

ОРИГИНАЛЬНАЯ СТАТЬЯ

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Влияние пандемии коронавируса на возобновление конфликта в Нагорном Карабахе

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Пандемия COVID-19 затронула все сферы человеческой жизни на трех уровнях: национальном, региональном и международном. Конфликт в Нагорном Карабахе, который, как ожидалось, во время пандемии коронавируса будет менее напряженным, чем в предыдущие годы, напротив, стал еще острее. Он вступает в новую фазу с продолжительной войной и наибольшим количеством жертв. В данной статье предпринята попытка дать ответ на вопрос: какую роль пандемия коронавируса сыграла в инициировании и усилении недавнего конфликта в Карабахском регионе? Авторы предполагают, что пандемия коронавируса в качестве катализатора оказала значительное влияние на эскалацию нагорно-карабахского конфликта, который привел к самым высоким человеческим жертвам за последние три десятилетия.

Ключевые слова: Армения; Азербайджан; Нагорный Карабах; вооруженный конфликт в Нагорном Карабахе; вторая карабахская война; пандемия COVID-19

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ORIGINAL PAPER

The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on the Resumption of the Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 virus pandemic has affected all areas of human life in the past year at three levels: national, regional, and international. The frozen Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was expected to be less intense during the corona pandemic than in previous years. On the contrary, during the coronavirus pandemic, it went through its most stressful period. Moreover, it has entered a new phase in its history with the most casualties and the longest war. In this regard, this article seeks to answer the following question in a descriptive-explanatory manner: "What role has the coronavirus pandemic played in initiating and intensifying the recent conflict in the Karabakh region?". Therefore, to answer the article's central question, the authors presented the hypothesis in this way. Although important national and regional factors contributed to the escalation of these tensions, the coronavirus pandemic as a catalyst had a significant impact on the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which had the highest human cost in the last three decades.

Keywords: Armenia; Azerbaijan; Nagorno-Karabakh; armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh; the second Karabakh war; pandemic COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

The South Caucasus region has geopolitical, geostrategic, and geocultural importance for various regional and trans-regional actors. Geopolitically, the balance of power traditionally created between the Russian-Armenian blocs, on the one hand, and the United States-Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia bloc, on the other, is changing. New actors such as Israel, India and Pakistan have now been added to the blocs. Iran has taken an active approach, and Baku is prone to Moscow. Strategically, the South Caucasus serves as a corridor for regional oil and gas pipelines to European and world markets. In terms of geoculture, the Caucasus is affected by fabricated cultural conflicts (Armenian-Azeri, Islamic-Christian) that create contradictory political contexts. As a result, many international actors (Russia, Iran, Israel, Turkey, and the West — the United States, France, and the European Union) are interested in managing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Thus, different approaches have complicated and intensified tensions in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict over the past year.

In addition to the above factors, a phenomenon such as a coronavirus, which created significant restrictions on communication between countries, strengthened the view of countries inward and intensified nationalism. Under these circumstances, what is expected to happen in international relations is the increase of nationalist tendencies in countries to preserve national interests. And, of course, the negative security, political and economic consequences of such a trend in international relations can be expected [1].

As a result of this situation, the possibility of instrumental abuse of this crisis by regional and trans-regional actors, and consequently, the possibility of intensifying regional conflicts, increased significantly. The coronavirus pandemic also restricted individual freedoms and international supervision within the South Caucasus [1].

In this situation, the second Karabakh war started on an immense scale. When the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict restarted on 27 September 2020, the world was distracted by the widespread COVID-19 epidemic. All countries were confused to some extent about how to control the disease. In this status, the Republic of Azerbaijan paralyzed the Armenian Defense Forces with drone strikes and artillery attacks on civilian areas in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In response, Armenian forces fired rockets at civilian areas in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

This war was the most significant conflict between the two countries in the history of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict [2]. The severity of the clashes through all the lines, the duration of the fighting for about six weeks, and the number of weapons used all made this war an utterly different conflict in the history of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict despite the spread of a coronavirus. This widespread war continued as all three sides of the conflict were fighting against the coronavirus, making it very difficult for its inhabitants in the conflict zones.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The coronavirus outbreak has shown us that, as neorealist insists, governments remain the most important actors in the international system, as governments are at the forefront of policy-making and decision-making to deal with such a crisis due to their abundant resources and high mobilizing power.

