

The Interests of Russia and Turkey in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Jakob Hedenskog & Kaan Korkmaz

The risk of full-scale war between Azerbaijan and Armenia has increased with the renewed fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh. Furthermore this increases the risk of a larger regional war involving Russia and Turkey, either directly or by proxies. On 3 May 2016, the Armenian government announced that it is preparing a law project on recognizing independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, something which would further raise tensions in the region.

Fierce fighting broke out early on 2 April 2016 along the Line of Contact (LoC) after Azerbaijani forces, backed by tanks, heavy artillery and helicopter gunships, attacked the positions of the separatist forces of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, supported by Armenian forces. During the following days of fighting, both sides reported dozens of deaths and destruction of military equipment, before they agreed on a new cease-fire on 5 April under Russian mediation.

Tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh date back to the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In 1988, the Armenian majority population of Nagorno-Karabakh in the Azerbaijani Soviet Republic sought to unite with their ethnic kin in Soviet Armenia. The war that started in 1991 left 30 000 people dead and nearly a million people displaced. The ethnic Azeri population was forced out of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding Azerbaijani districts, which were also occupied by Armenia as a buffer zone.

A cease-fire brokered in 1994 under Russian mediation established the so-called Minsk Group under the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) with Russia, the United States and France as co-chairs. However, more than twenty years of peace negotiations have not brought the parties much closer to a permanent solution of this “frozen” conflict. In fact, there have been smaller and larger skirmishes along the LoC throughout the last 22 years, regularly causing casualties on both sides, but none as serious as that in April 2016.

Russia's interests: Monopolisation of the peace settlement process in Nagorno-Karabakh and increased influence over the South Caucasus region

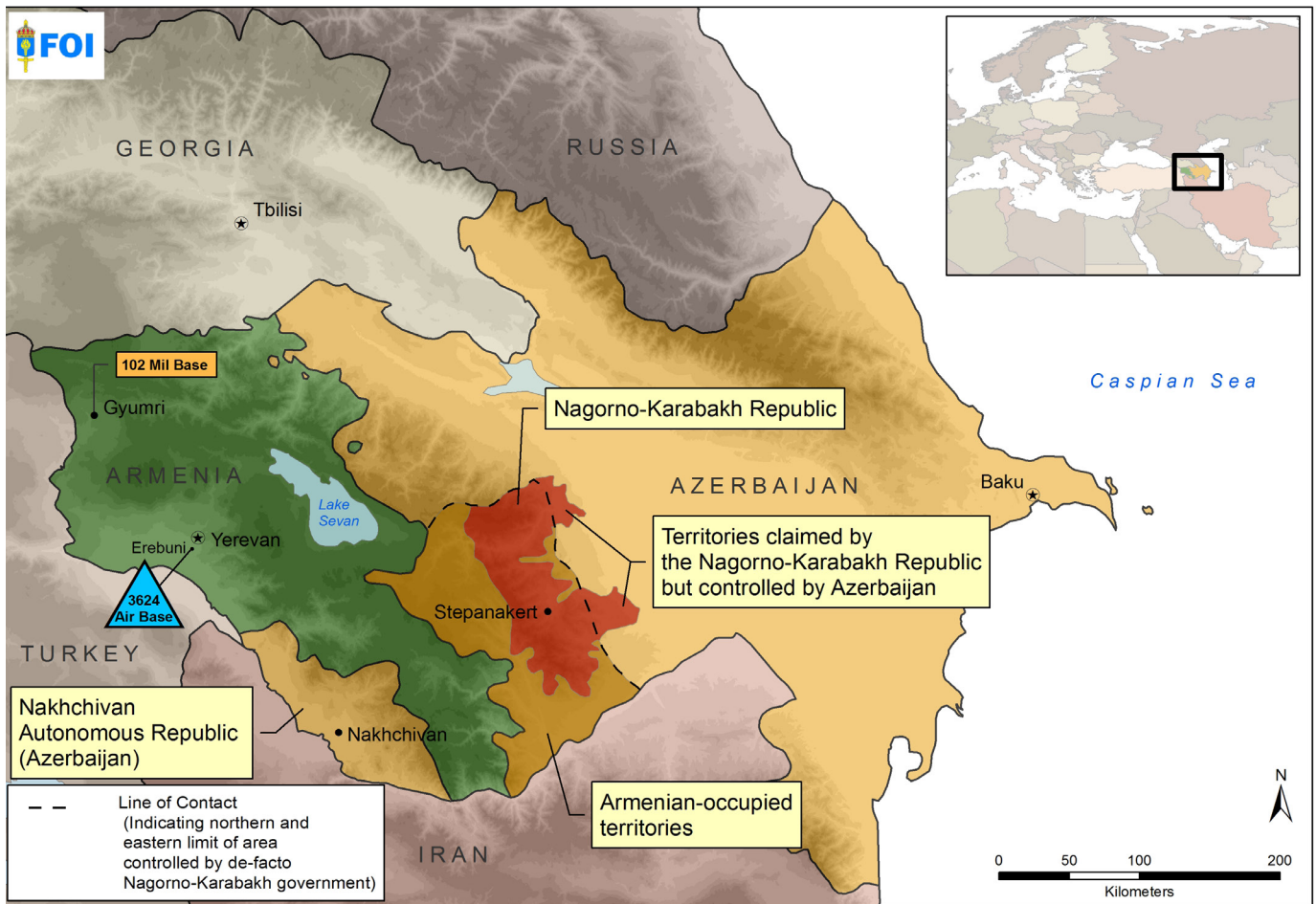
Over the years, the balance of power on the ground has gradually shifted towards Azerbaijan. Emboldened by its oil

