

Russia's Historic Role in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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Abstract: *This case study examines the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Besides, it studies a historic evidence of the conflict and introduces the historic background of key regional players' geostrategic interests in the South Caucasus region, as well as their role in balancing the geostrategic order. It also presents the challenges of diverse and complex cultures and religions of the South Caucasus nations, and promotes the regional level actors to be smarter by using the smart power instruments in foreign policy. The regional partners must strengthen their effort in partnerships, public diplomacy, and soft power institutions in order to meet twenty-first century challenges.*

Keywords: Smart power, balance of power, stability, political climate

1. Introduction

The South Caucasus is the oldest region, populated by nations with diverse and complex cultures. For many centuries the Mongols, Persians, and Ottomans have invaded the nations of the South Caucasus, each time reducing the population dramatically. Additionally, Islam was rapidly expanding in the region and became a direct threat to the Georgian and Armenian Christian states. In order to protect themselves from that threats, Georgia and Armenia have signed strategic partnership agreements with the Russian Empire, which promised to guarantee stability in the region and provide a balance of power. [3].

The Georgian and Armenian relationship with the Russian Empire by the end of the 18th century has created a geographical division between the Christian and Muslim States. Christian Georgia and Armenia were in the middle of the Muslim Nations, and above them was Christian Russia. The Georgian and Armenian Christian states have created a buffer zone between north and south, between the Muslim and Christian states. This region had a very complex structure of key regional players at that time: the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Persian Empire. The relationship between these great regional players - former empires echoes in the South Caucasus region even today.

After the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-78, the Ottoman Empire signed the treaty of San-Stefano (1878). The Ottoman Empire took responsibility to create favorable living conditions for the Armenians and other ethnic groups. The Russian Empire from the north continued its geostrategic influence on the South Caucasus region, and Sultan Abdul Hamid-II understood that the Christian Armenians wanted to create their independent state, while they were under the Christian Russian Empire.

By the end of the 19th century the young radical Turks mostly students educated in Europe led by Ahmed Rıza Bey, had formed a small organization called the (CUP) Committee of Union and Progress who were seriously criticizing Sultan Abdul Hamid through the pamphlets and magazines they were publishing in Paris [1].

The Ottoman Empire lost the Balkan Wars of 1912-13. After the Ottomans' defeat, the radical Young Turks gained power and in alliance with Germany in 1914 took the empire into the First World War, and initiated the Turkish Third Army's invasion into the Caucasus. In January 1915, the Russian Empire's army, together with the Armenian forces destroyed the Turkish army in the decisive battle at Sarikamis. After one of the worst defeats in the Ottoman Empire's history, the Young Turks responded with the mass deportation of Armenians from Eastern Anatolia to the deserts of Syria and Iraq. It was one of the most brutal events of the twentieth century against women, old people, and children, some died and others perished in the open-air concentration camp [4]. How was this allowed to happen in the South Caucasus region, why the Russian Empire or other major states from Europe didn't stop this mass deportation? In this case study when we mention the balance of stability in the region, we underline the importance of the peaceful relationship between the Muslims and the Christian nations. On the other hand, we mention the balance of power in the region. In order to achieve this balance, some region actors should have given up some strategic interests and supported their partners and strategic allies.

2. Literature Survey

This case study introduces the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Besides, it studies a historic evidence of the conflict and introduces the historic background of key regional players' geostrategic interests in the South Caucasus region, as well as their role in balancing the geostrategic order. This case study is based on the primary and secondary sources.

3. Problem Definition

The United States of America together with allies and partners should promote the multinational effort and focus on five critical areas. The regional partners must strengthen their effort in partnerships, public diplomacy, and soft power institutions in order to meet twenty-first century challenges. Key regional actors must use adequate investment in 'hard

power' vs. 'soft power', be strong in leading of global economy and security of global commons [6].

