

THE GEO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT:

Amir Jan,

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Studies, Lasbela University of Agriculture, Water and Marine Sciences, Uthal, Lasbela, Balochistan, Pakistan, Email: amirluawms@gmail.com <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4327-9254>

Jalal Faiz,

Associate Professor, Department of Political Studies, Lasbela University of Agriculture, Water and Marine Sciences, Uthal, Lasbela, Balochistan, Pakistan, Email: jalalfaiz@yahoo.com

Gulshan Munir,

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, SBK, Women University, Quetta Email: gulshan.badini@gmail.com

Abdul Rab,

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Studies, Lasbela University of Agriculture, Water and Marine Sciences, Uthal, Lasbela, Balochistan, Pakistan, Email: abdulrab00093@yahoo.com

Abstract- This paper aims to explore the geo-political implications of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on the region which have been witnessing human sufferings, political marginalization, economic instability and foreign intervention since 1990s. The paper finds that the geopolitical significance of the region and geo-strategic vested interests of the regional and extra-regional powers have enticed and stimulated the conflict to be sharpened. The paper also addressed the question that why Armenian and Azeri regimes failed to design a bilateral mechanism that could resolve the conflict with collective efforts, deny the foreign intervention and encouraged bilateral economic and political cooperation. The paper is qualitative in nature which explored and investigated different historical events, facts and incidents of Nagorno-Karabakh in order to find out its regional geo-political impacts on the region at large. The paper also tried to find out a way-forward that could address the issue via political and diplomatic means.

Keywords: Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia

INTRODUCTION

Nagorno-Karabakh, being a landlocked, mountainous and disputed area in the Caucasus region, finds its location between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Nagorno-Karabakh is no doubt, surrounded and fall at the territorial jurisdiction of Azerbaijan, however, it is overwhelmingly occupied by the ethnic Armenians and other minor ethnic groups. The government of Azerbaijan believes that Nagorno-Karabakh has been the territorial part of Soviet Azerbaijan before its independence in 1989 (Rasizade, 2011) whereas the Armenian regime claims that it originally belonged to Armenian Kingdom before Soviet federation which was later illegitimately occupied and controlled by Azerbaijan (Cornell, 1998). The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh territory began in February, 1988 when demonstration began in Stepanakert to unify Nagorno with Armenia. Even it Soviet of People's Deputies in Nagorno voted in favor of Armenia. However, Soviet Union rejected it straightforwardly. On the anticipation of the Soviet disintegration and end of Soviet rule in Nagorno-Karabakh November, 1989, the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh was transferred to Azerbaijan. However, the decision was overturned by the Armenian Supreme Soviet and National Council (Legislative Body) of Nagorno-Karabakh and made it the part of Armenia. The Azeri government resisted the decision of the legislative body of Nagorno-Karabakh by abolishing the status of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast and made its administrative union territory in November, 1991 (Roeder, 2012). Thus, after the disintegration of Soviet Union of Socialist Republics (USSR) in early 1990s, the territory of Karabakh became a disputed region between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The initial clashes took place between Azeri and Armenian regimes in 1988 that finally entered into a full-scale war in 1994, resulting many casualties on both sides (Abilov & Isayev, 2016). However, a ceasefire document was signed in 1994 between Azerbaijan and Armenia which provided peace and stability on the disputed region at least for two decades (Klever, 2013). There is no denying the fact that periodic clashes even after the signature of ceasefire in 1994 on the borderline between Azerbaijan and Armenia are still continued which have never let the ties of Azerbaijan and Armenia be normal and amicable.

The geo-political factor of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is not deniable as well. The dishonest attitude of Russia as a broker, the doubled-standard policies of Iran and Turkey in the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh have been adding fuel to the fire, rather than playing any political and diplomatic parts in the settlement process of the conflict. The Russian-Iranian-Armenian triangle on one side, the US-Azeri-Turkish alliance on the other side have left the regions of Central Asia, Caucasus and Eurasian to be tense, instable and vulnerable to World War 3rd. Most importantly, after the tragic human crisis in Chechnia, Bosnia, Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Kashmir, the Caucasus region has been added in the list.

