

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and foreign mediation to resolve and reduce critical situation

Shokhrukhbek Abdujabborov

Senior year student

The University of World Economy and Diplomacy,

Faculty of International Relations,

Department of Political Science

e-mail: abdujabborovshohruhbk2712@gmail.com

Abstract

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has remained a longstanding and contentious issue, characterized by territorial disputes and ethnic tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This paper examines the role of foreign mediation in resolving and reducing the critical situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. It explores the historical background of the conflict, analyzes the various attempts made by international actors to mediate and broker peace agreements, and assesses their effectiveness. The study also considers the challenges and limitations faced by foreign mediators in addressing the complex dynamics of the conflict. By examining the impact of external intervention, this research contributes to a better understanding of the potential role of foreign mediation in achieving a sustainable resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Keywords: *Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, foreign mediation, territorial disputes, ethnic tensions, peace agreements, international actors, critical situation.*

Introduction

Russia acquired what is now Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1813. Both countries declared independence when the Russian Empire collapsed in the 1917 revolution. Fighting quickly broke out between them in several disputed areas di in dispute, including Nagorno-Karabakh. By 1920, the Red Army had taken control of both countries and they were designated Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR).

Nagorno-Karabakh (“Mount Karabakh”) is located in Azerbaijan but is populated mainly by ethnic Armenians. The situation is further complicated by religious

divisions, as ethnic Azerbaijanis are Muslim, while ethnic Armenians are Christian. Thus, in 1923, Stalin, then the Nationalist Commissar, designated Nagorno-Karabakh an autonomous province, an administrative unit that enjoyed some control over its own affairs in Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic.¹

In 1988, as nationalist sentiment swept the Soviet Union, Nagorno-Karabakh passed a resolution to join the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. The weakened Soviet Union opposed the move as it tried to keep the country united, but the incident sparked ethnic violence in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions. Three years later, in 1991, Armenia and Azerbaijan declared independence as the Soviet Union collapsed. Nagorno-Karabakh did the same that year, after a referendum boycotted by ethnic Azerbaijanis. Even Armenia does not recognize the so-called Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, NKR). The war of moralities quickly turned into a brutal international armed conflict between two new nations for control of Nagorno-Karabakh. Tens of thousands of people died and more than a million were displaced. Armenian forces gained the upper hand and in 1994 captured Nagorno-Karabakh and much of southwestern Azerbaijan, including the territory connecting it to Armenia.

The UN Security Council observed these developments with great concern. In 1993, it adopted four resolutions affirming the inviolability of borders, demanding an immediate cessation of hostilities, urging the parties to establish a “durable ceasefire,” calling on Armenian forces to withdraw from areas it had occupied, expressing concerns over the displacement of civilians, calling for unimpeded access by humanitarian relief efforts, and expressing support for the work of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, today Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe or OSCE) and its “Minsk Group”.

¹ Michael N. Schmitt and Kevin S. Coble, “The Evolving Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict - an International Law Perspective - Part I,” Lieber Institute West Point, September 27, 2023, <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/evolving-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-international-law-perspective-part-i/>.

”The Minsk Group” was, and remains, tasked with conflict resolution and obtaining a permanent agreement on the cessation of hostilities. Despite the CSCE’s efforts, it was Russia that brought the parties to the table.²

In 1994, Armenia and Azerbaijan signed the Russian-brokered Bishkek Protocol, a ceasefire agreement that put in place a previously agreed “line of contact” from which troops were withdrawn.

As with all ceasefires, the Bishkek Protocol was a temporary arrangement pending the adoption of a “reliable, legally binding agreement” that would permanently end the conflict, establish a mechanism for “ensuring the non-resumption of military and hostile activities,” involve the “withdrawal of troops from occupied territories,” restore communication, and provide for the return of displaced persons to their homes.

