



## Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict & India

This article is based on [“Nagorno-Karabakh and India”](#) which was published in Indian Express on 13/10/2020. It talks about the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and its impact on India.

Recently, a three decades-old unresolved ethno territorial [conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan](#) over Nagorno-Karabakh flared up once again. The conflict is between two relatively small countries and is territorial in nature.

However, several regional and global players particularly Russia, Europe, Turkey and Iran are also involved to secure their strategic, security and economic interests in the region.

As the strategic importance of the region is derived from energy exports, the stability of the region is very important for regional growth and oil importing countries like India.

Further, the conflict may cause geopolitical unrest in the region which is already suffering from the [Covid-19 pandemic](#). Therefore, regional powers must strive to find a diplomatic solution to the problem and prevent the clash turning into a full blown regional conflict.

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### Genesis of the Conflict

- **Centre of Conflict:** Nagorno-Karabakh, the centre of the conflict, is located within Azerbaijan but is populated, mostly, by those of Armenian ethnicity (and mostly Christian compared to the Shia Muslim majority Azerbaijan).
- **Background of the Conflict:** The conflict can be traced back to the pre-Soviet era when the region was at the meeting point of Ottoman, Russian and the Persian empires.
  - Once Azerbaijan and Armenia became Soviet Republics in 1921, Russia (erstwhile Soviet Union) gave Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan but offered autonomy to the contested region.
  - In the 1980s, when the Soviet power was receding, separatist currents picked up in Nagorno-Karabakh. In 1988, the national assembly voted to dissolve the region's autonomous status and join Armenia.
  - However, Azerbaijan suppressed such calls, which led to a military conflict.
- **Flash Point of Conflict:** The self-declaration of independence by Nagorno-Karabakh in September 1991 in the backdrop of an imminent collapse of the USSR resulted in a war between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh — supported by Armenia.
- **Ceasefire:** This clash lasted till a ceasefire agreement was reached in 1994, mediated largely by Russia. Since then, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (**OSCE**) **Minsk Group** co-chaired by the USA, Russia and France have engaged Azerbaijan and Armenia extensively to resolve the conflict.
  - By that time, Armenia had taken control of Nagorno-Karabakh and handed it to Armenian rebels.
- **Present Day Condition:** The rebels have declared independence, but have not won recognition from any country.
  - The region is still treated as a part of Azerbaijan by the international community, and Azerbaijan wants to take it back.

## Strategic Significance of The Region

- The energy-rich Azerbaijan has built several gas and oil pipelines across the Caucasus (the region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea) to Turkey and Europe.
- Some of these pipelines pass close to the conflict zone (within 16 km of the border).
- In an open war between the two countries, the pipelines could be targeted, which would impact energy supplies and may even lead to higher oil prices globally.

## Role of Regional Players

- **Turkey:** The conflict between the two former Soviet republics has wider geopolitical implications as Turkey, which shares a border with Armenia, is backing Azerbaijan.
  - Given the deep cultural ties between the two countries, Turkey is staunchly backing Azerbaijan.
  - Further, this fits well into [Turkey's aggressive foreign policy](#), which seeks to expand Turkish interests to the former Ottoman territories.
- **Russia:** Russia enjoys good ties with both Azerbaijan and Armenia and supplies weapons to both.
  - Armenia is more dependent on Russia than the energy-rich Azerbaijan and Russia also has a military base in Armenia.
  - Therefore, Russia is trying to strike a balance between the two, by mediating a ceasefire between the warring sides, but it has yet to convene a meeting of Armenian and Azerbaijani political or military leaderships.
- **Israel:** The conflict marks a strange coupling of Turkey and Israel, which are hostile to one another both diplomatically and in terms of security.
  - Yet both states, dominated by their Sunni and Jewish communities respectively, support and arm Azerbaijan.
  - Also, Israel's major military and security firms seek to benefit from Azerbaijan's eagerness to be armed.

## Role of India: Interests & Challenges

### Asymmetry in Relations

- With Armenia, India has a friendship and cooperation treaty (signed in 1995), which, incidentally, would prohibit India from providing military or any other assistance to Azerbaijan.
- In the case of Azerbaijan, ONGC/OVL has made investments in an oilfield project in Azerbaijan and GAIL is exploring the possibilities of cooperation in LNG.
  - Azerbaijan also falls on the [International North South Transport Corridor \(INSTC\)](#) route, connecting India with Russia through Central Asia.
  - It can also connect India with Turkey and beyond through the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars passenger and freight rail link.
- Armenia extends its unequivocal support to India on Kashmir issue whereas Azerbaijan not only opposes but also promotes Pakistan's narrative on this issue.
- India does not have a publicly articulated policy for the South Caucasus — unlike “Neighbourhood First”, “Act East” or “Central Asia Connect”.
  - The region has remained on the periphery of its foreign policy radar.

### **Balancing Between The Two Extremes**

- The conflict is essentially a conflict between two international principles viz. the principle of territorial integrity advocated by Azerbaijan and the principle of the right to self-determination invoked by Nagorno-Karabakh and supported by Armenia.
- India has every reason not to support Azerbaijan's territorial integrity as Azerbaijan has shown scant regard for India's territorial integrity violated by Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir.
- At the same time it is difficult for India to publicly endorse Nagorno-Karabakh is right for self-determination in view of the possible repercussions it can have repercussions for India as its adversaries like Pakistan may misuse it not only by making erroneous connections with Kashmir but also re-ignite secessionist movement in certain parts of India.

### **Conclusion**

Armenia-Azerbaijan conflicts reflect the failure of the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In the absence of a peacekeeping force and the political will for peace, low-level frictions have persisted over the years.

Under these circumstances, India has done the right thing to adopt a balanced and neutral stance and pitching for a political solution as outlined in the Madrid Principles.

### **Madrid Principles**

- Co-chaired by Russia, France and the U.S., the Minsk Group put forward in 2007 the Madrid Principles as the basis for the formulation of a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan.
- In concrete terms, the Madrid Principles envisaged the demilitarisation of Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian majority region that seceded from Azerbaijan towards the end of the Soviet Union, and the gradual liberation of Azerbaijani territory that Armenia had occupied in the 1991-94 war.
- These steps are also consistent with the UN Security Council's 1993 resolutions, calling for the unconditional withdrawal of Armenian occupying forces from Azerbaijan.
- Besides, the Madrid Principles mentioned that international peacekeeping operations were to be deployed immediately after the Peace Agreement came into force, to monitor the Armenian redeployment
- Also, internally displaced persons and refugees were to be provided the right to return to their original place of residence.

### ***Drishti Mains Question***

Discuss the impact of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict on India's Connect Central Asia policy.

This editorial is based on [“Talking peace”](#) which was published in The Indian Express on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Now watch this on our Youtube channel.

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