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## *No Dog in the Fight: Nagorno-Karabakh's Conflict*

### *Isn't About Us (or Russia)*

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Journalists and geo-strategists call it a "[frozen conflict](#)" – one of [several](#) such deadlocked disputes under tenuous ceasefire in the post-Soviet states. Only now, the long-standing battle between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) is anything but. For the third time since the Russian-brokered 22-year armed-truce – ending a bloody 1988-94 [war](#) that claimed some 30,000 lives – broke down in 2016, the antagonists are at it again. Yet this outbreak feels different, far bigger, with an ambitious Azerbaijan seemingly intent on cracking the whole stalemate wide open. Indeed, Baku's bellicose [rhetoric](#) has drifted towards that ever-disturbing language of "final settlements," "Karabakh is ours," and of a "[life-and-death war](#)" – befitting the "[blitzkrieg](#)" intensity of the Azeri strike.

Those of us in the nerdy-niche tribe of NK-watchers would argue this latest bloodshed shouldn't have surprised anyone. Still, almost everyone was. Thus far, through [five](#) full days of intense fighting, scores of soldiers and civilians have been [killed](#) and neither side wants to back down. Worse yet, one generic – and perceptibly inexperienced – mainstream press report after another has [emphasized](#) that the recent violence could "[draw in](#)" outside powers like Russia and Turkey. Some have [postulated](#) a "worst case scenario" of "all-out war" between the two. That's a pretty darn bold assertion, of questionable veracity, especially when delivered so reflexively and downright casually – plus usually absent context or caveat. These contentions are inherently problematic because they assume a Russian-role that isn't so stark, and simplify a Turkish posture that's indeed worrisome, but highly complicated. The whole media picture creates – as it tends to – a conflict-caricature that divines nefarious nemeses-hands behind every dispute and views every challenge through proxy war prisms. Could this be but a mirror of our own meddling?

Let's get a few things out of the way up front. The unfrozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh *is not*, and has never been, a vital interest to the United States. Even rather [establishment](#) American think tanks have admitted as much. Despite its Christian Armenian, and Muslim Azeri antagonists, this isn't one of the "clashes of civilizations" Professor Samuel Huntington [predicted](#) back when the conflict was in full gear. After all, Armenia's Christian co-religionist Georgian neighbor has [hardly been a friend](#) – having assisted U.S. and Muslim Azeri efforts to bypass Armenian territory with Caspian oil and gas pipelines, and recently conducted trilateral military exercises with Azerbaijan and Turkey.

It also didn't begin as, and has rarely been, a classic proxy war. All interested global and regional parties – yes, even Russia and Iran – have generally demonstrated restraint, hedged bets, and maintained links with both sides. Nor is Nagorno-Karabakh a microcosm of Russian-Western confrontation; in fact, it ["falls outside this stereotype."](#) However imperfectly, Europe, America, Russia, and other regional actors have more often than not cooperated to negotiate and maintain the NK-armistices.

In other words, as one comprehensive [analysis](#) correctly posited, the "combination of structural distinctiveness and geographic remoteness has made the Nagorno Karabakh (NK) conflict conceptually and strategically peripheral." To translate from the think-tankery: America doesn't really have a dog in this fight. Unless it decides it does – which it's apt to do, especially in this madcap moment. Yet if, and I fear when, Washington makes this about *us*, and our troubles with those wretched Russkies, matters will only worsen.

In other words, lesson one of recent American Foreign Policy 101.

### **Bad History: Long Memories and Intractable Backstory**

Don't tell a pundit or a politician now, but when wading into regional ruckus – it usually helps to know at least a few things about the thing. That ought include the relevant backstory, even – maybe especially – if, as the conflict-acquainted journalist Bill Keller once [observed](#): "The Karabakh conflict taught me that we need a statute of limitations on history." Damned if he couldn't have said the same about Lebanon, Iraq, the Balkans, or heck – the American Civil War. Nevertheless, even contested pasts – both Armenian and Azeri leaders [deny documented communal massacres](#) and peddle [in conspiracy theories](#) – matter more than a mite. Here's an abridged "idiot's guide" to a conflict hardly any policy players have heard of, and even few scholars want to touch:

For at least 150 years now, ethnic Armenian Christians held hefty majorities in the more mountainous ("Nagorno" in Russian, language of the pre-1991 imperial masters) bit of the Karabakh (aptly meaning "black garden" in Turkish, language of that other interested regional actor) district in the South Caucasus. In 1805, Tsarist Russia [conquered](#) the region, including all of what's now Armenia and Azerbaijan. Divide and conquer, pitting different ethnic and religious groups against one another to maintain order through designed instability was this – and most all – imperium's ruling tool of choice. So too it was with the new Soviet Empire "of the proletariat" after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.

