



## Role of Regional Powers in Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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### Abstract:

The mountainous region Caucasus is one of the most diverse areas in the world that can be described as the hub of ethnic conflicts. One conflict is Nagorno-Karabakh, a longstanding dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over a mountainous and landlocked disputed territory. The region is predominantly ethnically Armenian, escalating the ongoing tensions and violence between the two countries, with caustic effects on the area. The involvement of regional stakeholders such as Türkiye, Iran and Russia plays a significant role in either intensifying or mitigating the conflict. This article provides an analysis of their influence, examining both constructive and destructive impacts. This research relies on qualitative data to offer an in-depth analysis, characterizing its nature as exploratory. The significant findings of this paper show that the influential roles of Iran, Türkiye and Russia is contributing both destructively and constructively to the conflict dynamics. Ultimately, the study concludes that these regional stakeholders, driven by political, financial and national interests, influence the conflict's trajectory, impacting it in varying degrees of constructive and destructive aspects ways.

**Keywords:** Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Türkiye, Russia, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, stakeholders, regional players

### INTRODUCTION

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is an ethnic and territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, rooted deeply in history. Both states emerged as successors of the USSR and engaged in a war following its dissolution, that is still ongoing. Nevertheless, this bilateral dispute transformed into a regional conflict with the potential to become an international conflict. Between 1918 to 2020, four wars and numerous border clashes have erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Different regional powers now assert their interests, emerging stakeholders in this conflict. Their national interests shape their role in the disputing states, raising critical questions about how their roles influence the conflict in both constructive and destructive ways. The main questions of the research are: What roles do competing regional stakeholders play in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and how do these roles impact the conflict?

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This paper is divided into three parts, aside from the introduction and conclusion. It starts with a brief historical overview of the conflict and its geopolitical significance. Further, it discusses the roles of the regional players (Türkiye, Russia and Iran) and their overlapping interests in the conflict. A detailed discussion follows on the constructive and destructive impacts of this triangular dynamic on the conflict.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Many books and journal articles have covered the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict's historical origin, geopolitical significance and strategic importance. Researchers have also discussed the roles played by different regional and international actors from multiple perspectives. However, few scholars have specifically addressed the influence of these actors in this conflict. A brief review of literature reveals existing studies on the role of Russia, Türkiye and Iran including( (Ebrahimi, n.d.) their mediation efforts (Başer, 2008), their perspectives on international law (Rashid, 2021) and the securing of their regional interests, often conflicting (Hayrapetyan, 2022, Iskandarov et al., 2019). Some authors have highlighted the geopolitical significance of the South Caucasus (Gachechiladze, 2002; Bekiarova, 2019) while other discuss these roles without focusing on their constructive aspects (Semercioglu, 2021). However, the constructive and destructive aspects of these regional players' roles have been insufficiently discussed. Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap by examining both the constructive and destructive influences of regional players. To address these questions, Classical Realism is applied, emphasizing national interest as a critical principle of Realist theory. This exploratory and descriptive study explores how the roles of international stakeholders in this regional conflict are viewed through the lens of Classical Realism.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employs qualitative methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the roles played by regional stakeholders. It utilizes historical analysis, policy review and case studies to gather and analyze data, facilitating a detailed exploration of the motivations and actions of Türkiye, Iran and Russia in the conflict. Given the complexity and evolving nature of the conflict, the study adopts an exploratory and descriptive approach, enabling a nuanced examination of how regional stakeholders influence and impact the conflict.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Classical Realism is a critical theory in international relations that emphasizes the significant role of states and their pursuit of national interests in a chaotic global system. States prioritize survival and power, constantly trying to protect and enhance their national interests. This theory is particularly relevant for understanding the dynamics of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, shedding light on the motivations behind the actions of countries like Türkiye, Iran and Russia.

National Interest is a vital part of Classical Realism, guiding state policies across political, economic and security domains. Understanding national interests is crucial in comprehending why countries involve themselves in conflicts such as Nagorno-Karabakh. Türkiye, Iran and Russia are actively engaged because they want to secure strategic advantages, economic gains and geopolitical influence in the area. Power and security are crucial elements in international relations. Countries aim to maximize their power to ensure security in a decentralized global environment. In context of

Nagorno-Karabakh, regional powers prioritize enhancing their influence and securing their interests. Russia asserts its military might and engaging in mediation efforts. Türkiye supports Azerbaijan, demonstrating a commitment to its ally, while Iran adopts a balanced approach to protect its interests.

