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***Agent and Structure:***  
**A Neoclassical Realist Approach to the Second Karabakh War**

CEERES Master's Thesis

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## **Abstract**

This thesis aims to explain the *timing* of the Second Karabakh War. More specifically, this study examines why Azerbaijan has decided to initiate a full-scale war in 2020. While the emerging literature on the Second Karabakh War has extensively focused on the causes at the systemic level, little attention has been assigned to the domestic motivations of this choice. By employing a mixed-method research design, which is theoretically guided by Neoclassical Realism, this research proposes a level-of-analysis examination of Azerbaijan's decision. After assessing the performance of variables at the systemic, domestic, and individual levels, this research advances that the decision to initiate war was primarily shaped by certain systemic opportunities — but was also strongly connected to Azerbaijan's internal dynamics. The research findings shed light on a topic that has not been explored in the specialized literature: the diversionary nature of the 44-Day War.

**Keywords:** Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, foreign policy, level-of-analysis, diversionary war.

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## **A note on terminology**

When studying ethnoterritorial conflict, naming can be a contentious and polarizing issue. In conflicts where identity and territorial disputes are at stake, the use of particular terms can reinforce different narratives and claims. Such names can carry political, historical, and cultural significance, as representatives of the conflicting parties' position. This is clearly evident in the Armenian-Azerbaijan dispute — a rivalry we will explore in depth in this research. Therefore, the criteria for the chosen terminology must be clarified.

The aim of this research is to explain the Azerbaijani decision to initiate a full-scale war in 2020. More specifically, I analyse the influence of external constraints and domestic dynamics on the timing of war. Given the context-specific focus of this study (i.e., Azerbaijan's foreign policy decision), I will adopt the terminology used by Azerbaijani state representatives. Therefore, I will use the term "Nagorno-Karabakh" (N-K) to refer to the region that has been at the centre of the conflict, and not "Artsakh", the Armenian term for the same enclave. The same reasoning applies for the city names: for instance, both "Shusha" and "Shushi" (respectively in Azeri and Armenian languages), are used to designate the same city in the N-K region. For this case, I will adopt the Azerbaijani nomenclature. Finally, the term "Azeri" and "Azerbaijani" will be used interchangeably for the purpose of qualifying matters related to this Transcaucasian country.

## Introduction

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*'We are not afraid of anyone. We are not intimidated by anyone. If we were afraid of someone, we would never have started the Second Karabakh War'<sup>1</sup>*

Ilham Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan,  
Shusha, November 08, 2022

Since 2020, the 8<sup>th</sup> of November is a public holiday in Azerbaijan. The festivity is known as 'Victory Day', or *Zəfər Günü*. The holiday celebrates the Azerbaijani victory in a brief, yet deadly war that shook the South Caucasus three years ago. On the second anniversary of 'Victory Day', Ilham Aliyev<sup>2</sup> directed a speech to Azerbaijani servicemen. On the occasion, the President reflected on their arduous victory and emphasized the importance of liberating Shusha<sup>3</sup> from Armenian occupation. Between the lines of the patriotic speech, one statement caught the attention of conflict analysts: a declaration that Azerbaijan started the Second Karabakh War. This would be the first time the Azeri leader openly acknowledged the country's role in initiating warfare.

Aliyev's speech illustrates the complexity of the Armenian-Azerbaijani rivalry: an ethnoterritorial dispute marked by deeply polarized narratives. At the centre of the rivalry lies the status of N-K, a mountainous enclave that is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan but has strong political and ethnic ties with Armenia. The dispute took shape in the late 1980s and evolved into a full-scale war after the Soviet Union's collapse. The First Karabakh War (1988-1994) ended in a stalemate: despite formally belonging to Azerbaijan, the N-K region (and several neighbouring districts) turned out to be *de facto* ruled by Armenian forces. Under the Minsk Group's framework, which is led by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), several attempts to negotiate a peace settlement were promoted. Yet, no compromise was achieved (Broers, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the event organized on the occasion of Victory Day in Shusha (2023). President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/57857>. Consulted on 02.03.23.

<sup>2</sup> Ilham Aliyev is the 4<sup>th</sup> President of Azerbaijan. Aliyev assumed the office in 2003.

<sup>3</sup> A historical city in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Shusha is considered to be Azerbaijan's cultural capital (Huseynli, 2023).

In the early 2000s, the deadlock seemed changeless. It is no surprise that external analysts often labelled the conflict as ‘frozen’: after all, a ceasefire was signed without a final resolution, and no other full-scale war had erupted. Armenians and Azerbaijanis, in sum, were said to coexist in a situation of *no war, no peace*.<sup>4</sup> Over time, however, it became clear that the dispute was far from ‘frozen’ on the ground. The conflict has, in fact, resulted in highly militarized borders, with constant and violent clashes between the sides. In the five years that preceded the 2020 War, for example, the International Crisis Group<sup>5</sup> reported over two hundred incidents involving Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the so-called ‘Line of Contact’ (LoC).

If the traditional ‘frozen’ terminology thus proves inadequate, how should we conceptualize the Armenian-Azerbaijani deadlock? Smetana and Ludvik (2018), for instance, propose a reconceptualization of a frozen conflict. The authors define it as a ‘protracted, post-war conflict process, characterized by the absence of stable peace between the opposing sides’ (Smetana & Ludvik, 2018: 4). In the authors’ perspective, the dispute over N-K is a particular (sub)type of international conflict, in which the disputed issue is determinant for the sides’ diplomatic relations. In this type of conflict, a potential for a renewed escalation exists, and the issue at stake is a mobilizing force in the domestic debate.

Another conceptualization that fits our case is the one advanced by Laurence Broers (2019), who defines the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute as an *enduring rivalry*. The term designates a ‘conflict between two states that lasts at least two decades and is punctuated by recursive episodes of violence’ (Broers, 2019:7). The expression brings attention to the (un)stable character of the dispute, despite changes in the regional and international arena. The confrontation is, in other words, a long-term antagonism, sustained by incompatible positions of two states.

In the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, such antagonism evolved into one of the longest and most critical conflicts in the South Caucasus. Considering the chronology of events and the duration of the deadlock, the eruption of a second inter-state war in 2020 was a milestone in such a prolonged dispute. The Second Karabakh War was launched in September 2020 and lasted for 44 days. As reported by de Waal (2021), the conflict

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<sup>4</sup> Özkan, B. (2008). Who Gains from the “No War No Peace” Situation? A Critical Analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict. *Geopolitics*, 13 (3), 572-599. DOI: [10.1080/14650040802203919](https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040802203919).

<sup>5</sup> International Crises Group (2023). The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Visual Explainer. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-visual-explainer>. Consulted on 02.03.23.

resulted in 8,000 casualties and led to the displacement of 30,000 individuals. In terms of military outcomes, the war presented Azerbaijan with an opportunity to change the geopolitical balance on the ground. Supported by external allies and high-technology weapons, Baku recaptured several territories in the N-K region. A Russian-mediated ceasefire was signed by the parties in November 2020, and solidified, unlike the 1994 agreement, a more favourable position for Azerbaijan. (de Waal, 2013).

Several dimensions of the Second Karabakh War may be the subject of scholarly analysis, such as the conditions that allowed for Azerbaijan's victory, the geopolitical outcomes of the conflict, or its domestic reverberations.<sup>6</sup> This study, however, aims to explain another relevant aspect of this conflict: the *timing* of war. The question of time has gained prominence in the study of International Relations (IR). Scholars associated with the so-called 'temporal turn' in IR acknowledge that 'time' can be considered to be a political phenomenon in itself. The first clarification is thus needed: Why do I consider the 'timing of war' as a relevant research problem in the N-K context?

The motivation for this study arose from empirical observation. I have decided to explore the timing of war because, from a material and rhetorical perspective, the conditions for this full-scale conflict seem to exist long before 2020. This argument is based on observations of the military, economic, and social dimensions in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. First, in the military realm, both countries have been engaged in an extensive military build-up for years. The militarization rankings published by the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC<sup>7</sup>) reveal that, since the mid-2000s, these states have occupied top positions as one of the most militarised countries in the world.

Secondly, from a purely economic perspective, Azerbaijan's advantage vis-à-vis Armenia could have enabled the country to direct resources to a full-scale war earlier. This advantage lies in the abundance of energy assets, which has driven economic growth in Azerbaijan since the early 2000s. This was evident in the oil boom years (2005-2007), in which Azerbaijan's annual GDP growth surpassed 25%<sup>8</sup>. Armenia's economy, in contrast, has not developed at the same pace: in the period 2008-2015, for

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<sup>6</sup> Even though these topics are not the particular focus of this study, I will briefly mention these elements in the following sections.

<sup>7</sup> BICC (2023). Global Militarisation Index. <https://gmi.bicc.de/publications>. Consulted on 03.03.23.

<sup>8</sup> The World Bank (2023). GDP growth (annual %) – Azerbaijan.

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=AZ>. Consulted on 05.08. 23.

example, Armenia's GDP per capita was around half of Azerbaijan's<sup>9</sup>. Besides, Armenia's energy sector has been marked by a high degree of insecurity. According to the International Energy Agency (2023), the country has heavily relied on imports to fulfil its energy needs — in particular, from Russia.

Third, from a sociopolitical perspective, the unresolved status of Karabakh continued to be a point of contention throughout the decades, leading to deeply antagonistic positions in both societies. The significant human losses faced by the two sides have solidified a sense of collective trauma, which persisted since the 1994 ceasefire agreement. Particular episodes of violent clashes (e.g., the Sumgait pogrom and the Khojaly massacre) became key images in national narratives, having sustained the perceptions of enmity. Therefore, from a rhetorical and ideational point of view, the conditions for another war also seemed long-set (Trupia. 2017).

Besides the three dimensions above, another empirical observation contributed to my interest in the timing of the 44-Day War: the short escalation that occurred in April 2016. The so-called 'Four-Day War' consisted of a series of brief, yet violent clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which resulted in the highest level of fatalities since the First Karabakh War (Shiriyev, 2017). The short conflict ended with a ceasefire agreement and was followed by a resumption of formal negotiations. The April clashes demonstrated the tactical advantages of Azerbaijan vis-à-vis Armenia, enabling the former to change the LoC in its favour. This, once again, raises the question as to *why* a full-scale military operation was not pursued in 2016 but rather a few years later.

Based on the observations above, I advance that the permissive conditions for the Second Karabakh War were long set, and consisted of high-level militarization, wealth disparity, and polarized societies. Under such circumstances, the eruption of the conflict *per se* may not be a puzzling phenomenon. However, the reasons why Azerbaijan decided to launch a full-scale offensive in 2020 have yet to be further assessed. This means, in other words, that the conditions discussed above may be necessary, but not sufficient to explain the start of the war.

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<sup>9</sup> The World Bank (2023). GDP per capita (current US\$) – Armenia, Azerbaijan. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=AM-AZ>. Consulted on 05.08.23.

The existing works on the Second Karabakh War have touched upon several aspects of the conflict, but the time factor has received relatively less attention. As I will discuss in the relevant chapter, the emerging literature has been marked by three major gaps: a narrow period of analysis, an overemphasis on external actors, and a relative inattention to Azerbaijan's domestic landscape. We will return to the gaps in the literature review later. For now, I propose that considering the timing of war is a task that requires a multi-dimensional approach, and one that should go beyond the description of events in 2020.

Aiming to contribute to this incipient literature, this study examines Azerbaijan's decision to launch war under a level-of-analysis approach. Rather than fixating on a single level (e.g., the international system), this research aims to highlight the influence of variables at the systemic, national, and individual levels on Aliyev's decision to start the conflict. I claim that such a decision was not only a result of favourable international conditions but was ultimately influenced by domestic and individual factors. To study the interplay between external and internal forces, I mobilize the theoretical assumptions of Neoclassical Realism, to which I will return later in this thesis.

Here, the study focus must also be clear. As the research puzzle concerns the decision to launch a war, I have, to a certain extent, assigned a greater focus to Azerbaijan. This does not mean this work disregards Armenia and other external actors (i.e., Russia and Turkey). They are indeed crucial elements for our system-level analysis. Nevertheless, I also intend to investigate the domestic reasons that led the Azerbaijani leadership to see a particular window of opportunity for a military operation in 2020. For this reason, a more context-specific approach is required.

### *Research Questions*

Given the empirical puzzle and the gap found in the specialized literature, the research questions can be summarized as follows:

- **Question 1:** Why did Azerbaijan decide to initiate a military operation in 2020?
  - *Subquestion:* To what extent do the circumstances in 2020 differ from the conditions in 2016?
- **Question 2:** How did systemic (macro), domestic (middle), and individual (micro) variables influence the outbreak of the Second Karabakh War?

- *Subquestion:* How is leadership rhetoric variation linked to the timing of war?

Even though my research interest is based on empirical observations of certain external and domestic factors, I have chosen a research design that applies a hypothetico-deductive approach. This means that I will formulate hypotheses, based on theoretical assumptions, and test them through empirical observations. The hypotheses testing will be conducted through a mixed-methods research design, which relies on both qualitative and quantitative data. The theoretical framework that will guide my hypothesis formulation will also be clarified later in this study.

Having stated the research questions, we may now reflect on the importance of this study. I suggest that the relevance of this work lies in its contribution to a better understanding of a critical conflict in the South Caucasus. By examining different factors that influenced Azerbaijan's decision to go to war, this research provides a distinct interpretation of the complex dynamics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani rivalry. Besides adding a new perspective to the existing body of literature, this analysis may provide insights for policymakers engaged in conflict resolution.

This research is structured in six chapters. In the *first* chapter, I provide a brief contextual background of the N-K conflict. The chapter aims to explain the rivalry's historical context, covering the period from the late 1980s until the 1994 ceasefire agreement. This will be the most descriptive part of the research, as the parties' positions must be clear before we proceed with the empirical analysis. In the *second* chapter, I present the current state of studies on the Second Karabakh War. In this brief literature review, I will outline how scholars have explained the eruption of the conflict and highlight to what extent the existing arguments help us to understand the timing of the Azerbaijani military operation.

In the *third* chapter, I will introduce and develop the study's theoretical framework. This chapter is divided into three sections. First, I will introduce the broader field of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and present the dominant assumptions regarding the foreign policy behaviour of small states. Next, I will discuss the contributions of Neoclassical Realism and the reasons why this theory is more suitable for this multi-level analysis. In the third and final section, based on the discussed assumptions, I will derive the research hypotheses.

In chapter *four*, I present the research methodology. Based on the previous theoretical discussion, I will first define the research variables. As we shall see, in terms of methodology, this study adopts a single-country (or case study) approach, which is built upon a mixed-method research design. This design means that, to empirically analyse the collected data, quantitative and qualitative methods will be employed.

In chapter *five*, the research findings will be presented. This chapter consists of two major sections, in which mixed methods are used to analyse systemic and domestic-level variables. Through hypothesis testing, at the end of this chapter, I aim to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of two significant theses concerning the timing of the Second Karabakh War, namely: (i) when a state is faced with systemic constraints that severely limit their foreign policy options, the resort to initiating war is likelier, and (ii) higher levels of state military capabilities are positively associated with a war-prone foreign policy.

## **1. The Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict: A Contextual Background**

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To fully understand the conflict dynamics in N-K, it is necessary to examine its historical roots. It's important to bear in mind that the origins of the Armenian-Azerbaijani rivalry are subject to different interpretations among analysts and historians. The specialized literature, however, acknowledges that the dispute's modern features were largely shaped by events that occurred during the Soviet Union. For that reason, this chapter aims to provide, first, a brief overview of how the conflict in N-K evolved throughout Soviet history, and the conditions that led to the First Karabakh War. In this analysis, I will consider the historical context, key events, and policies that shaped the rivalry, with a particular focus on emerging nationalisms, the policies of the Soviet central government, and the impact of the Soviet state's dissolution.

### **1.1. Precedents of the First Karabakh War**

Identifying the precise origin of an interethnic dispute is a challenging task. In the South Caucasus, the relationships between different ethnic groups were influenced, especially in the 19th century, by broader patterns of imperial rule. In contrast to existing narratives, Thomas de Waal emphasizes that 'Armenians and Azerbaijanis have not always been enemies' (de Waal, 2010: 100). Under Persian rule (1502-1828), and to some extent, during the Russian Empire, their coexistence was marked by significant cultural and economic exchanges. Even though episodes of interethnic tensions did occur before the 20th century, those were not marked by persistent violence (Coene, 2010).

In this historical context, the mountainous region of Karabakh became a type of borderland, or a line of division. Once a semi-independent khanate, the province counted on an ethnic composition that encompassed both groups (i.e., Armenians and Azerbaijanis). However, starting from the 19th century, the demographic balance began to change in favour of Armenians due to events such as the Treaty of Turkmenchay<sup>10</sup> (1828) and subsequent Russian-Ottoman conflicts. As noted by Coene (2010: 145),

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<sup>10</sup> The Treaty of Turkmenchay was an agreement that marked the end of the war between Persia and the Russian Empire. Under this treaty, several territories in the South Caucasus came to be under Russian control (Nation, 2015).

these events led to a formalized Russian control over the region and the migration of many Azerbaijanis and other Muslim groups to Persia or the Ottoman Empire.

It should be noted that the demographic shift did not immediately trigger a conflict. In fact, the eruption of an ethnoterritorial dispute in Karabakh coincided with the emergence of Armenia and Azerbaijan as nation-states<sup>11</sup>. After the dissolution of the Russian Empire, in 1917, the newly formed republics became involved in frequent quarrels. These disputes were not only about the control of N-K but also over territories such as Zangezur and Nakhchivan (Coene, 2010). The brief independence of these republics hindered any definitive resolution: when the Red Army took over the Caucasus, in 1920, these regions' fate was left up to the Bolsheviks to decide. As a result, in the emerging Soviet system, N-K was transformed into an Autonomous Region (or *Oblast*) within Soviet Azerbaijan<sup>12</sup>, despite the majority Armenian population (de Waal, 2010).

