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**Why Peace Remains Elusive?  
An Analysis of the Role of Global Stakeholders in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict**

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**Abstract:**

Nagorno-Karabakh remains a contested region between Azerbaijan and Armenia, both post-soviet Republics in the Caucasus region, surrounded by the Black and Caspian Seas. From 1918 to 2020, the area has been embroiled in four wars and many border clashes, resulting in thousands of casualties and the displacement of up to a million people. International players have been trying to mediate the conflict since 1988; however, it persists unresolved. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the roles of global stakeholders in the conflict and analyze the reasons behind their inability to achieve a resolution. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as realism and constructivism in conflict resolution, the research explores the interplay of historical grievances, geopolitical interests and domestic politics in perpetuating the ongoing stalemate. The study's significant findings show global stakeholders' national and geopolitical interests coupled with domestic politics and historical grievances make this conflict protracted. It offers theoretical suggestions for enhancing future mediation strategies. Such insights are vital for policymakers and practitioners seeking to advance sustainable peace in the South Caucasus region.

**Keywords:** Armenia, Azerbaijan, mediation, stakeholders, geopolitical, historical grievances,

**INTRODUCTION**

The South Caucasus, often referred to as a "region of conflicts" (Nodia, 2004), has been plagued by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan for decades, marked by erratic violence, failed peace talks and persistent tensions. Despite the involvement of various international stakeholders and numerous mediation attempts, the conflict remains unresolved. There are multifaceted reasons behind the failure of global stakeholders to achieve a lasting

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solution to the conflict. Their national and geopolitical interests often lead them to adopt biased positions in the conflict. The domestic politics of conflicting parties further complicate the resolution efforts. Although many global stakeholders in the conflict serve as mediators, but their involvement has not managed to extinguish this ongoing dispute in the South Caucasus. The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict involves several international stakeholders in mediation and peacekeeping initiatives. This paper will discuss the primary global mediators, e.g., the US, Russia, France, the EU, the UNO and the Minsk group, and analyze why their efforts to resolve the Armenia-Azerbaijan dispute have fallen short.

### **LITERATURE VIEW**

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a broad research topic, with several studies offering inclusive and impartial analyses of this multifaceted conflict (Broers, 2019; Cornell, 2019; De Wall, 2013). In addition, the recent shifts in conflict dynamics and the dissolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic prompted a reevaluation of factors contributing to escalation of the conflict. A comparison with previous research enhances understanding of conflict development and perspectives. Several facets of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have been discussed in scholarly literature: its historical genesis (De Wall, 2013), military aspects (Antal *et. al*, 2022), economic factors (Chitadze, 2016), legal analysis (Krüger, 2010), domestic politics (Gasparyan, 2019), peace negotiation and mediation efforts and the factors affecting them (Abilov, 2018; Bláhová, 2019; Freizer, 2014), and peacekeeping operations (Gasparyan & Skakov, 2023). Terms such as “frozen conflict” (Bláhová, 2019; Cornell, 2017), “intractable” conflict (Degirmencioglu, 2019; De Wall, 2010) and “enduring rivalry” (Broers, 2019) are used to describe its persistence. However, existing literature addresses the root causes of the conflict through liberal and constructivist lenses. Academicians highlight the history of the Caucasus region, the persecution of Armenians during the Ottoman Empire and the 1915 Armenian genocide as an exacerbating factor in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The internal dynamics within the conflict parties, such as using the status quo for political advantage (Ozkan, 2008), domestic politics and political culture (Fuller, 2020) also hinder conflict resolution. Moreover, research identifies mediator bias, particularly Russia’s, due to Armenia’s economic, security and military dependence (Abbasov, 2015; Abushov, 2019). Academia highlights the predominance of mediator’s national interests over the neutral approach in conflict resolution, alongside competition among potential mediators that allows Armenia and Azerbaijan to select the most favorable, potentially impeding compromise (Abbasov, 2015; Başer, 2008; Ozkan, 2008).

However, the role of significant global players as unsuccessful mediators in this conflict and reason behind their inability to resolve the dispute are noteworthy gaps. Therefore, this study aims to address the research gap by examining global players' mediation efforts and the underlying causes of their failure. Drawing on realistic approach and conflict resolution theory, this explanatory and descriptive study seeks to provide insights into these issues.

This paper is divided into two significant parts, aside from the introduction and conclusion. It starts with discussing the roles of major global players as mediators in the conflict and then analyzes the factors contributing to their unsuccessful mediation efforts.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research employs a qualitative and analytical methodology, relying mostly on the secondary sources, drawing primarily from available literature such as books, research articles, reports, papers, magazines, and newspapers etc. Thematic analysis method has been used to scrutinize and evaluate the data collected through various sources.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study is grounded in two primary theories of conflict resolution: realism and constructivism which are highly relevant to understanding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Realism focuses on the role of state power and national interests emphasizing states as the primary actors in international relations driven by security and power concerns. In contrast, constructivism emphasizes the influence of ideas, identities and social constructs on international relations, examining how historical narratives, cultural identities and social norms shape state behavior and conflict dynamics. By integrating these theories, the study aims to provide a nuanced analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, exploring the complex interplay of historical, geopolitical and domestic factors perpetuating the conflict, offering valuable insights for future mediation strategies.