Conflict and Cooperation are constant dynamics in international relations. Interactions among Türkiye, Iran and Russia show these fluctuations. They occasionally collaborate in peace talks or ceasefire arrangements to mitigate tensions. Conversely, their conflicting interests escalate tensions by backing different sides in the conflict.

### **NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT AND THE ROLE OF REGIONAL STAKEHOLDERS**

The word 'Nagorno' originates from the Russian term 'Nagorny', which means 'Mountainous'. Russian/Soviet sources often call the territory Nagorny Karabakh or 'NKAO', an acronym translating to 'Autonomous Territory of Mountainous Karabakh'. In Azerbaijan, the region is known as Daghlig, meaning 'Upper or Mountainous Karabakh'. Armenians call it 'Artsakh', a historical Armenian name for the area. Finally, the newly formed government in the territory identifies itself as the 'Nagorno Karabakh Republic' or NKR (Sienrukos, 2006).

Nagorno-Karabakh is a small, isolated region in the Lesser Caucasus Mountains, a self-declared country whose independence lacks international recognition (Klever, 2013). This region is geographically intertwined with three recognized countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Internationally, three states are only partially recognized: Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia, situated between the significant countries of Iran, Türkiye and Russia.

Few geographies hold as much strategic importance as the location and surroundings of Azerbaijan. The total area of the South Caucasus is 186000 sq<sup>2</sup> (71,850 square miles), and the population is exceeding 18 million according to the 2019 census. Its location is pivotal for both regional and trans-regional actors. To the north of the South Caucasus lies the Russian Federation, the world's largest country by area, while the Middle East lies to the South. The War in Syria and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have increased the role and importance of the South Caucasus (Bekiarova & Armencheva, 2019).



**Figure 1: MAP of the Caucasus**

### **The Role of the Regional Stakeholders (Türkiye, Iran, and Russia)**

When one looks at the map of the Caucasus region, one sees several crucial states as neighbors of the conflict-ridden region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iran, Russia, Georgia and

Türkiye are states in a geopolitically vital region in Western Asia. Regional powers are competing to expand their influence throughout the Caucasus region.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world observed three significant events: WW1, WWII and the collapse of the bipolar system. Every event changed the geopolitical structure of the world. Governments were removed and new states emerged on the world map. The collapse of the bipolar system led to waves of regional instability worldwide (Jansiz & Khojaste, 2015). This collapse created a power gap in the Caucasus region and led to competition between regional and international great powers. There were strategic, economic and political reasons for this competition along with the region's energy resources (Dadparvar & Azizi, 2021). Thus, three regional powers in the Caucasus, Russia, Türkiye and Iran, tried to maintain the status quo in their favor. The revival of Ottoman glory was Türkiye's innate wish.

On the other hand, Russia aimed to create a union under the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) but failed miserably. Russia has consistently supported Armenia, while Türkiye's support has been diplomatic rather than militarily in the conflict. However, a clear divergence in Türkiye's position can now be seen (Rashid, 2021).

No doubt, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is one of the latent issues of the post-Soviet era (Poghosyan, 2009). Resolving the conflict in their national interest is not only the concern of every regional power but also vital for regional stability. Iran and Türkiye have political and security concerns because of this issue. Although all regional powers have their stake in the conflict, we will focus on three significant powers: Russia, Iran and Türkiye.

### **Russia**

Russia has never forgotten its possessions, especially in the Caucasian region. Russia's resentment can be seen through its attack on its northern neighbor, Georgia, in 2008 and its attempts to maintain the status quo between the opposing parties, Azerbaijan and Armenia, regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Russia is using this conflict to expand its influence throughout the Caucasus region. Additionally, Russia aims to block Azerbaijan's access to Türkiye to solidify its strategic goals. The invasion of Georgia by Russia, including training flights in Armenia with Russian fighter jets, heightened concerns escalated the worrisome of Azerbaijan. So, the foreign policy of Azerbaijan has limited scope, which makes it highly unlikely that Russia's influence in the South Caucasus will increase (Walker, 2012).

Russia lies to the North of Azerbaijan and has been one of the region's major players since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It gradually expanded its territory and dominance, replacing other regional powers like Iran and the Ottoman Empire. "Divide and Rule," "encouraging the abomination among the states" and "reinforcing the rebellion activities in the states" were tools used by Russia to maintain its dominance over the region. The fall of the Soviet Union debilitated its supremacy due to political and economic turbulence within Russia itself, yet it always sought to retrieve its dominance. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh War 2020, Russia showed no interest in restarting violence for two main reasons. First, Russia did not want to jeopardize its relations with either warring states; supporting Armenia would strain ties with Azerbaijan, a consequence Russia wished to avoid. Secondly, the instability on its Western borders, the Ukrainian and Donbas conflicts and political developments in Belarus and involving Navalny all contributed to Russia's to stay out of the conflict.

