

THAWING OUT A FROZEN CONFLICT: WHY DID THE CONFLICT OVER NAGORNO-KARABAKH REIGNITE IN 2020?

E L E N E J A N A D A Z E

Abstract

This paper aims to examine the factors behind the escalation of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) territory in late September 2020. In order to address the main research question, the article draws on the scholarly literature that covers the causes of the conflict between the two countries. The paper identifies key gaps and analytical pitfalls in the scholarly debates that, on the one hand, no longer provide a relevant theoretical framework for analysing the reemergence of the fighting in 2020 and, on the other hand, fail to grasp the increasingly transforming nature of the current Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The paper focuses on domestic political undercurrents in Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as on new power dynamics in the South Caucasus, with a special emphasis on Turkey and Russia, to explain the factors that have paved the way for the emergence of the recent heavy fighting.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict, Caucasus, Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, Azerbaijan

INTRODUCTION

The paper investigates the reasons behind the reoccurrence of the conflict in 2020 by delving into the scholarly literature that covers the causes of the decades-long dispute to understand whether the current analytical frameworks can account for it. To provide an adequate explanation for the large-scale escalation of the conflict in 2020, the central proposition of this paper will revolve around the combination of the following arguments:

a) The recent transformations in Armenia's domestic politics led up to the change in the geopolitical power balance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and
b) The new geopolitical dynamics, such as Turkey's open support to Azerbaijan and Russia's reluctance to help its traditional ally in the region, played in the hands of Azerbaijan and motivated the latter to launch a long-awaited military strike. This paper argues that the dispute can no longer be seen through the lenses of 'post-Soviet', given its complex geopolitical dimension and long-standing domestic political undercurrents in both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The paper provides a brief background of the Velvet Revolution in order to demonstrate how the events of 2018 led up to Armenia's path towards a new democracy (Freedom House, 2020). The analysis then proceeds by focusing on how the democratic turn in Armenia contributed to the worsening of Armenian-Russian relations on the one hand, and to Moscow's move closer to Azerbaijan on the other. Additionally, this paper argues that Turkey's emerging role in the conflict has become another significant factor adding up to Russia's constrained involvement in the conflict. Eventually, the article brings forward how the outcome of the 2020 fighting weakens democratic aspirations of the South Caucasus countries (Armenia, Georgia) and paves the way for Russia and Turkey to advance their self-aggrandising political agendas.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) gave rise to ethno-nationalistic and almost chauvinistic independence movements in the post-Soviet republics of the South Caucasus.

The “ethno-culturally emancipated model of the Soviet Union” brought about the dominance of violent conflicts on ethnic grounds (Ghazaryan, 2013). The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one of the oldest unresolved disputes of this kind in the post-Soviet space, which has claimed the lives of more than 20,000 people and left nearly one million others displaced (de Waal, 2019b). From the Azerbaijani perspective - mostly supported by international law (UN General Assembly, 2008) - Nagorno-Karabakh and several districts around the region are occupied lands that the country lost when it emerged as an independent Azerbaijani republic in the early 1990s. In contrast, Armenians look back in history and argue that the ethnic Armenians of Karabakh have been deprived of the right of self-determination by totalitarians in the 1920s (Broers, 2015). The two sides of the conflict are often seen as representing two opposing international principles - territorial integrity, asserted by Azerbaijan, and the right of peoples to national self-determination, claimed by Armenians (Suny, 2020).

Revisionist historians on both sides of the conflict have engaged in pseudo-academic scholarship, manipulating historic facts and denying the heritage of the other side on the disputed lands. In fact, it was through these texts that Armenian and Azerbaijani scholars had driven the further development of the nationalistic narratives around the conflict in order to justify claims of their respective countries over the Nagorno-Karabakh territories. For example, Armenian nationalist authors like Zori Balayan deny the Azerbaijani heritage of the Armenian controlled lands through linguistic manipulations, portraying the remaining mosques in Yerevan and some parts of Karabakh (notably the town of Shusha) as ‘Persian’, thus refuting its historic links with Azerbaijan (de Waal, 2019a). Conversely, Azerbaijani nationalist author Zia Buniatov launched almost a fictional historical argument in the 1960s, claiming that Azerbaijanis were the descendants of Caucasian Albanians (de Waal, 2019a) – the medieval Christian people who lived in what is now Azerbaijan and who almost completely disappeared into other people over the course of history (Suny, 2000).

Soon after, the “Albanian argument” became dominant in the Azerbaijani public discourse, attributing authentic Armenian scripts to Albanians and erasing Armenian historical traces (de Waal, 2019a).

A critical takeaway of the analysis is that the enduring ‘history wars’ that seek to provide a factually correct answer to the question of ‘who was there first’ is a lost cause. The truth is that both Armenian and Azerbaijani tribes co-existed in these territories centuries before the conflict emerged in its modern shape. A more important question for this research is, however, whether or not historical causes of the conflict can provide an adequate explanation for the recent re-ignition of the conflict.

