

THE CONFLICT IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH: WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ITS GEOPOLITICS

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Analysis

As the effects of the crisis that emerged following Yerevan's attacks on Azerbaijan's Tovuz region in July 2020 persist, new conflicts have broken out in occupied Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian military offensive against civilian settlements in the Aghdam, Tartar, Fuzuli and Jabrayil regions on Sept. 27 has deepened tensions between the neighboring nations. After many civilians were killed, Azerbaijan launched military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh against Armenia.

Currently, Azerbaijan's counteroffensive is operating in the Murovdag-Fuzuli-Jabrayil axis.

Compared to previous conflicts, the parameters of the current one are very different. First of all, both parties are preparing for a prolonged fight as indicated by the declaration of martial law and mobilizations. Moreover, Azerbaijan is showing that it intends to "rescue its lands" by its multifaceted tactics.

Global, regional attitudes

Secondly, the political attitude of the great powers and regional actors in the conflict is remarkable. Moscow, which has two military bases in Armenia and organized a large-scale drill has taken a controlled "wait and see" attitude, unlike the previous period. Moreover, Russia is one of the largest exporters of weapons and ammunition to Armenia.

On the other hand, while Moscow officially called for a cease-fire, making a joint statement with the other two co-chair countries of the Minsk Group, which was set up in 1992 by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), it did not force Yerevan to stop the clashes. According to some experts, Russia will take a more active role and try to protect the status quo in the region if Azerbaijan continues to advance.



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France, which along with the U.S. is a co-chair of the Minsk Group, is currently using a hard-discourse in its foreign policy, unlike other members of the European Union. French President Emmanuel Macron's administration wants to play an active role in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya. Moreover, Paris aims to increase cooperation against Ankara and limit Turkey with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Greece and the Supply Chain Resources Group (SCRG). The Macron administration has started to use the same rhetoric for Nagorno-Karabakh.

On the other hand, Washington's agenda is different from previous years. According to U.S. President Donald Trump, regional countries should find solutions to regional problems. Despite this policy being described as "political uncertainty" by his critics in Washington, Trump believes regional nations should pay the cost of crises in their neighborhoods.

Moreover, the Trump administration does not want a new problem before the November election. After conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh started, the White House did nothing except call for a cease-fire between the parties. According to many experts, this situation opens up new opportunities for rival actors such as Russia and raises regional power competition.

As a matter of fact, Moscow has started to focus on expanding its power following Washington's withdrawal. After increasing its influence in Syria, Russian President Vladimir Putin started to be active in Libya. Nowadays, Putin wants to be a playmaker in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Ankara is the main actor that can compete with Moscow in the region, despite some scholars and nations blaming Turkey for cooperating with Russia. There is no doubt that both countries were rivals during the Ottoman Empire and Cold War eras but nowadays, even within the power struggle, each wants to increase cooperation in bilateral relations in economics and defense while reducing the conflict in Syria.

For instance, Moscow and Ankara have different interests from Crimea, the Eastern Mediterranean to Libya and the Caucasus. Decisionmaking actors in Turkey have not forgotten this situation, but cooperation and competition are inherent in international relations.

Before the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia started, Russia sent weapons to Yerevan and conducted a military drill. Ankara declared it was starting a similar exercise with Baku in the same period. Since the conflict restarted on Sept. 27, Turkey has continued its unconditional support for Azerbaijan.

For years, Ankara and Baku took care to develop bilateral relations in the political, military, economic, cultural and defense industries. During this period, Turkey changed the balance in favor of itself. In a sense, Ankara is one of the greatest players to stand in front of Moscow's desire to expand its regional hinterland. After the Syrian crisis, the regional competition between the two countries has been reflected in Libya, Ukraine, Georgia and now finally in Nagorno-Karabakh.

At a time when the Western world is facing great uncertainty, Turkey is playing an active role in balancing and stabilizing the region, standing up against Russia's dreams.

