

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IMBROGLIO: ARMENIA–AZERBAIJAN CONFLICT

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The South Caucasus, which was simmering on a low boil for the last two months, erupted on September 27, 2020 when fighting broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. There have been more than 2,000 fatal casualties and 5,000 injured on both sides. Notably, in a sign of upping the ante, the military confrontation has involved the deployment of fighter planes, tanks, heavy artillery, rockets and armed drones. This repeated cycle of violence raises pertinent questions on the nature of geo-strategic interests at play in the South Caucasus and its impact on the region's peace and stability.

The dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan is one of the several "frozen conflicts" in the post-Soviet Union space. The province of Nagorno-Karabakh comprises a majority Armenian Christian population, but belonged to Azerbaijan during the Soviet times. This was a carefully crafted policy by Soviet leader Josef Stalin to enmesh populations in order to stymie ethnic aspirations. Nagorno-Karabakh was severed from Armenia and allotted to Azerbaijan in the 1920s. A significant Armenian population was subsequently pushed into the region by Stalin, thereby turning it into a majority Armenian Christian region in an otherwise Muslim-majority Azerbaijan. With the dissolution of the former Soviet Union in 1991, the binding glue that kept peace and harmony in the region came off. This provided conditions for the two newly independent countries to fight an irredentist war between 1991 and 1994 over this landlocked mountainous region, resulting in thousands of casualties. The war also led to about 20 per cent of the Nagorno-Karabakh province of Azerbaijan coming under Armenian control. A "no war no peace" situation has prevailed between the two countries since then, albeit interspersed with periodic ceasefire violations.

It appears that most of the regional countries support either of the two warring sides. Turkey, a majority Sunni state, proclaims cultural and linguistic affinity with Shia-majority Azerbaijan. In fact, Turkey is Azerbaijan's key military and economic partner. This has seen Ankara refuse to accord diplomatic recognition to Armenia. It has imposed economic sanctions on Yerevan and shut their common border. Similarly, Israel supports Azerbaijan and supplies it with military hardware even though it maintains diplomatic relations with Armenia. On the other hand, Shia-majority Iran supports Armenia by proxy, through Russia. Interestingly, Iran also supports Azerbaijan due to its historical, cultural and religious linkages. It also does not want Azerbaijan to be drawn completely to the Turkish influence. This is especially so as Azeris constitute the largest ethnic minority group in Iran. Meanwhile, Russia considers the South Caucasus region as its "sphere of influence" as it remains the dominant power in many countries that were part of the former Soviet Union.

Azerbaijan is rich in oil and gas and is the region's largest economy. It is also a key ally of the West. It has adopted a multi-vectored foreign policy that seeks to build good ties with both Moscow and Washington. It has neither joined the Russia-backed Collective Treaty Security Organisation (CTSO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAU) nor the US-backed North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Armenia, on the other hand, shares close ties with Russia which is also its principal security partner. It is a member of the CTSSO which has led Russia to deploy 5,000 troops in the country. This has significantly

increased Yerevan's security deterrence. In this context, Russia's role in the region has been geared towards diplomatically "managing" the conflict in South Caucasus. It appears that Russia does not want to be seen taking sides between its two former republics. It also does not want the warring sides to gravitate the Ukraine way towards NATO. This has seen Russia supply military hardware not only to Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also to Turkey and Iran.

The United States' (US) muted role in the conflict, though baffling, can be attributed to the distraction caused by the impending elections, the global corona virus pandemic, and President Donald Trump's own Covid-19 infection.¹

Energy is a crucial cog in the geopolitics of the region. Turkey, a net importer of energy carries out significant oil and gas exploration in the Mediterranean. Turkey's energy pipelines from the Caspian Sea via Azerbaijan not only supply it with energy but also allow it to be a transit hub for export of energy to Europe. The several strategic oil and gas pipelines, which are important for Azerbaijan and Turkey as well as the US pass through Azerbaijan. The South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) routed through Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Southern Europe is aimed at delivering Azerbaijani gas to Europe by connecting to the Trans Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP).² The SCP will allow for a reduction in Europe's dependency on Russian gas as Russia will be completely bypassed for transporting natural gas to Europe. A parallel pipeline—the Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan pipeline—crosses the region of Tovuz and Southern Georgia to terminate on Turkey's Mediterranean port at Ceyhan. From here, the energy is exported to world markets.³ The recent discovery of gas in the Black Sea is also significant as it will provide Turkey an alternative to the expensive gas it imports from Iran through the Iran-Turkey pipeline.⁴ Interference with energy routes or supplies by rival powers, either directly or through another party, can lead to a potential confrontation in the region. If Azerbaijan, with the active support of Turkey, emerges victorious in these conflicts it will thrust Turkey to a leadership role in the energy geopolitics of the region at the expense of Russia and Iran.

