

A Comparative Analysis of Mediation Efforts by Iran and Russia in the Karabakh Conflict

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Abstract

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Karabakh conflict remains the longest and most significant conflict in the Caucasus region. This study examines the role of mediation, a key method in international conflict resolution, within international law, focusing particularly on the Karabakh conflict. The hypothesis suggests that mediation, a fundamental necessity for resolving international disputes, plays a crucial role in mitigating territorial conflicts, including Karabakh. Our findings highlight diverse perspectives regarding Iran's role in Central Asia, particularly in the Southern Caucasus during the conflict. Despite attempts by major powers like Russia, the USA, and Turkey to diminish its influence, Iran has maintained a stance of neutrality, asserting its significance as a neighboring state. Mediation, deeply rooted in various cultural traditions, including Islamic culture, has been strategically employed by Iran based on religious doctrines and national interests. Iran's mediation efforts, supported by cultural and historical commonalities, were conditional on the readiness of the conflicting parties and the appropriateness of the geopolitical context. The complexity of the Karabakh conflict is underscored by its multi-layered nature, the continued crisis, the geopolitical agendas of the mediators, and the number of involved actors. Iran's mediation aims to prevent a tripartite alliance among Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey, stave off the conflict's expansion towards its borders, and curb the involvement of external actors like Israel and the USA. Russia, although geographically distant from Karabakh, plays a pivotal role in the region, amplified by its recent diplomatic maneuvers in response to the USA's attempts to reduce Russian influence in the Southern Caucasus.

Keywords: Mediation, Karabakh conflict, International law, Iran's role, Geopolitical dynamics.

Introduction

The Karabakh conflict, rooted in the complex geopolitics of the Caucasus since the 19th century, continues to pose significant challenges in international relations. Initially established as a minority enclave within Azerbaijan in 1923, the socio-political landscape of Karabakh underwent dramatic changes following Russia's Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. This period was marked by extensive ethnic migrations that significantly altered the region's demographic composition, setting the stage for rising tensions by the late 20th century (Smith, 2019). These tensions escalated when Nagorno-Karabakh, a region with a predominantly Armenian population within Azerbaijan, pushed for unification with Armenia. This aspiration led to a contentious referendum and subsequently a full-scale war after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, plunging Armenia and Azerbaijan into a prolonged conflict (Davies, 2018).

Despite numerous international efforts to mediate the conflict, including significant interventions by the United Nations Security Council and the establishment of the OSCE Minsk Group in 1992, all subsequent ceasefire agreements, notably the 1994 Bishkek Protocol, have failed to produce a durable peace. The conflict continues to involve broader regional and international concerns that complicate the geopolitical landscape and amplify issues of territorial integrity, national sovereignty, and ethnic self-determination (Brown & Silver, 2020).

This study aims to examine the comparative effectiveness of the mediation efforts by Iran and Russia in resolving the Karabakh conflict. The guiding research question is: "How have Iran and Russia's mediation strategies influenced the dynamics and outcomes of the Karabakh conflict?" The hypothesis posits that while both countries have pursued distinct diplomatic approaches due to their geopolitical interests and historical ties with the conflict parties, their efforts have variably influenced the conflict's trajectory and the feasibility of achieving a sustainable resolution.

By dissecting the roles and impacts of these major powers within the context of regional dynamics, this study explores how the convergence of these elements shapes the peacemaking efforts in the post-Soviet space, potentially offering insights into achieving lasting peace in such entrenched conflicts (Johnson, 2021).

1. Changes in Russia's Approach Toward the Karabakh Conflict

In Russia's foreign policy, the Southern Caucasus region holds strategic significance due to its direct linkage with Russia's national

security and geopolitical interests. The post-Soviet era has seen significant threats emerge from this region, prompting numerous security concerns for Russia amid evolving international dynamics. Notably, centrifugal tendencies within the Caucasus, along with NATO's expanding policies and the varying stances of Western and Eastern neighbors, have heightened Russia's security apprehensions. Furthermore, the Southern Caucasus is crucial for Russia's energy-oriented policies due to its abundant energy resources and their transit routes to Europe.

