, nothing will change for Russia.

5. Conclusion

This project sought to answer the question *how has the Russian Federation's foreign policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict changed and for what reasons?* After the arguments presented and the framework shown, a clear answer to this question can be found.

Russia, at the time, was surprised by its own inertia. After the fall of the Soviet Union, dozens of conflicts born of national tensions and ethnic problems that Bolshevik policies had at best frozen and at worst exalted, exploded in its zone of influence. Nagorno Karabakh was one of the harshest, both for its rawness and for the early nature of its outbreak. Initially, Boris Yeltsin's objective was to maintain a timid foreign policy, in which the goal was not the resolution of the conflict, but to restore stability to the region. Faced with the alternative of sending troops and taking control of the conflict, it was decided to wait to observe how the war would develop. When the outcome, neither positive nor negative for Russia, simply an outcome, came, they adapted to it, called for a cease-fire and left the status quo as it was at the time. The defensive balance was not against any of the South Caucasus regions, which were not a problem for Russian security, but to maintain balance and control on a key border for their national interests.

Once the foundations of what would be the limits of the conflict for the next two decades were laid, Russia could begin to prepare a more consolidated strategy as to what to do with the territory. Armenia became Russia's powder keg, a state without close allies, surrounded by its two bitter enemies, totally dependent on Russia for defense and economy. Thanks to its multiple military treaties, Russia can dispose of a considerable number of troops in a crucial space not only for Russia's defense, but also to control insurgent movements in Georgia, to control the border with Turkey and Iran and to act as a firewall between the Caspian Sea connection and Europe.

For its part, Azerbaijan became a high-caliber trading partner. The constant purchase of arms, one of the most profitable sectors next to energy, keeps Russian elites satisfied, one of the reasons why

Azerbaijan can maintain close contact with the West without posing, for the time being, a major problem for Russia. Energy diversification is also a key factor, allowing the Russian Federation to buy at a reduced price, which it can recoup by selling it on the European market. A good relationship with Azerbaijan also guarantees stability in the bilateral relationship with Turkey, a regional player with increasing weight with which it fights in Syria and Libya.

Another major motive behind this policy of minimal intervention but playing both sides lies in the fact that Russia is not interested in a lasting resolution of the conflict, if at all. By keeping both nations focused on fighting each other, it is guaranteed undisputed control of the processes involved in this war. Russia has diplomatic control over the skirmishes and wars that have occurred and those that may occur, but acting as a neutral judge is how it ensures that the status quo of the territory remains under its dominance. An economic dominance on the other hand, since in the meantime, it sells weaponry and defense systems to both sides of the board.

Thus, it could be said that while the reasons why Russia has acted with enormous calm towards the conflict have varied over time, its foreign policy has not undergone a considerable change, at least in the practical part of it.

Using the premise of defensive neorealism and neoclassical realism, Russia has not approached Nagorno Karabakh as a risk to its security or as a challenge to its hegemony in the Caucasus, but through this war has been able to exercise a foreign policy of balance towards other actors, especially Turkey as the main regional rival and the United States as Western interference. The destabilization of Nagorno Karabakh is Putin's tool to continue controlling the future of Armenia and Azerbaijan. And thanks to this, their future, it seems impossible to trace without the Russian presence guiding from the north.

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