Throughout Soviet history, Armenians have consistently asserted their claim over Karabakh, seeking to alter its status (i.e., from an Oblast affiliated to Azerbaijan SSR to an Oblast under Armenian jurisdiction). Beyond the claims in Yerevan, Karabakh Armenians also contested the situation from within the enclave. From the local perspective, the economic policies adopted by Azerbaijan seemed to neglect the Autonomous Region's needs. Also, a gradual increase of Azeris in N-K was perceived to be a deliberate policy adopted by Baku to change the local demographic balance. Despite efforts to draw Moscow's attention to the issue (e.g., local petitions for a change of the enclave's ownership), no concrete measures were implemented (Cornell, 2000).

The turning point in the dispute occurred in the late 1980s, after policies such as *glasnost* and *perestroika* were introduced. The former, in particular, presented Armenians with an opportunity to foster national mobilization. The Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast's (NKAO) local Soviet formalized its aspiration to join the

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<sup>11</sup> Following the collapse of the Russian Empire, several external powers became involved in Caucasian affairs (e.g., the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain). As emphasized by Saparov (2015:122), this engagement allowed the emerging republics to negotiate cooperation in return for support in their territorial demands.

<sup>12</sup> As explained by Cornell (2000), the Soviet leadership initially considered assigning the Karabakh region to Soviet Armenia, but this decision was later reversed. Cornell argues that this change was influenced by the Soviet Union's growing relationship with Turkey, which supported the allocation of Karabakh to Azerbaijan. Additionally, the author advances that Joseph Stalin has deliberately chosen to allocate Karabakh to Azerbaijan to maintain further divisions in the South Caucasus.

Armenian SSR in 1988. The formal statement was issued in response to prior public demonstrations in Stepanakert (the largest city in the N-K region), where civilians had called for the enclave's unification with Armenia. The protests intensified rapidly, leading to a strong reaction from the Azerbaijani minority in the region (de Waal, 2013). It is worth noticing that the agitation between the two ethnic groups was not only restricted to the Karabakh region but also erupted in more distant locations, such as Agdam, Askeran, and Sumgait<sup>13</sup>, an industrial suburb near Baku.

The emergence of the so-called 'Karabakh movement' would soon become a significant concern for Moscow. The Soviet leadership's response to the movement involved a multi-layered strategy, such as maintaining control by replacing local authorities and deploying the Soviet state army on the ground. Ohannes Geukjian qualifies such strategy as 'skilfully balanced between the two sides' (Geukjian, 2012: 147), meaning that Party leaders refrained from addressing the border issue while being mindful of Armenian claims. In the meantime, the politicization of ethnicity had significant consequences in Karabakh, leading to a large-scale influx of refugees<sup>14</sup>.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 posed new challenges to the dispute, as both Armenia and Azerbaijan sought to establish and secure their new borders. It is important to point out that Karabakh Armenians readily proclaimed N-K as an independent republic, even though the declaration was not recognized by the international community (Yemelianova & Broers, 2020). After independence, and without the supranational government that could regulate the situation, the escalation of hostilities reached a point of no return. The first full-scale war broke out in June 1992. De Waal (2010) suggests that geography and demography played a significant role in shaping the course of the First Karabakh War, ultimately resulting in the Armenian victory. The author states:

The Armenians' goal was to use their demographic majority inside Nagorny Karabakh itself to drive out the Azerbaijani population, make Karabakh a defensible fortress, and cut a road link to Armenia. [...] There were three main reasons for the eventual Armenian victory: the Armenians were a more effective fighting force, the Azerbaijanis were more disunited and disorganized, and the Armenians benefited more from erratic Russian assistance (de Waal, 2010: 117).

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<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed recapitulation of how the hostilities escalated, see Cornell (2000: 65-71).

<sup>14</sup> According to Broers and Yemelianova (2020), during the eighteen months that followed the NKAO unification statement, around 200,000 Azerbaijanis and 360,000 Armenians were forcibly displaced.

De Waal's mention of Russia's involvement should also be further clarified, as this external actor was influential in the course of events. In 1991, the newly elected Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, tried to advance a peace deal in N-K, without success. When the full-scale war started, in 1992, Russia manifested a more pro-Armenian position, which might be explained by personal affinities between both countries' defence ministers. Russia was also a key player in the ceasefire's mediation, signed between the parties in 1994 (de Waal, 2010).

According to a report presented by the Human Rights Watch, the death toll of the conflict is estimated to be over 25,000, besides resulting in more than a million displaced persons. The report emphasizes, in particular, the acute displacement of Azeris from N-K and its surroundings (Human Rights Watch, 1994). As argued by Broers (2015), the Armenian-Azerbaijani war, compared to other conflicts in the Caucasus, was unique in many ways. From the author's perspective, the wider scope of violence is one of such distinctive features. Besides the profound human cost, the N-K conflict is unique due to its very nature: the rivalry's structure demonstrates elements of both an interstate and interethnic conflict, which differentiates it from other disputes in the post-soviet space.

## **1.2. Position of the Conflicting Parties After 1994**

Following the ceasefire agreement, the former battle line turned out to be a *de facto* border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. By the end of the conflict, the Armenian forces came to be in control of several regions around N-K (Figure 1). Among these regions, the Lachin Corridor stands out due to its strategic significance, as it provides a direct land connection between the enclave and Armenia. Given that no final resolution was achieved, the negotiations over the status of N-K continued under the framework of the Minsk Group. The Group operates in the scope of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), being co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States (de Waal, 2013).

**Figure 1 - De Facto Borders After 1994**



*Note.* The map shows the area de facto controlled by Armenia after the 1994 ceasefire. The N-K region is presented in the brown colour, while the surrounding regions (also under Armenian control) are presented in orange. Source: *The Conversation* (2016). In: <https://theconversation.com/how-war-in-nagorno-karabakh-could-spread-and-become-a-major-problem-for-europe-57241>. Consulted on 04.03.23.

After the First Karabakh War, the conflicting parties' positions may be summarized as follows. On the one hand, Armenia emphasizes N-K's right to self-determination and supports the enclave's claims in peace negotiations. Although not recognizing the independence of the so-called Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, the country developed extensive political and economic ties with Stepanakert, therefore performing the role of a patron state. Armenia's patronage has also been visible in the security sector, where the goal of guaranteeing the enclave's survival is clearly stated (Miarka, 2022).

Azerbaijan, on the other hand, emphasizes the inviolability of its state borders. For Baku, any settlement that potentially threatens its sovereign rights over N-K is framed as unacceptable. Even more, its attempts to alter the status quo in the enclave are announced as a legitimate measure to end Armenia's occupation. This does not mean that autonomy solutions within Azeri jurisdiction have been discarded: in the 1996 Lisbon Summit, for instance, a settlement proposal sought to incorporate both the principles of self-determination and territorial integrity. However, no compromise was reached (Cornell, 2015).

Throughout the 1990s, the negotiations confirmed the complexity of the deadlock. Such discussions have happened under different formats and proposed diverse deals. One of the dominant models for conflict resolution was the above-mentioned ‘federal’ solution. Alternative proposals were also introduced over time and signalled the possibility of a territorial ‘swap’, meaning that N-K would be ceded to Armenia in exchange for the Zangezur Corridor<sup>15</sup>. Another model, the so-called ‘step-by-step’ approach, was presented in 1997. Under this model, the status of N-K itself would be discussed had a series of conditions been met (e.g., the withdrawal of troops and the return of refugees). Armenia objected to such initiatives, fearing that they would strengthen Azerbaijan's position over the enclave (Cornell, 2015).

It is also important to consider the domestic reverberations of the Karabakh issue, particularly after the 1994 ceasefire agreement. In both Armenia and Azerbaijan, the position regarding the status of N-K became a central feature of the political landscape, having a strong influence over power dynamics. As stated by Miarka (2021), the developments in N-K have been a determinant for the legitimacy of state leaders. As more recent events demonstrate, a more assertive policy towards Armenia has bolstered the popularity of Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev, while the Armenian losses in the LoC have increased pressure on Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan (Samadov, 2021).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the rivalry has not only been sustained by systemic and domestic-level factors, but also by individual perceptions about the conflict. As de Waal emphasizes, ‘to hear leaders on either side talk about the origins of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is to hear two narratives, each hermetically sealed from the other’ (de Waal, 2013: 140). It is noticeable that leaders from both sides frame N-K as an indissociable part of their nation’s historical memory, besides claiming ancestral ownership of the region.

The competing narratives in the early 1990s also showed the various sources of the ethnic groups’ grievances. From the Armenian perspective, the struggle over Karabakh became closely associated with the Armenian genocide’s memory, an atrocity committed by the Ottoman Empire in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Krzysztań, 2021). On the Azerbaijani side, and apart from the territorial integrity issue, resentment grew out of the belief that Armenians were favoured by Soviet policies (Ghazaryan & Huseynli,

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<sup>15</sup> The Zangezur Corridor is a land located in Armenia’s south, which connects mainland Azerbaijan with its exclave, Nakhichevan.

2022). As I will later consider, even though the discursive practices certainly changed over time, they continued to play a role in sustaining the stalemate.

## **2. Literature Review: The Causes of the Second Karabakh War**

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It perhaps goes without saying that while there is extensive literature on the 1992 War, the discussion on the causes of the 2020 conflict is still incipient. This chapter aims to present the current scholarly debate on the Second Karabakh War and to position this study within the broader literature. To do so, I conduct a review of works that touch upon the topic of *war causes* and seek to answer the question ‘Why has the war started in 2020?’. Considering that our research topic is a relatively recent event, this literature mapping covers scholarly works published between 2020 and 2023, mostly in English and Russian languages. Additionally, the process of selecting relevant works was carried out with the intention of including scholars from both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In the first section, I will present the major explanations for war occurrence, as well as the similarities and tensions between these arguments. This section is organized by a thematic approach, in which three major trends in the debate are highlighted, namely: i) the focus on the international context; ii) the emphasis on internal attributes; and iii) the attention to the leaders’ role. We must bear in mind that these categories are in no way exclusive. Some studies indeed proposed a multi-dimensional assessment of the conflict. As an example, we may point out the analysis of Ibrahimov and Oztarsu (2022), which briefly considers leadership attributes, domestic capabilities, and structural factors, and the work of Askerov and Ibadoghlu (2021), which also examines psychological factors and patriotism.

After presenting the main explanations for war occurrence, in the second section, I will critically examine the emerging literature. I advance that while the existing works touch upon several causes of the conflict, certain gaps require further examination, such as the domestic circumstances in Azerbaijan before the war, and the transformation of the Azerbaijani leadership perceptions. Based on the identified challenges, in the third and final section, I discuss how this research aims to contribute to the literature on the Second Karabakh War, as well as the specific study objectives.

## 2.1. The System-Level and the Likelihood of War

The dominant view in the literature emphasizes the international context's importance for the outbreak of the 2020 War. This level of analysis is traditionally the focus of those who aim to comprehend the eruption and outcomes of interstate conflicts and is usually adopted by realist traditions of thought (e.g., Waltz, 1959; Mearsheimer, 2001). In the literature on the 44-Day War, we can identify three major lines of argument that are connected to the international system. They focus, more specifically, on the issue of relative power, external allies, and the overall international community's permissiveness regarding the Azerbaijani offensive. I will now map these explanations in more detail.

The first group of scholars focuses on the strategic dimension, and the balance of power issue. These analysts (Bivainis, 2022; Wezeman et al., 2021; Ibrahimov & Oztarsu, 2022) propose that the conflict was a result of an increasing military build-up in the region, which has altered the relative power between Armenia and Azerbaijan in favour of the Azeris. By assessing the military expenditure and arms transfers to Armenia and Azerbaijan, Bivainis (2022) and Wezeman et al. (2021) advance that the regional security build-up was one of the major drivers of the 2020 escalation. Therefore, under this perspective, the Azerbaijani turn towards a more aggressive foreign policy can be considered a result of arms accumulation.

A second line of argument emphasises the role of external allies. Although there is no consensus on the exact importance of a particular external actor, a handful of works (Shumilov & Shumilov, 2022; Köse & Wakizaka, 2022; Kinik & Çelik, 2021; Jović-Lazić, 2021) stress the role of Russia and Turkey as facilitators of the Azerbaijani offensive. The prevailing assumption is that a window of opportunity for war arose out of strained relations between Russia and Armenia after the 2018 Velvet Revolution<sup>16</sup>, in parallel to a strengthening of the Turkish-Azerbaijani partnership.

A third line of explanation highlights the international community's passivity concerning the Karabakh conflict (Aliyev, 2021; Davtyan, 2023). The work of Davtyan (2023), for instance, explains the Azerbaijani offensive through the concept of *foreign policy learning*. In the author's argument, previous episodes of conflict escalation (e.g.,

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<sup>16</sup> The so-called Velvet Revolution was a series of mass movements that took place in Armenia in 2018, and that resulted in the resignation of the long-standing government of Serzh Sargsyan and the election of Nikol Pashinyan as Prime Minister of Armenia (Abrahamian & Shagoyan, 2018).

the 2016 clashes) led Azerbaijan to conclude that a military operation could be conducted without the fear of external retaliation. In a similar reasoning, Alexander Iskandaryan (2020) advances that ‘Azerbaijan chose the perfect timing for starting a war’ (Iskandaryan, 2020: 9) because key external actors had their attention diverted towards other matters. As an example, the analyst cites the presidential elections in the United States, the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fact that Russia had its own security concerns directed toward Ukraine and Belarus.

## 2.2. State-Level Factors

Even though most analyses depart from a geopolitical or systemic perspective, a group of scholars advance that the parties’ domestic landscape is accountable for the outbreak of war. The term "domestic landscape", of course, may encompass various sectors, including the military, the economy, politics, and society. One approach (Shengelia, 2022; Rubin, 2020) toward these factors is the comparison of Armenia and Azerbaijan’s state power in absolute terms. Such comparison reveals a growing asymmetry of power in Azerbaijan’s favour, which surpasses the neighbour in terms of demography, territorial size, and economic power. Regarding the latter, Rubin (2020) states that:

Armenia, the poorer of the two, did not have the resources to modernize its ground forces and air defences, and the war found it still largely equipped with legacy Soviet-era weapons, some obsolete. [...] Azerbaijan, by contrast, used its increased income from oil and gas exports to modernize some of its equipment, but mainly to invest in a growing fleet of Unmanned Air Vehicles (UAVs) and a force of precise tactical ballistic missiles (Rubin, 2020: 6).

Some analysts not only compared the countries’ capabilities in the few years that preceded the conflict but proposed a broader comparison between the First and the Second Karabakh Wars. The work of Cheterian (2022) is particularly worthy of note, as it demonstrates that Azerbaijan, in both historical periods, counted on superior military assets and technology. Therefore, from the author’s perspective, these indicators are not the most relevant for understanding the conflicts’ timing and outcomes. The scholar advances that the defining factor in the two N-K conflicts was the parties’ strategic advantage. The last is conceptualized as the ‘set of structural configurations that gives a

party to a conflict the possibility of concentrating forces' (Cheterian, 2022: 4). This includes variables such as the level of elite cohesion, power struggles, and regime type.

Another argument emphasizes that the conflict occurred due to the loss of trust between the conflicting parties. The work of Kurt and Tüysüzoglu (2022), for example, departs from a securitization perspective to explain the reescalation of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Even though the authors do not deny the role played by regional and systemic factors, their main argument is that successive deadlocks in peace negotiations paved the way for a military solution. It is important to bear in mind that the question of why the deadlock was sustained (and eventually intensified) is a matter of disagreements between analysts. Here, again, it is not unusual to find a strong polarization in the academic debate, with accusations that one side did not wish for a peaceful resolution.

One particular perspective that proposes a straightforward connection between state-level factors and the launching of war is the so-called 'diversionary war' theory (or *theories*, considering the diverse perspectives under this umbrella term). Here, the core assumption is that state leaders may purposely engage in external crises to redirect the national audience's attention to international affairs. By doing so, state leaders may also foster national cohesiveness: as advanced by Alrababa'h and Blaydes, 'by focusing public attention on a foreign enemy, the public overcomes internal divisions and becomes united against the foreign enemy' (Alrababa'h & Blaydes, 2021: 695).

It is interesting to observe that, in 2016, state-level factors (particularly, in Azerbaijan) were often mentioned as drivers of conflict escalation. The analyses of Anaïs Marin (2017) and Broers (2016), for instance, advance that the Four Day War had a diversionary purpose, which aimed at outshining the socio-economic challenges faced by the Azerbaijani society. Among such challenges, the scholars emphasize the decrease in Azerbaijan's state budget (caused by lower oil revenues), the devaluation of the national currency (the manat), and higher unemployment rates. Despite the precedent in 2016, this argument has not been mobilized to explain the launching of the 2020 War. Therefore, one of the contributions I expect to make to the incipient literature is evaluating whether the diversionary rationale also applies to the Second Karabakh War.

### **2.3. Whose Fault? Leadership Perceptions and War Occurrence**

At the individual level of analysis (i.e., leadership perceptions), one interpretation of war occurrence, often presented by Azerbaijani scholars, suggests that Aliyev's decision was a reaction to Armenia's discourses after the 2018 Velvet Revolution (Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2021; Lantsov, 2022. Babayev & Mahmudov, 2023). At this level, what is often debated are the miscalculations of Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan (Cornell, 2020), as well as the political and economic challenges faced by Armenia in the few years that preceded the war. Most of these analyses focus on the period between 2018 and 2020, thus covering the political and economic developments that followed the Velvet Revolution.

In this perspective, a change in Armenia's leadership, i.e., Pashinyan's rise to power, has led to a shift in the country's position at the negotiating table. Babayev and Mahmudov (2023) advance that such regime change has fomented nationalism and populism in Armenia, leading to more assertive claims over N-K. This, in turn, is said to have compelled Azerbaijan to pursue a military solution. The argument that a democratic transition in Armenia may be accountable for conflict escalation contrasts with a previously held belief that a greater level of democratization would open the path for conflict resolution (Özkan, 2008; Caspersen, 2012; Gasparyan, 2019).

Some Armenian scholars have also undertaken a critical evaluation of Pashinyan's foreign policy-making and its effects on conflict escalation. Nikoghosyan and Ter-Matevosyan (2022), for instance, recognize that Armenia's new regime stood out for its populist assertions, which deepened the geopolitical tensions between the two countries. In their view, however, Azerbaijan's decision to initiate war was not simply a reactionary response to the prime minister's stances. Instead, they suggest that Aliyev would have ultimately exploited Armenia's domestic instability while gathering external support.