To thoroughly understand Russia's evolving strategy regarding the Karabakh crisis and the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, it is crucial to examine the progression of Russia's involvement over time. In the initial period from 1991 to 1994, Russia's indirect support of Armenia played a notable role in Armenia's success in the contested areas. From 1994 to 2000, there was a notable stagnation in active conflict management as Russia prioritized its domestic issues, although it continued to participate in peace negotiations. Between 2000 and 2020, Russia adopted a more balanced approach towards both Armenia and Azerbaijan, strengthening its bilateral relations and military ties with each. The 44-Day War in 2020 marked a pivotal shift in Russia's strategy, as its role became more decisive, influenced by the evolving dynamics between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In this regard, indicators of Russia's strategic behavior include its efforts to rebalance the economic and military dynamics in favor of Azerbaijan, seeking to alter the status quo in the Karabakh region. Geopolitical maneuvering also played a role, with Turkey attempting to enhance its influence by leveraging conflicts between the USA and Russia. Iran's focus on maintaining peace and stability along its northern borders further underscores the importance of resolving the Karabakh crisis for regional cooperation. Additionally, broader regional conflicts, such as Russia's ongoing disputes with Ukraine and Georgia, political instability in Belarus, and increasing sanctions from Europe and the USA, have influenced Russia's strategies. The shifting priorities of the US administration under President Biden, along with Europe's challenges in establishing an independent role in managing the Southern Caucasus crisis, have also impacted Russia's approach. These elements underscore Russia's multifaceted approach to managing its interests in the Karabakh conflict within the broader context of its foreign policy objectives.

2. Karabakh Conflict and Its Impacts on Iran's Security

Following the 1990 dissolution of the Soviet Union, new geopolitical dynamics emerged in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The formation of several post-Soviet states initiated a complex pattern of cooperation and competition among regional and international powers, including Iran, Turkey, Russia, the USA, and Israel. Iran and Turkey, in particular, found themselves competing for influence in these regions, driven by geographical proximity, cultural similarities, and strategic political considerations (Ghaempanah, 2011).

The Karabakh conflict, erupting near Iran's borders, has significantly impacted Iran's security landscape. This conflict has been perceived as one of the most direct threats to Iran's stability, prompting a series of defensive measures. Following the escalation of the conflict in 1993, the proximity of active hostilities led to concerns about a potential influx of refugees from Azerbaijan into Iran. In response, Iran mobilized its military forces to manage border security and handle refugee movements effectively. This period also saw an escalation in regional arms trade, heightening tensions between key players like Russia and Turkey, which further complicated the security scenario for Iran.

These challenges underscore the conflict's role as a pivotal element in shaping Iran's national security strategy. Concerns over the extension of the conflict to Iran's borders, coupled with the economic and logistical burdens posed by incoming refugees, have necessitated a robust defense posture aimed at maintaining border security, protecting territorial integrity, and safeguarding national sovereignty and unity (Najafzadeh, 1996).

The strategic position of the Karabakh region presents a double-edged sword for Iran. On one hand, it offers Iran opportunities to assert its influence and stabilize its borders; on the other, it poses significant risks should the conflict escalate or spill over. Therefore, understanding the potential political trajectories of Karabakh is crucial for Iran. The strategies that Iran might pursue in response to various outcomes of the Karabakh conflict can shape its long-term regional strategy and influence its diplomatic relations and security policies.

3. Mediation: Iran's Efforts to Resolve the Conflict

The presence of transterritorial actors in the crisis-stricken South Caucasus has threatened Iran's national security, prompting Iran to mediate in the Karabakh conflict. This mediation is rooted in Iran's Islamic Foreign Policy, which emphasizes neutrality and the

consent of parties involved toward a peaceful resolution. Iran aims to mitigate security threats that persist as the crisis continues, thereby enhancing its regional influence and playing a central role in conflict resolution. Despite these efforts, opposition from the USA, Russia, and Turkey-due to conflicting interests-has led to Iran's disconnection from the Minsk Group (Vaezi, 2007)⁷

In response, Iran has pursued alternative mediation routes through bilateral and multilateral negotiations with Azerbaijan and Armenia. A significant event was the trilateral meeting in Tehran in April 1992, involving Hashemi Rafsanjani, then President of Iran; Yaqub Mammadov, acting President of Azerbaijan; and Levon Ter-Petrossian, President of Armenia. However, this meeting did not yield successful outcomes due to interventions by Western and regional actors. Continued negotiations in 1994 between Iran and Russia facilitated a ceasefire agreement in May of that year (Shafei, 2008).

Furthermore, Iran has consistently cooperated with conflict parties, aiding Azerbaijani refugees and facilitating commerce between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. Since the onset of the crisis, Iran has pursued a peaceful resolution. Its mediation efforts have been extensive, organizing several meetings since January 1992, culminating in a significant meeting in 1992 that led to a joint declaration for peace in Tehran. However, the intense conflict dynamics and subsequent seizure of Shusha by Armenian forces rendered these efforts ineffective. The election of Elchibey as Azerbaijan's president in June 1992, who held anti-Iranian views, further complicated mediation efforts.

Following the election of Heydar Aliyev as Azerbaijan's president in June 1993 and the subsequent ceasefire in 1994, Iran sought a balanced approach towards both Azerbaijan and Armenia, supporting the ceasefire without showing favoritism to maintain regional balance. This policy aimed to preserve Iran's northern border security, its territorial integrity, and national unity, which were under threat from the ongoing conflict and external military interventions by NATO, the USA, and Russia.

