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The 2023 Nagorno- Karabakh War: How a Frozen Conflict Bursts into Flames

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Abstract

This study examines why the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict escalated in September 2023, with the decision of Azerbaijan to intervene militarily. By using a single case study and process tracing methodology, this research investigates the interplay between systemic and domestic factors that influenced this decision. Neorealism and neoclassical realism serve as the theoretical frameworks for this analysis. The study finds that regional instability, particularly the shifts in power dynamics, influenced by weakened Russian presence and enhanced Azerbaijani-Turkish relations, created a strategic opportunity for Azerbaijan to assert control over Nagorno-Karabakh. This supports the neorealist theory that focuses on the systemic factors. At the same time, President Ilham Aliyev's decisive and task-oriented leadership style, revealed through Leadership Trait Analysis, was crucial in translating these systemic pressures into military action. This aligns with neoclassical realism. The findings show that both systemic and domestic factors played important roles in shaping Azerbaijan's actions. This research helps to explain how different factors drive state behavior in conflicts and highlights the critical role of leadership in making foreign policy decisions.

Keywords

Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, neorealism, neoclassical realism, military intervention, leadership trait analysis, Ilham Aliyev.

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List of Abbreviations

BTC = Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan
 CSTO = Collective Security Treaty Organization
 EU = European Union
 IR = International Relations
 LTA = Leadership Trait Analysis
 NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization
 NCR = Neoclassical Realism
 NK = Nagorno-Karabakh
 OSCE = Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
 QCA = Qualitative content analysis
 SU = Soviet Union
 UN = the United Nations
 US = United States of America

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1. Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union (SU) resulted in the collapse of the bipolar world order and the dominant Cold War discourse in international relations (IR). In this chaotic environment, new independent states emerged in the post-Soviet environment together with destructive wars (Özkan, 2008). The Caucasus, seen as the most diverse region of the Soviet Union in terms of linguistics and culture, harbored almost one-third of these ethnic conflicts. The Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict is the most complex and longest-running unresolved dispute in the post-Soviet space. The conflict started already three years before the collapse of the SU when the autonomous region of NK declared its independence from Azerbaijan to join Armenia (ibid.). After Armenian members of NK's parliament voted to unify the region with Armenia on 20 February 1988, violent attacks against minority populations in Armenia and Azerbaijan started. In December 1991, after the approval of the referendum for the creation of an independent state, Azeri troops and Armenian secessionists started the first all-out war. After three years of fighting, the de facto independent state was left in the hands of ethnic Armenians when the Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement was signed in 1994. During the fighting between 1992 and 1994, up to 30,000 people have lost their lives and more than a million Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Muslim Kurds, and others permanently lost their homes (BBC News, 2023). Azerbaijanis fled Armenia, NK, and the adjacent territories, while Armenians left homes in Azerbaijan. Only a small part of them have returned to their homes since the ceasefire (Crisis Group, 2023). The feature of this state of affairs an example of the continuation of the region's frozen conflicts in the Russian near abroad, of which Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria are similar examples. A frozen conflict can be defined as 'a violent ethno-political conflict over secession that has led to the establishment of a de facto regime that is recognized by neither the international community nor the rump state from which the secession occurred' (Clancy & Nagle, 2009). As the violence surrounding the secession has largely abated, the conflict is considered to be 'frozen'. A conflict is considered 'frozen' when there is no active fighting, no comprehensive peace agreement, and unresolved political and territorial disputes. These conflicts typically involve occasional clashes without significant changes in control, with embedded positions by conflicting parties and external powers maintaining the status quo (Caspersen, 2017; Geldenhuys, 2009).

From 1994 until 2020 there was a great risk that the war would burst into flames again. In April 2016, four days of intense fighting at the line of separation killed hundreds of people on both sides (Crisis Group, 2023). After these four days both sides unexpectedly announced a ceasefire and the continuation of peace talks. In September 2020, Azerbaijan launched an assault that recaptured the territory around NK. Around 3,000 Azerbaijani soldiers and 4,000 Armenian soldiers were killed after six weeks of fighting before another Russian-brokered truce (BCC News, 2023). Three years later, on 19 September 2023, three decades of de facto independence for the breakaway region was ended by Azerbaijan's lightning attack on NK (Landgraf & Seferian, 2024). Baku had begun a blockade of the enclave nine months earlier, and the assault overwhelmed local Armenian forces within just 24 hours. This Azerbaijani military offensive led to the rapid capitulation and break-up of the territory's governing authority and changed the local, regional, and global power dynamics. The frozen conflict burst into flames once again and this time it did not end with a Russian-brokered ceasefire, but with Azerbaijani victory. This is a significant change in the regional power dynamics. Russia had been the most dominant and influential player in the region, shaping the trajectory of the conflict for a few decades. But after the NK war in September 2023, The President of NK, Samvel Shahramanyan, decided to dissolve his government and all state institutions by 1 January 2024. This marked the end of decades of conflict, and potentially the end of centuries of Armenian presence in the region (Edwards, 2023).

The NK conflict has always been part of the global power struggle in the Eurasian continent (Kakachia, 2009). Regional and international powers such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the United States (US) as well as international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations (UN), and the European Union (EU) have been significant players in the region (Uzer, 2012). The three principal regional powers, Russia, Turkey, and Iran, all have a differing stance towards the issue (German, 2023). While Iran always remained neutral, the Turkish and Russian interests in this region collide. Russia and Turkey back opposing sides of the conflict over the NK region: Moscow has a defence pact with Yerevan while Ankara has a strategic partnership with Baku. This conflict is however not only shaped by the external environment but also by domestic factors, such as the leadership styles of key figures in the conflict. For example, Ismayilzada (2021) described the evolution of the discourse of President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, as a transition from hopeful and constructive narratives towards more dissatisfaction, frustration, and pro-war sentiments. This shift in leadership rhetoric is also a crucial factor in understanding the war's development.

This study examines how both systemic factors and domestic factors intersect to explain the decision of Azerbaijan to let the NK conflict burst into flames in September 2023. The research question therefore is: *'What factors can account for the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in September 2023, leading to its unresolved status?'*

The core of this research is to understand the complex interplay between systemic and domestic factors in the context of frozen conflict dynamics. This will be done by reflecting upon both neorealistic and neoclassical realistic theory (NCR). These two key theoretical perspectives of IR are specifically chosen to research the impact of the international system on the behavior of Azerbaijan (systemic) (neorealism), but also to include domestic factors that act as mediators through which systemic outcomes are eventually produced, such as decision-makers' perceptions and leadership styles of key actors in the conflict (domestic) (NCR). This research focuses thus on systemic pressures but also translates this through intervening and mediating variables at the unit level.

1.1 Methods

This research employs a single case study design, focusing on Azerbaijan's military offensive of September 2023 that resulted in the end of the NK conflict and the de facto state. The NK conflict serves as a unique case, enabling the research of interactions at various levels of analysis. Through this case study, we will enhance our understanding of the explanatory strength of neorealism and NCR. Process tracing will be used to investigate the causal mechanisms behind Azerbaijan's actions, providing a detailed analysis of the sequence of events and underlying factors. This method will help determine if the theoretical expectations of neorealism and NCR are evident in this specific case. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and strategic decisions leading to the intervention.

In terms of data collection, the primary sources for this research include official speeches of Ilham Aliyev, providing insights into his leadership style. Besides this, secondary sources such as academic books and articles written by scholars in political science will be used in order to examine the developments.

1.2 Societal and Academic Relevance

Conducting this research provides valuable insights in various factors that contribute to the escalation of frozen conflicts under a level-of-analysis approach. By scrutinizing the NK case, this research may identify common patterns and recurring themes in the escalation of frozen conflicts. This includes systemic pressures, and domestic factors. Recognizing these patterns enhances the generalizability of findings to other frozen conflicts that share similar characteristics. Examples of other frozen conflicts that share potential similarities and could benefit from the insights generated by this research include the conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. These regions, like NK, have experienced periods of frozen status and intermittent escalations, making them relevant comparators for assessing the broader applicability of findings.

In addition to the academic relevance, lessons learned from the NK case may encourage international organizations, governments, and non-governmental actors to engage in proactive peacemaking efforts. They could utilize the insights gained from the NK case to guide negotiations and conflict resolution initiatives.

1.3 Overview

This research is structured in five chapters. In the second chapter, the study's theoretical framework will be developed. The research delves into the theoretical underpinnings that guide the multi-level analysis of Azerbaijan's decision-making in response to the NK conflict escalation. This theoretical framework centers on the contributions of neorealism and NCR. This sets the stage for the subsequent theoretical hypotheses that will guide this study. Chapter three presents the methodological framework of this research, together with the case study design, data analysis technique and the data collection strategy. This chapter also discusses how the theoretical hypotheses will be tested, and the key concepts are operationalized. In chapter four, the research findings will be presented. This chapter consists of a detailed exploration of Azerbaijan's decision to escalate the conflict in September 2023, focusing on the shifts in regional power dynamics and shifts in Ilham Aliyev's leadership style. The findings will thus address both systemic and domestic factors. This research then ends with chapter five, which presents the conclusions of the analysis. I will also elaborate on the limitations and shortcomings of this study and provide recommendations for further research.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides the theoretical foundations for the empirical research that will be conducted in chapter four. This research uses neorealism and neoclassical realism (NCR), two theoretical approaches of IR, in order to provide an explanation of the causes that led to the decision of Azerbaijan to launch a military offensive in September 2023. First, I will provide a brief overview of the intellectual history of realism as the ontological and epistemological background of this theory provides the basis for both neorealism and NCR. Subsequently, I will give a more extensive explanation of neorealism and NCR and then both theories will be applied to this specific research. This also includes an explanation of the critique on both theories. This chapter will be concluded by the formulation of two theoretical hypotheses that are examined for this case study in chapter four.

2.1 The Intellectual History of Realism

Realism is an approach to IR that seeks to explain the behavior of states and other actors in the international system. The evolution of realism can be understood through its historical development and the modifications it has undergone over time. Thomas Hobbes and Niccolò Machiavelli are accepted to be the founders of realism in Western political thought. The Hobbesian version is defined as classical realism. Hans Morgenthau became the most significant proponent of classical realism. In his book *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (1948), Morgenthau emphasized that power and politics are products of human nature. According to Morgenthau, human beings are inherently selfish and seek to maximize their own interests. This fundamental aggressive nature of human beings creates a state of perpetual competition and conflict between states. The preservation of peace and the maintenance of international stability thus depend on the attitudes and the characteristics of states. Classical realism assumes that the ordering principle of the international system is anarchy, which means there is no central authority, and that states operate in a self-help environment where their primary goal is to ensure their survival and security. Realists assert that international politics should be viewed as a constant competition for power among states which is always a zero-sum game. This means that a state gaining power means that the power of another state will be reduced.