While the analyses of Pashinyan's flaws exceed the critical views on Aliyev's position, a handful of works have concentrated on the latter. A discourse analysis conducted by Naira Sahakyan (2022), for instance, exemplifies how Ilham Aliyev has delineated a certain image of the enemy in his public speeches. The author points out three main components of the leader's statements between 2016 and 2020, namely: (i) the identification of Armenians as the first and foremost threat to Azerbaijanis; (ii) the

emphasis on the so-called ‘barbarism’ of Armenians; and (iii) the stress in an alleged superiority of Azerbaijan. The process of dehumanizing the Other, according to the author, can be considered a major factor behind war legitimization.

Besides the debate on the perceived provocations between the sides, some works (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022; Askerov & Ibadoghlu, 2022; Lantsov, 2022) associate the conflict timing with Aliyev’s leadership abilities *per se*. Yavuz and Gunter advance that Aliyev “bided his time wisely in order to shape Azerbaijani identity while preparing the military to restore the dignity and territorial integrity of the nation” (Yavuz & Gunter, 2022: 157). In their view, the leader had skilfully managed the expectations of regional powers, while acting on behalf of national dignity and state sovereignty.

We may therefore conclude that there is no consensus on how the countries’ leaderships may be associated with the conflict’s timing. It is clear, however, that a significant number of works have emphasized that Pashinyan’s position provided a stimulus for Azerbaijan’s launching of war. As these individual-level analyses assign a greater focus on the Armenian leadership, I aim to contribute to the literature by examining changes in Ilham Aliyev’s stances on the N-K dispute, and whether it may have shaped the offensive’s timing.

#### **2.4. Literature Mapping: Summary and Critique**

This brief literature mapping reveals, first, that the timing of the Second Karabakh War is a problem worth exploring, and one that incites several lines of argumentation. Second, it reveals that multiple levels of analysis (i.e., the international system, the state, and the individual levels) may be subject to investigation if one aims to comprehend the timing of a conflict outbreak. As I have stated above, the identified themes are not exclusive, and most analyses recognize the multi-dimensional nature of the conflict. A significant portion of these studies, however, offer a more descriptive assessment of events, and few works are informed by a specific theoretical framework. As a result, while many levels of analysis are considered, the causal relations between the different variables are often not clearly stated. Therefore, a critical assessment of the selected works shows that there are certain gaps to be filled, and validity issues that must also be addressed.

Regarding the first group of scholars (i.e., those who emphasize system-level variables), I argue that a certain oversimplification prevails. As major allies of Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively, Russia and Turkey certainly played a key role in the Second Karabakh War. However, I advance that additional empirical analysis must be conducted, besides more careful conceptualization. More specifically, to what extent do these alliances differ in intensity, compared to the previous balance of power? How is the balance of power evaluated over time?

Secondly, some works on the states' domestic and individual attributes must also be an object of scrutiny. It is noticeable that some studies, published in the immediate aftermath of war, were written by authors whose views are closely associated with Armenian or Azerbaijani official positions. This means, in other words, that some analyses contain biased language and a strong nationalistic component, which reflect the polarization between the conflicting sides. Also, while several scholars consider the limitations of Armenia before the Second Karabakh War, little attention has been paid to the domestic circumstances in Azerbaijan. As I advance in the next session, major foreign policy decisions (such as the choice to launch war) may be a response to systemic constraints — but also are shaped by capabilities and preferences of domestic nature. A comprehensive analysis of the Second Karabakh War, therefore, requires a more detailed assessment of the environment in which the Azerbaijani decision was made.

Finally, in terms of theoretical approaches, the overall emphasis on the role of regional powers and relative military capabilities illustrates the neorealist thought's dominance in this research agenda. Even though neorealist theory can explain broader patterns of interstate relations, the existing analyses have not been able to explore the timing of the 2020 escalation in depth. For this reason, in the next section, I propose the adoption of a distinct theoretical framework.

## **2.5. Research Objectives**

Based on this critical literature review, we may position this study within the emerging debate, as well as clarify the research focus and objectives. As stated above, this study seeks to conduct a multi-level assessment of the 2020 War. Aiming to address the major gaps identified in the previous section, this research proposes understanding

the influence of system-, domestic-, and individual-level variables in the timing of the 2020 War.

If the dispute over N-K consists of an enduring dyadic rivalry, we may raise the question of why the focus of analysis is placed primarily on Azerbaijan. Here, the research rationale must be clear: as the existing literature has extensively focused on Armenia's domestic dynamics, and their effects on conflict eruption, what is yet to be explored is the correlation between the Azerbaijani domestic arena and the country's foreign policy decision. As we have seen, a significant share of works advances that Baku responded to political developments in Armenia and relied on external allies to formulate a counter-reaction. I argue, however, that the decision to initiate war was not a merely reactive measure, and that internal factors were also decisive for Aliyev's decision-making process. And what justifies this argument?

The launching of war is certainly one of the most critical foreign policy decisions a state leader can make. Indeed, the field of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) provides several explanations as to why decision-making is influenced by domestic factors. Even though foreign policy decisions are aimed at orienting the behaviour of states in the international system, one must not forget that these decisions also have important distributive consequences for a country. Therefore, the state's internal attributes (e.g., economic circumstances, domestic politics, elite preferences, and even cultural perceptions) often provide incentives for the adoption of a certain course of action. In the next session, I will examine the theoretical framework of FPA in further detail (in particular, the assumptions of Neoclassical Realism), and explore how system- and domestic-level variables influence a foreign policy decision. At this point, the research objectives may be summarized as follows:

**Objective 1:** Examine in-depth the timing of the war, namely, why Azerbaijan chose to go to war in 2020 and not before (e.g., 2016).

**Objective 2:** Explore the impact of macro (systemic), middle (state), and individual variables on the outbreak of the Second Karabakh War.

**Objective 3:** Compare Azerbaijan's leadership rhetoric over time and observe potential variations that may be connected to the timing of war.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

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The purpose of this chapter is to present the theoretical framework that will guide the upcoming empirical analysis. As discussed in the literature review, the debate on the causes of the Second Karabakh War has been mostly influenced by macro-level approaches. As we aim to comprehend the impact of external and internal factors in Azerbaijan's decision to initiate war, the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) framework provides us with relevant approaches. As pointed out by Hudson (2020), one important contribution of the FPA field is its agent-oriented emphasis, which goes against the 'black-boxing' of the state. Therefore, understanding one specific decision (e.g., launching war) under the FPA's framework allows for a greater understanding of agent-structure interaction. It should be noted that the focus of analysis is not Azerbaijan's broader foreign policy orientation, but a particular decision that targeted an external entity (Armenia).

This theoretical discussion consists of two sections. In the first section, I will present the common assumptions regarding the making of foreign policy in small states (e.g., Armenia and Azerbaijan). As we shall see below, a dominant perspective is that such states mostly respond to the international system's constraints, with little space left for influences of domestic nature. I advance, however, that system-level variables alone may not be sufficient to comprehend the Azerbaijani decision to launch a military operation in 2020. For that reason, in the second section, I present the theoretical contributions of Neoclassical Realism and the ways it incorporates the states' domestic capabilities into the FPA debate. Having clarified the main assumptions of Neoclassical Realism, I proceed to the conceptualization of the research variables.

#### **3.1. Foreign Policy Decision-Making in Small States: Common Assumptions**

As mentioned above, when it comes to foreign policymaking in small states, a dominant perception is that the international system is the most important force in action. We must define, first, what is meant by 'small state'. It is worth mentioning that, in the academic literature, the term may assume the designation of 'weak state' (Handel, 1990) or even 'small power' (Rothstein, 1968). As advanced by Maass (2017), there is no consensus on the definition of 'smallness', even though two major criteria are often

employed: the material dimension and the so-called 'structural relevance'. From a physical perspective, small states are the ones that possess a compact geographic size, economy, and population. In an alternative interpretation, small states are those unable to meaningfully alter the structure of international relations. In our case, Armenia and Azerbaijan fall into that category.

As indicated by Elman (1995), the scholarly consensus on small states' behaviour is mainly influenced by neorealist thought. Neorealists (also known as *structural realists*) identify anarchy, i.e., the absence of a supranational government, as the international system's defining feature. Given the anarchy condition, states, which are framed as unitary and rational actors, need to provide for their own security. As advanced by Kenneth Waltz, since 'any state may at any time use force, all states must constantly be ready either to counterforce, or to pay the cost of weakness' (Waltz, 1959:160). This situation results in the so-called 'security dilemma': that is, a state's attempt to increase its own security triggers other states' insecurity, ultimately leading to a spiral of competition (Griffiths et al., 2002: 295). Considering their vulnerable position in the international system vis-à-vis greater powers, small states are thus expected to be constrained by external forces, and not by domestic factors.

These constraints are said to affect, for example, the small states' ability to make alliances. As advanced by FPA and IR scholars, when states face an external threat, they must adopt a certain alignment strategy, such as balancing or bandwagoning. As simply explained by Stephen Walt, "balancing is defined as allying with others against the prevailing threat", and "bandwagoning refers to alignment with the source of danger" (Walt, 2013:17). Considering the small states' relative capabilities, a prevailing assumption is that they are more likely to pursue a bandwagoning behaviour. Here, again, the very structure of the international system, characterized by the security dilemma, plays a relevant role. Even though all states are primarily concerned with survival, small states are especially vulnerable when compared to larger, more powerful states. For this reason, the latter are expected to bandwagon in order to avoid a coercive reaction from the stronger power (Handel, 1990).

With these considerations in mind, when do small states go to war? Based on the assumptions above, the major drivers of conflict are changes in the distribution of power, usually defined in material terms. Some realist scholars, however, also advance that states do not merely balance power *per se*, but balance against perceived threats.

Balance-of-threats theorists (e.g., Walt, 1990) thus propose that threat perception is affected by several factors beyond military capabilities, and include, for example, geographic proximity and states' aggressive intentions (James, 2022). This assumption has been clearly identified in our literature review, particularly in the works that interpreted the war as a reaction to Armenia's provocations. However, neither neorealist nor offensive realist perspectives shed light on the domestic context in which Aliyev's decision was made. Even more, they do not clarify the issue of conflict timing.

Here, I argue that, if relative power and aggressive rhetoric were the most determinant factors for conflict escalation, then empirical evidence suggests that the conditions for a military operation were set earlier than 2020. I will test this argument later in this study. For now, some suppositions may be posed, such as: a) the launching of war may be attributed to a change in the systemic variables' intensity; or b) domestic-factors may have been determinants for the timing of war. Therefore, and aiming to verify these assumptions and contribute to the emerging literature, I mobilize the theoretical framework of Neoclassical Realism.

### **3.2. The Neoclassical Realist Perspective**

While neorealism is able to explain broader patterns of state behaviour in the international system, the theory is not able to clarify why particular decisions are made. The assumptions provided by Neoclassical Realism, a term coined by Gideon Rose in 1998<sup>17</sup>, aim at addressing this gap. A major argument advanced by neoclassical realists is that the international system does not alone explain variations in foreign policy. This does not mean, however, that system-level factors should be disregarded in the analysis. On the contrary, they are expected to set the parameters for a certain decision but are nevertheless 'filtered' through a series of domestic-level factors.

Under this perspective, 'unit-level variables constrain or facilitate the ability of all types of states, great powers as well as lesser states, to respond to systemic imperatives' (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009: 4). Here, in contrast to the above-mentioned neorealist assumptions, domestic-level factors are expected to play a more

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<sup>17</sup> Rose, G. (1998). Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy. *World Politics*, 51 (1), 144-172. DOI: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25054068>.

salient role in decision-making. We shall explore below why and under what circumstances these domestic factors are the most influential.

First, it is important to explain the ‘realist’ aspect of this theoretical framework. As explained before, neoclassical realists do not disregard the role played by the international context. In fact, they depart from the neorealist assumption that the system’s anarchic condition motivates states to seek security. In that sense, anarchy is still viewed as a permissive cause of war, and the assessment of relative power continues to be of ultimate importance for decision-makers. However, for neoclassical realists, the distribution of power is not believed to have a direct impact on states’ behaviour. What does sustain this theoretical position? Rose (1998) points out several reasons why one shouldn’t expect the international system to have a straightforward influence on foreign policy. The author states:

Foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and elites, and so it is their perceptions of relative power that matter, not simply relative quantities of physical resources or forces in being. [...] Furthermore, those leaders and elites do not always have complete freedom to extract and direct national resources as they might wish. Power analysis must therefore also examine the strength and structure of states relative to their societies, because these affect the proportion of national resources that can be allocated to foreign policy (Rose, 1998: 147).

From the quote above, we may note two important neoclassical realist assumptions. First, there is no ideal ‘transmission belt’ between systemic constraints and foreign policy. As argued by Ripsman et al. (2016), ‘only in rare circumstances does the international system provide clear information to states about the external constraints and opportunities they face’ (Ripsman et al., 2016: p. 2). Also, states differ in their ability to respond to such external stimuli. This is because decision-making procedures may encounter a handful of obstacles, which are strongly connected to the political dynamics of the state itself (e.g., the perception of leaders and institutional constraints). For that reason, the context in which the decision is made turns out to be relevant.

Secondly, we see that this theoretical framework offers a broader conceptualization of power itself, which goes beyond the assessment of states' relative military capabilities. This enlarged perception arises from the assumption that 'power can be used only if it can be mobilized' (Rathbun, 2008: 302), meaning that the ability to extract resources and mobilize social support are important variables of a state's power. In sum, while the anarchic nature of the international system provides incentives for states to seek security, anarchy *per se* does not tell us how domestic processes will respond to those external constraints. Such view on international politics may be summarized in the following figure (Figure 2).

**Figure 2 - The Neoclassical Realist Rationale**



*Note. The figure shows the Neoclassical Realist view on the dynamics of international politics. From Neoclassical Realist Rtheory of International Politics (online edition, p. 5), by Ripsman et al., 2016. Copyright 2016 by Oxford University Press. Reprinted with permission.*

It is important to mention that this theoretical approach does not limit the analysis to a particular set of international and domestic variables. Here, there is no consensus on which specific indicators are the most relevant, or how they impact foreign policy behaviour. For example, some neoclassical realists may emphasize the role of leaders and elites in decision-making, while others stress the influence of domestic institutions. While it is beyond the scope of this research to present all the details of neoclassical realist theory, it is important to highlight its relevance and utility in addressing our research questions. What do analysts mobilize neoclassical realism for? Why is it suitable for the analysis of war timing?

As explained by Ripsman et al. (2016: 27-31), we may identify two major uses for this theoretical approach. The ‘Type I’ neoclassical realism, according to the authors, aims at explaining anomalies in the international system. Here, the term ‘anomaly’ refers to events in which states behaved contrarily to the expectations of purely systemic or neorealist theories. One example of this variant, in the particular context of the South Caucasus, is the work of Gvalia et al. (2013), which offers a neoclassical realist explanation for Georgia’s puzzling foreign policy behaviour<sup>18</sup>. The so-called ‘Type II’ analyses, in turn, go beyond the explanation of anomalies and propose that neoclassical realist assumptions are suitable for comprehending foreign policy behaviour *per se*. In this study, the use of neoclassical realism is more closely associated with the second variant.

### 3.3. Working hypotheses

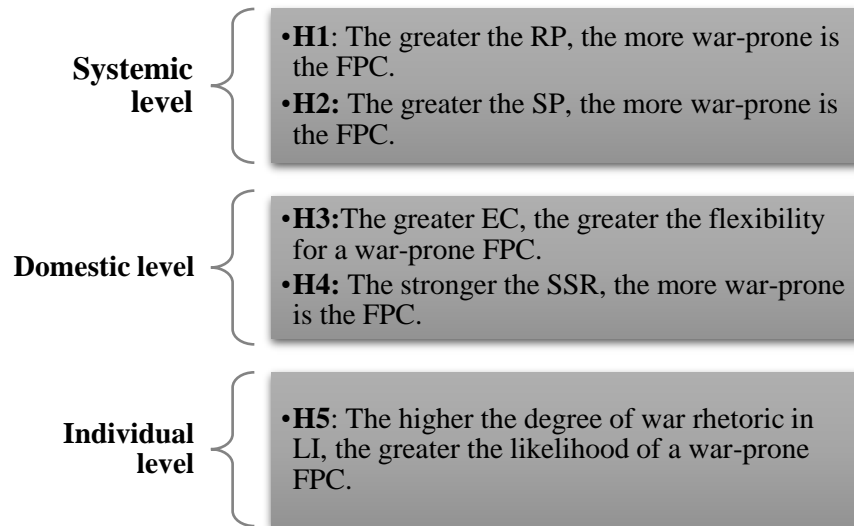
Finally, having examined the theoretical framework, we may proceed with the elaboration of working hypotheses. They are inspired by the works of neoclassical realist scholars, such as Rosa et al. (2020), besides Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2009 and 2016). The latter seek to systematize a neoclassical realist theory and test its assumptions in some case studies (e.g., great powers’ strategic calculation in the inter-war period). Rosa et al. (2020) do not to explain a particular foreign policy choice but employ the neoclassical realism framework (and quantitative methods) to explain Italy’s involvement in militarized disputes. Adapting their models and assumptions to the singularities of this study, the Foreign Policy Choice (FPC) of Azerbaijan is understood as a function of relative power (RP), security partnerships (SP), state-society relations (SSR), level of extractive capacity (EC), and leader images (LI). The function can be represented as follows:

$$FPC = f(RP, SA, SC, EC, LI)$$

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<sup>18</sup> As a small state, Georgia would be expected to bandwagon, and not balance against threatening powers. However, the country opted for a balancing behaviour against Russia, despite the imminent risks of this choice.

Based on the assumptions of Neoclassical Realism the hypotheses are presented below. Note that each variable will be explained in further detail in the subsequent chapter.



## 4. Research Variables and Methodology

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Having defined the main assumptions of neoclassical realism, I will now clarify the research operationalization. For this purpose, this chapter consists of two main sections. First, I will present the conceptualization of the research variables, and discuss the indicators that will be used for the variables' measurement. In the second chapter, I define the research design and the specific techniques that will be used for data collection.