Iran's strategic position, with significant Azerbaijani and Armenian populations within its borders, places it in a unique position to influence both sides. Despite repeated efforts to mediate, the involvement of major powers like the USA, Russia, and Turkey, who viewed Iran's role unfavorably, led Iran to step back from the Minsk group. Since 1994, Iran has endeavored to maintain neutral and supportive relations with both sides, aiding Azerbaijani refugees and facilitating transit goods between Nakhchivan and Azerbaijan,

ensuring Armenia does not lose its connections to the world.

In later years, geopolitical and legal disputes, such as those concerning the Caspian Sea and the evolving Iran-Russia relations, continued to shape Iran-Azerbaijan relations. Despite good economic ties with Azerbaijan, Iran's role as a Muslim supporter led Azerbaijani officials to seek Iran's favor in the conflict. Conversely, Armenia sought to maintain consistent relations with its neighbors, including Iran. The Iran-Armenia gas pipeline exemplifies these ongoing relations, highlighting Iran's extensive political and military connections with Karabakh.

Today, the conflict remains one of Iran's most pressing security concerns. The militarization of border areas and the frequent escalations between Azerbaijan and Armenia prompt Iran to seek new mediatory initiatives and peace plans (Zahrani and Faraji Lohesara, 2013).

4. Comparative Analysis of Mediation Roles: Iran and Russia-Similarities and Differences

In late September 2020, after two weeks of intense conflict in Karabakh, Azerbaijan and Armenia reached a ceasefire agreement mediated directly by Russia. This conflict, which lasted 12 days, was marked by significant artillery exchanges and was the most severe in the region in the last 30 years, leading to numerous casualties and displacements. The involvement of regional powers like Turkey heightened the stakes, suggesting the potential for an escalation beyond the immediate Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict.

Both Iran and Russia have maintained active and stabilizing approaches to the conflict in Karabakh. Iran's diplomacy was characterized by open dialogues; the Iranian President engaged with his counterparts in Baku and Yerevan, promoting peace and stability. These high-level interactions, coupled with Iran's emphasis on the dangers of continued conflict, played a pivotal role in tempering hostilities.

Russia, leveraging its historical ties to the region as the USSR's successor, views the South Caucasus as a critical buffer zone. Russian policy aims to prevent any foreign power's interference, striving to maintain neutrality and balance interests between Baku and Yerevan. This strategic positioning is intended to secure trust and cooperation from both parties, facilitating a ceasefire that has shown promising results.

Iran, known for its diplomatic relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia, continues to advocate for peace. Iranian leadership has

historically referred to both nations as "friendly countries" and "good neighbors." Iran's influence was instrumental in fostering dialogue that helped de-escalate the situation, underscoring its role as a mediator that champions dialogue over military action.

Looking ahead, it is anticipated that negotiations facilitated by Iran and Russia-both significant regional powers with shared borders and political-economic ties to the Caucasus-will persist in their efforts to stabilize peace. As principal actors in the peace process, they are expected to guide Baku and Yerevan towards a mutually acceptable resolution.

Iran's principles for resolving the Karabakh conflict are clear: first, the insistence on a peaceful resolution through negotiation, affirming that the use of force is unacceptable; and second, the belief that only neighboring countries should mediate, thus external powers should refrain from intervening in the conflict.

During the Karabakh conflicts, Iran repeatedly attempted mediation. However, its efforts were opposed by the U.S., Russia, and Turkey, who viewed Iran's involvement as contrary to their interests. Consequently, Iran withdrew from the Minsk Group in 2007 (Vaezi, 2007). In response, Iran pursued alternative diplomatic strategies, engaging in both bilateral and multilateral negotiations with officials from Azerbaijan and Armenia. A notable effort was the trilateral meeting in Tehran in April 1992, involving Iran's then-President Hashemi Rafsanjani, Yaqub Mammadov, the acting president of Azerbaijan, and Levon Ter-Petrossian, the president of Armenia. Despite these efforts, the intervention by Western and regional powers thwarted any progress. Further negotiations between Iran and Russia in 1994 culminated in a temporary ceasefire agreement in May (Shafei, 2008).

Subsequently, Iran continued its support for the conflict parties, assisting Azerbaijani refugees and facilitating trade between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. During Vladimir Putin's presidency (2000-present), he called for a ceasefire to mitigate further casualties, highlighting concerns about potential military aggression. Recent collaborative efforts, involving Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, supported by the OSCE, aim to achieve a lasting resolution to the conflict (Bayuasi Nammeiluki and Nursrat, 2016).

