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Crises in Nagorno-Karabakh and Kyrgyzstan: Russia's Interests

By Chris Cheang

SYNOPSIS

After political unrest in Belarus, the ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and the sudden political upheaval in Kyrgyzstan appear, at first glance, to threaten Russia's foremost position in the former Soviet space.

COMMENTARY

THE OUTBREAK of hostilities on 27 September 2020 over Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the political upheaval in Kyrgyzstan over disputed parliamentary elections on 5 October, do not mean Russian influence in the region is on the wane. Rather, they manifest underlying instability in parts of the former Soviet space, due to unresolved political and territorial differences.

The Russian-brokered Armenian-Azeri ceasefire agreement on 10 October has since broken down. In Kyrgystan, Moscow is cautious in approaching the dramatic power play where President Sooronbai Jeenbekov had resigned and his political rival, Sadyr Japarov, is now acting president after becoming appointed prime minister. President Vladimir Putin has avoided getting directly involved in the turmoil in the Kyrgyz republic.

Russia's Balancing Strategy

Russia has had good reasons not to portray itself as an overbearing factor in these countries' affairs though it is clear that only Moscow has the resources, political will and motivation to play the crucial role in any solution. President Putin's attention has been focussed on domestic socio-economic issues arising from the negative impact of COVID-19 on the economy and nearer home, the political trouble in Belarus.

Relations with the European Union, principally Germany, have deteriorated further over the imposition of limited sanctions over the poisoning of Alexei Navalny. Moreover, the final stages of the US presidential election and latest polls indicating a possible Biden victory, occupy Putin's mind, given his admiration for President Donald Trump.

Together with the US and France, Russia is a co-chair of the Minsk Group, which since 1994, has spearheaded international efforts to find a peaceful solution to the NK conflict. Russia has close but balanced relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

While Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) with a Russian military base on its territory, Russian obligations to Armenia's defence are confined to external attacks on its territory (NK is not internationally recognised as Armenian territory). Armenia is also a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU); Russia is its major trade partner.

Russia is reportedly not enamoured of the current Armenian government which it sees as having come to power as a consequence of street demonstrations against the previous government, said to have been friendlier to Moscow. Hence, it does not feel pressure to militarily support Armenia.

Azerbaijan's military is stronger than Armenia's. With 10 million people and an energy-rich economy, it has the advantage over the smaller Armenia with its three million population. Russia neither wants a total Azeri victory nor an indisputable Armenian defeat. To balance them, Russia has been selling weapons to both sides.

There is also a domestic dimension to Russia's calculations. There is a very large Azeri and Armenian diaspora in Russia (about two million for each community) and Moscow is keen on ensuring that the current conflict does not translate into instability between these communities on Russian soil.

The Turkish Factor

Turkey's support of Azerbaijan is of concern to Russia; it already has policy differences with Turkey over Syria and Libya. Since Azerbaijan is already close to Turkey, Russia does not wish to push it closer to Ankara by openly supporting Armenia.

Russian concern about growing Turkish influence in Azerbaijan is also linked to a deep fear of the possible introduction of Syrian fighters aligned to Turkey into the Caucasus, where Russia is battling Chechens and other Muslim groups. Escalation of the conflict could also drag Russia into hostilities with Turkey.

Russia would not want to upset its relations with Turkey. As pointed out by President Putin at the annual Valdai Discussion Club (VDC) in Moscow on 22 October, bilateral trade between the two countries exceeded US\$20 billion, both sides implemented the TurkStream energy project and Turkey purchased Russia's S-400 missile system.

It also stands to reason that Turkey's troubled relations with NATO are not necessarily disadvantageous to Russia's strategic interests.

The Kyrgyz Front

Russia has links with the opposing sides and does not want to appear favouring factions in the traditional north-south divide. Members of the Kyrgyz elite are invariably Russian-educated, retain strong links with and look to Russia more than any other power. While neighbouring China's economic influence is strong, anti-Chinese sentiments in Kyrgyzstan are rising and becoming harder to manage.

Remittances from Kyrgyz migrant workers in Russia accounted for around a third of gross domestic product in 2018; while COVID-19 has led to many losing their jobs, Russia is likely to remain its main market for Kyrgyz labour; being a member of the EAEU, Kyrgyz workers do not require a work permit. Russia has also implemented projects valued at US\$500 million.

Kyrgyzstan is a CSTO member and hosts a major Russian air base. While Russia is concerned about the situation, direct Russian intervention is unlikely. There is no direct land access to Kyrgyzstan for Russia to project its military power rapidly and efficiently. Russia is also mindful of the probable negative Western reaction to any intervention and would not want to introduce an additional issue into its current tense relations with the West.

Thirdly, no anti-Russian sentiments have been expressed by the competing factions in Kyrgyzstan. Finally, Russia did not directly intervene in the previous political upheavals in 2005 and 2010; there is no compelling reason for it to do so now.

Avoiding EU and US Entry

Given the protracted and highly emotional nature of the NK conflict and the role of Turkey, Russia has to move strategically. Moscow has no desire to let the EU and the US into this arena, and complicate Moscow's own balancing strategy.

The ambitions of the Turkish president and his Azeri counterpart require careful handling as they could complicate Russian interests in the Middle East and the Black Sea/Caspian Sea region.

It is also too early to ascertain whether and how Kyrgyzstan's political turmoil could end soon. However, the one constant factor is that without Russia's involvement or influence one way or the other, the chances of any solution to these unstable developments would be practically nil.

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