and gas windfall, Baku increased its military expenditure more than twenty-fold between 2004 and 2014, making Azerbaijan's defence budget twice as large as Armenia's overall state budget. Russia has benefited from selling arms to both parties, often selling at higher prices to Baku to effectively subsidise lower-price sales to Yerevan.

Russia is the regional power likely to gain most from the increased tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh. Moscow's putative interest is to expand its influence not only over the conflict settlement process in Nagorno-Karabakh, but also over Armenia and Azerbaijan per se. In so doing, Russia would also increase its sway over the South Caucasus, a region where the control of current and proposed transport routes of energy from the Caspian region to Europe is of great importance for Russia. By brokering the cease-fire on 5 April, Moscow demonstrated that it has the will to settle the conflict on its own terms – sidestepping the other co-chairs in the Minsk Group.

Moscow's likely aim is also to push Azerbaijan towards closer engagement with Russian-led organisations such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), thus curtailing Baku's engagement with the West. Geographically and politically isolated Armenia, sandwiched between Azerbaijan and its main ally Turkey, has little room for manoeuvre in its foreign policy. Yerevan is heavily dependent on Moscow and is a member of both the EEU and CSTO. In 2013, Moscow pressured Yerevan to cancel its prospects for an Association Agreement with the EU. Besides Armenia's commitments under the CSTO, Russia and Armenia have a military bilateral agreement and Moscow has a military base (102nd Military Base) in Gyumri and an airbase in Erebuni on the outskirts of Yerevan.

The next step in Russia's efforts to increase its influence over the peace settlement might be to propose a peacekeeping force for Nagorno-Karabakh. This force could formally be placed under the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) with symbolic participation by other countries, as previously in Abkhazia, but in size and substance it would most likely be a Russian force. Through this step, Moscow would gain direct influence on the ground in resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Russia has direct influence



in Donbas, Transnistria and the frozen conflicts in Georgia, but not in Nagorno-Karabakh, as Russia has no direct border to the conflict zone.