Russia's reluctance to upset the status quo in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict stemmed from the fear that changing the status quo would diminish Russia's hegemonic position in the region. Thus, maintaining a cold conflict was in Russia's interests, aligning with its national interests in managing relations with both conflicting parties. Russia adjusted its strategy following Türkiye's involvement in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 preferring not to resolve the conflict outright but to manage it and prevent escalation.

Russia wants to manage this conflict according to its national interests, which are directly intertwined with the region. Instability along Russia's southern border disrupts its relations with South Caucasian states. Acting as a critical mediator, Russia aims to maintain its political and economic presence in the region, control Caspian oil transport routes and extraction fields and manage its adversaries (Türkiye, the US and the Western World). Its mediator role helps Russia to achieve these goals effectively in the South Caucasus. However, balancing Russia's domestic and foreign interests with those of the warring states are challenging. Russia has signed treaties with both Armenia and Azerbaijan at various times and places, guided by its national interests. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan benefit from the rivalries between the US and Russia each seeking maximum advantage in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Pressure from the US and the Western world forces Russia to engage in efforts to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Russia supports the rule of territorial integrity and does not consider Nagorno-Karabakh as a full negotiating partner, influenced by its experiences in Chechnya. The geopolitical isolation of Armenia drives its reliance on Russian support, which Russia provides. Backing Armenia allows Russia to counterbalance its rivalries in the region, particularly given USA and Turkish support for Azerbaijan. Despite Russia's efforts to maintain influence in the area, its political stance constantly changes, inviting criticism both domestically and from the contending parties in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

In 1992, the Tashkent treaty changed the dynamics of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This positioned Russia to potentially support Armenia and exert pressure on Azerbaijan when necessary. Russia aimed to counterbalance NATO's involvement in managing the conflict by emphasizing the role of the Tashkent treaty. In April 1999, Azerbaijan withdrew from the Tashkent treaty because Russia had acquiesced to the development in Nagorno-Karabakh without any resistance. Russia also gave no response but continued the arms shipment to Armenia, which is the rival state of Azerbaijan in the conflict. However, Azerbaijan's decision to exit the Tashkent treaty was driven by its national interests (CSTO) (Malysheva, 2001).

This conflict determines the relations between Azerbaijan and Russia, primarily due to the energy resources, which are a focal point of bilateral interest. Although Russia has never considered Azerbaijan as a partner, the bilateral relations between the two countries are improving daily compared to Georgia. In 2008, the Russian-Georgian ties broke down, and the war started between the two states. Russia recognized the independence of "South Ossetia" and "Abkhazia"; the separatist movements were carried on in both provinces of Georgia. When Russia waged war against Georgia in 2008, it was an indirect signal to those states that fall within Russia's sphere of influence that any partnership or alliance could harm Russia's geo-energy interests. The recognition as Sovereign states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by Russia was an indirect message to Azerbaijan and Armenia that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict would be solved according to Russia's interests;



otherwise, Russia would recognize it too. The energy resources of Azerbaijan are essential for Russia's interests. Therefore, during the Nagorno-Karabakh War 2020, Russia has tried hard to maintain the balance between both conflicting parties, Armenia and Azerbaijan. For example, the supply of weapons is continued to Armenia and Azerbaijan by Russia at the same time. Moreover, the frozen conflicts of the South Caucasus favor Russia's interests as Russia doubts the TAP and construction of her pipelines. Currently, no pipelines are passing through Armenia's land due to Azerbaijan and Armenia's strained relations, which also benefits Russian interests (Pena-Ramos, 2017).

Russia maintains direct linkages with both Azerbaijan and Armenia and has its reasons and causes to maintain the status quo or to resolve the conflict. However, it would be erroneous to think that the key to resolving the conflict lies in Russia. The warring states should be considered the primary decision-makers (De Wall, 2017).

Russia, after invading Georgia, sought to reaffirm its influence in the South Caucasus, so it played an active role in the resolution process of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Russia's active involvement in this conflict aims to demonstrate its ability to the International Community, that it can resolve disputes through negotiation without force. On November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2008, the Mayendorf Declaration was signed by Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia presidents. When Russia announced the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the hopes of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh were increased inspired by this precedent (De Wall, 2017).

