

Azerbaijan - Armenia:

Perspectives on Normalization of Relations

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Genesis of strained relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan

Armenia and Azerbaijan achieved independence by the end of May 1918, from the clutches of the Russian Czarist Romanov empire and immediately thereafter engaged in a conflict over territorial issues for the land which both the newly independent countries considered their own historically and ethnically. This led to the war between the two from 1918 to 1920. The war-torn nations could barely enjoy their freedom before they were merged with Russia, Byelorussia and Ukraine in 1922 under the treaty for the formation of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR) and thus became the republics within the Soviet Union.

The **Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (SFSR)** was created in March 1922, bringing the three, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan under its domain. It was primarily done to bring the region under the control of the Bolsheviks. The sanctity of the Transcaucasian SFSR continued from 1922 to 1936 when it was dissolved on the adoption of the Soviet Constitution in 1936 and its constituent republics were elevated individually to Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) under the banner of the USSR.

To resolve the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the issue of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, the then newly formed USSR turned this region into **Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO)** on July 7, 1923, within the state of Azerbaijan as an autonomous administrative unit, administered from Baku.

After the signing of the Treaty of Tukumenchay between Persia and Russia in 1928, the latter began to actively resettle the Christian population, mainly Armenians, into the territory of

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present-day Azerbaijan and, in particular, in the Karabakh region. As a result of this resettlement policy of tsarist Russia, aimed at strengthening its position in the newly gained territories, the Armenian population of Karabakh began to increase. So, if in 1823 it was 9% (the remaining 91 percent were Azerbaijanis), in 1832 - 35%, in 1880 - 53%, then already in 1926, the NKAO region had a pre-dominance of Armenians of almost 80% of total inhabitants, whereas the rest were mostly Azerbaijanis. From the very beginning of the establishment of the NKAO region, the catch-22 situation prevailed wherein the Armenians had a major population share in the autonomous region, though the region was under the physical territory of Azerbaijan. In the period between 1921 to 1988, there had been a few unsuccessful attempts by the Armenian leaders to secede the region from Azerbaijan.

The conflicts leading to the **first Nagorno-Karabakh War** began in 1988 as the Armenians of Karabakh wanted to secede from Azerbaijan and join Armenia. The government of Azerbaijan dissolved the autonomous status of the NKAO oblast in 1991 and distributed its territories to the neighboring administrative divisions within Azerbaijan. In response, the Armenian population declared their independence as the “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic/ Republic of Artsakh” with the support of Armenia. This breakaway state within the territory of Azerbaijan became a flashpoint between the two countries.

After the collapse and break-up of the USSR in 1991, the conflict between the two sovereign states continued and became internationally known which initially because of the policies and strict regime of the USSR was not well known. The Armenians with the support of Soviet/Russian troops took control of the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave and the seven adjoining regions of Azerbaijan in the early 1990s and de facto ran the administration from Stepanakert/Khankendi (Armenian/Azerbaijani versions of the biggest city in Karabakh).

Following the war of 1988-1994 Armenia occupied 20% of Azerbaijani territories and only a cease-fire agreement of May 1994 stopped the hot/military phase of the war. But the strained relationship between the two continued wherein skirmishes were taking place frequently with a major conflict in 2008. There was an intense clash again in 2016, commonly known as the **four-days war**. The fierce war left several casualties before the two countries could decide to sit down at the negotiating table. Both sides accused each other of ceasefire violations. Actually, Armenia wished to win the time and keep the status quo while Azerbaijan has never been ready to compromise an inch of its internationally recognized territories. The issue was

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not politically resolved and it kept simmering till the next major war between the two nations took place.

The **second Nagorno-Karabakh War** broke out on September 27, 2020. Also referred to as the 44 days of war that ended on November 20, 2020, with the Ceasefire Agreement brokered by Russia in November 2020. Azerbaijan liberated its territories while Russian Peacekeeping contingent was deployed on about 4% of Azerbaijani territories to allow a smooth reintegration of ethnic Armenians into Azerbaijani society. The war witnessed several hundred civilians killed along with the thousands of soldiers. It was not restricted to the border as there had been the use of long-range weapons and drones and covert operations were conducted.