Observers and commentators have highlighted the routing of mercenaries from Syria and Libya to fight in support of Azerbaijan, thereby exacerbating the situation on ground.⁵ However, this has been denied by both Azerbaijan and Turkey, notwithstanding the fact that the Turkey had tacitly supported militia fighters in the Libyan civil war. There are reports emanating from the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh Republic) spokesperson that Turkey has a deal with Gulbudin Hekmatyar, a United Nations (UN) blacklisted terrorist, for sending Afghan mercenaries to Azerbaijan.⁶ There have also been unverified reports of terrorists from the Afghan-Pakistan border, Iran and Syria being paid huge sums for fighting Christian Armenia.⁷ While this information is unverified, the participation of mercenaries would have concerned both Russia and Iran. These mercenaries can use Azerbaijan as a launch pad to enter Iran, which has the largest Turkish Azerbaijani ethnic group, and Russia which remains apprehensive of radical elements infiltrating its restive regions in the North Caucasus.

There have also been reports in the media of Pakistani fighters, essentially retired servicemen and mercenaries, fighting alongside Azerbaijani forces.⁸ Armenia's Deputy Foreign Minister Avet Adonts has been widely quoted saying that he "can't exclude the possibility" of Pakistani fighters fighting on the ground alongside other mercenaries. There is, after all, a precedence for the presence of Pakistani fighters in Nagorno-Karabakh during the military confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the early 1990s. However, Pakistan's Foreign Minister has refuted these reports. Nevertheless, it may not be a coincidence that the Azerbaijan Ambassador to Pakistan, Ali Adizada, met with General Nadeem Raza, Chairman, Pakistan's Joint Chief of Staff, as reported by Pakistan's Inter Services public Relations (ISPR).⁹ Pakistan's Army Chief General Qamar Bajwa is also reported to have said earlier this month that his forces fully support Azerbaijan's position in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁰

Arguably, the South Caucasus features lower down in the hierarchy of India's strategic outreach. India's bilateral trade with the region also remains low: annual trade with Azerbaijan is a shade more than US \$1 billion, while that with Armenia is less than \$65 million. India signed a friendship and cooperation treaty with Armenia in 1995 and has received three head of states from the country, but none from Azerbaijan. India recently won a US\$ 40 million contract to supply four Swati Weapon Locating Radars to Armenia.¹¹ Meanwhile, Indian companies such as Oil and Natural Gas Company (ONGC), ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL), and Gas Authority of India Limited (GAIL) have made investments in oil and gas projects in Azerbaijan. Yet, India's overall interest in the region remains perfunctory. Armenia has supported India over Kashmir whereas Azerbaijan has supported the Turkey-Pakistan tandem. Turkey's attempts to build a block comprising Pakistan, Malaysia and Iran as a counter to India's influence has not gone well with New Delhi. Iran's renewed stance on the Chahbahar project has also caused discomfiture in the country. India has, therefore, taken a balanced and neutral stand expressing concern while calling for restraint, and an immediate cessation of hostilities and resolution of conflict through diplomatic negotiations.¹²

The situation in the South Caucasus is on a dangerous tailspin due to conflicting interests and geopolitical manoeuvrings. The tenuous humanitarian ceasefire agreement, negotiated by Russia appears frayed, and has been marked by repeated violations. The territorial dispute provides incendiary fodder for frequent localised kinetic engagements. This is further aggravated by the geo-strategic interests of key regional and extra-regional actors. Notably, the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group has not been successful in mediating the conflict primarily because of the presence of a significant Armenian diaspora in Russia, the US and France—the three core members of the group. Meanwhile, the UN, which has often done the P5 countries bidding, appears to have an opportunity to redeem itself, including from its perceived inaction in tackling the global COVID-19 pandemic. There appears to be a case for the UN to broker sustained peace in the region and not let vested interests from exacerbating historical schisms through geopolitical machinations and energy politics.

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