Why Nagorno-Karabakh and Why Now?

Several months ago, I wrote that things had been tense on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone since the collapse of the USSR, but only now are we hearing of a resumption of active hostilities, the deployment of heavy weaponry and heated engagements.

Observers on the ground have no doubt that the heaviest fighting in years is going on, and this is only the early stages of what may develop into a larger geopolitical conflict, involving proxy sources.

Each side is posting videos of their forces destroying the heavy armour of the other. Both Azerbaijan and Armenia may be playing to a domestic audience by mobilising, but Turkey is involved too. As ever, anything involving military aggression in support of an ally also plays well for a Turkish domestic audience.

Outside meddling in the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict is nothing new, and one should keep in mind that much is below the surface. Different actors have different reasons for wanting this conflict to either remain frozen or escalate, and what happens will be governed by how much these actors respect each other, or don’t.

Moscow and Washington may be happy for the conflict to stay frozen, as they can then pursue their own agenda, goes the traditional theory. Those who don’t like either Moscow or Washington, either now or historically, see a potential geopolitical victory over both sides in resolving the conflict by force when the big boys have failed to do so.

All the while neither country fully develops, and the status quo is maintained, at least in the case of Azerbaijan. After thirty years, negotiations have not worked and the populace of Azerbaijan is tired, seeing others spout off about “territorial integrity” while not being interested in restoring its own.

Mutual Cards

House Select Committee on Intelligence Chair Adam Schiff (D-CA) was the first US Congressman to condemn Azerbaijan’s alleged pre-emptive attack back in July, saying, “I am very concerned by the recent provocative and destabilising actions taken by Azerbaijan in recent days along the Armenian border, including the shelling of Armenian soldiers.”

His diatribe continued with “how these actions must also be viewed in the context of Azerbaijan’s consistently bellicose rhetoric towards Armenia and Artsakh, and its refusal to allow international monitoring of their borders. I urge the State Department to make clear to all parties the need for restraint and diplomacy, and reduced tensions.”

Making such statements about one side of a conflict is hardly going to reduce tensions. But Schiff is talking to Armenian donors to his campaign chest, and Armenian voters in his district. The Armenian lobby has always been better organised than the Azeri one, another factor which might propel Azerbaijan to war against what it sees as the rest of the world.

But that very imbalance of international support can be used to win friends. Back in the 90s MEGA Oil, a US-CIA proxy company, was importing fighters from Afghanistan to fight on the side of Azerbaijan to keep some balance on the battlefield.

The Azeris could not fight, as they lacked training and equipment, and seemed to have no taste for it. But an Armenian victory would have benefitted Russia, its greatest ally, more than the US, and, however, much the US
listens to Armenians, it wouldn’t want that perceived threat to its own interests.

Turkey obviously supports Azerbaijan, as it is a fellow Turkish nation. Once again, the Turkic Council, this little-known international forum few are interested in, is showing that it is more ruthless than any other in achieving its aims, which are ultimately about the religious and ethnic cleansing of the highest order.

Turkey now needs to relocate Syrian operatives and other US/Saudi trained and paid "freedom fighters," and is glad the opportunity this long-frozen conflict presents. With all sides playing what appears to be a very big game of chicken, a sudden influx of mercenaries with nothing else to do is certain to change the situation in Turkey’s favour—or at least that was the plan.

**All Of A Sudden**

The conflict has been more or less frozen since 1994 when Armenia occupied not only Karabakh itself, which is ethnically Armenian, but several districts surrounding it, which are not. Armenia argues that this has actually prevented further conflict, but the US used the same argument to destroy the Native American population, and Argentina’s “disappeared” died of the same logic.

Things are spinning in a different direction now with offensive fighting, and pro-war rallies in Baku. Several weeks prior to the start of fighting in July I personally saw lots of Green Evergreen containers, freight forwarding company, crossing the Georgian border. Border guards and customs officials both told me that it was not possible to check them, but agreed that weapons were within.

I wouldn’t put anything past Ankara either, despite the danger of Turkish engagement in the Caucasus inviting an immediate and strong response from Moscow. The two governments have already locked horns in Syria and Libya, but this has not dissuaded Turkey from pursuing an ever more openly aggressive international agenda.

**Sheep in Wolves’ Clothing**

The bits and pieces I have read about who has started it this time just don’t add up. What is written says nothing, which is why I am all the more suspect, especially about pro-war protests.

Take for example, “... thousands of protestors rallied earlier in the centre of Baku, calling on the government to mobilize troops and retake Nagorno-Karabakh. News outlets estimated that 30 to 50 thousand protestors gathered in front of the parliament building.” Why now, and why is this one of the international news items chosen to be reported?

If the Azeri are tired of this frozen conflict, tens of thousands of them are not going to come into the streets demanding further engagement with it unless they think they can end it on terms they find acceptable. So, who has guaranteed what, and why are they bothering?

However, the move towards conflict is still more likely to have come from the Azeri side. Armenia has done pretty well out of international sanctions and blockades imposed since 1994. These have enabled it to remain friendly with Russia, its only real supporter, and find a way for good terms with the West, without compromising its national independence. No other regional state can do this, but if the conflict ended, Armenia would have to find a wider group of friends and sink back into the pack like the rest.

It is money paid by US and Turkish defence contractors, and therefore by the US government indirectly, which is painting the conflict in a new light. Azerbaijani oil prices are low, Dutch Disease is running rampant, there is little diversity in the economy and corruption is well-ingrained and supported by networks of patronage (especially the ruling family).