2020 FLARE-UP OF THE CONFLICT

The long-standing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh erupted in late September 2020, after cross-border clashes in summer 2020 that killed nearly twenty people, including a general from the Azerbaijani side (Global Conflict Tracker, 2021). The recent fighting not only claimed the lives of more than a thousand soldiers and civilians but also drastically changed the status quo of the conflict. Despite pressures from the United Nations (UN), the United States (US) and Russia, the two countries refused to end hostilities and respect cease-fire agreements negotiated successively by Russia, France and the United States. Azerbaijan achieved a decisive military victory in what came to be called “the Six-Week War” (Kramer, 2021) by not only taking control over all seven districts around Karabakh (occupied by Armenian forces since the early 1990s) but also by regaining parts of the Nagorno-Karabakh territory. The conflict ended with the truce deal signed by Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan on November 9, which marked almost a full capitulation of the Armenian side and a major change of the status quo in favour of Azerbaijan.

Even though there were regular sniper attacks throughout the ‘frozen period’ of the conflict, the scale of the fighting in 2020 was unprecedented for the local nature of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute.

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan used powerful, heavy weaponry and long-range artillery while Azerbaijan deployed sophisticated attack drones. Additionally, Turkey provided direct support to Azerbaijan — its ethnic Turkic ally in Russia's historic sphere of influence — thus adding an apparent regional dimension to the dispute (Kramer, 2021). Moreover, the conditions of the Russian-brokered cease-fire agreement enabled Moscow to strengthen its influence over the conflict.

UNDERLYING CAUSES OF THE CONFLICT

The majority of authors (Zürcher, 2007; Suny, 2000; Beacháin, 2015; Cheterian, 2001; De Waal and von Twickel, 2020) follow a comparative analysis approach when examining the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh. They place the dispute in the group of post-Soviet conflicts, thus emphasising their common origins. The causes of the dispute are predominantly attributed to modern Armenia and Azerbaijan due to powerful nationalist sentiments that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union (de Waal, 2003). However, the existing research has many problems in representing the differences between the conflicts of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Chechnya and Karabakh today. Indeed, all the above-mentioned conflicts have experienced a distinct transformation over the past few years, and even though their common post-Soviet dimension stands, it no longer provides a valid analytical frame for explaining the numerous evolving differences. Some authors have addressed this trend as a “widely circulating conceptual deficit” (Broers, 2015). Arguably, some of the factors that have shaped the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the 1990s are no longer useful in explaining why the war reignited in 2020. The dispute has transformed from post-Soviet to contemporary (Broers, 2019) with its unique power dynamics, heavy weaponry, long-range artillery, domestic changes in both countries and complex great power geopolitics. This paints a very different picture from other Eurasian conflicts of its generation (Broers, 2015).

Another analytical paradigm often attributed to the

Eurasian conflicts is the concept of the “frozen conflict” (Orttung and Walker, 2015). The notion entered the vocabulary of international politics in the 1990s and is still widely used in media, policy and academia (Smetana and Ludvík, 2019). The term indicates an unresolved conflict that is temporarily stopped but can easily slide back to violence. Several authors have criticised this terminology (Smetana and Ludvík, 2019; Broers, 2015; De Waal and von Twickel, 2020) as vague and misleading. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has seen numerous escalations and rising tensions over time, raising questions about the applicability of this analytical framework even before 2020 (Broers, 2015). Now that the dispute escalated into heated fighting, a new approach is needed for addressing the reoccurrence of the conflict in 2020. Indeed, understanding the unprecedented scale of the 2020 fighting and the emerging regional dimension of what used to be a local, interstate conflict requires a new analytical approach.

TOWARDS THE REGIONALIZATION OF THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

The 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia not only brought about significant political changes within the country but also, and perhaps more importantly, drastically transformed the geopolitical power balance in the Karabakh conflict. Russia's fear of the Colour Revolutions made the country reluctant to support democratising Armenia, thus providing momentum for Azerbaijan to pursue its long-standing military ambitions. Additionally, unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan was supported by Turkey - its historic ally. This has shaped a new geopolitical power balance in the region, favouring an authoritarian Azerbaijan over a more democratic Armenia.

THE VELVET REVOLUTION - BACKGROUND

In 2018, what started as a modest student movement transformed into a mass protest that mobilised masses of people against the administration of former president

Serzh Sargsyan and the entrenched political elite in the country. After the Velvet Revolution, Armenia has experienced a significant democratic transition under the Kremlin's shadow (Paul and Sammut, 2018). Subsequent parliamentary elections forced the governing Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) out of office, and Nikol Pashinyan rose to prominence. His positioning against the corrupt political establishment voiced the concerns of thousands of people, paving the way for his unexpected rise to the leadership of Armenia. Nikol Pashinyan's Alliance "My Step" received an overwhelming mandate (70.4% of the votes) in the December 2018 elections, allowing him to assume the position of prime minister.