### 4.1. Research Variables

The variables' selection is influenced by the work of Ripsman et al. (2016). Recognizing the diversity of approaches under the neoclassical realism umbrella, the authors acknowledge that the theory has been criticized for incorporating an excessive number of variables. Therefore, the authors advance a more systematized neoclassical realist theory and propose particular *clusters* of variables, which belong to distinct levels of analysis. Despite the influence of their work on the definition of the research variables, note that other studies will be mobilized in this conceptualization.

#### 4.1.1. System-Level Independent Variables (IVs)

As discussed in the theoretical section, the international system is the departing point (i.e., the explanatory variable) of an analysis informed by neoclassical realism. And how may we define the international system? We have seen that, at this level of analysis, neoclassical realism and neorealism share common assumptions. In their view, a system is characterized by three major characteristics. The first is the ordering principle, i.e., hierarchy or anarchy. Secondly, a system is defined by the function of the units (that is, states). Third, a system is determined by the distribution of capabilities. The first two elements are assumed to be constant, as the long-lasting condition of anarchy minimizes functional differentiation between the actors. Therefore, changes in the structure *mostly* occur in the realm of power distribution (Keohane, 1986). Although there is no academic consensus on the definition of 'power', in neorealist thought, and to an extent in neoclassical realism, it usually refers to the military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities of a state.

Based on this logic and conceptualization, our independent variables are related to the so-called *systemic constraints*, which can be understood as the level of pressures that arise from the structure of the international system. A more specific definition is provided by Lobell et al. (2009), who define such pressures as a result of “relative distribution of power, the offense-defence balance in military technology, and geographic proximity” (p. 213). However, it is important to emphasize that not all scholars limit systemic analysis to an assessment of material power. As suggested by Donnelly (2013), the relations between the units (e.g., patterns of amity and enmity, expressed through alliances and security partnerships) are also defining features of systemic pressures.

Departing from this broader conceptualization, the level of systemic constraints will be captured through two variables. The first is Azerbaijan’s *relative power vis-à-vis Armenia*. This variable is here conceptualized as the economic power and military capabilities of one country in relation to another state. Certain indicators are traditionally used to measure relative power, such as the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) ratio among countries, and other gross indicators such as military spending (Beckley, 2018).

To ‘measure’ relative power, I rely on traditional economic indicators such as GDP per capita but also adopt a broader data collection for military capabilities. For this purpose, I rely on the works of the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC, 2023), and its extensive dataset on militarization. Here, a major indicator to assess Azerbaijan’s relative military power is the so-called ‘GMI score<sup>19</sup>’. The calculation of this score considers factors such as military spending in relation to GDP, the number of military personnel vis-à-vis the population, and the number of heavy weapons per capita. The GMI score, therefore, grasps important aspects of the parties’ military capabilities.

The second variable at the systemic level is the *security partnerships*. These are defined as the level of military cooperation and mutual support among states. In this study, the measurement of security partners will be done through the indicator ‘joint military exercises’. There are two reasons for this choice. First, the literature on the 44-Day War often emphasizes that military exercises between Azerbaijan and its regional

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<sup>19</sup> The GMI score can be located in the previously mentioned Global Militarization Index.

allies may have increased Aliyev's confidence to engage in a full-scale war. In this study, we will be able to examine this proposition through a quantitative approach and observe if the results match the qualitative analysis carried out by other scholars. Secondly, joint military exercises are a symbol of trust, cooperation, and interoperability among states, and therefore are an important dimension of a security partnership's strength.

#### 4.1.2. Domestic-Level Intervening Variables

As mentioned above, neoclassical realism assumes that states' capabilities function as intervening variables between systemic forces and foreign policymaking. Jeffrey Taliaferro (2006) defines state capabilities, or state power, as "the relative ability of the state to extract or mobilize resources from domestic society" (Taliaferro, 2006: 467). As we see, the term 'state capability' is a broad umbrella term, whose measurement requires a set of indicators at both state (middle) and individual (micro) levels of analysis.

The first middle-level variable is the state's *extractive capacity*. The term can be defined as the state's ability to extract and control valuable resources. To measure Azerbaijan's extractive capacity, I will focus on its economic sector and, more specifically, on the energy industry's performance. This is because, in Azerbaijan's context, the extraction and exports of hydrocarbons constitute one of the state budget's most important features<sup>20</sup>. These resources play a crucial role in the Azerbaijani economy, government revenue, and overall power dynamics. Given the government's reliance on oil revenues, a fluctuation in oil prices has a substantial impact on the economy (affecting, for example, the available resources for military investments). To measure the country's extractive capacity, I will assess the performance of indicators such as oil rents and exports.

The second middle-level variable is *state-society relations*. Here, I adopt the definition provided by Huma Haider (2010), who advances that state-society relations are "interactions between state institutions and societal groups to negotiate how public authority is exercised and how it can be influenced by people" (Haider, 2010: 6). In this

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<sup>20</sup> According to the International Trade Administration (2022), fuel accounted for 85% of the country's total exports in 2021.

view, weak state-society relations are those marked by weak social cohesion, high state repression and concentration of political power. This variable is thus highly dependent on the nature of a country's political regime. To assess the level of state-society in Azerbaijan, I rely on indicators such as social demonstrations, besides the degree of civil liberties in the country.

Finally, at the individual level of analysis, I will examine the *leader images*. This variable is defined as the beliefs of a state leadership over a certain national issue (in this case, the N-K conflict). The rationale behind this category may be summarized in the assertion of Taliaferro (2006), who proposes that “the ability of states to extract resources from the society is not simply a function of the strength of institutions: it also depends on leaders’ ability to raise and maintain support for national security strategies” (Taliaferro, 2006: 489). In Azerbaijan’s case, I am interested in observing whether there is a relationship between President Ilham Aliyev’s perceptions of national security and the launching of a full-scale war. To observe leader images’ variation, I will collect and code publicly available presidential speeches in the years 2016 and 2020.

#### 4.1.3. *The Dependent Variable (DV): Foreign Policy Choice*

As we have discussed, the phenomenon to be explained is the timing of the Second Karabakh War. However, to operationalize this research, the decision to initiate war is representative of the broader concept of ‘foreign policy choice’. In the neoclassical realist literature, the term may be used as a synonym of ‘foreign policy response’ or ‘strategic adjustment’, as depicted in the work of Ripsman et al. (2016). A foreign policy choice, in this case, can be simply defined as the implementation of a particular course of action regarding an external actor. In this research, I employ a nominal level of precision when analysing the foreign policy choices of Azerbaijan. More specifically, I propose a clear-cut dichotomy between two outcomes: the decision to engage in a full-scale war or the absence of such a decision (‘war’ or ‘no war’).

Having defined the research variables, we may summarize the indicators and levels of precision in the arrow diagram below (Figure 3):

**Figure 3 - Research Variables**

Source: Elaborated by the author, based on the theoretical assumptions of Ripsman et al. (2016).

## 4.2. Research Methods and Techniques

In this second section, we will delve deeper into the research methodology. From the conceptualization of the variables and the arrow diagram above, it is clear that this research has a multi-dimensional focus, which touches upon different dimensions of political science research. For this reason, the mixed-method research (MMR) design stands out as an appropriate strategy for dealing with such diverse indicators. Before proceeding with the specific features of our MMR design, I will first clarify this research's position in the broader field of social sciences.

If we consider that positivism and interpretivism are the two opposite poles of an epistemology continuum, then this work can be located in between the spectrum, yet closer to the first. On one hand, this research design is mostly consonant with positivist assumptions, which is partially inherited from the theoretical approach I have adopted. Ripsman et al. (2016: 105) advance that neoclassical realism is indeed characterized by a 'soft positivism', meaning that the theory departs from the assumption that the world (objectively) exists beyond the observer's mind. Causal inferences, in this sense, are expected to be validated through systematic testing. However, the emphasis on 'softness' refers to the acknowledgement that social sciences are permeated by phenomena that require subjective interpretation (which might pose limitations to systematic theory testing).

We may also specify the nature of the research puzzle and focus. Departing from the puzzle-based analysis of Day and Koivu (2019), I define the research puzzle as an

empirical one, whose purpose is to explain *variation over time*. As advanced by the authors, this applies to puzzles that aim to explain, for instance, sudden change in a previous stable political phenomenon. In the typology of Ripsman et al. (2016), it can be also framed as a ‘surprising outcome’ puzzle. Furthermore, the study focus can be considered as ‘outcome-centric’ (Gschwend & Schimmelfenning, 2007). Here, I aim to analyse the effects of independent variables (at the systemic level), an intervening variables (at the domestic and individual levels), on the dependent variable (foreign policy choice). By examining the causal relations between these variables, the research seeks to comprehend the mechanisms that led to the specific outcome of choosing war.

The next step is to comprehend how this research will be operationalized in terms of methods and research techniques. For this purpose, I will first present the chosen mixed-method research design, as well as the reasons why it is suitable for this study. It is important to bear in mind that the research design is built under the framework of a *case study*, or a single-country approach<sup>21</sup>. Case studies provide a valuable means to examine the causal mechanisms underlying foreign policy choices. Contrary to a popular misconception, the case study method does not imply a singular observation, nor does it imply the exclusive use of qualitative analysis. In this thesis, our case study will encompass an expanded time frame, allowing for a broader examination of relevant factors in Azerbaijani foreign policy. By employing a mixed-research design, I will conduct both quantitative and qualitative analyses within the case study framework.

#### 4.2.1. Mixed-Method Research (MMR)

This study adopts a mixed-method research (MMR) design, meaning that both qualitative and quantitative methods are used to fulfil the research goals. It is worth mentioning that there is no singular template to be followed in an MMR design. As clarified by Harbers and Ingram, an MMR study may vary in “(1) the manner in which methods are combined, or the degree of integration, (2) the sequence in which they are combined, and (3) the analytic motivations for such combinations” (Harbers & Ingram,

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<sup>21</sup> We should note, as stated by Todd Landman (2003), that single-country studies are not necessarily limited to descriptive analyses. In fact, this approach is an important tool for the broader field of comparative politics: the studied concepts may be used, for instance, in the study of other countries under similar circumstances.

2020: 1118). I start this subsection by providing clarification for the third aspect, i.e., the rationale for adopting this particular design.

In this case study, the MMR is adopted to fulfil the gaps identified in the literature review. While previous studies have predominantly relied on a single method (e.g., descriptive qualitative analysis), the MMR allows for an alternative examination and testing of the factors influencing the foreign policy choice of Azerbaijan. Concerning how methods are combined, we may define the adopted strategy as an ‘explanatory sequential design’<sup>22</sup>. This means that quantitative and qualitative methods will be executed separately, in two different phases.

The *first* phase consists of numerical data collection at the system level, which intends to assess the impact of systemic variables on foreign policy choices. In this quantitative analysis, a descriptive statistics technique will be employed to observe the influence of the independent variables (IVs) on the dependent variable (DV). By doing so, we will be able to test the system-level hypothesis (H1) and (H2). The *second* phase will focus on Azerbaijan’s domestic dynamics. In this phase, other research techniques, mostly qualitative, will be employed. The first is the process tracing method. The method is defined by Zaks (2016:452) as “an analytic procedure for systematically evaluating pieces of (usually) qualitative evidence to explain an outcome of interest”. In this study, this within-case method is particularly suitable for examining the intervening variables, as it allows us to attentively observe the temporal sequence of political events, social dynamics, and economic developments.

A second qualitative method, particularly suitable for the variable ‘leader images’, is content analysis. The employment of this method allows us to fulfil one of the research objectives, namely “to compare the leadership rhetoric over time and observe potential variations that may be connected to the timing of war”. To reach this goal, I will conduct a content analysis of President Ilham Aliyev’s speeches in the years 2016 and 2020, whose transcriptions are available on Azerbaijan’s governmental website. The analysis is structured according to the phase-based approach of Braun and Clarke (2016), which goes as follows. After collecting the transcribed data (phase one), I will generate initial codes related to the leader images over the N-K conflict (phase two). After, they will be systematized into overarching themes (phase three). Next, we

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<sup>22</sup> On the typology of MMR designs, see Creswell (2017: 51-99).

will review and refine the themes to enhance their coherence. Lastly, the final themes will be defined and the findings, presented.

Finally, in the examination of domestic-level variables, descriptive statistics will also be mobilized. Considering the nature of certain indicators at this level of analysis (e.g., economic data and number of social demonstrations), the study also benefits from the use of this quantitative method in this middle-level stage. Having clarified the structure of data collection and analysis, we may summarize the research operationalization in the table below (Table 1):

**Table 1 – Research Variables and Level of Precision**

	Variable	Indicator	Level of precision
SYSTEM-LEVEL VARIABLES	Relative Power Distribution	Relative Militarization (GMI score)	Numerical
		Relative economic power (GDP per capita)	Numerical
	Security Partners	Joint military exercises	Numerical
DOMESTIC-LEVEL VARIABLES ( <i>Middle and individual levels</i> )	Extractive capacity	Oil rents Oil exports	Numerical
	State-society relations	Number of social demonstrations	Numerical
		Level of civil liberties	Categorical/ Nominal
Leader Images	Perceptions on the N-K conflict	Categorical/ Nominal	

*Source: Elaborated by the author.*

## 5. Agent and Structure: Comprehending the Timing of the Second Karabakh War

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In this chapter, a mixed-method analysis will be conducted. As stated above, the first phase of the research consists of a quantitative assessment of system-level variables. In the second phase, Azerbaijan's domestic dynamics will be examined through a qualitative approach, and also through descriptive statistics. It is noteworthy that the period I analyse differs in each phase. In the first section, as I am interested in observing structural patterns and employing quantitative research techniques, a longer time framework is required. For that purpose, I have collected data relative to the period 2003-2020, as it comprehends the whole period of Ilham Aliyev's leadership.

In the second phase, which is more context-specific, the data collection and analysis will contemplate the years 2016 and 2020. One exception concerns the variable 'state-society relations', as the available data source comprehends the period 2018-2020. However, as I will discuss in the relevant section, this shorter period is also illustrative of the singularities of Azerbaijan's domestic dynamics before the Second Karabakh War. After considering the systemic and domestic drivers of the full-scale war, I will provide a final assessment of the conflict's timing.

### 5.1. Effects of the Structure

In this section, the performance of two variables will be assessed, namely *relative power* and *security partnerships*. The section will be structured as follows. First, I will present the findings for the variable 'relative power' and specify the data collection for its indicators. Secondly, I will discuss the data collection for the variable 'security partners' and clarify, in particular, the strategies I have adopted to overcome the data availability issue. Note that, when examining these variables, I will consider Azerbaijan's indicators in relation to Armenia's. This is because, in the context of an enduring rivalry, we may expect structural pressures to arise from this dyadic relationship. After exploring the results in more detail, I will be able to test our system-level hypotheses (H1) and (H2).

### 5.1.1. *Relative Power: Military and Economic Dimensions*

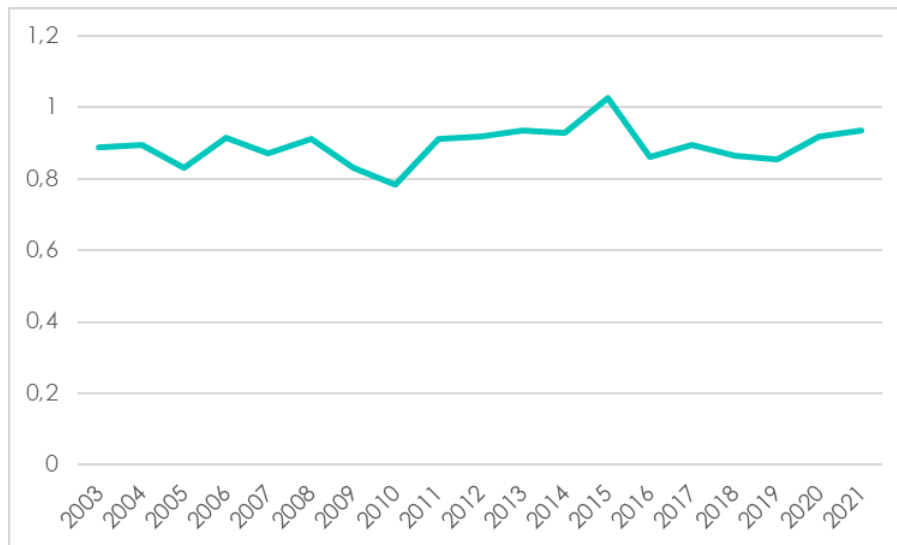
As mentioned above, for the analysis of Azerbaijan's relative power vis-à-vis Armenia, I have adopted two main indicators: (i) the relative militarization level, and (ii) the relative economic power. Concerning the data collection for the first indicator, I have used the dataset provided by the Global Militarization Index (GMI), which stands out for its validity and reliability. This is because, to assess the militarization level in a certain country, this index takes into consideration various aspects, such as military expenditure per capita, the number of personnel in the army, and the level of arms imports.

To measure the relative militarization level, I have relied on the so-called 'GMI score'. In the above-mentioned datasets, the GMI score is a numerical value assigned to each country annually and represents the overall level of a state's militarization. Therefore, our first step is to measure the relative militarization of Armenia and Azerbaijan between 2003 and 2020. To do so, I use the following equation:

$$\textit{Relative militarization} = \frac{\textit{GMI Score of Azerbaijan}}{\textit{GMI Score of Armenia}}$$

According to this equation, the higher the 'relative militarization' value, the more 'militarized' Azerbaijan is compared to Armenia. Conversely, the lower the relative power value, the more militarized Armenia is compared to Azerbaijan. Based on the results obtained from the equation (Figure 4), it is worthy of note that Azerbaijan's relative militarization has fluctuated over the period 2003-2020, with values ranging from 0.7825 to 1.0259. We can see that, based on the GMI calculation, Azerbaijan did not count on an expressive advantage in terms of relative militarization. This ratio, of course, does not represent the country's military capabilities in absolute terms but tells us about an existing systemic constraint faced by Azerbaijan throughout the decades.