Also, central to his approach is the concept of power as the main purpose in international politics. His often-quoted statement that ‘‘all politics is power politics’’ seems to confirm this

view. He believed that the pursuit of power was a natural and necessary aspect of international politics, and that states should focus on their own interests and security rather than moral or ideological considerations (Morgenthau, 1948). Those who do not have power seek war in order to gain it and will use whatever means necessary to achieve this goal, including military force, economic coercion, and diplomatic pressure. Morgenthau's approach to international politics is thus state-centered and focuses on the constant struggle for power in state actions. A key concept in Morgenthau's power politics is the balance of power. The balance of power describes a condition in which the distribution of power among great powers is in equilibrium. This is an essential stabilizing factor in a society of sovereign nations. The most powerful states will seek to preserve the status quo and less powerful states will try to change it (ibid.). Each state seeks to maintain a favorable balance of power to ensure their security. This may involve forming alliances with other states or engaging in power-balancing behavior to counter the actions of other states. His theory is nonetheless not simply a reduction of politics to pure power. Introducing power as a central concept does not mean that only power relations control political action. Power serves as a criterion that distinguishes politics from other spheres (Algozaibi, 1965). Realists diverge on the issue of why states want power. For classical realists, the nature of international politics is essentially derivative of human nature, but for neorealists and neoclassical realists these reasons lie in other fields, such as systemic factors.

Criticism of Morgenthau's classical realism lies in its remarkably narrow understanding of politics. According to Williams (2004), a concern with political economy, the influence of culture and identity, or the impact of domestic structures all appear remarkably marginal (p. 635). Many critics argue that classical realism is proven to be inadequate as a basis for thinking about world politics. In *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (1948), Morgenthau suggests that activities such as negotiating extradition treaties, engaging in trade, cooperating in disaster relief efforts, and promoting cultural exchanges between nations do not typically constitute participation in international politics. This statement proves the narrowness of the realist vision and its inadequacy as a basis for thinking about world politics (Rosenberg, 1994). Although this is strong criticism towards the theory, it also forms a key element in accounts of the evolution of discussions in IR.

2.2 Neorealism

The narrowness of the classical realist vision of international politics is seen as a symbol of its limited theoretical bases and the evolution of the field of IR is presented as a process of moving

beyond these limits toward a more sophisticated theory of IR (Williams, 2004). Neorealism developed out of classical realism. Both theories place emphasis on the concepts of power and the pursuit of national interests in international politics, but they differ in their understanding of the sources and nature of international conflict. Neorealism emerged in the 1970s and focuses on the structure of the international system as the primary determinant of state behavior. Kenneth Waltz (1924-2013) is known as the most influential proponent of neorealism. His neorealism advocates a systemic approach to international relations that starts from the condition of anarchy and perceives the state as a unitary, rational actor. Contrary to classical realism, Waltzian neorealism rejects any major role for human nature. According to Waltz (1979), states are unitary, rational actors and their behavior is primarily influenced by the international system rather than by domestic pressures or human nature. Like classical realism, neorealism argues that the international system is characterized by anarchy and that states are rational actors who pursue their self-interest. This means states are primarily concerned with their own security and survival. However, classical realism focuses on the individual level of analysis and neorealism takes a systemic approach. According to Waltz (1979), the international system poses constraints on states' behavior and forces them to adapt if they aim to survive in a competitive environment. All states are functionally similar units and face the same pressures within the international system. In this context, the international system is characterized by an absence of overarching authority, leading to a self-help system where states must rely on their own capabilities to secure their interests and protect their sovereignty. Waltz argues that despite the diversity in state attributes such as size, power, and domestic politics, all states are functionally similar units within the international system. This means that they all perform similar functions with the primary goal of survival. Due to the anarchic nature of the system, states are driven by the same basic imperatives: to ensure their security, maintain their independence, and maximize their power relative to other states. Waltz's theory emphasizes that the international system exerts a homogenizing effect on states' behavior (ibid.).

Waltz' theory is therefore mainly a critique on reductionist theories which attribute the cause of state behavior solely within the state to explain outcomes. Following Waltz, the reductionist approach overlooks the constraints imposed on state behavior by the international environment. The whole is understood by knowing the attributes and interactions of its parts (ibid.). According to a reductionist approach, international outcomes can be explained through elements and combinations of elements found at the national or subnational levels. These theories assert that internal forces explain external outcomes. The international system, if

conceived at all, is taken to be merely an outcome. A reductionist theory is therefore a theory about the behavior of parts (ibid.).

A state's foreign policy behavior as presumed by neorealism depends on its position in the international system. A state's power position is dependent on its share of resources in the system and the number of poles within it (Rittberger, 2001). Neorealist scholars share a set of general assumptions about world politics. Neorealists agree on three characteristics of the international system, namely, that the international system is anarchic, that states can never be certain about each other's intentions, and that survival is states' principal goal. When explaining the foreign policy behavior of a state, its relative power position has to be derived from the international distribution of power. A state's relative power position is determined by the polarity of the system and the share of capabilities the state has at its disposal. Taken together, they decisively influence a state's foreign policy behavior (ibid.). Their domestic political characteristics do not matter in this sense.

According to Rittberger (2001), foreign policy behavior can be categorized into two distinct forms of power politics: autonomy-seeking policy and influence-seeking policy. These two approaches represent different strategies that states can employ to navigate the international system and achieve their objectives. Autonomy-seeking policy is focused on maintaining and enhancing a state's independence and self-determination. This approach is designed to prevent new dependencies or reduce existing dependencies on other states. According to Rittberger (2001), modes of autonomy-seeking behavior include non-compliance with existing obligations under bilateral or multilateral international agreements, and the refusal to cooperate when such cooperation would create or reinforce asymmetric dependencies. The fundamental goal of autonomy-seeking policies is to evade the influence of the international environment and preserve the state's sovereignty and decision-making freedom. In contrast, influence-seeking policy aims to increase a state's ability to shape the behavior of other states and exert control over international interactions. States employing this strategy attempt to mold the processes of interaction with other states to produce outcomes that align with their interests. An example of influence-seeking behavior is enhancing a state's voice and voting power in international organizations by increasing its share of intra-organizational resources (e.g., voting rights) (ibid.). Influence-seeking policies are about extending a state's reach and impact, thereby exerting influence on the international stage. While autonomy-seeking and influence-seeking policies represent different approaches, they are not mutually exclusive. States often pursue a

balance between the two, adapting their strategies based on their capabilities, goals, and the international context. For instance, a state might seek to enhance its autonomy through military buildup while simultaneously engaging in diplomacy to shape regional dynamics in its favor.

Russia's foreign policy towards Ukraine is a good illustration of how neorealism helps to explain a state's behavior in the international system. According to Mearsheimer (2014), Moscow's actions are the result of external pressures, especially the European Union's (EU) and NATO's eastward expansion. The level of external pressure leads to local great powers adopting more assertive policies, including the threat and use of force. Whenever Kiev indicated its willingness to cooperate with Moscow in foreign affairs over the last 25 years, Russia pursued less assertive policies and sought to pull Ukraine closer through economic benefits (Götz, 2016). However, when the new government in Kiev made clear its commitments to sign the EU association agreement and to develop close ties with Western states and institutions in 2014, Moscow got disturbed (BBC News, 2014). Brussels and Washington made a great effort in forging closer links with the new government in Kiev which gave Moscow the impression that Western powers were setting the stage for building an alliance-like relationship with Ukraine (Götz, 2016). The level of external pressure was high, and Russia felt the need to restore the status-quo and make sure it lost no relative power in the international system. Consequently, Russia put more pressure on Ukraine and adopted a new strategy that included taking control of Crimea. Also, in the context of polarity, Russia's actions can be understood as efforts to maintain a favorable balance of power. The high level of external pressure from the EU and NATO expansions represented a threat to Russia's regional dominance and its position in the international system. By taking control of Crimea, Russia ensured that it did not lose relative power in the face of Western advances.

2.2.1 Critique

Critics of neorealism state that, in accounting for reoccurring patterns over longer periods of time, it has little to say about actual foreign policies of states which can deviate significantly from what might be expected based on the system's structure. Waltz acknowledges this. He states that neorealism is a theory about international politics and not a theory about foreign policy. It explains how external forces shape states' behavior but says nothing about the effects of internal forces. States respond in a timely and systematic way to dangerous changes in relative power (Waltz, 2004). However, to say that neorealism does not provide a theory of foreign policy does not mean that it has no consequence for the study of foreign policy. To say

that relative power or the drive for self-preservation alone, does not shape the foreign policies of states is not to say that a theory of foreign policy can ignore these factors (Telhami, 2003). As strictly a theory of international politics, which explains constraints that confine all states, but not ‘why state X made a certain move last Tuesday’ (Waltz, 1979), neorealism is left with little relevance for the analysis of foreign policy (Wivel, 2005). It fails to explain variation in state responses to similar external pressures. Contemporary realist foreign policy analysis, also known as NCR, tackles this problem directly. Also, Mearsheimer criticized Waltz’s view that the state is in a constant state of defense in a ‘security dilemma’ and therefore tries to increase its power as defensive. According to Mearsheimer (2001), the competition of states for power, which he calls ‘aggressive realism’ is because five different elements come together and give their characteristic features to the international system. They are, respectively (Mearsheimer, 2008):

1. Great powers are the main actors in the system;
2. Every state has an offensive military capability;
3. States can never be confident of the intentions of other states;
4. The ultimate purpose of states is survival;
5. States are rational actors.

Several other scholars have critiqued neorealism from various perspectives. One prominent author that should be named in this research is Richard Ned Lebow. In his book ‘The Tragic Vision of Politics: ethics, interests, and orders’ (2003), he argues that human nature, ethical considerations, and historical context play significant roles in shaping state behavior. His arguments challenge the neorealist focus on structural constraints and the assumption that state behavior can be explained solely by the anarchic nature of the international system and the distribution of power. Lebow (2003) asserts that historical experiences and the lessons derived from them significantly influence national strategies and policies. Waltz would likely reiterate the argument that neorealism’s focus on structural constraints does not negate the importance of historical context or psychological factors. For instance, while historical experiences shape state behavior, they do so within the constraints of the international system’s structure.

