

Karabakh Conflict: Armenia and Azerbaijan

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The conflict between the two former Soviet republics has again come into fore. Turkey, which shares a border with Armenia, is backing Azerbaijan, while Russia, has good ties with both countries and needs a ceasefire. The conflict if turned into an open war will have wider geopolitical implications.

In news: There are fierce clashes going on over the disputed region of Nagorno Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Placing it in syllabus: Geography – Places in news

Static dimensions

1. What is the conflict about?

Current dimensions

1. In news
2. Role of other powers

Content:

In news:

- **Armenia and Azerbaijan have rejected international calls for negotiations** and a halt to fighting over the disputed region of Nagorno Karabakh.
- Armenian and Azerbaijani forces are engaged in the heaviest fighting in years over Karabakh.
- Two sides are into trading heavy fire where hundreds are confirmed to have died in the flare-up.
- Azerbaijan has vowed to pursue military action against Armenian separatists in the region until a full Armenian withdrawal from the disputed territory.
- There has been **increasing international pressure for a**

ceasefire, as there are fears that the conflict could escalate into a devastating all-out war.

- It has been accused that the **Turkish jets are performing “provocative flights” along their shared border** and violating Armenia airspace.
- **Russia has called for an end to the fighting** and offered to help with talks.

What is the conflict about?

- **Nagorno-Karabakh is located within Azerbaijan** but is **populated, mostly, by those of Armenian ethnicity** (mostly Christian where as Azerbaijan has Shia Muslim majority).
- In the pre-Soviet era the region was at the meeting point of Ottoman, Russian and the Persian empires.



- Once **Azerbaijan and Armenia became Soviet Republics in 1921**, Moscow gave Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan but offered autonomy to the contested region.
- In the 1980s, when the Soviet power was receding, separatist currents picked up in Nagorno-Karabakh.
- **In 1988, the national assembly voted to dissolve the region’s autonomous status and join Armenia.**
- But Azerbaijan suppressed such calls, which led to a military conflict.
- When Armenia and Azerbaijan **became independent countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991**, the clashes led to an open war.

- The war lasted till **1994 when both sides reached a ceasefire brokered by Russia.**
- However **no peace treaty was signed and the border is not clearly demarcated.**
- By that time, **Armenia had taken control of Nagorno-Karabakh and handed it to Armenian rebels.**
- The rebels have declared independence, but have not won recognition from any country.
- The **region is still treated as a part of Azerbaijan by the international community** and Baku wants to take it back.
- Political and economic developments in both the countries and the absence of an agreed political settlement have altered the military balance, hardened negotiating positions thereby amplifying prospects for renewed fighting.
- In April 2016, a significant flare up occurred along the line of contact, dubbed as the **“Four-Day War”** in which Azerbaijan recaptured a small amount of land, but the war cost hundreds of lives.
- Since then tensions have remained high, possibly setting the stage for the current military action.

Geographical Features of Karabakh:

- Karabakh is a landlocked region located in the south of Armenia and the west of Azerbaijan.
- There is currently no official designation for what constitutes the whole of Karabakh.
- Historically, the maximum extent of Karabakh in the 18th century extended from the Zangezur Mountains in the west, following eastwards along the Aras river to the point where it meets with the Kura river in the Kur-Araz Lowland.
- The Armenian population of the region speaks the Karabakh dialect of Armenia which is heavily influenced by the Persian, Russian, and Turkish languages. In the

Soviet period the dialect of Yerevan became the official tongue of Armenia.

Role of other powers:

- The energy-rich Azerbaijan has built several gas and oil pipelines across the Caucasus region to Turkey and Europe.
- This includes the **Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Western Route Export oil pipeline, the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline and the South Caucasus gas pipeline.**
- Some of these pipelines pass close to the conflict zone.
- If an open war breaks out between the two countries, the pipelines could be targeted which would impact energy supplies.

Turkey's role:

- **Turkey has historically supported Azerbaijan** and in the 1990s war Turkey closed its border with Armenia and has no diplomatic relations with the country.
- The main point of contention between the two was Ankara's refusal to recognise the 1915 Armenian genocide in which the Ottomans killed some 1.5 million Armenians.
- The **Azeris and Turks share strong cultural and historical links** as Azerbaijanis are a Turkic ethnic group and their language is from the Turkic family.
- After recent clashes Turkish President Recep Erdogan blamed Armenia and offered support to Azerbaijan.
- There were reports that Turkey was recruiting mercenaries from West Asia to fight for Azerbaijan in the Caucasus.
- This move is seen as **Turkey's aggressive foreign policy, which seeks to expand Turkish interests to the former Ottoman territories.**

Russia's role:

- Russia enjoys good ties with both Azerbaijan and Armenia and supplies weapons to both.
- It sees the Caucasus and Central Asian region as its backyard.
- **Armenia is more dependent on Russia than the energy-rich, Azerbaijan.**
- **Russia has a military alliance with Armenia**, which does not include the Nagorno-Karabakh region, and **operates a major military base in the Armenian city of Gyumri.**
- Like in the 1990s, Russia in its best interest has liked to mediate a ceasefire between the two countries.

USA's role:

- Since 1992, responsibility for the international mediation of this dispute has rested with the **Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group** which is led by **three co-chairs: the United States, France, and Russia.**
- Though the Minsk Group has helped the conflicting parties move toward an agreement, apart from the general absence of conflict, the negotiations have yielded little progress.
- Relations between the three co-chair countries have diminished under the Trump administration and the **US has explicitly discouraged external parties from participating in the escalating violence over Nagorno-Karabakh.**

OSCE Minsk Group:

- It was created in 1992 by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), (now OSCE) to encourage a peaceful, negotiated resolution to the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.
- Other than **France, Russia and the United States**, the Minsk Group also includes the following **participating states: Belarus, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Netherlands,**

Sweden, Finland, Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Mould your thought:

1. Explain the strategic importance of the Karabakh region.

Approach to the answer:

- Write why the region is in news
- Brief about the conflict
- Explain the role of other countries in the region
- Conclusion