



Nagorno-Karabakh: The Caucasus Time Machine

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: No major power has attempted in earnest to mediate the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, and some have actively participated in keeping the situation ablaze. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have been actively preparing for hostilities, but Armenia finds itself at a political and military disadvantage.

Anyone who has been following world politics for the past 30 years must feel overwhelmed these days by *déjà vu*. At times it seems as though decades-old headlines are being recycled.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh is one example of this phenomenon. The conflict was artificially created by the Soviets, starting with Stalin, who paid special attention to the Caucasus and the drawing of its borders in order to ensure that nobody there would feel confident, secure, or satisfied. The clash flared up in the last years of Soviet Union, culminating in direct military conflict and an Armenian victory—and both sides thoroughly exhausted.

That did not end the conflict, which continued to simmer and occasionally reached boiling point. No major power seriously attempted to mediate the crisis, and some actively participated in keeping it ablaze. Both sides have been actively preparing for the resumption of hostilities, but it is now Armenia that finds itself at a political and military disadvantage.

In the early days of the conflict, Armenia made a strategic decision to align itself with Russia and its interests in the region. That approach paid huge dividends in the early 1990s, with Russia aiding Armenia with military equipment, training, and even direct assistance to ensure that it would emerge victorious in the war with Azerbaijan. This over-reliance on Russia continued to be the main pillar of Armenian foreign policy, culminating in a defense pact between Armenia and Russia. Only a few months ago, the countries held joint military exercises with thousands of troops from both countries involved.

But Russia is never playing with only one deck. Over the last few decades it has become a major supplier of military hardware to Azerbaijan as well as Armenia, and has become a major economic partner of that oil-rich Caspian country. Armenia, when compared to Azerbaijan, is relatively poor. Given the duplicity of Russia's interests, Yerevan is thus left at a significant disadvantage in this political triangle.

That is not Armenia's only failure. Another, and perhaps even larger, strategic mistake is the country's relative isolation on the world stage. This is especially striking given the established and financially successful Armenian diaspora in the West, particularly in France and the US. These communities, which are prosperous and politically influential, have nevertheless failed to articulate Armenia's security concerns for their respective governments and the general public. In its powerful diaspora, Armenia possesses strategic leverage that only a few small countries can boast, but that advantage has been wasted.

This represents a catastrophic blunder on the part of successive Armenian governments and is a clear indicator of their strategic blindness. Even with Armenia's recent attempts at warming its relationship with the US and Europe, Western public opinion is unfamiliar with the conflict and not ready to accept the arguments of either side. Armenia's friendly relationship with Iran does not help its world standing either, but one can argue that in that region countries are not necessarily at liberty to be picky about their friends.

Azerbaijan has oil. It is a country run by a single family, the Aliyevs. It is a Shiite-majority fiefdom run along the lines of the UAE, but with an inept and kleptocratic authoritarian regime. That regime has been on a major arms-buying spree, purchasing arms from Russia and recently from Israel.

On a strategic level, Armenia is in conflict with Turkey, not Azerbaijan. Certain sectors of Turkey, with President Erdoğan as their representative, have never made peace with the fact that they failed to finish off Armenia completely. Turkey's involvement in this conflict thus contains a pathological aspect.

Erdoğan, with his revanchist imperial strategy, wants to present Turkey as the defender of all Muslim and Turkic people. But in the Caucasus, his ambitions clash with similar imperial sentiments held by Vladimir Putin. This rivalry is as old as both respective empires.

If one is to believe recent reports, Ankara is ramping up its direct involvement in the conflict. It allegedly shot down Armenian SU-25s in Armenian air space and is recruiting and sending Syrian mercenaries to the area in an attempt to replicate the approach it took in Libya.

Everyone is awaiting Russia's response—but Putin is very careful, and he has apparently calculated that he will not step into this quagmire despite Moscow's military agreement with Armenia. The conflict, after all, plays into his strategy for the regions surrounding Russia, in what the Kremlin calls the "near far."

Russia's goal is to destabilize its neighbors by creating semi-independent states that are quietly stage-managed by Moscow, giving the Kremlin the power to control the political temperature in those countries. Russia may want to sustain the current conflict for a little while for the purpose of weakening Armenia a bit more and then coming in as peacemaker. The end result would render Armenia even more dependent on Russia than it is already.

Russia will not allow Armenia to crush Azerbaijan, as doing so would provoke Turkey to openly enter the conflict—which in turn would force Russia to intervene directly. Sadly, a peaceful resolution to this conflict—if one is even possible—is not currently on the table.

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