



### RUSSIAN INTERESTS IN THE NAGORNO-KARABAGH CONFLICT

By  
**Muhammad Taimur Fahad Khan**  
*Research Associate*  
*Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP), ISSI*

Edited by  
**Najam Rafique**

November 8, 2020

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



**On October 31, 2020, in a letter to the Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan formally requested the Russian Federation to ensure Armenia’s security given the escalating conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K) conflict.<sup>1</sup>**

Hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the N-K region (located in South Caucasus) began in late September this year.<sup>2</sup> The conflict is a decades-old phenomenon which technically erupted in the year 1988. Hostilities between the two countries over the N-K region led to a full-scale war which began in 1988 and lasted till 1994.<sup>3</sup>

The ceasefire after the 6-year war did not result in any peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Low-intensity conflict continued for years between the two countries which resulted in numerous casualties on both sides.

According to several sources, since the resumption of fighting in September this year, thousands of people (civilians as well as military personnel) have died with an even larger number of people being severely injured and displaced.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Pashinyan asks Putin to help ensure Armenia’s security”, *TASS*, accessed on October 31, 2020, <https://tass.com/world/1218647>

<sup>2</sup> “Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict”, *Global Conflict Tracker, Council on Foreign Relations*, accessed on October 31, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/nagorno-karabakh-conflict>

<sup>3</sup> “Nagorno-Karabakh Profile”, *BBC*, published on October 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18270325>

<sup>4</sup> Hovhannisyan & Bagirova, “U.S. urges diplomacy as Nagorno-Karabakh fighting rages”, *Reuters*, updated on October 28, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-azerbaijan/u-s-urges-diplomacy-as-nagorno-karabakh-fighting-rages-idUSKBN27C16A>

So far, four ceasefire initiatives<sup>56</sup> have been taken by regional and extra-regional states including the United States (US), Russia and France (also known as the OSCE's Minsk Group)<sup>7</sup> to stop the hostilities. All attempts have met with failure so far due to reported violations by Armenia and Azerbaijan, with both sides blaming each other for violating ceasefires and terming their military actions against one another as 'counter-offensives'.

Several countries seem to have chosen sides in this conflict either siding with Armenia or Azerbaijan owing to their respective geo-political, geo-economic and geo-strategic reasons. For instance, Turkey openly pledged its support to Azerbaijan,<sup>8</sup> while Iran (although maintaining a delicate balancing act in the conflict) seems to have inclinations towards Armenia.<sup>9</sup>

However, despite being one of the major stakeholders in the N-K conflict and the most dominant regional power, Russia has maintained a neutral stance in the current conflict and has refrained from siding either with Armenia or Azerbaijan.

Despite Yerevan's numerous attempts to lure Russia into the N-K conflict and as per predictions by several political pundits, Moscow has adopted an entirely different policy approach, where it is constantly called for halting all hostilities and propagating the notion of solving the dispute peacefully via political means.

Owing to multiple existing complementarities between Russia and Armenia, including the long-standing military partnership, common religious roots of Orthodox Christianity and common membership under the banner of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), it was believed by many observers that Russia might openly side with Armenia against Azerbaijan. However, much to Yerevan's disappointment, this has not happened till now.

The question arises, what are the reasons behind Russia's current approach to the conflict? The simple answer is interests, pertaining to Russia's political, economic and geo-strategic objectives.

As the world is experiencing a paradigm shift from a unipolar world order to a multipolar world order where there are multiple power centres across the globe, Russia has emerged as one of the

---

<sup>5</sup> "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", Global Conflict Tracker, *Council on Foreign Relations*, accessed on October 31, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/nagorno-karabakh-conflict>

<sup>6</sup> "Armenia, Azerbaijan agree to defuse Nagorno-Karabakh conflict", *DAWN*, accessed on October 31, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1587834/armenia-azerbaijan-agree-to-defuse-nagorno-karabakh-conflict>

<sup>7</sup> "OSCE Minsk Group, Institutions & Structures," *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe*, accessed on October 31, 2020, <https://www.osce.org/mg>

<sup>8</sup> EminAvundukluoglu, "Turkey to continue supporting Baku 'with all means", *Anadolu Agency (AA)*, published on October 01, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-to-continue-supporting-baku-with-all-means/1992169>

<sup>9</sup> Murat Sofuoglu, "What's Iran's role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan clash?", *TRT World*, accessed on October 30, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/what-s-iran-s-role-in-the-armenia-azerbaijan-clash-40114>

major power centres in the world. With its new-found role, it was important for Russia to maintain neutrality in the N-K conflict and act as a peace-maker rather than a country that fuels conflict. Adopting a neutral stance was also important for its international image as well, opposed to its 'aggressor & invader' image that mainstreamed in 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Furthermore, from the legal standpoint, there are four United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions that demand the withdrawal of Armenian forces from the N-K region and other occupied territories that are recognized as Azeri territory by the international body. Those resolutions are UNSC Resolution # 822<sup>10</sup>, 853<sup>11</sup>, 874<sup>12</sup> & 887<sup>13</sup> passed in 1993. In light of these resolutions, passed by all P5 states, Russia cannot afford to side with Armenia and violate the norms of multilateralism that it is fighting extremely hard to protect.