It was in the gradual and contested consolidation of communist control – and the ensuing intra-Soviet politics over proceeding decades – that [established](#) the framework for the current NK-conflict. Initially, in 1920-21, things looked to be swinging in the direction of Armenia and self-determination for Nagorno-Karabakh's people. Unfortunately for them, the Azeri's had then been more amenable to communism and the precarious USSR hoped to placate the new Armenian-hating Turkish republic of Kemal Ataturk to earn a desperately needed ally. That didn't pan out, but the new Soviet commissar for nationalities, Josef Stalin (yes, *that* Stalin) reneged and established NK as an autonomous *Oblast* within the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). Despite occasional ethnic strife – often smothered by ample Soviet troops – that unhappy arrangement held for some 65 years.

However, this lengthy backstory aside, it's vital to recall that – contra modern Western orientalist assumptions – over the centuries the mixed Armenian-Azeri communities in the Karabakh region [generally cohabited peacefully](#). In that sense, they track the experience of Mideast Sunnis and Shia, whose conflict is [hardly](#) as ancient and hopelessly intractable as most Americans assume. Nagorno-Karabakh's current ethno-religious (emphasis on the ethnic) dispute – like the Muslim World's intra-confessional divide – is mainly a modern affair. Both were reignited by recent geopolitical contexts and catalysts. For NK that meant, however lamentably, the unintended effects of the last Soviet premier, Mikhail Gorbachev, and his Glasnost – or "opening" – political and social reforms in the late-1980s. (To review,

this means that Washington's recent tack [towards the Azeri position](#) not only places the US at odds with its supposed commitment to self-determination, but on the side of Stalin's ghost over Gorbachev's living legacy – isn't that fun?)

The lid blew off in 1988, when Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenian-super-majority sought independence from Azerbaijan. After its defeat in the Afghan War, and given Gorbachev's newly peaceful proclivity, the Soviet Army hadn't the stomach for its mass-suppression standard and mostly left the local antagonists to fight it out. The ensuing six-year war resulted in 25-30,000 deaths, about a million displaced persons, and with the Armenians in control of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven additional adjoining sub-regions – in total, nearly 20 percent of young Azerbaijan's territory.

Both sides engaged in atrocities, particularly [mass expulsions and ethnic cleansing](#). Large-scale combat stopped in 1994 with a Russian-brokered ceasefire, but neither side accepted the status quo and international settlement efforts like the tri-chaired – Russia, America, and France – Minsk Group barely moved the needle. Nevertheless, despite semi-regular – but usually short – violent outbursts, the Russian-orchestrated truce basically held for 22 years. It's not that any permanent resolution was forthcoming, but the absence of war was an accomplishment in itself.

So what changed by 2016 – when in the "[Four-Day War](#)" Azerbaijan recaptured small parcels of territory and at least [200 people were killed](#) – and especially during the run-up to the current combat in Nagorno-Karabakh? Well, three key things, actually. Specifically, the machinations of three "mad men."

#### **Mad Man #1: An emboldened Aliyev's opportunistic blitzkrieg.**

First, Baku's strategic calculus: the reality, and Azerbaijani perception, of a growing power and military mismatch with weaker Armenia. That plus Aliyev's not incorrect sense that the lingering status quo would ultimately favor its enemy. In international affairs too, it seems possession is often nine-tenths of the law, and the facts-on-the-ground benefit Armenia's de facto occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven other Azeri-majority districts it won in battle during the 1988-94 war. Time isn't on Aliyev's side, diplomatically, so he decided on a game changer. Say what you want about this scion of Azerbaijan's [mini-Stalinist](#) autocratic dynasty, but – like his daddy Heydar – Ilkham Aliyev sure (thinks he) can read a regional room.

There's always been an implicit – if initially unrealized – potential power gap between these two small countries fighting for a Caucasus sliver the size of Rhode Island. It begins with raw population numbers: 9.9 million Azeris versus 2.9 million Armenians, or almost a 3.5-to-one ratio. Their respective military arsenals are also increasingly [mismatched](#). Azerbaijan's defense expenditures now hover between \$2 to \$3.5 billion annually – in 2014, for example, it spent \$3.43 on its military, [compared](#) to just \$458 million by Armenia, about 7.5-to-one. Baku also imported 20 times more arms than Armenia from 2012-16.

