

Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Protracted Melted Conflict rather than a Frozen one

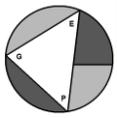
Babak Rezvani & Caspar ten Dam ¹

Abstract: *This article discusses the recent re-eruption of the Karabakh war, which is about the ownership and control of the former Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Province and seven surrounding districts in the Republic of Azerbaijan. The parties to this conflict are the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Armenian separatists from Karabakh supported by Armenia. Nagorno Karabakh is de jure part of Republic of Azerbaijan. However, it is mainly inhabited by ethnic Armenians and is de facto under the control of the self-declared Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh). This article seeks to offer an objective discussion of this conflict which has re-erupted again into a full-scale war since September 2020; it discusses the positions taken by surrounding countries as well.*

Keywords: Nagorno Karabakh, Karabakh Conflict, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, Iran, Georgia, Russia, Turkey, the Caucasus, International Law, Ethno-territorial Conflict.

Introduction

After months of tension that began in July 2020, the Karabakh Conflict re-erupted into a full-scale war in late September 2020. The long-term yet barely functioning ceasefire broke down on September 27 (for reasons that have yet to become clear). Even though skirmishes along



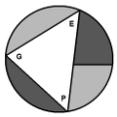
the so-called “line-of-contact’ have not been rare in the past, this time it broke out in a full-scale war.

The Armenian and Azerbaijani accounts of development to re-ignited war may differ. However, the Azerbaijani military action was resolute, and followed by an offensive by the modernised and reinvigorated Azerbaijani armed forces. Subsequent fighting and shelling of both military positions and civilian centers (each side accusing the other of violating temporary ceasefires and/or attacking civilians), has killed thousands of combatants and hundreds of civilians on both sides (estimates are preliminary, often partisan and vary considerably) and displaced tens of thousands of Armenian and Azeri civilians alike.

Azerbaijani troops recaptured some adjacent areas of Nagorno-Karabakh that had been occupied by Armenian forces for years if not decades, as well as some (outlying) parts of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. For now there seems to be a shaky stand-off if not stalemate, interspersed with flare-ups and even major military operations initiated by both sides—despite peace talks and ceasefires brokered by some neighbouring countries and (other) international mediators.

This conflict about sovereignty over the former Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Province, in the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, started in the late 1980s, with a full-scale war between 1988 and 1994. There have been skirmishes despite a ceasefire negotiated in 1994 (Bishkek Protocol), most notably in 2016. ²

The label “frozen conflict” may not entirely fit the ethno-territorial conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space, as the root causes of none of these

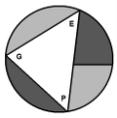


have been addressed yet and as almost all of these (with the exception of Transnistrian conflict) have re-erupted twice (e.g. Abkhazia, South Ossetia etc.). It will be very difficult to solve an ethno-territorial dispute owing to the fact that in the current state of international law sovereignty over a territory is indivisible (barring particular rights of self-determination in post-colonial contexts).

There are possibilities to negotiate and even agree about rights of a country over a territory which is *de jure* not its territory, or establish a condominium (for example, Andorra). However, it still requires to assign the ultimate sovereignty over the territory to an independent country whose independence has been recognised internationally.

Therefore, resolving territorial conflicts is very difficult to say the least. It becomes even more difficult when it concerns an ethno-territorial conflict such as those in the Post-Soviet Space. In such conflicts ethnic groups demand almost exclusive rights or entitlement to a territory and develop often discourses about its inhabitation in history. Such discourses may be effective in building a sense of legitimacy among people but have often not much legal value according to international law.

This article seeks to discuss the Karabakh War in a rather objective i.e. non-partisan fashion, yet at the same time without discussing it too analytically or proposing possible solutions to the conflict in question. Nevertheless, it is our intention to offer more in-depth analyses and solutions for this or similar conflicts in the future.



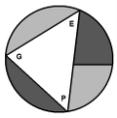
Positions of Neighbouring Countries vis-à-vis the Karabakh Conflict

It is increasingly common—since the skirmishes started in July 2020—that the main regional news outlets, notably those of Russia and Iran, call the Karabakh War a conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia and no longer a conflict between Azerbaijan and the Armenian separatists of Karabakh. ³

All neighbouring countries, i.e. Russia, Georgia, Turkey and Iran, recognise the Nagorno Karabakh region as *de jure* territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Russia has good relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan and is trying to balance the richer and larger Azerbaijan with the poorer and smaller Armenia. Georgia has good relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia. However, as it has its own issues with break-away regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and as the oil pipeline from Azerbaijan passes through its territory, Georgia might be slightly in favour of Azerbaijan.

Turkey has no diplomatic relations with Armenia as it has its own issues and troubled history with Armenia and Armenian diaspora, and supports rhetorically Azerbaijan (unlike Pakistan, Turkey does recognise Armenia). The Armenian claims of involvement of Turkish F16 fighter jets in the recent hostilities cannot be confirmed. The claims of Turkey that PKK/YPG fighters are present in Karabakh cannot be confirmed either.

Similar to Pakistan, Turkey frames its support of Azerbaijan as a sign of Islamic solidarity, while for the predominantly Western international



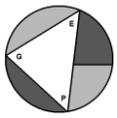
audience, Turkey frames its support as a natural regard for international law and the principle of territorial integrity. However, the Turkish reaction towards Kosovo's independence and the territorial integrity of Serbia was very different. Be that as it may, for the Azerbaijani audience, Turkey tries to frame its support for Azerbaijan as a Turkic-speaking fraternal nation given that both countries speak a similar Turkic language.