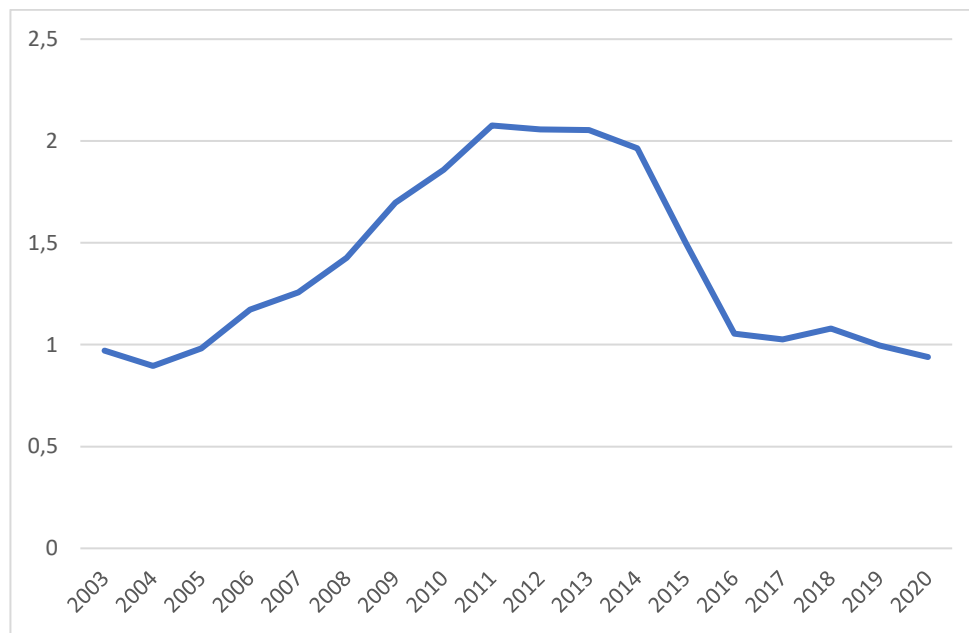
**Figure 4 - Azerbaijan's Relative Militarization (2003-2020)**



*Note. This figure demonstrates the equation results for Azerbaijan's relative militarization vis-à-vis Armenia, in the period 2003-2020. The data was retrieved from BICC's Global Militarization Dataset (2023).*

I have employed similar reasoning when analysing the economic component of relative power. Based on the macroeconomic data provided by the World Bank (2023), I have collected Azerbaijan's and Armenia's GDP per capita in the period 2003-2020. To measure Azerbaijan's relative economic power vis-à-vis Armenia, I have applied the same equation as the one presented above (considering, in this case, both countries' GDP per capita). These results can be visualized in the chart below (Figure 5).

**Figure 5 - Azerbaijan's Relative Economic Power (2003-2020)**



*Note. The chart represents Azerbaijan's relative economic power (vis-à-vis Armenia), using the indicator GDP per capita. The data was retrieved from the World Bank database (2023).*

Based on the results above, we can draw initial conclusions about the relationship between relative power and conflict occurrence. In terms of relative militarization, we could see that the Azerbaijani-Armenian ratio did not significantly vary over time. Particularly, in 2020, we do not observe an expressive shift that may be connected to the timing of war. In other words, the conflict doesn't seem to be a result of greater militarization vis-à-vis Armenia, nor a reaction to the rival's militarization level. The results for relative economic power, on the other hand, demonstrate that the foreign policy decision (i.e., launching war) coincides with a sharp decrease in Azerbaijan's GDP per capita vis-à-vis Armenia. Therefore, these findings support, to a certain extent, the argument that systemic pressures may have shaped the timing of Aliyev's decision.

### *5.1.2. Measuring Security Partnerships*

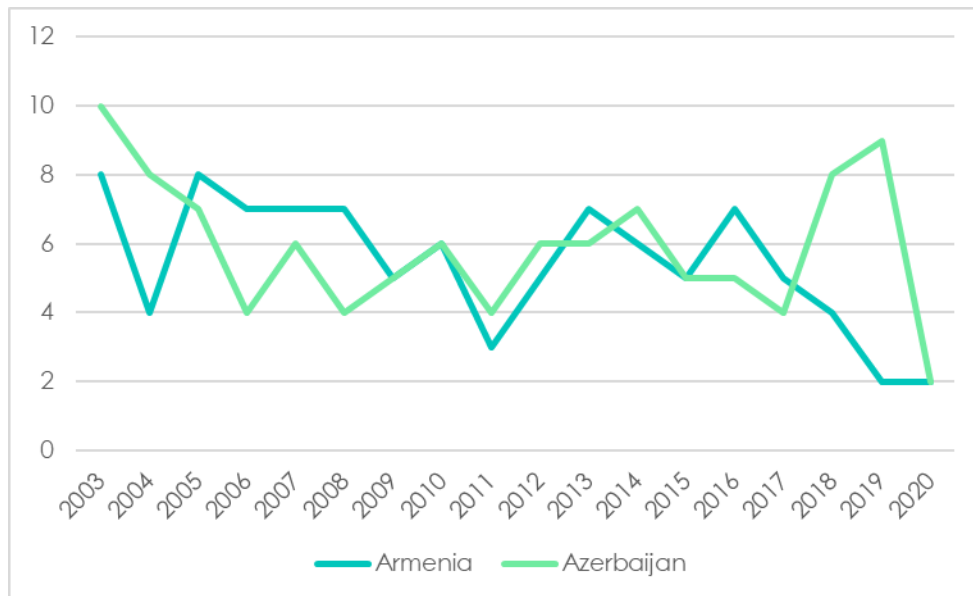
I will now clarify the data collection for our second system-level variable, i.e., security partnerships. As discussed above, the variable 'security partnerships' is here measured through the number of joint military exercises. One may argue that the

indicator ‘joint military exercises’ provides us with an indirect measurement of security partnerships — and, perhaps, that security agreements would be a more appropriate indicator. Yet, this choice has certain advantages when compared to alternative ones: for instance, security agreements often end up dormant, and thus do not clarify the strength of security partnerships over time. It is also important to emphasize the issue of data availability. Considering the limited access to data of a security nature in open sources, I have opted for an indicator that could be captured and collected in the available sources.

In terms of data collection, I rely on the time series presented by Jordan Bernhardt (2021), named ‘Joint Military Exercises Dataset’. This dataset presents us with a comprehensive assessment of military exercises worldwide, encompassing the period 1980-2016. To be included in the dataset, the exercises had to fulfil four criteria: (i) the military personnel must have performed active roles in the exercise, and come from at least two different countries; (ii) the exercise must have trained the personnel of the involved states; (iii) the event shall focus on practicing military operations (not necessarily limited to combat); and (iv) the exercise shall not be in support of an active military operation.

Given that Bernhardt’s dataset does not cover our entire period of analysis, I have used a second data source for the missing data. In this process, I relied on Armenia’s and Azerbaijan’s Ministries of Defence websites, employing Bernhardt’s criteria above to select the relevant events. Through an extensive review of the news archive in the specified period, I have identified a total of thirty-six other joint military exercises. After the inclusion of the missing data, the total number of joint military exercises in the period between 2003 and September 2020 is 119. We may see the frequency, per year, of exercises attended by each country in the following chart (Figure 6).

**Figure 6 - Azerbaijan's and Armenia's Joint Military Exercises (2003-2020)**



*Note. The figure demonstrates the number of joint military exercises, in which Azerbaijan and Armenia participated, throughout the period 2003-2020. The data was collected from Jordan Bernhardt's 'Joint Military Exercises Dataset' (2021), and Azerbaijan's and Armenia's Ministry of Defence's websites.*

### 5.1.3. The System-level Beyond Quantitative Analysis

The findings allow us to confirm or falsify the hypothesis at the systemic level. We could observe that the validity of (H1) '*the greater the relative power, the more war-prone the foreign policy choice*' depends on the dimension of relative power the researcher focuses on. It is noticeable that the 2016 escalation coincided with a sharp increase in Azerbaijan's relative militarization vis-à-vis Armenia, but this causal relation did not hold in the 2020 War. In contrast, the indicator of 'relative economic power' seems to have been one relevant pressure at the system level, which might explain the timing of the most recent escalations. The empirical findings thus show that the lower the relative (economic) power between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the greater the likelihood of war in N-K.

The hypothesis (H2), *‘the greater the security partnerships, the more war-prone the foreign policy choice’* has been fully supported by empirical evidence. It is true that, in the year 2020, we may observe a marked decrease in Azerbaijan’s joint military exercises. However, we cannot disconnect this phenomenon from the broader context of international politics at the time, marked by COVID-19 restrictions. Also, a qualitative assessment of the 2019 exercises reveals the singular intensity of the Turkish-Azerbaijani partnership in the year that preceded the Second Karabakh War. Out of nine publicly announced joint military exercises, in 2019, seven events involved Turkey’s participation. Here, it is also important to reflect on Armenia’s security partnerships — and how they may be associated with Aliyev’s perception of a systemic window of opportunity. In the graph above (Figure 6), we can see that the war was launched at a moment when Armenia’s security partnerships, in the form of joint military exercises, were less pronounced.

Of course, the number of joint military exercises does not fully represent a state’s security allies. In the case of Armenia, we should also address some qualitative aspects of its major security partnerships. Throughout the years, it is noticeable that the country has relied on a decisive regional security partner: Russia. As I have discussed in the historical section, Russia has historically been Armenia’s security guarantor in the N-K conflict. This Russian-Armenian partnership has expressed itself in several dimensions, for example: in the establishment of a Russian military base in Gyumri; in Armenia’s participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union; and the high dependence on Russia as an energy supplier (Vardazaryan, 2014).

Armenia’s decreasing number of joint military exercises in the period 2016-2020, in fact, coincides with a change in the strength of the Russian-Armenian partnership. The reason, as we have discussed before, was the more critical tone adopted by Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan regarding Russia (Batashvili, 2019). This ‘partnership strength’ factor certainly played an important role in the timing of the Second Karabakh War. In this sense, one potential explanation as to why the war has not erupted earlier, but in 2020, is that Aliyev might have sought to exploit a (perceived) negative trend in the Armenian-Russian partnership. This, again, supports the idea that diverse system-level variables were considered in the formulation of this foreign policy choice.

At the same time, after considering several system-level variables, we can see that such structural constraints were not *rapidly* translated into the decision to launch a war. It is noticeable that these system-level pressures took shape in the years that preceded the war and do not fully explain why a full-scale operation was particularly an option in 2020. For this reason, in the next section, I will discuss how domestic factors might have influenced the timing of the Azerbaijani offensive.

## **5.2. Domestic-Level Variables: An Agent-Oriented Analysis**

In this section, I will analyse domestic-level factors in Azerbaijan in the period 2016-2020. Even though the escalation of violence did not result in a full-scale war in 2016, this period marked a crucial turning point in the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. Therefore, the rationale for limiting the period of analysis to these two particular years is the goal of comprehending the *momentum* of decision-making. By employing a process-tracing method, allied with descriptive statistics, we will be able to observe the factors that influenced the escalation of both conflicts and the reasons why a final military solution was pursued in 2020.

The structure of this section is organized as follows. First, I will examine Azerbaijan's extractive capacity, and highlight the country's main economic challenges in the respective period. In the second subsection, state-society relations will be assessed, with particular emphasis on the social movements that erupted between the years 2018 and 2020. It is important to emphasize that, even though the leader rhetoric is also a 'state attribute', in this study it will be analysed on a different level, being the focus of the next section.

### *5.2.1. Extractive Capacity*

In this subsection, I will analyse whether the variable 'extractive capacity' is associated with conflict occurrence. Here, 'extractive capacity' is measured through indicators related to the Azerbaijani economy, and more specifically, to the oil industry's performance. As mentioned above, the focus on this particular industry is justified by the influence it exerts on the state's macroeconomic stability, politics, and social welfare. Before examining economic indicators in 2016 and 2020, I start this subsection

with a brief historical recapitulation. Through this short historical analysis, we will be able to comprehend the origins of Azerbaijan's dependence on hydrocarbon resources.

The development of Azerbaijan's energy sector is strongly connected to the country's transition to a market economy, after the fall of the Soviet Union. Even though Azerbaijan had been an energy hub in the USSR during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (especially during the Second World War), the state of its economy was extremely precarious after 1991<sup>23</sup>. For instance, in the years 1992-1995 the country's GDP fell by 60% (de Waal, 2010). In this scenario, the economic challenges were aggravated by the conflict in N-K and by internal power struggles.

The return of Heydar Aliyev<sup>24</sup> to power, in 1994, is seen as the driver of economic and political stabilisation. This is because, under Aliyev's rule, a cease-fire agreement was negotiated with Armenia, and a program of macroeconomic stability was pursued. In this context, oil revenues were seen as a way of funding such state reforms and promoting foreign investments (Cornell, 2015). Indeed, international oil companies (e.g., British Petroleum) played a fundamental role in the industry's revival. According to Mustafayev (2015), more than \$55 billion have been attracted through 30 Production Sharing Agreements (PSAs) in the period between 1991-2015. This shows us that, in the twenty-first century, the Azeri economy experienced rapid and sustained economic growth, led by oil production.

Beyond the economic dimension, oil revenues played a vital role in financing government spendings in infrastructure projects and social welfare programs. Oil rents (i.e., profits) not only allowed the state to implement such social initiatives but also granted the leader a source of patronage. For that reason, Azerbaijan's energy industry cannot be disconnected from regime stability and survival (Guliyev, 2013). Of course, such revenues also played an important role in the country's military security. With substantial financial resources coming from oil exports, Azerbaijan could allocate significant funds to build and maintain its armed forces.

Having briefly stated the oil industry's importance for Azerbaijan, I may now assess the hydrocarbon sector's performance in the years 2016-2020. This interval, in fact, comprehends two significant events in the international energy markets. First, in

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<sup>23</sup> For a comprehensive examination of the oil industry's development in Azerbaijan, see Hastings (2020).

<sup>24</sup> Heydar Aliyev served as the First Secretary of the Azerbaijan Communist Party in the USSR.

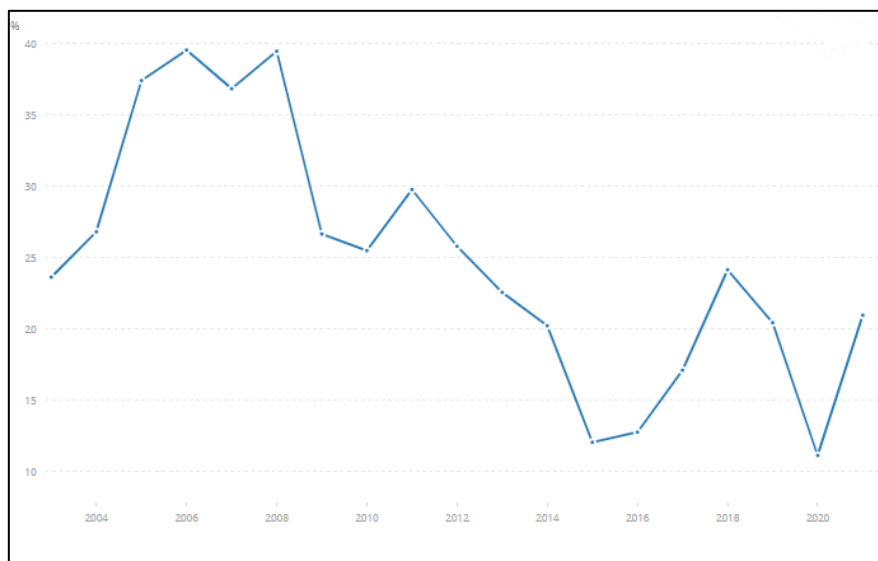
the period between 2014-2016, oil prices suffered an expressive decline. According to the World Bank (2018), the 70% decline was one of the most significant drops for this commodity since the Second World War. The oversupply of oil, maintained by the high-level production in the US and OPEC countries, is considered to be one of the main reasons why oil prices plunged.<sup>25</sup> In 2020, another expressive downgrade occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent decline of economic activity on a global scale.

Such negative shocks highly impacted Azerbaijan's economy. These two events may be identified in the graphs below. In Figure 7, we may observe the sharp decline in Azerbaijan's oil rents<sup>26</sup> in the years 2016 and 2020. As a consequence, the Gross National Income (GNI) also contracted, as we can see in Figure 8. This represented a reversal in the positive growth path enjoyed by the country in the oil boom years. Overall, they show that Azerbaijan's reliance on hydrocarbon resources makes the real economy vulnerable to fluctuations in the international energy markets.

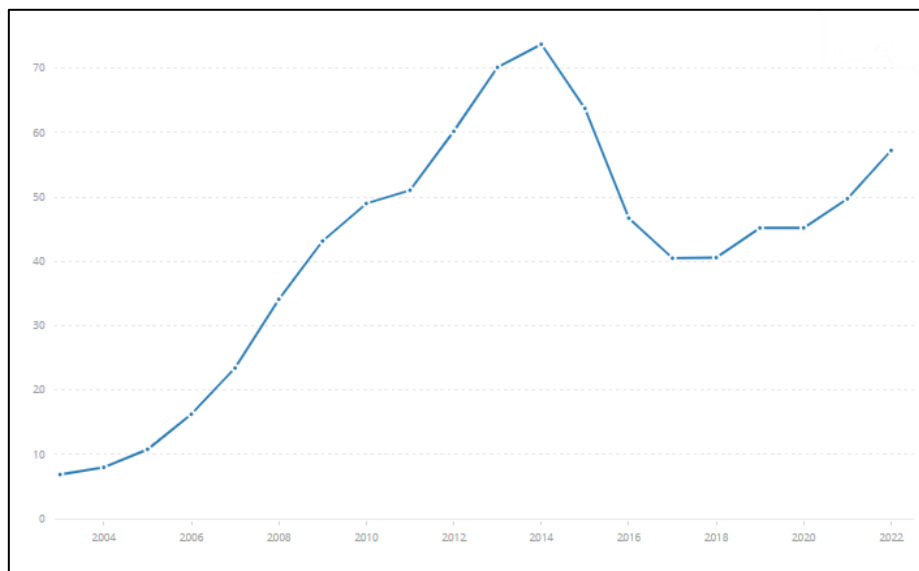
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<sup>25</sup> World Bank (2018) What triggered the oil price plunge of 2014-2016 and why it failed to deliver an economic impetus in eight charts. Available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/what-triggered-oil-price-plunge-2014-2016-and-why-it-failed-deliver-economic-impetus-eight-charts>

<sup>26</sup> According to the World Bank, 'Oil rents are the difference between the value of crude oil production at regional prices and total costs of production' (World Bank, 2023).

