

**Armenia-Azerbaijan Wars: Looking for Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Resolution**

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## **Abstract**

The Nagorno-Karabakh territorial dispute is one of the longest inter-ethnic conflicts from the former Soviet Union, devastating Azerbaijan and Armenia since 1988. The geographic location complicates the situation from a geopolitical perspective by bringing several outside stakeholders to the discussion table. The efforts of one key organization to mitigate the conflict, the Minsk Group, have been questioned by both Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Minsk Group was established in 1992 to provide a peaceful resolution to this territorial dispute by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Competing regional and international interests further complicate this stalemate and finding a single resolution that fits all involved parties' interests has been an arduous path. This paper explores the complexities of this conflict, discusses if Minsk Group should continue leading negotiation efforts, and proposes possible courses of actions for the international community to take with these countries.

## **Background and Involved Parties**

The inter-ethnic tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Karabakh region can be traced back to the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union era (Migdalovitz 2001, 6). For a brief period in 1921, Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) was part of Armenia before Stalin acknowledged their ties to Azerbaijan (ibid). Since 1923, NK has been part of Azerbaijan but is populated primarily by ethnic Armenians who have a different culture, religion, and language than the Azeris (ibid, 4). With the weakening of the Soviet Union in 1988, both countries sought to gain control over NK. The territorial conflict started in 1988 when Armenian nationalists demanded to make NK an autonomous region and then unite it with Armenia (Shafiyev and Huseynov 2020, 100). The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan since then has resulted in countless loss of lives on all sides and internal displacement of people (ibid).

Armenia and Azerbaijan gained their independence after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Ismailzade 2005, 104). In 1992, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group (MG) was established by the Conference on Security and Cooperation to collaborate and provide a peaceful solution to this conflict (Abilov 2018, 143). Armenia, Azerbaijan, and researchers question the effectiveness of this “negotiation institute” co-chaired by Russia, the US, and France (ibid). The MG exists to uphold a measure of stability in the area by maintaining control and oversight of Armenian and Azerbaijan interests (ibid). On the other hand, MG members state that both countries are acting as “facilitators” versus “negotiators” thus contributing to the stalemate (Ismailzade 2005, 106).

In 1993, Russia and United Nations reached a resolution with both sides; NK was recognized as part of Azerbaijan, subsequently resulting in a temporary ceasefire (ibid). Armenia has shown frustration with Azerbaijan’s attempt to discuss the Karabakh conflict in the United Nations because of four existing U.N. Resolutions (#822, #853, #874, and #884) that condemn Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani lands and clearly recognize the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan (Ziyadov 2007).

Both Azerbaijan and Armenia occupy a strategic geographical location and serve as the bridge between the East and West. Azerbaijan's oil and gas reserves combined with competing international interests of Russia, Turkey, the United States, the European Union, Iran, the Islamic World, and China influence the conflict (Ismailzade 2005, 104). To understand the complexities of this territorial dispute, it is important to highlight these key parties and other stakeholders relevant to the US's continued effort to compete for diplomatic, economic, and strategic advantage in the international arena.

Partly due to the region's history, Russia remains involved in the NK conflict directly and indirectly. Russia supplies weapons to both sides of this conflict and some argue this was done to keep both states dependent on Moscow (Ismailzade 2005, 104; Migdalovitz 2001, 12). Others note how fellow-Christians who were relocated to Armenia during the Tsarist era garnered support from Moscow to further Russia's interests in and outside the NK (Ismailzade 2005, 105). Additionally, Russia has two military bases in Armenia, and owns 90 percent of Armenia's energy generation and distribution systems (ibid). This situation was the result of Armenia clearing all its debts with Russia (ibid). Subsequently, Russia diplomatically represents Armenia in the international community, hindering any dispute resolution that may impact Russia's own interests (ibid). This creates a conflict of interest when collaborating with Western partners and suggests Russia is truly the main stakeholder and likely biased based on their assets in Armenia.

Azerbaijan is a Muslim country and has close ties to Turkish culture, bringing Turkey into the stakeholder pool (Ismailzade 2005, 105; Migdalovitz 2001, 11-12). Turkey has provided military and economic assistance to Azerbaijan throughout the years (ibid). The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline project between the two nations, which opened in 2005, further brought their relationships closer with economic ties (ibid). With Turkish influence in the area, and its close ties to the US, Turkey is considered one of the key parties to resolving this conflict.

The US is a key player in negotiations because of Armenia and Azerbaijan's geostrategic importance against terror stemming from September 11, 2001, attack on the country and its alliance with nearby Turkey (Ismailzade 2005, 106; Migdalovitz 2001, 13-14). In addition, the Armenian Diaspora in the US has been actively lobbying the US Congress to prevent any significant assistance to Azerbaijan (ibid). BTC project, further linked Azerbaijan to Georgia, Turkey, and the West, highlighting its strategic importance (ibid). Therefore, the US remains involved and pressing for diplomatic resolution (ibid).