## **THE ROLE OF GLOBAL PLAYERS IN THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT**

Nagorno-Karabakh remains a contested region between Azerbaijan and Armenia, both post-soviet Republics in the Caucasus region, surrounded by the Black and Caspian Seas. From 1918 to 2020, the area has been embroiled in four wars and many border clashes, resulting in thousands of casualties and the displacement of up to a million people. International players have been trying to mediate the conflict since 1988; however, it persists unresolved. This section surveys the role of global stakeholders in the conflict and analyze the reasons behind their inability to achieve a resolution.

### **The USA**

Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are conflicts in the South Caucasian, and the US has played an active role in resolving these conflicts through negotiation processes. The US has an eminent position in the OSCE Minsk Group and serves as a co-chair in the group (De Wall, 2017). When the South Caucasus gained independence, this region was unfamiliar to most American researchers and policymakers, resulting in the US not establishing firm relations with these states until the early 1990s. By the mid-1990s, the US formulated a coherent policy for these states (Baran, 2002). The US recognized Azerbaijan's vital importance when significant energy resources were discovered in the 1990s. Concerned that Russia might gain control of these resources without US involvement, the US adopted proactive measures in the region, including financial assistance through initiatives like USAID under the Freedom Support Act. Initially aimed at humanitarian grounds, but with time, the fundamental purposes were flashed, and this humanitarian aid turned into economic aid and democratization efforts. However, due to conflicting national interests, the US aid to Azerbaijan was eventually halted.

In 1994, Baku and Western Energy companies (including those from the US) signed the Contract of the Century, solidifying US interests in the Caucasus. Following the 9/11 attacks, the US played an active role in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, supported by Azerbaijan's full support in its

“war against terror,” which included opening of its airspace to the US. The US consistently supported Azerbaijan's principle of ‘territorial integrity’ but has also advocated for peacefully resolving the conflict through negotiations (Ismailzade, 2005). Fiona Hill argues in her article that the US foreign policy during this period lacked a clear strategic focus. She points out discrepancies in the timing of US recognition of post-Soviet states, noting that Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were recognized in January 1992, while Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and Georgia was recognized in March 1992. The three-tier recognition of the South Caucasus and Central Asian states created the impression of the hierarchy in US foreign policy towards Caucasian states, further supported by the US Congress Freedom Support Act when US aid was given to newly emerged countries. The primary purpose of this aid was to help the Caucasian States to transform themselves into democracies and open markets in April and October 1992. However, an amendment (section 907) to this act immediately nullified assistance to Azerbaijan due to pressure from the US Armenian diaspora, especially in response to Azerbaijan’s blockade of Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Hill, 2001). A significant challenge for US foreign policy in the Caucasus has been maintaining a delicate balance between Azerbaijan and Armenia, particularly concerning the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Kasim, 2012).

Indeed, the energy reserves of the South Caucasus and their transportation through pipelines linking the Caspian Sea with the Mediterranean are the primary interests that the US has successfully pursued. The US has distanced itself from Russia’s ‘near abroad’ to assert its autonomy. Despite that, the rivalry between the US and Russia has increased due to the launch of various oil and gas pipelines, following the US call for other states to participate (Abushov, 2009).

US policies toward the Caucasus region were determined by its energy contemplation and the competition with Russia for influence until 2008. To bypass Russia, the US established alternative routes for energy transportation. In 1994, the policy for the Caspian region was formulated. Türkiye, as a NATO member aligned with US interests, played a crucial role in establishing alternative energy transportation routes like BTC and the South Caucasus pipeline, also known as BTE. The US also supported GUAM (an organization for democracy and economic development) with Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova seeking closer relationship with the West. While establishing a relationship with Armenia, the US supported Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye geopolitical line in the Caucasus region. All the American governments have given particular importance to the Caucasus region after the Cold War.

During Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s visit to the region, the US expressed its intention to adopt a neutral policy on conflicts. Being a close ally of Israel, Azerbaijan holds immense importance for the US, although the US also considers the Armenians-American community (Walker, 2012). Indeed, the US wants to expand its Euro-Atlantic Community and envisions the Caucasus states as potential members (Murinson, 2014). The United States of America is attracted to the Caucasus for its strategic energy corridor. The Caucasus’s wide corridor attracts the US and will be helpful in hydrocarbon transportation (Murinson, 2014).

Promoting the independence and richness of the new Caspian states, strengthening regional collaboration, enhancing universal energy security over the free flow of Caspian oil and gas to world markets, and growing investment prospects for companies from the US and other countries is the agenda of the US in the Caucasus region. The Caucasian states have become significant

security allies of the US in its campaign against terrorism. Following the 9/11 attacks, Azerbaijan and Armenia unequivocally offered their airspace to the US, with Armenia providing cautious support. The US cooperated with Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Georgia to achieve energy transportation objectives, thereby breaking Russian monopoly. The US clarified that its policies aim to promote competition rather than being anti-Russian (Baran, 2002).

