

# THE DISPUTE OVER NAGORNO-KARABAKH: A PROTRACTED CONFLICT

(DAĞLIK KARABAĞ İHTİLAFI: GECİKTİRİLMİŞ BİR ÇATIŞMA)

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to discuss the historical background of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, to identify the positions of the main parties involved and to analyze this dispute from two different level-of-analyses. The first analysis will be a systemic one where the system level conflict dimension in the Caucasus will be investigated. This analysis will demonstrate how the two aspiring hegemons', namely the United States (US) and Russia, rivalry over critical energy resources in the Caucasus let the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict unresolved. The reasoning behind this hypothesis is that since other actors in the region have quite limited power capabilities vis-à-vis these great powers, the systemic dimension of the conflict counteracts their involvement to the definitive resolution. On the other hand, the second analysis which will examine the domestic factors determining foreign policy choices of the actors involved in the conflict will provide an alternative preference formation process other than the structural one. This approach will present the impact of state-society relations on the conflicted actors' preferences and foreign policy choices. Making this kind of a dual study is a necessity in terms of seeing the complete picture and understanding the reasons of why the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains unresolved despite all the bilateral and international efforts.*

**Keywords:** *Nagorno-Karabakh, Conflict Resolution, United States, Russia, system analysis, foreign policy*

**Öz:** *Bu makalenin amacı Dağlık Karabağ çatışmasının tarihsel arka planını tartışmak, müdahil olan tarafların konuya ilişkin tavırlarını tanımlamak ve sorunu iki farklı analiz-seviyesinde ele almaktır. İlk analiz, Kafkasya'daki sistem düzeyinde çatışma boyutunun ele alınacağı sistemik bir analiz olacaktır. Bu değerlendirme iki hevesli hegemon, yani Birleşik Devletler ve Rusya arasında Kafkasya'daki enerji kaynakları üzerindeki rekabetin Dağlık Karabağ sorununun çözülmesini engellediği gösterilecektir. Bu hipotezin temelindeki*

*düşünce, bölgedeki diğer aktörlerin bu güçler ile karşılaştırıldığında güç kapasiteleri sınırlı olduğundan, çatışmanın sistem boyutu bu ülkelerin kesin çözüme müdahil olmasını önlemektedir. Çatışmaya müdahil olan aktörlerin dış politika tercihlerini belirleyen yerel sebepleri inceleyecek ikinci analiz, yapısal tercih oluşturma sürecinden farklı alternatif bir süreç oluşumunu ortaya koyacaktır. Bu yaklaşım devlet-toplum ilişkilerinin çatışan tarafların tercihleri ve dış politika seçimlerine etkisini gösterecektir. Böyle bir iki yönlü çalışma, resmin tamamının görülebilmesi ve tüm ikili ve uluslararası çabalara rağmen Dağlık Karabağ ihtilafının çözümsüz kalmasının sebeplerinin anlaşılması açısından gereklidir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Dağlık Karabağ, İhtilaf Çözümü, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, Rusya, sistem analizi, dış politika*

## INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the international community has witnessed the emergence of fifteen new states on the soil of the old Soviet Empire. The South Caucasus<sup>1</sup>, which was one of the most diverse and conflict-ridden regions in the former Soviet Union lands, hosted three of these new countries, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Besides economic misery and corrupted institutions that they inherited from the Old Empire; these new states were born into a world of fragmentation, political instability and internal conflicts. During the Cold War years, the frozen disputes were by and large controlled and suppressed by successive Soviet governments. Following the disappearance of this repressive authority, the conflicts have been reactivated. The willingness of the Moscow administration under the presidency of the Mikhail Gorbachev to implement reforms and to treat social and political problems more efficiently in the entire country aroused hopes within the Soviet Union's various nations that now they could review diverse conflicts that had been suppressed until then.<sup>2</sup> However, the escalation of sharp ethnic tensions and the exacerbation of armed conflicts have contributed both to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and in the emergence of new nation states.

The geopolitical struggle developing in the South Caucasus over its energy resources and energy transport routes has placed the region at the center of the global power struggle. In this regard, local conflicts in the region have entered into the sphere of interest of great powers. The dispute over

1 South Caucasus is the new name of the Transcaucasia region. In the Soviet regime, Transcaucasia was reflecting the Russian geographical position and literally meant beyond or behind the Caucasus.

