

The Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict and the future of the Nagorno-Karabakh region

By

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Abstract

This study (the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict and the future of the Nagorno-Karabakh region) is important because of the resurgence of conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, nearly 22 years after the war between them over the Nagorno-Karabakh region had originally concluded. This war clearly indicates the seriousness of crises based on ethnic-civilizational differences. Added to this is the role of regional and international countries intervening in support of either of the conflicting parties similarly, on the basis of ethnic-civilizational motives. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the events that accompanied the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh since 2019 and its political and economic consequences for the region as well as the region's future prospects. On the basis of our analysis, we find that the relationship between the supporting countries involved in this local crisis, far from resolving the conflict, has had the effect of exacerbating matters in the opposite direction, transforming the limited local conflict into a possible regional or universal confrontation, similar to what we witnessed in historical examples, foremost of which were World Wars I and II.

The current confrontation in the disputed region resembles the conflicts that arose after the end of the Cold War, especially in terms of the external interventions of several parties as a result of interrelated interests and international competition. The research concludes that the continuation of clashes at a certain level is the likely scenario for the future of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, based on the evidence garnered from the current data for several reasons. First, it does not constitute an immediate danger to the supporting countries and, second, there is an absence of contexts and conditions for a consensual political solution that satisfies all parties, as is the case with most local conflicts of this kind. Yet, it cannot be concluded that a regional military confrontation could not occur at any time, in which the circumstances of the local confrontation deviate from what was planned for it, spontaneously or through plans of one of the active international actors in the international political system.

Keywords: conflict, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh.

Introduction

Historically, we have witnessed renewed waves of military movements resulting from the absence of solutions regarding the unresolved conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Recent events have shown that the parties directly involved in this conflict, as well as the countries supporting them, have been unable to find diplomatic or political solutions to this existential crisis, which has led to war and another stage of heated conflict. Nagorno-Karabakh is a region located between Iran, Turkey, Russia and Georgia, that is, it is politically, ethnically and religiously the focus of the conflict over Russian, Iranian and Turkish regional claims. The region is characterised by a history of genocide and religious clashes between Armenia, Turkey

and Sunni and Shiite Azerbaijan, exemplifying Samuel Huntington's theory of the "clash of civilizations". However, In terms of religious diversity, the conflict is more complex because Azerbaijan has affinities with Iran, both being Shiite-majority countries, unlike Turkey which has a Sunni majority. Yet Iran is the second most important supporter of Armenia after Russia, offset by Turkish support for Azerbaijan. During the Nagorno-Karabakh war in the early 1990s, Armenia was weak but, in the current stage of the continuing dispute, Shiite Muslim Iran is more closely linked to Armenia. Yet, Shiite-majority Azerbaijan maintains a strategic partnership with Israel which can be considered as an argument against the rhetoric of a clash of civilizations. There are many discussions about the on-going military war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, different from what was the case in the Russian-Georgian war of 2008. In contrast to what some scholars of international relations have predicted, direct military nation-state confrontation has not completely disappeared in the 21st century as is evident in the case of Azerbaijan using military forces to direct the course of events on the ground (such as capturing Shusha, a site of significant strategic and cultural importance). This, in turn, could affect possible diplomatic settlements by producing more favourable outcomes. The recent fighting around Nagorno-Karabakh included elements of classic warfare related to the mobilization of tanks, artillery and air power to exert hard power in order to control the disputed territories, accompanied by formal announcements of martial law and the implementation of a restrictive state of emergency. However, as well as combat, unconventional elements such as the involvement of mercenaries and militias have also appeared in the clashes. The recent conflict is notorious for its humanitarian impacts, the commission of war crimes and the use of prohibited weapons such as cluster bombs with their incendiary capability to spread beyond the immediate arena of Nagorno-Karabakh. This leads to a scientific-political hypothesis that the greater the intensity of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, the greater the support and intervention by regional parties. The intervention of allies of each of the two parties in the conflict may lead to a larger war in which the international parties have a greater role to play because regional conflicts have international repercussions if they continue. Consequently, the impact on the international arena is inevitable, thus causing a new war similar to the previous wars and vice versa. When the impact of the conflict decreases on the region, in which the linkage of the major powers fluctuates, the greater the chances of maintaining international peace and security in the region first, and in the world as a whole.