There are additional stakeholders including the EU, Iran, the Islamic World, and China. Their influence in the region and potential capabilities cannot be ignored. Armenia and Azerbaijan's location serves as a bridge between the East and West and connects these states physically and ideologically. The EU's involvement in the NK case has been mainly economic in nature providing technical assistance to both Armenia and Azerbaijan (Ismailzade 2005, 108). Azerbaijan's oil and gas reserves attracted the EU and they have participated in energy projects. In addition, EU members serve on the MG and support both countries' territorial integrity (ibid). Researchers have also discussed and proposed that favorable relations between the EU and Russia may facilitate a peaceful resolution to NK conflict (ibid). The presence of large ethnic Azeri's in Iran, and concerns over increasing US influence in the region has kept Iran involved in the conflict discussions (Migdalovitz 2001, 11). The US should assume that Iran will continue to influence future peace negotiations considering its significant power in the region. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Persian Gulf countries have supported Azeri refugees and remain involved in rebuilding Azerbaijan's economy through energy and trade deals (Ismailzade 2005, 109). While Islamic countries have not directly participated in the negotiations, their influence and financial capabilities to support humanitarian and weapons purchases should not be ignored. With China's increasing economic, energy, and trade participation, it is important to consider its potential role in these negotiations. China has not been directly involved in the discussions, but due to its regional power they have the capacity to become a direct player (Ismailzade 2005, 109). As the conflict continues more countries may become

involved in the negotiations with evolving alliances and geopolitical interests. Any solution for this conflict must understand these involved parties: their roles, interests' potential impact, and resolves the MG has proposed in the past.

### **Discussion & Recommendations**

Since 1997, the MG has proposed the following resolutions: the “package deal,” “step-by-step deal,” “common state deal,” “Land-Swap” proposal, “basic principles” and the “Madrid Principles” (Migdalovitz 2001, 4-9; Abilov 2018, 143-153; Shafiyev and Huseynov 2020, 100;). They developed the Prague Process and Madrid Principles addressing the option and “methodologies,” however, all proposals failed to achieve a resolution to this conflict (ibid). Some of these initiatives posed establishing an administrative border within Azerbaijan, withdrawal of Armenians and NK Military to the 1988 border, returning Azeris to their homes in NK, and the establishment of a common state between Azerbaijan and NK (ibid). Most of the discussions came to a standstill when the status of NK was left undetermined or when the proposed NK status was perceived as an imminent threat to Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity (ibid). Considering the MG’s background and collaborated efforts towards resolution, it is best to keep this organization focused on this issue. Adding another party from the EU or other country to the MG could be beneficial for the independent verification of facts and collaboration efforts.

The complexity of the inter-ethnic relations between the both countries and involved stakeholder’s influences and objectives can further exacerbate the situation. Thus far, the proposed resolutions have provided no positive results to the issues regarding the status of the NK and Azerbaijan’s perceived threat to their territorial integrity. The following recommendations should be considered in accordance with the US administration’s strategic objectives and used to address both NK’s status as well as the Azeri’s territorial concerns:

- 1) The US should continue diplomatic support with emphasis on an autonomous and self-governed NK.

Under this proposal, NK would remain “de jure” in Azerbaijan and establish a self-government of

Karabakh with Azerbaijan and Armenia representation in government positions. The Karabakh government would have full rights in regard to policing, education, local investment in infrastructure, and culture, and would have its own anthem, symbol and flag (possibly incorporating both Azerbaijan and Armenia symbols). Taxes would be collected based on Azerbaijan tax codes and used to develop the new Republic. Armenians and Azerbaijanis living in Karabakh would have the right to dual citizenship or full citizenship in either republic with the right to permanent residence in Karabakh. All Karabakh foreign affairs initiatives would require Azerbaijan involvement because of the territorial integrity and potential impact to their national security. There should be periodic inspections from the international community to ensure that Armenia and Azerbaijan are upholding their agreement. This solution provides Azerbaijan formal sovereignty over its territory, while Armenians in NK would have self-government capabilities and international community protection. This approach addresses both topics resulting in the current stalemate. This initiative is similar to the “Madrid Principles” and may require collaboration with Russia and Turkey to influence both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Border crossings, the Lachin corridor, as well as the Shusha city boundaries must be addressed with this proposal.

2) The NK conflict has resulted in countless lives and many have fled their homes for safety. As a second order effect of this conflict, there are over 700,000 internally displaced persons that took shelter in and around the neighboring towns and countries and are in need of support (CRS 2010, 7-11). The US should increase humanitarian and economic aid for these displaced people and facilitate NK’s redevelopment. This will require further coordination in the US Congress, the Department of State, and through existing ties with the Armenian diaspora in the US.

3) The US should consider steering all three locations, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and NK towards some measure of fossil fuel independence from Russia. This approach could be piloted by the Biden administration’s humanitarian and climate initiatives, and facilitate discussions of building new

industries, markets, and corridors of cooperation. The US could aid Azerbaijan to develop other avenues to sustain itself in addition to its oil reserves. Oil is not going to be in high demand forever; exploring opportunities for low carbon energy resources and reducing the risk exposure to climate change will prove to be beneficial for mitigating several global issues. Exploring other opportunities for import, export, tourism and focusing on creating a safe environment for Western market influence would further aid the Caucasus area. The economic benefits are not the only potential outcomes but also a climate of productivity and new opportunities for the people of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and NK.

All of these approaches will still require a measure of diplomatic and economic involvement. Improved relations between Russia, the EU, and the US could lead to a long-term solution in these NK negotiations (Ismailzade 2005, 109-111). Relationships and tensions between countries like Turkey and Iran; US and Iran; US and China; and Islamic World and the West, require careful navigation while maintaining stability in the region. These contentious and competing relations have hindered the successful resolution of the NK conflict to date.

### **Conclusion**

Due to the complexities of the conflict, it is best that any resolution continues to be handled by the MG. Along with implementing the recommendations above, the MG will need to add more co-chairs for the independent verification of facts and collaboration efforts without resorting to force. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan tensions are fueled by historical disputes influenced first by Tsarist Russia and later by the Soviets who reshaped identities that has a part in this frozen conflict. For the people of Armenia, Azerbaijan, NK, and the international community, it is important that resolution be closer on the horizon to avoid further violence and development of additional stakeholders which may exacerbate the situation.



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