2 Marina Kurkchyan, "The Karabakh Conflict". *The Armenians. Past and Present in the Making of National Identity*, ed. Edmund Herzig and Marina Kurkchyan. (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005) pp. 147

Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan is an excellent example of how a local conflict can serve as the manifestation of a larger power struggle between great powers, in this case for political and economic control over the Caucasus and the Caspian regions.<sup>3</sup> This persistent “frozen” conflict in the Black Sea and South Caucasus is a principal obstacle to political stability, economic development and regional cooperation. Although the roots of the disagreement can be traced further back, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict became an international affair during the late 1980s when this predominantly Armenian enclave in the newly independent Republic of Azerbaijan witnessed an escalation of ethnic tension between Armenians and Azeris. Since the region hosting this conflict is a Euro-Atlantic borderland and at the same time a crossroads where the interests of many states overlap in a complex pattern, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict immediately became an issue of interest in Trans-Atlantic politics.

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The aim of this paper is to discuss the historical background of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, to identify the positions of the main parties involved and to analyze this dispute from two different level-of-analyses. The first analysis will be a systemic one where the system level conflict dimension in the Caucasus will be investigated. This analysis will demonstrate how the two aspiring hegemons', namely the United States (US) and Russia, rivalry over critical energy resources in the Caucasus let the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict unresolved. The reasoning behind this hypothesis is that since other actors in the region have quite limited power capabilities *vis-à-vis* these great powers, the systemic dimension of the conflict counteracts their involvement to the definitive resolution. On the other hand, the second analysis which will examine the domestic factors determining foreign policy choices of the actors involved in the conflict will provide an alternative preference formation process other than the structural one. This approach will present the impact of state-society relations on the conflicted actors' preferences and foreign policy choices. Making this kind of a dual study is a necessity in terms of seeing the complete picture and understanding the reasons of why the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains unresolved despite all the bilateral and international efforts.

3 Dina Malysheva, “The Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh: Its Impact on Security in the Caspian Region”. *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region*, ed. Gennady Chufirin. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) pp. 257.

## The Historical Background

The South Caucasus has always been a strategic region at the crossroads of the Russian and Muslim<sup>4</sup> hegemonies and “a boundary zone contested by two major spheres of influence”.<sup>5</sup> After the collapse of the Russian and Ottoman empires in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the region was dominated by the Soviets. Moscow’s policies towards the South Caucasus aimed to control the internal disputes and establish a manageable system for the region. Following a policy of ‘divide and rule’, the Armenian populated Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region was incorporated into Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani populated Nakhichevan was separated from this country by an Armenian corridor. Consequently Azerbaijan’s direct contact with a major province was cut and the formation of a substantial Azerbaijan-Turkey border was blocked. On the other hand, the incorporation of an autonomous Nagorno-Karabakh into Azerbaijan created a constant source of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In this way, Moscow guaranteed that it would be a necessary arbitrator in the conflicts between the two nations. The new status quo did not change Armenia’s aspirations to integrate the Nagorno-Karabakh region into its territory, but such attempts were harshly crushed by the Moscow administration. So the successive Soviet governments were quite successful in managing and controlling the territorial disputes in the South Caucasus, but the approaching collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s had the alarming effect of enflaming these frozen conflicts.

According to a 1989 census, Nagorno-Karabakh’s population was approximately 75 percent ethnic Armenian (145.000) and 25 percent ethnic Azeri (40.688).<sup>6</sup> The conflict over this territory began in February 1988 when demonstrations in both Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia called for unification of the region with Armenia.<sup>7</sup> The territorial dispute rapidly escalated into armed conflict and the war intensified in 1992. In January 1992, Nagorno-Karabakh declared itself an independent republic, but has not been recognized by any state, including Armenia. A ceasefire was signed by military representatives of three sides in May 1994; however since that time Armenian forces have not only kept Azerbaijanis out of most Nagorno-Karabakh but also occupied seven regions of that country.<sup>8</sup> Since 1988, the conflict has produced new refugees and internally displaced people (IDP) on both sides: close to 350.000 Armenians from Azerbaijan

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4 It includes both Turkish and Persian Empires.

5 Kurkchiyan, (note 2), pp. 148

6 “Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh” Human Rights Watch website (December 1994) ([http://www.geocities.com/fanthom\\_2000/hrw-azerbaijan/hrw-contents/2.html#g-d-h](http://www.geocities.com/fanthom_2000/hrw-azerbaijan/hrw-contents/2.html#g-d-h))

7 Rachel Goshgarian “Breaking the Stalemate: Turkish-Armenian Relations in the 21st Century” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* vol. 4, no.4. (Winter 2005), pp. 3

8 During the war, Armenia occupied approximately 20% of Azerbaijani territory, breaching international law.

and Karabakh, almost 700.000 Azeris from Armenia, Karabakh and surrounding Azerbaijani districts.<sup>9</sup> Attempts have been made at reconciliation, including a promising set of meetings at Key West in 2001. Later, meetings between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey took place in Reykjavik in May, 2002 and, again, in June 2004.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the bilateral contacts, international mediation efforts, especially under the aegis of the OSCE Minsk group<sup>11</sup> have tried to find a peaceful solution to this protracted conflict.

