



Can America Stop a Wider War Between Armenia and Azerbaijan?

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For the second time in three months, Armenia and Azerbaijan are involved in heavy fighting. To even casual observers of the region, this is nothing new: flareups in this supposedly “frozen” conflict have been commonplace in the past decade. The only problem seems to be that they tend to get worse over time. But reality is much more worrisome. The conflict is all but “frozen.” In the past few years, the entire premise on which the uneasy balance in this conflict rested has essentially been razed, paving the way for a new logic of escalation in which the likelihood of a major war is increasingly obvious.

Much of the coverage of this conflict centers on who started whichever spat. This is largely irrelevant. Much more important are three major changes to the conflict's underlying logic. The first is the broader erosion of a norms-based international system based on international law and institutions. The second is the merger of the region's geopolitics with the Middle East. And the third is Armenia's shift to a revisionist approach to the conflict and negotiations since the 2018 Velvet revolution.

Even prior to these shifts, there was always a major factor of instability in this conflict. The original war in the 1990s saw Armenia, the smaller and poorer of the two countries, coming away with a victory. Exploiting Azerbaijan's domestic troubles and enjoying Russian support, Armenia did not stay at taking control over the main disputed territory—the mainly Armenian-populated enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. Instead, Armenian forces conquered much larger areas to the south and east that were compactly settled with Azerbaijanis. As a result, in the name of protecting 150,000 co-ethnics, Armenian forces drove away over 750,000 people from their homes and occupied over a sixth of Azerbaijan's territory.

This had two effects. First, it changed the international perception of Armenia from that of a victim to that of an aggressor. Second, it ensured that Azerbaijan would never come to terms with the result of the conflict. Instead, revanchism became a prominent element of the Azerbaijani psyche. When Azerbaijan was able to begin producing large volumes of oil a decade later, it spent a significant amount of this windfall on its military. For several years, Azerbaijan's defense spending exceeded Armenia's entire budget, and Azerbaijan's rhetoric intensified accordingly.

But then there were changes in regional geopolitics. The most prominent shift in the past decade is the gradual weakening of international institutions and international law. Great powers that were once bound by certain norms of behavior now essentially do what they can get away with and engage in various adventures on other countries' territories, increasingly not bothering to disguise it. Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, then annexed Crimea, and invaded Ukraine in 2014. China is unilaterally expanding its control over the South China Sea. Iran, ignoring national boundaries, is building an arc of Shi'a militias from Yemen across Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. Saudi Arabia is meddling in Yemen's civil war, and Turkey is arming and training militias in Syria and Lebanon. The list goes on. The point is that the main method used to resolve disputes has shifted from international diplomacy to the covert or overt use of force. Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev in 2019 recognized this shift, commenting that “today, the ‘might is right’ principle prevails in the world. This is a new reality. We must be ready for it.”

This has huge implications for the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, because Baku had built its entire effort to restore its territorial integrity on appeals to international law, and diplomacy in international institutions—albeit with its growing military capability serving as enhanced motivation to change Armenia's calculus. Over the past few years, however, Baku has come to conclude this policy has reached a dead end. That forces the Azerbaijani leadership either to accept the loss of its territory—an impossible choice in the face of an increasingly nationalistic and revanchist public opinion—or to do something about it. Had the international mechanism to mediate the conflict been functional, things might have been different. But the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Minsk Group, co-chaired by Russia, France and the United States, has done little except shuttling between capitals and holding meetings. The perception that the Minsk Group has degenerated into a process for the sake of process, or an excuse for inaction, is widespread across the region.

The second shift is that in regional geopolitics. For long, the logic of South Caucasus geopolitics was entirely within the post-Soviet logic: Russia's efforts to dominate the region faced growing Western efforts to open up the corridor to Central Asia across the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. But all this changed in the past decade, with the region's geopolitics gradually merging with those of the Middle East. This happened for several reasons. The first was America's gradual disengagement, which began in the late George W. Bush administration but deepened during the Obama era. The second was Russia's decision to exploit the vacuum Obama created, by making a bid for a key role in the affairs of the Middle East, particularly in Syria. This resulted in a situation where Russia, Turkey and Iran emerged as the key brokers in regional hotspots in the South Caucasus and Syria. Similarly, Turkey and Russia found themselves supporting warring sides in the Libyan conflict.

As a result, the interactions among those powers in Middle Eastern theaters began to affect Armenia and Azerbaijan directly. This was clear already in 2015 when Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet over Syria—and Moscow responded by beefing up its military presence in bases in Armenia near the Turkish border. But as Turkey and Russia have once again fallen out over Syria and Libya, the impact on the region has become even more pronounced. When fighting erupted in July, it happened on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border—far north of the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh but very close to the pipeline infrastructure carrying Azerbaijani oil and gas to Turkey. Both Ankara and Baku interpreted this as a Russian-inspired threat against them both. This, in turn, triggered an unprecedented Turkish endorsement of Azerbaijan, including the rapid deployment of Turkish forces for military exercises in Azerbaijan. Turkey, a NATO member, now suggests it may get directly involved in a conflict against Armenia, a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty.