**Figure 7 - Oil Rents (% of GDP)**

Note. In the chart, we can see the fluctuations in oil rents) in the period 2003-2020. The 'boom' noted in the early 2000s can be attributed to the construction of the BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) pipeline, a major oil transportation route that carries Azerbaijani oil from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. World Bank (2023). In <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PETR.RT.ZS?locations=AZ>.

**Figure 8 - Gross National Income (USD Billion)**

Note. The chart shows the performance of the indicator 'Gross National Income' (GNI) in the period 2003-2020. The sharp decrease, in the year 2014, occurred due to a significant oil price drop in international markets. From: World Bank (2023). In <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.MKTP.CD?locations=AZ>. Consulted on 23.07.23.

Similarly, in the chart below (Figure 9), we can see how the structure of Azerbaijan's exports responded to such external shocks. We must bear in mind that the share of oil-related products in the country's total exports was around 90% (OECD, 2019) in 2016, and 87.25% in 2020 (World Bank, 2020). Therefore, even though the graph does not show the specific share of oil exports, it is clear that they were responsible for such sharp fluctuations. Due to the lack of economic diversification, Azerbaijan thus experienced a significant decrease in export revenues, which led to a deterioration of the government's fiscal position.

**Figure 9 - Azerbaijan Exports (USD Thousand)**

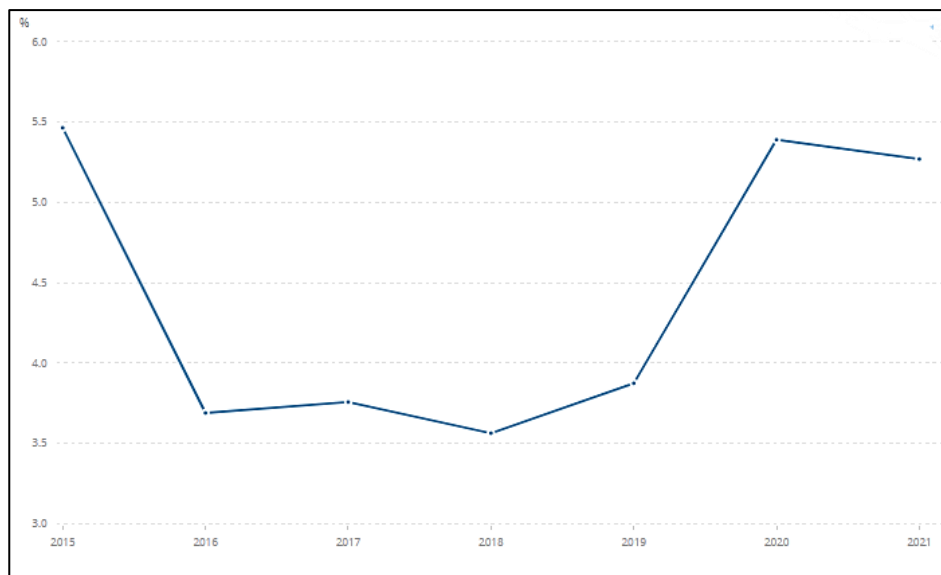


*Note. This chart demonstrates the performance of Azerbaijan's exports from 2003-2020. From: Trading Economics (2023). In: <https://tradingeconomics.com/azerbaijan/exports>. Consulted on 23.07.23.*

After assessing the effects of price shocks on the Azerbaijani economy, we may reflect on its consequences over the N-K conflict and the war timing. As we can see, the periods of lower extraction capacity (2016 and 2020) coincide with conflict escalation in N-K. This causal relation is, in a certain way, puzzling: after all, as oil revenues decrease, the available funds for militarization also diminish. This is because, in such a context, states inevitably face a trade-off in terms of resource allocation and may often reduce investments in the military sector. Therefore, the worsening of such economic indicators is one possible reason why Azerbaijan has not pursued a full-scale military operation in 2016. However, despite a lower extractive capacity in 2020 (due to another

oil price drop and the COVID pandemic), the country engaged in significant military investments, as we can see below (Figure 10):

**Figure 10 - Azerbaijan's Military Expenditure (% of GDP)**



*Note:* Chart retrieved from *The World Bank* (2023). In: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=AZ>. Consulted on 23.07.23.

What could be the rationale for this resource allocation? The long-established potential of armed conflict in Karabakh, of course, justifies an increase in military expenditure. I advance, however, that despite the geopolitical factor, the worsening of Azerbaijan's economic conditions (and their social effects) also shaped the timing of Aliyev's decision. In 2020, as we have discussed, the state budget was affected by another sharp oil price drop. In this scenario, the COVID-19 pandemic accentuated the country's socioeconomic challenges, such as increasing unemployment and poverty rates. According to a report published by Ilaha Abasli (2020), Azerbaijan faced economic losses in the magnitude of 120-150 million manat per day — the equivalent of 71-88 million USD.

Even though the government invested in social security packages to mitigate such challenges, its results have often been ambiguous. First, some social groups did not benefit from such governmental assistance. This was the case, for example, of informal workers, a sector of great significance in the Azeri economy. Second, a share of the

public opinion did not assess these policies positively (Aliyev, 2021). A study conducted by Khatai Aliyev (2021) shows that the public trust in the state's policies was, overall, low. Aliyev's (2021) social survey ( $n = 2.174$ ) demonstrates that a significant portion of respondents (29%) totally disagreed with the government's policies. If we include the share of participants that slightly disagreed (12%) or were neutral (18%) about the COVID-19 policies, then this means that almost 60% of the sample did not openly approve of the government's measures.

Therefore, in this case, the hypothesis (H3) "*the greater the extractive capacity, the greater the flexibility for a war-prone FPC*" was falsified by our empirical observation. We have identified that, in Azerbaijan, the eruption of conflict was more likely when the country faced lower extractive capacity. Yet, this is an interesting finding that strengthens the argument that domestic factors were important for the timing of Aliyev's decision. Even more, the results are aligned with the assumptions of the so-called 'diversionary war theory'. As mentioned before, the rationale behind this theory is that war may be used as a tool to manage internal unrest, such as the unpopularity of leaders and poor economic performance. To further confirm the validity of these assumptions, I will now examine some aspects of state-society relations in Azerbaijan.

### 5.2.2. State-Society Relations

In this subsection, I will assess Azerbaijan's state-society relations before the Second Karabakh War. Here, this variable is measured through the indicators 'social demonstrations' and 'level of civil liberties'. Before delving into the research findings, it is first important to reflect on the issue of data availability and reliability. This is because, due to the government's media restrictions and lack of transparency, accessing such social indicators is a challenging task. In this context, and with limited access to primary sources, the reports published by independent media and international observers turned out to be major sources of data collection.

The annual reports published by the Freedom House, an independent organization that assesses democracy in the world, provide extensive information on the nature of Azerbaijan's state-society relations. One relevant piece of information, in this context, is the level of media freedom. By comparing the country's performance in the

period 2017-2021, it is noticeable that the level of political and civil liberties throughout the years has decreased. When it comes to freedom of expression, the 2017 Country Report emphasized the tight governmental control over media outlets and the repression of journalists and independent media (Freedom House, 2017). In the COVID-19 pandemic scenario, the level of civil liberties decreased further. Azerbaijan's Country Report, published in 2021, showed an accentuated government control over the press and online media in 2020, including those involved in pandemic-related reports (Freedom House, 2021).

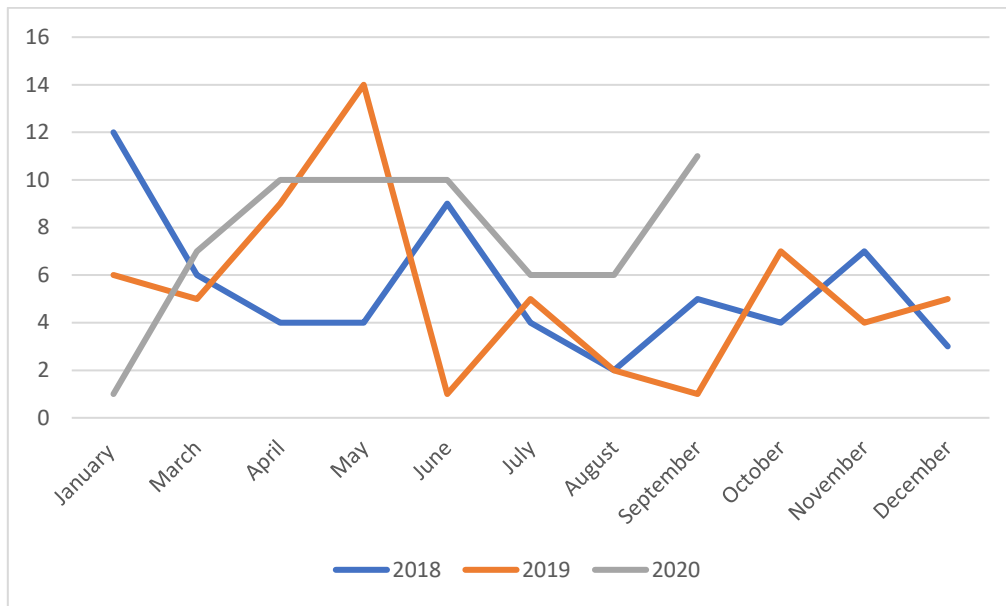
Considering such restrictions, I have not relied on governmental sources to collect data on social demonstrations. Instead, I have retrieved data from the ACLED<sup>27</sup> (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) datasets. In particular, my data source is the 'Conflict Data for Azerbaijan' dataset (2023), which provides an extensive tracking of political violence events, including details such as the interaction type, involved actors, location, and date. It is noteworthy that the dataset relies on independent data sources, such as independent media outlets. The ACLED project thus provides us with the possibility of assessing the level of social discontent in the country, besides the tight government control over media.

The data availability in ACLED's dataset commences in January 2018. From this date, the criteria for data collection were established as follows. First, I have excluded all the events categorized as 'battles', as they represent armed clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Secondly, I have refined the data collection once again, focusing on social movements of various sorts (e.g., protests, riots, violence against civilians). In total, in the period between January 2018 and September 2020, two hundred and two social demonstrations were identified. In the chart below (Figure 11), we may observe the number of events per year. Note that, in 2020, a correlation between growing social demonstrations and the timing of war can be verified.

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<sup>27</sup> The ACLED datasets can be retrieved from the website <https://acleddata.com/>.

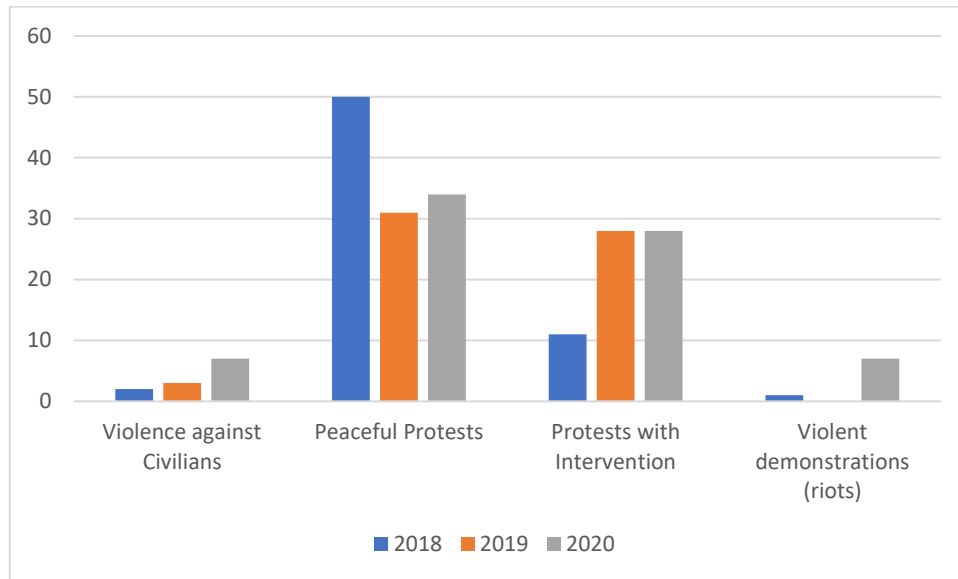
**Figure 11 - Social Demonstrations (2018-2020)**



*Note. The chart shows the frequency of social demonstration per month, in the period between January 2018 and September 2020. Source: elaborated by the author, based on data retrieved from ACLED'S 'Conflict Data for Azerbaijan' dataset (2023).*

A qualitative analysis of the data above reveals four main patterns of social mobilization, namely: (i) violence against civilians; (ii) peaceful protests; (iii) protests with state intervention; and (iv) violent demonstrations, i.e., riots. In the chart below (Figure 9), I have categorized the occurrence of such events per year. It is noticeable that, even though social mobilizations (in the form of peaceful protests) were particularly robust in the year 2018, there was a gradual change toward more violent forms of state-society interactions in 2020.

**Figure 12 - Demonstration Type per Year (2018-2020)**



*Note. The column chart shows the frequency of specific types of social demonstrations in Azerbaijan, in the period 2018-2020. Source: elaborated by the author, based on data retrieved from ACLED'S 'Conflict Data for Azerbaijan' dataset (2023).*

It is also important to reflect on the events' geographical location. In Figure 13, we can see the 'heat maps' of the collected social demonstrations. By looking at the hotspots throughout the years, it is perceptible that the protests are not concentrated in Baku. This reveals widespread grievances and concerns in various regions, which are also illustrative of broader dissatisfaction with government policies. Yet, in 2020, the concentration of protests in Azerbaijan's capital certainly increased the level of pressure on the central government. This helps us to comprehend, for example, the employment of higher security tactics as a response to such protests.

**Figure 13 - Hotspots of Social Protests (2018-2020)**



*Note. The three heat maps show the social demonstrations' geographical location in the period 2018-2020. Source: elaborated by the author in Google Data Studio, based on data retrieved from ACLED'S 'Conflict Data for Azerbaijan' dataset (2023).*

Finally, the data presented above allows us to test the second domestic-level hypothesis, namely “*the stronger the state-society relations, the more war-prone is the foreign policy choice*” (H4). Based on the charts and maps, I advance that the timing of war is not connected to stronger state-society relations, but to weaker ones. This result falsifies H4. Several factors allow us to characterize these relations as ‘weak’, such as increasingly limited civil liberties, the higher level of social discontent, the rising number of repressive measures, and the pressuring location of protests. These findings, again, corroborate the diversionary theory’s argument: the launching of war, in 2020, might have been a resort to divert the population’s attention from particular domestic issues and grievances — and therefore safeguard the regime’s stability.

### **5.3. Individual Level: A Turn to Offensive Diplomacy**

Finally, I move to the individual level of analysis. The goal of this subsection is to comprehend whether the launching and the timing of a full-scale war may be connected to a change in the leader’s perception regarding the conflict. To test this hypothesis, I will conduct a content analysis of Ilham Aliyev’s presidential speeches in the years 2016 and 2020. Such statements are available on the President of the Republic

of Azerbaijan's official website<sup>28</sup>, under the category 'Speeches'. The selection criterion has both a temporal and thematic component: the collected statements were the ones published before the respective escalations (e.g., Four-Day War and Second Karabakh War), and touched upon the topics of conflict and security.

In total, 32 speeches were collected and coded, using the NVivo 14 software. The codes were generated through an inductive procedure. As defined by Chandra and Shang (2019), inductive coding "refers to a data analysis process whereby the researcher reads and interprets raw textual data to develop concepts, themes or a process model through interpretations based on data" (Chandra & Shang, 2019: 91). The process thus started with a systematic examination of the presidential speeches, in which specific labels (codes) were applied. After coding the texts' segments, I have categorized the codes into three broader categories, namely: (i) international relations, (ii) Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and (iii) state capabilities. The codebooks, with specific labels and meanings, can be found in the Appendices.

I start this subsection with an examination of leader images before the Four-Day War, that is, the perceptions that were announced between January and April 2016. The first element that stands out is how President Aliyev perceived Azerbaijan's place in the international system, in 2016. The coding results show that, before the Four-Day War, Aliyev did not manifest a particularly offensive view of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. We must note that a debate of utmost importance in the international arena, at that time, was the Syrian refugee crisis. In that context, one recurrent theme in the leader's speeches was the need for an active engagement in humanitarian efforts and post-conflict reconstruction. From the President's perspective, 'we [Azerbaijan], as a country which suffered from these enormous economic and social difficulties, know how to do it'<sup>29</sup>. In 2016, therefore, the idea of 'active diplomacy' occupied a central role in the leader images.

The pursuit of active diplomacy was manifested, at the discursive level, in two particular ways. First, the leader emphasized Azerbaijan's growing 'international

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<sup>28</sup> The speeches were retrieved from the website <https://president.az/en>.

<sup>29</sup> Aliyev, I. (2016) Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the "Supporting Syria and the Region Conference" in London <https://president.az/en/articles/view/17957>. Consulted on 15.07.23.

authority<sup>30</sup> and reputation as a reliable partner. In his view, participation in several international events, added to the wide scope of official state visits<sup>31</sup>, was indicative of a prestigious international position. Secondly, Aliyev expressed a particular commitment to promoting unity, solidarity, and cooperation between Muslim-majority countries, reassuring that ‘Azerbaijan is an integral part of the Muslim world’<sup>32</sup>.

Even though the ties with Muslim-majority countries were often reassured, it is noticeable that no particular emphasis had been assigned to the Turkish-Azerbaijani partnership. In fact, throughout the discourses, greater attention was given to the trilateral arrangements in the region, such as Azerbaijan-Iran-Russia, or Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey (which were coded as ‘regional cooperation’). It is noteworthy that such tripartite initiatives were not strongly connected to military security but were mostly related to energy and transport projects. We must bear in mind that while the region was often depicted as an area of cooperation, the leader also perceived it as an area of growing instability, and therefore required close monitoring.