The OSCE Minsk group that was created in 1992 to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict has not yielded a successful result so far. The Group is headed by a co-chairmanship consisting of France, Russia and the US. Alongside France's symbolic and the US' limited presence in the South Caucasus; the only actor capable of putting pressure to both Armenia and Azerbaijan is Russia. So the conflict resolution process seems highly dependent to Russia's political calculations.

In 2007, the Minsk Group proposed a set of principles, a.k.a. Madrid principles, to the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Even though these principles offer a ground that would satisfy both sides, no agreement is achieved so far. The principles were revised in 2009 and included following points:<sup>12</sup>

1. Return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control
2. An interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self governance
3. A corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh
4. Future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will
5. The right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence
6. International security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation

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9 Gerard J. Libaridian. *The challenge of statehood* (Cambridge: Blue Crane Books, 1999), pp. 8 – 9

10 Rachel Goshgarian "Breaking the Stalemate: Turkish-Armenian Relations in the 21st Century" *Turkish Policy Quarterly* vol. 4, no.4. (Winter 2005), pp. 4

11 The OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Minsk Group was created in 1992 by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe to encourage a peaceful, negotiated resolution to the Karabakh conflict. The group was headed by a co-chairmanship consisting of France, Russia and the United States.

12 Mark Dietzen, 2010-11 Fox Fellow to Freie University in Berlin, *A New Look at Old Principles: Making the Madrid Document Work*. *Caucasus Edition* : April 1, 2011, Volume 4, Issue 1.

## Actors involved in the conflict and their positions:

### *Armenia*

Armenia argues that Nagorno-Karabakh is the historic motherland of the Armenian people and the roots of its cultural and religious traditions can be found there.<sup>13</sup> This country does not officially recognize the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) but defends its right of self-determination.<sup>14</sup> This means that Armenia sees the NKR as a belligerent party in the conflict together with Armenia and Azerbaijan. During the war, Armenia supported the Karabakh army and helped it to occupy seven regions surrounding this enclave.<sup>15</sup> In addition, a significant part of the state elites of modern Armenia are former activists of the Karabakh movement,<sup>16</sup> thus it exists an organic bond between Armenia and the NKR.

Since the NKR is not recognized by any state or organization; Armenia is blamed for the current situation which constitutes a breach of international law. UN Security Council Resolutions 822, 853, 874 and 884 call for an end to the occupation by Armenia and demand respect to the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.<sup>17</sup> The deadlock in Nagorno-Karabakh paved the way to the exclusion of Armenia from profitable energy projects including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline.

Therefore, the resolution of the conflict would work to the advantage of Armenia by breaking its isolation, normalizing its relations with neighbors and the international community and improving economic and the social situation in the country. Armenia is totally against to the reintegration of NKR to Azerbaijan as a way of resolving the conflict, which clashes the Azerbaijani demand of subjecting this region to Azeri jurisdiction and legislation.

### *Azerbaijan*

Azerbaijan tries to defend its territorial integrity and refuses to recognize the NKR or to regard it as a party in the conflict. Azerbaijan claims that

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13 Kurkchian, (note 2), pp. 150

14 Malysheva, (note 3), pp. 261.

15 Haroutiun Khachatryan, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Perspective of a Year-Long Deadlock" *Caucas Europe News* (07.10.2007) ([http://www.caucas.com/home\\_eng/breve\\_contenu.php?id=329](http://www.caucas.com/home_eng/breve_contenu.php?id=329))

16 A group of oligarchs/politicians who were born in Karabakh and who are very influential in modern Armenia is often called as the *Karabakh Clan*. The former president Kocharian and the current president Sargsyan are cited in this group.

17 "1993 UN Security Council Resolutions on Nagorno-Karabakh" US Department of State website (<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/13508.htm>)

Nagorno-Karabakh is an “inalienable part” of its territory and that Soviet officials illegally detached this region from Azerbaijan. The invasion of Azerbaijani lands by Armenian forces during the war has gravely wounded the national pride of Azerbaijan. The quick defeat of Azerbaijani forces in particular demonstrated that Azerbaijan needed an urgent military reform in order to fight back. In 2005 Azerbaijani president Aliyev declared that Azerbaijan’s defense budget would be equal to Armenia’s entire budget.<sup>18</sup> This demonstrates how efficiently Azerbaijan uses the Caspian oil revenues to put pressure on Armenia. In this context, Kocharian, the former president of Armenia, has argued that in the near future Azerbaijan will be powerful enough to get back its occupied territories through military force.<sup>19</sup> Thus the status quo is about to change in the favor of Azerbaijan, at least from a military perspective.

