War over Nagorno-Karabakh threatens to become a conflagration

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On the morning of September 27, the growing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which had been more or less openly carried on for more than three years, escalated. Azerbaijani troops bombarded Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian enclave that formally belongs to the territory of Azerbaijan but has been closely linked to Armenia as an independent region since the mid-1990s and is struggling for international recognition. Although Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence in 2017, as the Republic of Artsakh, this has not been recognised internationally.

Reactionary attack

The bombing by the Azerbaijan army represents a qualitative intensification of the fighting in the smouldering conflict, which has been increasingly armed by both sides since July.

For its part, the leadership of Azerbaijan, under the autocratic President Ilham Aliyev, is under pressure from extremely nationalistic opposition hardliners who accuse it of being too soft on Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. A mobilisation against its arch enemy, Armenia, military successes in the embattled border region, and even more so the reconquest of Nagorno-Karabakh, would be a "liberating blow" for the regime in the face of a deep economic crisis, rampant corruption, and falling oil and gas prices, the country's most important source of income. As so often, a nationalist attack is legitimised as an act of self-defence. The massive artillery attacks on Armenian settlements on September 27 were declared by Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defence to be a "counteroffensive" "to stop Armenia's military activities and protect the security of the population". ([https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/bergkarabach-kaempfe-103.html](https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/bergkarabach-kaempfe-103.html)).

In reality, the attack is clearly reactionary in nature. If successful, the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh would become an oppressed nation, its right to self-determination trampled underfoot. In Azerbaijan, the rule of the oligarchs and of President Aliyev, who has ruled for 15 years with semi-dictatorial means, would gain new legitimacy. Not only the minorities, but also the working class and youth, which are to be used as cannon fodder in the reactionary arms race, would be subjected to increased, nationalist-legitimised oppression.

In the face of this situation, our solidarity goes to all forces on the left, such as the Azerbaijani Leftist Youth ([http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/anti-war-statement-of-azerbaijani-left...](http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/anti-war-statement-of-azerbaijani-left...)), who resisted the reactionary nationalist drive and are calling for an end to the attack.

There is no doubt that the people of Nagorno-Karabakh can claim a legitimate right to self-determination (and self-defence) for themselves. Revolutionaries, indeed all democrats, should recognise their right to decide for themselves whether they want to found their own state or join Armenia.
Roots of the conflict and Armenia's role

If it were only about Nagorno-Karabakh and the question of its right to self-determination, the question of the character of the overall conflict would be quite simple. However, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which has lasted more than three decades, complicates the matter.

During the last years of the Soviet Union, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, which itself goes back a long way, broke out openly. In the USSR, the region had been allocated to Azerbaijan against the will of its Armenian population. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, they again claimed the right to secede and were met with bitter resistance from Azerbaijan, itself on the road to independence. The nationalists, themselves former party bureaucrats and urban intellectuals, did not want to give up Nagorno-Karabakh. They rejected Soviet mediation attempts and sought a military solution.

At the beginning of the open war, which lasted from 1992 to 1994, the armed forces of Azerbaijan looked likely to win, not least because of their brutal actions, which cost thousands of civilians their lives and culminated in barbaric massacres of entire villages. But then the tide turned. The military units of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh were not only able to defend the enclave, but also conquered several provinces that lay between it and Armenia. The mainly Azerbaijani population of these areas were "ethnically cleansed" under the rule of the no less brutal Armenian nationalism. It clearly did not limit itself to supporting its own allies, but subsequently expelled hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis from seven districts under Armenian control since the ceasefire in 1994.

By 1994, more than 1.1 million people had been displaced from Azerbaijan and Armenia, almost 10 % of the total population of the two states. Between 25,000 and 50,000 people died, according to various estimates. Since then, Armenia and Azerbaijan have been in holding positions. Not only the question of Nagorno-Karabakh is unresolved. Both sides refuse to allow hundreds of thousands of refugees to return.

Reactionary nationalism on both sides

Nationalism became de facto state doctrine on both sides, including often extreme exaggeration of religious and ethnic differences. Since 1994, there have been repeated cases of limited armed conflict between the two parties, most recently in the so-called "Four Day War" in 2016.

Both states experienced a massive economic slump after the collapse of the Soviet Union, since their economic planning was based on the division of labour within that state. The machinery in industry was largely obsolete. The introduction of the market economy and privatisation took the form of plundering, a kind of ?primitive accumulation? by mafia-like, oligarchic structures.

Both states, or their regimes, continued to maintain close economic relations with Russia. The latter acted as a moderator between the opposing sides, either on its own account or within the framework of the so-called "Minsk Group," which was created in 1993 to mediate and pacify the conflict and includes not only Russia but also Germany, France and the United States. Basically, the conflict was frozen. The UN refused to recognise the right of self-determination of Nagorno Karabakh. On the other hand, its close de facto ties with Armenia and an economic and monetary union were tolerated as was Armenian control over areas with a formerly Azerbaijani majority population.

