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## **The Main Stages of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict and the Consequences of the Conflict**

### **Abstract**

*The South Caucasus region has always been an important player in regional geopolitics, closely connected with the national interests and security of Russia, Iran, and Türkiye. Its significance increased significantly after the Soviet Union's collapse. The region is a strategically vital transport hub, where communication and trade routes from East to West (the ancient Silk Road) and from South to North intersect. However, ongoing conflicts between Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, as well as between Azerbaijan and Armenia, have hindered the region's economic development. These conflicts have partially blocked the region, which has crucially impacted its political development. The most dangerous conflict is between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. In 2020, Azerbaijan regained control of seven regions around Karabakh, which were occupied by Armenians during the first Armenian-Azerbaijani war in the early 1990s. In 2023, during a one-day special operation, Azerbaijan established full control over the territory of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region. The Azerbaijani army's victorious military operations have changed the balance of forces, opening up new opportunities for strengthening peace and developing economic, political, and cultural cooperation between the countries of the region. This paper examines how the Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation impacted on the geopolitical situation in the South Caucasian region. The official and historical documentation as well as diplomatic reports and media outlets analyzed for these purposes. The comparative-descriptive method was applied to analyze the sources.*

**Keywords:** *Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, ethnic confrontation, geopolitical situation, Tripartite Declaration, Shusha Declaration, South Caucasus*

## Ermenistan-Azerbaycan Çatışmasının ana Aşamaları ve Çatışmanın Sonuçları

### Öz

*Güney Kafkasya bölgesi, Rusya, İran ve Türkiye'nin ulusal çıkarları ve güvenliği ile yakından bağlantılı olarak bölgesel jeopolitikte her zaman önemli bir oyuncu olmuştur. Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasından sonra önemi daha da artmıştır. Bölge, Doğu'dan Batı'ya (antik İpek Yolu) ve Güney'den Kuzey'e iletişim ve ticaret yollarının kesiştiği stratejik açıdan hayati bir ulaşım merkezidir. Ancak Gürcistan, Abhazya ve Güney Osetya ile Azerbaycan ve Ermenistan arasında süregelen çatışmalar bölgenin ekonomik gelişimini engellemiştir. Bu çatışmalar bölgeyi kısmen bloke etmiş ve bu da bölgenin siyasi gelişimini önemli ölçüde etkilemiştir. En tehlikeli çatışma Ermenistan ve Azerbaycan arasında Dağlık Karabağ'ın statüsü konusunda yaşanmaktadır. 2020 yılında Azerbaycan, 1990'ların başındaki ilk Ermenistan-Azerbaycan savaşı sırasında Ermeniler tarafından işgal edilen Karabağ çevresindeki yedi bölgenin kontrolünü yeniden ele geçirmiştir. 2023 yılında Azerbaycan, bir günlük özel bir operasyonla eski Dağlık Karabağ Özerk Bölgesi toprakları üzerinde tam kontrol sağladı. Azerbaycan ordusunun zaferle sonuçlanan askeri operasyonları güçler dengesini değiştirerek bölge ülkeleri arasında barışın güçlendirilmesi ve ekonomik, siyasi ve kültürel işbirliğinin geliştirilmesi için yeni fırsatlar yarattı. Bu çalışma, Ermenistan-Azerbaycan çatışmasının Güney Kafkasya bölgesindeki jeopolitik durumu nasıl etkilediğini incelemektedir. Bu amaçla resmi ve tarihi belgelerin yanı sıra diplomatik raporlar ve medya organları analiz edilmiştir. Kaynakları analiz etmek için karşılaştırmalı betimsel yöntem uygulanmıştır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Ermenistan-Azerbaycan çatışması, etnik çatışma, jeopolitik durum, Üçlü Deklarasyon, Şuşa Deklarasyonu, Güney Kafkasya*

### Introduction

The Caucasus region, both historically and in the current time, is politically unstable and turbulent. This is due to several factors that can be divided into internal and external. In addition to all this, both factors were formed not only because of regional and international vicissitudes after the collapse of the USSR, but also have deep historical roots. The 1990s turned out to be a difficult time for all three South Caucasian states. Russia has become more focused on the problems of the North Caucasus - on the domestic side and quelling unrest in relations. Russian policy in the South Caucasus was driven mainly by the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the unstable situation in Georgia, which Moscow immediately took advantage of to further undermine that state.