The military doctrine adopted by Azerbaijan in 2010 envisages a military solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict if “the territory could not be liberated peacefully.”<sup>20</sup> The International Crisis Group’s policy brief that was published in February 2011 also highlights the deterioration of the situation in the conflict. The report underlines that the “increased military capabilities on both sides would make a new armed conflict in the South Caucasus far more deadly than the 1992-1994 one that ended with a shaky truce.”<sup>21</sup> At the beginning, Azerbaijan’s negotiating position was as follows:<sup>22</sup>

1. The legislation that changed the status of Karabakh must be abolished
2. The seven districts adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh presently occupied by the NKR army must be returned
3. The NKR army must be disarmed and disbanded
4. Nagorno-Karabakh must be subject to the jurisdiction and legislation of Azerbaijan

As of 2012, the fourth article seems quite unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. Even though Azerbaijan is ready to grant Nagorno-Karabakh the highest status of self-government within Azerbaijan, the

18 Speech by Ilham Aliyev. Arm Info News Agency (29.09.2005)

19 Sinan Oğan. “Presidential Elections in Russia and Armenia and their Impact on Turkey and the Region” 2023 (15.03.2008)

20 “Azerbaijani parliament approves Military Doctrine” News.Az Website (09.06.2010), (<http://news.az/articles/17123>)

21 The briefing can be found on the following address: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/south-caucasus/B60-armenia-and-azerbaijan-preventing-war.aspx>

22 Malysheva, (note 3), pp. 260.

authorities of the de facto NKR defend this enclave's right to self-determination.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh is actually the essential problem blocking any progress in official talks. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan could not find a consensus about this issue despite all the international pressures and supports.

### *The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic*

The problem with the NKR is that only Armenia recognizes it as a legitimate party in the conflict. Therefore it would be fair to claim that the crucial issue for the NKR is its status. In 2006, the parliament of NKR ratified a constitution declaring its sovereignty and independence,<sup>24</sup> but this decision is still not recognized by any country, including Armenia. On the contrary, this action attracted a great deal of criticisms from the international community and it has been argued that it hampered the OSCE Minsk group's mediation efforts.<sup>25</sup> Still, political elites of Karabakh continue to exert considerable influence on Armenian politics and they keep high-level positions in Armenia. Therefore Armenia remains the sole supporter of this autonomous region's long-term goal of the international recognition as an independent entity.

### *Russia*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it took a while for Russia to reestablish its dominion on the South Caucasus region. On the other hand, as the largest state on former Soviet Union land, Russia has always been a major party in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The absence of diplomatic ties with Turkey and the war with Azerbaijan has naturally pushed Armenia to the Russian sphere of influence. In addition to the cultural and religious affinities between the two countries, Russia has become the protector of Armenia politically, economically and militarily.

23 Abasov & Khachatryan, *Karabakh Conflict Variants of Settlement: concepts and reality*. 3rd edition. Baku/Yerevan: Areat, Noyan Tapan. (2006) pp. 44

24 "Referendum in Nagorno-Karabakh caused a problem" *Sabah Newspaper* (11.12.2006) (<http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2006/12/11/dun107.html>)

25 Ibid.



In 1997, an agreement of friendship and mutual cooperation has been signed between Russia and Armenia allowing Russian forces to be stationed in the country.<sup>26</sup> According to the accord, in the case of a military clash, both sides would help each other and respond collectively against the aggressor party. In August 2010, Russia signed a new military agreement with Armenia and extended its military activities in this country. Accordingly, Armenian and Russian authorities have agreed that the Russian military base will remain in Armenia for 49 years instead of 25.<sup>27</sup> Azerbaijani authorities were not pleased and expressed their “concern about the stalling of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem in terms of expansion of the Russian army in the Caucasus”.<sup>28</sup> So the deadlock in Nagorno-Karabakh has given Russia a chance to exert great influence on Armenia and on the South Caucasus. In addition, the fact that Russia has been working behind the scenes to ensure the continuation of the conflict and supporting the *Karabakh clan* in Armenia, which profits politically and economically from the conflict, demonstrates that Russia is ultimately in favor of the status quo.

