

# WAR IN CAUCASUS: ON AZERBAIJAN'S RECAPTURE OF NAGORNO-KARABAKH

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[Azerbaijan's brisk military recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh](#), an Armenian-populated enclave within its borders, shows the changing [power dynamics in the Caucasus](#), where American, Russian and Turkish interests collide. The roots of the conflict go back to the final days of the Soviet Union when the enclave's majority Armenian-Christian population held a referendum to break away from the Shia majority [Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh](#) was then run by Armenian separatists, backed by the Republic of Armenia, until recently. In 2020, Azerbaijan, backed by Turkey, fought Armenia, a Russian treaty ally, and captured much of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Russians then did little to help Armenia, but brokered a ceasefire that left Stepanakert, Nagorno-Karabakh's biggest city, in the hands of the locals. The peace did not hold. Azerbaijan blockaded the Lachin Corridor, the main road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, leaving the 1,20,000 population of the enclave to face mounting economic miseries. Facing international criticism for the blockade, Azerbaijan promised to lift it, but established a checkpoint, continuing to control the flow of goods and medicines. Last week, it attacked Stepanakert, forcing the separatists to hand over full control to Baku.

In effect, Azerbaijan achieved in a day what it had failed to do in three decades. Two major geopolitical shifts seem to have helped Baku. First, Turkey, keen to play a bigger role in the Caucasus region, the former periphery of the Ottoman Turks, threw its weight behind Azerbaijan, with political and military support. Second, Russia's Ukraine invasion, which tied Moscow to its western front, has led to a substantial erosion of Russian power in the Caucasus. Armenia had often expressed displeasure with Russia's lack of action. Moscow did nothing besides issuing statements when Azerbaijan gradually dismantled the ceasefire agreement. Baku realised that the geopolitical situation favoured it and then moved in to take over the enclave. It is widely recognised that Nagorno-Karabakh is a part of Azerbaijan. But there is a history of mistrust and violence. Armenians in the region, having gone through a genocide and several conflicts, have a sharp historical memory and remain wary of any change in the status quo. Azerbaijan's takeover has triggered a massive refugee outflow to Armenia. There are already allegations that Baku is committing genocidal crimes. For Azerbaijan, this can be an opportunity to integrate Nagorno-Karabakh without further bloodshed. But for that, Baku should ensure equal rights for the Armenian population and respect its autonomy. If not, Azerbaijan could face prolonged local resistance, which could not only deny it a clean victory but also turn its quest to control the enclave ugly.

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