Compared to neighbouring countries such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran, the South Caucasus has historically held a secondary position in US foreign policy. Consequently, South Caucasian countries are often considered less of a priority in US foreign policy calculations (Cohen, 2012). One of the main objectives of the US foreign policy in the Caucasus is to isolate Iran and to prevent its role in Caucasus energy transportation. The formation of GUAM in 1997, exemplifies US efforts to assert influence in the Caucasus (Cohen, 2012). The US tried to counter Russia in the region through GUAM, which consisted of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova. In 1999, GUAM expanded to GUUAM with addition of Uzbekistan. James Baker, then US secretary of State, introduced principles in the CSCE mission known as the 'Baker Rules,' which were accepted by both conflicting parties and the two communities of Nagorno-Karabakh.

After the attacks of 9/11, the US focus shifted to the Middle East and the Black Sea regions. Reassessing its national interests in geostrategic fields, the US enhanced NATO's role and military presence through this strategy. During Obama administration, a clear shift in US foreign policy was evident. President Obama prioritized relations with the Arab world, focusing on withdrawing from Iran and Afghanistan.

The Obama administration also adopted a "Russia first" policy to rebuild relations and confidence with Russia. President Clinton wanted to restart the peace process after the ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In July 1994, John Maresca proposed a conflict settlement for Nagorno-Karabakh. Maresca's principles for resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were personal, but as a former representative of the US to the Minsk Group, the US's potential role in implementing the proposal was considered. However, this proposal was not accepted by the US government, indicating a lack of interest in playing a role in resolving the conflict or challenging Russia.

### **Russia**

Russia has never forgotten its possessions, especially in the Caucasian region. Russia's resentment can be seen through its 2008 attack on its Northern neighbor, Georgia and its attempts to maintain the status quo between the contestant parties, Azerbaijan and Armenia, regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Russia uses this conflict to expand its influence across the Caucasus and aims to block Azerbaijan's access to Türkiye as a part of its strategic objectives. Russia's invasion of Georgia, including the training flights with fighter jets in Armenia, have escalated Azerbaijan's concern. Consequently, the foreign policy of Azerbaijan has limited scope, making it highly unlikely that Russia's influence in the South Caucasus will increase (Walker, 2012).

Historically, Russia has been a major player in the region since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, gradually expanding its territory and asserting dominance by pushing other regional powers like Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Russia has employed strategies such as "Divide and Rule," fostering animosities between states and reinforcing the rebellious activities to maintain its dominance over the region.

The fall of the Soviet Union weakened its supremacy due to internal political and financial turbulence in its own country.

Russia pursues its national interests in managing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, directly involving itself due to strategic concerns. Destabilization along its southern border disrupts its relations with South Caucasian states. It plays the role of a critical mediator in conflict. Russia aims to maintain its political and economic presence in the region, enlarge its control over the Caspian oil transport routes and oil extraction fields, and keep its adversaries including Türkiye, the US, and Western World. Its mediation role helps Russia achieve all its goals in the South Caucasus, despite conflicting interests between Russia's domestic priorities and goals of the conflicting states (Malysheva, 2001).

Russia has direct linkages with both Azerbaijan and Armenia and seeks to preserve the status quo or resolve the conflict based on its interests. However, it is crucial to recognize that the primary decision makers in resolving the conflict are the conflicting states themselves. Zeyno Buran states, "Russia has had difficulty coming to terms with the fact that the Caucasus region is no longer under its control." In the recent escalation of the conflict, Russia played the role of peace broker and consolidated its position in the region's geopolitics by deploying more Russian troops in the conflicted region than ever. Following the three-party peace deal between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, Russian peacekeepers are supposed to control two crucial corridors that are essential for both parties: The Lachin Corridor, which not only serves as a transportation route between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh but also connects Azerbaijan to its exclave, Nakhchivan. In a statement to the United Nations on 18th September 2005, the Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan, Elmar Mammadyarov stated, "It is the issue of communication of the Armenians living in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan with Armenia and that of the Azerbaijanis living in the Nakhchivan region of Azerbaijan with the rest of the country. We suggest using the so-called Lachin corridor – which should be called "Road of Peace" – by both sides in both directions provided that the security of this road will be ensured by the multinational peacekeeping forces at the initial stage." (Mammadyarov, 2005).

In conclusion, frozen conflicts serve Russia's interests more than complete instability, which could potentially disrupt its southern borders. However, it is evident that conflicts, particularly the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, cannot remain frozen indefinitely. During the second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, Russia showed no interest in reigniting violence for two main reasons. Firstly, Russia does not want to deteriorate its relations with any warring states. If Russia supports Armenia, it will have to pay the price at the expense of damaging ties with Azerbaijan. Secondly, the unstable situation on its Western borders, the problems in Ukraine and Donbas, and the political developments in Belarus and Navalny all these situations push Russia to keep itself out of the conflict.