2.2.2 Hypothesis and Conceptual Model

This study takes neorealism as first set out by Waltz (1979) as its point of reference, which posits that the structure of the international system, characterized by anarchy and the absence of a central authority, shapes states’ behaviors. States seek to maximize their security and power

within this anarchic system. Therefore, when systemic conditions, such as power vacuums, regional instability, or threats of the balance of power, arise, states may resort to military intervention as a means to safeguard their interests, establish influence, or prevent the emergence of hostile powers. Therefore, systemic factors, alongside state interests and calculations of power, influence the decision-making processes that lead to military intervention by states. These systemic factors include for example military advancements, shifts in alliances, and broader international events, such as Russia’s involvement in Ukraine.

This leads to the following theoretical hypothesis:

H1: States are more likely to intervene militarily when there is an imbalance or instability in the international system, especially if they have strategic interests in the affected region, to strengthen their position.

This can be translated to the following conceptual model:

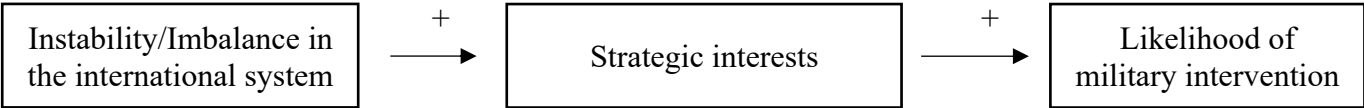


Figure 1 The conceptual model of H1

The perceived imbalance or instability in the international system (X) affects the likelihood of military intervention (Y). This relationship is intervened by the presence of strategic interests. If this intervening variable is high, the likelihood of military intervention increases.

It is important to note that this theoretical hypothesis is in line with offensive neorealism rather than defensive neorealism. According to offensive realism, as articulated by scholars like Mearsheimer (2001), states are driven to maximize their power proactively to ensure their survival in an anarchic international system. Offensive realism posits that states do not merely defend their security but try to gain strategic advantages. This proactive behavior aligns with the hypothesis that states intervene when systemic instability intersects with strategic interests. This differs from defensive realism, which states that states are primarily concerned with maintaining their security rather than maximizing power (Waltz, 1979).

In terms of this study, Azerbaijan would be expected to have perceived an imbalance in regional power dynamics: Armenia’s political and military alliances, including its ties with Russia,

might have been seen as weakened or distracted, particularly due to Russia's ongoing involvement in Ukraine. This perceived instability in Armenia's support structure could have created an opportune moment for Azerbaijan to assert its dominance. In terms of the strategic interests, Azerbaijan has a longstanding strategic interest in reclaiming NK and reintegrating it fully under its control.

2.3 Neoclassical Realism

In examining the NK conflict, neorealism falls short in explaining the specific decisions that lead to the initiation of armed conflicts. Neorealism's focus on systemic factors and the balance of power between states is insufficient when delving into the motivations and considerations of individual leaders and other domestic motives. This is where Neoclassical realism (NCR) becomes crucial for a comprehensive understanding. NCR distinguishes itself from other realisms primarily in the degree to which the translation of systemic conditions into state behavior is explicitly analyzed rather than either simply assumed or treated as a conceptually separate area of inquiry (Waltz, 1979). This is possible because compared to neorealism, NCR has a less strict understanding of the constraints systemic conditions pose on state behavior. NCR emphasizes the importance of the anarchic international system, relative power distributions, and pervasive uncertainty. However, they see anarchy as a permissive condition rather than an independent causal force. In this regard, NCR represents a return to the earlier views of Morgenthau, Kissinger, Wolfers, and other classical realists ((Lobell et al. 2009).

Although NCR builds on the core realist assumption that states are the primary actors in international relations, it also argues that the behavior of states is not solely determined by external factors such as power and security. According to neoclassical realists, one should pay attention to both the analytical strengths of neo-realists and the analytical strengths of unit level studies classical realists when studying foreign policy of states in context of the international system (Firoozabadi & Ashkezari, 2016). The main objective of NCR is to find out how the distribution of power in the international system, motivations, and subjective structures of states towards the international system shape their foreign policy (ibid.). This theory acknowledges that political economy, the impact of domestic structures, leadership perceptions, and the influence of culture and identity all appear remarkably marginal, which is something that other forms of realisms failed to acknowledge (Williams, 2004). Internal factors thus play a more significant role than traditional realist theories would suggest, and NCR tries to open the black

box of domestic influences that could shape the foreign policy of a state. The most straightforward yet enduring conclusion of NCR is that while the international system plays an important role in shaping national interests and foreign policies, those interests are filtered through the domestic political environment which, eventually, leads to variations in foreign policy (Lobell et al., 2009).

In his article *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy* (1998), Gideon Rose provides a comprehensive overview of NCR and its contributions to our understanding of state behavior in the international system. States' behavior is determined by a combination of systemic, domestic, and individual-level factors. Examples of these factors are the distribution of power in the international system, the domestic political and economic conditions, and the beliefs and preferences of individual leaders and decision-makers. In the article, Rose (1998) explains how this theory combines both realist and classical realist elements. "It [neoclassical realism] explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist thought. Its adherents argue that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why they are realist. They argue further, however, that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. This is why they are neoclassical." Also, his article is concerned with independent and intervening variables that are closely linked to the formulation and implementation of foreign policies of states.

Neorealist approaches assume that foreign policy choice does not really exist. A foreign policy is pursued by perceiving systemic conditions and deducing the national interest (Meibauer, 2020). A choice only exists when two options have the exact same costs and consequences. NCR attempts to explain variations of foreign policy over time and space by adding neorealist assumptions to the structure and material capabilities with intervening variables mediating the impact of systemic stimuli (Wivel, 2005). NCR recognizes the limitations of the neorealist framework and seeks to explain foreign policy. Although NCR theorists acknowledge the importance of the structure of the international system, they find that 'anarchy is a permissive condition rather than an independent causal force' (Walt, 2002).

NCR aims to explain the variations in the foreign policies of the same state over time or between different states facing similar external constraints. It does not attempt to account for broad patterns of systemic or recurring outcomes. Therefore, an NCR hypothesis might predict the likely diplomatic, economic, and military responses of specific states to systemic imperatives, but it cannot explain the systemic consequences of those responses (Lobell et al., 2009).

NCR therefore expects that a combination of a states' relative power compared to other states, the level of internal cohesion and stability within a state, and the preferences of the state's leaders and decision-makers determines state behavior. One example of a foreign policy decision that can be explained using NCR is the United States' (US) decision to invade Iraq in 2003. The US was the dominant military and economic power in the international system at the time and was faced with a perceived threat from Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. At the systemic level, the US saw the opportunity to advance its strategic interests in the Middle East and promote democracy and stability in the region. Besides this, the decision to invade Iraq was also the Bush administration's own perception of American national security interests in relation to Iraq (Lobell et al., 2009). The 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 also created a sense of urgency and a desire for revenge among many Americans, which contributed to support for the invasion. Most voters were not enthusiastic for war, but they trusted Bush's leadership on issues of national security and offered him and his party a vote of confidence during the mid-term elections of 2002 (ibid.). The idea of taking the 'war on terror' into Iraq was appealing to Bush's conservative supporters, kept the Democrats divided, and redirected the national security debate to issues where Republicans had an advantage. Lastly, at the individual level, the decision to invade Iraq was shaped by the beliefs and preferences of key decision-makers, of which President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney are most important. They saw the invasion as a necessary step to protect American security and advance American interests in the region. The events of 9/11 shocked Bush into a new willingness to put national security policy first on his list of priorities. He decided to be more aggressive against potential external threats. On this issue, for better or worse, the president and his leading foreign policy advisors appear to have believed in what they were doing (ibid.). Their beliefs, ideologies, and perceptions of the Iraqi regime's intentions influenced the decision-making process significantly. Bush's commitment to combating terrorism and spreading democracy, combined with the belief in the efficacy of military force, led to the adoption of a policy regime change in Iraq.

This example presents that the constraints imposed by the international system are combined with the key personnel's assessment of probable dangers, identification of feasible and appropriate responses for combating the dangers, and finally the mobilization of necessary resources from society for implementing the strategic responses of the US (Rahman, 2021). Specifically, this type of behavior is the essence of NCR which is claimed by its advocates as the theory of foreign policy.

2.3.1 Leadership Styles

Neoclassical realists reject the idea of neorealism that systemic pressures will immediately affect behaviors of units. They believe that subjective attitudes and domestic structures of states are as important as factors of systemic levels (Firoozabadi & Ashkezari, 2016). Also, NCR shows how individual leaders' interpretations of threats and opportunities, and their leadership style can drive state behavior, bridging the gap between systemic forces and domestic factors. In the book 'Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy' (2009), Steven Lobell, Jeffrey Taliaferro and Norrin Ripsman provide significant insights into the role of leadership perceptions in NCR. Lobell and his co-authors argue that while systemic factors such as the distribution of power in the international system are crucial, the perceptions and preferences of national leaders play a critical role in shaping foreign policy decisions. They emphasize that leaders' interpretations of international threats and opportunities, influenced by their beliefs, experiences, and domestic political considerations, mediate the relationship between systemic pressures and state behavior. By analyzing the cognitive processes of leaders, NCR provides insights into the origins of state behavior and the mechanisms by which states respond to external threats (Lobell et al., 2009).

Rose (1998) supports the idea that in order to grasp how states react to external pressures, one must examine how these pressures are filtered through factors like decision-makers' perceptions and domestic state structures. In the realm of international relations, leaders can find themselves constrained by both global and domestic political considerations. The way decision-makers perceive these pressures serves as a crucial intermediary that shapes their responses to the external environment. This underscores the importance of understanding how leaders interpret and react to international dynamics.