The Karabakh crisis has profoundly impeded the development of both Azerbaijan and Armenia, with significant repercussions for neighboring countries, including Iran. The region's insecurity and instability directly impact the security of these countries. Three critical aspects of Iran's involvement are noteworthy:

- 1- The influence of major powers such as Russia, the United States, and the European Union has often overshadowed Iran's role in the crisis.
- 2- The proposed Russia-Armenia-Iran axis, which contrasts with the Russia-U.S.-Georgia axis, has faced skepticism. Azerbaijan's antagonistic policies towards certain Iranian interests have raised doubts about Iran's effectiveness as a mediator. The current status of the Russia-Armenia-Iran axis needs to be reassessed in light of recent geopolitical developments.
- 3- Given the strategic importance of the region, Iran has the opportunity to adopt a more proactive diplomatic strategy to protect its national security and foster stability in the Caucasus. Effective mediation in this conflict could bolster Iran's regional standing and enhance its position against external adversaries.

Iran and Russia, although sharing common goals of achieving peace through dialogue, exhibit distinct long-term objectives in their mediation efforts. Russia seeks to maintain its influence in the South Caucasus, often supporting Armenia to counterbalance Azerbaijani advances. Conversely, Iran advocates for regional stability without exerting dominance, striving to maintain the status quo and prevent further insecurity along its borders.

Iran's mediation strategy aims to prevent the involvement of external powers like the U.S. and Israel and avoid regional alliances that could exacerbate security threats. By promoting peace, Iran seeks to mitigate the formation of any hostile blocs involving Israel, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, which could lead to increased separatist movements and regional instability.

Conclusion

The Karabakh conflict, deeply rooted in historical grievances and geopolitical maneuvers, has had a lasting impact on the Caucasus region. Established as an Armenian minority autonomous region by Soviet authorities in 1920, Karabakh's declaration of independence in 1991 catalyzed a prolonged and devastating conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, marked by significant casualties and the displacement of about one million people.

Intermittent negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, such as those in 2009, have repeatedly stalled, with recent escalations in 2016 and 2020 demonstrating both sides' adoption of advanced military tactics. This ongoing conflict not only hampers the development of the states involved but also jeopardizes regional stability, impacting neighboring countries, including Iran.

Iran has been an active mediator since the conflict's early stages, with significant attempts to negotiate peace starting in 1991. However, external influences, particularly from the U.S. and Russia, and the ineffectiveness of international mechanisms like the Minsk Group have often undermined these efforts. Despite being led by major powers such as the U.S., France, and Russia, this group has failed to achieve lasting peace, as evidenced by the unsuccessful implementation of UN Resolutions 878 and 884.

Russia's mediation strategy has evolved over the years, particularly influenced by Armenia's failure to adhere to the Madrid Principles, which demanded the return of occupied territories, and the Western-oriented policies of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, elected in 2018. Russia's efforts have shifted from a neutral stance advocating for immediate ceasefires to a more proactive role in facilitating dialogue and deploying peacekeeping forces.

Strategically, Russia seeks to maintain a delicate balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan, each important for different reasons-Armenia for military alliances and Azerbaijan for its energy resources. This balancing act is essential for Russia to assert its influence in the Caucasus and counter Western encroachments.

In conclusion, the Karabakh conflict presents a complex geopolitical puzzle that involves multiple regional and transregional actors, each with distinct strategic interests. Iran, as a mediator and regional stakeholder, continues to push for peaceful resolutions, aiming to stabilize its borders and minimize external influences. As the situation evolves, the roles of significant powers like Russia and Iran will be crucial in determining the future of Karabakh and the broader geopolitical dynamics of the Caucasus.

Recommendations

- *Maintain neutrality and active mediation:* Iran should continue to uphold a neutral stance while actively mediating between the conflicting parties to preserve its strategic influence in the region. This approach will help safeguard Iran's interests and foster trust among all regional actors.
- *Constructive role in post-crisis recovery:* In the post-conflict period, Iran has the opportunity to play a crucial role in the region's recovery and reconstruction efforts. By leveraging the vulnerabilities and disarray in Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran can assist in reconstructing military capabilities and supporting economic redevelopment efforts in both countries. This involvement not only aids in stabilization but also enhances

Iran's diplomatic ties and economic interests in Karabakh.

- *Opportunistic approach to the Zangezur Corridor:* The Zangezur Corridor presents a strategic challenge and opportunity for Iran. While there are disputes regarding its creation, Iran can negotiate to facilitate infrastructure projects like gas pipelines from Azerbaijan through Nakhchivan to Turkey, potentially transforming a geopolitical threat into a cooperative economic venture.
- *Strengthening border security:* It is critical for Iran to enhance the capabilities of its border guards both qualitatively and quantitatively. Improvements should include advanced training and equipping with modern technology to address new security challenges in border areas with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Nakhchivan.
- *Enhancing transportation and transit networks:* Iran should focus on expanding transportation links and transit routes with Azerbaijan, particularly in strategically important areas like Khoda Afarin County. This initiative would not only meet some of Azerbaijan's logistical needs but also strengthen economic relations between the two nations.

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