The United Nations, USA and France could not convince either of the sides in halting the war. Russia brokered the peace between the two on November 9, 2020. Further to the peace brokered by Russia, as said it deployed its peacekeeping troops in the area around of Stepanakert/Khankendi to ensure security in and around the enclave. In Armenia, violent protests broke out against the brokering of a peace agreement as it was seen as a political sell-out by the people of Armenia whereas Azerbaijanis saw it as a long-awaited decisive victory that was validated with the celebrations taking place across the streets. Azerbaijan felt confident and resurgent after taking the regions which were in control of Armenia. Azerbaijan thus ensured leverage at the negotiating table.

There was hardly a lull in the confrontations when the situation started getting worse in September 2022 and the two nations were fighting on their border. Armenia claims that Azerbaijan expanded the battlefield into the territory of Armenia but Baku denies it and insists on soonest border delimitation and demarcation. Russia is obliged to intervene as a military ally of Armenia (both countries are members of Collective Security Treaty Organization) in case the border of the latter is violated.

Current Postures of Azerbaijan and Armenia

At present, the major territory of former NKAO in the central and northern regions is under the control of the self-proclaimed “Republic of Artsakh” whereas Azerbaijan controls the southern parts of the former oblast, but in reality, Baku controls the area from all sides including air since Karabakh is an enclave inside of Azerbaijan. There is a clear-cut

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dichotomy that exists: an enclave that self-proclaims itself as the “Republic of Artsakh” with the support of Armenia; however, the enclave itself is a part of Azerbaijan de-jure, though with a larger population of Armenians inhabiting. It is worth to mention that Azerbaijan has always been a multinational and multi-religious country, and Baku keeps declaring that ethnic Armenians of Karabakh will benefit from the same rights secured by the Constitution as the rest of population of Azerbaijan, including number of other ethnicities.

The Caucasus region encompasses the region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea and has two nations embroiled in conflicts for the last several decades and the other three, Russia, Georgia, Turkey and Iran are the regional powers. The South Caucasus region per-se remains a flashpoint due to two main reasons:

One, there is a standoff between the two belligerent nations for almost a century. Armenia and Azerbaijan have a long history of mutual distrust and hostility as substantiated by wars fought, small-scale conflicts and skirmishes that had taken place and no political settlement till date have fructified. And, it is difficult to imagine a political resolution to this imbroglio in the near future. Even maintaining a ceasefire and status quo will require tremendous willful efforts from the two governments as also from the local Armenians of the enclave and the surrounding Azerbaijanis.

Two, the dangerous game being played by several players to dominate the region as this is geo-politically a vital stretch of land connecting Asia and Europe and economically has become important to Central Europe and Asian countries for import of oil and gas from Azerbaijan.

Add to the above matrix, the regional power play and biases. Russia has a military alliance with Armenia and has its military bases in its territory and at the same time, it sells weaponry to both the nations. France and Iran also openly inclined towards Armenian side due to their own geopolitical interests. Turkey overtly supports Azerbaijan on several platforms and has vowed to help it militarily. There is a growing dependence on Azerbaijan from the Central European and Asian countries for its oil and gas reserves as it has become the most feasible and reliable alternative as a provider of oil and gas because of the protracted war between Russia and Ukraine.

The Mediations

The **Minsk group** was created in 1992 by the Conference on Security & Cooperation in Europe, now being recognised as **Organisation for Security & Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)** for encouraging a peaceful negotiated resolution to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. The OSCE was co-chaired by France, Russia and the USA and has countries, Belarus, Finland, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan as participating states.

It had been effective only in preventing the full-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan for almost three decades without concluding the political settlement between the two nations. In essence, it had been ineffective as minuscule could be accomplished. With its Madrid Principles also, it had neither been able to foster any kind of peace between the two nations nor bring these countries to the negotiating table. Post, the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, the Azerbaijani government took a unilateral position that the Minsk Group no longer needed as the conflict stood resolved.