When unit-level factors are established, they can then be treated as inputs at the structural-systemic level to explain how unit- and structural-level causes interact to produce systemic

outcomes. Therefore, different kinds of leadership styles are explained, as they are a natural fit within the NCR theoretical framework. Kaarbo (1997) discusses the impact of prime minister leadership styles on foreign policy decision-making. She presents a framework for understanding how the leadership style of prime ministers in parliamentary democracies influences decision-making processes, outcomes, and foreign policy outputs. Kaarbo (1997) explores how different components of leadership style can directly and indirectly affect the decision-making process and ultimately shape foreign policy decisions. The article she wrote emphasizes the importance of studying individual differences in leadership style. This aligns with NCR's emphasis on the interplay between internal and external factors in shaping state behavior. Kaarbo (1997) discusses the overlap between prime ministers and presidents in terms of their leadership styles and the influence of individual characteristics on foreign policy decision-making.

The article by Kaarbo (1997), building on Hermann's (1980) work, focuses on five personal characteristics for leadership: interest and experience in foreign policy, task orientation, strategy for managing conflict, strategy for managing information, and strategy for dealing with party relations. Hermann's (1980) model was pioneering in systematically linking leader's personal characteristics to foreign policy outcomes. She identified traits such as leader's belief in their ability to control events, need for power, and conceptual complexity as critical factors that shape their foreign policy decisions. Building on this, Kaarbo (1997) refined and applied these characteristics to the study of leadership in parliamentary democracies.

The first characteristic, interest and experience, refers to whether a leader is more interested in overall government organization or a particular policy area. The second characteristic, task orientation, measures the degree to which a leader focuses on a specific policy goal or on interpersonal and political relations. The third characteristic, strategy for managing conflict, examines how a leader addresses conflicts, whether by advocating for personal positions, arbitrating between others' positions, attempting to build consensus, or opting to remain uninvolved. The fourth characteristic, strategy for managing information, assesses how the leader manages challenges from other parties, distinguishing between competitive or noncompetitive strategies. Lastly, strategy for dealing with party relations looks at how leaders navigate their interactions with party members or other stakeholders to maintain cohesion and support (*ibid.*).

When looking at the characteristics of leadership styles that can directly influence foreign policy in an autocratic regime instead of a parliamentary democracy, the degree of task orientation is the most important element of leadership style for this study. A leader's task orientation depends on the degree to which a leader is focused on a specific policy goal, or whether he is focused on interpersonal or political relations, either domestic or international (ibid.). It can be examined whether a leader holds particular relationships with other state's leaders, or if he is more focused on policy goals in general.

There is a growing literature that indicates a leadership's way of approaching the world can affect how confrontational their country is likely to be, how likely it is they are to take initiatives, and when they are likely to engage in military interventions (Hermann, 1980). Kelman's (1983) argues that leaders' perceptions of their own and other states' intentions and capabilities influence their willingness to engage in conflict or cooperation. Also, Driver (1997) suggests that leaders with aggressive or authoritarian personality traits are more likely to adopt confrontational and assertive foreign policies.

Even more scholars have written on leadership styles, not only in parliamentary democracies but also in autocracies. Keller (2005) discusses two types of leadership styles in autocracies: constraint respecters and constraint challengers. Constraint respecters in autocracies are likely to be more pacific in their crisis responses compared to constraint challengers. They exhibit higher levels of trust, decreased fear of exploitation, non-nationalistic attitudes, diminished need to dominate others, and a preference for participatory decision-making. Constraint respecters in autocracies are expected to be more cautious in risky foreign policy confrontations (Keller, 2005). On the other hand, constraint challengers in autocracies are expected to respond aggressively to international crises. They tend to suppress opposition, violate power-sharing mechanisms, fear exploitation by adversaries, and prefer violent policy instruments. Constraint challengers are more willing to resort to force in dealing with crises. When looking at foreign policy outcomes, constraint respecters tend to behave more cautious or risk-averse, and constraint challengers tend to behave more reckless or risk-seeking.

In this study, the degree to which a leader is task-oriented and whether a leader is more constraint respecting or constraint challenging, will be used to formulate NCR hypotheses. The way 'leadership styles' will be measured in this research is explained in chapter three.

2.3.2 Critique

Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik are two of the most prominent authors known for their critical perspectives on NCR. These authors state that the central problem is that the theoretical core of the realist approach has been undermined by NCR, one of its own defenders (Legro & Moravcsik, 1999). According to Legro and Moravcsik, NCR lacks clarity and theoretical rigor, because it often falls into the trap of theoretical eclecticism, where it blends elements of different theories without providing a coherent or systematic framework. They emphasize that this approach can lead to vague explanations that lack predictive power and analytical precision.

Additionally, they raised concerns about the theoretical coherence and justifications behind incorporating domestic and ideational variables. The incorporation of variation in underlying domestic preferences undermines the theoretical distinctiveness of NCR as a form of realism by rendering it indistinguishable from nonrealist theories about domestic institutions, ideas, and interests (*ibid.*).

Walt (2002) echoes these concerns, stating that by incorporating a wide range of domestic factors, NCR becomes overly complex and less parsimonious compared to structural realism. This complexity can make it difficult to generate clear, testable hypotheses and to maintain the explanatory power that neorealism, for example, offers. Besides this, Walt (2002) points out that NCR may suffer from issues of endogeneity and tautology. He argues that the theory sometimes uses domestic variables in a way that risks circular reasoning, where the explanation for state behavior becomes self-referential and difficult to falsify. This problem arises when domestic factors are selectively invoked to account for outcomes, potentially leading to ad hoc explanations that lack predictive utility.

Rose (1998) acknowledges the complexity that comes with incorporating domestic factors into realist theory but argues that this complexity is essential for a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of state behavior. He contends that the criticisms regarding theoretical eclecticism and lack of parsimony overlook the fact that international politics is inherently complex and cannot be fully explained by systemic factors alone. Rose (1998) argues that NCR offers a more nuanced and empirically accurate framework by accounting for the ways in which domestic politics mediate the impact of systemic pressures on state behavior. Similarly, Schweller (2014) refutes the criticisms by highlighting the limitations of purely systemic theories. He argues that ignoring domestic factors can lead to an incomplete understanding of

international relations. Schweller (2014) posits that the inclusion of domestic variables rather provides a richer and more realistic depiction of state behavior. He also responds to the criticism of endogeneity by emphasizing the importance of clearly defining and operationalizing variables to avoid tautological explanations.

2.3.3 Hypothesis and Conceptual Model

According to NCR, state behavior is significantly influenced by the interplay between systemic factors and the perceptions and preferences of individual leaders. This theory posits that while systemic constraints such as the distribution of power in the international system are crucial, domestic pressures and leadership styles serve as critical intervening variables that shape foreign policy decisions. This research places emphasis on leadership styles and therefore, a task-oriented and/or constraint challenging leadership style is conducted as an intervening variable that strengthens the relationship between perceived instability in the international system and the likelihood of military intervention. Leadership-style acts as an intervening variable and partially mediates the relationship between the independent and dependent variable. Therefore, the NCR hypothesis that will be tested in this study is:

H2: When there is a perceived instability or imbalance in the international system, the more task-oriented and/or constraint challenging a leader is, the higher the likelihood of military intervention.

This can be translated to the following conceptual model:

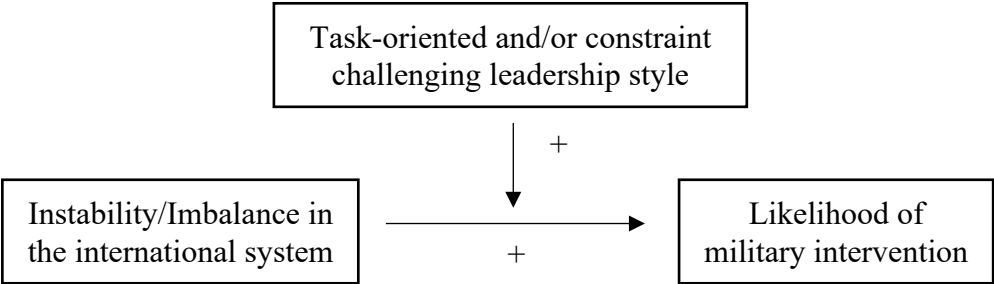


Figure 2 The conceptual model of H2

This conceptual model visually represents the hypothesized relationship, showing how the relationship between a perceived instability or imbalance in the international system and the likelihood of military intervention is positively strengthened by the degree to which a leadership style is task-oriented and/or constraint challenging. This is a mediating variable, because the

strength of the relationship between X and Y is influenced by the degree of a task-orientation and/or a constraint challenging leadership style.

When applying this NCR hypothesis to this study, it is expected that President Aliyev played a pivotal role in shaping the foreign policy decision of Azerbaijan to intervene militarily in the NK region in September 2023. Aliyev's leadership style is expected to be characterized by a high degree of task-orientation and a willingness to challenge constraints in the period before September 2023. This leadership style is expected to be characterized by a clear, unwavering commitment to achieving territorial gains. This reflects proactive and aggressive style, aiming to swiftly alter the status quo in Azerbaijan's favor, leveraging military power to achieve this. Under Aliyev's leadership, Azerbaijan is expected to pursue a more assertive foreign policy stance, emphasizing the importance of reclaiming lost territories.

3 Methods

In this chapter, I will present the methodology used in this study, detailing the case study design, data collection strategy, and the data analysis technique that is employed to answer the research question. I will also discuss how the theoretical hypotheses will be tested and operationalize the key concepts in this study. Finally, I will look at the strengths and limitations of the chosen approach.

3.1 Case Study Design

This research uses a single case study design to gain a deep understanding of the subject (Gustafsson, 2017). Focusing on Azerbaijan's military offensive of September 2023, which resulted in the end of the NK conflict and the de facto state, this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the context, dynamics, and factors influencing Azerbaijan's decision-making process. A single case study design is particularly valuable for its ability to provide detailed insights into complex phenomena. According to Yin (2014), this method allows researchers to investigate a contemporary event within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. This is crucial for understanding the multifaceted aspects of Azerbaijan's decision to intervene militarily in the NK region in September 2023 and the subsequent geopolitical outcomes.

Yin (2014) identifies three main types of case studies: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. An exploratory case study is used in the preliminary stages of a research project to define

research questions and hypotheses. It investigates little-understood phenomena and helps identify variables and theoretical frameworks for further study. A descriptive case study provides a detailed account of a specific phenomenon within its real-life context. Its primary goal is to describe the characteristics and context of the subject in detail, offering a comprehensive understanding of complex subjects. This type of case study relies on rich, qualitative data from various sources such as documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations (ibid.). Lastly, an explanatory case study explores causal relationships to determine how and why particular events occur. It is suited for understanding the dynamics and processes within a specific context. Explanatory case studies typically involve detailed, longitudinal data that allows researchers to trace processes and changes over time (ibid.).