The third and final shift is in Armenia's approach to the conflict. When Nikol Pashinyan came to power following a Velvet Revolution in 2018, Azerbaijan tacitly welcomed the transition and markedly refrained from taking advantage of Armenia's internal turmoil on the frontline. Aliyev welcomed the arrival to power, for the first time in twenty years, of an Armenian leadership that did not have its roots in Nagorno-Karabakh even though both Pashinyan's predecessors hailed from there. Baku seemed to expect that once Pashinyan consolidated power, he would be amenable to work toward a compromise solution to the conflict.

What happened was quite the opposite. Under Pashinyan, Armenia's position has hardened. In 2019, Pashinyan repudiated the "Madrid Principles," which have served the basis for negotiations since 2007. Yerevan also sought to change the very format of negotiations, demanding the involvement of the local leadership in Nagorno-Karabakh in the talks. This appeared to be an effort to advance the fiction that Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are not a united front, flying in the face of the 2015 conclusion of the European Court of Human Rights that Armenia exercises effective control over the territory. Incidentally, it contradicted Pashinyan's own 2019 statement that Karabakh "is Armenia, and that's it," which seemingly removed any space for discussion of the territory's status. Not staying at that, Armenians began to speak of the occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh as "liberated" territories. This was another shift because Armenia had previously indicated it held these territories—historically populated by Azerbaijanis—as bargaining chips that would be returned in a peace deal that would settle the conflict. Defense Minister David Tonoyan's statement that Armenia rebuked the land-for-peace idea to a strategy pursuing "new wars for new territories" did not help matters. Finally, Armenia's efforts to resettle ethnic Armenians from Syria and Lebanon into the occupied territories were a clear effort to create new facts on the ground.

Of course, Azerbaijan has not been passive or blameless. With every year of failed negotiations, Azerbaijani rhetoric threatening a military solution has grown more prominent. In 2016, Azerbaijan actually reasserted control over smaller areas of the occupied territories, in the first meaningful shift of territorial possession since 1994. This certainly appears to have had a powerful effect on Armenian planners and contributed to the more bellicose Armenian rhetoric. Furthermore, the lack of direct contact except occasional top-level meetings ensures that each side interprets the other side's words in the most ominous way possible, leading to frequent misunderstandings. What is eminently clear is that it is the failure of international efforts to make the negotiations even remotely meaningful that has pushed both sides in an unconstructive direction.

All of these factors have undermined the fragile balance preventing a resumption of full-scale war in the conflict. But strangely, Western powers have seemed to ignore the conflict and the South Caucasus. Over the past two years, the European Union and the United States both released thoughtful and assertive new strategies for Central Asia. That was a welcome step given positive developments in that region and its obvious growing importance in a time when the U.S. government sees "strategic competition" with Eurasian great powers as the key challenge to U.S. national security. What is mystifying is that both the United States and EU appeared to ignore that the South Caucasus is their gateway to Central Asia. Without that gateway, their ambitions of strengthening their presence in the heart of the Eurasian continent may well be moot.

A reason for this inaction is, perhaps, that there are no easy solutions. Getting involved in the South Caucasus implies involvement in highly contentious conflicts—including those in Georgia—that overwhelmed Western powers might prefer to ignore. It also means challenging conventional wisdom. While Westerners have welcomed the domestic reform efforts of Armenia's new government, which are very real, they seem to have forgotten that a more democratic government does not mean a more peaceful one. In fact, as political scientists like Jack Snyder have long shown, countries in transition to democracy are at the greatest risk of involving themselves in armed conflict, given the government's need to respond to nationalist sentiments. The fact that Russia and Iran have cooperated in supplying Armenia with weaponry in the midst of the fighting should also give western leaders pause about the structure of power relationships in the region, and the interest of those powers in destabilizing the east-west corridor connecting Europe with Central Asia.

By contrast, getting involved in the South Caucasus will imply the difficult task of managing recalcitrant partners like Turkey. While Turkey has turned increasingly anti-Western in recent years, the crises in Libya and in the Caucasus have clearly shown that more often than not, Turkish interests align with the West and not with Russia. Turkish leaders may not yet fully realize this, upset as they are over Western support for Kurdish groups in Syria aligned with the anti-Turkish PKK terrorist organization. Still, the recent flareup provides an opportunity to work to restore cooperation with Ankara to safeguard the common interest in the security of the South Caucasus as a transit corridor.

The ongoing fighting is a reminder to America and Europe that they ignore security in the South Caucasus at their own peril. Much is at stake, and the conflict's path of escalation can only be reversed by rebuilding a credible international mediation effort that aspires not only to maintain the status quo but to actually resolve this conflict once and for all. That can only be done by the Western powers and will require a broader re-engagement of the South Caucasus. If that does not happen, then the current flareup risks being only a precursor to much larger wars.

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