Russia's restraint from militarily getting involved in the conflict is also due to some technicalities as well. Russia is a member of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) along with Armenia and other member states. Article 7<sup>14</sup> of CSTO entails that member states are obligated to extend all kinds of assistance to a member state if in trouble.

However, Russia still cannot get involved militarily because the current conflict particularly over the Line of Contact (LoC – north of N-K) and the N-K region in general does not come under the Armenian territory. Plus, the territory seized by Azeri military in the current conflict were Azeri territories to begin with (as per UNSC resolutions), hence does not warrant any third party involvement. Moreover, despite opposing claims by Yerevan and Baku regarding who initiated the hostilities, Russia is unsure about who was actually responsible for the eruption of hostilities; hence it cannot take any chances.

In addition, it is also in Russia's interest not to take any clear sides in this conflict because choosing a side will be detrimental for its relations with other regional and extra-regional states such as Turkey, Iran and Israel. Plus, in the recent past, Russia has reconfigured its stance towards Azerbaijan and

---

<sup>10</sup> "UNSC Resolution 822 (1993)", United Nations Digital Library, accessed on October 25, 2020, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/165604?ln=en>

<sup>11</sup> "UNSC Resolution 853 (1993)", United Nations Digital Library, accessed on October 25, 2020, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/170257?ln=en>

<sup>12</sup> "UNSC Resolution 874 (1993)", United Nations Digital Library, accessed on October 25, 2020, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/174420?ln=en>

<sup>13</sup> "UNSC Resolution 884 (1993)", United Nations Digital Library, accessed on October 25, 2020, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/176731?ln=en>

<sup>14</sup> "Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, dated October 07, 2002", Collective Security Treaty Organization, 'Basic Documents', accessed on October 25, 2020, [https://en.odkb-csto.org/documents/documents/ustav\\_organizatsii\\_dogovora\\_o\\_kollektivnoy\\_bezopasnosti/](https://en.odkb-csto.org/documents/documents/ustav_organizatsii_dogovora_o_kollektivnoy_bezopasnosti/)

has adopted a rapprochement policy vis-à-vis Baku<sup>15</sup> which has also led to the establishment of defense relations between the two countries and complimented its role of a ‘balancer’ in the Southern Caucasus region.

Furthermore, Russia’s maintenance of a non-partisan orientation can also be attributed to thinking among Moscow’s policy-makers that want to teach Armenia a valuable lesson as the latter, during the recent past, showed signs of inclinations towards the US agenda in the region while simultaneously wooing the European Union as well much to the displeasure of Russia.

Russia’s current reluctance to get directly involved in the conflict between Armenia Azerbaijan is majorly owed to its renewed interest in “un-freezing” of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its peaceful resolution via political means which not only is in line with its rapprochement policy towards Azerbaijan, but also makes it a stakeholder in the energy rich region and develops new complementarities with Turkey and Iran.

It is in Russia’s long term economic and geo-political interest to abandon its policy of implicit support to the freezing of N-K conflict because not only is it against the spirit of the UNSC Resolutions, but it will disrupt several energy transport and transit trade projects (such as the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline – TANAP<sup>16</sup>, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway Line – BTKR<sup>17</sup> and North-South Transport Corridor – NSTC<sup>18</sup>) that it has initiated over the past two decades. Prolonging the resolution of the N-K conflict is detrimental to the realization of Russia’s dream of Eurasian integration as well, plus it will minimize any chance of interference and involvement of extra-regional powers such as the US in the region, which is practically Russia’s backyard.

---

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Korybko, “Russia’s New Thinking Towards Armenia and Azerbaijan: An ‘Obstructionist’ vs. An ‘Integrationalist’,” *Oriental Review*, published on September 15, 2017, <https://orientalreview.org/2017/09/15/russias-new-thinking-towards-armenia-azerbaijan/>

<sup>16</sup> “Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project”, *World Bank*, accessed on October 25, 2020, <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P157416?lang=en&tab=newsmedia>

<sup>17</sup> “Transport capacity on Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway increased”, *Daily Sabah*, last updated on May 13, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/transportation/transport-capacity-on-baku-tbilisi-kars-railway-increased>

<sup>18</sup> Javid Gurbanov, “North-South transport corridor to benefit Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia”, *The Iran Project*, accessed on October 25, 2020, <https://theiranproject.com/blog/2016/10/10/north-south-transport-corridor-to-benefit-iran-azerbaijan-russia/>