

FRAGILE CEASEFIRE: ON ARMENIA–AZERBAIJAN CLASHES

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The six-week-long [war over Nagorno-Karabakh](#) has come to a halt following a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement between [Armenia and Azerbaijan](#), but only after altering the balance of power in the region. Before Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev went to war in late September, Nagorno-Karabakh and its surrounding villages connecting the enclave with mainland Armenia were controlled by either [Armenian troops](#) or their proxies. Armenia had captured the mountainous region within Azerbaijan — populated by ethnic Armenians — in the earlier war in the 1990s. But tensions continued even after the 1994 ceasefire. When he launched the offensive, Mr. Aliyev, backed by Turkey, vowed to capture Nagorno-Karabakh. Last week, when the ceasefire was announced, Azeri troops had captured several areas around Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia, including the strategic Shusha, a city just 16 km from Nagorno-Karabakh's capital, Stepanakert. If Armenia was seen as the victor in the 1991-94 war, Mr. Aliyev has claimed triumph this time. On the other side, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is facing a political backlash. Yerevan has seen protests against the troops' withdrawal, [Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan has quit](#) over the ceasefire and the country's President has asked Mr. Pashinyan to resign and hold a snap election.

Even if the direct conflict was between Armenia and Azerbaijan, two bigger powers had high stakes — [Russia](#) and Turkey. While Turkey strongly supported Azerbaijan, reportedly with armed drones and military advisers, Russia, which has a security agreement with Armenia, tried to remain neutral. While Azerbaijan made military progress, Russia resisted calls to back Armenia and continued with its push to bring the conflict in its backyard to an end, which it managed to do, finally. Vladimir Putin is the only signatory to the agreement besides the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan. While Armenia was forced to pull back from several villages and Shusha, it avoided defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia would send 2,000 peacekeepers to protect the remaining Armenian population and patrol the corridor that links the enclave with the Armenian mainland. While the ceasefire has reinforced Russia's influence in the region, the war itself pointed to its declining clout in its backyard. Turkey did not only help Azerbaijan fight a war against Moscow's wishes but also made sure that the Azeris prevailed in the conflict. So now, there is a triumphant Azerbaijan, a wounded Armenia, a cautious Russia and an ambitious Turkey, with a fragile truce over an unresolved dispute. For peace to prevail, Armenia and Azerbaijan must find a lasting settlement to the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. The ceasefire in 1994 did not resolve the conflict. And unlike 1994, when Russia was the only big power, now, the South Caucasus is open for contest between Russia and Turkey, which makes the crisis even more dangerous.

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