Armenia and Azerbaijan both obtained most of their weapons from Russia, albeit on different terms. Thus, Azerbaijan, which is rich in oil and gas, had to buy at world market prices, while the Armenian army was able to upgrade at more favourable Russian "domestic? prices. Serbia also sold to both "friendly" states, while Israel and Turkey supplied exclusively to Azerbaijan.
While the regional power, Turkey, as the protecting power of Azerbaijan, put its foot down and adopted extremely aggressive tones, Armenia tied itself more closely to Russia and Iran. Iran is the country’s most important energy supplier. Russia is in fact Armenia’s protecting power and maintains several military bases there. The country is also a member of the Russian-dominated economic, political and military alliances, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Russian-dominated counterpart to NATO.

Why now?

Why exactly armed conflict broke out again in July remains unclear. However, we can identify three factors that destabilised the balance that maintained a fragile ceasefire since 1994 and that had been further "mediated" by the Minsk Group and especially by Russia.

The first is the political and economic instability of both states. Not only are both hard hit by the Great Recession, they are both led by repressive, capitalist and anti-democratic regimes, even if the Armenian president boasts of having come to power through a Velvet Revolution. For both, nationalism offers an opportunity to divert attention from internal conflicts by invoking the "unity of the People".

Secondly, the economic balance between the states has shifted. Azerbaijan, unlike Armenia, has large oil and gas deposits and thus sources of foreign exchange. Although this wealth benefits primarily the capitalist oligarchy and the leading strata of the state apparatus, the country has also been able to use the returns from oil and gas exports for military spending, which in recent years has been five times greater than that of Armenia. In view of the regime’s (and the nationalist opposition's) goals, it is probably only too tempting to translate these larger economic and military reserves into territorial gains.

Thirdly, changed geo-strategic conditions have fuelled the conflict, in particular, the growing rivalry between Russian imperialism and Turkey. These two are finally clashing not only in the Caucasus but also in Syria and Libya, making the conflict even more explosive.

Even if the EU and the US would prefer to act primarily as mediators, since both are confronted with major domestic problems and other priorities, it is doubtful that the US, in particular, will stand aside if the conflict intensifies or expands regionally, for example, if Iran is drawn into it.

Imminent wildfire

Just as any of the conflicts in the Balkans before 1914 could easily have led to world war, so also could the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the threat of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Both sides, Azerbaijan and Armenia, have so far refused any mediation, both have declared martial law. Both blame other powers, with more or less justification, of supporting the other side. While Turkey openly and completely supports Azerbaijan, is probably giving logistical help and is accused of sending reactionary militiamen from the Syrian war as "volunteers", it accuses Iran and Russia of supporting Armenia.

At present, Russia (and probably China and most of the West as well) prefers a "peaceful" solution, i.e. the further freezing of the conflict. This would allow Russia to maintain close ties to Azerbaijan and Armenia and thus a dominant role. On the other hand, it would find it difficult to tolerate a geostrategic expansion by Turkey, because this would severely shake its role as a force for order in Eurasia as well as in the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

Thus, the CSTO would turn out to be a paper tiger if it could not support an Armenia in distress and
Nagorno-Karabakh, which it supports, even against Azerbaijani forces and Turkey's growing influence.

The threat of war is real. The conflict can easily escalate into a conflagration, and even if no one wants that, any action by one side threatens to provoke a reaction by the other. Even if some of Erdogan's grand-Turkish rhetoric may be "only" rhetoric, bonapartist regimes like his can easily go too far with their foreign policy adventures - with fatal consequences.

What perspective?

The international workers' movement and the entire left must resolutely oppose nationalist mobilisation on both sides and any interference by Turkey, Russia and other powers. They must support all forces in Armenia and Azerbaijan that oppose an imminent massacre and strengthen them through actions of the working class and the oppressed, especially in Turkey and Russia.

A central means to stop the geo-strategic interventions of Turkey and Russia (as well as other powers) is the struggle against the autocratic regimes of Erdogan and Putin themselves.

However, in order to counter nationalism in Armenia and Azerbaijan with a political alternative, a programme is also needed that can provide a solution to the pressing democratic and social issues.

This must include the recognition of the right of self-determination of all nations, including the population of Nagorno-Karabakh; the right of return of all displaced persons and the decision on the future status of the districts occupied by the Armenian armed forces by the population. In the Caucasus, as in the Balkans, the right to self-determination can only be one element in the solution of the national question. The other must consist in the formation of a voluntary federation of the states of the Caucasus in order to ensure open borders between the various regions.

As the history of the Soviet Union, but above all the restoration of capitalism, has shown, a democratic solution to the national question is inseparable from the class question, the question in whose interest the economy is organised. On the basis of oligarchic capitalism, neoliberal markets, scarcity, unemployment and poverty, reactionary, nationalist or racist sham solutions will be presented again and again by the ruling classes. The struggle for self-determination and a federation of the Caucasus states must therefore be combined with the struggle for revolutionary workers' and peasants' governments and the formation of a socialist federation based on democratic planned economies.

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