

Armenia-Azerbaijan Tug of War on Nagorno-Karabakh



The Armenia-Azerbaijan border crisis is centered on a geopolitical dispute continuing for decades. Mountainous in nature, the region of Nagorno-Karabakh has long been at the heart of the tension between the two countries. It is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, but has a majority of the ethnic Armenian population. This geopolitical configuration goes way back to the Stalin era when the demographic structure was engineered for political purposes. As part of the traditional divide-and-rule tactic, the then-Soviet government formed the autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan in the 1920s. An overwhelming majority (95%) of the Armenian population was put under Azerbaijan's territorial authority, and the problems began to get exposed once Soviet rule started to scramble. Full-scale war broke out in 1992; thousands of people were killed; hundreds of thousands were displaced until the cease-fire was declared in 1994. Armenia ended up controlling the region and an additional pie of the Azerbaijani territory.

The dynamics of territorial conflicts change with time. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was also no exception as it entered into the 21st century. Periodic tussles along the border continued for years until 2016 when the two sides engaged in fierce clashes for four days. But the two countries again got themselves into a full-scale war in 2020 which started the ongoing episode of the conflict. Starting at the end of September, the death toll of this round of conflict was in the thousands, and it caused the displacement of tens of thousands of people. The narratives of

the two sides were conflicting as the Armenian authority alleged the attacks by Azerbaijan, while the latter justified its action as a response to the belligerent provocation by its counterpart. Neighbouring major power Russia played a role, and it brokered a cease-fire deal.

The deal resulted in Azerbaijan conquering most of the territory and Armenian forces retreating. Russian peacekeepers moved in to ensure the implementation of the deal, but the permanent solution was not to be found in a temporary cease-fire. And in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War, the region is susceptible to volatility. Renewed fighting between the two sides erupted in the middle of last month, and it is feared that the conflict is in the course for a protracted period of time.

The conflict along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border is rooted in the Soviet Union era and the Cold War political landscape, but it has already moved beyond those dynamics. Both sides have powerful backing from regional and extra-regional powers. The escalation of the conflict in 2020 was thought to be influenced by Turkey as Azerbaijan enjoyed its heavy military backup. Turkey also has a longstanding enmity with Armenia, and the latter is still pursuing an active diplomatic effort for the recognition of Turkey's role in the Armenian genocide. Meanwhile, Russia is mandated to protect the interest of Armenia as it is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, Russia is tied with its military operation in Ukraine, and the protracted timespan of the operation has already reshuffled its strategic objectives in Ukraine.

Therefore, Russia's entanglement in Ukraine opened a unique strategic opportunity for Azerbaijan to solidify its claim of the disputed region. Ukraine's success in reclaiming its captured territory is making the task easier for Azerbaijan. Armenia being a Russian ally, has the strategic disadvantage here as its counterpart enjoys the privilege of constructing an anti-Armenian narrative. Moreover, Turkish backups have been proven more effective than ever before as the country is poised to pursue a proactive foreign policy.

The conflict has got complicated in a cyclic manner. As of now, Azerbaijan is trying to establish its total control over the disputed territory and get international recognition. The Ukraine conflict is providing strategic leverage for Azerbaijan in this regard. And if Azerbaijan succeeds, Armenia will lose its control over the territory it has been controlling since 1994. Again it is worth mentioning that the region is inhabited by people from the Armenian ethnic background. Therefore, Azerbaijani control over the region will always have the risk of producing a civilian conflict which can be costly in terms of human suffering. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan will not also leave its claim over the territory as it ruled till 1994, and the UN also recognized it as a part of Azerbaijan. So, this cycle of conflict is not expected to end anytime soon.

On top of that, the national interest of the major powers will complicate the conflict even more. Europe is on the brink of an energy catastrophe, and therefore energy security will lie at the heart of this conflict. Europe might not be inclined to denounce any Azerbaijani offensive as the latter is a potential alternative source of natural gas in the context of sanctioned Russian sources. The US is also entangled with the situation in Ukraine and Taiwan, and the developing complexities in the global oil market. Therefore, the trajectory of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will depend a lot on the role of Turkey and the trajectory of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The projection is not optimistic; rather, the conflict might take some interesting twists.

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