Zeyno Buran states, "...Russia has had difficulty coming to terms with the fact that the Caucasus region is no longer under its control" (Baran, 2010). In the recent escalation of the conflict, Russia played the role of peace broker and consolidated its position in the region's geopolitics. It stationed more Russian troops in the conflicted region than ever ("Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia," 2020). After the three-party peace deal between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, the Russian peacekeepers are supposed to control two crucial corridors that are essential for both parties: the Lachin Corridor, which is not only the source of transportation between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh but also connects Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhchivan (Hayrapetyan, 2022). In a statement to the United Nations on 18 September 2005, the Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan, Elmar Mammadyarov, said, "It is the issue of communication of the Armenians living in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan with Armenia and that of the Azerbaijanis living in the Nakhchivan region of Azerbaijan with the rest of the country. We suggest the use of the so-called Lachin corridor - which should be called "Road of Peace" - by both sides in both directions provided that the multinational peacekeeping forces will ensure the security of this road at the initial stage." It can be said that frozen conflicts are in Russia's interest rather than complete instability as they can potentially disrupt the southern borders. However, it is evident that conflicts, particularly the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, cannot remain frozen (Hayrapetyan, 2022).

### **Iran**

Iran shares borders with both contestant parties in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenia and Azerbaijan. So, Iran emerges as a significant regional stakeholder in this conflict. Iran has actively sought peace initiatives for both parties. Unfortunately, no peace proposal has been accepted by Armenia and Azerbaijan, as presented by Iran so far (Bijan, n.d.). Iran shares a 700 km border with

Azerbaijan. Ethnically, 25% of Iranian people are Azeri, and the majority of them are Shiite Muslims.

Geopolitically, the South Caucasus region holds significant importance for Iran. It has cultural and historical connections too. It serves as a buffer zone between Iran and its conventional enemy, Russia. Iran's support for new geopolitical settings has no doubt. However, the presence of Turkic ethnic groups in the minority makes Iran anxious. Iran has always wanted to cooperate with the South Caucasian countries, including Armenia and Russia. Türkiye's policy to facilitate Western regional intervention contradicts Iran's policy. So, the fundamental pillar of Iran's policy is to curtail Turkey's influence, which strife with Iran's identity. Iran considers this inimical to its identity and national integrity. Azerbaijani politicians play a card of "Southern Azerbaijan" (which advocates the rule of self-determination for the Azeri people of Iran and supports the integrity of the Azeri people on both sides). Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement is a flag bearer of this.

In exchange, an unstable Azerbaijan is in favor of Iran and Armenia. They exploit Azerbaijan's weak national unity and promote their mutual relations. Both states seek mutual benefits. Being an isolated state from the East and the West, the relationship with Armenia gives Iran a windpipe. Likewise, Iran succeeds in creating a balance between Azerbaijan and Türkiye. Nowadays, Iran's policy advocates the restoration of any territory to its rightful owner. Therefore, the protracting of the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh benefits Iran, and it becomes easy for Iran to gain backing from Armenia and Russia against the sanctions (Vatankhah & Navazeni, n.d.).

The Islamic Republic of Iran paved a new way in its relationship with South Caucasian states according to its national interests and security after the fall of the Soviet Union. Three events are considerable in this regard. The location of the South Caucasian states to the North of Iran, the end of the Cold War, and the rise of the new states. These events changed the views of Iran towards its North. New opportunities were emerging, but threats were also there. Historically, due to its strategic location, the Caucasus has been an area of conflict between the Russian, Ottoman, and Persian empires. The region's substantial oil and gas reserves are the main reason for enhancing their importance and political position (Vatankhah & Navazeni, n.d.).

### **Türkiye**

Türkiye is on the world map at the Balkans, Caucasus, Middle East, and Eastern Mediterranean crossroads. Türkiye and Azerbaijan share a nearly 17-kilometer-long border with the River Aras, which separates Türkiye from the Nakchivan (an autonomous republic within Azerbaijan). Being a regional power, Türkiye wants to expand its influence regionally and internationally. The role of Türkiye in the Syrian crisis demonstrates that Türkiye seeks regional power. Türkiye's political activities in the Caucasus, Middle East and Mediterranean regions clearly show that Türkiye wants to influence regional conflicts in its national interest, including Nagorno-Karabakh. It is considered the closest ally of Azerbaijan historically and linguistically.