Realists believe that the world will see the revival and return of the nation-state and the strengthening of its power because realists have long been critical of liberal globalization, arguing that interdependence cannot change the anarchic nature of the international system and politics. The United States or the European Union was a sign of a return to nationalism and mercantilism, and the corona crisis will reinforce this trend [3].

Based on survival and self-reliance motifs, the coronavirus is in the scope of environmental security as an existential threat to human life. Its political implications can be examined in the context of the performance of governments. In different societies, individuals want governments to intervene in the threat of coronavirus, and it is expected that governments will respond to its biological threats [3].

While emphasizing the lack of central authority, neorealism places the level of analysis on the international system and believes that the structure of the international system determines the type and rules of the game. Accordingly, the foreign policy of all governments is influenced by systemic factors and, like billiard balls, follow the same laws of geometry and political physics. From the point of view of neorealism, the possibility of cooperation in the anarchic international system is minimal. Although governments may benefit economically from collaboration and convergence, economic gains are overshadowed by political interests. Governments are always concerned about how the benefits of cooperation are distributed, and they are frightened that others will benefit more from the cooperation.

Thus, although the absolute gain of cooperation may be high, what matters to them is the relative gain. If to their detriment, it will prevent cooperation or its continuation. So this is anarchy that limits the amount of cooperation and its scopes.

From the neorealist point of view, the state is the most important threatening and the most important being treated. Thus, stability in the system and international security are possible when global hegemony can control the erring and rebellious parts or blocs. The reason for the necessity of such a factor is that governments are inherently seeking competition and expansionism. These imperialist interests threaten the preservation of the status quo. Another condition for the existence and activity of a powerful and hegemonic government is that under the protection of such stability, international organizations and institutions have the opportunity to be born and developed [4].

There is an approximate consensus that the corona outbreak will bring changes in the international power structure, which we may be beginning to understand and imagine. Mr Richard Hass said the crisis was likely to worsen current US-China relations and weaken European integration. On the positive side, the strengthening of global public health management will be observed. But on the whole, the crisis rooted in globalization will weaken the global desire to deal with it rather than strengthen it [5].

Another threat to global security by this virus is the conflict-affected areas, which unfortunately are primarily located in the Middle East, including Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and the South Caucasus. Concerns about this situation arise because these countries are waging a "two-sided war" against the virus and the groups involved.

Thus, given the crucial propositions of Neorealism, including strengthening the role of governments in managing the corona crisis, the attention of all governments to national and internal goals and security, the decline of international cooperation and supervision due to the corona pandemic, Neorealism has the conceptual potential to provide a reliable analysis to assess the resumption of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As a result of strengthening the role of governments and the attention of governments to internal issues and national interests, and given the weakening of international supervision, Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan were encouraged to start a large-scale conflict in Karabakh. In the same framework and focusing

only on its own interests, Russia cooperated at a superficial level with Armenia. It paved the way for the advancement of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

The Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, like many border crises that have long overshadowed regional developments, is a legacy of the imperialist and interventionist policies of the world's small and big powers. Today's divisions in the South Caucasus are the result of Russian-Ottoman rivalry in World War I. These rivalries and the advance of the Ottoman forces in the South Caucasus created the basis for a series of subsequent border disputes in the Caucasus, including the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict [6]. Thus, historically, the origin of the debate in Karabakh dates back to the colonial rivalries between the Russian and Ottoman empires. The recent year's dispute started in 1988 over the Karabakh autonomous region concerns the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the right of self-determination of the Armenians to choose between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The autonomous Republic of Karabakh declared its independence in 1991. However, it was not recognized by the international community, even Armenia itself. The first Karabakh war lasted from February 1988 to March 1994 in the Karabakh region. Finally, on 24 March 1994, the two sides signed a ceasefire agreement in Bishkek. The agreement lasted in a way that there was neither war nor peace until April 2016. In April 2016, a four-day war broke out between the two sides, in which some small areas were taken out of Armenian control, but the ceasefire was maintained with Russian mediation. Although limited clashes continued on the borders, there were no widespread ceasefire violations. In September 2020, despite the widespread coronavirus pandemic, the 1994-ceasefire agreement was widely violated, and the forces of the Republic of Azerbaijan advanced along the entire border. The main front was the advance of the forces of the Republic of Azerbaijan from the south of the Karabakh region and near the borders of Iran. Three rounds of face-to-face and cyber mediation by Russia and other actors, including the United States, failed during the conflict. After about six weeks of conflict in the most extreme state and the fall of Shushi, and the arrival of the forces of the Republic of Azerbaijan to 5 km from Stepanakert (Khankendi), on 10 November 2020, a new cyber-ceasefire agreement was made between the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia by Russia's mediation, and it has lasted so far.

THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR

While the Covid-19 pandemic is currently engaging in world politics, the conflict in Karabakh ended on 10 November after a six-week conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan with a Russian-mediated peace agreement. During this period, a Russian-mediated ceasefire was declared three separate times on October 10, 18 and 26, but it has been the shortest ceasefire since 1994. After the escalation of the conflict on 27 September, Armenia and Azerbaijan attacked each other's positions, and violence was intensified, resulting in the displacement of tens of thousands of people, the destruction of thousands of buildings and being killed off hundreds of people, including soldiers on both sides. The second Karabakh war was much different from previous wars. During this period, the clashes were more intense than before, and its human cost was the highest in the last three decades. Armenia and Azerbaijan have repeatedly condemned each other for violating the agreement, targeting civilians and bombing residential areas with missiles, and violating a humanitarian ceasefire.

CORONA OUTBREAK IN KARABAKH REGION

Before the war, the self-proclaimed Karabakh Republic managed to control the virus with border controls and strict quarantines. At the same time, the number of corona patients increased in Armenia. In July, health officials opened a new laboratory to test Stepanakert (Khankendi) samples instead of sending them to Armenia.

But as the war broke out, preventive measures such as controlling and quarantining patients with corona were ceased where there were overcrowds in the basements, making the virus spread much easier. Most of the medical capacity was allocated to those injured or wounded at war, and most of the health protocols to deal with coronavirus were abandoned in case of emergency. Border control and crossings were halted, and as a result, two months after the outbreak of the war, coronavirus cases were increased eightfold. Due to the overcrowding in hospitals resulting from the war, many doctors and nurses had to continue working in the hospital and provide services to the wounded despite being infected by coronavirus [7].

The first case of Covid-19 was registered in Armenia in early March 2020, and on 16 March, the country declared a state of emergency. Over the next few months, the number of people with corona disease was increased significantly. But by the end

of the summer, Armenia was able to shift the corona infection curve from ascending to flat. Although the number of cases had risen somewhat due to the opening of schools, the number of new cases reached 328 daily on 26 September, and the country had begun to overcome the global threat. Unfortunately, this success was short-lived, as another epidemic wave started with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (<https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-data-explorer>).

DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS TO RESOLVE THE CONFLICT DURING CORONA PANDEMIC

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the joint leaders of the OSCE Minsk Group (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) held separate virtual meetings with the foreign ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Armenia. But they could not prevent the escalation of the conflict. The last detailed meeting between the officials of Armenia and Azerbaijan took place on 29 January 2020. The meeting was held between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan within the framework of the Minsk Group along with Igor Popov from Russia, Stephen Visconti from France, Andrew Schoffer from the United States, and Andrzej Kasprzyk as the representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and more than 10 hours of confidential talks took place in two days (www.aa.com.tr). In these meetings, parts discussed the condition for accelerating the negotiations and achieving concrete results in the process of resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

On 23 October 2020, during the second Karabakh War, the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan met separately in Washington with the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. But this meeting did not affect stopping the war. During the second Karabakh War, the unprecedented three Russian-mediated ceasefire agreements failed, while the two sides accused each other of carrying out intense attacks and violating the agreement [8].

