

# Great power rivalries inflame Nagorno-Karabakh dispute

**Niall Green****23 December 2009**

The scramble for control of the oil and natural gas riches of Central Asia threatens to reanimate the conflict between the former Soviet republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia over the province of Nagorno-Karabakh. This dispute has already led to war between the South Caucasus neighbors.

Since establishing independence upon the liquidation of the USSR in 1991, Azerbaijan and Armenia have been locked in a dispute over the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian enclave surrounded and claimed by Azerbaijan. Yerevan, Armenia's capital, has been in effective control of the territory since the 1990s, stationing its troops there and backing the local ethnic Armenian government.

The dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh has been made even more explosive thanks to the machinations of the major powers, primarily the United States and Russia, which seek control over the energy pipelines that run close to the territory. The involvement of regional powers, namely Turkey, in this scramble for resources is adding to the mix.

Earlier this year Turkey sought to improve relations with Armenia, primarily in order to pressure the Armenian government to relinquish its claim to Nagorno-Karabakh. In addition to hoping that better ties between the two countries will smooth Turkey's ascension to the European Union, the Turkish elite is aiming to secure a resolution to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh because this is key to its plans to build a major new pipeline that will transport Central Asian natural gas from Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, through Georgia, to Turkey's energy hub at Erzurum. From there, the gas will be piped to Western Europe in the new Nabucco pipeline. This plan, which is supported by the United States, has the potential to greatly reduce Russia's share of natural gas exports to the EU.

The rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia follows a century of hostility that included a genocidal campaign against the Armenian people at the end of World War One by Turkey's predecessor, the Ottoman Empire. Since the 1920s, Ankara has opposed the incorporation of Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia, fearing the prospect of a Greater

Armenia with territorial claims within its own territory. Additionally, with the collapse of the USSR, Ankara has viewed Azerbaijan as a regional ally whose cooperation is crucial to its plans to become the alternative to Russia in the export of Central Asian energy resources to Western Europe.

Both the planned Nabucco pipeline and a second, already-existing oil pipeline—the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline—pass near to Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian claims to Nagorno-Karabakh therefore threaten to disrupt the US-backed Nabucco and BTC pipeline routes. Should Armenia win control of the disputed territory, the position of Turkey and Azerbaijan, which are closely tied to the US, would be weakened and the hand of Moscow, which enjoys closer relations with Armenia, strengthened.

As a condition for improved relations with Turkey, Ankara has pressured Yerevan to drop its claim to Nagorno-Karabakh. Following the reopening of the two countries' border and the establishment of diplomatic ties in October, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned that the Armenian claim over Nagorno-Karabakh must end.

"We want all conflicts to be resolved and we want all borders to be opened at the same time," Erdogan said. "As long as Armenia does not withdraw from occupied territories in Azerbaijan, Turkey cannot take up a positive position."

However, Ankara's intervention has only served to inflame the rival claims to the territory, with the Armenian government rejecting Turkish demands regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. "If Turkey wants the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to be settled, it should not interfere in this process," Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandyan told journalists December 19 during a trip to Turkey.

"The world community, including Armenia, say that there is no link between the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Turkey-Armenia rapprochement," Nalbandyan continued.

While Turkish efforts to force Armenia to drop its claim to Nagorno-Karabakh are in line with the aims of Azerbaijan, the Azeri elite remain concerned that any rapprochement between Ankara and Yerevan could weaken their position in the region. President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan reminded

Ankara during a televised cabinet meeting that his country sold natural gas to Turkey at one-third of the world market price. In an effort to compel the Turkish government to ratchet up the pressure on Armenia, Aliyev warned that any compromise over the future of Nagorno-Karabakh could result in an increase in energy prices, rendering the Nabucco pipeline uneconomical.

Aliyev also stated that Azerbaijan could export much of its natural gas to Europe through Russia's proposed new South Stream pipeline. In October he signed a deal to export 500 million cubic meters of natural gas to Russia's Gazprom energy company.

The region has been an area of ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan since the final years of the Soviet Union. At that time, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's policies promoting capitalist restoration encouraged local bureaucrats and black-market businessmen to carve out ethnic areas under their control through which they could directly exploit the working class.

In 1988 a series of conflicts broke out between ethnic Azeris and Armenians in the two republics. By the following year Moscow granted the local Stalinist regime in Azerbaijan authority to directly clamp down on Armenian separatists inside Nagorno-Karabakh.

This prompted the Soviet Armenian republic and the local government in Nagorno-Karabakh to proclaim the province's independence from Azerbaijan and its succession to Armenia. In the last days of the Soviet Union in December 1991, war broke out between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, backed by Armenia. During the conflict, the armed forces of Azerbaijan were reportedly aided by several hundred former Afghan mujahadeen fighters, as well as Islamist Chechen separatist fighters.

The war, which claimed the lives of several thousand people and made tens of thousands more refugees, lasted until a formal cease-fire in 1994. However, low-level fighting has continued since then, with several fatal clashes between Azeri and ethnic Armenian soldiers and militants, as well as frequent violence and intimidation against civilians from both groups.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has attempted to negotiate a peace settlement between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the territory. The OSCE Minsk Group, led by the United States, France and Russia, has been ineffectually proposing a referendum to decide the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh since the early 1990s.

Russia and the United States have, however, been separately backing their proxies in this conflict. Washington and the EU have given large-scale development aid to Azerbaijan, which is also a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Partnership For Peace

initiative, recognized as a precursor to membership of the US-led military alliance. Azerbaijan has also contributed forces to the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

Moscow has more closely backed Armenia, with which it has extensive military ties. Considered the only ex-Soviet state in the South Caucasus to be allied to Russia, Armenia is a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. It hosts a Russian army base and air-defense installations.

Any attempts by Turkey, with the blessing of the US, to win influence in Armenia will be opposed by Moscow. Efforts by the Kremlin to court Azerbaijan will be met with hostility by Washington.

In a November 29 editorial, the British Telegraph newspaper commented on the disputed territory: "The future of Nagorno-Karabakh carries serious implications for Turkey's role in the Caucasus, and, by extension, its bid for EU membership, for the supply of oil and gas to the West, and for Armenia's crippled economy."

Comparing the situation in the enclave to the Schleswick Holstein dispute between Prussia and Austria in the 19th Century, as an example of how a seemingly obscure dispute could erupt into a major war, the piece continued: "Finding a solution, based on Armenia's ceding of territory in exchange for an eventual referendum on the enclave's status, is daunting. But the stakes, in an area of great strategic importance, are high."



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