

CRISIS IN CAUCASUS: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN AND NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The ongoing [fighting between Armenian rebels and the Azerbaijani Army in Nagorno-Karabakh](#), a self-declared republic within Azerbaijan, risks becoming a wider regional conflict. Though Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a Russia-mediated ceasefire last week after days of fighting, the [truce crumbled immediately amid a blame game](#). Whatever the truth is, an emboldened Azerbaijan, backed by Turkey, seems determined to press ahead with its offensive. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is decades old. The region, largely populated by ethnic Armenians, is located within the international boundaries of Azerbaijan. Under the Soviet Union, it was an autonomous province that was part of the Azerbaijan republic. In 1988, when the Soviet power was receding, the regional assembly in Nagorno-Karabakh voted to join Armenia, triggering ethnic clashes. After the Soviet disintegration in 1991, Armenia and Azerbaijan went to war over this largely mountainous, forested enclave. By the time a ceasefire was reached in 1994, the rebels, with support from Armenia and Russia, had established their *de facto* rule and extended their influence to the Armenian border. Ever since, the border has remained tense.

Ending conflict in the Caucasus

What makes the clashes now far more dangerous is the external intervention. Turkey has called Armenia a threat to peace in the region; the Azeris and Turks share ethnic and linguistic bonds. Also, the pre-Soviet Azerbaijan was a local ally of the Ottomans when they invaded Transcaucasia in the last leg of World War I. For Turkey, which, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoan, is trying to expand its geopolitical reach to the former Ottoman regions, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is an opportunity to enter the South Caucasus. Turkey also has a particularly bad relationship with Armenia. But its problem is that Armenia is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Russia enjoys good economic and defence ties with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. But Armenia, as a CSTO member and host to a Russian military base, has more weight. In a wider conflict, Armenia could trigger Article 4 of the CSTO treaty and ask for Russian help. And if Moscow responds favourably, that would pit Russia against Turkey, a NATO member. Russia, already involved in military conflicts in Syria, Ukraine and Libya, may not like opening another front. That is why it has re-emphasised its neutrality and hosted talks in Moscow for a truce. But it will be forced to take sides if the conflict spills into Armenia. Both sides should understand the volatile situation and call off the hostilities. Nagorno-Karabakh has in the past witnessed large-scale ethnic violence. Instead of risking a regional war, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Karabakh rebels should go back to the ceasefire and open up diplomatic channels.

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