### **France**

France is considered one of the influential members of the EU due to its membership in the Minsk Group and historical ties with the South Caucasus region. Being a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, France has been playing an active role in expressing the interests of the EU in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, the EU has shown less political determination in the post-Soviet era to play a leading role as compared to the US and Russia in the settlement of the Nagorno-

Karabakh conflict. The EU exerts its influence through institutionalization, albeit at a slower pace. Through initiatives like the ENP (European Neighborhood Policy) and EP (European Parliament) projects, the EU integrates the Caucasus region into its economic, cultural and political spheres, albeit without fully meeting regional expectations (Deriglazova & Minasyan, 2011).

France, despite its role as a co-chair of the Minsk Group, is presenting itself as an ally of Armenia, leading Azerbaijan to oppose France's nomination in 1996 due to the presence of the Armenian community in France, which has played an influential role for many years. Eventually, Azerbaijan accepted a compromise, resulting in Russia, the US and France becoming the co-chairmen of the Minsk Group (De Wall, 2003).

In recent years, Azerbaijan has worked consistently on improving diplomatic relations with all the co-chair members of the Minsk Group, especially with France, which hosts the third biggest Armenian diaspora. The Armenian Community's Parliamentary influence shapes French foreign policy towards the South Caucasus and Türkiye. Azerbaijan has increased cooperation with France, hosting up to sixty-five French companies across different sectors of the Azerbaijani economy. The French giant company 'TOTAL' played a role in countervailing the influence of the Armenian diaspora against Azerbaijan. Instead, the stance of France could not change, and it has been violating its mediator's commitment over the years. It has become more apparent during the escalation of the 2nd Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 (Mustafayev, 2021).

The groundless statements and accusations of French President Emmanuel Macron against Türkiye and Azerbaijan continued, including accusations during the conflict, sparked controversy in Baku and Ankara. The President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev demanded called for all the co-chair member states of the Minsk Group to act as mediators and maintain their neutrality or step down from their positions. of the Minsk Group (Aliyev, 2020).

After facing severe criticism from Türkiye and Azerbaijan, Paris adjusted its stance towards neutrality as clarified by the French Foreign Minister, acknowledging both Azerbaijan's strategic importance due to its rich natural resources and France's historical affinity with Armenia (Cook, 2020). The French Senate's 2020 resolution entitled "On the need to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh" in acted like a final straw in France's biased stance ("French Senate adopts," 2020).

France re-engaged in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and sought to reactivate the Minsk Group for several reasons. Firstly, Paris and Washington felt humiliated after the Peace Deal on 9th November 2020, which ended the 44-day war brokered by Russia with limited participation from the US and France Secondly, France wanted to demonstrate its power in the South Caucasus through diplomatic activities. Thirdly, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power, France wanted to strengthen the peace in the region. Fourthly, France's investment in the North-South Corridor heightened its interest in regional stability (Minassian, 2021).

Another significant reason for France's support of Armenia was to counter Türkiye's presence in the Southern Caucasus. When Türkiye was supporting Azerbaijan in the second war of Nagorno-Karabakh, France took an opposing stance in support of Armenia (Irish, 2020).

Given France's dual role as a founding member of the European Union and a co-chair of the Minsk Group, its perceived bias in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict raises concerns about European Union

values. The stance of France appears inconsistent with the values and norms of the European Union.

### **The United Nations Organization**

After the end of the 2nd World War in 1945, the charter of the United Nations was drafted by the great powers of the time to establish an international system aimed at global peace. International organizations were seen as a key to achieving this objective, facilitating cooperation among former wartime allies through institutional structures. The establishment of the UN Security Council underscored the importance of its founder members, who intended for the UNSC to assume primary responsibility for international peace and security (Bourantonis, 2007).

The UNSC has always played its role in conflicts by passing resolutions since its creation. While these resolutions are not binding on the UN members, they have shaped the dynamics of conflicts between Azerbaijan and Armenia, each with their respective pros and cons. The UN Security Council passed Resolution 822 on 30th April 1993 during its 3205th meeting. Resolution 853 was adopted on 29th July 1993 by the UNSC at its 3259th meeting, followed by Resolution 874 on 14th October 1993 during meeting No. 3292. UNSC adopted Resolution 884 at its 3313th meeting on 12th November 1993 ("1993 UN Security Council Resolutions," n.d.). In Resolution 822 emphasized the security of international borders against trespassing and the invalidity of using military force to occupy any territory. This resolution demanded the immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces from the district of Kelbejar and other populated areas of Azerbaijan. In Resolution 853 repeated these demands and additionally condemned the seizure of the Agdam district and other occupied parts of Azerbaijan. Resolution 874 repeated the arguments of the previous resolutions and called for the urgent implementation of the "Adjustable Timetable" of the Minsk Group. It also urged both parties to withdraw their forces from occupied areas and remove all the obstacles to communication and transport. Resolution 884 called upon Armenia to use its influence to achieve acceptance of the previous UNSC Resolutions by the inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh. It also urged both conflicting parties to ensure to prevent themselves from escalating their military campaign further by refraining from providing military assistance (Kasim, 2012).