For this research, focusing on Azerbaijan's military offensive in September 2023 and the end of the NK conflict, an explanatory case study is most fitting. This approach helps to explore the causal relationships and underlying factors influencing Azerbaijan's decision-making process, addressing the 'how' and 'why' questions critical to understanding the dynamics of the conflict. Therefore, this study adopts an explanatory single case study design.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the criticisms and limitations associated with single case study designs. One significant critique is the issue of generalizability. Because the findings are derived from a single case, it can be challenging to apply these insights to broader contexts (Gerring, 2004). This limitation raises questions about the external validity of the research. Additionally, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that single case studies are often criticized for their potential to be subjective, as they rely heavily on the researcher's interpretation of data, which may introduce bias. Also, compared to multiple case study designs, single case studies can sometimes lack robustness. With only one case, the ability to compare and contrast findings across different scenarios is inherently limited, potentially reducing the study's analytical depth and breadth (Stake, 1995). This limitation is particularly pertinent in the context of international relations, where multiple cases could provide a more comprehensive understanding of patterns and variations in state behavior.

Despite these limitations, the single case study design remains a powerful tool, because it allows for a focused, detailed examination of Azerbaijan's military offensive and its implications, providing a foundation for future comparative studies. Also, this study can provide valuable insights into the dynamics and potential resolutions of other frozen conflicts. By situating the

findings within the broader category of frozen conflicts, the generalizability of this single case study is enhanced. Therefore, this study can contribute to the development of more robust theories in international relations and conflict resolution.

3.2 Data Analysis

The aim of this study is to investigate the causal chain of events and identifying the mechanisms that led to Azerbaijan's decision to intervene militarily in the NK region in September 2023.

Process tracing is an ideal method for this research because it allows to delve deeply into the causal mechanisms behind Azerbaijan's actions. Process tracing is a qualitative research method used to explore and identify the sequences of events, actions, and contextual factors that lead to a particular outcome (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). This method is suitable for this single case study because it provides a detailed, within-case analysis that can uncover the causal chains that are often overlooked in broader comparative studies (George & Bennett, 2005). A key aspect is that causal mechanisms can support theoretical expectations. By examining these mechanisms, process tracing can more effectively evaluate the validity of theories. Process tracing works by systematically collecting and analyzing evidence to trace the sequence of events and the underlying causal mechanisms. The method involves several steps: identifying key events, establishing causal mechanisms, collecting and analyzing data, sequencing and contextualizing events, and validating causal links. This structured approach allows me to create a detailed narrative that explains the outcome (Beach & Pedersen, 2019).

For this research, process tracing is especially suitable. It enables a thorough examination of the complex interplay between systemic pressures and domestic factors, central to neorealist and NCR theoretical frameworks guiding this study. Process tracing allows for the integration of these perspectives by tracing how systemic conditions influenced Azerbaijan's strategic decisions and how domestic variables shaped the final outcome. By focusing on causal pathways and decision-making processes, process tracing can elucidate not just what happened, by how and why Azerbaijan's leadership decided to act as it did (Collier, 2011).

Process tracing can be divided into three main variants: theory building, theory testing, and explaining outcomes. Firstly, theory building process tracing is used to develop new theoretical frameworks or refine existing ones by identifying causal mechanisms within a specific case (ibid.). This variant involves an inductive approach where the researcher starts with empirical

observations and works backward to construct a theory that explains the observed phenomena. Secondly, theory testing process tracing evaluates the validity of existing theories by examining whether the hypothesized causal mechanisms are present and function as expected within a particular case (ibid.). This variant uses a deductive approach, starting with theoretical propositions and systematically testing them against empirical evidence. The goal is to contribute to the body of knowledge by either supporting or challenging existing theoretical claims. Lastly, explaining outcome process tracing focuses on understanding the specific causal pathways that lead to a particular outcome in a case (ibid.). This approach is outcome-centric and seeks to provide a comprehensive explanation of how and why a specific event or result occurred. It involves a within-case analysis to trace the sequence of events and identify the critical junctures and mechanisms that produced the outcome. For this research, which aims to understand the factors that led to Azerbaijan's military intervention in NK in September 2023, explaining-outcome process tracing is the most appropriate variant. This study seeks to provide a detailed and nuanced explanation of the causal mechanisms and sequences of events that influenced Azerbaijan's decision-making process.

Despite its strengths for this study, process tracing also has notable weaknesses. One significant challenge is the issue of equifinality, where multiple causal pathways can lead to the same outcome. This can make it difficult to isolate and identify the specific mechanisms at work, potentially leading to biased or incomplete explanations if not properly addressed (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). There is also the risk of 'storytelling' in process tracing, where researchers might construct a coherent narrative that aligns with their expectations, thereby overlooking alternative causal paths and limiting the depth of their analysis (Collier, 2011). This risk underscores the importance of maintaining analytical rigor and continuously questioning and testing the evidence. Finally, it is challenging to fully capture the contextual factors that influence causal processes. While process tracing highlights the importance of context, it can be difficult to comprehensively account for all relevant contextual variables, potentially leading to an incomplete understanding of the causal dynamics (Bennett & Checkel, 2015).

When conducting a process tracing case study, researchers need to be aware of several potential biases. One key bias is confirmation bias, where researchers might selectively collect and interpret evidence that support their preconceived notions or hypotheses while disregarding contradictory information (George & Bennett, 2005). Another potential bias is availability bias, which occurs when easily accessible or memorable evidence is given undue weight over less

accessible data. Additionally, there is the risk of narrative fallacy, where researchers might create a coherent story from the data that oversimplifies the complexity of causal mechanisms (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). To mitigate these biases, it is crucial to systematically consider alternative explanations and ensure comprehensive and balanced evidence collection and analysis.

3.3 Operationalization

3.3.1 Regional Power Dynamics

This study seeks to understand how changes in the regional power structures influenced Azerbaijan's strategic decisions, drawing on the theoretical foundations of neorealism. Therefore, the concept 'power dynamics' must be operationalized. This involves identifying specific indicators that reflect this concept and applying them to the context of Azerbaijan's military intervention in NK in 2023. Shifts in power dynamics

It is essential to identify specific indicators that can reflect potential shifts in power among key regional actors – Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, and Russia – since 2019. Iran is not included in this study because it did not explicitly choose a side in the NK conflict. The indicators include changes in military capabilities, diplomatic relations, shifts in alliances, and broader international events. This section outlines how these indicators can be used to measure changes in power dynamics.

A significant indicator of power dynamics are changes in military capabilities. This can be measured by looking for changes in military support and technological advancements provided by key allies. For example, increased military support from Turkey to Azerbaijan could indicate a shift in power dynamics by enhancing Azerbaijan's military capabilities. Furthermore, joint military exercises and the continued supply of advanced weaponry from Turkey would bolster Azerbaijan's military confidence and capabilities, positioning it more assertively in the region (Kucera, 2020). Similarly, the presence of a Russian military base in Armenia and ongoing military cooperation with Yerevan are key indicators of Russia's commitment to maintaining a balance of power favorable to its interests. Changes in support or opposition from key regional actors can drastically alter a country's strategic decisions. As Waltz (1979) posits, the distribution of power in the international system shapes states' behaviors, making it essential to understand these dynamics. Similarly, Mearsheimer (2001) emphasizes that states constantly seek to maximize their power relative to others, which can lead to shifts in alliances and

strategic calculations. In this study, I will examine changes in this indicator, that potentially lead to changes in the regional power structures, to understand how shifts in military capabilities among regional actors influenced Azerbaijan's strategic decisions.

Diplomatic relations and shifts in alliances are also crucial indicators of international (in)stability that can significantly influence power dynamics. These indicators include the formation and strengthening of alliances, diplomatic exchanges, and changes in foreign policy alignments. For this study, I will focus on these aspects to measure the evolution of diplomatic relations and their impact on the decision by Azerbaijan to intervene militarily in September 2023.

This thesis will study the shifts in these regional power structures per regional power (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey and Russia). In order to do this, it is important to determine a 'status quo moment'. As this thesis dives into the military intervention of September 2023, the status quo is set at the start of 2019.

3.3.2 Strategic Interests

In the context of neorealism, strategic interests are defined as the goals that a state pursues to maximize its power and ensure its survival in an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979). These interests include territorial integrity, control over resources and regional influence. For this study, strategic interests will be operationalized through specific indicators. These indicators are territorial claims, military modernization and buildup, and regional influence. These indicators will be examined to understand how these interests have developed and influenced Azerbaijan's decision to intervene in NK in September 2023.

Azerbaijan's assertions of sovereignty over NK are a key indicator of its strategic interest in reclaiming these territories. This study will trace the evolution of Azerbaijan's territorial claims from the status quo in 2019 to the military intervention in 2023. I will do this by analyzing official speeches of President Ilham Aliyev in this period.

Another important indicator of strategic interests is Azerbaijan's military modernization and buildup. This will be examined by analyzing defense budgets and procurement of advanced military technology. Azerbaijan's investments in modernizing its armed forces and enhancing

its military capabilities are reflective of its broader strategic objectives. This military buildup also aligns with offensive neorealism, which states that states seek to maximize their power to achieve dominance (Mearsheimer, 2001). In this study I will analyze the changes in military capabilities from the start of 2019 to September 2023.

The last indicator that is important for this study is regional influence. Azerbaijan's efforts to assert its influence in the South Caucasus region, through diplomatic, economic, and military means, reflect its broader strategic goals. This will be measured by examining Azerbaijan's participation in regional collaboration with other countries. For instance, Azerbaijan's strategic partnership with Turkey and its involvement in regional energy projects, such as the Southern Gas Corridor, illustrate its efforts to enhance its regional influence (Altstadt, 2017).

For this study it is important to gain insight into how these strategic interests have developed from the status quo moment in 2019 until the military intervention in September 2023.

3.3.3 Leadership Styles

To analyze Ilham Aliyev's leadership style, it is essential to construct a profile and evaluate his behavior against this profile. Hermann (1999) developed a comprehensive framework for analyzing leadership traits, which will be used to assess President Aliyev's degree of task orientation compared to relational orientation. This framework includes evaluating leaders based on their policy goals versus interpersonal and political relations. Hermann's (1999) Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) methodology is used for this study.