Following the collapse of USSR, Türkiye began to modify its relations with Russia. Türkiye once considered the USSR as an enemy state; however, after its collapse, Türkiye began to see post-Soviet Russia as a regional rival. Western allies often leverage Türkiye to contain Iran's regional influence in the Middle East or to isolate Russia within the region (Walker, 2012). Türkiye's extensive involvement in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 highlighted its emergence as a

growing regional power and positioned it as a leading country in the Muslim world. Türkiye aims to expand its role on the global stage. In 1992, Türkiye took the initiative to establish the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), uniting countries bordering the Black Sea, including Armenia and Azerbaijan (Baran, 2010).

The fundamental pillar of Türkiye's foreign policy is to decrease the reliance of Caucasian states on Russia. Pipeline projects exemplify this strategy, fostering mutual economic interests. Another essential pillar of its policy is promoting territorial cooperation, alongside efforts to settle regional conflicts that harm regional collaboration. Initiatives like the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the expansion of the Economic Cooperation Organization's (ECO) illustrate Türkiye's commitment to these goals. However, its involvement in the mediation process has been constrained by the format of the Organization for Peace and Security in Europe (Degirmencioglu, 2019).

Türkiye maintains three key interests that align with those of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Firstly, there is linguistic and ethnic solidarity between Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Secondly, Türkiye seeks to counteract the growing influence of Iran and Russia in the region. Thirdly, Türkiye benefits from oil production and transportation that traverse its territory (Vatankhah & Navazeni, n.d.).

Analyzing the overlapping interests of regional powers and their realistic approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, alongside their roles in resolving the issue in ways that serve their interests, highlights the complexity of the conflict. Nevertheless, there are also constructive aspects to consider.

### **Constructive Aspects**

Conflicts naturally arise wherever there are humans governing states, resulting in different types of conflicts in the international arena. Resolving these conflicts is crucial for fostering a peaceful global environment. However, efforts are often hindered by states prioritizing their national interests. One of the significant examples of this dynamic is the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, attracting regional and international stakeholders seeking to pursue their respective interests. Since 1992, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been internationalized with the participation of neighboring countries such as Iran, Turkey and Russia, which have actively playing their role in mediating the conflict, each with their interests at stake. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict requires active mediation by an impartial and unbiased party untainted by self-centered interests for regional hegemony or national interests. Regional states have been trying to play their role between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Several constructive aspects of the role of the regional players can be explained under the following headings:

#### ***Provision of the Facilities for Negotiations***

Iran is a regional power that shares direct borders with the conflicting parties, has shown consistent interest in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It had taken diplomatic initiatives to help the conflicting parties as a mediator. Its initial step occurred in 1992 when Iran convened meetings between the heads of state of Azerbaijan and Armenia in Tehran. Both signed an agreement for a ceasefire in May 1992. Unfortunately, on the same day as the signing, Armenian forces violated the agreement by occupying Shusha. This action undermined Azerbaijan's trust and stalled Iran's mediation efforts (Ceyhun & Abhilov, 2018).



Iran's mediation strategy aims to balance power dynamics between the conflicting parties. The existing animosity between Armenia and Türkiye allows Iran to maintain an impartial mediator role. During a visit by the President of Iran to Azerbaijan, a new ceasefire was announced between the conflicting parties on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1993. Although Karabakh and Armenia initially agreed to this ceasefire at Iran's urging, but it regrettably lasted only for a few days (Ramenzanzadeh, 1996).

The head of the fact-finding mission, Velayati's efforts proved fruitful on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1992, when representatives of the warring parties signed Iran's four-point plan. These points included a permanent cease-fire in the region, deployment of an observer force, exchange of prisoners of war and the repatriation of the deceased combatants. The seven-day cease-fire was considered as the first step towards achieving lasting peace (Ramzani, 1992).

On the other hand, from a realpolitik perspective, Iran stands out among one of the three key regional actors (the other being Russia and Türkiye) for maintaining political relations with all three recognized countries in the South Caucasus, unlike Russia, which has strained relations with Georgia and Türkiye's closed border with Armenia. Thus, Iran considers itself as the most legitimate and influential power to settle regional issues (Gevorgyan, 2022).