The political dimension of the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict

Nagorno-Karabakh is a disputed region mainly inhabited by Christian Armenians. It separated from and became independent of Muslim Azerbaijan with the support of Armenia, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. This involved the seizure of a large part of Azerbaijani lands and its annexation to the newly separated region. In this war, tens of thousands of innocent people were killed and about a million people were displaced. A cease-fire was declared in 1994.

The region lies in the South Caucasus between Iran, Turkey, Russia and Georgia, each of which is politically, ethnically and religiously divergent (Maj Gen P K Mallick, 2021). The region links Eastern Europe with Central Asia and Azerbaijan and is, thus, an important 'geopolitical hub' in Eurasia.

Because of its geographical location, Azerbaijan represents an important location as a defensive shield for the Caspian Sea as it permits or prevents access for many important interested

parties outside the region which need oil and gas. The Azerbaijani city of Baku is strategically important as the gateway to the rich and dynamic Caspian Sea region whose position in global energy geopolitics increases in proportion to the degree of instability in the Middle East (Baban, 2016). Azerbaijan's ambitions have gone beyond the limits of its geopolitical axis, especially following the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline in 2005 which is considered a strategic axis for improving energy security in the Euro-Atlantic region, even if its neighbours such as Russia and Iran interpret this controversial project as the result of a deliberate American tactic. This development enabled Azerbaijan to sharpen its focus and encouraged it to play its role in the regional balance of power (Khatawi, 2008). As a result, Baku began promoting its foreign policy interests by speaking more frankly with political actors who used the language of power as a fundamental principle in its energy policy. There was a time when Baku was, geopolitically, not very important and was, instead, influenced by the most powerful voices, geo-economically, which aimed at using oil companies to influence the policies of their home-based countries. However, more recently, Baku has become aware of its role in Euro-Atlantic energy security issues and has learned from some of its neighbours in the Caspian Sea by using its strategic potential as a tool of foreign policy to speak directly to governments whose actions or initiatives may harm their national interests. This tactic works because it is a means for reconciling Turkey and Armenia, which broke their bilateral relations after the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and disconcerted Azerbaijan as there are violations of its strategy and goals. Baku links the normalisation of Turkish-Armenian relations with the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, refusing to separate the problems of Arivan from those of its neighbours on two different dimensions: (Armenian-Azerbaijani) and (Armenian-Turkish). Despite this, the United States of America has pressed for the normalisation of Armenian-Turkish relations without any reference to the unresolved problem of Nagorno-Karabakh (Young, 2020).

The internal political dimensions

The Caucasus is a mountainous region which is now controlled by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (Alonso-Trabanco, 2020). Because it is located near Eastern Europe, the Anatolian Peninsula, the Middle East, the Caspian Sea, Central Asia and the Black Sea, the Caucasus has been the targeted crossroads of imperial ambition since antiquity. For example, ancient Rome and the Persian Empire often aimed to directly or indirectly control of the region, as an area in which their respective influences overlapped when absolute power was not an option and uneasy diplomatic compromises had to be negotiated (Gürcan, 2020). Also, strategic competition was fierce and conspiracies were common, so it can be said that the geostrategic rationale for such manoeuvres was the control of pivotal places on the eastern Mediterranean. Unsurprisingly, the region has continued to be characterised by brutal turmoil into the twentieth century (Gürcan, 2020):

- 1 The Armenian Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire.
- 2 Deviation of the establishment of a Trans-Caucasian federation from its course.
- 3 Local wars between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.
- 4 Turkish and Russian invasions.

