

Russia is withdrawing its forces from Nagorno-Karabakh

Krzysztof Strachota, Andrzej Wilk

On 17 April, the Russian president's press secretary Dmitry Peskov confirmed that Russia has begun the complete withdrawal of its peace-keeping contingent from Nagorno-Karabakh (now part of the territory of Azerbaijan, but which until September 2023 was the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic). This represents the formalisation of the decisions taken by the 'top echelons of power' of Russia and Azerbaijan.

The Russian contingent had been stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh on the basis of a trilateral ceasefire agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, which was signed on 10 November 2020 and ended the Second Karabakh War. Its responsibilities included enforcing the agreement as regards the transfer to Azerbaijani troops of territories which had thus far been controlled by the Armenian separatists, and ensuring the security of the demarcation line and protecting Armenian civilians. In its peak period it comprised around 2000 soldiers. In line with its mandate, its presence there was planned to last five years. After the defeat of Armenian forces on 19–20 September 2023, which was followed by the flight of the entire Armenian population from Nagorno-Karabakh and the self-dissolution of the separatist republic, the contingent's activities were limited to taking over Armenian military equipment (which – according to unconfirmed reports – was then transferred to Russia) and protecting several Armenian historical monuments.

Commentary

- The introduction of the Russian contingent to Nagorno-Karabakh (that is to the internationally recognised territory of Azerbaijan) in 2020 was an undoubted success for Moscow following the defeat of Armenian troops in the Second Karabakh War. The Kremlin managed to achieve this despite the weakening of its strongest instrument in the region, namely the Karabakh Armenians, and Baku's opposition at the time to Russia's military presence in the conflict region. Russia's role as a guarantor of the ceasefire, which involved deploying its military contingent, corroborated its still strong position in the region and limited the consequences of Azerbaijan's success. However, Baku's swift seizure of the whole of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, and its depopulation – which the Russian troops passively witnessed – showed that Moscow either has no political will or is unable to continue bearing the cost of protecting the Armenians. The new reality saw an aggravation of the crisis in the relations between Russia and Armenia. The withdrawal from Nagorno-Karabakh of the troops, whose influence on real politics was insignificant, marks a symbolic end to three decades of Russia's policy in the region, which was based on supporting and playing off Armenians and Armenia against Azerbaijan.

- The strategy's revision does not necessarily equate to Moscow abandoning its ambitions to maintain and boost its influence. At present it is focused on Azerbaijan, which has dominated the region. Russia is effectively supporting Baku's pressure on Armenia, and their shared goal is to eliminate the West from the peace process between these two countries (and *de facto* from regional politics), and to force Armenia to open the so-called Zangezur corridor, which would run via its territory. This corridor would separate the Armenian state from Iran and link Azerbaijan to its exclave in Nakhichevan. This effectively extraterritorial corridor would be protected and supervised by Russia. From Baku's point of view, the contingent's withdrawal is a success as it politically seals its military victories in Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, however, Azerbaijan still intends to seek Russia's support for, or at least approval of, its efforts to obtain favourable political solutions in its conflict with Armenia. In this context, the removal of the contingent is an element of the Russian-Azerbaijani relationship as it takes its new form, as well as a manifestation of mutual confidence-building (the bilateral talks were confidential).
- The withdrawal of the Russian contingent from Nagorno-Karabakh does not introduce any major modifications to Russia's potential and military involvement in the South Caucasus. Its military presence in Nagorno-Karabakh relied on motorised sub-units intended for peace-keeping missions (with no heavy equipment), and did not evolve into attempts to locate a permanent military base there. Two military bases in Georgia (the 4th Guards Military Base in South Ossetia and the 7th Military Base in Abkhazia), which are equivalent to mechanised brigades, and the 102nd Military Base in Armenia, which has been reinforced with an additional air force and air defence component, continue to form the backbone of Russian troops in the region. However, due to mounting tension in the relationship between Moscow and Yerevan, maintaining its military presence in Armenia (at least according to the principles applied so far) may become one of the most important challenges for Russia in its policy towards the region. In this context, it is unlikely that a potential Russian contingent in the Zangezur corridor could gain any real military significance.