The US quickly declared that Azerbaijan’s attack was unacceptable. But from Azerbaijan’s perspective it was successful: in the use of force forced the Nagorno-Karabakh government to accept Baku's conditions. Lessons will certainly be learned, not just in Azerbaijan. This will worry European policymakers, who are in the middle of mediating between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the process of normalizing relations between the two countries. A statement this week from EU President Charles Michel confirmed that meetings on the normalization process are expected to continue with a possible meeting between the two heads of state in Grenada in October; he only briefly mentioned “the military operation that took place last week” and asked for “more details on Baku’s vision for the future of Karabakh Armenians in Azerbaijan.”³

The EU has recently taken on a larger role between Armenia and Azerbaijan, deploying high-level efforts in a conflict long considered neglected and intractable. Technically, within the international multilateral system, the conflict was supposed to be resolved by the Minsk Group under the auspices of the OSCE, established in 1992

² Security Council Report, “Briefing on the Situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh Region*,” Security Council Report, September 20, 2023, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/09/briefing-on-the-situation-in-the-nagorno-karabakh-region-2.php>.

³ Jane Kinninmont | Policy & Impact Director, Jane Kinninmont, and | Policy & Impact Director, “Nagorno-Karabakh: Violence amid Mediation,” European Leadership Network, 2023, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/nagorno-karabakh-violence-amid-mediation/>.

and co-chaired by Russia, the US and France. Tensions between Russia and the West have brought the group to near collapse in recent years, even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, the view in Azerbaijan is that Europe lacks credibility when it comes to human rights, having failed to protect displaced Azerbaijanis when Armenia took control of Nagorno-Karabakh for the first time, during the war.

Understanding France's relationship with Armenia and Azerbaijan is imperative to fully understand its role in finding a solution to the conflict. For France and Armenia, friendly relations were established as early as the 11th century, the Cilician kingdom of Armenia at that time was an important refuge for Frankish Christian crusaders.

After the Armenian genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire in 1915, a large number of Armenians settled in France, forming one of the largest Armenian diasporas abroad (500,000 current French citizens of Armenian origin). Since then, Armenians have become an important part of French society, giving way to the country's famous figures such as singer Charles Aznavour.

In 2001, France recognized the Armenian genocide. France today (after Russia) is the second foreign investor in the country since 2016. Famous companies such as Pernot Ricard (Beverages) and Véolia (Infrastructure) are present throughout the country. France and Armenia cooperate on important cultural, scientific and technical projects, and there is even a key French university located in Yerevan. Finally, Armenia is a member of the French language organization, La Francophonie.

Azerbaijan and France, on the other hand, do not have such a long history. Regardless, the first two presidents of modern Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev (1993-2003) and Ilham Aliyev (since 2003), made their first foreign visits to France. Furthermore, a friendship treaty was signed between the two countries in 1993 and France was the second country to recognize Azerbaijan's independence, after Turkey. Azerbaijan became the first economic partner of the French South Caucasus in 2020 (even before Armenia).

France is also a significant foreign investor in the country (7th in 2019). France also maintains important cultural and scientific networks in Azerbaijan, with the establishment of the French Institute in 2011 in Baku, the Franco-Azerbaijan

University in 2016, and more than 30 agreements between French and Azerbaijani universities, where the Collaboration mainly focuses on energy resources and engineering. The French energy company Total is present throughout the country and has shown interest in the Absheron gas block and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan gas pipeline.