Indeed, until the breakout of the Five-Day War with Georgia in August 2008, Russia’s policy has been the maintenance of the status-quo, in other words, the freezing of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. However, Russia revisited this strategy after the war and started to play an active role in the resolution of the conflict as well as in the rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia. The signing of the Moscow Declaration<sup>29</sup> on the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by the Presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia on November 2, 2008 and Sargsyan’s invitation of Turkey’s President Gül to Yerevan, which started the famous football diplomacy, during a Moscow visit, were crucial developments of this change.

Russia also took into consideration the fact that mega-energy transportation projects were extremely depended on Georgia and thus Baku-Tbilisi-Ankara line was getting stronger every day. So Russia supported the Armenia-Turkey rapprochement in order to “instigate” Baku against Turkey and attenuate the trilateral cooperation.<sup>30</sup> The plan worked well;

26 Hatem Cabbarlı “Ermenistan ve Rusya Arasında Gelişen İşbirliği” *Azsam* (April 2006) (<http://www.azsam.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=46>)

27 Hasan Selim Özertem, “Russia’s Strengthening Military Presence in the Caucasus and the Black Sea” *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, August 2010. (<http://www.turkishweekly.net/columnist/3373/russia-39-s-strengthening-military-presence-in-the-caucasus-and-the-black-sea.html>)

28 “Azerbaijan to discuss Russian-Armenian military agreement at OSCE PA’s session” *Trend News Website* (30.08.2010). (<http://en.trend.az/news/karabakh/1742830.html>)

29 The full text of the Moscow Declaration can be found in the following address: <http://www.reporter.am/go/article/2008-11-02-document-full-text-of-the-declaration-adopted-by-presidents-of-azerbaijan-armenia-and-russia-at-meiendorf-castle-near-moscow-on-november-2-2008>

30 Efgan Niftiyev, “Why Did Russia support Turkish-Armenian Rapprochement?” *Washington Review of Turkish and Eurasian Affairs*, June 2010. (<http://www.thewashingtonreview.org/articles/turkisharmenian-rapprochement.html>)

Azerbaijanis were provoked against Turkey in the aftermath of the declaration of the “Road Map” between Turkey and Armenia in April 2009. Erdoğan tried to ease his Azerbaijani counterparts in different occasions by declaring that the Armenia-Turkey border will not be open before the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.<sup>31</sup> Despite these support messages, Azerbaijan and Turkey clashed over energy in the following months which is actually the most important agenda item in bilateral relations.<sup>32</sup>

In the time being, Russia dominated the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution process and Russia’s President of the time, Medvedev, started hosting his counterparts Aliyev and Sargsyan regularly in order to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. Later, it became clear that Russia was not after a quick resolution but instead trying to control both parts in order to hamper a hot war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. So Russia was being more careful after the Five-Day War that has once more demonstrated that protracted conflicts can easily turn into military disputes in the South Caucasus. It would not be inappropriate to argue that Russia consolidated his position in the South Caucasus after the Five-Day War. Russia supported Armenia-Turkey rapprochement and took responsibility in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, thus it improved its post-war image.<sup>33</sup> But in the final stage, Armenia became more pro-Russian than ever, Azerbaijan-Turkey relations became worse and finally Armenia-Turkey rapprochement is suspended.

### *Turkey*

Turkey’s official policy towards the South Caucasus is one of pursuing a cooperative policy in order to consolidate its influence and maximize its interests. Turkey also aims to maintain regional security and stability by supporting the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the South Caucasus countries. Thus Turkey encourages their integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures as well as other international organizations. However, the disorder in this region has been an obstacle to Turkey’s plans to become an oil and natural gas hub connecting the Caspian resources to Europe. This is why ensuring the long-term stability of the Caucasus region became one of the major strategic concerns for Turkey’s foreign policy.

31 “Erdoğan Wants Armenian Withdrawal from Karabakh” *Euronews Website* (11.10.2009). (<http://www.euronews.net/2009/10/11/erdogan-wants-armenian-withdrawal-from-karabakh/>)

32 R. M. Cutler, “Azerbaijan and Turkey clash over energy” *Asia Times Online*, (23.10.2009). ([http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central\\_Asia/KJ23Ag04.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/KJ23Ag04.html))

33 Niftiyev (note 28)

Following the independence of South Caucasus states in 1991, Turkey established diplomatic ties with Azerbaijan and Georgia, while its first contacts with Armenia were quite positive. However the exacerbation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the invasion of Kelbejer rayon by Armenian forces strained the negotiation process and ultimately led to the complete closure of the Armenia-Turkey land border in 1993. As of today, the land border is still closed and very little progress is achieved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution process.

