

## Karabakh: a peacekeepers' base or the keys to the South Caucasus?

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Russia has withdrawn the RPC – its “peacekeeping contingent” from Nagorno-Karabakh. This is a 2000-man-strong grouping armed with small arms and light armored vehicles. At the same time, there is unconfirmed information that a contingent of 500 Russian military personnel will remain in Nagorno-Karabakh at least until the fall of 2025. If the information is confirmed, one should assume that the remaining unit will perform a purely symbolic function of “face-saving” for Moscow, which abandoned its commitments following the results of the “November 9, 2020 Agreement” orchestrated by the same Moscow.

Anyway, such a decision hardly changes the essence of this high-profile event, which is nothing more than the next step in Russia's systematic abandonment of its “*zone of historical responsibility*”.

In their comments, the official representatives of the Russian authorities, as expected, avoid interpreting the RPC's withdrawal within the logics of Moscow's global retreat from its positions and, moreover, do not emphasize the historical context of the happening. To varying degrees, the Russian expert circles recognize the fact of a large-scale geopolitical failure in the South Caucasus, but try to explain it in terms of pressure from the Western coalition and regional actors. But not the miscalculations of the Russian diplomacy and other agencies responsible for the implementation of country's foreign policy.

In general, the attempt is being made to justify the failure of Moscow's “Karabakh policy”, which has slipped into a grander version of the notorious Operation “Ring” of 1991, either with reference to “*the Armenian authorities' collusion with Western actors*” or with reference to the existential necessity of sacrificing “*one military base*” in order to save “*something more valuable*” in Ukraine and the future of Russia itself. Meanwhile, who, if not the author of this formulation, a known Russian orientalist Mr. Satanovsky, knows that in the historical context we are talking not about “*a base*”, but about the keys that some three centuries ago were handed over to the Russian autocrats, by the Karabakh princes (meliks) and clergy who, thus opening the door to the South Caucasus for Russia. These are the very “keys” that Moscow, violating sacred symbols and ignoring the manifesto of its own historical mission as the “Third Rome” called to protect small Christian nations, is calmly and unrepentantly handing over to those who are ready to fight for the South Caucasus

All is left is to see who is going to get the South Caucasian inheritance of the “Russian statehood”. The Turkish-Israeli “*military-political consortium*” under British patronage or to the resurgent “*Iranian imperialism*”, from which the region was once taken away because of its failure? Could it be that Tehran, on the threshold of “hot events” on the territory of Azerbaijan, asked Moscow to leave in order not to fall under its blow? Or perhaps Moscow's priority is still the formula “*if not ours, then nobody else's*”, considering the awaited bloody and destructive rivalry between the contenders for the South Caucasus? And afterwards, as they put it, the situation will tell what to do?

Is that what another, no less authoritative, Russian political scientist, a leading research fellow of the Institute for International Studies at MGIMO Sergei Markedonov is alluding to,

arguing in the context of the events that *“any withdrawal is not a condemnation, but retreat is a completely legitimate way not only of military affairs, but also of “great geopolitics”, and that “the withdrawal of the Russian peacekeeping contingent from NK is not the end of history, if we assess it calmly and rationally”?*

One can only guess who Mr. Markedonov is calling not to believe in the *“end of history”* and to assess *“calmly and rationally”*. The Russian power, which may one day return to the South Caucasus, or the Armenian people, which will face new challenges and struggles.

And yet, an important question remains: has Moscow eventually gained a free hand in relations with Azerbaijan by leaving Nagorno Karabakh? Will it establish qualitatively new relations with Yerevan, or will it still insist on the necessity of implementing the trilateral agreements of 2020-2022, including the realization of the so-called *“Zangezur Corridor”*?