Eventually the Soviet Union gained control and absorbed the entire region as Moscow's undisputed control temporarily ended the regional conflicts. Although it attempted to implement aggressive policies to weaken nationalism and religious identity, Moscow was unable to erase old rivalries or the vengeful desires of the contending parties. As World War II broke out, the region was almost overwhelmed by turmoil once again. One of the geostrategic goals behind Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union was to seize the oil fields in the

Caspian Sea region, although this attempt ended in failure due to the decisive defeats of the Wehrmacht in the Battle of Stalingrad (Limbach, 2021).

The demise of the Soviet Union after nearly half a century indicated that Armenians, Azeris and Georgians could reaffirm their independence as sovereign states after long periods of oppressive governance by the Soviet Union. It is worth noting that in the early 1990s Armenia and Azerbaijan engaged in a war to control Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountainous region inhabited by ethnic Armenians but officially governed by Azerbaijan. Although the result was a military victory for the Armenians, formal reunification eventually did not occur, and the clash ended with a Russian-brokered cease-fire putting an end to hostilities although sporadic clashes continued (Report, United Nations, Security Council, for the sixty-third year, 2008).

Another chapter was written to the region's turbulent history when Georgia resorted to military action to regain sovereign control over the separatist enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both close allies of the Kremlin. This clash led to the reassertion of Russia's power in the Caucasus region and Moscow's disposition for using military capabilities to protect its geopolitical interests (Housley). In the Karabakh conflict, on September 27, 2020, when Azerbaijan waged a war with artillery, armour, drones, cluster munitions, infantry forces and ballistic missiles to re-control Nagorno-Karabakh and besiege the formerly populated areas of Azerbaijan, Russia intervened and brokered a peace agreement on November 10, 2020. Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to this Russian-brokered settlement and, thus, the Six-Week War ended, which was seen as a victory in Azerbaijan and a surrender in Armenia as Russia carried out a notable geopolitical coup in order to successfully reassert its influence in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan, heralded its importance to Turkey and confirmed its dominant power in the South Caucasus (Nasser). After the ceasefire, continuous efforts were required on different issues such as facilitating the safe return of refugees and demining, rebuilding, addressing human rights abuses, humanitarian support and securing access for international and UN agencies to Nagorno-Karabakh which was isolated. The end of the war marked a comprehensive redrawing of the security maps of the South Caucasus, a turbulent area between Turkey, Russia and Iran. Nevertheless, the settlement also defined a role for Turkey in the region and asserted its interest in understanding the nature of the conflict (Maj Gen P K Mallick, 2021).

The motives underlying the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict

Armenian forces controlled Nagorno-Karabakh and its neighbouring regions before the Russian-brokered ceasefire in 1994. Then, the region stayed as part of Azerbaijan and has since been governed, mostly as a self-declared separatist republic, by ethnic Armenians supported by the Armenian state (Weise, Cienski, & Herszenhorn, 2020). It also created the Nagorno-Karabakh Line of Communication, which separates Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. Peace talks have since been brokered by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Minsk Group, a body founded in 1992 and chaired by France, Russia and the United States (Makhlouf, 2021). Yet, the clashes persisted without interruption with a serious escalation in 2016 that led to the killing of dozens of soldiers on both sides. The conflict was further escalated by the geopolitical realities of the region, as Turkey, a member of NATO, was the first country to recognise Azerbaijan's independence in 1991. The former Azerbaijani president, Heydar Aliyev, described this situation as "one nation, two states" both sharing Turkish culture and populations (Montez, 2020). Moreover, there were no official relations between Turkey and Armenia, as Turkey closed its borders with Armenia in 1993 in support of Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh War (al-Baqali, 2020). Despite signing a ceasefire in 1994, there was actually no peace treaty. Additionally, Armenia continued to have good links

with Russia and even had a Russian military base located in within its territory. Furthermore, the two are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) military alliance. However, President Vladimir Putin also had useful connections with Azerbaijan (The Arab Strategic Report, (2008-2009), The Continuity of the Russian Existential Policies, 2010).