Turkey's involvement to the conflict as a party rather than a mediator and its strong support for Azerbaijan motivated both by strategic factors - *oil rich Azerbaijan's importance in the region* - but also domestic factors; - *Azerbaijan being a Muslim and Turkic brother state* - has limited its potential role as a mediator. Still, Turkey is eager to act as a negotiator between the two sides, since the resolution of this conflict is vital to Turkey's interests in terms of both the normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations and the establishment of peace and stability in the Caucasus region. If we take into consideration the fact that the protocols that were signed between Armenia and Turkey in October 2010 were suspended mainly because of the deadlock in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution process; Turkey is definitely in favor of change in the status-quo and encourages diplomatic means for the resolution.

### *United States*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US has started pursuing an active foreign policy in the former Soviet lands to fill the power gap in the region. US policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was deeply influenced by the powerful Armenian lobby in the US Congress. In 1992, the Freedom Supports Act was passed by the Congress and denied all American aid to Azerbaijan unless "*it respects international human rights standards, abandons its blockade of Armenia, ceases its use of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and searches a peaceful solution to the conflict*".<sup>34</sup> Azerbaijan thus became the only former Soviet republic deprived of American aid, while Armenia continued to receive aid in generous quantities. On the other hand, the US is favor of the immediate resolution of the conflict and the normalization of Armenia's relations with its neighbors. This is why the US pushes Azerbaijan to sit at the negotiation table with Armenia to resolve the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh. In this way, the US aspires to decrease the Russian influence on Armenia and to

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34 Svante E. Cornell. "Turkey and the Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh: A delicate Balance" *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 1 (1998). pp. 57.

pursue its interests by establishing stability and order in the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea regions.

**As a result**, even though Russia is the undisputed strategic partner of Armenia, it firmly supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. By the same token, the US supports Armenia financially and politically but tries also to establish good relations with Azerbaijan. These two aspiring hegemons' positions differ in their expectation from the conflict: The US wants an immediate resolution while Russia is satisfied with the status quo.

It is clear that the current situation threatens the transit of Caspian oil to the world market and thus harms all the main parties to the conflict.

Accordingly; Armenia, NKR and Azerbaijan are interested in peace since the first two are isolated from the world and the third is officially under occupation for almost 20 years. So the resolution of the conflict will be therefore beneficial for the main actors involved, but still there is little progress. According to Minasyan, "all parties to this conflict seek support from a considerable body of historical, political and legal arguments to strengthen their respective positions and to justify the implementation of their political stance".<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, any actor seems ready to make a compromise for an everlasting peace that will satisfy all sides. Therefore, there is no serious progress to reach a peaceful agreement in the foreseeable future.<sup>36</sup>

*Hegemons' positions differ in their expectation from the conflict: The US wants an immediate resolution while Russia is satisfied with the status quo.*

### **A Systemic Approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict:**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union was at the same time the end of the bipolar world order. The US has been the winner of the Cold War in terms of erasing the Soviet Union from the political map of the world, but it has failed in establishing a unipolar system. Therefore, the power vacuum left behind with the collapse of the Old Empire has reactivated the conflicted patterns all around the world. If we are looking for an answer to the crucial question of why does the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains unresolved despite all the bilateral and international efforts; the neorealist paradigm should advise us to look at the structure of the post-Cold war international

35 Sergey Minasyan, "Nagorno-Karabakh after Two Decades of Conflict: is Prolongation of the Status Quo Inevitable?" *Caucasus Institute Research Papers*; № 2, Yerevan : Caucasus Institute, 2010, pp. 5

36 Ibid, pp. 6

system and to understand the dynamics of the scene set by the great powers. Then only we can understand how a very minor player like Armenia had obtained enough economic and military capabilities to conquer Nagorno-Karabakh and some other parts of Azerbaijan and no resolution has been achieved thus far.

Lena Johnson suggests that the new geopolitical structure during 1990s can be characterized as “*a process of Russian retreat from the Caucasus and Central Asia in the economic, political and military fields, an increasing involvement by external actors (both state and non-state) and increased competition between Russia and external state actors, first and foremost the US.*”<sup>37</sup> Doubtless it is correct to argue that the new Moscow administration has inherited a rather “weak power projection potential” from the Soviets, but Russia still remained a great power in the international system.<sup>38</sup> If we apply Waltz’s structural realism to the new status quo, Nagorno-Karabakh lies at the center of the new puzzle where great powers compete for strengthening their influence in the Caucasus region determined by key issues of energy and security. In this perspective, it can be argued that the behavior of the states in the Caspian region very much confirms the basic assumptions of the realist school of thought where states always seek to increase their security and international influence.<sup>39</sup>

