

Armenia's last round?

by GWYNNE DYER

The Armenians are a people of great antiquity ? the first Armenian kingdom was in the 8th century BC ? but they grew up in a tough neighbourhood, and they have been in retreat for a very long time.

They lost their independence to the Persians, then to Alexander the Great, then to the Romans and the Byzantine empire and the Seljuk Turks and the Ottoman empire and the Russians, bleeding territory at almost every step.

Armenia's borders stabilised under the Russian empire and the Soviet Union, but after the Soviet collapse in 1991 they got their independence back and the border problems started again. They held their own against the neighbours for a while, but now they are making a bad mistake.

It's still a rough neighbourhood ? Turkey to the west, Iran to the south, Azerbaijan to the east, and Georgia to the north (with Russia just beyond Georgia) ? and Armenians are minnows in a sea of sharks. Turkey is 85 million people, Iran is 89 million, even Azerbaijan is 10 million ? and Armenia is 2.7 million.

Having a serious border dispute with Azerbaijan was unlucky, but the Armenians couldn't help it. In Stalin's time Moscow deliberately drew the borders of the non-Russian republics in ways that would foster disputes between them: it was a tactic that strengthened imperial control.

Armenia and Azerbaijan both got their independence from Russia in 1991. However, there was an enclave of 150,000 Armenians inside Azerbaijan called Nagorno-Karabakh and a similar-sized exclave of half a million Azeris on the far side of Armenia proper. So there was an immediate war, of course (1991-1994), and the Armenians won it.

Russia, as the former imperial power, helped negotiate the ceasefire and guaranteed it. The Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh kept all the land they had in Soviet times plus about as much again around it, and a road corridor to Armenia proper guarded by Russian troops.

There were several opportunities in the following years to make a peace deal that left all the existing borders in place, but turbulent Armenian domestic politics sabotaged them. By 2020 Azerbaijan had used its oil wealth to build up its army and buy attack drones from Turkey, and it reopened the war.

The drones carried the day. The Armenian troops in Nagorno-Karabakh, which was effectively being run by Armenia, were decimated, and by the time of the ceasefire (mediated by Vladimir Putin) even much of the core territory of the enclave had been captured. So had the road leading west to Armenia proper, but Russian troops kept it open.

It might have stayed like that for many more years, but last year Putin invaded Ukraine. By December the Azerbaijanis had figured out that the Russians were too distracted by that war to worry about Armenia, so they imposed a blockade on that single road to Nagorno-Karabakh ? and the Russian troops did nothing.

There are now dire food shortages in Nagorno-Karabakh, and in desperation Armenia's prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, has turned to the United States for help. There are still Russian military bases in Armenia, but the first joint exercise between Armenian and American troops got underway on Monday.

Armenia has also sent its first humanitarian aid to Ukraine, in a deliberate snub to the Russians, and it has moved to ratify the treaty establishing the International Criminal Court (which has indicted Putin as a war criminal).

The Armenians' anger is understandable, as the Russians have been their only useful ally for decades, but they should remember that Russia has no strategic or economic interests in Armenia. It only supports the country out of imperial nostalgia and Christian solidarity. Both are quite fragile motivations.

It is therefore foolish for Prime Minister Pashinyan to imagine that the United States can or would take Russia's place. Seen from Washington, Armenia is an opportunity to embarrass the Russians, but it's too far away, too inaccessible, too poor and unimportant to waste much American time or money on, let alone American lives.

Azerbaijan is not looking for another war, and it's certainly not planning a genocide. The 'blockade' is illegal, but it is only on the road from Armenia proper. People in Nagorno-Karabakh can bring in food any time they want by the roads that connect it to the rest of Azerbaijan. They won't, but that's just a matter of principle.

If there was ever a chance to make Nagorno-Karabakh part of Armenia, it was lost many years ago. Cutting a good deal for the Armenian minority in Azerbaijan is still possible ? and if the Armenian government doesn't believe that, then all the more it needs the Russians.

Putin was always awful and now he's abandoned them, but for Armenians Russia is still the only game in town. Before they bet the farm on the Americans, they should have a chat with the Kurds.