Having assessed how the president framed the country’s international position, we may now analyse his perceptions of state capabilities. Before the 2016 escalation, we can see that the debate regarding military power was not a salient feature of the presidential discourses. In fact, Azerbaijan’s economic performance was one of the most frequent themes in all the analysed speeches for the respective year. As I have discussed in the previous section, one of the reasons why the economic agenda occupied such a central position in the leader discourses was the drastic fall of oil prices. As oil revenues constitute a major feature of the state budget, overcoming this external shock became a national priority. Therefore, a great majority of the speeches revolved around the government’s efforts to promote macroeconomic stability, and the efforts to reduce the country’s dependence on oil resources.

In the social sphere, the 2016 presidential statements highlighted Azerbaijan's status as a multiethnic and multi-confessional country. By reviewing the main codes in the 2016 discourses, we may notice a sense of pride in the country's commitment to

<sup>30</sup> Aliyev, I. (2016) Opening speech by Ilham Aliyev at the meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers dedicated to the results of socioeconomic development of 2015 and objectives for the future. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/17441>. Consulted on 15.07.23.

<sup>31</sup> Aliyev, I. (2016) Opening speech by Ilham Aliyev at the meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers dedicated to the results of the first quarter of 2016 and objectives for the future. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/19266>. Consulted on 15.07.23.

<sup>32</sup> Aliyev, I. (2016) Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Imamzade religious complex in Ganja. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/18061>. Consulted on 15.07.23.

multiculturalism, and its goal to serve as a role model for other nations. Even though a commitment to national values had also been manifested, this was not strongly linked to militarization efforts. When it comes to security, Azerbaijan was described by its leader as a country able to defend itself. The president advanced, for instance, that ‘the Azerbaijani people are the guarantor of stability in Azerbaijan’, and that ‘we [Azerbaijanis] provide for our security ourselves’<sup>33</sup>. Even more, Aliyev reassured that the nation did not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries and focused on its own development.

Finally, regarding the leader’s perceptions of the conflict in N-K, some particular discursive markers stood out. First, it is possible to see a continuation of the president’s firm stance on the issue of territorial integrity, besides a reassurance that the international community considers N-K as an integral part of Azerbaijan. One distinctive feature of the 2016 speeches was the focus on the *causes* of the peace talks’ stagnation. In this context, two major reasons have been often reiterated. First, in Aliyev’s view, Armenian representatives had been deliberately prolonging the negotiations to maintain the status quo. He manifested that ‘Armenia does not want peace, tries to maintain the status quo as much as possible, does not want to vacate the occupied territories, perceives the talks simply as a process, gains time, and wants to see the negotiations as a never-ending process’<sup>34</sup>. Distinct terms were employed to characterize Armenia’s position in the conflict, such as ‘act of genocide’<sup>35</sup>, ‘ethnic cleansing’, and ‘historical injustice’.

Added to this, the president was critical of the mediators’ role, such as the OSCE’s Minsk Group. He often expressed the perception that the OSCE’s mediation efforts were ultimately destructive and served to maintain the status quo on the ground. In the leader’s view, one of the reasons for international passivity vis-à-vis the negotiation process was the religious factor. He advanced that ‘we [Azerbaijani] are Muslims, so we are treated with double standards, especially in the current period when

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<sup>33</sup> Aliyev, I. (2016) Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the meeting with a group of Azerbaijani youth. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/17701>. Consulted on 16.07.23.

<sup>34</sup> Aliyev, I. (2016) Opening speech by Ilham Aliyev at the meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers dedicated to the results of socioeconomic development of 2015 and objectives for the future. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/17441>. Consulted on 17.07.23.

<sup>35</sup> Aliyev, I. (2016) Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the meeting of the Security Council under the President of Azerbaijan. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/19323>. Consulted on 17.07.23.

Islamophobia in Europe has reached its peak<sup>36</sup>. Yet, one striking feature of the 2016 speeches is the commitment to a diplomatic solution. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April, during the violent clashes between the sides, the president manifested that:

“We are trying to resolve the issue peacefully. I have repeatedly stated this, and I want to say it again today: we want a peaceful solution to the issue. We do not want war. We do not want to shed blood. We do not want young people to die. We do not want mothers to shed tears. We do not want Azerbaijani and Armenian mothers to shed tears.”<sup>37</sup>. (Aliyev, 2016)

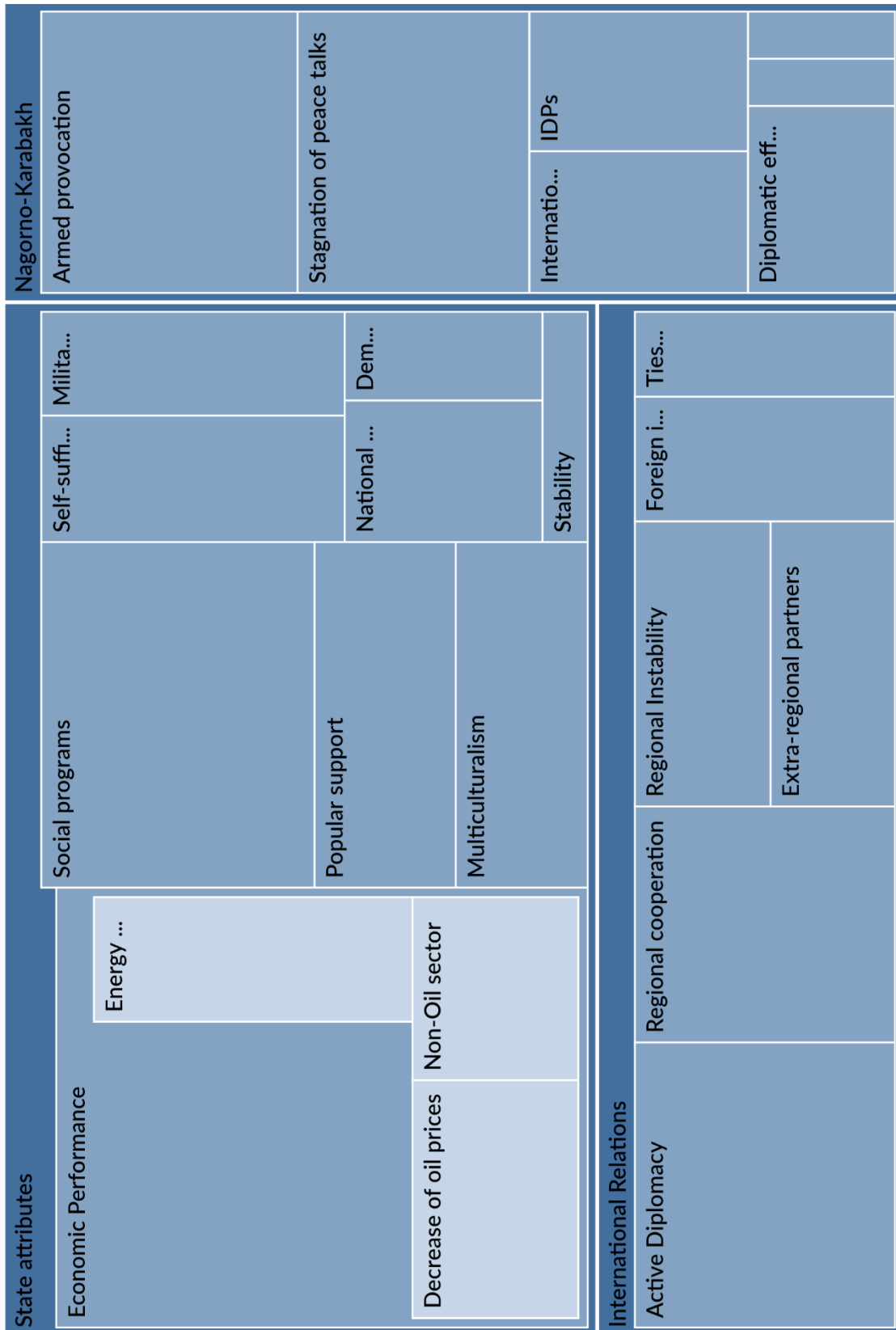
Therefore, by analysing the 2016 speeches, domestic and individual factors seem to have played an important role in conflict de-escalation. Before the Four-Day War, the leader did not express strong prospects for a final military solution and reassured that the diplomatic alternative was still on the table. The major themes in the leader images may be summarized as follows:

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<sup>36</sup> Aliyev, I. (2016) Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the meeting with a group of Azerbaijani youth. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/17701>. Consulted on 17.07.23.

<sup>37</sup> Aliyev, I. (2016) Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the meeting of the Security Council under the President of Azerbaijan. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/19323>. Consulted on 17.07.23.

Figure 14 - Hierarchy of Codes (2016 Speeches)



Note. Elaborated by the author in the Nvivo 14 Plus Software.

In 2020, however, the perceptions of the leader had dramatically changed. In this period of analysis, the speeches, encompassing the period from January to September 2020, were also categorized under the same broader themes (i.e., international relations, N-K conflict, and state capabilities). Yet, as we will see, the codes associated with them are noticeably distinct. By the end of this subsection, the 2020 codes will be presented and compared with the ones in the previous period.

As done above, we shall start with a qualitative assessment of the discourses from January to September 2020. In terms of the leader's images regarding Azerbaijan's place in the international system, some variations are worthy of note. First of all, there is a renewed perception that Azerbaijan counts on several strategic partnerships in the international arena. Among these partners, Aliyev brings attention to the member-states of the European Union, the Council of Turkic-speaking states, and regional partners such as Georgia and Turkey. Concerning the latter, more special attention is assigned to the Turkish-Azerbaijani partnership, when compared to 2016. Adjectives such as 'brotherly'<sup>38</sup>, 'fraternal'<sup>39</sup>, and 'friendly' permeate Aliyev's speeches on the topic, and his close connection to Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is often highlighted. The statement that 'on a global scale there are no two countries as close to each other as Turkey and Azerbaijan'<sup>40</sup> is representative of this position.

Another relevant discursive change concerns the topic of international organizations and their mediating role in N-K. As we have seen, in the previous period, the leader had already demonstrated a certain discontentment about OSCE's Minsk Group, accusing it of maintaining the status quo in Armenia's favour. Yet, the prospect for negotiations within this framework was still active. In 2020, however, this criticism gained a new tone: Aliyev expressed a complete disregard for the decisions and resolutions adopted by these organizations (i.e., OSCE and the Council of Europe), and

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<sup>38</sup> Aliyev, I. (2020) Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the first session of Azerbaijani Parliament's sixth convocation. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/36133>. Consulted on 18.07.23.

<sup>39</sup> Aliyev, I. (2020) Opening speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Cabinet meeting on results of socio-economic development in first quarter of 2020 and future tasks. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/39687>. Consulted on 18.07.23.

<sup>40</sup> Aliyev, I. (2020) President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2020. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/39687>. Consulted on 18.07.23.

considered them to be insignificant<sup>41</sup>. Even more, the leader accused some external observers of ‘Azerbaijanophobia’, and no longer attributed their so-called double standards to the religious factor.

In terms of state capabilities, it is noticeable that the emphasis has shifted from Azerbaijan’s economic performance to its military capabilities. The majority of presidential speeches throughout the year 2020 have stressed the topic of army-building, bringing attention to the production and acquisition of modern weapons and other investments in the defense sector. Before the initiation of the Second Karabakh War, in September 2020, the president considered that Azerbaijan already found itself at war — and, therefore, a great emphasis was put on the idea of ‘combat-readiness’. This is clear in a statement published on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, in which the leader advanced that “army building is a priority for us [Azerbaijan]. And this is only natural because we are at war, and this being the case, all issues related to the army are of top priority.”<sup>42</sup>

Another salient feature of the 2020 speeches, in contrast to the previous period, is the various references to the political dynamics within the country. While the 2016 statements mostly focused on macroeconomic stability, in 2020 the leader urged for a deepening of political reforms and a review of the country’s legislative framework. Aliyev also expressed particular views about certain opposition groups (e.g., the Popular Front of Azerbaijan). In his statements, such groups are framed as a challenge to Azerbaijan’s stability and are often equated with enemies of the state — even ‘worse than the Armenians’<sup>43</sup>, as the leader advanced. Also, such opposition groups were often associated with the unstable political forces that ruled the state after the fall of the Soviet Union, in 1991. In this sense, the president emphasized, on several occasions, the challenges, and successes of his father (i.e., former President Heydar Aliyev) in stabilizing and developing the country.

Moreover, the speeches highlighted the support and approval of the Azerbaijani people for the government's decisions. Aliyev’s statements suggest a strong sense of

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<sup>41</sup> Aliyev, I. (2020) Opening speech by Ilham Aliyev at the meeting on the socio-economic results of the first quarter of 2020 through videoconference. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/36561>. Consulted on 18.07.23.

<sup>42</sup> Aliyev, I. (2020) Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the opening of the Defense Ministry’s military unit. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/39853>. Consulted on 18.07.23.

<sup>43</sup> Aliyev, I. (2020) Opening speech by Ilham Aliyev at the Cabinet meeting on results of socio-economic development in the first quarter of 2020 and future tasks. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/39687>. Consulted on 18.07.23.

national unity and a perceived consensus over the military operations in N-K. Also, strong attention was given to the preservation and promotion of national values and Azerbaijani identity. The leader stressed the importance of patriotism, knowledge of history, and attachment to the motherland, especially among the younger generation. In the president's view, adherence to national values would be a safeguard against assimilation and external influences, and therefore essential for the maintenance of the country's independence.

Lastly, the leader images over Armenia and the N-K conflict also underwent significant changes in 2020. Within this topic, one of the most frequent themes in the discourses was the need for a strong and offensive approach towards the conflict. Aliyev advanced, for instance, that 'the force factor in the world is coming to the fore, and we [Azerbaijan] must accumulate strength and resolve the issue in any way'<sup>44</sup>. We may notice that the intensification of the president's military rhetoric took place in July 2020, following another series of violent clashes between Armenian forces and Azerbaijani servicemen. From that particular point, the idea of *avenging* the casualties entered the leader's discourses. We must note, however, that even before this escalation, the tone used by the president already counted on a more nationalistic character. Already in May 2020, for example, the leader pointed out the need for accumulating strength, assessing the correct timing, and pursuing a final solution for the stalemate.

Perhaps the dimension that changed the most (at the level of discourse) is the leader's characterization of Armenia and its respective leadership. In 2020, Aliyev often mobilized the word 'fascist' to describe Armenia's government, besides claiming that the glorification of Nazism was a state policy in the neighbouring country. Expressions such as 'genocide', 'ethnic cleansing', 'terrorism', 'dictatorship', 'envy', and 'criminal government' permeated the presidential statements, as well as the perception that Armenia falsified historical facts to assert claims over the enclave. In this context, the president advocated that historical justice must be pursued, bringing attention to territories that, in the leader's views, were unrightfully transferred to Armenia during imperial and Soviet times (e.g., the Zangezur and Armenia's capital, Yerevan).

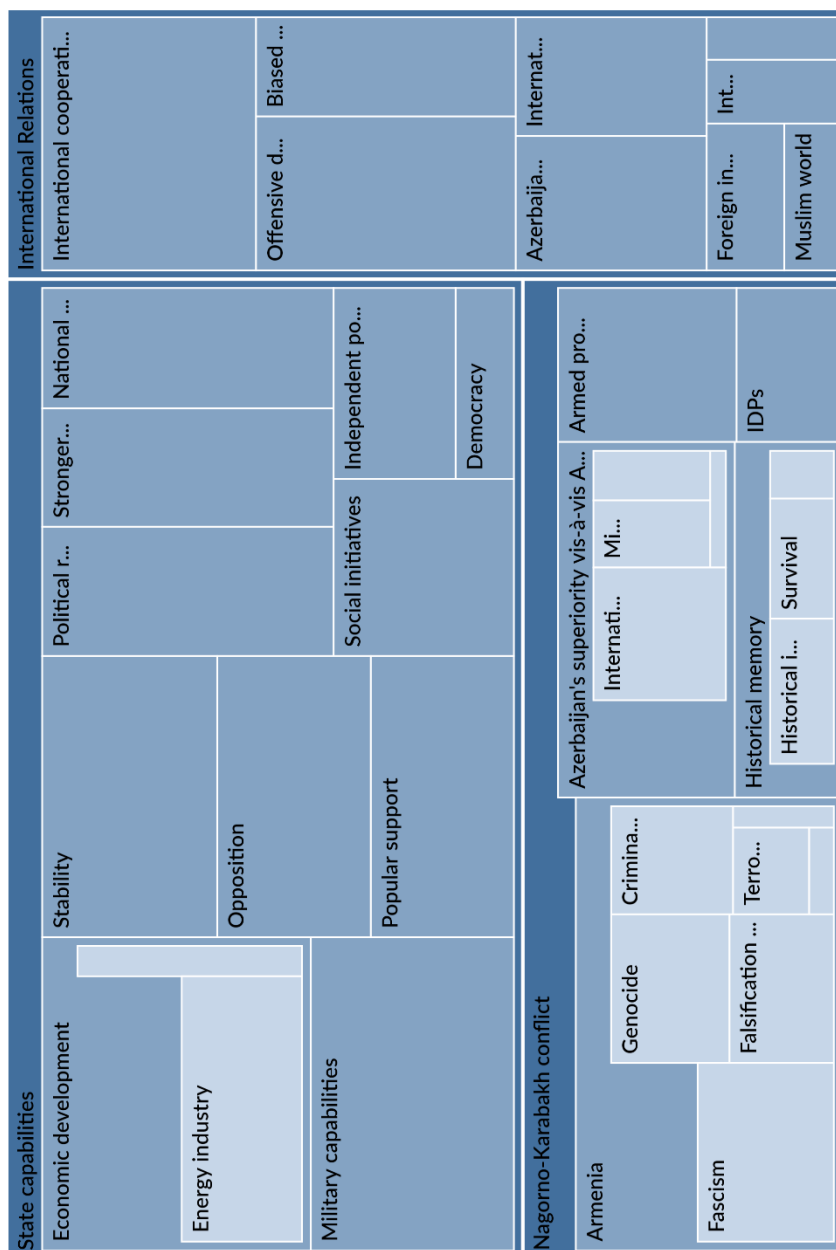
Finally, a relevant trend that is visible in the 2020 statements, and not earlier, is the leader's systematic comparison of Azerbaijan and Armenia. This comparison is not

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<sup>44</sup> Aliyev, I. (2020). Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the opening of the Defence Ministry's military unit. Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/39853>. Consulted on 18.07.23.

