



The renewed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is a combination of external and internal factors – with Armenia's leadership wanting to appear more nationalistic being one of the latter | Foto: Flickr, Adam Jones | CC BY-SA 2.0

Nagorno-Karabakh: Why did the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War Start?

5. November 2020 Azer Babayev

The “frozen” Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan existed for 26 years being neither at war nor at peace, with no diplomatic relations. What has changed over the past years so that a new all-out war erupted unexpectedly between the conflict parties in late September: military balance, geopolitical balance – or what else?

From Karabakh War I to Karabakh War II

Following the end of the first war (1992–1994) in Karabakh, Armenia and Azerbaijan could not reach a political solution to the conflict: Countless attempts and numerous rounds of negotiation failed and an attitude of resignation crept in. Particularly, as decades went by, Azerbaijan got frustrated over a lengthy peace process without progress. The OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs (France, Russia and the US) as key peace brokers were reproached for not placing enough political or diplomatic pressure on the Armenians to withdraw from the occupied Azerbaijani territories, which especially precluded any settlement via negotiations.

Although the conflict was sparked by the *status* of Nagorno-Karabakh, which remains the main bone of contention, the issue of occupied surrounding territories complicated the nature of the conflict as a whole. **In this regard, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict brought with it the risk of an additional shift in former state boundaries, in contrast to other conflicts in the region.** Overall, since the First Karabakh War the conflict situation has featured a structural asymmetry: Armenia wanted to use the power of facts (i.e. military control) to maintain the de facto status and change the de-jure status, while Azerbaijan wanted to use force of law (i.e. international law) to preserve the de-jure status and change the de facto status.

Having lost the first war, Baku was utterly dissatisfied with a permanent occupation of its territories and the plight of IDPs and interpreted Armenia's negotiating practice as a kind of salami tactics: Yerevan was trying to make only rhetorical – or at most minimal – concessions in order to prolong negotiations because it was not at all interested in changing the status quo. Armenia counted on the negotiations either being ended with minimal concessions or being broken off with absolutely no results. The positions remained entrenched. The peace process was leading nowhere, which was why, from time to time, the Azerbaijani side asked what the point of negotiations was and threatened to use its ultimate form of pressure – its military – in order to prevent the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from remaining “frozen”, as it came to be known.

Overall, following the end of the war a fragile situation around the conflict region took root. And over the past time it was feared that the longer sides had to wait for a peace agreement, the more likely the conflict was to re-escalate and eventually erupt into a hot war. However, an equilibrium favoring the status quo appeared to be established around this “frozen conflict”, and that in three ways: militarily, an offence-defence balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan (favoring defence); internationally, a regional balance of power with Russia as the key stabilizing actor, and socio-psychologically, a political inertia

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(habituation effect) in the conflict countries. From today's perspective, some important shifts in these equilibriums can provide the best explanation for the ongoing war in the region.

Arms race and the shift in the offence-defence balance

The arms race can commonly be a significant predictor of an increased probability of war. Yet, whether or not the arms race actually makes wars more likely, it can be argued that it helps increase their intensity (and duration). This is precisely the case in today's war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which has already been continuing unabated for over a month. In the fourth week of fierce fighting already, **Russian President Putin referred to a very high intensity of violence by making a prominent comparison: "the Soviet army lost 13,000 people during the ten years of war in Afghanistan. Now the toll [in this war] is almost 5,000 in such a short span of time."**

The likelihood of a new war between Armenia and Azerbaijan increased in the last decades – especially in light of the massive arms race that had been taking place for years, as proven by their hugely inflated military budgets. **With rising oil revenues and lingering frustration over the futile negotiations, Azerbaijan has increased its annual military spending more than ninefold in the last two decades (from \$196 m. in 2000 to \$1854 m. in 2019), while Armenia has increased it more than fourfold during the same period (from \$149 m. to \$673 m.).** In addition, as Russia's military ally Armenia bought its weapons from it at so-called domestic prices, which somewhat mitigated its significantly smaller expenditures. And the new arms did less to deter and more to perpetuate the state of war.

Overall, for many years after the First Karabakh War the offence-defence balance appeared to be overwhelmingly in favor of Armenia, having clear defensive advantages favored by military and geographical factors. It is no surprise that Nagorno-Karabakh has been among the most militarized regions in the world – with heavy defensive fortifications including many kilometers of tunnels interlinking with each other along the ceasefire line, thus having offered the Armenian side a false sense of invincibility for a long time.



The Nagorno Karabakh Defense Army uses sophisticated electronic surveillance devices (Photo: Flickr, David Stanley CC BY 2.0).