In order to analyze Aliyev's leadership style, I will use the Profiler Plus program, a tool developed by Nick Levine and Michael Young (2014). Profiler Plus enables researchers to extract and quantify leadership traits from textual data, offering a systematic approach to content analysis. Using this program, I will analyze a series of speeches delivered by Ilham Aliyev in October 2019, December 2020, October 2021, November 2022, and July 2023. These speeches provide a rich dataset for evaluating his leadership style over a critical period in Azerbaijan's history, encompassing the lead-up to the third NK war in September 2023.

The trait scores generated through this analysis will be compared to a reference group of 87 heads of state from around the world (Hermann, 1999). This comparative approach allows me

to contextualize Aliyev’s traits, identifying whether they are high, low, or average relative to global standards. However, it is important to note that the reference data for the 87 heads of state is from 1999, which might limit its relevance to contemporary leadership contexts. Despite the age of this reference data, it is still applicable for this study. Many core leadership traits, such as dominance and task orientation, are relatively stable over time. These traits are deeply rooted in personality and cognitive styles, which do not change drastically with short-term political trends. Also, even though the absolute scores may shift over time due to changing global contexts, the relative differences between leaders are likely to remain consistent.

Although Hermann (1999) focuses on seven key traits that are indicative of a leader’s style, I will place most emphasis on the degree on task-orientation versus relational-orientation. High scores on task-orientation indicates that Aliyev is more oriented towards solving problems and achieving goals. Following Hermann (1999), examples of task-oriented words are: ‘accomplishment, achieve(ment), plan, position, proposal, recommendation, tactic’ (p. 26). These types of leaders tend to see the world in terms of problems and the role of the group as providing solutions to these problems. They view people less as individuals than as instruments and are constantly seeking for options to deal with a problem. Also, leaders with a high degree of task-orientation are willing to sacrifice a high level of morale in the group for accomplishing the task. As they note: ‘‘You can’t keep all the people happy; leaders have to make hard decisions for the good of the group and the people will just have to understand’’ (ibid.). On the contrary, illustrative of a more relational leadership style (or group-maintenance focus) type of words are appreciation, collaboration, disappoint(ment), forgive(ness), harm and liberation (p. 26). These leaders are generally more sensitive and focus on keeping the morale and spirit of their groups high. More emphasis is placed on loyalty and commitment to the group, either in the domestic or international context.

<i>Score on Task Focus</i>	<i>Motivation for Seeking Office</i>
<i>High</i>	<i>Problem</i>
<i>Moderate</i>	<i>Both Problem & Relationship Depending on the Context</i>
<i>Low</i>	<i>Relationship</i>

Figure 3: Hermann's (1980) Rules for Assessing Motivation for Seeking Office

Additionally, Keller's (2005) typology of constraint-respecting versus constraint-challenging leadership will be used to further refine Aliyev's leadership profile. By examining his responses to strategic decisions, the study will categorize his behavior as either cautious and risk-averse (constraint-respecting) or aggressive and risk-seeking (constraint-challenging). Hermann's (1999) can be used to analyze leaders' responsiveness to political constraints. Leaders who are predisposed to challenge constraints are more intent on meeting a situation head-on, achieving quick resolution to an issue, being decisive, and dealing forcefully with the problem of the moment. Their personal characteristics are highly predictive of their responses to events because constraints are viewed as obstacles but not unsurmountable. This also fits with a high degree of task-orientation.

3.4 Data Collection

In terms of data collection, I focus on gathering evidence to trace the causal mechanisms leading to Azerbaijan's 2023 military intervention in NK. This study will collect official speeches of President Ilham Aliyev from five specific moments: October 2019, December 2020, October 2021, November 2022, and July 2023. These speeches will provide direct insights into Aliyev's leadership style. To complement the primary data, secondary sources will be used. Scholarly analyses of the NK conflict, with an emphasis on geopolitical strategies and international relations theories, will offer theoretical context and support the analysis of systemic factors. Understanding the developments in regional power dynamics, particularly involving Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, and Turkey, is important for comprehending the systemic pressures at play. In addition to academic sources, news outlets such as BBC News, CNN, and regional media outlets will be used to gather real-time information and various viewpoints on the conflict's development.

The data collection process will involve systematically identifying and gathering these relevant sources. Once collected, a detailed chronological mapping of key events, decisions, and changes in the power dynamics will be created. The goal is to identify the causal mechanisms linking systemic pressures and domestic factors to the military intervention.

3.5 Hypothesized Causal Mechanisms

To understand the factors leading to Azerbaijan's military intervention in NK in September 2023, this study explores two theoretical hypotheses grounded in neorealism and NCR. Each

hypothesis presents a distinct causal pathway, elucidating the mechanisms through which systemic pressures and leadership styles influenced Azerbaijan's strategic decisions.

Hypothesis 1 (neorealism): States are more likely to intervene militarily when there is an imbalance or instability in the international system, especially if they have strategic interests in the affected region, to strengthen their position.

Defining the causal pathway for H1: Regional conflicts, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine, created a perception of instability in the international system. Azerbaijan perceived this instability as an opportunity. Azerbaijan's strategic interests, including territorial integrity and regional influence, were at stake. Furthermore, Azerbaijan was so firmly committed to its right over NK that it sought any opportunity to reclaim it. They were not moderate in their stance, focusing solely on reclaiming territory. These systemic pressures, characterized by opportunities arising from the international instability, led Azerbaijan to conclude that military intervention was necessary to secure its strategic interests.

Hypothesis 2 (NCR): When there is a perceived instability or imbalance in the international system, the more task-oriented and/or constraint challenging a leader is, the higher the likelihood of military intervention.

Defining the causal pathway for H2: Similar to the neorealist hypothesis, systemic pressures, due to international instability and regional power imbalances were perceived. These pressures created a context in which decisive action could be justified. President Ilham Aliyev's leadership style, characterized by a high degree of task orientation and a tension to challenge constraints, played a critical role. Task-oriented leaders focus on achieving specific goals, while constraint-challenging leaders are willing to take bold actions despite potential risks. Aliyev's leadership style influenced how these systemic pressures were interpreted and addressed. His focus on a concrete policy goal, reclaiming NK, and his willingness to engage in aggressive military actions were pivotal. The causal mechanism according to NCR is particularly visible through Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA). The interaction between the systemic pressures and Aliyev's leadership style led to the decision to intervene militarily.

To uncover these causal mechanisms, this study will create a detailed timeline of key events leading up to the military intervention. This approach involves tracing the decision-making process within the context of both hypotheses.

Figure 4 Table with overview of variables

Variable	Operationalized definition	Indicators	Data
Power dynamics	The shifts in military, diplomatic, and economic influence among regional actors affecting Azerbaijan’s strategic decisions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Changes in military capabilities. - Diplomatic relations and shifts in alliances. - Shifts in the regional power structures. - Broader international events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Military support and technological advancements - High level diplomatic exchanges. - Formation and dissolution of alliances.
Strategic interests	The goals that a state pursues to maximize its power and ensure survival in an anarchic international system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Territorial claims - Military modernization and buildup - Regional influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Official speeches of Ilham Aliyev - Defense budgets - Participation in regional collaborations
Leadership styles	The specific behavioral traits and decision-making approaches of Ilham Aliyev	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Task-orientation versus relational-orientation. - Constraint-respecting versus constraint-challenging leadership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of speeches and public statements of Ilham Aliyev in October 2019, December 2020, October 2021, November 2022, and July 2023. - Comparative analysis with 87 other heads of state

4 Analysis

In this chapter I will analyze all the collected data by using the method of process tracing. Throughout this analysis, I aim to identify and examine the theoretical hypothesis of neorealism and neoclassical realism (NCR) and the established causal mechanisms based on these hypotheses. By examining this, this study aims to assess the explanatory power of both theories.

Firstly, I will provide an elaborate contextual background of the NK conflict with emphasis on the period from the 2019 status quo leading up to the September 2023 intervention. Secondly, I will examine the evolving roles of the key regional actors, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, and Russia, during those years. I will focus on the power dynamics and strategic interests with the corresponding indicators. This sheds light on the potential influence of systemic factors on Azerbaijan's decision-making. In order to gain a more comprehensive view of this decision, I conduct a Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) of President Ilham Aliyev, a key player in the conflict, to gain insight in the domestic factors that may have shaped Azerbaijan's strategic choices.

By intertwining the systemic and domestic levels of analysis, I aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of the causal mechanisms underpinning Azerbaijan's actions, ultimately evaluating the explanatory power of the neorealist and NCR frameworks.

4.1 Chronological Mapping of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict (2019 – 2023)

Although this study focuses on the period between 2019 and the Third Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) War in September 2023, it is important to provide a brief overview of the NK conflict to contextualize the historical tensions.

The NK conflict is a territorial and ethnic dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan that has deep historical roots dating back to early 20th century. This predominantly Armenian-populated region declared independence from Azerbaijan during the dissolution of the Soviet Union (SU), leading to a full-scale war from 1988 to 1994 (de Waal, 2003). With the collapse of the SU and the establishment of independent Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1991, the conflict became international, involving regional and international powers, including Turkey. This

internationalization has influenced the foreign policies of both countries regarding NK (Sahakyan, 2024). In May 1994, both Armenia and Azerbaijan entered a state of frozen conflict, where mass violence ceased, but the political dispute remained unresolved. In the following years, Armenia experienced political turbulence, while Azerbaijan, unable to develop peacefully, endured the stifling order imposed by President Heydar Aliyev (De Waal, 2003). Although the war ended with a ceasefire, NK remained under Armenian control, without international recognition, and tensions simmered for decades, periodically erupting into violence.

In April 2016, a major escalation occurred, known as the 'Four-Day War', involving intense fighting between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. This was the first significant escalation of violence since the 1994 ceasefire. This brief but violent confrontation resulted in significant casualties and even higher tensions between the two nations. According to academic analyses, the April 2016 clashes involved heavy artillery, tanks, and drones, marking a significant shift in the military capabilities and strategies of both sides. These clashes underscored the volatility of the ceasefire and the potential for renewed large-scale conflict (De Waal, 2003; Broers, 2019; Cornell, 2015).

