

Armenia-Azerbaijan border clashes threaten broader war in Caucasus

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Armed clashes involving tanks and artillery on the border between Tavush in north-eastern Armenia and the Tovuz district in Azerbaijan since last Sunday threaten to provoke all-out war. At least 12 soldiers, including a major general and a colonel, and one civilian from Azerbaijan are dead, as are four soldiers from Armenia. Many others are wounded.

After a dangerous China-India border clash last month, this is further confirmation that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified geo-political conflicts all over the world. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan face a growing coronavirus outbreak and a serious economic and social crisis causing mounting anger among working people. While Azerbaijan, with a population of 10 million, has registered more than 26,000 cases and 334 deaths, Armenia has reported more than 33,000 cases and 607 deaths despite having a population of less than three million.

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan accused each other of having violated the ceasefire between their countries. The BBC reported that the border clashes came “just days after Azerbaijan’s President [Ilham] Aliyev criticised international mediators conducting peace negotiations with Armenia, describing the process as ‘meaningless.’”

Significantly, these clashes have taken place not in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, but along an internationally-recognized border between the two countries. Azerbaijani Deputy Defense Minister Kerim Veliyev claimed on Tuesday that nearly 100 Armenian soldiers have been killed, but Armenian officials denied this.

While Armenian official Artsrun Hovhannisyan said on Friday “it can be considered that the tension has been greatly eased,” this second armed clash in five years between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and official threats show an all-out war between the two South Caucasian states is a real danger. Such a war that could easily erupt into a conflict between Russia, a close backer of Armenia, and Turkey, a traditional ally of Azerbaijan and a member of NATO.

The seriousness of the conflict was underlined on Thursday with a statement from Azerbaijan’s Defense Ministry spokesman Vagif Dargyakhly, who said: “The Armenian side must not forget that the state-of-the-art missile systems our army has are capable of launching a precision strike on the

Metsamor nuclear power plant, and that would be a huge tragedy for Armenia.”

This Soviet-built nuclear plant is about 35 kilometers from Yerevan, the Armenian capital, and close to the eastern border with Turkey as well. A missile attack on this plant would inevitably lead to a horrific nuclear disaster affecting the entire region.

The Armenian Foreign Ministry called this threat an “explicit demonstration of state terrorism and genocidal intent,” adding: “We strongly condemn the nuclear threats voiced by Azerbaijan, which demonstrate absolute absence of responsibility and sound judgment from this particular member of the international community.”

Moreover, Baku and Yerevan both accused each other of targeting civilians. While Armenia’s Defense Ministry spokeswoman Sushan Stepanyan said on Thursday Azerbaijani forces were “shelling Armenian villages with mortars and howitzers,” Azerbaijani officials claimed that “Armenians shelled Azerbaijani villages with large-caliber weapons.”

President Aliyev sacked his Foreign Minister Elmar Mamedyarov on Thursday after accusing him of engaging “in meaningless work, meaningless negotiations.” This came after a pro-war demonstration in Azerbaijan’s capital Baku on Tuesday night, involving about 30,000 people shouting slogans like “Karabakh is Azerbaijan!” and “Mobilisation,” according to local reports. At 4:00 a.m. local time, several protesters broke into the parliament.

According to AP, Aliyev “lashed out at nationalist demonstrators” and “accused the leaders of the opposition Popular Front of Azerbaijan of inciting riots to destabilize Azerbaijan during the renewed fighting with Armenia.”

Since Sunday, many official statements have come from all over the world. Reuters news agency wrote: “International concern is high because of the threat to stability in a region that hosts pipelines taking oil and gas from the Caspian Sea to global markets.”

While UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called Tuesday for an immediate cessation of hostilities on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, the Co-Chairs of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) Minsk Group urged all “sides to refrain from inflammatory

rhetoric and attempts to change the situation on the ground,” in a statement on Wednesday.