With the OSCE failing to deliver any kind of negotiated settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan for the adverse situation prevailing in the Nagorno-Karabakh region for decades, the Russians took the individual initiative and led **Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)** to bring the opposing parties on a negotiating table.

Both the organisations, OSCE and CSTO have failed to deliver meaningfully. Yerevan has reservations about CSTO's proposals and Baku has vehemently rejected the suggestions from OSCE.

Under these circumstances, the **EU's initiative** on January 23, 2023, to deploy a new monitoring mission to Armenia in the border area to keep the opposing forces at bay and not let them get engaged in brief skirmishes or sharp conflicts at the border is being hailed as a welcome step in Yerevan but not in the most of regional Capitals including Russia. It is too early to comment upon the capability of the EU's mission and its accomplishment in the days to come. As of now, the assessment is skeptical unless the EU's mission proves its mettle in bringing both the governments to the negotiating table breaking the stalemate and implementing the steps to promote peace within the framework of countervailing principles of maintaining the territorial integrity and right of self-determination by the people.

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With the EU mission moving forward, it has to earn the confidence of Baku that it lacks at present. It also has to get into operational details of the ground realities and deploy its peacekeeping forces to coexist with Russian troops at the border. Iran is also not happy with the semi-military mission representing NATO countries on its border although being allied with Armenia keeps silent. If Moscow continues objecting to the EU's mission, it will be a difficult proposition, however, if Moscow sees an opportunity to de-escalating tensions in the South Caucasus, then the interests of the EU and Russia will overlap, which is under current circumstances seems unlikely.

Azerbaijan perspective

Azerbaijan at different forums has conveyed its intention of seeking peace contingent on five principles of normalization of relations between the two countries and it has been insisting on concluding the bilateral peace agreement based on the principles as stated below:

- Mutual respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability of internationally recognized borders and political independence of each other;
- Mutual confirmation of the absence of territorial claims against each other and acceptance of legally binding obligations not to raise such a claim in future;
- Refrain from threats or use of force against political independence and territorial integrity.
- Delimitation and demarcation of the state border and establishment of diplomatic relations and;
- Unlocking of transportation and other communications.

The Caucasus region has been at the crossroads of Asia and Europe and has been a vital region on a trade route and a melting pot of various religions and ethnicities. However, history is not sacrosanct. The important questions that are raised by the government of Azerbaijan about the present claims of Armenia are:

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- One, is it ethical to have a referendum from the population in the former Nagorno-Karabakh enclave in 1991 when the war between the two nations was still raging and the
- Azerbaijanis were forced to evict and the majority of people who voted in the referendum were Armenians?
- Is it ethical to force the Armenians to migrate to the Nagorno-Karabakh region to make it a majority of the mono-ethnic population?
- Was any validation carried out from the government of Azerbaijan of the referendum when the enclave was a formal part of it?
- How can the demand of secession be considered legal when it was clearly stated in the then Soviet constitutional law that the right for unilateral secession was retained exclusively by 15 constituent republics, but not for lower-level administrative entities – and not for Oblasts, of which Nagorno-Karabakh was one.
- All issues relating to Karabakh region of Azerbaijan are internal issues and no interference into internal issues will be allowed. The mediators can contribute only to normalization of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia based on the proposed principles mentioned above.

Armenian perspective

Armenians residing in the enclave always quote the history and based on the fact of common history, culture, language and inspirations, they declared and established the “Republic of Artsakh”. Since the breakaway state has been formed based on the population referendum with almost 90% of Armenians wanting to secede from Azerbaijan and live in an independent country, they always refer to the principle of the right of self-determination. However, Baku as in the case of other ongoing conflicts demands for the respect its territorial integrity, internationally recognized borders, and denies any possibility of self-determination of Armenians on the territory of Azerbaijan.

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As per the Armenians, the act of declaration of independence took as per the norms and principles of international law and within the Soviet constitutional framework of that time, that granted oblasts the right to follow that path in a legally binding manner. On December 10, 1991, the Nagorno-Karabakh people held their own referendum: 82.2% of ethnic Armenian voters participated and 99% voted for independence. Thus, the “Republic of Artsakh” got its independence in the same manner as Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and all other former Soviet Republics.

