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Europe

The Guardian view on Nagorno-Karabakh: new interests in an old conflict

Editorial

A long-running dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been supercharged by Turkey throwing its weight behind Baku

Thu 1 Oct 2020 19:09 BST



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▲ Demonstrators wave flags of Azerbaijan and Turkey in Istanbul on Thursday, during a protest supporting Azerbaijan. Photograph: Emrah Gürel/AP

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In Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountainous region of just 150,000 people in the South Caucasus, not one but multiple conflicts are playing out. More than a hundred people, including civilians, have been killed there since fighting broke out at the weekend. But the bigger picture draws in politicians and people thousands of miles away.

The first conflict is the deep and bitter dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory, which has centuries-old roots. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the mostly Armenian inhabitants declared independence from Azerbaijan, sparking a war in which around 30,000 died and each side ethnically cleansed areas. Since the 1994 ceasefire, Nagorno-Karabakh has been run as an independent enclave, with Armenian support but no international recognition.

Years of negotiations led by Russia, France and the US have failed to resolve matters or prevent sporadic violence. Each side has blamed the other for the latest fighting, the heaviest since the early 1990s. Their rhetoric is increasingly bellicose. The key difference this time is that Turkey, which previously urged peaceful resolution, has emboldened Azerbaijan with its outright backing. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has declared that: "For there to be a solution, the occupiers must withdraw from these lands." Armenia claims, though Ankara denies it, that a Turkish F-16 shot down an Armenian fighter jet. Turkey has a large Azeri community and this clash is shadowed by another profound historical rift: Turkey's refusal to recognise the Ottoman empire's 1915 killing of 1.5 million Armenians as genocide.

The Turkish president's increasing forcefulness internationally has played well at home, distracting from economic woes. The South Caucasus now appears to have become a third theatre in the power struggle between Russia and Turkey. Ankara's dramatic intervention in Libya turned the tide in favour of the Government of National Accord, allowing it to repel Khalifa Haftar, the strongman backed by Russia and others. But, as in Syria, there is now deadlock. Syrian opposition fighters, who played a key role in Libya, are believed to have been hired by Turkish security contractors to fight in Nagorno-Karabakh, embodying the links between the three conflicts.

Nato and the EU have urged a ceasefire; the region is a key corridor for gas and oil. Iran, with its large Azeri population, also keeps a wary eye on proceedings. On Thursday, Vladimir Putin, Emmanuel Macron and Donald Trump called for an immediate end to hostilities and talks without preconditions. But the US is distracted and France has little leverage. Moscow has previously forced the two parties to the table, and has every reason to do so again. It has a defence pact with Armenia but sells arms to Azerbaijan and has successfully balanced the two so far. It does not want to see trouble which might, in the long run, destabilise the North Caucasus. Most of all, it does not want Turkey in its backyard.

Ankara and Moscow's pragmatism has kept a complicated mix of mutual interests and rivalry from spilling over. Mr Erdoğan calculates that he is strengthening his hand before they once more come to terms. But as their linkages become more complex, the risk of miscalculation grows too. Either way, civilians pay – perhaps in Idlib as well as in Nagorno-Karabakh.