Of all neighbouring countries, Iran is closest to Azerbaijan in the cultural sense. Both countries share similar culture and history. The northwestern Iranian region of Azerbaijan has historically been among the most—perhaps the most—important region of Iran. To give an example, the Iranian crown princes used to live in Tabriz—the capital city of the Iranian region of Azerbaijan—before moving to Tehran in order to be crowned as the Iranian king, after their father's death.

Today, there are more Azerbaijanis living in Iran than in the Republic of Azerbaijan (perhaps even more than double as many), and there are many other ethnic groups living in Iran who, similar to Azerbaijanis, are Shia Muslims and speak a similar Turkic language.

Stalin has tried to steer the Azerbaijani language in the Caucasus away from its vast Persian vocabulary. Still, the extent of Persian vocabulary in the Azerbaijani language of the Caucasus remains significant. It is even more evident when Azerbaijani singers sing poetry in classical Azerbaijani which does not differ a lot from contemporary Azerbaijani language spoken in Iran.

Iran has a policy of not recognising break-away regions. For example,



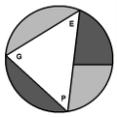
Iran has not recognised Kosovo, while Turkey did for the reasons of historical ties and Islamic solidarity. Several important Iranian political figures have stated after the re-eruption of the Karabakh conflict that Iran is against the occupation of Azerbaijani territory and supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. However, they also have expressed concerns about the reports and rumours about the usage of Israeli drones and deployment of conservative Islamist fighters—who were allegedly brought by Turkey from Syria—along the Iranian northwestern borders (see e.g. *Tehran Times* 2020 and *Tasnim News Agency* 2020).

Iran has actively (and reportedly even militarily) supported the Republic of Azerbaijan in the early days of the Karabakh conflict in the 1990s (see e.g. Rezvani 2013a & 2013b; there are other sources mentioned in those articles too). But Iran has retreated from such close involvement after it was sidelined by the fact that the solution or at least containment of the Karabakh conflict was trusted to the OSCE Minsk Group consisting of Russia, the United States and France, which appeared to be fairly ineffective.

Despite all these facts, Iran remains now neutral and is on speaking terms with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, the influence of Iran on both countries is much less compared to that of Russia.

Final Remarks

Despite American and notably Russian mediated ceasefires, these ceasefires were violated many times. According to our confidential

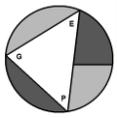


sources who wish to remain anonymous, Russia has made the warring parties know that an attack on big cities outside Karabakh is a redline for Russia. That is the reason why both sides accuse the other of having attacked cities in Armenia or Azerbaijan outside the immediate zone of conflict, whereas the other party denies such claims. In a regular war, a country is not very likely to deny its successful operations (even if those operations produce a lot of collateral damage).

As of now, Azerbaijan has recovered territories around the former Nagorno Karabakh to the south of the Lachin Corridor, but for now its advance into the former Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Province has been restricted. It may point towards a possible agreement about the evacuation of the seven districts outside the former Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Province. Certainly, there has been such a peace scheme negotiated by Levon Ter-Petrossyan and Heydar Aliyev, then the presidents of respectively Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In a recent debate during the Munich Security Conference (February 2020) the current President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, expressed support for such a scheme, while Nikol Pashinyan, the current prime minister of Armenia, stated that any solution to the Karabakh conflict should be acceptable to the peoples of Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as to the people of Karabakh itself. He mentioned that he is the first Armenian leader ever for whom an acceptance by the people of Azerbaijan is a precondition for a solution. ⁴

Military action to resolve the Karabakh conflict—indeed any armed conflict in general and ethno-territorial conflict in particular—may



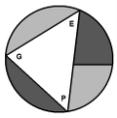
recover territories but is unlikely to offer sustainable peace, for the losing party may reorganise and wage a new war in the foreseeable future. Only negotiated agreements seem to be sustainable, and this can only be reached by credible commitment and confidence building, not merely among government officials of the opposing sides but most of all among the peoples the officials of each side claim to represent and take their interests, safety and well-being to heart.

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Endnotes

1. I want to express my gratitude to co-author and fellow-editor Caspar ten Dam, without whose careful edition of our journal and patience and critical reading of my article, this current issue of our journal would not have been possible.
2. An earlier article in our journal discusses the hostilities Karabakh in 2016 (Baghdasaryan 2019). As we have mentioned in the Editorial of the current issue, we do not necessarily endorse the author's view. However, the fact that author has discussed these hostilities, shows that the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, unlike by many or most analysts in the West, has not been regarded a frozen conflict in the region itself.



3. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrvpT2KONPU&ab_channel=RT. See also Chadwick (2020), and other (secondary) sources mentioned in it or in other sources that are referred to in this article.
4. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKcUniwblk&ab_channel=AZERTAC_English ; or www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBh7LBjOHjs&ab_channel=%D4%B1%D5%A6%D5%A1%D5%BF%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%A9%D5%B5%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B6.

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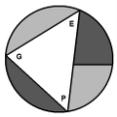
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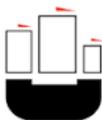


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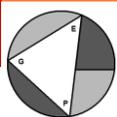
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