In the interest (initially) of shaving off some of Baku's Caspian energy supplies, and (then) contain arch-rival Iran to its south, Washington has disproportionately [upped](#) its security-sector investments to favor Azerbaijan. Most recently, Trump's taken the gap to obscene levels, bolstering Baku's aid from about \$3 million in 2016-17 to some \$100 million in 2018-19. Armenia, on the other hand, received just \$4.2 million in US security assistance in 2018 – or about a 25-to-one ratio. In other words, official Washington can protest its NK-neutrality to the high heavens but – unlike Russia's [relatively](#) balanced arms bonanza with both – America arms one side to the teeth at the expense of the other, then feigns ignorance and shock when its favored party puts all that "Made in the U.S.A." gear to good use.

As a not irrelevant side note: there's also a corruption gap between the two antagonists. While neither is a particularly free or open society, the current Transparency International

[Index](#) ranks Armenia as 77th out of 198, and America's vaguely favored friend Azerbaijan at 126th on the same list.

In another odd twist, Shia Muslim Azerbaijan (along with Iran and Bahrain, one of the few majority-Shiite nation-states) has long [consorted](#), conspired, and traded arms with Israel – not a bad big brother to have in a fight. In the last few battles, the Azeris have even slammed [Israeli-supplied](#) suicide kamikaze drones into Armenian positions. Overall, Baku is the [third-largest](#) purchaser of Israeli arms, buying a cool \$137 million's worth in 2017 alone.

Furthermore, Aliyev's aggression may be geared for domestic edification. Amidst the economic turmoil of waning energy prices and popular frustration with his dynastic corruption, he's whipped up nationalist revanchism – a move right out of the strongman's playbook. Look back to the language. On Sunday, Aliyev [called](#) "settlement" of the NK-conflict "our historic duty," so that "the Azerbaijani people are satisfied." He is no doubt partly responding to the thousands of angry Azeri citizens who [poured](#) into Baku's streets in July, demanding the government mobilize the army wage war on Armenia. Azeri police had to arrest several protesters to tamp down this popular outburst.

In fact, though both sides profess obligatory innocence, Azerbaijan probably started the current combat. It's no accident that a researcher at Germany's Bremen University [said of](#) the recent Azeri offensive: "This is a blitzkrieg, of course." Also, given the order of battle, weapons employed, and intensity of the assault, it appears Baku has likely planned the attack for years. For example, it bears noting that Baku [threatened to target Armenia's nuclear power plant](#) back in July.

Of course, even beset with internal insecurity, economic instability, and not-easily bottled popular jingoism, [Khan](#) Aliyev II might not have gone into full conqueror-mode without the presumed – and/or actual – promise of [more Turkish support than usual](#). Enter President [now nearly for-life] Recep Tayip Erdogan, head of NATO's second-largest army and perhaps the most madcap meddler of all.

### **Mad Man #2: Sultan Erdogan and NATO fracture.**

Another favored regional (among Ankara's [enemies](#)) and Western media trope these days is Erdogan's [neo-Ottoman](#) angle – the idea that the strongman seeks a rebirth of the old empire: to [make Turkey great again](#)! TAGA, anyone? Some of this is overblown – confusing capacity with aspiration. Still, there's something to Erdogan's delusions of grandeur. Turkish troops [invaded](#) and persistently patrol northern Syria, and it both [bombs](#) and deploys its private mercenary army in Libya. Erdogan's ambition outruns his actual capabilities or strategic competence, but his authoritarian hyper-nationalist [chauvinism](#) ensures that it is a different sort of Turkey approaching Nagorno-Karabakh's latest outbreak. Ankara under this sultan has demonstrably drifted away from NATO Europe, and towards the Greater Levant and Central Asia. This doesn't bode well for a South Caucasus conflict. Thus, [according](#) to a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group, "Turkey is definitely a wild card in any escalation." Some of Ankara's bias is perhaps natural: Azeris are ethnically and linguistically Turkic. They share common cultures and historical memories of [nomadic steppe-horsemen greatness](#). Yet the ties of blood and native tongues only go so far. Though halting and regionally uneven, Turkey's Russia rapprochement has also been [real](#). Though Ankara and Moscow do, in fact, back opposing sides in the Libyan and Syrian civil wars, they've also maintained trade ties, cut natural gas deals and Turkey even angered the US by buying Russian antiaircraft missiles. Though Baku denies it, Armenian foreign ministry spokesmen have [claimed](#) Turkish "military experts" – and perhaps even Ankara-paid Syrian mercenaries – are fighting alongside Azerbaijani troops this time around. On Tuesday, Armenia [alleged](#) that a Turkish fighter jet shot down one of its planes, killing the pilot – though Ankara denied it. So far, much of that may be a stretch but it's hardly outside the realm of possibility. After all, this year Turkey [shipped](#) 5,000 such Syrian soldiers of fortune to turn the Libyan tide in favor of