Furthermore, a matrix has taken shape and evolved based on the fluidity of geo-political factors wherein the global rivalries between the USA and Russia are visible and the EU enters as a potential power house as the clout of the USA is on the decline. Add to this the countervailing principles of territorial integrity and right of self-determination; the war between Russia and Ukraine affecting the countries nearby and the EU considerably; and, last but not the least, Azerbaijan’s position as a provider of oil and gas to the EU and Asian nations. The whole gamut is a cauldron of regional and global political dynamics superimposing the two nations already at war with each other.

Russian and European Union Initiatives on promoting peace

The Russians have brokered peace in the past and deployed their peacekeeping troops on the joint understanding of the three nations, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia. Their Border guards are deployed on the Armenian border. Yet again, Russia is expanding its reach for normalization of relations between the two nations from the former approach to giving a proposal of 3+3, that is, making the Caucasus region economically viable and politically stable involving Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iran by making a regional group. However, its hopes are already dashed by Georgia denying to be a part of such a proposal.

The EU has sanctioned a civilian led two-year mission for promoting stabilization in the border areas, strengthening confidence and normalizing relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The mission is headquartered in Armenia and the civil interlocutor will be taking the necessary steps towards the objectives of the mission. The mission is still in its nascent phase of comprehending the ground realities and thereafter bringing the two countries on the

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same page to move forward from the position of stalemate. A difficult task to achieve. NATO has conveyed its support and welcomes EU efforts.

The rivalry: Russians are vehemently opposing the deployment of such a mission stating that Russia's mediation efforts will be jeopardized to bring peace to the Caucasus region. The EU considers that the normalization between Armenia and Azerbaijan should not become a hostage to competition between the EU and Russia.

Concluding Remarks

At present, the European Union and Russia are the two main players in the South Caucasus region to promote peace and stability in the region. The OSCE has almost lost its teeth if it had any and the UN is not able to implement any policy to halt the conflicts between the two war-locked nations for decades. The options available area:

EU works through its mission that has been deployed for two years and tries to bring visible changes to promote peace and stability in the region. The mission is led by civil officials and deployed in Armenia at present. It has the Armenian government's support, however, it has yet to break the ice with the Azerbaijani government. And, Russia and Iran see it with suspicious eyes too. There is likely to be a competition between the two, EU and Russia, about who is more relevant for the cause of bringing peace and stability in the region; who is more forceful in implementing the tactics and strategies on the ground and who is more diplomatic to garner the support of not only Armenia, Azerbaijan but also those who matter in the Caucasus region, that is, Turkey, Iran and Georgia and beyond, of international fraternity including the countries having an interest in the region and the international institutions.

Russia individually works to bring peace and stability to the region. It has the advantage of brokering the peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan on more than one occasion where other initiatives have failed. It has its Border guards deployed on the Armenian side of the border. It has a military alliance with Armenia and ironically, supplies weapons to both the warring countries. The disadvantage is that Russia itself is fully

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committed and embroiled in its protracted war with Ukraine. How much effort, time and resources it can commit to the cause of this region is quite debatable.

Or a mixed approach with the EU and Russia combining together to resolve the issue and bring both the countries to the negotiating table.

The resolution of this knotted imbroglio will come from the rational approach rather than the approach mired by the narratives etched in history and articulated by Armenia and Azerbaijan each for their own benefit. The enclave be first made autonomous completely; all the communication channels, rail, road and air be opened gradually, border peacekeeping guards be deployed by Russia and EU; talks be conducted as per time schedule between the two countries along with delegates from Turkey, Iran, Georgia and Russian to promote trade, and cultural exchanges to build confidence in each other. It is going to be a long-drawn process but a timeline is to be fixed, for a maximum of three years. Both nations have to shed their mindsets of narrow approaches in case it has to be on the road to peace and stability. The Caucasus region boasts of multi-faith, multi-culture and multi-ethnic character.

In essence, to avert a full-fledged war and promote confidence in each other, the national mindsets have to be first tackled with, later the steps to promote peace, stability and economy will fall in place gradually.

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