The region is in the focus of attention of the main players in world politics for several reasons. In particular, the South Caucasus is important from the point of view of the penetration of the collective West into Central Asia. It is also noticeable that the West, using instruments

of soft power, is trying to use the states of the region to oust Russia from the South Caucasus and to gain full influence in the Caucasus-Caspian region. For Türkiye, the South Caucasus is important not only as a direct border region, but also as a transit zone for strengthening its economic and political influence in the region. For Iran, the South Caucasus is a possible window to the outside world, and at the same time, in its current configuration, it can become a buffer zone ensuring the security of its northern borders. Russia views the South Caucasus as part of the former Russian Empire and an important security zone for its southern borders. Maintaining Russia's influence in the South Caucasus allows to ensure security in the Black Sea basin.

Intraregional processes in the South Caucasus itself are not conducive to achieving long-term stability. The states of the region have historically developed their own problems. One of them, for example, is related to the contradictions caused by the administrative-territorial division of the Russian Empire, and then the USSR, which became one of the causes of tension in the post-Soviet Caucasus. For more than three decades after the collapse of the USSR, it was not possible to find any model of economic and military-political cooperation between the states of the South Caucasus.

All these problems, as well as the long-term military confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, pushed the countries of the region towards a more rational and consistent domestic and foreign policy. During the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the internationalization of the post-Soviet space was actively taking place in the South Caucasus. Today, the geopolitical boundaries between the three states of the South Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean and Greater Middle East are changing. The South Caucasian states are increasingly diversifying their foreign and economic policies.

The problems of military confrontation and establishing political stability in the South Caucasus region have become relevant over the past 30 years. Scholars studying the geopolitical situation in the region pay special attention to the problems of political and economic partnership of the South Caucasus countries with the leading world powers (Hunter, 2017; de Wall, 2012; Hill, 2015; Aydin, 2020; Ergun, 2020; Samkharadze, 2022; Avdaliani, 2022). Some studies examine issues of geopolitical stability in the context of interethnic conflicts in the region (Kakachia, 2012; Kapanadze, 2014; Sadiyev, 2021). The problems of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, which ceased to be intra-Caucasian and affected the interests of leading world powers such as Russia, the USA, the European Union, and Great Britain became the object of close attention of both regional and foreign scientists (Svante, 1999; Broers, 2005; Freiser, 2015; Branch, 2018; Alstadt, 2016, de Wall, 2021). This article's primary goal is to

analyze the main stages of the Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation to determine the level of its influence on the geopolitical situation in the region. For this purpose, historical and diplomatic materials, as well as government documentation and media outlets were studied. The comparative-descriptive method was applied to analyze the sources.

### **1.Armenian-Azerbaijani Confrontation from Political Perspective**

Russia has been the dominant power in the South Caucasus since the last Russian-Persian War in the early 19th century (Hunter, 2016, p. 5-6). In order to strengthen its geopolitical position, Russia supported Armenian migrations to the South Caucasus from Persia and the Ottoman Empire throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a result of the Russian authorities' protection, Armenian settlers gradually took over the lands of the local populations, Azerbaijanis. After the October Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd, the country was weakened by the civil war for a while. However, the Bolsheviks were eventually able to defeat the White forces in the war, and consequently recaptured part of the lost territories of the Russian Empire by the end of 1921.

After sovietization of Azerbaijan in April 1920, Armenian and Georgia were occupied by the 11<sup>th</sup> Red Army's detachments. To strengthen its position in Armenia Moscow promised some territorial concessions to Armenia. Thus, on November 30 of 1920, on the next day of the establishment of the Soviet power in Armenia, the western part of Zangazur was given to Armenia. On July 7, 1923, an administrative body - Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Province - was created in the mountainous part of Karabakh (О разграничение территорий НКАО и Курдистанской автономии). Armenians have attempted to take control of new territories from Azerbaijan whenever they had the opportunity. Back in November 1945, Gregori Arutyunov, who was the secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia, suggested that Nagorno-Karabakh be annexed to Armenia. He made an appeal to Josef Stalin, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party. However, due to the decisive position taken by the Azerbaijani leadership, Stalin rejected the proposal (Исмаилов, 2003, 219). At the beginning of 1964, Mikoyan, then the chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, proposed the transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. Khrushchev, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union rejected this baseless proposal and stated that he can provide 12.000 military trucks to the Armenians to be moved to Armenia within a day (Помпеев, 1992, з. 16-17). After the election of Gorbachev as the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in early 1985, who was known for his pro-Armenian position, Armenian nationalists became active again. At that time, the sufficient representation of Armenians in the supreme

leadership of the USSR, with Shahnazarov as Gorbachev's assistant, Sitaryan as the deputy chairman of the Soviet of Ministers, and Aganbekyan as Gorbachev's advisor ensured that they would realize their intentions. The Armenian leaders also tried to remove Heydar Aliyev, a wise politician, a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPSU, the first deputy chairman of the Soviet of Ministers of the USSR from political scene. The Armenian political leaders considered Aliyev as the main obstacle for their political activity. Under the pressure of Armenians and pro-Armenian circles, Gorbachov succeeded in releasing Aliyev from his position in October 1987.