### ***Helping in Ceasefire Agreements***

Successive ceasefires brokered by Russia, Kazakhstan and Iran (in September 1991, September 1992, February and May 1992) failed to take effect. Both warring parties maintain that the resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict hinges on Moscow's intervention. This perspective is less common that the solution depends on the governments of the conflicting parties only. The role of Moscow has evolved through three diverse phases:

- a. 1992-1993: Azerbaijan's Pan-Turkic view and anti-Russian stance pushed Russia to support Armenia.
- b. 1993-1994: When Azerbaijan joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a Moscow-led alliance, spurred Russia to put an effort to intervene in the conflict to end the military campaign. Acting as a mediator, Moscow succeeded in brokering a ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, helping to militarize Armenia while working to improve its relations with Azerbaijan.
- c. November 2008-January 2012: Russia hosted talks between the presidents of the conflicting parties.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's perspective and relationship differ from his predecessor's, characterized by a more amicable yet cautious stance. The conflict's status quo is considered the most viable option by Moscow. Putin's interest in the conflict reflects a resolution aligned with national interests and reputation (Shiriyev, 2018).

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict cannot remain frozen indefinitely. Any instability in the South Caucasus region necessitates Russian involvement. The Karabakh conflict ensures military presence of Russia in the region, as demonstrated the war in 2020 war. However, it also plays the role of guarantor between Armenia and Azerbaijan, maintaining the balance of power in the region.

Russia's diplomatic fallout from supporting Armenia in the war of 2020 strained its relations with Iran, which is considered Armenia's firm ally (Shiriyev, 2018).

## **Destructive Aspects**

The collapse of USSR in the second half of the 20th century ushered in new opportunities and challenges. This event pushed many states to reformulate their foreign policies regarding NIS (Newly Independent States) countries, neighbouring of the regional powers such as Iran, Türkiye and Russia. Similarly, the end of the 'cold war' and the rise of NIS states modified Iran's foreign policy approach towards its North (Chitadze, 2012).

### ***Pursuance of National Interests by Regional Stakeholders***

Before the fall of the USSR, Iran's stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was primarily ideological, leaning towards solidarity with Muslims of Azerbaijan. However, after the independence of the Newly Independent States, Iran's stance has been dictated by its geopolitical interests. With approximately one-third of its population being Azerbaijanis, Iran's goal is to prevent destabilization among the Azerbaijani population within its borders (Shaffer, 2004). Iran's role as a mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been debated. While Iran was proceeding with the official appeal for ceasefire agreements between Azerbaijan and Armenia, there are assertions that Iran's initiatives was to fill the power gap and to gain political influence in its North (Ceyhun & Abhilov, 2018). This fact cannot be denied that Iran has been promoting a peaceful settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh. The fundamental cause of this is to preclude Turkish military Intervention in the region (Maggs, 1993).

The geopolitical and national interests of the regional and global powers, as classical Realism asserts, also affect the positive or negative outcomes of the mediation efforts of the mediators. In this respect, one of the reasons for the failure of Iran's mediation between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1992 was the strong reaction from regional powers, above all from Russia. Independent mediation efforts of Iran in the Russian 'near abroad' attracted Russia's immediate attention. Nevertheless, the Iranian delegation tried to negotiate its mediation effort with the leaders of Russia from the start to boost Russia to join the procedure. However, the foreign minister of the Russian Federation conveyed its refusal to participate via diplomatic formalities (Ceyhun & Abhilov, 2018).

Russian policies are designed to achieve short-term and controlled stability that suits its immediate interests rather than long-term goals. The Russian aim for coercive control in its near abroad pushes it to support secessionism in its periphery. Azerbaijan, on other hand, tried to use its Caspian energy resources as a tool for bargaining in negotiation efforts. Contrary to Russian perception, using this conflict as a leverage against Azerbaijan did not stop Azerbaijan from joining various pipeline projects (Ceyhun & Abhilov, 2018).

### ***The Role of Regional Stakeholders: Internal Factors***

Since the onset of the conflict, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue has posed a challenge to Iran's policies. The Azerbaijani population in Iran has urged Iran to take sides in the conflict (Murinson, 2014). They expressed their solidarity with Azerbaijan and criticized Iran's support to Armenia. Two hundred students demonstrated at Tabriz University on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1992. The students at Tehran University held a demonstration in front of the Armenian embassy resulting in some embassy windows being broken by stones. Mahmud Vaezi, the then Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran, pointed

to internal considerations as one of Iran's significant factors in its policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Iran's official ideology as a protector and champion of the Shia community is viewed as inconsistent throughout most of the time as Iran has cooperated with Armenia. Iran believed that Azerbaijan remained involved in the conflict; it made Azerbaijan less effective and attractive to Iran's Azerbaijani population. Similarly, Baku will be unable to allocate resources to give rise to South Azerbaijan. Iran only adopted an anti-Armenian stance when the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh directly threatened the state interests of Iran (Shaffer, 2004).