In the last years, however, the offence-defence balance has changed gradually in favor of Azerbaijan. Its extensive military buildup of the past years became a first important indicator for this shift. Several years ago, Azerbaijani government established a "Ministry of Defense Industry" to build up the country's military capabilities. In addition, Baku imported high-tech modern weaponry in

large quantities including drones and loitering weapons, especially from Israel and Turkey, thus creating considerable offensive advantages. It is no surprise that these weapons are now proving very effective in the Azerbaijani offensive: over the past month, Azerbaijan troops have been able to break through the Armenian defense line on several places and retake significant swaths of occupied territory. **That is why Azerbaijani President Aliyev proudly stated that "in this case, unmanned aircraft, both Turkish and Israeli drones, of course, helped us a lot."**

Russia vs Turkey: the shift in the regional balance of power

Over the past time, no international protagonists have felt a strong need to try to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Besides, all international actors have dismissed the idea of "power mediation." Also, although Russia as a key international actor is directly involved in all the conflicts on the territory of the former Soviet Union, its involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh has been rather indirect: there it is both a critical and a questionable actor. On one hand, the Kremlin has taken a central position in mediating a peaceful settlement to the conflict while, on the other hand, Moscow has been delivering weapons to both sides – perhaps the most striking situation regarding the international dimension of the conflict. Russia is militarily allied with Armenia and has a military presence in the country. It provides security guarantees to Yerevan, primarily through its CSTO membership, which neutralized to a certain extent the potential effect of the weapons Russia sells to financially strong Baku on a purely commercial basis.

In the last decades, Moscow's role as an external veto power has also been central – in two regards. On one hand, Russia has been the only external actor that was believed to contain and actually stop a new war between the conflict parties, as was evident during the April 2016 clashes, when Moscow forced them to a ceasefire. On the other hand, any amicable resolution to the conflict that

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goes against Moscow's will is unimaginable. As such, Russia appeared to create a geostrategic stability/balance around the military and political status quo on the ground.

In recent years, with Turkey's rapid rise in power and more assertive foreign policy in its neighborhood has this balance-of-power system in the region gradually shifted in favour of Azerbaijan. Specifically, Turkey and Azerbaijan built a very effective alliance, under a "one nation, two states" ideology, which in turn weakened the stabilizing impact of the Armenia-Russia alliance on the status quo. But Baku also tried to maintain close relations with Russia as part of its "balanced" foreign policy, having a constraining effect on the scope of Russian commitments towards Armenia. That is why, in connection with the ongoing crisis, Russian President Putin pointed out that, besides Armenia, Russia has **"also always had special ties with Azerbaijan as well... Therefore, Armenia and Azerbaijan are both equal partners for us"**, and he did not extend Russia's alliance obligations to this war, because it is **"not taking place in the Armenian territory."**

Specifically, a shift in the geopolitical context of the conflict showed itself clearly when a three-day fighting on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border erupted in mid-July 2020 – far away from the conflict region but very close to the pipeline infrastructure carrying energy resources to Turkey. Ankara saw this as an externally inspired threat against its interests as well. **This, in turn, triggered an unprecedented Turkish endorsement of Azerbaijan, including the rapid deployment of Turkish forces for military exercises in Azerbaijan.** Afterwards, Turkish F-16 fighter jets were even kept in Azerbaijan as a deterrent against possible foreign attacks.

The Erdogan government now speaks of its "red lines" regarding the conflict – in terms of a possible foreign interference – and suggests that in this case Ankara may get directly involved. Also, President Aliyev publicly referred to this changed geopolitical reality in the region and the special role of Turkey: **„The main reason why other countries do not interfere in this issue today is the statements of President Erdogan from the first hours that Azerbaijan is not alone, Turkey is with Azerbaijan and will be with it until the end.“**

Democratization and getting out of inertia

Nagorno-Karabakh is a perfect example for how a political regime's ambivalence can encourage the escalation and/or settlement of an ethno-territorial conflict. The conflict that had been settled early in the Soviet era violently flared up again during the Soviet Union's phase of democratization in the late 1980s. Back then, and also during the early 1990s, democratization in the post-Soviet states of Azerbaijan and Armenia strengthened nationalism and intransigence and was used for mobilizing by protagonists on both sides: They preferred to go to war rather than negotiate a political settlement.

Also, after the end of the first war it was unrealistic to assume that regime change and democratization could break the stalemate and bring peace to the region. In general, experience shows that a (second) wave of democratization during a decades-old frozen conflict would most likely lead to renewed nationalistic mass mobilization. **That is, more democracy in one or both of the conflict countries could actually facilitate an escalation and resumption of war, because democratization can exacerbate nationalist fervor and thus conflict.**

Starting in the second half of the 1990s, a political stability set in domestically both in Armenia and Azerbaijan. And a decades-old conflict situation and unsuccessful negotiations bilaterally created a lasting condition of "No War, No Peace" which the adversaries appeared to accept implicitly and gradually. Most importantly, over time it led to the effect that they now avoided new costs or 'extreme' measures in terms of either military escalation or substantive compromises – i.e., the willingness to take high risks declined unceasingly on both sides. Being full of uncertainties and insecurities, "No War, No Peace" implied a potential source of instability, but a 'stable' one: since over the past time, conflict parties got *used* to this in-between state (of affairs). Thus, "No War, No Peace" became a 'new normal' and established its own equilibrium. And this inertia became more sustainable the longer it lasted.