its favored faction in that civil war (incidentally, Russian hired guns from the Wagner Group fight on the other side). While an overt Turkish military intervention, or attack on its eastern Armenian neighbor, still seems unlikely, Ankara is more liable than ever to escalate and catalyze conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Again, look too to Erdogan's language – which disturbingly tracks the Azeri line. Early this week, he [spoke of](#) Armenia's "occupation" of NK, and said it was time for the dispute "to be put to an end." Talk of final solutions to frozen conflicts rarely end well.

In case any further proof was needed that a utility-diminishing NATO has all but reached its [breaking point](#), on Wednesday, French President Emmanuel Macron [blamed](#) Erdogan's "warlike" rhetoric for removing "Azerbaijan's inhibitions in reconquering Nagorno-Karabakh." These two ostensible NATO brethren have traded insults – after their navies [nearly came to blows](#) off Libya's coast this July – calling each other, and perhaps the whole Atlantic Alliance "[brain-dead](#)." Both may be right.

Then there's the minor matter that in backing Turkey – in NK especially – America sides with a government full of [official genocide deniers](#). Remember, part of the reason for all those fraught ties between Ankara and Yerevan is that the Turks *still* won't fess up to displacing, starving, and killing a million odd Armenians during the First World War. It's a deeply held non-culpability delusion: in 2016, a Turkish exchange officer in a strategy class at Fort Leavenworth nearly tore my head off when I politely nudged him on the subject. (Incidentally, he soon left the course and sought asylum in the US after Erdogan stymied [a suspicious coup-attempt](#) that July – fearing himself among the many military personas non grata in its wake.)

### **Mad Man #3: The boys in Washington and their imaginary Russian-monster friend.**

Finally, the world family's crazy curmudgeonly Uncle, Sam, is more of a wildcard than at any time in three plus decades of NK-strife. Washington styles itself the foremost "honest broker" for global conflicts; but it's [almost never](#) that. Ever heard of Palestine? However, as Nagorno-Karabakh has shown, even the most tangential and distant discord belies America's professed straight-dealing. Ole Sam hasn't met a far-flung fracas in which he won't take sides, seek personal benefit, accelerate, and counterproductively catalyze, for quite some time now. And if Washington catches a whiff of Russia? Well, then it's game on.

The US has long had its vulturous eyes on the region, especially after the Soviet Union's final collapse in 1991. It [still does](#) – more so maybe. As a student at the Army's Command and General Staff College (CGSC) in 2016-17, all us officers focused almost exclusively on planning fictitious, but highly realistic, combat missions in the South Caucasus region. As I recall, our recurring scenario involved defending Azerbaijan (and, incidentally, its pipelines and Caspian Basin energy sources) from a northbound attack from a breakaway statelet of ethnic-Azeri Iranians. We planned, practiced, and simulated offloading troops, tanks, and supplies at Georgia's Black Sea ports, through its capital Tbilisi – bypassing Russian and Armenian territory, and staying clear of the Nagorno-Karabakh third-rail, naturally – into the frontlines in southern Azerbaijan. Come to think of it, in the war-game, US forces traced a rather reverse [route](#) of the corporate-crafted BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Turkey) pipeline...must've been a coincidence.

To be fair, my own joint strategy instructor was a thoughtful, sensible guy who eschewed the mission's potential for grandiosity – always questioning our ambitions, challenging assumptions, and emphasizing regional tensions and limitations. In fact, he was the person who first truly peaked my interest on Nagorno-Karabakh. That said, to my knowledge, he didn't choose the scenario – and the fact that similar war-games [infused](#) the military world for a couple of decades speaks to the thinking in Washington. And while Armenia stayed tangential to the CGSC training, it was quite clear that Azerbaijan was the protected



protagonist – invaded by putatively Iranian factions (and, of course, the Russian menace was always in the air).