Ali Askerov provided a critical analysis noting that the resolutions did not explicitly name the occupying forces in Resolution 822 when demanding the withdrawal from Kelbadjar and other recently occupied areas of Azerbaijan. Only three months after UNSC adopted Resolution 822, a new Resolution No. 853 urged the Armenian government to exert its influence over the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh of Azerbaijan to accept the resolutions without labelling Armenia as an aggressor state but rather as a party to the conflict. Resolutions 874 and 884, adopted by the UNSC later in the same year, similarly avoided mention the names of the aggressors, referring instead to "all parties" or "the parties concerned." However, the positive aspects of these resolutions include recognizing and accepting the rule of 'territorial integrity' in Azerbaijan. The use of military force was unacceptable and exerted pressure on the significance of the negotiation through the role of the Minsk Group. However, none of the above-discussed resolutions have been fully implemented, casting doubts on the efficiency and powers of the UNSC. Although the immediate withdrawal of all occupying parties from the territories of Azerbaijan, cessation of hostilities on an urgent basis and carrying on the negotiating process within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group are standard features of the Resolutions passed by the UNSC on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, they do not explicitly



mention external aggressors , creating misleading perceptions about the parties in the conflict (Askerov, 2020). In 2005, the UN fact-finding mission ended and adopted a resolution on 14th March 2008 calling for the withdrawal of Armenian Forces from all the occupied territories and respecting the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, the UNGA also called for these issues again in its resolutions (Mosashvili, 2020). Regarding the role of the UN in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, criticism suggests the organization lacks genuine interest in resolving a potentially escalatory international issue, focusing on the agendas of global players.

### **The Minsk Group**

When the USSR invaded the Southern Caucasus, including Karabakh and other khanates, the Russian Tsar seized control. As Russia did not trust the Turkish-origin population, it resettled a population it could rely on. In 1828, the Treaty of Turkmenchay was signed between Iran and Russia allowing mutual migration of the population between both countries. After 1920, Armenia sought to annex Zangezur, Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhchivan. According to the 1920s agreement, Armenia was given Zangezur but the other regions were retained. However, in 1924, the Nagorno-Karabakh region was declared 'autonomous' under the sovereignty of Azerbaijan. In 1991, the USSR reaffirmed Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan. On 30th August 1991, Armenia declared independence, and Nagorno-Karabakh followed suit on 31st August 1990. Over the years, the tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia fluctuated, marked by terrorist attacks and armed conflict since the 1920s. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was the first institution to express concern about the deteriorating situation (Azer, 2013).

In 1992, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) established the Minsk Group to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Grigoryan, 2012). The Minsk Group, initially established by the CSCE now renamed as Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), aimed to find some peaceful settlements to the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh (Abilov, 2015). The Minsk Group involved regional countries such as Russia and Türkiye, along with European and North American countries. All these countries had a strong belief that the conflict would end peacefully. The term 'Troika' is used for the US, Russia and France who served as co-chairs of the Minsk Group (Abilov, 2018).

Until now, the Minsk Group has formulated three proposals to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict known as the "Package Deal," "step-by-step deal," and "common state deal." However, none of these proposals or deal succeeded in bridging the gap between the conflicting parties. The rule of self-determination conflicted with the principle of territorial integrity, making reconciliation challenging for all parties involved (Jacoby, 2005). Due to a perceived lack of interest from the co-chairs of the Minsk Group, the OSCE could not find a solution to the conflict. The ceasefire established in May 1994 between Armenia and Azerbaijan stands as the primary achievement of the Minsk Group. Despite repeated attempts, the conflict parties were not ready to accept any deal proposed by the Minsk Group. Indeed, Moscow emerged as the primary mediator in the conflict, overshadowing the efforts of the Minsk Group.

Following the Minsk Group's unsuccessful peace proposals, negotiations escalated to the presidential level in 1999. In the same year, the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan convened in Geneva, Yalta and Sadarak to discuss a "Land Swap" proposal. Unfortunately, progress was halted

by a terrorist incident in the Armenian Parliament, where a small group of shooters broke through the security and opened fire, resulting in the deaths of eight well-known political leaders died, including the prime minister of Armenia and the speaker of the Armenian Parliament (King, 2008).

After this horrible terrorist attack, the negotiations were halted. Nevertheless, the parties did not lose hope. The US, as a member of the co-chairs of the Minsk Group, pushed the parties for dialogue leading to renewed negotiations in Key West, Florida, started in 2001. However, these talks also failed as neither party could accept the proposed peace agreement in 2001. Subsequently, the Minsk Group initiated the 'Prague Process' or 'fundamental principles' in 2002 and the 'Madrid Principles' in 2007, updated in 2009 (Abilov, 2018). However, these negotiations also failed due to the lack of trust between the conflicting parties and the fundamental clash between the principles of 'Self-Determination' and 'Territorial Integrity.' So, a resolution to the conflict remained elusive. Although the Madrid Principles were updated in 2009, the differences between the original and revised Madrid Principles was very slight.