The relative peace lasted until September 2020. From 2020 to 2023, the NK conflict saw significant developments that culminated in Azerbaijan's military intervention in September 2023. This period is marked by a series of key events and strategic decisions made by the key actors, which shaped the trajectory of the conflict. In July 2020, tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan escalated significantly with border clashes in Tovuz region, resulting in casualties on both sides. The conflict escalated dramatically in September 2020, and full-fledged war resumed on the 27th of that month. This war is known as the '44-day war'. Six weeks of intense conflict ended in the early hours of November 10th with a ceasefire brokered by the Russian Federation. Although the deal did not establish a clear and stable peace, it ended the deadliest fighting in the region in nearly three decades, with over 7.000 military personnel and about 170 civilians killed (Crisis Group, 2023; Ioanes, 2023). It is important to note that during this war, Azerbaijan recaptured all the territories surrounding NK held by Armenia since 1994 (Ioanes, 2023).

The Armenia-Russia-Azerbaijan trilateral agreement of November 2020 relied on the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to ensure the safety of ethnic Armenians and to oversee

the Lachin Corridor, the *only* road connecting Armenia to NK (Demytrie, 2023). The Lachin Corridor had been under control of Armenian troops between 1992 and 2020 and has guaranteed the viability of NK as a self-declared independent entity for almost 30 years. It allowed residents of NK to access services in Armenia, and military equipment and personnel could transit from one entity to the other. This began to change with the end of the war of 2020 (Oltramonti, 2023). An important part of the November 2020 agreement was that Azerbaijan had to guarantee the security of persons, vehicles and cargo moving along the Lachin Corridor in both directions. However, Azerbaijan's actions following the ceasefire suggest a departure from strictly adhering to the terms of the agreement. Azerbaijan's actions, including blockages and restrictions on movement through the Lachin Corridor, created significant challenges for the Armenian population in NK. These measures disrupted the flow of essential goods and services. In response to these ongoing issues and the broader need to further stabilize the situation, a subsequent agreement was reached on January 11, 2021 (Smbatyan & Isayev, 2022). This agreement involved the creation of a working group composed of officials from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, tasked with unblocking regional economic and transport infrastructure.

Despite these efforts, Azerbaijan's actions continued to strain relations. Azerbaijan's interpretation of the ceasefire terms appeared flexible, often leveraging its position to exert pressure on Armenia and the Armenian population in NK (Oltramonti, 2023). Hostilities still periodically occurred while many other provisions of the November 2020 and January 2021 agreements remained unfulfilled. On November 6, 2021, the Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian leaders signed a third statement in Sochi, Russia, again reaffirming their commitment to the implementation of the previously signed ceasefire statements. During that meeting, Ilham Aliyev stated that "We have agreed to intensify the joint efforts towards the earliest possible solution of the remaining tasks arising from the statements dated November 2020 and January 2021" (Aliyev, 2021a). Although the statements were released and the meetings held with emphasis on commitment to the November 2020 and January 2021 statement, still no significant progress was made, and the tensions remained high. Thus, the two years after the 2020 war were marked by continued tension and sporadic skirmishes along the new lines of control. The front line became longer and more volatile. The Armenian and Azerbaijani forces frequently accused each other of violating the ceasefire, and incidents of gunfire and minor clashes were common (Crisis Group, 2021).

In December 2022, Azerbaijan began intensifying its actions by initiating a blockade of the Lachin Corridor. This blockage deepened in April 2023 with the establishment of a border checkpoint and replacement of Russian peacekeepers with Azerbaijani special services (Tatikyan, 2024). Azerbaijan accused Armenia of using the Lachin Corridor to bring in military supplies, which Armenia denies (Demytrie, 2023). The blockade led to deliberate starvation of the population and weaponization of energy and humanitarian aid. Since that time, the humanitarian situation in NK became increasingly desperate (Ioanes, 2023). Azerbaijan denied that a humanitarian crisis was unfolding, saying it wanted full control of the territory.

On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijani forces launched a large-scale military operation in NK. This assault marked the culmination of months of mounting pressure and strategic preparations by Azerbaijan. Despite the presence of Russian peacekeepers, who had been stationed in the region since the 2020 ceasefire agreement, no significant action was taken by these forces to prevent or halt the fighting. Within 24 hours, the leadership of NK capitulated. For the first time in 30 years, Baku could claim full control over the contested territory. The President of NK declared that the entity would formally cease to exist on January 1, 2024 (Landgraf & Seferian, 2024).

4.2 Developments in the Regional Power Balance (2019 – 2023)

The period from 2019 to Azerbaijan's military intervention in NK in September 2023 witnesses significant shifts in regional power dynamics. I will elaborate on the developments involving all key actors separately, focusing on Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia and Turkey. Turkey has close cultural and historical links to Azerbaijan. Armenia, on the other hand, has strong relations with Russia. I will conclude with a comprehensive examination of the shifts in the regional power dynamics that influenced the September 2023 intervention.

4.2.1 Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan's military strategy transformed significantly since 2019. This transformation is driven by the regional power dynamics and Azerbaijan's strategic interests. The 44-day war in 2020 marked an important moment, changing the balance of power in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan's victory allowed it to reclaim territory lost more than a quarter-century earlier and enabled the return of hundreds of thousands of displaced Azerbaijanis to their homes (De Waal, 2021). This victory was underpinned by the effective use of advanced weaponry, particularly

Turkish-made Bayraktar drones, which played a crucial role in Azerbaijan’s military successes. Following the war, Azerbaijan started to focus on an extensive military modernization program. This was heavily influenced by Turkish military models and expertise. President Ilham Aliyev revealed Azerbaijan’s intention to strengthen the national army, creating new commando units in challenging terrains and increasing defense expenditure substantially (Kazimbeyli, 2023). The near doubling of Azerbaijan’s defense and national security budget from \$1.8 billion USD to \$3.77 billion USD between 2021 and 2022 reflects this commitment to military enhancement (ibid.). Azerbaijan pledged to continue the army building programs as one of the priorities in the coming years. Figure 5 illustrates the increase in defense expenditures of Azerbaijan compared to Armenia. It is evident from the figure that Armenia allocated significantly less for defense. In 2021, Armenia’s defense budget was \$663 million USD, which increased to \$1.09 billion USD in 2022 (Stepanyan, 2024).

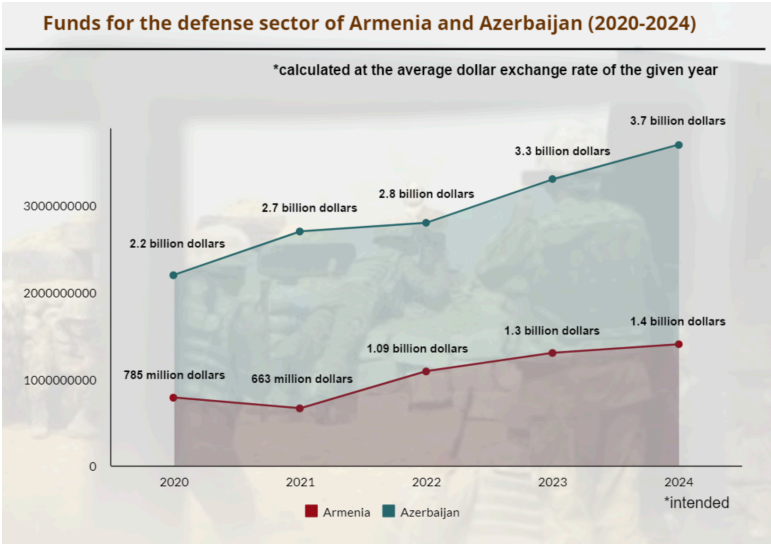


Figure 5 Military expenditures of Armenia and Azerbaijan (Stepanyan, 2024)

Also, Azerbaijan’s strategic partnership with Turkey was strengthened post-2020. Turkish military specialists played a direct role in training Azerbaijani commando forces, and Azerbaijan defense procurement from Turkey increased. This partnership marks Azerbaijan’s strategic interest in boosting its military capabilities to assert its influence in NK and the broader region (Ghahriyan et al., 2024).

A notable shift in Azerbaijan’s foreign policy occurred just before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Azerbaijan and Russia signed a declaration on ‘‘Allied Interaction between

the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation'', formally elevating their partnership to the level of an alliance (Tatikyan, 2024). This alliance represents a significant realignment in Azerbaijan's foreign policy for several reasons. Reorienting towards Moscow suggests a potential shift amidst growing regional tensions. Despite its longstanding strategic partnership with Turkey, Azerbaijan's move towards an alliance with Russia indicates a complex balancing act between its alliances with Turkey and its new partnership with Russia. The timing of this alliance, just before the invasion of Ukraine, implies a calculated decision by Azerbaijan to secure its regional position. This decision highlights Azerbaijan's strategic maneuvering in response to broader geopolitical shifts. Aligning with Russia, particularly amid its international isolation due to the Ukraine conflict, risks alienating Azerbaijan's Western allies and complicating its relations with Turkey. However, it also positions Azerbaijan to leverage its relationship with Russia to enhance its influence in the region (ibid.).

Azerbaijan's emphasis on military modernization is evident in its procurement of advanced weaponry and technology. The successful deployment of Turkish-made Bayraktar drones during the 2020 war exemplifies Azerbaijan's strategic interest in incorporating advanced technology into its military operations. This focus on modernization aims to maintain and extend its territorial gains in NK and assert its influence in the South Caucasus. The latest military intervention in September 2023 further underscores Azerbaijan's strategic intent to consolidate its control over NK. This intervention is marked by decisive military actions, which reflects Azerbaijan's enhanced military capabilities and strategic resolve. The continued buildup of its military forces and the strategic use of advanced technology indicate Azerbaijan's determination to assert its dominance in the region (Ghahriyan et al., 2024).

On top of this, it is important to place emphasis on the soft power elements Azerbaijan has increasingly utilized in its foreign policy strategies after the 2020 NK war. The liberation of natural beauties, historical artifacts, and cultural riches after the 44-day war has underscored tourism's significance as a soft power tool. Viewed as a means to diversify the economy and reduce dependence on oil, the tourism sector has enhanced Azerbaijan's soft power potential. Data from the Azerbaijan State Statistical Committee shows a rise in tourist numbers, reflecting growing soft power influence. Stability and security in the region are crucial for attracting tourists and improving perceptions of Azerbaijan, further strengthening its global influence and image (Mammadov, 2022).