The OSCE Minsk Group, led by the United States, France and Russia, was created in 1992, ostensibly to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Nagorno-Karabakh, a majority-Armenian mountainous region in Azerbaijan, declared independence in 1991. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh had begun in 1988, when Azerbaijan and Armenia were still part of the Soviet Union. It escalated into a full-scale war in the early 1990s, after the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991. The war between Azeri troops and Armenian separatists had claimed some 30,000 lives by the time of the 1994 ceasefire.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned in 2016, when the last serious armed clashes erupted between the two countries, killing nearly 200 soldiers on both sides: “The war danger posed by the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis points to the disastrous geopolitical consequences of the dissolution of the USSR, and the reactionary character of the nationalist politics that predominate in all the former Soviet republics, including Russia. This provided the basis for the emergence of explosive ethnic conflicts and imperialist intrigue across the region.”

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared his government is “deeply concerned about deaths and violence on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan,” and called on “parties to immediately de-escalate, resume meaningful dialogue and ceasefire to start negotiations with the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs.”

France for its part condemned the “armed confrontation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border,” calling for “dialogue.”

“We are deeply concerned about the shootings on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. We call on both sides to exercise restraint and respect their obligations under the cease-fire,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday, adding: “Russia, as we have already stated at various levels, is ready to provide its mediation efforts for a settlement, as a co-chair of the Minsk group.”

Russia has two military bases in Armenia, with about 5,000 soldiers and hundreds of tanks, armored vehicles, and artillery systems as well as reportedly a dozen MiG-29 fighter jets, helicopter gunships and other weapons.

According to Russia’s TASS news agency, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a “surprise combat readiness check” on Friday. It involved about 150,000 troops, over 26,000 weapon systems, 414 aircraft and 106 warships “for Russia’s Southern and Western Military Districts, the Airborne Force and marine infantry of the Northern and Pacific Fleets.”

Defense Minister Army General Sergei Shoigu said: “The check stipulates holding 56 tactical exercises with the troops. A total of 35 training grounds and camps and 17 naval ranges in the Black and Caspian Seas will be involved. ... The results of training measures held should be taken into account in assessing the level of the preparedness of military large units

and formations for taking part in the Kavkaz-2020 [Caucasus-2020] strategic exercise [scheduled for September].”

However, the most belligerent statements came from Ankara, a major ally of Baku for decades. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan condemned the “attack by Armenia against friend and brother Azerbaijan,” during a press conference on Tuesday. He said: “Moreover, this last attack was not on the Upper Karabakh line, but directly on the borders between the two states and with heavy weapons.”

Erdoğan was effectively implying the Kremlin is behind what he called “Armenia’s reckless and systematic attacks,” which he said aim “block the solution in the Upper Karabakh and to reveal new conflict areas.”

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar also declared that this move “goes over Armenia’s head,” after a meeting with Azerbaijani Deputy Defense Minister and Air Force Commander Ramiz Tahirov on July 16.

On Friday, İsmail Demir, head of the Presidency of Defense Industries, an affiliate of the Turkish Presidency, declared on Twitter: “We need to show the world that the two brother countries are in full unity. One nation, two states,” adding that “Our armed unmanned aerial vehicles, ammunition and missiles with our experience, technology and capabilities are at Azerbaijan’s service.”

Emphasizing their full support for the Erdoğan government in the conflict, the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) and Good Party backed a joint statement with the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its ally Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in the name of the Turkish Parliament on Wednesday, declaring: “Turkey, which has always been a defender of peace and stability with the understanding of ‘two states, one nation,’ will continue to stand with Azerbaijan in its efforts to restore its territorial integrity.”

Amid dangerous proxy wars between Turkey and Russia in Syria and Libya, the Turkish ruling elite’s full support for Azerbaijan and Moscow’s massive military exercise constitute a warning that escalation between Azerbaijan and Armenia could rapidly spiral out of control and provoke a broader conflict including Russia, Turkey and NATO.



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