But then a revolution took place in Armenia: A new leader of opposition, Nikol Pashinyan, came to power after a popular uprising in 2018, also raising expectations/hope in Azerbaijan for progress in negotiations. **And initially, it looked as though "he was an open interlocutor ready to discuss thorny issues."** Yet, gradually quite the opposite happened. Tensions escalated, as the democratically elected Armenian government started making increasingly populist statements over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. **Most prominently, Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan said in his address at the opening ceremony of the Pan-Armenian games held in Nagorno-Karabakh in August 2019: "Karabakh is Armenia. Period." He also repeatedly led the crowd in chants of "miatsum" ("unification" in Armenian) – the pan-nationalist slogan that gained popularity during the original escalation of the conflict in the late 1980s.** In this way, he apparently yielded to an **"irredentist nationalism seemingly required to survive in Armenian domestic politics."**

There were also further moves that came across as a provocation for the Azerbaijani side: Announcing plans to make Shusha – a city in Nagorno-Karabakh that Azerbaijanis regard as one of their cultural centers – the capital of the region, and with the same logic, holding the inauguration ceremony of the new president of Nagorno-Karabakh not in the capital of the region, but in Shusha, as well as resettling Armenians from abroad (notably, from Lebanon) to Shusha (and doing this demonstratively by broadcasting it on TV) and building a new road from Armenia to Jabrayil – one of the occupied districts around Nagorno-Karabakh. Also, on the diplomacy track, **Prime Minister Pashinyan openly repudiated the Basic Principles (preliminarily) agreed within the OSCE Minsk framework, insisting on a fresh start to negotiations in a new format with Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians as equal participants.** Because he was not elected by them, he cannot represent them – a typical populist argument, yet the final nail in the coffin for the negotiation process, because of this being an absolute ‘no go’ for the Azerbaijani side. He was also rebuked by the Minsk Group Co-Chairs, **urging “to refrain from statements [...], demanding unilateral changes to the format without agreement of the other party.”** Yet, his **defense minister Davit Tonoyan went even further by publicly declaring the underlying “land for peace” formula for the Basic Principles to be replaced by the “a new war for new lands” one,** hinting at a possible Armenian offensive to gain new territories.

The culmination of the pre-war increased tensions was an above-mentioned fighting on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border and the death of several Azerbaijani soldiers and officers, including an army general in July. Following this clash, an unprecedented event – a spontaneous and unorganized meeting of tens of thousands – took place in Baku: an outpour of rage about the humiliating status quo and to demand retaking Nagorno-Karabakh by military means.

All of these so-called provocative statements and actions by the new Armenian leadership were probably motivated domestically for reasons of power consolidation and increasing legitimacy by appearing more nationalistic in the first instance. But they also implied that Yerevan was taking a harder and thus dangerously populist line on the Karabakh issue. And most importantly, these moves were perceived as insulting and hurting the national pride in Azerbaijan, and thus amounted to ‘adding insult to injury’ in the public’s perception. It can be argued that, as such, they ‘upset’ both the people and government of the country and thus the political inertia of the last decades. **And it is now proving “too costly” for the Armenian government “to insult the Azerbaijani people”, as emphasized by President Aliyev in the context of the ongoing military clashes.**

To sum it up, the military confrontation in Karabakh today is a both powerful and straightforward case in point showing how an arms race leading to more and better weapons means a greater risk of war. With Azerbaijan successfully building up both its military capabilities and its alliance with Turkey, this case is also a good example for the effective combination of an internal and external (un-)balancing policy. Furthermore, the Second Karabakh War shows how easily a (revolutionary) democratization process in a conflict party, attended by increased nationalism and populism, can contribute to conflict escalation.

Background

Nagorno-Karabakh was the first ethnoterritorial dispute in the declining Soviet Union, yet soon turned into an armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. First, an irredentist Karabakh movement sprang up in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, calling for unification. After Nagorno-Karabakh declared its will to secede and join Armenia in February 1988, violent confrontations erupted throughout the region and beyond.

In the early 1990s, severe violence claimed tens of thousands’ lives and a process of “ethnic cleansing” displaced hundreds of thousands. In the course of a bloody war, the Armenian side occupied seven districts bordering Nagorno-Karabakh, establishing a military “buffer zone” around the region – more than twice the size of Nagorno-Karabakh alone. And just as in the region itself, all ethnic Azeris (altogether, five times the population of Nagorno-Karabakh) either fled the occupied districts or were expelled.

This way, what was originally a *status* dispute over the autonomous region escalated to an international conflict. And that is why between April and November 1993, the UN Security Council responded by passing four resolutions demanding an immediate end to hostilities and the withdrawal of Armenian forces from the occupied areas of Azerbaijan. However, the resolutions failed to have any effect.

 Bio

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