### ***Lack of Trust and Past Grievances***

Past grievances also play a destructive role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Khojaly massacre serves as a poignant example, as Armenian Christians always blamed the Ottoman Turks for the "massacre" in Khojaly. Khojaly is an Azerbaijani town in Karabakh. Armenia and Karabakh called for a fact-finding mission for this 'massacre.' Mediatory efforts in the Soviet era and afterward in the Russian government had already failed because neither warring party trusted them. Türkiye tried to mediate, but Armenia blocked the efforts. It is considered that the Turks are highly sympathetic to Azerbaijan (Ramzani, 1992).

Turkey and Iran share concerns about the prolongation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but both have different opinions about how to solve the conflict. Türkiye prefers the OSCE platform to solve the conflict, but Iran does not support this idea. Iran always supports the mediating efforts between the two Caucasian republics. However, Iran's attempts at mediation create concerns for Türkiye as it can lead to a possible increase in Iranian influence in the region. Iran worries about Türkiye's support for the US in solving the conflict. Iran sees it as a growing regional influence (Aydin, 2002).

Many states perceive Iran and its nuclear program as a threat. Azerbaijan and Israel are one of them. Being a neighbor country of Iran, Azerbaijan tries to act in coping with this threat as well as to preserve its relations with Iran to some extent. 'Foreign Policy' published a report in March 2012 which stated that Azerbaijan had granted permission to Israel to use its bases for an attack on Iran. Although, the minister of Foreign Affairs in Azerbaijan denied it fervently (Murinson, 2014). Russia still uses this conflict as an essential lever on Azerbaijan. Despite publicly supporting the principle of territorial integrity in all statements, Russia's perceived biased stance over Nagorno-Karabakh has raised the mistrust feelings in Azerbaijan against Moscow. It pushes Azerbaijan to seek new and alternative allies to balance Russia's partiality (Abushov, 2009).

### **Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Factors**

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the only interstate conflict in the CIS. So, Russia's policy towards the conflicting parties is defined by Russia's attitude towards the conflict. This disputed area has led to old geopolitical disputes involving Türkiye, Iran, and the international community. This conflict pushes Russian efforts to achieve hegemonic control over the South Caucasian states. But now, it has become highly impossible. This conflict works as a lever in Russian foreign policy and enables it to influence the issues in the South Caucasus. The pipeline routes, Caspian energy resources and Türkiye's growing political and military interference in the South Caucasus region are the factors that make this conflict important for Russia. This conflict also helps Russia to ensure its presence militarily in the region. The massacre of Azerbaijanis in Khojaly was the cause of the resignation of

the pro-Russia government of Mutallibove. An anti-Russian and pro-Turkish government of President Elicibey was installed. This incident happened when Russia elaborated a strategy for the South Caucasus region. At that time, Russian assistance to Armenia was based on strategic interests with identity. The religious fraternity pushed Russia towards Armenian support (Abushov, 2009).

In Iran, one-third of the population comprises of Azerbaijanis, with Kurds, Turkmen, Arabs and Baluchis are also residing in Iran's frontier areas with ethnic ties with the adjoining states like Turkmenistan, Türkiye, Pakistan and Azerbaijan. So, any incident that happens in these bordering states influences Iran's internal dynamics. Similarly, the ethnic question extends beyond domestic matter evident with approximately 7 million Azerbaijanis residing in Azerbaijan and a significant number in Iran, concentrated in the provinces of Ardabil, East Azerbaijan and West Azerbaijan. This region is often considered as 'South Azerbaijan' (Shaffer, 2004).

Iran's policy regarding the conflict between Nagorno and Karabakh has influenced the relations between Iran and Russia, influenced by Baku's position on Iranian oil exploration in the Caspian Sea. It also has an ardent desire to project itself as a good mediator. When the USSR collapsed, Iran's stable Northern border became a conflict-ridden zone, impacting its international standing amidst the emergence of new states from the NIS (Shaffer, 2004).

Iran was once considered the only regional honest peace broker in the region, given almost 200000 Armenian Christians lived in Iran along with a substantial number of ethnic Azerbaijanis. In this way, Iranian sympathy with Azerbaijan is tempered by these demographic considerations. The community of Armenian Christians was represented in the 'Majlis' too. The threat of many new refugees was still there. Iran has already become the host of nearly four million Afghan and Iraqi refugees (Ramzani, 1992).