Russia’s first and foremost aim in the Caucasus was to reestablish its dominance and to bring especially the three South Caucasus states back under its control. However it was not an easy task since all ex-Soviet republics were seeking ways of minimizing the Russian influence. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the following blood feud between Armenia and Azerbaijan created an ample opportunity for Moscow administration to exert influence on these countries and balance them against each other effectively in order to accomplish its own security interests regarding a forward security zone in the Caucasus.<sup>40</sup> So the relocation of power in the region has created a strict competition between the two opposing great powers. Rosenkvist argues that the Caucasus broke into two camps: “The US sponsored East-West axis and the Russian sponsored North-South axis.” Accordingly, Russia supported Yerevan by providing the necessary means to conquer Nagorno-Karabakh and some other Azerbaijani provinces, while Azerbaijan improved its relations with Washington. So the minor players of the system became locked in the opposite sides of the great powers’ system

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37 Lena Johnson, “The New Geopolitical Situation in the Caspian Region”. *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region*, ed. Gennady Chufirin. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) pp. 11.

38 Morten Anstorp Rosenkvist, “Black Soil. Oil and Ethnicity in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict” *Working Papers - Programa CEI & Países Bálticos 007*, (Argentine Center of International Studies, 2005) pp. 4.

39 Johnson, (note 30), pp.13

40 Rosenkvist (note 31), pp.36

level conflict and gradually depended on the developments in the chess game between Russia and the US.

The deadlock in Nagorno-Karabakh is favored by Russia since the status quo guaranteed Armenia's dependency on this country and hampered the regional stability which is highly desired by the US in terms of transporting Caspian oil and gas resources to the Western markets without Russian interference. The US was aware that the way the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is resolved will in many respects determine the prospects of a new geopolitical configuration in the Caucasus and in the Caspian region in general.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, increasing the share of western and especially American oil companies' access to the Caspian oil and gas resources would serve to minimize the West's dependence on Middle East oil. That is why the US declared the region as a zone of vital interests and began to play a more active role in the Caucasus. In this regard, the direct access of the US to the management of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 1994 by being one of co-chairman of the Minsk Group has been accepted as an important development.

So attempts to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by reaching a consensus on the principles of a peaceful coexistence are hindered by the great divergence of interests between two great powers and this competition over the domination in the Caucasus blocked a resolution in the conflict. According to our systemic analysis the deadlock is upheld since the status quo best suits the interests of Russia and the US in their challenge over energy channels and their dominant positions demonstrate how the system level is crucial for explaining the state behavior. So if what matters most is the balance of power between the great powers, and it is the great powers not the minor ones that define the fate of the world politics, the Nagorno-Karabakh problem will remain unsettled until the system level conflict in the Caucasus will be solved.

### **A “Reductionist” Approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict:**

Structural realism was a good starting point for explaining the systemic factors impeding the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However the inherent problems of this analysis such as underestimating the relationship between domestic politics and decision-making processes necessitates a second investigation which will explore the impact of state-society relations on the conflicted actors' preferences and foreign policy choices. This study will be “reductionist” according to Kenneth Waltz's

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41 Malysheva, (note 3), pp. 271.

terminology by looking solely to the role of unit-level forces in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but will expand at the same time the limited range of phenomena encompassed by the neorealist analysis.

The essential argument of the liberal theory of IR formulated by Andrew Moravcsik is that “*the relationship between states and the surrounding domestic and transnational society in which they are embedded critically shapes state behavior by influencing the social purposes underlying state preferences.*”<sup>42</sup> However, Moravcsik’s theory is not a purely domestic or unit-level theory ignoring the international environment; on the other hand its fundamental premise is looking to the preference formation processes at the domestic level by taking into consideration the systemic outcomes of interstate interactions. Therefore in order to understand the complexity in Nagorno-Karabakh, besides the structural aspects, we should also analyze the domestic factors determining the decision making procedures and foreign policy choices of the involved parties. Our central question was why does the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remain unresolved despite all the bilateral and international efforts and we sought the answer in the conflicting positions of Russia and the US. The same pattern will be followed in the second analysis with a focus on the domestic level.

Organized interest groups are a powerful force in the American domestic and foreign policies. Despite the fact that there exist various interest groups with different agendas, our analysis will focus solely on the ethnic ones, specifically the Armenian American lobby, in order to understand their level of efficiency on the American foreign policy preferences.