limited to the military realm but extends to the economic, diplomatic, moral, and intellectual dimensions. As mentioned above, such assessments were often accompanied by historical statements, which highlighted Azerbaijan’s ability to survive and establish itself as a strong and stable state. Noticeably, in 2020, the president himself acknowledged that the mobilization capacity (e.g., army volunteers) had increased after his speeches to the nation. We can observe the hierarchy of codes in 2020 below:

**Figure 15 - Hierarchy of Codes (2020 Speeches)**



*Note. Elaborated by the author, through the Nvivo 14 Plus Software.*

By comparing the presidential speeches in 2016 and 2020, I advance that the leader images are strongly connected to the timing of war. As we have discussed in the theoretical section, individual preferences, especially in more authoritarian regimes, are more likely to influence foreign policy decisions. In our case study, the degree of militarism in the leader's rhetoric is indeed associated with the eruption of the Second Karabakh War. The findings, therefore, confirm one of our working hypotheses, namely that *'the higher the degree of war rhetoric in leader images, the more war-prone the foreign policy choice'* (H5). Finally, the patterns identified in the president's speeches, as well as the number of references to a particular code, are presented in the table below:

**Table 2 - Variation in Leader Images (2016-2020)**

Leader images	2016	2020
International Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Active diplomacy (23)</li> <li>- Extra-regional partners (11)</li> <li>- Regional cooperation (6)</li> <li>- Regional instability (12)</li> <li>- Ties with the Muslim world (7)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Offensive diplomacy (14)</li> <li>- International cooperation (19)</li> <li>- Azerbaijani-Turkish partnership (9)</li> <li>- International reputation (8)</li> <li>- Foreign investments (4)</li> <li>- International instability (3)</li> <li>- Ties with the Muslim world (3)</li> <li>- Regional partners (1)</li> </ul>
State capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Economic performance (77)</li> <li>- Military potential (9)</li> <li>- Multiculturalism (13)</li> <li>- National values (8)</li> <li>- Popular support (14)</li> <li>- Self-sufficiency (11)</li> <li>- Social programs (27)</li> <li>- Democracy (5)</li> <li>- Stability (3)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Military capabilities (22)</li> <li>- Stability (17)</li> <li>- Opposition (15)</li> <li>- Popular support (14)</li> <li>- Political reforms (13)</li> <li>- Economic development (12)</li> <li>- 'Stronger' state (12)</li> <li>- National values (12)</li> <li>- Social initiatives (11)</li> <li>- Independent policy (8)</li> <li>- Democracy (4)</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Armed provocation (21)</li> <li>- Stagnation of peace talks (19)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Armed provocation (10)</li> <li>- Armenia's flaws:</li> </ul>

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Diplomatic efforts (8)</li> <li>- IDPs (9)</li> <li>- International negligence (9)</li> <li>- Historical injustice (2)</li> <li>- Ethnic cleansing (2)</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Biased external observers (9)</li> <li>- IDPs (6)</li> <li>- Azerbaijan's superiority (6)</li> <li>- Historical memory (14)</li> </ul>
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*Note. Elaborated by the author, based on the codes' frequency obtained on NVivo 14 Plus Software.*

## 6. Conclusion

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The decision to launch war is certainly one of the most critical foreign policy choices to be made by state leaders. In contrast to the widespread belief that small states are mostly influenced by systemic imperatives, this study demonstrates that several causal relations can be established between international relations, internal dynamics, and the launching of war. The level-of-analysis approach, guided by Neoclassical Realism, proved to be a valuable tool to reach this study's objectives. In this concluding chapter, I will first clarify how the results answer the proposed research questions, as well as summarize the results of hypotheses testing. In the second section, I will advance the thesis contribution to the relevant literature. In the third and last section, I propose a reflection on the limitations of this study.

This study aimed to answer two major research questions. The first is '*why did Azerbaijan decide to initiate a military operation in 2020?*'. Based on the findings, I argue that the Azerbaijani leadership chose to launch war, first, due to constraints and opportunities at the system level. After 2016, we could observe a sustained decrease in Azerbaijan's relative power vis-à-vis Armenia, which might have motivated the first to resort to military action before its relative position weakened further. Even more, the offensive's timing can be explained by the particularly high level of Azerbaijan's security partnerships — which provided Aliyev with a source of military and diplomatic support. However, I also advance that Aliyev initiated war in 2020 due to considerations of domestic nature. The data collected in this study suggests that the leader, facing economic and social challenges within Azerbaijan, may have resorted to war as a diversionary tactic to preserve regime stability. I will explore the validity of the diversionary argument later in this chapter.

The second research question I expected to answer is '*how did systemic, domestic, and individual variables influence the outbreak of the Second Karabakh War?*'. We may start with a discussion on how the system impacted the timing of the conflict. Here, the systemic attributes were measured through two variables: relative power and security partnerships. Their effects on the timing of war, as I have shown, were not always straightforward. For example, the military dimension of relative power does not explain the timing of Aliyev's decision, but relative *economic* power does.

After data collection and analysis, it was evident that conflict escalation is more likely when Azerbaijan's economic power vis-à-vis Armenia is lower.

The level of 'security partnerships' was also positively associated with the timing of this particular decision. As I have demonstrated, the 44-Day War was preceded by a sharp increase in the number and strength of Azerbaijan's security partnerships. In particular, the dyadic relations between the conflicting parties and their regional allies (i.e., the security partnerships between Azerbaijan-Turkey and Armenia-Russia) seem to have exerted a significant influence on Aliyev's foreign policy choice. This reveals that systemic pressures in the N-K conflict have a strong *regional* component.

Second, we must reflect on the impacts of domestic-level intervening variables on the timing of war. In this study, I have chosen to examine two intervening variables: extractive capacity and state-society relations. Here, one important finding was that internal economic challenges (or low extractive capacity) were strongly associated with the timing of conflict escalation — both in 2016 and 2020. The research also revealed a strong impact of state-society relations on the decision to launch war: this course of action was chosen when state-society relations were particularly weak. The 'weakness' of such relations was evident in the increased number of social demonstrations (and their violent repression), and in the worsening of civil liberties in 2020.

Third, individual perceptions were also connected to the timing of war. It is true that, throughout the decades, presidential speeches (on both sides) were marked by clashing views on the future of N-K. However, by comparing Aliyev's presidential statements in 2016 and 2020, we could observe that the 44-Day War was preceded by a singular change in the leader images. Among these changes, the discursive turn to offensive diplomacy, as well as the more aggressive tone when referring to Armenia, stood out. Therefore, instead of considering that the launching of war was simply a reactionary move against Armenia (an argument seen in the literature), the research findings show several internal drivers for this particular foreign policy choice.

We shall also return to the working hypotheses and observe to what extent they were validated or falsified. At the system level, my hypotheses were (H1) '*the greater the RP, the more war-prone is the FPC*' and (H2) '*the greater the SP, the more war-prone is the FPC*'. While H2 was promptly confirmed in the analysis of security

partnerships, H1 was not fully verified empirically. Note that, in the theoretical chapter, I have discussed the importance of relative power for system-level approaches. Given that this variable seems to have no outstanding influence on the timing of the N-K conflict, the analysis of domestic-level factors gained even further relevance.

At the domestic level, two hypotheses were set, namely (H3) *'the greater the EC, the greater the flexibility for a war-prone FPC'* and (H4) *'the stronger the SSR, the more war-prone is the FPC'*. Both hypotheses were falsified by empirical evidence: the timing of war is, in fact, associated with a period of lower EC, and weak SSR. One interesting finding was that, even in the context of low EC (due to a decrease in state revenues), Azerbaijan's leadership significantly invested in the military sector. As the decision to launch war was made in a context of particularly low SSR, the diversionary theory's argument found empirical validity.

Also, the analysis of individual-level perceptions allowed us to confirm hypothesis (H5) *'the higher the degree of war rhetoric in LI, the greater the likelihood of a war-prone FPC'* and to fulfil one of the research objectives (i.e., compare the leadership rhetoric over time and observe potential variations that may be connected to the timing of war). In this study, I carried out a content analysis of Aliyev's presidential speeches in 2016 and 2020, using an inductive coding technique. In the analysis, three main themes stood out: international relations, N-K conflict, and state capabilities. By examining these overarching themes in both periods, we could observe that the leader images varied significantly in the 2016 and 2020 escalations. Regarding international relations, Aliyev advanced a more offensive foreign policy behaviour, besides emphasizing Azerbaijan's military build-up. We could also notice a shift in the way the leader described the 'enemy', and a more nationalistic approach when addressing state capabilities.

To sum up, this thesis aimed to comprehend the timing of Azerbaijan's decision to initiate war against Armenia. The puzzle that led to this question emerged from an empirical observation: if the conditions for a full-scale conflict were long-set, what explains this course of action in 2020? By examining the literature, I have concluded that while most analyses focused on the causes at the international level (and on Armenia's provocations), few studies have considered the internal incentives for this foreign policy decision. Therefore, I aimed to fill this gap in literature and to test certain hypotheses at distinct levels of analysis. The results presented above show a strong

correlation between Azerbaijan's domestic conditions and the timing of war. Even more, through an extensive content analysis of Ilham Aliyev's presidential speeches, this study was able to explore a dimension often neglected in IR and FPA analyses (i.e., the individual level).

### **6.1. Contributions to the literature**

I advance that this thesis contributes to the emerging literature on the Second Karabakh War in three particular ways. First, this study went beyond the description of events that preceded the 2020 escalation. In the thesis operationalization, I sought to establish specific parameters for data collection and evaluation over time. Even though concepts such as 'balance of power' and 'security allies' may not be exclusive to this work, I aimed to define the variables and indicators in a systematic and tangible manner. By doing so, we were able to examine their performance over time and comprehend why the circumstances in 2020 were singular.

Secondly, this study sought to explore Azerbaijan's domestic landscape in more detail. As explained in the literature review, the majority of the existing works have focused on the international context, or the developments in Armenia after the Velvet Revolution. This means, in other words, that little attention has been paid to the environment in which the foreign policy decision was made. Therefore, this thesis adds to this discussion by shedding light on Azerbaijan's domestic landscape in 2020.

Third, the research findings (particularly at the domestic level of analysis) support the diversionary theory's argument, which is a new interpretation of this particular conflict. It is important to note that, while the 2016 escalation is often explained through the diversionary theory's argument, this interpretation was not salient in the works on the 44-Day War. However, our domestic-level level analysis supports the assumption that, facing domestic discontent and growing concerns over the country's economic stability, Aliyev may have sought a diversionary tactic to redirect public attention away from such internal issues.

As I have mentioned before, the existing works have also extensively interpreted the war as a reaction to Armenia's internal developments. In this research, I do not neglect the role of perceived provocations, but advance that the decision to go to war

was also filtered by the pressures the leader faced from within Azerbaijan. By engaging in a military conflict with Armenia over N-K, Aliyev attempted to foster a sense of unity and nationalism in Azerbaijani society, which was also promoted at the discursive level.

## **6.2. Research limitations**

Having clarified the research contributions, I will now discuss the research limitations. The first topic we must reflect on is the issues of validity and reliability of the chosen indicators. Concerning the validity of indicators, one may question if the collected data accurately measured what we intended to. It is true that, even though the indicators were relevant within our particular theoretical framework, I have often incurred a certain simplification (for example, measuring ‘security partnerships’ through the number of joint military exercises). One major reason for this simplification was the lack of accessible data for more comprehensive indicators.

As seen in this study, I have relied on several indicators of numerical nature, especially when analysing economic data. Even though I have relied on data sources that are external to the conflicting parties (e.g., international organizations’ reports and datasets), we may also question the reliability of such indicators. This is because Azerbaijan policymakers, like other authoritarian regimes do, can potentially distort certain data to suit their political agenda.

Second, I must also acknowledge the limitations posed by the language barrier and the overall lack of Azerbaijani language sources. When collecting data from primary resources (e.g., presidential speeches), I have relied on available translations. Therefore, particularly when examining the leader images, the use of primary sources in their original language may have revealed other tones and nuances — and incur, for instance, in a distinct set of codes.

Another limitation of this research concerns the lack of fieldwork and in-depth interviews with policymakers. The fieldwork would have benefited, in particular, the analysis of state-society relations — which is, perhaps, the most difficult variable to assess in an authoritarian context. The interviews with policymakers would also have allowed for a better understanding of the constraints faced in the making of foreign policy, and the motivations behind this specific decision of launching war.

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## 8. Appendices

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### Appendix 1 – 2016 Speeches' Codebook

Name	Description
<b>International Relations</b>	Statements made by Ilham Aliyev which are related to interactions with other countries.
Active Diplomacy	Instances where Ilham Aliyev emphasized a proactive role in the diplomatic arena.
Extra-Regional Partners	References to states outside the South Caucasus and its immediate neighbouring states.
Regional Cooperation	References to partnerships within the South Caucasus region.
Regional Instability	Instances where the president emphasized security and instability in the South Caucasus.
Ties with the Muslim World	Statements related to Azerbaijan's connections with Muslim-majority countries.
Foreign Investments	Statements in which the leader discussed the attraction of foreign investments, as a way of fostering development.
<b>Nagorno-Karabakh</b>	References to the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute over N-K
Armed Provocation	Instances where the president referred to aggressive provocations by Armenia.
Diplomatic Efforts	Instances where Aliyev proposed a diplomatic solution to the N-K conflict.
Ethnic Cleansing	References made by Aliyev to the forced displacement of ethnic Azerbaijani populations from certain regions due to the N-K conflict.
Historical Injustice	Aliyev's comments on historical grievances that are related to the current N-K dispute.
IDPs	Statements related to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and the challenges faced by these citizens.
International Negligence	Instances where the president implied that the international community gives insufficient attention to the N-K issue.

Name	Description
Stagnation of Peace Talks	References to the lack of progress in the formal negotiation process.
<b>State Capabilities</b>	Codes related to Azerbaijan's national attributes.
Democracy	References to the leader's commitment to democratic governance.
Economic Performance	References to the overall economic landscape in Azerbaijan.
Decrease of Oil Prices	Instances where the president acknowledged the effects of falling oil rents.
Energy Industry	Statements related to Azerbaijan's energy industry, including energy-related projects.
Non-Oil Sector	References to economic diversification (beyond the oil sector).
Military Potential	Statements related to the development of Azerbaijan's military capabilities.
Multiculturalism	Instances where the president emphasized the multicultural character of Azerbaijan's society.
National Values	References to the preservation and promotion of national values.
Popular Support	Instances in which the leader emphasized that the government's policies count on popular support.
Self-sufficiency	References to Azerbaijan's efforts to obtain economic and security self-sufficiency.
Social Programs	Statements related to social initiatives implemented by Aliyev's government.
Stability	References to stability within Azerbaijan.

## Appendix 2 - 2020 Speeches' Codebook

Name	Description
<b>International Relations</b>	Statements made by Ilham Aliyev related to interactions with other countries.
Azerbaijani-Turkish Partnership	Instances where President Aliyev specifically referred to the close ties between Azerbaijan and Turkey.
Foreign investments	Statements in which the leader discussed the attraction of foreign investments, as a way of fostering development.
International cooperation	Remarks about Azerbaijan's cooperation with other nations (beyond the South Caucasus).
International Instability	References to instability in international relations (globally).
International reputation	Stances where the leader emphasized Azerbaijan's prestigious position in the international arena.
Muslim world	Statements related to Azerbaijan's connections with Muslim-majority countries.
Offensive diplomacy	Instances where Aliyev defended a more assertive foreign policy behaviour.
Regional cooperation	References to partnerships within the South Caucasus region.
<b>Nagorno-Karabakh conflict</b>	References to the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute over N-K.
Biased external observers	Perceptions of an unfair judgement from other countries and organizations.
Armed provocation	Instances where the president referred to aggressive provocations by Armenia.
Armenia	Broader code that encompasses specific views on Armenia.
<i>Criminal government</i>	Instances when the president suggested that Armenia's government is involved in illegal activities.
<i>Envy</i>	Perceptions of jealousy from Armenians.

Name	Description
<i>Falsification of history</i>	Statements in which the leader claims that Armenia's government manipulates historical events to justify its claim over N-K.
<i>Fascism</i>	Instances when Aliyev accused Armenia's government of fascist ideology.
<i>Genocide</i>	Claims that Armenia committed genocide against Azerbaijani people (e.g., references to the Khojaly massacre).
<i>Isolation of Armenia</i>	References to Armenia's isolation in the international system.
<i>Terrorism</i>	Statements that characterized Armenia as a 'terrorist' state.
Azerbaijan's superiority vis-à-vis Armenia	Instances in which Aliyev compared Azerbaijan and Armenia.
<i>Economic superiority</i>	Statements about Azerbaijan's economic strength in relation to Armenia.
<i>Intellectual superiority</i>	Claims that Azerbaijan possesses higher intellectual achievements.
<i>International support</i>	Perceptions that Azerbaijan counts on a more expressive international support.
<i>Military victories against Armenia</i>	References to military successes of Azerbaijan against Armenia.
Historical memory	Broader code that encompasses statements about N-K's historical significance for Azerbaijan.
Historical injustice	Perceived injustice regarding the settlement patterns in N-K.
Survival	References to Azerbaijan's survival as a nation.
IDPs	Statements related to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and the challenges faced by these citizens.
<b>State Capabilities</b>	Codes related to Azerbaijan's national attributes.

Name	Description
Democracy	References to the leader's commitment to democratic governance.
Economic Performance	References to the overall economic landscape in Azerbaijan.
Energy industry	Statements related to Azerbaijan's energy industry, including energy-related projects.
Non-Oil Sector	References to economic diversification (beyond the oil sector).
Independent policy	Statements in which Aliyev emphasized that government policies do not depend on other states.
Military capabilities	References to Azerbaijan's military build-up.
National values	References to the preservation and promotion of national values.
Opposition	Statements about opposition groups in the domestic political landscape.
Political reforms	References to changes in Azerbaijan's political system.
Popular support	Instances in which the leader emphasized that the government's policies count on popular support.
Social programs	Statements related to social initiatives implemented by Aliyev's government.
Stability	References to stability within Azerbaijan.
Stronger state	Claims that Azerbaijan is in a strengthened position (e.g., a stronger economy, army, statehood).