When the government in Armenia changed in 2018, it gave hope to the international community for a potential resolution to the conflict. The Minsk Group co-chairs welcomed the new administrations of Armenia and Azerbaijan, expressing their wishes to take solid steps for permanent peace. Some observers were hopeful that new efforts for conflict resolution could succeed. In March 2019, the Minsk Group co-chairs facilitated an official meeting between the leaders of both countries. Subsequently, in September 2019, the foreign ministers of both countries held a meeting. Although there were positive signs of reduced tensions on the border, the situation between Azerbaijan and Armenia deteriorated in 2020, surprising many observers. On 30th October 2020, a meeting was held between the co-chairs of the Minsk Group and the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Switzerland, where both sides agreed on measures such as "not targeting the civil population, recovery and exchange of soldiers and an exchange of prisoners of war (Walt & Bowen, 2021)."

In 2020, the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, quit the Madrid Principles by advocating for the inclusion of representatives from the self-declared "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh" in negotiations with Azerbaijan. He also insisted that IDPs of the occupied territories, who are Azerbaijani citizens, should not participate in the negotiation process explicitly rejecting the Madrid Proposals. This move signaled a decline in the influence of the Minsk Group, which had already diminished significantly since the last decade of the 20th century. The geopolitical landscape has evolved from the post-Soviet World, reducing the sway of Minsk Group co-chairs France and the US.

Azerbaijan has constantly been raising its concerns about the impartiality of the co-chairs of the Minsk Group; the US, Russia and France—citing the longstanding presence of Armenian diaspora communities in these countries. These communities exert significant influence on their respective governments (Abilov, 2018). In conclusion, it appears that the co-chairs of the Minsk Group aimed to maintain the status quo to safeguard their national interests rather than actively facilitating a platform for peaceful settlement or the resolution of the conflict.

### **The European Union**

In the last decade of the 20th century, the European Union's involvement in the South Caucasus was limited. By 1995, the EU had established an office solely in Tbilisi (Georgia), focused on providing humanitarian aid to the Caucasian states. In 1996, the European Union signed an agreement with

the South Caucasian states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) on partnership cooperation, though this agreement wasn't enacted until 1999 (Gafarlı et al., 2016).

The European Union has its own policy regarding the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan exemplified by initiatives like the European Neighborhood Policy and Eastern Partnership. These programs and policies primarily aim to strengthen the prosperity, security and stability in the South Caucasus, a neighbor of the EU. Therefore, the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict aligns with the strategic interest of the European Union. Since 2008, the EU has maintained delegations in the capitals of both Azerbaijan and Armenia and has constantly supported the Minsk Group and its recommendations. The Council of Europe, however, maintains no direct involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Mosashvili, 2020).

Initially, the European Union's stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was ambiguous. In 2006, this ambiguity persisted when the European Neighborhood Policy Action Plans were introduced for Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the European Union failed to play the role of a new security actor in the region (Mustafayev, 2021).

This uncertainty and ambiguity of the European Union stemmed from its reluctance and fear of provoking Russia within its sphere of influence. Consequently, a severe rift developed between Azerbaijan and the European Union. This rift became evident in 2013 when Baku refused to negotiate the Association Agreement (Gurbanov, 2017a).

In addition to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the EU and its members have set priorities. Their primary objective is to eliminate the military intensification, maintain the status quo, and benefit those actors who uphold it. The second priority lies in promoting regional integration through open borders and regional cooperation, which contribute to stability. The third and last priority of the EU is to secure the energy projects to provide its member states with alternative energy sources. The region's conflicts are directly affected by the involvement of the EU, which has started different economic and humanitarian projects aimed at easing tensions. These include rehabilitation of refugees, poverty reduction, strengthening of civilian supremacy over the military, and promotion of the building of democratic political institutions. All these projects ease the tensions and help create a Westernized and Europeanized elite with a constructive attitude towards the settlements of the ethno-political conflicts (Deriglazova & Minasyan, 2011). The EU is interested in developing strategic and commercial relations with Azerbaijan, particularly in the context of the Southern Energy Corridor.

The EU deployed a mission to Georgia under the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), where its involvement has been more pronounced in contrast to its role in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Until now, the EU's participation in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been minimal. Azerbaijan believes the EU is primarily interested in diversifying energy supplies. The EU-Azerbaijan Energy Memorandum 2006 declared Azerbaijan as the EU's 'strategic partner' in energy cooperation, focusing on its role as the region's primary transit route for Caspian oil and gas (Huseynov, 2009). The EU-Eastern Partnership Summit was held in Riga in 2015. The President of Azerbaijan declined to participate and sign the joint declaration of this summit. The valid reason for the objection of Azerbaijan was the EU's firm stance on the illegal annexation of Ukraine by Russia,

contrasting with its more reserved stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict ("Azerbaijan Objects to," 2015).

In 2017, during the EaP Brussels Summit, the EU addressed Baku's complaints and clarified its stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Despite protests and attempts by Armenia to block the joint declaration, the EU supported the principle of territorial integrity, explicitly including a paragraph about it in the statement (Gurbanov, 2017). This support was reiterated in July 2019 during the visit of European Council President Donald Tusk to Baku and Yerevan, where the EU again emphasized its backing for Azerbaijan's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. In 2020, the EU reaffirmed its support for Azerbaijan when member states' foreign ministers approved the concluding statements on Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020 (Gurbanov, 2017). The EU's stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is noticeably clear and consistent, emphasizing condemnation of any unlawful actions by the Armenian government.