Nikol Pashinyan is the first Armenian leader in two decades who does not hail from Karabakh (Paul and Sammut, 2018). This mere fact inherently made his positioning on the conflict different from the radical political stances of his predecessors. Prior to the re-emergence of the conflict, Prime Minister Pashinyan continuously emphasised the importance of the conflict resolution, stating that the outcome should have been "acceptable for the peoples of Artsakh Armenia, and Azerbaijan" (Freedom House, 2020). This has raised hopes about the negotiations towards a peaceful resolution of the long-running dispute. In December 2019 the USC Institute of Armenian Studies observed that the year ended as the most peaceful in 25 years of the ceasefire in terms of war-related deaths (USC Institute of Armenian Studies, 2019). However, Pashinyan's political agenda required him to prioritise his domestic promises. This meant dealing with systemic corruption, opaque policymaking, a flawed electoral system, and the weak rule of law (Freedom House). Numerous systemic problems in the country hindered him from focusing on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and instead shifted the prime minister's focus to domestic reforms. Subsequently, the country had to leave the status quo in Nagorno Karabakh (Delcour, 2021).

REGRESS IN ARMENIA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

The Velvet Revolution did not inherently possess a strong geopolitical element (Giragosian, 2021). Some authors have emphasised that Pashinyan's movement shared relatively little with the post-Soviet Colour Revolutions (Ohanyan, 2018). Indeed, unlike the Rose, Orange and Tulip revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, the Armenian revolution emerged through the country's institutions and was driven by non-elites (Ohanyan, 2018). Even though there was neither involvement of third countries nor signalling of a strategic change in Armenia's geopolitical direction (Giragosian, 2021), the very nature of the revolution ideologically distanced democratising Armenia from Russia's orbit. Indeed, Moscow has a troubled history with the Colour Revolutions. In 2005 Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov addressed the trend of exporting the revolution "no matter what colour" as a national threat to Russia (Ambrosio, 2010). Russia not only sees these revolutions as encouraged by the West but also fears that the Rose, Orange and especially Tulip revolutions demonstrated an immense inclination of democratic contagion that would eventually reach the Kremlin. Russia proceeded with creating a counter-narrative in response to the peaceful "electoral revolutions", declaring the changes as undemocratic and "extra-parliamentary" (Ambrosio, 2010). Consequently, the domestic threat of revolutionary uprising became synonymous with Western military intervention and regime change for Moscow.

Some authors argue that the 2018 Velvet Revolution had little effect on Armenia's foreign policy challenges (Giragosian, 2021). In contrast, the underlying argument of this paper is that Pashinyan's rise in power seriously damaged Armenia-Russia relations and led to the Kremlin's reluctance to support Yerevan in the 2020 fighting. Russia's support has always had a huge weight in the country's national security (Kasapoglu, 2017). Armenia depends on Russian military and economic backing through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The country has a security treaty with Moscow and maintains Russian military bases on its soil (Kasapoglu, 2017).

Armenia's immediate geopolitical context is extremely complex for a small country of 2.9 million people (Giragosian, 2021). Therefore, Nikol Pashinyan tried to exclude foreign and security policy from his immediate agenda (Paul and Sammut, 2018). However, his parliamentary bloc submitted legislation to withdraw from the Eurasian Economic Union as early as 2017 (Paul and Sammut, 2018). Additionally, his mixed comments around launching "special relations" with the West raised alarms in the Kremlin. While reassuring President Vladimir Putin about the importance of the strategic relations between the two countries, Pashinyan's reforms sought to diversify the country's foreign policy sector. Armenia's democratic aspirations soon materialised in the country's changed positions on the Russo-Georgian conflict. Armenia consistently followed Russia's footsteps and voted against the return of refugees to Abkhazia and South Ossetia at the UN General Assembly sessions. However, after Pashinyan came to power, the country has refrained from voting and declared friendly neutrality to Georgia (Kobakhidze, 2020).

There are a number of international law constraints in place that hinder Russia from openly engaging in the conflict. Russia has signed a security agreement with Yerevan, urging it to guarantee Armenia's territorial integrity through military support. However, the agreement only applies to the territory of Armenia. According to international law, Nagorno Karabakh is de jure part of Azerbaijan. At the same time, Russia is the co-chair of the Minsk Group as a neutral facilitator of the negotiations. Moscow's open support to Armenia would undermine the country's image as an objective arbiter and potentially push Azerbaijan towards Ankara even more (Zakareishvili, 2020). However, this paper argues that it was mainly due to the political changes in Armenia that Russia started questioning its historical ally. Indeed, international law has hardly stopped the Kremlin from advancing its offensive political agenda when occupying and annexing Georgia and Ukraine.