After the fall of the USSR, eight out of the fifteen NIS states (established on the land of the former USSR) share a common political or cultural history with Iran. Azerbaijan shares a border with Iran. So, any vital change in these states directly affects Iran's interests (Ramenzanzadeh, 1996). The severity and vigorous nature of the conflict, stimulation of the warring parties and impartiality of Iran constructed a conducive environment for the mediation of Iran in 1992 (Ceyhun & Abhilov, 2018).

At the end of the Cold War, the emergence of fifteen independent states reshaped the global dynamics. Eight of these states emerged to Turkey's northeast. So, Türkiye found itself at the center of the Eurasian region. Its solid historical, linguistic, ethnic and cultural bonds with these newly independent states of Eurasia underscores its pivotal role in the region. However, Türkiye's enlarged role presented opportunities and risks in the region. It has always been enjoying its strategic importance in the post-WWII era. Its policy of 'do not interfere in the regional problems,' was punctured after the emergence of the NIS. Similarly, the policy towards the Caucasus also changed significantly. The conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh has a special place in Türkiye's foreign policy. This conflict is considered an enormous burden for Turkish policy toward the Caucasus. Turkish people pressured their government to side with Azerbaijan (Aydin, 2002).

Türkiye's clear stance over the conflict makes it unacceptable for Armenia as a mediator. Türkiye is not in a position to play a constructive role or constructively influence the conflict as it is not playing on a neutral pitch. Although It is far away from any direct involvement in the conflict, the

historical burden of the “killing of Armenians by Ottoman Turkey in 1915” is kept alive by Armenia. This psychological barrier restricts Türkiye from playing the role of the mediator between the warring states.

Türkiye cannot be considered an honest peace broker between the conflicting states because Armenia perceives Türkiye as a close ally of Azerbaijan. Türkiye attempted to mediate between the two parties, but Armenia opposed Turkish involvement in the conflict resolution. Each instance of Turkish-Armenia rapprochement has historically provoked Azerbaijan. In 2009, Türkiye signed the Zurich Protocols with Armenia; However, it was made clear by the government of Türkiye that the protocols would not be ratified until any positive developments were seen toward the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. By honest dealing and as a precondition to moving forward in the resolution process, Türkiye was waiting for the ‘one region return’ policy as a good faith gesture. However, Türkiye could not play the role of mediator because it favored the pro-Azerbaijani stance due to its strategic and linguistic links with Baku (Aydin2012). A complex web of diplomatic relations was created during the Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020 when Russia decided not to intervene in the military conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Russia also agreed not to deploy its forces to the disputed region.

## **CONCLUSION**

Due to the national interests of regional stakeholders, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has become increasingly complicated, impeding its resolution. In the current Nagorno-Karabakh war 2020, new alliances were forged, altering previous dynamics. The former dignified supporters are now seen as the bodies opposed by the international community. Its latest example is that Russia did not support Armenia in the 2020 war. Although it was considered the core partner of Armenia, it not only gave military aid but has also been a helping hand through thick and thin after its independence. The efforts of neighboring countries to influence the conflict have continued in every era. This conflict is called “frozen” because the national interests of the regional players kept the conflict frozen. However, no conflict can keep the situation frozen for an extended period. So, this conflict escalated in 2020 once again. This issue cannot be resolved even in 2020. Regardless of repeated appeals by the international community, both states did not stop fighting, and this war continued for 44 days.

The role of Iran, Türkiye, and Russia hold substantial significance in the region. These countries are not only neighbors but also in conflict with each other. All these countries want to influence this conflict so that they can emerge as regional powers. Their roles influence not only the conflict but also each other. Israel is unacceptable to Iran, so Iran wants to strengthen its ties with Armenia to sideline Israel. The presence of Israel in Azerbaijan creates anger in Iran.

Consequently, relations between Iran and Azerbaijan have reached the lowest level. While initially regional in nature, this rift has the power to escalate to international level. The unity of language and religion also played a significant role, but this factor could not work at all in developing the relationship between Iran and Azerbaijan. A vacuum was created in the region after the fall of the USSR. Türkiye has stepped forward to fill this vacuum, but its national interests have also affected its role. So, Türkiye cannot be a neutral mediator in the conflict. Other stakeholders at the regional level have also been supporting either Azerbaijan or Armenia according to their interests.



The regional stakeholders influence the conflict in both constructive and destructive manner, regarding their political, strategic and national interests. Hence, the mediators can still not present a solution to the conflict. Despite efforts by the conflicting parties, a compromise has been proven elusive in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The common perception of the conflict categorizes it as frozen conflict. This is a solid reason for not giving the 'high priority' to this conflict by the international stakeholders. The conflict has not garnered significant attention from the global media.

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