However, the EU has a state-centric stance over territorial conflicts. However, its active role in the peaceful settlement of the Eap member states' conflicts is missing, especially in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The EU did not adopt any coherent strategy for internal coordination. Member states pursue parallel foreign policies which sabotage the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), preventing the EU from de-escalating tensions between its members. The EU's policy clearly shows its geopolitical priorities towards Azerbaijan, adopting a balanced foreign policy approach, unlike regional countries. Azerbaijan has avoided adopting "Euro-Atlantic integration" or aligning solely under a "Russian Umbrella," instead crafting policies that blend both approaches to serve its national interests (Makili-Aliyev, 2013).

### **CAUSES OF THE FAILURE OF THE MEDIATION EFFORTS**

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been a longstanding and complex issue, and several factors have contributed to the failure of international stakeholders to resolve it.

#### **Historical & Ethnic Roots**

The conflict has deep historical and ethnic roots, dating back to the early 20th century. Nagorno-Karabakh is an ethnically Armenian region that was placed under Azerbaijani control during the Soviet era. When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, both Armenia and Azerbaijan claimed sovereignty over the territory, leading to a full-scale war. Nagorno-Karabakh is predominantly populated by ethnic Armenians, while Azerbaijan asserts its territorial sovereignty over the region. Ethnic nationalism plays a significant role in fueling the conflict with both sides deeply rooted in historical narratives and cultural identities that hinder compromise.

#### **Territorial Dispute**

The primary issue fueling the conflict remains the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia supports its self-determination and independence, while Azerbaijan insists on maintaining territorial integrity. This fundamental disagreement has made finding a mutually acceptable solution extremely challenging. The Nagorno-Karabakh region is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. Yet, it has been under the control of ethnic Armenian forces since a war in the early 1990s, with Azerbaijan regaining its territory in a 44-days war in 2020. This territorial dispute complicates resolution efforts, as both sides assert strong territorial claims.

### **Geopolitical Considerations**

Brzezinski describes Azerbaijan's importance: "Despite its limited size and small population, Azerbaijan, with its vast energy resources, is also geopolitically critical. It is the cork in the bottle containing the riches of the Caspian Sea basin and the central Asia" (Brzezinski, 1997). The involvement of regional and global powers adds complexity. Historically, Armenia has strong ties with Russia, while Azerbaijan has cultivated relationships with Türkiye and, to some extent, with Western countries due to its oil and gas resources. These geopolitical interests often shape the positions of international stakeholders, making it difficult to find a neutral mediator. Global players typically pursue their geopolitical interests and alliances, influencing their approach to the conflict. Balancing these interests while seeking a resolution is challenging and may impede progress. The strategic interest of the US made it possible to promote the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, with significant influence from Iran. The US aims in the Caucasus region includes gaining control over the energy sector, introducing NATO's Program 'Partnership for Peace, and persuading the local elites through oil and gas pipelines (Malysheva, 2001).

### **Failed Peace Talks**

Despite numerous peace talks and mediation efforts, a lasting solution has not been achieved. The OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States since the 1990s, has struggled to make significant progress due to the entrenched positions. Numerous ceasefires and negotiations have been attempted, but most have broken down, leading to renewed hostilities. Each breakdown or ceasefire violations further erodes trust, complicating future agreements.

### **Domestic Political Considerations**

Domestic politics in Armenia and Azerbaijan also significantly influence the conflict. Nationalist sentiments, political instability and leadership changes in both countries can influence their willingness to engage in meaningful negotiations and compromise. Despite international efforts, a lasting resolution to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict remains elusive. Resolving such deeply entrenched conflicts requires sustained diplomatic efforts, genuine willingness from all parties to compromise, and often a long-term commitment to peacebuilding and reconciliation.

### **Lack of Trust**

Years of conflict have deeply entrenched a lack of trust between Armenia and Azerbaijan, making negotiation and implementation of agreements challenging. Previous ceasefires and peace talks have been fragile and short-lived, hindered by deep-seated mistrust. Decades of conflict, including the violent breakup of the Soviet Union and the Nagorno-Karabakh War in the early 1990s, have ingrained suspicion and hostility between the two nations. Rebuilding trust is essential but challenging, given the history of animosity. In "The Black Garden," Thomas de Waal illustrates how these factors combine to create a deep-seated and pervasive distrust between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This lack of trust complicates peace efforts and makes resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict particularly challenging (De Waal, 2003).

### **International Involvement**

External actors and international organizations have been involved in mediation efforts, but their perceived biases and interests have sometimes exacerbated distrust. Both nations have often viewed international interventions with suspicion, fearing hidden agendas.

### **Internal Divisions**

Divisions within Armenia and Azerbaijan further complicate efforts to resolve the conflict. In both countries, political factions, including nationalist and militarist elements, exert influence and resist concessions that could lead to peace. The presence of hardliners on both sides undermines the ability of leaders to engage in meaningful negotiations.

### **Economic Interests**

Economic considerations, particularly regarding control over natural resources, add another layer of complexity to the conflict. Nagorno-Karabakh is in a geopolitically strategic region rich in oil and gas reserves. Control over these resources has economic implications for Armenia and Azerbaijan, making compromise more challenging.