The economic dimension of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict

In recent years, the Nagorno-Karabakh region has witnessed important developments, in conjunction with the development of regional and international competition within the region. This rising interest expresses not only geopolitical motives, but the geo-economics of the region also places it high on the agenda of regional and international actors. This constitutes an important factor for shaping or legitimizing rapprochements and alignments, especially with talks about natural gas discoveries and the possibilities of investing in these discoveries which have been on the agenda of the governments of the various countries in the region (Salaymeh).

It can be said that the current war is one of the most important frozen ethnic conflicts and the most complex in the international arena because it takes place in a region of special strategic importance, being a geopolitical extension to Central Asia and the Middle East. As a whole, it represents a region which is of the greatest importance for the economies of the major countries, which compete for dominance and influence over vital resources. Most important are gas and oil, and a network of pipelines transporting the wealth of the Caspian Sea to Europe. Based on the importance of the geopolitics of this region, any interpretation of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue which sees it as an event linked to a state of historical hostility between Armenia and Azerbaijan because of their rigid and conflicting positions, is deficient. The war is far from being simply a conflict over a region and it is more comprehensive and general than merely a religious conflict. Rather, the particulars which characterise the region are now employed by international parties to meet their interests in the region. Also, the movement of stagnant waters in the South Caucasus region is only evidence of the growing international conflict over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, along with conflicts for political dominance in the countries of the Middle Eastern and North African axis ("The positions of the active countries in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Barq Forum for Policies and Consultations," 2020). Hence, what is happening cannot be explained in isolation from the crises of the Caspian Sea, Central Asia, the North and South Caucasus and the Eastern Mediterranean Basin region, in which, it is believed, that the rise in international tension was the reason for the re-igniting of the crisis between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which is supported by competing countries. Some of these countries are recently trying to impose a new reality on the region (Salih, 2012).

The economic dimension at the regional level

The economic dimension is one of the main reasons for the Armenian-Azerbaijani battle over Nagorno-Karabakh. On the one hand, Azerbaijan is working to increase its financial resources and exploit its wealth and, on the other hand, regional parties are trying to threaten the oil pipelines extending to Turkey, which is trying to reduce its dependence on Russian and Iranian gas and to diversify its options. This will reflect positively on Turkey to strengthen its political decision, by attempting to convey energy resources to Europe through its lands and waters. Iran, Russia and European countries are working to place obstacles in the way of Turkey's tendencies to re-strengthen its relations with the Caucasus countries. The aim is to prevent the increase of Turkey's influence while international positions in its entirety rightly

acknowledge Azerbaijan's influence in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which is consistent with its geographical borders with Armenia and international laws. However, despite this, some countries adopt their positions based on other political and economic factors and calculations, fearing that Turkey will benefit from Azerbaijan's victory in strengthening its communication with the Caucasus countries with which it shares a common culture and ethnicity. Hence, the Turkish influence expanded and benefited from new resources in the vicinity and arenas of these countries, most notably Iran, Russia and France (Al-Afour, 2007). The Israeli position on the conflict raises much attention, as Israel has good relations with Azerbaijan, and cooperates with it in the face of Iran, which is closer to Armenia, and the role of Israel is clear. It is the second largest exporter of arms to Azerbaijan after Russia, and it is likely that the relations between the two parties will be further strengthened. Because of the current crisis, as for Syria, the conflict has sparked a greater state of controversy, especially in light of the mutual accusations of transferring Syrian fighters to the conflict zone, whereby French President Emmanuel Macron accused Turkey of transferring Syrian fighters to fight in Nagorno-Karabakh. It is the same accusation made by Turkey with regard to Armenia (Al-Hajj). The timing of the new conflict, coinciding with the imminent commissioning of long-awaited energy pipelines extending from gas-rich Azerbaijan to Europe via Georgia, gives it an international dimension stemming from geo-economics and geopolitical ramifications. Pipelines that pass through Russia and Iran aim at reducing Europe's energy dependence on Moscow in light of the US sanctions against Russia over the gas pipeline (Nord Stream 2) to Germany (Franji, 2020). Speculation has spread that Russian President Vladimir Putin is already unhappy with the perceived US and European intervention in Belarus in response to Armenia which could easily enable the bombing of critical infrastructure in the Tovuz region, where more than 80% of Azerbaijani energy is transmitted. There is also a Russian determination to compel the United States of America to pay the price of opposition (Nord Stream 2) (Sweidan).