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AND NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

The corona pandemic has had four unprecedented consequences in the politics of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the past year:

- 1 — Changing the nature of international diplomacy
- 2 — Weakening the role of civil society

3 — Changing the approach of regional power actors

4 — Cyber Warfare

CHANGING THE NATURE OF INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY

The global corona pandemic has changed the nature of international diplomacy. Travel restrictions have made it impossible not only international travel but also “face-to-face” diplomacy, which plays a vital role in reducing tensions. The epidemic stopped traditional “personal” diplomacy and suspended international law [2]. However, cyber diplomacy is underway with its relative achievements, including the 10 November ceasefire agreement in Karabakh to establish a credible format in which effective and confidential negotiations can occur.

WEAKENING THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

An essential criterion of diplomacy is the establishment of genuine “people-to-people” dialogue and civil society relations in creating peace, which the limitations of the corona pandemic severely prevented from such diplomacy in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In recent years, through the initiative of the European Union, European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh to reduce ethnic hatred and pave the way for peace in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, various meetings were held between journalists, civil society activists, students, and even ordinary people of Azerbaijan and Armenia (www.ngo-monitor.org/). These meetings were very useful in changing the attitudes of the two countries towards each other, reducing ethnic hatred, and creating a platform for more effective political dialogue (www.c-r.org/our-work-in-action/supporting-creative-thinking-across-armenian-azerbaijani-divide). The Karabakh Contact Group, headquartered in the United Kingdom, was a non-governmental organization that was active in the field and had made extensive efforts before the corona pandemic. But with the corona outbreak, all of these programs were suspended.

CHANGING THE APPROACH OF REGIONAL POWER ACTORS

Suspension of international diplomacy changes the network of regional power actors. Armenia and Azerbaijan are rethinking national security priorities and investing in the latest military technologies [2]. They have been investing in

various weapons for more than a decade; they are increasing the number of new weapons, drones and missiles. While the Republic of Azerbaijan has established a “strategic partnership” with Israel and is developing relations with Pakistan, we are witnessing the formation of the triangle of Turkey, the Republic of Azerbaijan and Pakistan in the South Caucasus. In March 2020, Armenia purchased radar systems worth 40 million dollars from India

CYBER WARFARE

Unprecedented inhuman activities have become commonplace during the corona pandemic, which highlights cyber warfare. International reports show that both sides are using high-tech warfare, including artillery, tanks, drones and fighter jets, against residential areas. During the epidemic, a small-scale local conflict has become a much larger-scale cyber warfare that undoubtedly includes more civilian reasons. Cyber-warfare is overcoming cyber-diplomacy, which has brought all sides to a dead end at the national, regional, and international levels.

CONCLUSION

The corona-virus pandemic has affected all aspects of social, economic and political life worldwide in the past year. The South Caucasus region has not been an exception. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was not expected to escalate as in previous years. However, we observed the most intense battle in the history of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where they used various weapons in terms of volume, technology and intensity of the fire. In terms of concepts taken from Neorealism, coronavirus brought about significant changes in the international arena and, consequently, in the region, which directly impacted the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Corona has established four important consequences, including changing the nature of international diplomacy, weakening the role of civil society, changing the approach of regional power actors and cyber warfare in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through restricting direct communication between countries, strengthening nationalist tendencies, highlighting the role of governments in the international system, strengthening the survival-oriented view and self-reliance among governments, limiting cooperation in the anarchic international system and reducing international supervision.

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