



The Cambridge Security Initiative

## FIGHTING BETWEEN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN THREATENS REGIONAL STABILITY

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Violence has erupted in the South Caucasus, with clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani troops along the border between the two countries resulting in a number of casualties. Each side accused the other of attacking troops and shelling villages between Armenia's north-eastern Tavush district and the Tovuz district of western Azerbaijan. Armenia is still officially at war with neighbouring Azerbaijan over the majority-Armenian populated enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Though a cease-fire agreement was signed in 1994, the ensuing stalemate has brought neither peace nor stability: fundamental issues remain unresolved and the threat of increasing hostilities remains real, demonstrated by the rapid escalation of violence along the 160-mile Line of Contact (LoC) around Nagorno-Karabakh in April 2016.

Violence along the LoC has been accompanied by increasingly belligerent rhetoric from political leaders and a significant growth in defence spending by both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Significantly, this latest eruption of fighting, which began on 12 July, took place to the north of Nagorno-Karabakh, far from the LoC, where hostilities have tended to be focused. It is not immediately clear what triggered this round of fighting, but violence away from the LoC has tended to be deterred by Armenian membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

The unresolved dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the most worrying unresolved conflicts in the Caucasus region, both because of rising tension between the two sovereign states and because the three principal regional powers – Russia, Turkey, and Iran – all have a differing stance towards the issue. The tense situation polarises the regional powers, with Russian support for Armenia and Turkey's strategic partnership with Azerbaijan dividing the wider Caucasus region into two blocs, and raising fears that a sustained renewal of fighting could rapidly become internationalised.

Turkey has issued a [strong statement of support](#) for Azerbaijan, with the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu stating in a television interview 'we will stand by Azerbaijan'. By contrast, [Russia](#) called on both sides to exercise restraint, expressing serious concern about the escalation of violence that threatens regional stability, echoing the [U.S.](#), which condemned the violence 'in the strongest terms' and urged the immediate cessation of hostilities.

The resumption of fighting between the two countries triggered a large, pro-war [demonstration](#) in Azerbaijan's capital Baku, with thousands of protestors demanding that the government mobilise troops to regain control of Nagorno-Karabakh. The protest took place despite a ban on mass gatherings due to coronavirus and ended with protestors breaking into the country's parliament. The violence has also prompted Azerbaijan's President, Heydar Aliyev, to [fire](#) his long-standing foreign minister, Elmar Mammadyarov.

## OUTLOOK

After years of stalemate and an apparent lack of resolve in the international community to sort out the problem, the rapid escalation of hostilities in the South Caucasus has taken many by surprise. This latest escalation of hostilities should act as a stark reminder of the need for greater international attention and the imperative of a negotiated settlement involving the OSCE Minsk Group, the coalition of member states, co-chaired by France, Russia and the U.S., dedicated to seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The rising tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan threaten to undermine security in its broadest sense across the volatile Caucasus region. In addition to the security and geostrategic implications of any renewal of conflict, the region's role as a key transit route for the export of hydrocarbons from the landlocked Caspian Sea region means that the South Caucasus is tied into the global economy and the impact of the violence could be felt far beyond the region's borders. The South Caucasus plays a key role in enabling European countries to reduce their dependence on Russian energy; any renewal of conflict in the region could threaten security of supply.