AZERBAIJAN - MILITARY BUILD-UP

In full contrast with the democratic turn of Armenia, President Ilham Aliyev's regime managed to consolidate deeper authoritarianism in Azerbaijan (Freedom House, 2020). The country came out humiliated from the 1994 military confrontation. Since then, Azerbaijan has dramatically increased its military spending and prepared for regaining its territorial integrity. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Azerbaijan spent more than \$24 billion on arms between 2008 and 2018 (Yavuz and Huseynov, 2020). The Azerbaijani regime skillfully used the territorial question for advancing its political interests (Cheterian, 2010). In the hands of the country's authoritarian leadership, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict became a daunting weapon to securitize politics, exclude opposition and justify the absence of reform (Broers, 2014). Prior to the 2020 escalation of the conflict, Azerbaijan managed to achieve relative military success in the 2016 fighting. The event has emboldened the Azeri regime, allowing President Aliyev to enjoy a marked increase in the public approval ratings (UCDP, 2020). Consequently, as the Armenian side prevailed in the 90s, Azerbaijan took military action to reverse that defeat and recover lost lands on September 27 (de Waal, 2020).

The ongoing processes in Armenia have brought Azerbaijan and Russia closer together. Historically, Russia has been one of the major arms suppliers of Azerbaijan. Thanks to oil extraction, the regime does not require foreign patronage and has a self-sufficient economy. The Azerbaijani government has never had democratic and pro-Western aspirations, which made Russia's attitude towards the country less hostile. Unlike Pashinyan's Armenia, Azerbaijan emerged as a stable autocracy, sharing Russia's fears about the export of "Colour Revolutions". Indeed, President Ilham Aliyev adopted a similar 'anti-revolution' rhetoric as Russia (Al Jazeera, 2020). This way, the regime managed to send a message to the Russian authorities that this time it is not just a fight against 'aggressor' Armenia, but against Pashinyan's project of revolution. In an interview with Al Jazeera on October 3, 2020, he called the 2018 events in Armenia a "so-called revolution" and expressed apparent dissatisfaction with Nikol Pashinyan's figure

(Al Jazeera, 2020). He emphasised that Armenia and Azerbaijan made progress in resolving the conflict during the leadership of the former Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan and that everything changed for the worse after Pashinyan came to power.

Azerbaijan received substantial military assistance from Ankara, including high precision cruise missiles (Molenda, 2018). Some scholars argue that a new Russian-Turkish condominium marked the regionalization of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict (Broers, 2021). Unlike Russia's historical involvement in the conflict, Turkey's emerging role was another unprecedented dimension of the reignited conflict (Kucera, 2020). The increasingly more authoritarian Turkey under Erdogan's leadership emerged as a significant regional player not only in the Middle East but also in the post-Soviet space (Freedom House, 2020). Turkey's mounting assertiveness in Russia's historic sphere of influence played a significant role in the outcome of the fighting. Arguably, direct Turkish involvement in the recent Karabakh War contributed to Russia's disengagement from the conflict. As Turkey is a member state of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), any direct military confrontation between Turkey and Russia risks destructive escalation.

THE OUTCOME OF THE CONFLICT

A new regional power balance emerges as Armenian and Azerbaijani states are faced with the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War. Azerbaijan stands at a critical moment in its history as the country finally manages to regain control of the strategically significant territories (Broers, 2021). Armenia, however, is experiencing a political crisis caused by a devastating military defeat. Losing the war puts Armenia's young democracy to the test, while Aliyev's regime might come out from the conflict stronger than ever. With the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) occupied with their internal problems, Russia emerges as a peacemaker in the conflict. The Russian-brokered truce marks the end of the military confrontation. However, the new agreement cements Turkey as a power in Russia's

traditional sphere of influence, creating a new geopolitical balance in the region (Foy and Pitel, 2020). Emerging power balance enables two external autocratic neighbours – Russia and Turkey – to further increase their influence in the South Caucasus region.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explained the flare-up of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict in 2020. The paper engaged with scholarly literature covering the causes of the conflict. It demonstrated a number of analytical and conceptual pitfalls in the existing research, signalling the need for new theoretical approaches. Existing accounts fail to grasp the changing nature of the Karabakh conflict, thus providing little basis for explaining the reignition of the conflict in 2020. The article argues that the Velvet Revolution in Armenia had a significant influence on the change in the power balance of the conflict. The political changes and a democratic turn of Armenia weakened historical ties between Moscow and Yerevan. Russian disengagement coupled with Turkey's unprecedented support to Baku provided Azerbaijan with a unique opportunity to launch a long-awaited military strike against Armenia.

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