After Heydar Aliyev was removed from his position, Armenian leaders increased pressure on the Soviet leadership. On February 11th, 1988, rallies and demonstrations started in Khankendi, which was then known as Stepanakert. Mass rallies began in Yerevan on February 18<sup>th</sup>, which continued almost non-stop. The number of participants increased to one million (Tomas di Vaal, 2008, p. 33). On February 20, 1988, during a meeting of the Soviet of People's Deputies of NKAP, Azerbaijani deputies were not allowed to attend. During this meeting, a decision was made to request the transfer of NKAP from Azerbaijan SSR to Armenian SSR. This decision led to increased pressure against Azerbaijanis in the region, resulting in an increase in cases of Azerbaijani expulsions from Armenia (События вокруг НКАО в кривом зеркале фальсификаторов, 1989, p.8). Following this, in March 1988, Armenian nationalist organization "Krunck" (Crane) in Nagorno-Karabakh, led by Robert Kocharyan, and the newly formed "Karabakh Committee" headed by Vazgen Manukyan and Levon Ter-Petrosyan in Yerevan, began to escalate events on a larger scale.

It is a well-known fact that the Soviet leadership failed to take decisive action against the usurpation of one allied republic by another (de Wall, 2021, p.2). Instead, they violated the rights of the Azerbaijan SSR and established a Special Administrative Committee in the Nagorno-Karabakh province on January 12, 1989 (Qasımlı, 2015, p. 12). This committee, led by Arkadi Volski, engaged in activities that were anti-Azerbaijani in nature and resulted in the province being taken out of Azerbaijan's control.

At the request of Azerbaijan, the Special Management Committee was dissolved on November 28, 1989. In its place, the Organizational Committee of the Azerbaijan SSR for Nagorno-Karabakh was established. This committee was supervised by the Special Commission of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, led by Polyanichko, the Second Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan (Köçərli, 2002, p. 90). Armenia didn't agree with this decision. Thus, the mass expulsion of Azerbaijanis from their ancestral homes in Armenia intensified. As a result of the ethnic cleansing of 1988-1989, Azerbaijani

community of Armenia, a total of 200.000 people, were deported from its homeland. During this resettlement process more than 200 Azerbaijanis were mercilessly murdered (Квяткевич, 2009, p. 76). At the same time, sabotage was committed in Baku (perhaps by the hands of the USSR State Security Committee). In January 1990, some deranged gangs entered Armenian homes and started looting and killing. The Soviet army units in the city did nothing to prevent the unrests. The President of the USSR Gorbachev signed the law on the introduction of a state of emergency in Baku at 00:00 on January 20. Just a few hours before that, troops entered Baku. As a result of the army's assault on the population, according to official information, 131 civilians were killed in Baku and other parts of the republic. According to the official reports 744 people were injured, 100 people were arrested, 4 people went missing during this clash (Balayev, 2000, p. 179-180). Due to Moscow's negative stance towards Azerbaijan, Armenians increased their separatist and terrorist activities. They formed military units equipped with small arms, jet, and artillery systems in Armenia. On September 2, during the joint meeting of Soviet of People's Deputies of NKAP and Shaumyan district, the creation of the so-called "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" within the administrative territories of NKAP and Shaumyan district was announced. Later, this self-proclaimed entity declared its independence and disassociated itself from Azerbaijan (Эфендиев, 2006, p. 178). After Azerbaijan regained its independence on October 18, 1991, it had to go to war with the enemy, resulting in the First Karabakh war. Unfortunately, this war led to Armenia occupying approximately 20% of Azerbaijan's territory. As a result of the occupation, roughly 700 thousand Azerbaijanis from Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts were forced to become internally displaced persons (IDPs). The war also caused approximately 50,000 injuries or disabilities, around 5,000 individuals to go missing, and resulted in thousands of civilians being taken hostage (Qasımlı, 2016, p. 501).

## **2.Ethnic Confrontation and Regional Geopolitics**

For the past two decades, political leadership of Azerbaijan has made great efforts to resolve the Karabakh conflict peacefully. However, the self-proclaimed "Republic of Artsakh" and political leadership of Armenia ignored UN Security Council resolutions. As a result, on September 27, 2020, the Azerbaijani Army, under the leadership of Supreme Commander-in-Chief, President Ilham Aliyev, launched a counterattack to restore the country's territorial integrity.