The economic dimension at the international level

A cursory look at the position held by stakeholders in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is enough to understand the reasons that have kept it as one of the most intractable conflicts to date. The Middle East and Central Asia make the region attractive to all influential external powers, both regional and international. NATO and the United States of America also have a strong strategic interest in this region, as NATO works to contain the three Caucasus countries within the Partnership for Peace program in the context of its geopolitical repercussions for the Eurasian mainland. The European Union also offered it the possibility of membership within the European Neighbourhood Policy Program in order to share the peace, stability and prosperity that the European Union has with the countries of the region in a geo-economic alignment with the Atlantic strategy towards Russia as well. A number of foreign oil companies are also active in the Caucasus that aim to invest energy resources in Azerbaijan, especially those overlooking the Caspian Sea which is one of the global energy reserves. These include British Petroleum and other American, Italian, Japanese, Turkish and even Georgian companies. All of these hope for a stable region in terms of security so that stability will help it accelerate their projects there, and help countries to protect pipeline projects passing through the region as well as their independence from any pressures that may be exerted by hostile parties (Gamaghelyan).

International positions were characterised by calls for stopping the war and resorting to

dialogue. At the forefront, at least Russia seemed to adopt a position different from what Armenia has been accustomed to. The conflict in Karabakh between the two parties is an extension of a previous series of clashes, the most serious of which was the July 12, 2020 round. It revealed new dimensions to the crisis after entering a new field variable on the battlefield. In this battlefield, the clash took place outside the traditional areas of the region in the strategic Tovuz region located at a crossroads vital for the transfer of energy resources to Europe via Turkey and Georgia, along with power lines that play an important role in the stability of the region (Benmoussi, 2020).

This matter raised fears and threats that were perceived as bleak not only by Azerbaijan, but also by the major countries, NATO and European countries. All of them share with the countries of the region, especially the newly independent countries from the Soviet Union (Azerbaijan - Kazakhstan - Turkmenistan) with a package of projects and investments for a huge pipeline network through which the insurance had been secured. Their gas needs as an alternative to the Russian supplier, which means that this will reflect on Russia, which considers itself to have the greatest influence in the South Caucasus, where its security and strategic depth appear. Therefore, what happened in July 2020 was a signal that the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan may expand beyond the Baku-Yerevan bilateralism, into a larger regional and international conflict (Turkey: The bombing of the Azerbaijani city of Ganja is a sign of Armenia's desperation, Anadolu Agency <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/>, visit date: 12/12/2021, 2020).

The future of the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the light of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict

Based on the description of the positions of the countries supporting the two parties in the conflict in the Karabakh crisis, the preoccupation of the United States of America with its internal issues, and the lack of European effectiveness by the "Minsk" group to resolve the conflict, it is likely that the crisis is managed and contained by two actors, Turkey and Russia. The former tries to find a new approach to settling the conflict to be a part of it in a way that guarantees it some of its future gains in the region. Perhaps, its most important element is to push Azerbaijan to achieve the largest possible field gains and expand areas of control in a way that supports its negotiating position with Armenia in the future. Moscow will play on all the contradictions between the two parties. The local conflict, by virtue of the nature of the bilateral relationship, aims at preventing the crisis from sliding to a global level. Such an option would be a huge loss for it in the energy equation, in addition to blowing up its security and defence depth for the capital, Moscow. Therefore, it may take advantage of the busy period of the American elections with the aim of redrawing new determinants between Armenia and Azerbaijan to ensure the preservation of a minimum balance of power in the South Caucasus. Yet, this time it will be different from the 1990s, and perhaps this is what concerns Yerevan more, which is continuously deteriorating in all fields. It is clear from the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict the extent of the complexity of this crisis at both regional and international levels. Therefore, it is possible to anticipate the future of the conflict by presenting two main scenarios:

