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Armenian-Azeri war threatens to trigger Russia-Turkey clash

Uncontrolled military clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus involving artillery, tanks, helicopters and drones have continued for a third day after fighting erupted over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region on Sunday. It marks the bloodiest Armenian-Azeri fighting since the 1988-1994 conflict between the two former Soviet republics, which erupted in the run-up to the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. While Yerevan claims its forces have caused 500 deaths of Azeri forces, Baku says Armenian forces have lost 550. However, officials in Nagorno-Karabakh (who call it by the Armenian name Artsakh) only acknowledged that “80 servicemen were killed and nearly 120 were wounded in Artsakh” as well as four civilians. On the other hand, Baku claims 12 civilians have been killed in Armenian attacks.

Russia’s Sputnik news agency reported that “hostilities are not only taking place in Karabakh, but also in other areas of Armenia and Azerbaijan.”

While Azeri Defense Ministry Colonel Vagif Dargahli stated that “the 3rd Martuni motorized rifle regiment of the Armenian armed forces, stationed in Khojavand region, was destroyed,” the Armenian Defense Ministry has released a footage purportedly showing the “of the destruction of an entire Azerbaijani military unit.” Baku has declared that it will destroy Armenian S-300 missile systems if they are deployed in the Nagorno-Karabakh.

Though severe clashes continued yesterday, and Baku has claimed that it has seized certain villages around Nagorno-Karabakh, several Russian military experts speculated that “neither of them is capable of achieving a significant military success.”

The fighting further escalated yesterday, when Armenian Defense Ministry spokesperson Shushan Stepanyan claimed that “a Turkish Air Force F-16 fighter jet shot down an on-duty SU-25 jet of the Armenian Air Force in Armenian airspace,” killing the pilot.

Both Azeri and Turkish officials rapidly denied this allegation, denouncing it as a “lie”. While Baku said that “The report alleging Armenia’s Sukhoi-25 was destroyed by an F-16 fighter is a lie,” Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Communications Director Fahrettin Altun told Bloomberg: “The claim that Turkey shot down an Armenian fighter jet is absolutely untrue.” He added: “Armenia should withdraw from the territories under its occupation instead of resorting to cheap propaganda tricks.”

Moreover, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan directly accused Ankara of being involved in the military conflict. Interviewed by Russia's Rossiya1 TV channel, he said: "This operation was planned beforehand, and there are no doubts that this operation was plotted during joint drill with the Turkish armed forces." He asserted: "A very important detail is that Turkey is essentially involved in this process."

While Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu declared on Tuesday that Ankara will continue to stand with Baku "on the ground, and at the negotiation table," Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev said: "Turkey is our brotherly country and our ally. It gives us only moral support, and we are grateful for its solidarity."

Whether or not allegations of Turkish involvement are true, it is clear that the war between these two former Soviet republics could rapidly spiral out of control, engulfing both a NATO member state, Turkey, and nuclear-armed Russia, Yerevan's main backer. Both Turkey and Russia have bilateral military pacts with their allies in Baku and Yerevan, respectively, ensuring military support in case of a war with a third party.

With Armenian officials leaving the door open to ask support from Russia and other allies, such a case would inevitably raise the prospect of an all-out regional or global war.

Armenian Ambassador to Russia Vardan Toghonyan said yesterday: "Whether there is now a statement on the possibility of contacting the CSTO or not, we have this opportunity. We are now discussing this issue in connection with the development of the situation." A military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) includes Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The terms of the CSTO treaty require all member states to respond militarily if any member state is attacked by a third country.

This war is the toxic product of the Stalinist regime's dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and three decades of escalating NATO imperialist war in the region. The Caucasus, an energy-rich, strategically-located trade and pipeline route through Eurasia, is at the heart of bitter geopolitical rivalries in the region involving all the major world powers. NATO's wars of the last decade vastly intensified tensions between Ankara and Moscow, who back opposing sides in the civil wars provoked by NATO in both Libya and Syria.

The current fighting takes place amid war preparations in Washington against both Russia and Iran. As Washington accelerates its effort to forge an anti-Iranian axis involving Israel and the Gulf oil sheikdoms, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared on Tuesday that "we are not ruling out a preliminary strike" against Tehran.

After US forces conducted provocative military exercises near Russian borders in Ukraine, NATO has raised the conflicts over the disputed Abkhazia and South Ossetia, calling Moscow to withdraw its forces from these breakaway regions in Georgia. In 2008, Tbilisi provoked a war with Russia over these regions. US and European media backed Georgia, falsely blaming the war on Russian peacekeepers stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ensuing Georgian Civil War.

At a joint press conference with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said: "We call on Russia to end its recognition of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to withdraw its forces." He also told Gakharia: "I encourage you to continue making full use of all the opportunities for coming closer to NATO, and to prepare for membership."

Stoltenberg's comments are a threat against Russia and mark a further, dangerous escalation of military tensions in the region. If Georgia joined NATO, a renewed Georgian attack on Abkhazia or South Ossetia—if NATO again blamed it on Russia—would let the Georgian government claim NATO was legally bound to go to war with Russia in its defense.

While the current Armenian-Azeri war and the 2008 war in Georgia are products of capitalist restoration in the USSR, exposing the reactionary character of nation-state system, the social

and economic crisis in both countries intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic is a key factor in the warmongering of the Azeri and Armenian ruling elites.

Class tensions in both countries were already explosive before the pandemic, and both Baku and Yerevan fear a social explosion in the working class as part of resurgence in the class struggle internationally against capitalist governments' homicidal response to the disease.

Yerevan launched its back-to-work campaign in early May, and it now has the highest death rate in Asia, with 959 deaths out of its 2.9 million population. 54 percent of Armenians said their financial situation has worsened due to the pandemic, 35 percent have lost their job or income, and one-third expect the situation to worsen, according to a poll conducted in July.

After it also lifted coronavirus measures prematurely, oil-rich Azerbaijan now faces a deep economic crisis linked to the collapse of global oil prices amid the pandemic. Income from oil exports fell 30 percent in the first half of 2020. Oil and gas sales account for nearly 40 percent of Azeri GDP and 81 percent of export revenues. According to an August report by Khazar University, 1.3 million people in Azerbaijan may lose their jobs due to the pandemic, or nearly 25 percent of Azerbaijan's nearly 5.1 million-strong labor force.

The only way forward against the escalating bloodshed in the Caucasus is to unite and mobilize the working class of all nationalities and ethnicities in the region and internationally against war and nationalism on the basis of a socialist program.

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