On November 8 and 9, 2023 the Azerbaijani Army achieved a significant victory by liberating Shusha, an important cultural center of Azerbaijan, along with 72 settlements. This liberation caused heavy damage to the enemy and was a great historical achievement. The

Second Karabakh War lasted for only 44 days, and it ended with the complete victory of the Azerbaijani Army. Azerbaijan was able to liberate the areas that were occupied by Armenia, which were known as "the security belt". After the liberation of Shusha, the president of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and the president of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signed a declaration which actually presupposes a military-political alliance between Azerbaijan and Türkiye (Azərbaycan ilə Türkiyə arasında müttəfiqlik münasibətləri haqqında Şuşa bəyannaməsi imzalanıb, 2021). In September 2023, the Azerbaijani government organized anti-terrorist measures that completely resolved the Karabakh problem. The Azerbaijani army was able to enter Khankendi, which was the last stronghold of the Armenian separatists. As a result, the self-proclaimed "Republic of Artsakh" announced its dissolution. Therefore, the Azerbaijani leadership has successfully completed the process of restoring the territorial integrity of the state and has put an end to Armenian separatism.

On November 9, 2020, the presidents of Russia, Azerbaijan and the prime minister of Armenia signed an agreement to cease hostilities in Karabakh region (Azərbaycan Respublikasının Prezidenti, Ermənistan Respublikasının baş naziri və Rusiya Federasiyasının Prezidentinin Bəyanatı, 2020). Both sides of the conflict recognized the need to deploy Russian peacekeepers in the conflict zone. On November 10, 2020, a tripartite agreement was signed by the President of Russia, the President of Azerbaijan and the Prime Minister of Armenia on a ceasefire and all military operations in the conflict zone. On January 30, 2021, the Joint Russian-Turkish Center for monitoring the ceasefire and all military operations in the conflict zone in Karabakh, which is located on the territory of Azerbaijan, began work. As part of the Karabakh issue, Russia and Türkiye are trying to increase their own status in the South Caucasus. Türkiye continues to support Azerbaijan to increase influence in the region. Russia, in turn, maneuvers between Azerbaijan and Armenia, but if a military clash occurs, the priority of the Russian side will be the role of a mediator.

Armed conflict in Karabakh made radical changes into the regional balance of power. The wrong political direction of the Armenian leadership led to the loss of captured and illegally detained Azerbaijani lands. It turned out to be even more difficult psychological blow to those forces in Armenian society, who thought about categories of "Great Armenia". For Azerbaijan the war was a liberation of its lands. Victory in it contributed to the growth of his authority not only as a regional leader of the South Caucasus, but also as a state capable of defending its sovereignty. As a result of the war, the South Caucasus moved into a new geopolitical dimension. Minsk Group has remained in the past, and its place occupied by Russia and Türkiye. Bringing Turkish to the forefront actor in the region was not unexpected. Over the past

30 years, Ankara has actively supported Azerbaijan, providing diplomatic support, economic and military assistance.

The position of other countries in the region, especially Georgia and Iran, is also important (de Waal, 2012, p. 1718). When the military conflict was raging, the Prime Minister of Georgia proposed holding peace negotiations in Tbilisi. Tehran took a position of neutrality. Armenia's attempts to win over Iran on their side were not successful, he prefers to take a balanced position. Iranian diplomacy does not have the necessary tools, and most importantly, the motivation to play on the contradictions between Armenia and Azerbaijan. As for France and the United States as co-chairs of the Minsk Group, in the context of problems associated with the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation they demonstrated complete helplessness and lack of strategic thinking. Receiving in Baku on December 12, 2020, the co-chairs of the Minsk group - representatives of the United States and France, President Aliyev said that the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Karabakh conflict has changed the situation in the region.

### **Conclusion**

Internationalization of the post-Soviet space has been most active in the South Caucasus during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The status quo in the zone of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, which had been maintained for 26 years, was radically changed because of the second Karabakh war in 2020 and the anti-terrorist operation of the Azerbaijani Army in September 2023. These changes apply not only to the territory of Karabakh itself and the seven adjacent Azerbaijani regions but also to the general geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus. The unprecedented involvement of Türkiye in a military campaign of Azerbaijan to restore its territorial integrity became the first experience of breaking the regional balance of power with the participation of a NATO member country. Significant changes in the Caucasus also contributed to the intensification of Iran in the region. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the United States, the EU, especially France, have taken the path of increasing diplomatic pressure on Armenia and Azerbaijan. The aim is to speed up the negotiation process for signing a peace treaty between Yerevan and Baku. The Turkish Republic has significantly improved its position in the South Caucasus. What was once a regional ethnopolitical conflict related to the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union has now become much more significant. If Armenia and Azerbaijan can find a way to make peace, it may lead to a reconciliation between Armenia and Türkiye. This would, in turn, reopen the borders between the three countries and end Armenia's long-term geographic isolation. It would also prepare the South Caucasus to take full advantage of new transport projects that aim to move goods between Europe and Asia.



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