The interests of the US in the South Caucasus are primarily revolving around energy rather than political or security concern. Common interests among Caucasian states brought them closer to the US, as they seek to balance Russian hegemony. The 'influence game' is continues in the region, with some Commonwealth of Independent States countries supporting the US to counterbalance Russian influence. Resolving territorial conflicts in Georgia or between Azerbaijan and Armenia is not among the top priorities for the US, which aims to avoid confrontation with Russia (Abushov, 2009).

International Human Rights Watchdogs have been criticizing Azerbaijan noting its prioritization of Western investment and petrodollars over democracy and human rights reforms since 2000. However, Azerbaijan's stance shifts if it satisfies the European Union. Energy overweigh human rights considerations, with Azerbaijan leveraging its authority to some extent. The European Union has prioritized the stability of energy supplies over challenging Azerbaijan's repressive ruling regime. Current indicators suggest strengthening ties between Azerbaijan and the EU, as the EU is largest trading partner of Azerbaijan, accounting for 51% of Azerbaijan's total trade and being its primary importer and exporter. Ninety-eight percent of EU imports consist of oil and gas from Azerbaijan, which meets only the 5% demand of the EU's total energy needs (Geybullu, 2018).

### **External Influences**

The involvement of external actors, including Russia, Türkiye and Iran, further complicates the conflict dynamics. These countries have strategic interests in the South Caucasus region and often support one side or the other, exacerbating tensions and undermining efforts at impartial mediation. Various external actors have regional interests and influence which often exacerbates tensions rather than facilitate a peaceful resolution. For instance, historically, Russia has supported Armenia, while Türkiye has supported Azerbaijan.

Russia supports the principle of territorial integrity and does not consider Nagorno-Karabakh as a full negotiating partner in resolving the conflict, influenced by its experiences in Chechnya. The

geopolitical isolation of Armenia pushes its reliance on Russia for backing, which Russia provides to counterbalance its regional rivalries such as the USA and Türkiye, which support Azerbaijan. Russia's political stance fluctuates, inviting criticism domestically and from the contending parties in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Tashkent treaty of 1992 reshaped the conflict dynamics, positioning Russia to support Armenia if needed and exert pressure on Azerbaijan to be uncooperative. Thus, Russia tried to counterbalance NATO's involvement in managing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by leveraging the Tashkent treaty. In April 1999, Azerbaijan quit the Tashkent treaty because Russia had accepted what was happening in Nagorno-Karabakh without any resistance. Russia also gave no response but continued the delivery of weapons to Armenia, which is the rival state of Azerbaijan in the conflict. However, Azerbaijan's national interests determined its logic in quitting the Tashkent treaty (CSTO) (Malysheva, 2001).

Status Quo Bias: Over time, protracted conflict tends to entrench the status quo, leading to a "status quo bias" where parties are reluctant to deviate from familiar patterns or risk concessions that could upset the delicate balance of power.

Russia did not want to upset the status quo in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict due to fear of losing its hegemonic position in the region. Thus, keeping the conflict cold was advantageous to Russia's national interests when managing relations with both conflicting parties. However, Russia changed its strategy after Türkiye's involvement in the 2nd Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 prompting Russia to prioritize conflict management and prevent escalation rather than seeking resolution (Hayrapetyan, 2022).

The energy resources of Azerbaijan are essential for Russia's interests. Therefore, in the Nagorno-Karabakh War 2020, Russia tried hard to maintain the balance between both conflicting parties, Armenia and Azerbaijan. For example, Russia continued to supply weapons to both countries at the same time, leveraging the frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus to its interests. This situation also aligns with Russia's doubts over constructing the TAP and other pipelines, which will cross the South Caucasus bypassing Russian territory. Currently, no pipelines are passing through Armenia's land due to Azerbaijan and Armenia's strained relations, further benefiting Russia's geopolitical interests (Pena-Ramos, 2017).

## **CONCLUSION**

Periodic outbreaks of violence, such as the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, have resulted in loss of life and displacement of populations, exacerbating tensions and deepening mistrust between Armenia and Azerbaijan. These escalations make it harder for international stakeholders to facilitate dialogue and achieve a peaceful resolution. The conflict involves territorial disputes, issues related to refugees and internally displaced persons, human rights violations and the status of Nagorno-Karabakh's independence or autonomy. Addressing all these issues requires comprehensive and nuanced negotiations. The conflict has led to significant humanitarian consequences, including displacement of populations, loss of lives and violations of human rights. The humanitarian dimension of the conflict creates emotional barriers to reconciliation and underscored the urgency of finding a resolution. However, addressing these concerns while navigating the political complexities of the conflict presents a formidable challenge. In conclusion, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains a protracted and complex dispute shaped by historical, geopolitical and domestic

factors. While international stakeholders have made considerable efforts to mediate, achieving lasting peace requires a more integrated and multifaceted approach that addresses both the immediate and underlying causes of the conflict. The insights gained from this study offer valuable guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to advance sustainable peace.

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