The paper is qualitative in nature which explored and investigated different historical events, facts and incidents of Nagorno-Karabakh in order to find out its regional geo-political impacts on the region at large. The paper also tried to find out a way-forward that could address the issue via political and diplomatic means.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The first ethnic conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh took place in February, 1988 between Azerbaijan and Armenia on the future rule of Nagorno-Karabakh territory after the end of Soviet rule. The Artsakh Liberation War known as first Nagorno-Karabakh war, was fought between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijan armed forces. The Artsakh Liberation war took place at Nagorno-Karabakh when the Parliament of Karabakh, passed a resolution to unify the Nagorno-Karabakh region with Armenia on February 20th, 1989 (Panossian, 2001) since it was strongly resisted by the Azeri government and abolished the status of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (Roeder, 2012). Thus, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was sharpened and went to its extreme phase in 1994. Despite the fact that, Armenia and Azerbaijan were the integral parts of Soviet Union, however, after the disintegration of Soviet Union, both nations entangled themselves over the territorial dispute of Karabakh. It ought to be noted that the Nagorno-Karabakh has remained the bone of contention between Azerbaijan and Armenia since 1988. After signing the ceasefire in 1994, Karabakh witnessed peace and harmony for two decades. In addition to this, after a long period of peace, once again the Mardakert clashes started in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2008 between Azerbaijan forces and Armenian ethnic groups (Johansson, 2009). The Mardakert clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh are extremely important to this study that for the first time the General Assembly of United Nations passed a resolution, directing the Armenian forces to withdraw from the disputed territory at the earliest (Taşcıoğlu, 2017). But resolution did not bring any change in the ongoing clash. The Nagorno-Karabakh clash took a serious shape in 2010 when free use of gun and bullets were witnessed on the border of Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh by the forces of both sides, resulting the death and casualties (Krüger, 2010). It has been reported that the Mardakert clash between Azerbaijan and Armenia claimed 74 personnel of both sides (Sanamyan, 2016). No doubt, the Mardakert clashes of 2008 and 2010 were the serious violations of the provision of the ceasefire of 1994 between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Apart from this, the soldiers of Azerbaijan and Armenia faced serious clashes at border in April 2011, resulting the death of ethnic Armenians. The relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia went to its lowest ebb in 2014 when the borderline witnessed several clashes time to time. In August, 2014, for the first time, the border clashes between the forces of Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh drew the attention of Russia to issue a strong warning of military intervention in the region if Azerbaijan and Armenia further accelerated the borderline clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh (Pashinyan et al., 2014). Despite the Russian warning, the armed conflict between Azerbaijan and ethnic Armenians was further accelerated over the tragic event of shooting down the Mil-Mi-24 helicopter of Nagorno-Karabakh Defense Army on November 12th, 2014 (Pashinyan et al., 2014). The unfortunate incident did not only claim the death of three Armenian army men, it also resulted the series of extreme exchange of warnings and ultimatums on both sides (Pashinyan et al., 2014).

There is no denying the fact that the status quo position of Nagorno-Karabakh since 1994 has been irritating Azerbaijan badly due to which the periodic clashes have been taking place throughout 2015 between the forces of Azerbaijan and ethnic Armenians. In order to disturb the status quo of Nagorno-Karabakh, the regime of the Republic of Azerbaijan allocated \$ 3 billion dollar for defense in 2015 (Pashinyan et al., 2014). There is no doubt that Azerbaijan has been the key penetrator and provoker of the border clashes since 2008 because it has been the ultimate motive of Azerbaijan to regain and annex the territorial control of Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, the borderline clashes continued at Nagorno-Karabakh from 2008 till present.

The clashes on border took a serious shape on September, 2020 between Azerbaijan and Armenia which forced Armenia to declare Martial law in Nagorno-Karabakh. Meantime, the government of Azerbaijan also declared Martial Law and curfews in most of its cities. This time the clashes were so much severe that drew the attention of the regional and international powers. Once again Russia came forward as broker between Azerbaijan and Armenia to end 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh. The peace deal also convinced Armenian government to transfer the all occupied areas outside of the former Soviet Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast to Azerbaijan (Yavuz & Huseynov, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The roots of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan are traced back in 1988 when both nations were in their final stages of political and economic independence from Soviet federation. No doubt, the Nagorno-Karabakh region falls under the de jure and international-recognized territory of Azerbaijan, however, it has been under the control of ethnic Armenians who have been fighting with the Azeri forces for last three decades. On the other hand, the Armenian government has claimed that the disputed territory originally has been the part of Armenian Kingdom Before the Christ period. Cornell (1999) writes in his book, "Armenian Karabakh was part of a great Armenian kingdom as far back as the fourth century Before Christ" where the ethnic Armenians have been living there for ages. After its recognition as the territorial part of Azerbaijan, the insurgency and liberation movements took place in Nagorno-Karabakh, which has not only resulted the death of many people, it also created one and half million refugees in the region. Cornell (1999) further investigates, "The conflict has led to over twenty thousands casualties and almost one and a half million refugees, a refugee flow which has resulted in a considerable crisis especially in Azerbaijan".