The continuation of the war

This scenario presupposes the continuation of the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, as the two sides are trying to impose their wills on the ground and consolidate their gains. On the one hand, Azerbaijan seeks to liberate its land supported by international legitimacy and the difference in the capabilities that became available to it during the last period and gave it an estimated preference. On the other hand, Armenia is trying to push the international community to change its position on its occupation of the region under the pretext that the residents in it can represent their region. Also, the customs of their entity support historical enmities and the state of customary mobilization of the method of conflict, and the difficulty of settlement (Nouri, 2021).

Two: Finding a truce

It is likely that the two countries, especially Azerbaijan, and Turkey following it, will be forced to accept the ceasefire at a later stage. This is by regaining some occupied areas and pushing international positions to pressure Armenia to find a just settlement. This scenario stems from the assumption that it is difficult for Azerbaijan to end the Armenian occupation of its territories within the current military operations, due to several factors, most notably the expansion of the geography of the invaded areas which constitutes 20% of the territory of Azerbaijan. Another possible factor is that the Armenians consolidate their presence in those areas and that international supporters of Armenia increase. In addition, there is no major difference in terms of logistical capabilities that can achieve gains on the ground, compared to the Armenian official and popular resistance and mobilization. This is expected to be the most likely scenario (Al-Ati).

Conclusions

The outbreak of the renewed clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan nearly 22 years after the end of the war between them over the Nagorno-Karabakh region clearly indicates the seriousness of the crisis based on ethnic-civilizational differences and the role of regional and global states supporting the conflicting parties in the field - both stimulating and discouraging equally. The efforts of the supporting countries to contain the local crisis may sometimes interact in the opposite direction in such a way that the limited local conflict extends to become a regional or global confrontation, as happened in historical examples, the foremost of which was World War I. The current confrontation in the disputed region bears the characteristics of post-Cold War conflicts, especially in terms of the external interference from several parties due to the interconnections of the relations, interests and international competitions. This research focused on one of these external factors, which is the Russian-Turkish tension as one of the most important influences on the course of events and, as it is susceptible to being affected - more than perhaps others - by the course of developments on the Armenian-Azeri front. This research concluded that clashes continue at a certain level because it does not pose a direct threat to the supporting countries, and also the absence of contexts and conditions for reaching a consensual political solution that satisfies all parties. This is the case with most similar local conflicts, while it is not possible to be certain that a regional military confrontation cannot take place at any time when the conditions of local confrontation may depart from the plan spontaneously or by the planning of one of the international parties. Based on what was mentioned and after refuting the positions of the various parties supporting the two parties to the conflict in the Karabakh crisis, the following conclusions were drawn:

- 1 The current round of conflict is a series of a complex historical path between two contradictory parties religiously, ethnically and nationally, with interests, goals and alliances, in proportion to the geopolitical changes and their interests in the region.
- 2 The conflict between Baku - Yerevan goes beyond the issue of a legal dispute over the fate of the region and has become linked to international and regional dimensions that directly affect the equations of geo-economics competition over the energy resources available in the Caucasus - Central Asia - the Caspian Sea.
- 3 This conflict is dealt with at the international and regional levels between the competitors according to strategies of testing strength in several ways, such as imposing assumption of fact policies, and exerting mutual pressures in the shared issues especially in the gas pipeline projects.
- 4 The entry of new players into the conflict, such as Turkey, which showed its full support for Azerbaijan, may contribute to escalating the crisis, because it stands in contrast with some countries about the fate and future of the South Caucasus region, in addition to increasing the activity of the role of Moscow, Iran and France.

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