Armenia has similar problems. The Pashinyan government has been highly criticised by a wealthy and influential political and business figure, Gagik Tsarukyan, and some legal and political backlash has been felt in this case. The trial of former president Kocharyan is also sputtering along in fits and starts, and a major reform package directed at the country’s Constitutional Court has also brought up significant controversy.

But none of that dents Armenia’s dependence on Russia, and the benefits it is gaining from that which the US never wanted it to. It seems the US wants Armenia back in the pack, and this is the way of getting it there. Certainly, it will act as this is a regional affair to be sorted out by the local players, diplomatically or by brute force.

**Old Hands Make Light Work**
Who might be linking these indirect US government funds to the Azeri side? No one is ever likely to put their head above the parapet. But as often happens in this region, the name Matthew Bryza is one which keeps coming into the frame.

Bryza was once the US Ambassador to Turkey, and subsequently Azerbaijan. He is married to Zeyno Baran, a Turkish-born foreign policy analyst at the Hudson Institute. She has worked with Neo-Con think tanks in the past, which is why Bryza kept insisting in interviews that he no longer worked for the (Bush) White House but for the State Department, even when he was not being asked a question about this.

In 2005 Baran told a US Senate hearing that she opposed the Congressional resolution on the Armenian Genocide, a position generally seen as partisan as that of Richard Verrall’s book on the Nazi atrocities, “Did Six Million Really Die?” At the same time, Bryza was busy telling reporters that Turkey was his “second home,” and was removed as Ambassador when he too made statements opposing the Armenian Genocide.

Bryza is no longer a diplomat. He claims to earn his living as a consultant on “business and democratic development,” which is a not very subtle way of saying that he is still finding new markets and areas of influence for his friends, but is no longer restricted by diplomatic protocols.

But he is still a regular visitor to Turkey and is a board member of Turcas Petrol, which is linked to the Party of War in the US and the corporate interests behind it. His explanation is that Turcas is “a private company that is traded on the Istanbul stock exchange” but “has no affiliation of any sort with the Turkish Government (or the Azerbaijani Government). In fact, the Turkish Government’s energy policies often work against the commercial interests of Turcas.”

This is despite the fact that Turcas is an affiliate of SOCAR, the Azerbaijan state oil company. Through this, the Azerbaijani and Turkish governments either own, fund or sponsor most business in the Caucasus, thereby buying off many politicians along the way.

In Georgia in particular, you see a connection with SOCAR (share ownership, personnel, supply) whenever you look at the lists of business owners, or investigate the many businesses whose known real owners do not appear on the published lists. This helps explain why Georgia, having partly reformed itself since the Saakashvili years, is no longer the regional arms smuggling hub but has simply exchanged illegal arms for semi-legal oil.

Turkish and Iranian business interests have been subject to investigation in Georgia on charges of oil smuggling. New, modern-day versions of MEGA Oil, US-funded companies, have inevitably been involved. These include Frontera Resources, a company which once ostensibly left Georgian, but re-entered it when a new US Ambassador was appointed.

Following this, the Government of Georgia suddenly decided not to terminate its contract with Frontera Resources Georgia Corporation, under hard US pressure, and allowed the company to continue operating in part of the original contract area, where oil has been produced since Soviet times. The justification used for this at the time was that this was necessary, “especially in times of low oil prices and heating up conflicts.”

The phrase “heating up” cannot refer to new conflicts but to dormant ones which are starting again. Making such a comment casually, when talking about a seemingly unrelated issue, is an old trick for establishing in the minds of listeners that everyone knows a conflict is going to heat up again. Which conflict is being referred to, and to whom is it inevitable that the fighting will resume?

You Know Who Still Knows Too Much

Do we have anything else which will support this assertion? In the words of an old radio show, “It’s That Man Again.” If the US is up to something by proxy, it always chooses the same, compromised mouthpiece.

The aforementioned Mikheil Saakashvili, the President of Georgia when Bryza was the US envoy to the region, can’t live in Georgia anymore because he is wanted there on a multitude of criminal charges. Having been ratlined out to Ukraine and given a job in its government, he was also expelled from there facing more criminal charges. He has since lived in Poland and Hungary, also US allies like the other two countries, where he likewise faces multiple criminal charges.

Saakashvili has more criminal indictments against his name than Al Capone and Pol Pot put together. Yet his US protectors (for now) present him as a politician and buy him column space in newspapers that otherwise don’t care
about him, or are sick of seeing his name.

Misha has suddenly reappeared from wherever he is hiding now with the following statement: Nagorno Karabakh is Sovereign Territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan and nothing will change it. What does he have to gain by saying this, especially now, given how many Armenians live in Georgia, and he ruined his own relations with Azerbaijan by making advances to Aliyev’s wife?

All Saakashvili has to live for is the continued protection of his handlers. They want to build a climate of opinion in which everyone expects Azerbaijan to go to war with Armenia over the injustice of the Armenian occupation. The Azeri government and people may not be interested, but they can easily be blackmailed or at least manipulated by international opinion pointing fingers at them for not doing what they expect, as if they are not worthy of support, independence, or office.

However strong the Armenian lobby is, the US interest is paramount. An ongoing war, and funding committed to it, always ensures policy continuations in election years, regardless of who wins those elections.

The US wants this war, and its Armenian lobby will donate more to politicians who blame Azerbaijan for it, in the hope of getting more US themselves in return if Azerbaijan is successful. The only question is how much Turkey will be blamed for pulling the trigger when it is all over.

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