All of which reflects an increasingly (if inconsistently) Azeri-friendly US posture since the late 1990s. Despite the real, but oft-inflated influence of the Armenian-American Lobby – consider it the [Kardashian Factor](#) (Kim has been weighing-in with a [series of tweets](#)) – the Washington winds have been blowing Baku's way for quite a while. As [Antiwar.com](#)'s own, the late Justin Raimondo – a rare NK-watcher – [explained](#) during the first major post-truce explosion in 2016, US policy in the South Caucasus is driven by two main motives: energy and encirclement [of Russia].

The [view from Moscow](#) – and frankly from objective outer space – is clear: since the late 1990s, the US has geographically (through overt [NATO eastward-expansion](#)) and diplomatically (by denying any legitimacy to Russia's sphere, or say, in regional affairs) caged-in the Bear. Washington would've gone far further if its (at a minimum) [encouraged](#) "color revolutions" along Russia's borders – "Rose:" Georgia, 2003; "Orange:" Ukraine, 2004; "Denim" and "Tulip:" Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, 2005) hadn't fallen flat, and that pesky Putin hadn't used force in 2008 to keep a rather [aggressive](#) little Georgia from joining NATO. It's only gotten worse since then, as the entire bipartisan Washington establishment has donned [facts-resistant](#) Russia-alarm goggles, particularly since Donald Trump's election. Pundits and politicians alike now view every global conflict through these Moscow-facing lens.

Then there's the money to follow. While its markets, sources, and the US supply-situation have since diminished certain energy-urgency, Washington seems stuck in the oil-is-everything past. It was that calculus which, in the late 1990s, helped push America towards Azeri-amenable positions in the Caucasus. The key was that BTC pipeline and the [announcement](#) by Papa Aliyev of "the Contract of the Century" – apparently strongmen speak similar slangs. That centennial deal amounted to an agreement with a consortium of oil companies – Amoco, Pennzoil, British Petroleum, Unocal, McDermott, Statoil, Lukoil, and the state-owned Turkish and Saudi enterprises, which granted them exclusive rights to Azerbaijan's oil and gas reserves.

Adding insult to injury, it's another "[inconvenient truth](#)" of his career that in 1997, now environmentalist-guru and then vice president Al Gore [presided over](#) the White House signing ceremony of four additional Caspian Sea contracts between Aliyev-senior and US oil giants Exxon, Chevron, Mobil, and Amoco (which merged with British Petroleum-BP a year later). The deals were reportedly worth some \$8 billion. As it relates to NK, there's one salient fact to keep in mind: Armenia has no oil reserves to speak of. But I'm sure that nasty corporate cash would never sway the evenhandedness of honest Abe's successors in Washington.

Only wait for it: the 2016 burst of NK-combat – what Raimondo [dubbed](#) "The April Fool's War" – was launched by Azerbaijan just as Aliyev-the-Younger was flying back from Washington. In that meeting, Secretary of State John Kerry used suspiciously Azeri-inflected language, calling for "an ultimate resolution" to the decades-old conflict. Kerry's (maybe) unwittingly incendiary phrasing was absurd, Justin wrote, "because the 'crisis' has already been resolved" – meaning the facts on the ground support a de facto independent Nagorno-Karabakh that accords with self-determination, as well as the world as it is.

No doubt, there are serious outstanding issues and Baku has real grievances: the expelled NK-Azeris have a right to return and the seven additional Azeri-majority occupied districts should be handed back to Baku. Nevertheless, by pretending that there's a solution that involves peaceful reintegration of Armenian super-majority Nagorno-Karabakh into Azerbaijan, the US all but green-lights Baku's resort to game-changing conquest.

**The Ghost of Woodrow Wilson**

At root, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – and US perceptions of it – comes down to the seemingly incompatible tension between two geopolitical and international legal principles: [Armenian] self-determination and [Azerbaijani] territorial sovereignty. So far, all attempts to square that circle – in Moscow, Brussels, and various international bodies – have failed. Washington, though, has barely tried – especially since the energy-crazy late-1990s and the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Funny, isn't it, how inconsistently various American administrations have applied the self-determination principle [pronounced](#) by President Woodrow Wilson in January 1918? Not that Wilson evenly applied his own policy either (Just ask anti-imperialists like Mao or Ho Chi Minh how *they* [fared](#) at the Versailles Peace Conference). In fact, from the first, contradictory commitment to popular sovereignty was an American trademark: you can talk to a Kurd, or a Palestinian, or some [Kashmiris](#) about that. Furthermore, since the fall of the USSR, the US and a compliant West treat the synthetic post-Soviet state borders – Justin [called](#) Azerbaijan a "Soviet fiction, created by Stalin," back in 1999 – as inerrant gospel only when it suits them. Take just a few examples: Kosovar Albanians – possessed with [remarkably similar](#) arguments as the NK-Armenians, by the way – apparently deserved to carve an independent state out of Serbia. In fact, the US Air Force went to war on behalf of the rather [checkered](#) Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in the late Clinton-era. Yet, Russian-friendly Abkhazian or South Ossetian [minorities](#) – who want out of post-Soviet Georgia – or even locals voting for autonomy or outside-accession in Nagorno Karabakh (1991) or Crimea (2014)? Nah, Uncle Sam says they have no inherent right to self-determine or choose which state they live in. *Their* borders are inalterable, see.