Apart from human crisis and human rights violation, the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh has generated an interesting geo-strategic competition and geo-political race among the regional and extra-regional powers. Russia, Iran and Turkey have not

only been directly involved in the conflict, they have also been fraudulent brokers and supporting of both sides (Diyarbakirlioglu, 2020). Turkey is the only ally of Azerbaijan in the region, finds it extremely tough to support Azerbaijan politically, militarily and diplomacy since it does not share direct borderline with Azerbaijan and Nakhjivan, an Armenian area divides Turkey from Azerbaijan (Abrahamyan, 2017). Thus, the influence of Turkey in Azerbaijan is limited to somehow. Most importantly, the oil-rich Azerbaijan which intends to import its oil to Eastern Europe via Turkey, has also strongly checked by Iran on the Southern part and Russia-Georgia on Northern Part (Nuriyev, 2008). Cornell (1999) explores that due to a ring of circle of Russia, Iran and Armenia, around Azerbaijan does not only create security threats for Azerbaijan, it also prevents Azerbaijan to import its oil to international market.

INTERNATIONAL ACTORS IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a territorial dispute of Azerbaijan and Armenia over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh which originally belonged to Azerbaijan. The territorial dispute did not only create mistrust, misconception, perpetual borderline clashes and casualties on both sides, it has also opened door for the military and political intervention of regional and extra-regional powers in the Nagorno-Conflict. Russia which borders both states, has been directly involved in the conflict. Apart from its mediatory role in the conflict, Russia has even been witnessed in issuing warning statements to both of them in refraining physical strikes (German, 2012). However, Azerbaijan has been found in blaming Russia in siding Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Askerov, 2020). In this regards, different historical facts indicate that Russia no doubt has been involved in supporting Armenia, nonetheless, it has been extremely cautious and limited to its military, economic and political supports to Armenia since Russia has never intended to be well-involved in the bilateral conflict of Azerbaijan and Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh (Ismailzade, 2005). In addition this, there are other certain facts which explore the Russian involvement and support on both sides in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The stance and role of Russia in the conflict is not only vague, Russia has always been in favor of status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh so that it would maintain its arm-sell and regional dominancy.

As far as Turkey is concerned in respect to Azeri-Armenian conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, it has been the key supporter of Azerbaijan. Since the start of the conflict in 1988, Turkey has been found in providing military, political and logistic supports to Azerbaijan against Armenia (Cornell, 1998). It has been reported that Turkey is the main supplier of arms and weapons of Azeri government (Balayev, 2013). Both, Turkey and Azerbaijan have jointly conducted military operation and strike against Armenia in past (Abbasov, 2011). It ought to be noted that Turkey has had also border clashes with Armenia for last three decades. Most importantly, Turkey had suspended its diplomatic relations with Armenia in the solidarity with Azeri government.

On the other hand, Iran has been a key player in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict since it shares borderline with Azerbaijan and Armenia on the North. Despite the fact that Iran considers itself neutral in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Iran has been found in supporting Armenia politically and financially in the very conflict (Nuriyev, 2008). In addition to this, Iran has also supported Azerbaijan in past. This ought to be learnt that Iran has been so much diplomatic in the regional issues of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey. Historical evidence fortified the fact that Iran supported Armenia against Turkey (Abbasov, 2011), however, in case against Azerbaijan, Iranian support to Armenia has been limited. Analysts opined that Iran would use Armenia a geo-political counter against Turkey and maintain its regional power-domain and power-game between Azeri-Armenian nations.

Even the regional policies of US have been divided in respect to Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The historical history reveals that US has been following dual policy in the Armenian-Azeri conflict. The executive branch, especially the State Department of US has been dominated by the Azeri lobby whereas the Congress of US have had soft corner for Armenian regime (Ambrosio, 2001). In order to counter-weigh the geo-political policies of Russia, US has well-mangled itself in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The regional dual policy of US was intended to carry out its dominancy in natured-blessed regions of Central Asia and Caucasus.

GEO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONFLICT ON THE REGION

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has not only been a bilateral conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, it has also drew the attention of regional and extra-regional powers since Nagorno-Karabakh is bordered with oil-rich and natural-blessed countries of the world. The three decades conflict has no doubt, claimed many civilian and armed lives, it also opened the door for foreign intervention, subversive activities, arms race and backdoor diplomacy for the vested interests of regional powers. Nagorno-Karabakh Republic which is commonly known as Artsakh is currently under the control of ethnic Armenians, however, it officially and legally is the part and parcel of Azerbaijan (Rasizade, 2011). Despite this fact, countries like Greece, Cyprus, France, Russia, Iran and US supported the cause of Armenian in international forums. Regional analysts believe that international supports to the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh was intended to entertain their regional policies and ensure their presence on oil-rich field.

On the other hand, Pakistan and Turkey have announced their diplomatic support in favor of Azerbaijan explicitly during the war-time phases between Azerbaijan and Armenia on Nagorno-Karabakh (Khan & Syed, 2021). I ought to be learnt that Turkey is the only state in the region which has refrained to recognize and acknowledge the independence status of Armenia in

solidarity with Azerbaijan. Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Israel, Kosovo, Serbia, Ukraine, Moldova, Uzbekistan along with Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have been found in supporting Azeri stance in the region.