Military achievements

The latest conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh illustrates both sides' differing military and technological capacity. Yerevan has a strategic partnership with Moscow and uses Russian-made technology and weapons systems that include Sukhoi Su-30 aircraft, Mikoyan MiG-29 fighters, the surface-to-air S-300 and Tor-M2KM missile systems, Tocka-U type ballistic missiles, tanks and its own unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

The Armenian administration continues to display an image that has remained defensive in the field so far.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan's military spending has increased in the last few years following the development of its economy through oil and natural gas exports. According to military spending data announced by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Baku's defense spending has jumped since 2010 and currently sits at almost \$3.7 billion dollars.

In the post-2009 period, Azerbaijan spent four times more money than Armenia according to some data. Along with its strong cooperation with Turkey, Baku has military agreements with Israel and Russia. Azerbaijan's tactical arsenals include Israel-made UAVs, IAI Harop loitering munitions, drones, T-90C tanks, BTR-82A armored personnel carrier vehicles, MiG-35 helicopters, S-300 surface-to-air missile systems, Tor-M2E short-range air defense missile systems, Spike NLOS anti-tank missiles, BM-21 Grad rocket launcher systems, D-30 howitzers, Bayraktar TB2 UAVs, TRG-300 Tiger missiles, SOM missiles and Sakarya and Kasirga rocket systems.

Baku's strategic goals

When we analyzed the military capacity and international partnerships of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, data shows the Yerevan administration has an asymmetric dependence on Russia in the context of its security needs. Moscow has two military bases in Armenia and Russian-made weapons are critical for Yerevan. In contrast, Azerbaijan has some alternatives. Baku has also signed many agreements with Israel, Turkey and Ukraine. Compared to Armenia, Azerbaijan is in a more balanced position.

Moreover, in the last decade, Ankara and Baku have increased military cooperation. Turkey has begun to play an important role in Azerbaijan's defense industry. For instance, Baku is interested in Turkish-made Altay tanks and ATAK helicopters according to some reports.

Since the fighting restarted on Sept. 27, Azerbaijan has had a major advantage over

Armenia, especially thanks to its military technology. While Baku declared the liberation of its territories as its main goal during the conflict, Yerevan has only been able to focus on bringing the international community to its side. The main aim of Armenia is to protect the current status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh but the conditions for a cease-fire have not been created for Azerbaijan yet.

Azerbaijan was especially effective in the previous conflict causing heavy losses to the Armenian military, making progress in some regions and revealing its defense capacity. For Baku, achieving a transformative result in the field has become a priority for the country.

The ongoing conflicts reveal a successful picture for Azerbaijan, but it is too early to have a transformative result. Considering the possibility of pressure by Moscow and the international community for a cease-fire and the fact that geopolitical or other new groups such as Wagner might participate make absolute victory uncertain.

Another large risk is the military involvement of the great powers in the region. Moreover, the use of ballistic missiles may change the nature of the fighting. In another scenario, the battles may expand to Nakhchivan and Turkey could change its military engagements.

As a result, the liberation of Nagorno-Karabakh is the most critical issue. The Baku administration, aware of this, is continuing to use diplomatic channels but could put a stronger emphasis on its military options. At this point, Ankara has to support Baku politically, diplomatically and technologically. Moreover, Turkey should take its place at the table and join the negotiation process with the members of the Minsk Group.

On the other hand, there may be some crucial developments that could tip the balance in the south Caucasus. First of all, there is a weak status quo in the region after Nagorno-Karabakh began being occupied by the Armenians in the Cold War period.

The current situation in the region is important to Yerevan's interests as well as those in Moscow and Tehran. Azerbaijan wants to get its land back and this can change the status quo. In this conflict, some physical and mental barriers

will be destroyed. Moreover, developments in this region, known as South Azerbaijan, where Azerbaijani Turks constitute the majority of the population, should be followed carefully in terms of balances of power in the region.