The Armenian population in the US is approximately one million and they are active under the umbrella Armenian Assembly of America (AAA) and the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA). One of the essential agendas of the Assembly is to provide economic assistance to Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh, enhancing the American financial support to Armenia, which is the second highest amount after Israel, and lobbying for a resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh favoring Armenian interests.<sup>43</sup> The incontestable American support to Armenia as a result of the strong Armenian lobby’s pressure is a good example in terms of demonstrating how domestic level interests shape the foreign policy formulations. According to the balance of power in the region, the US should establish better relations with Azerbaijan since this country is the least depended one to Russia among the ex-Soviet republics and it possesses rich oil and natural gas resources which is crucial to the American interests.

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42 Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Relations” *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 4. (1997), pp. 516

43 Fraser Cameron. *US Foreign Policy after the Cold War: Global Hegemon or Reluctant Sheriff?* (London: Routledge, 2002) pp. 91

On the other hand, Armenia is the undisputed strategic partner of Russia and Russia exerts great influence on Armenian politics. It is argued that the US tries to balance the Russian influence in the region by doing so; however the absolute support to Armenia in every realm frustrates the American interests in the Caucasus similar to the support to Israel does in the Middle East.

According to our model, if the American foreign policy was solely influenced by the systemic factors, the US's first priority in the Caucasus would be supporting Azerbaijan since this state is a key to the gate for the West into the

*Russia follows a very careful foreign policy towards the irredentist movements in the region and this country's opposition towards the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh*

Caspian Sea and a pro-Moscow administration would change the geopolitical balance in the region. However as a result of the bargaining process between the domestic interest groups, the American foreign policy pays more attention to develop good relations with Armenia. This situation impedes American efforts to play a constructive role in the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and fosters the deadlock.

Domestic factors are influential on the Russian foreign policy choices as well. One of the most crucial internal problems of Russia is the ethnic disputes and separatist movements in the Caucasus. The largely Muslim republics of this region including Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria have serious problems with the Moscow administration due to their Islamic and nationalist aspirations. Since Russia regards the Caspian region as a central concern for its national security, the turmoil in these breakaway provinces constitutes the weak spot of Russia in terms fueling irredentism in other parts of the Caspian region and the Caucasus. Given the fact that the US and European states are highly interested with the developments in Caspian basin, the territorial disputes and regional clashes can foster the western perception of the power vacuum in the Caucasus and can legitimize the West's possible intervention to fill this gap and stabilize the region.<sup>44</sup> So Russia follows a very careful foreign policy towards the irredentist movements in the region and this country's opposition towards the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh should be evaluated in this context.

The main logic behind the fact that Russia would never recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent state is that Azerbaijan would accept such a development as *casus belli* and start preparations for unleashing a new war in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan will not obviously aim Russia due to the

<sup>44</sup> European Neighborhood Policy can be evaluated in this context.



impossibility of winning such a war, but a new armed conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh would be inevitable in this scenario. It is not easy to predict the results of such a new regional war; however it is highly probable that Russia might lose its advantageous position in the aftermath and this clash can trigger the conflictual pattern in Russia's problematic republics. In sum, Russia's policies of gradual change favoring the status quo in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute have also a domestic aspect and a solution which will declare this enclave as an independent entity would jeopardize Russian interests in the region.

### CONCLUSION

With the dislocation of Soviet Union, Moscow's capabilities and responsibilities to manage the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh have suddenly disappeared. This paved the way to a full scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan resulting with conquest of the entire province of the Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding *rayons* by the latter. Despite all the bilateral and the international efforts, no resolution has been achieved thus far. This paper tried to analyze the conflict by explaining the background, underlining main actors involved, their positions and finally discussing the logic behind the deadlock. The major argument of the study was that Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remained unresolved due the power struggle where the US and Russia were competing for strengthening their influence in the Caucasus region determined by key issues of energy and security. In the neorealist analysis, the strong system level conflict dimension employing a top-down influence in Nagorno-Karabakh has been analyzed. However looking solely to the systemic aspects and ignoring the domestic factors determining the policy formations in both sides would be insufficient for explaining the different features of the unresolved dispute in Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore the domestic level factors influencing the foreign policy choices are also examined.

The ultimate aim of this study was to show different levels of preference formation processes and to underline that a single theory rests insufficient to explain the complex patterns and important aspects of post-cold war crises. The next step after this analysis would be looking at the regional dimension of the conflict by focusing specifically on Armenia and Azerbaijan. Even though these countries do not matter much on the global scale, they definitely have the capacity to influence the regional power balances with a potential of affecting the policies of the great powers competing for strengthening their influence in the Caucasus region. This regional dimension would certainly enhance the explanatory capacity of the analysis dealing with the complex pattern behind the deadlock in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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