

Flashpoint Caucasus: the unresolved tensions of Nagorno-Karabakh

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Unresolved tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus region could develop into an international issue, unless a peace deal can be negotiated. The Caucasus – a transcontinental region between the Black Sea and



the Caspian Sea – is on the crossroads of Europe and Asia. It is a bustling melting pot of diverse ethnic groups, languages and religions, and Indigenous cultures have flourished in the Caucasus for centuries. The region’s geographic location – serving as a conduit between the two continents – is pivotal. Historically, it facilitated the Silk Road, famed for its trade and cultural exchange between the East and the West. Now, its abundant natural resources in oil and gas are capturing the interest and focus of global powers.

Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) – a region in Azerbaijan, covering the south-eastern stretch of the Lesser Caucasus mountain range – has been the focal point of the most significant and enduring conflict in the Caucasus. It has a majority Armenian population and tense rivalry has existed between Azerbaijan and Armenia since the beginning of the century.

Tensions in the region have escalated since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan established independence in the 1990s and NK declared its own independence triggering a full-scale war. Although a ceasefire was agreed in 1994, the conflict remains unresolved and there are still outbreaks of violence.

The formidable challenge in achieving a lasting negotiated peace is compounded by NK’s strategic significance – its geographical positioning, ethnic diversity and fervent nationalism. This complexity elevates the issue beyond local or regional concerns, transforming it into a matter of international significance.

Persistent tensions and violations

At the core of this dispute is land, with both Armenia and Azerbaijan claiming historical and cultural rights over NK. Political discord from both factions exacerbate the situation, with any attempts to rally domestic support only intensifying the tension. Additionally, a gradual build-up of military presence in the region contributes to an heightened state of readiness for conflict. This dynamic is keeping all stakeholders on edge and introducing another layer of disruption that complicates any efforts towards peace.

Regional powers: Russia and Turkey's involvement

The advent of Russia and Turkey actively monitoring the situation adds a further layer of complexity. Russia has designated itself peacekeeper in the region, playing on its historical rule and influence post-Soviet Union. Russia's multifaceted agenda includes maintaining southern border stability, retaining influence over Armenia and Azerbaijan and, more importantly, controlling the energy routes in the Caucasus.

Turkey, on the other hand, always supported Azerbaijan, united by their shared ethnic ties and cultural affiliation. Turkey also has geopolitical ambitions to become a bigger player and is looking to exert influence in the region and counterbalance Russia. It is important to note that the involvement of Russia and Turkey in the Caucasus extends beyond the NK conflict. Their actions are symptomatic of broader regional strategies and the ever-shifting dynamics of power in Eurasia.

Wider international perspectives and involvement

International reaction to the NK regional conflict has been varied. The Minsk Group, co-chaired by the US, France and Russia, has made substantial efforts to address the problems.

Formed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 1992, the Minsk Group has been pivotal in mediating and implementing peace plans. Russia's engagement in Ukraine, though, has hindered its mediation efforts in the NK disputes.

Consequently, Moscow's influence in the Caucasus has diminished, prompting doubts about its ability to collaborate with the remaining Minsk Group co-chairs – the US and France. Since the invasion of Ukraine began, troubles in NK have escalated, resulting in Azerbaijan's capture of an ethnic Armenian village in March 2023. This was a clear violation of the November 2020 ceasefire implemented by Russia, but the Kremlin's muted response demonstrates an unwillingness to engage in mediation in the region at the moment. Concerns have been raised about France's ongoing mediation within the Minsk Group, particularly in light of the Azerbaijani State Security Services (SSS) expelling several French secret service agents found to be operating in the French embassy in December 2023. French and Azerbaijani relations have been strained due to France's commitment to support both the separatists in NK and Armenia itself. While the connection between the French spies' activities and NK separatists remains unclear, reports suggest that they have been involved in recruiting soldiers to support Ukraine in the ongoing war.

The United Nations has made efforts to find solutions, focusing on the humanitarian consequences of conflict and calling for a ceasefire to halt the bloodshed. However, considering the complex and deeply rooted historical tensions, efforts to resolve the problem must be viewed as exceptionally challenging.

The risk of renewed conflict

The possibility of renewed conflict remains an ongoing concern for all stakeholders, with various triggers capable of reigniting full-scale fighting. These include military manoeuvres near disputed areas, sabre rattling by political leaders, escalating skirmishes and targeted attacks. Additionally, the policies of neighbouring countries could contribute to such an outcome, not to mention the geopolitical actions of major powers such as the US, Russia and the EU.

The future of the Caucasus

The NK portion of the Caucasus region is standing at the edge of a precipice. Despite its current precarious state, there is potential for de-escalation through Azerbaijan's peace proposal and Armenia's request for international intervention.

Achieving a successful peace plan will require the involvement of world powers, although one such power is Russia, which is currently engaged with its own conflicts. Despite the obstacles, it is essential for influential parties to focus on practical solutions and collaborate to monitor and stabilise the region.

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