The renewed fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh was timely for Russia, since both Azerbaijan's President Aliyev and Armenia's President Sargsyan were in Washington, DC, for the nuclear summit, a meeting boycotted by the Russian president. Moreover, Moscow is probably interested in establishing facts on the ground before the NATO summit in Warsaw in July and before the US presidential election campaign in the autumn. Furthermore, the current deteriorating relations between Russia and Turkey over the war in Syria is another key factor in Moscow's likely goal to increase its influence in the Caucasus region at the expense of Turkey. Russia considers the Caucasus region to be in its exclusive sphere of influence.

Turkey's interests: Driven by geopolitics and nationalism

In response to the outbreak of renewed armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Turkish government publicly announced its unwavering support for Azerbaijan's cause. Turkey's Prime Minister Davutoğlu stated that "Turkey will stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Azerbaijan against Armenian aggression and occupation until the end of time". Similarly, President Erdoğan professed that "Karabakh will surely be returned to its rightful owner, Azerbaijan, one day".

While Ankara has usually sought a more balanced public approach to the conflict and its two antagonists, since 2011 and the "Arab Spring" Turkey's foreign policy has become increasingly aggressive and at times confrontational, particularly towards its southern neighbours. Turkey's interests and policies regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict



are currently driven by both geopolitical and domestic considerations. First, the deterioration of Russian-Turkish relations and heightened tension between Moscow and Ankara following the Turkish downing of a Russian fighter jet in Syria in November 2015 has reinvigorated the geopolitical rivalry between the two countries. That rivalry is played out not only in Syria, but increasingly also in the Caucasus area and the wider Black Sea region. Since November 2015, Turkey has publicly announced its support for Georgia's ambition to become a NATO member and has signed defence agreements with Ukraine. Turkey's recent explicit support for Azerbaijan should thus be viewed in the context of Ankara's current confrontation with Moscow. Furthermore, by aligning itself closer to Baku, Turkey seeks to precede and disturb Russian overtures to enhance bilateral relations with Azerbaijan.

Second, domestic politics has become an increasingly strong driver of Turkish foreign policy. While nationalism is not a new phenomenon in Turkish politics, there is currently a surge in nationalistic rhetoric. Stoking nationalist fervour has become a key political tool for Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), particularly following a series of political scandals in 2013 involving top government officials and, later, the collapse of the peace process with the PKK, a Kurdish armed group designated a terrorist organisation in Turkey and the West. Resumption of armed conflict between the state and the PKK in 2015 has prompted the AKP, and particularly President Erdoğan, to take a more nationalistic turn in order to maintain political credibility and legitimacy. Turkey shares an ethnic, Turkic kinship with Azerbaijan that has long served as a foundation for their bilateral relationship. Publically supporting Baku in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict serves the dual purpose of alleviating nationalist pressure on the AKP to take a firm stance against Armenia and rallying more support for government policies in other areas.

Future prospects

The combination of increasing Russian and Turkish nationalism and heightened geopolitical tensions increases the risk of conflict escalation in the South Caucasus. In other words, their rivalry and the conflict in Syria have the potential to spread to other regions that have hitherto been unaffected by the consequences of Russian-Turkish antagonism. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has the potential not only to escalate to a full-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also to become another arena in which Turkey and Russia, through proxy, compete for power and influence.

This scenario would most likely trigger an Iranian reaction and probably also drag Georgia into the conflict. As Georgia happens to lie between Russia and Turkey, both Moscow and Ankara are likely to demand the right to transit troops over Georgian territory in the event of a full-scale war in the region. Both Iran and Georgia hold large Azeri and Armenian minorities within their territories. The revived conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh may thus escalate and evolve into a greater confrontation between several regional great powers. The many conflicts in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, risk spilling over into the Caucasus. The regions and their conflicts are increasingly intertwined.

Nevertheless, despite wider Russian-Turkish confrontation and the risk of escalation in the South Caucasus, Turkey remains constrained in its policy options. Further escalation of tensions with Russia will hardly serve key Turkish interests in other regions, such as Syria. Turkey is also likely to fall under pressure from its Western NATO allies to avoid escalation and conflict with Russia. Russia is not constrained to the same extent.

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