To Washingtonians, the degree of popular sovereignty rights all depends which way the people in question are perceived to lean – East or West, so to speak. Even inconsistency can be consistent.

Still, Russia doesn't deserve most of the rancor it receives regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. Despite having a military base in Armenia and the country being a signatory to the Russian-led NATO-facsimile Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Moscow isn't terribly close to Yerevan on this issue. While [some claim](#) "Armenia has become a pawn in the Kremlin's geopolitical games," because Russia convinced Armenia to scuttle an association agreement with the European Union (and instead join the Eurasian Economic Union, a Moscow-led free-trade bloc). Predictably, few Westerners bother ask why Armenia *should* be tied to the EU – it's not even located in Europe.

Besides, the lukewarm relationship is reciprocated. Indeed, Russia's responsible hedging behavior during the NK conflicts has, [according](#) to the director of a think tank in Yerevan, engendered "a justified Armenian perception of questionable and unreliable backing from Russia in the event the current fighting expands." That's understandable, given that the spokesman for the supposedly neo-imperial-obsessed Kremlin [said Monday](#) that "[they] are not talking now about military options."

Still, make no mistake: on its merits, Nagorno-Karabakh has not – and need not – be a classic proxy war. This isn't Libya or Syria – though Turkish, and/or American interventions could help make it so.

For their part, America's favorite bad boys – Russia and Iran – have generally shown remarkable restraint in Nagorno-Karabakh, past and present. The former has quickly [called on](#) both sides to "immediately halt fire and begin talks to stabilize the situation." One might assume the latter would back its co-religionist Shia Muslims in Azerbaijan; or conversely, that Iran – [pushed](#) ever closer to Moscow by U.S. enmity – would tack towards Russia's treaty-allied Armenians. Yet Tehran has rarely come down strongly on either side.

Few observers, even among the more aggressive Iran hawks, realize that the Islamic Republic is hardly a homogenous state. Perhaps [20 percent](#) of its people are ethnically Azeri; which at

10-15 million souls is greater than the total population of Azerbaijan. Yet, lest one assume that instantly translates into support for Baku, [in fact](#) Persian-dominated Tehran tends to fear its occasionally restive Azeri minority and resents its northern neighbor's amenability to Israeli encirclement of their embattled Islamic Republic. Furthermore, Iran – like Armenia and (mostly) Russia – was notably [excluded](#) from the U.S.-organized Azeri oil consortium. That doesn't mean Tehran necessarily pivots to Christian Armenia either; rather, that its response to the latest fighting has basically been balanced and circumspect. During the smaller July outbreak of violence, one of its senior diplomats [said only](#) that "Iran supports a peaceful solution," – that while "we support the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan...we are interested in resolving the issue through dialogue in favor of Azerbaijan...when it comes to war and military conflict, we do not agree at all with this subject and prefer to maintain the status quo."

Hardly words commensurate with the "Mad Mullahs" of American imaginations.

Meanwhile, on Monday, that supposed Moscow-mule of an American president, Donald J. Trump, simply [said](#) of the current NK-outbreak, "We're looking at it very strongly...We'll see if we can stop it."

Trump is hardly a geostrategic whiz – one doubts he'd ever heard tell of Nagorno-Karabakh. Still, like it (or him) or not, in this case his perfunctory, and somewhat dismissive, realism inadvertently reflects what's what. Sad indeed, that it takes a foreign policy sub-neophyte like The Donald to put his finger on what's at stake and what's not for the US in NK; to denote the limits of American power, interests, and investment in this Caucasus backwater. But it is what it is.

In Nagorno-Karabakh, count me highly [Hippocratic](#): "*primum non nocere*"..."first, do no harm."

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