The regional and extra-regional actors have been so much divided in respect to Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that instead of its settlement, it has gone from bad to worse. The conflict has ultimately given birth to human crisis which is really a question mark for the international community.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has become a challenging task for the Eurasian states since the stances of regional powers over the conflict is vague, indecisive and divided. The conflict seems to be a conflict within the conflict where the regional powers have been witnessed in fighting for their own designed policies in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Turkish, Iranian, US and Russian military, political and economic aids and cooperation to both sides of the conflict have never allowed Armenia and Azerbaijan to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict amicably and diplomatically.

Russian economic and military aids to Armenia is perceived a regional threat to the national security of Azerbaijan (Cornell, 1999) whereas the same alliance and nature of cooperation with Azerbaijan would become a threat to the national security of Armenia. The similar situation exists in case of Turkish economic and military cooperation with both of the states. This fortifies the argument that the regional powers never intend to bring out any political and diplomatic solution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Apart from foreign supports, Azerbaijan strongly relies on its natural gas and oil to strengthen its economy, politics and military to regain the occupied territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Unfortunately, Armenia acts as the major obstacle for Azeri regime in planning to export and ship the oil and gas to European Nations via Turkey because Armenia falls on the Western border of Azerbaijan which disconnects Azerbaijan with Europe.

Getting the supports of US along with European Nations, the geo-strategic significance and geo-economic importance of Azerbaijan are far better than Armenia. In addition to this, Azerbaijan is one of most oil-rich and nature-blessed Republics of Central Asia due to which US, European Nations and other some regional powers make strong political, economic and military ties with Azerbaijan. By contrast, Armenia has no such geographical and economic importance that could attract the international powers. Nevertheless, it has to fortify its relations with Russia and Iran to encounter Azeri geo-political powers in the region. It needs to be learnt that Russian-Iranian-Armenian alliance in the region does not only strengthen and sharpen the Azeri-US-Turkey military and economic cooperation, it would further allow US to penetrate in the politics of Central Asia and Eurasia.

- i. As far US-Azerbaijan alliance is concerned, it may make little difference for the Armenian stance on Nagorno-Karabakh for two reasons.
- ii. US presence in Baku would be more focused to US regional interest, i.e. deterrence against Russian, Chinese economic policies, maintenance of regional economic and political dominancy.

The Armenian lobby in US Congress are so much strong and dominant which may shift into Armenian's gear anytime in US politics.

However, as far as Turkey is concerned, Turkish solidarity with Azerbaijan would continue at the cost of Armenia due to historical territorial differences with Armenia. Moreover, the Armenians do not only perceive Turkey as a national security threat for Armenia, they also view Turkey as a genocidal Republic (Cornell, 1999). No doubt, Turkey is much closer with Azerbaijan and it would support Azeri government in its difficult hours, but unfortunate fact is that Turkey does not share direct border with Azerbaijan. The Iranian and Russian political, economic and military support to Armenia against Azerbaijan can better jeopardize Azerbaijan since they are not only the regional powers, they also share direct borders with Azerbaijan. So, the alliance of Iran, Russia and Armenia can make a ring of circle via-s-via Azeri regional policies and trade. Most importantly, Azerbaijan is an oil-rich nation and Iran never accepts an oil rich state on its Northern border. Moreover, the military relations of Armenia and Russia which include the sale of arms and weapons to Armenia has not only created security panic for Azerbaijan, it also compelled Azeri regime to demand from US a military base in Baku in 1999 (Cornell, 1999). It is believed that Turkey entered in Azeri-Armenian war in 1992 due to border clashes with Armenia whereas the Russian and Iranian involvements have been termed to deter and curtail the Turkish regional influence and policy. Thus, the security situation in Caucasus has invited the foreign involvement, arms race and security complex which seems no table-talks and negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia in near future.

CONCLUSION

The conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh is much different with the conflicts of Kashmir, Chechnia, and Bosnia in nature since along with human sufferings, it has also geo-political importance for the regional and international powers which might deteriorate and conflagrate so largely in the area in future. Furthermore, the conflict also involves the risk of 3rd World War as both US and Russia are directly positioned on two different sides. No doubt, it is ethnic and territorial dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia, but it has created much panic and military arms race in the region. The foreign involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is intended to entertain the regional policies of regional powers which have given birth to human crisis. Both parties need to have a realization that future peace to both nations is in the fact of mutual coexistence, mutual territorial respect and

compromise on both sides and most importantly, the rejection of regional and international actors otherwise, the regional and extra-regional would prolong the war for their own vested interests.

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