Since EU member states are not united on these issues, this can only work if a coalition of EU member states gets the job done. France and Germany could create a coalition of goodwill with other like-minded EU countries to take greater ownership in resolving the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Berlin could balance Paris's close ties with Armenia, and France could follow through on its words with actions supporting visa liberalization for Armenians and providing announced military support. This alliance could provide security through peacekeeping and surveillance, supplementing or replacing the United Nations. But he also needs more support for sanctions from German Chancellor Scholz if Azerbaijan uses military force against the Armenian state.⁴

Armenia needs support in drawing closer to the EU and on the path to democracy, which began with the Velvet Revolution in 2018, but has been interrupted since the war in 2020. Armenia needs the prospect of membership. The EU, if interested, is willing and able to leave Russia's institutional framework of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The visa-free regime would be an important signal to Armenian society. Armenia has a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU similar to the Association Agreements signed by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, without a free trade agreement as it is part of the Asian Customs Union -Europe and Russia. The agreement could easily be converted into a formal association agreement (which Armenia negotiated between 2010 and 2013) if it was interested. However, such an offer can only work if it is combined with security guarantees for Armenia.

⁴ Thomas Vignes, "RIAC :: France and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: The Role of French Diplomacy," RIAC :: France and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: The Role of French Diplomacy, September 19, 2023, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/t-vignes/france-and-the-nagornokarabakh-conflict-the-role-of-french-diplomacy/>, 1-2.

While institutional security guarantees from the EU or NATO are unlikely, EU member states, in the framework of the European Peace Facility, and NATO members like the US, could help train the Armenian army. Military trainers could be deployed on the ground, which would also help deter Azerbaijani attacks. The recent exercises of US and Armenian troops for peacekeeping missions are a step in the right direction. The EU needs to understand that Russia increasingly coordinates with Azerbaijan and Turkey, and that several Azerbaijani actions against Nagorno-Karabakh or Armenia must have been agreed with Moscow since they were preceded by a withdrawal of Russian “peace forces” in Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia also changed its position on the disputed region and agreed with Azerbaijani control of Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, there are no credible Russian security guarantees for Armenia, and Russian officials have made clear that they support the so-called Zangezur corridor and understand it from the perspective of economic benefits.

Russia needs to emphasize that the situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh region is an internal matter of the sovereign territory of Azerbaijan. It could also highlight the important role peacekeepers played in brokering the ceasefire agreement.

Yerevan has criticized Moscow and the PRC for what they say is a lack of action to protect the people of the Nagorno-Karabakh region from Azerbaijan's alleged actions, including its alleged blockade of the corridor Lachin. This leads to tension in relations between Moscow and Yerevan. In January, Armenia declined to host military exercises of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) within its borders.

Furthermore, Armenia has moved towards ratifying the Rome Statute that established the International Criminal Court (ICC). (Notably, the ICC issued an arrest warrant earlier this year for Russian President Vladimir Putin over alleged war crimes related to the forced removal of children from Ukraine.) On 8 September, marking another point of contention, the Russian foreign ministry summoned Armenia's ambassador to Russia to discuss “unfriendly steps” taken by Yerevan, including Armenia's participation in joint military exercises with the US which concluded today (20 September).

Council members remain united in their support for a negotiated solution for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and supportive of the efforts by the OSCE Minsk Group.

In the past, the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh represented a rare instance of cooperation between Russia and the P3 (France, the UK, and the US)—members who are often divided on other issues addressed by the Council. However, these dynamics may have changed because of recent developments, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In addition, recent years appear to have brought growing competition—between Russia, on the one hand, and the EU and the US, on the other—to assume the leading mediation role in negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has presented a highly complex and volatile situation, necessitating foreign mediation efforts to resolve and reduce tensions. The involvement of external actors, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group co-chair countries, has been crucial in facilitating negotiations and promoting peaceful dialogue between the parties involved. These mediation efforts have aimed to address the core issues at the heart of the conflict, including the territorial dispute and the protection of the rights and security of the affected populations. However, it is important to acknowledge that finding a lasting resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains a challenging task, as it requires the willingness of all parties to engage in meaningful dialogue and compromises. As scholar Thomas de Waal observes, “The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has defied resolution for decades, despite numerous international mediation efforts” (de Waal, 2022). Therefore, sustained and coordinated foreign mediation, coupled with genuine political will from the conflicting parties, is imperative to achieve a sustainable and just resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

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