4. Results & Discussion

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh

In the beginning of the 19th century, the Russian Empire increased its sphere of influence in the South Caucasus region. The Persian Empire was defeated in War with Russia and gave up the Karabakh khanate region (the disputed region between Armenia and Azerbaijan), while the treaty of Gulistan (1813) and the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828) brought Karabakh under the control of the Russian Empire. After those treaties and the Russian-Ottoman War (1855-6 and 1877-8), the new Russian policy of cohabitation in the region provoked the Muslim people to mass migration from the Karabakh to Persia and the Ottoman Empire. The Armenian population in that region increased from nine percent in 1823 to fifty-three percent in 1880. In 1920 and 1921 Soviet Russia changed its decision about the future of Nagorno-Karabakh several times. Firstly, in December 1920 it forced Azerbaijan to surrender Nagorno-Karabakh, Zangezur and Nakhchivan to Armenia. Secondly, in July 1921 it made a decision to give autonomy to Karabakh under the Azerbaijan SSR. Finally, two years later on July 7, 1923, Nagorno-Karabakh officially became an Autonomous Oblast within the Azerbaijan SSR [3].

During the Soviet period, the Armenian nationalist movement, and intra-ethnic tensions arose several times in the region, with the goal of regaining Karabakh. However, it did not have success until a certain moment. The declaration of independence in Georgia and other Republics of the Soviet Union provoked Nagorno-Karabakh to declare independence on September 2, 1991. It was the beginning of the Soviet Union's collapse, and also of the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is still unresolved. The conflict of 1988-1994 caused about one million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), refugees and 20,000 dead from both sides. On May 16, 1994, Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a ceasefire; however, it did not stop the occasional shooting in Nagorno-Karabakh. The recent conflict on November 2020 has changed the map in the region again, Azerbaijan Forces using the new technologies and artificial intelligence succeeded at the tactical and operational level, Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a ceasefire agreement. Russian peacekeeping forces monitoring the conflict region and maintaining the peace according to the ceasefire agreement. Azerbaijan and Armenia, both claim that they have historical proof, that this area belonged to their ancestors [3].

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh created an opportunity for the Russian government to maintain its national interest over the region, and maintain its strategic sphere of influence. Russia supports a military base in Armenia to secure the region from the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it seeks to continue to hold the balance of power in that strategic region.

5. Conclusion

After six weeks of fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh on November 10, 2020, the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev agreed on the peace deal, which was signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Under the deal, 1,960 Russian peacekeepers were deployed to patrol the front line and guard the "Lachin corridor", which links the Karabakh capital, Stepanakert, to Armenia [2].

The geostrategic balance of power and political climate for stability in the South Caucasus region depends on the relationship among the key players of this region; the European Union, the United States of America, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The strategic communications routes from Asia to Europe, make the South Caucasus region very attractive and strategically important to the United States of America and its allies. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States of America has become a strategic player for Georgia promoting democracy and supporting the government in improving their instruments of national power. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has allowed the Russian government to hold its role of regional power by keeping its sphere of influence and military presence in Armenia and Georgia. The South Caucasus States Integration to the European Union and NATO will change the balance of force in this region and rebalance the Russian sphere of influence. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, "America cannot solve the most pressing problems on our own, and the world cannot solve them without America. . . . We must use what has been called 'smart power,' the full range of tools at our disposal" [5].

The United States of America together with allies and partners should promote the multinational effort and focus on five critical areas. The regional partners must strengthen their effort in partnerships, public diplomacy, and soft power institutions in order to meet twenty-first-century challenges. Key regional actors must use adequate investment in 'hard power' vs. 'soft power', be strong in leading of global economy, and security of global commons [6].

6. Future Scope

This case study does not provide strategies or options. It analyses a historic evidence of the conflict and introduces the historic background of key regional players' geostrategic interests in the South Caucasus region, as well as their role in balancing the geostrategic order. This research gives only recommendation for the regional players to use instruments of 'smart power'.

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