In conclusion, Azerbaijan's strategic adjustments since 2019 reflect its adaptive response to shifting power dynamics in the South Caucasus. The 2020 war's victory and subsequent military modernization have enhanced its territorial control and defense capabilities. By strengthening its alliance with Turkey and forming a pragmatic partnership with Russia, Azerbaijan has effectively navigated regional tensions. These strategic choices emphasize Azerbaijan's commitment to securing its national interests and expanding its influence. The 2023 military intervention particularly highlights Azerbaijan's determination to consolidate control over NK.

4.2.2 Armenia

Since 2019, Armenia has undergone a lot of turbulence, especially following the 2020 NK war. The conflict's conclusion, marked by a ceasefire on the night of November 10, 2020, triggered a severe political crisis in Armenia. Widespread discontent manifested as angry mobs stormed government buildings, and key ruling-party figures, including Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, were forced into hiding (Crisis Group, 2021). This turmoil deeply influenced the subsequent parliamentary election campaigns, where candidates primarily focused on addressing wartime losses and proposing future strategies. A common theme among major political figures was advocating for closer ties with Russia, perceived as a crucial security guarantor amidst the ongoing instability (ibid.).

In contrast, Azerbaijan emerged from the war in a triumphant mood. This sentiment was vividly displayed during a military parade on December 10, 2020, where Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, supported by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, celebrated the conflict as a just war and highlighted Azerbaijan's strengthened regional position. The victory shifted the South Caucasus power balance in Azerbaijan's favor, leaving Armenia to grapple with its defeat and its far-reaching implications (De Waal, 2021).

Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan flared again in May 2021 at their shared border, resulting in an exchange of fire between their forces. This area was notably not patrolled by Russian peacekeepers, emphasizing the fragile security situation (ibid.). For Armenia, these border skirmishes underscored the critical need for Russian support. It became evident that without substantial Russian backing, Armenia's ability to assert its interests and ensure its security was severely limited.

The regional power dynamics further evolved with Azerbaijan's military intervention in September 2023. Armenia, still shaking from the 2020 defeat and amidst ongoing political instability, found itself at a significant disadvantage. This intervention showcased Azerbaijan's enhanced military capabilities and strategic resolve, further consolidating its control over NK and reinforcing its regional dominance (Ghahriyan et al., 2024). This period again highlighted Armenia's reliance on external powers, particularly Russia, for security and stability (Tatikyan, 2024).

Armenia's political and military challenges since 2019 reflect a broader shift in regional power dynamics. The 2020 war marked a crucial moment, leading to significant territorial and political losses for Armenia. While Azerbaijan has significantly increased its military spending, Armenia has placed less emphasis on modernizing its armed forces. Instead, Armenia primarily pursued a strategy of maintaining the status quo through diplomatic negotiations and relying on Russia to prevent large-scale military conflicts (Mikaelian, 2023).

However, Armenia's defeat in the 2020 war showed Russia's inability to maintain stability, despite its direct military presence. Moscow's failure to respond adequately, even after several of its soldiers were killed during hostilities, severely damaged Russia's image in the eyes of Armenians. This has led to the withdrawal of Russian ground troops from NK, as there are no longer any sides to divide, and has raised questions about the continued presence of Russian military bases in Armenia proper (ibid.).

In conclusion, Armenia's political and military landscape has been shaped by its conflict with Azerbaijan and the subsequent shifts in regional power dynamics since 2019. The 2020 war marked a significant turning point, leading to territorial losses and political upheaval in Armenia. Azerbaijan's strengthened position and increased military spending contrast sharply with Armenia's reliance on diplomatic negotiations and Russian support. However, Russia's diminishing influence and Armenia's growing interest in Western alliances suggest a potential realignment in the South Caucasus power structures, indicating an ongoing evolution in the region's geopolitical landscape.

4.2.3 Turkey

Since the start of the NK conflict in the late 1980s Turkey showed a strong interest in acting as a mediator, but its role was constrained by domestic and external factors. Despite these limitations, Turkey has consistently supported Azerbaijan through diplomatic, military,

political, and economic means, solidifying a strategic partnership that has evolved significantly over the decades. This support has not only strengthened Azerbaijan but also served the strategic interests of the European Union (EU) and United States (US) for balancing Russian power in the region.

From 2019 onwards, Turkey adopted a more proactive stance in the South Caucasus, culminating its assertive involvement during the Second NK War in 2020. Turkey played a pivotal role in this conflict, actively helping to tip the balance in favor of Azerbaijan (Ötzig, 2023). The deployment of Turkish-made Bayraktar drones, which Turkey had used effectively in operations in Syria and Libya, was crucial in Azerbaijan's military successes, enabling significant territorial gains (Çelik, 2021). This technological advantage was a game-changer in the NK conflict and altered the regional power structures. For the first time, Turkey's proactive efforts in the lead-up to the 2020 war posed a substantial challenge to Russia's dominance in the region (Isachenko, 2020).

Turkey's intensified support for Azerbaijan ahead of the 2020 war was driven by a strategic goal to disrupt the existing regional status quo. By actively participating in the conflict and its resolution, Turkey sought to consolidate its status as a regional power and assert its influence in negotiation processes alongside Russia (ibid.). Turkey's military assistance significantly enhanced Azerbaijan's combat capabilities, marking a transition from passive to proactive foreign policy.

The deepening of Turkish-Azerbaijani ties has been a cornerstone of Turkey's regional strategy. These ties are rooted in shared ethnic, cultural, and linguistic bonds, further reinforced by mutual strategic interests. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, for instance, symbolizes the economic interdependence between the two nations, providing Azerbaijan with critical access to global markets while reducing its reliance on Russian energy routes (Yesevi & Tiftikçigil, 2015). Energy security has remained an important aspect of Turkey's strategic interests. Projects like the BTC pipeline are crucial for diversifying energy routes and reducing dependence on Russian supplies.

Turkey's actions in the NK conflict are part of a broader strategy to counterbalance Russian dominance in the South Caucasus. By supporting Azerbaijan militarily and politically, Turkey challenges Russia's traditional role as the primary power broker in the region (Kharshiladze,

2021). The use of Bayraktar drones by Azerbaijan not only tipped the balance but also highlighted Turkey as a significant player in the global arms market, enhancing its reputation and influence.

In conclusion, until 2019 Turkey had not been able to challenge Moscow's hegemonic position in the South Caucasus. However, from 2019 onwards, Turkey's role in the NK conflict has markedly shifted from a supportive ally to an assertive and proactive power. This transition involved providing substantial military assistance, including the deployment of advanced drones, which significantly bolstered Azerbaijan's capabilities. This support not only tipped the balance in Azerbaijan's favor during the Second NK War but also challenged Russia's traditional dominance in the South Caucasus. By seizing strategic opportunities, Turkey has redefined regional power dynamics, positioning itself as a more important player in the conflict's resolution and broader regional affairs.

4.2.4 Russia

Russia's involvement in the NK conflict has been a cornerstone of its regional policy in the South Caucasus. Historically, Russia's strategy has been to maintain a balance of power between Armenia and Azerbaijan, often positioning itself as a mediator to ensure both sides remained dependent on Moscow. This strategic ambiguity allowed Russia to exert significant influence over the region without committing to a definitive resolution (De Waal, 2003; Helvaciköylü, 2021).

Post-Soviet Russia has preferred to maintain the status quo rather than resolve the conflict. This approach allowed Moscow to keep both sides dependent on its influence. Playing the role of mediator, Russia aimed to ensure that neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan could act independently without Russian support (*ibid.*). Despite its alliance with Armenia, exemplified by Armenia's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia maintained a neutral stance during conflicts to preserve good relations with Azerbaijan as well (Isachenko, 2020).

Before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia balanced its relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan carefully. Armenia's economic and political dependency on Russia was stark, while Azerbaijan was a strategic partner. The deployment of Russian peacekeepers in NK following the 2020 ceasefire solidified Russia's role as a key player in regional stability, controlling critical areas like the Lachin corridor and limiting Western influence (Helvaciköylü, 2021).

However, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine significantly altered Russia's capacity to project power in the South Caucasus. The conflict diverted Russian military and diplomatic resources, weakening its ability to manage and influence regional dynamics effectively. This undermined Russia's strategic positioning and credibility in the region (Ioanes, 2023). The redirection of Russian military assets to Ukraine reduced the effectiveness of its peacekeeping forces in NK, leading to a resurgence of low-level hostilities and challenging the stability that Russian forces were meant to ensure.

Diplomatically, the invasion isolated Russia on the international stage, weakening its influence in multilateral settings and reducing its leverage over both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia, while still reliant on Russian support, has shown signs of seeking alternative security partnerships, given the uncertainty of Russian commitments. Azerbaijan, emboldened by Russian distractions, has pursued more assertive policies, further destabilizing the region (Isachenko, 2020).

With Russia's diminished role, other regional actors have sought to expand their influence. Turkey has strengthened its ties with Azerbaijan, filling the power vacuum left by Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine. This shift has introduced new complexities to the geopolitical landscape, potentially leading to a more multipolar and unstable regional order (Değirmenciöğlü, 2019).

Despite its reduced influence, Russia continued to play an administrative role in the NK conflict, facilitating discussions between the Azerbaijani government and local Armenian authorities during the Azerbaijani blockade of the Lachin corridor in December 2022. Baku viewed Russia's role as a stabilizing factor during this time (Ioanes, 2023). Politically, the allowance for the defeat of Armenia has enabled Moscow to gain the trust of Azerbaijan. From the Armenian perspective, Russia remains their only friend and savior in the region (Helvaciköylü, 2021).

In conclusion, Russia's involvement in the NK conflict has been marked by strategic ambiguity, maintaining a balance of power without committing to a resolution. However, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine has significantly weakened Russia's influence and ability to manage regional dynamics, leading to a shift in power structures. This change has created new opportunities for other regional actors to expand their influence, resulting in a more complex and potentially unstable geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus.

4.2.5 An Integrated Analysis of the Shifts in Regional Power Dynamics (2019-2023)

After analyzing the developments of all key regional actors between 2019 and September 2023 separately, it is important to provide a comprehensive examination of the shifts in the regional power dynamics. This is necessary to be able to examine the neorealist hypothesis (H1) which states that states are more likely to intervene militarily when there is an imbalance or instability in the international system, especially if they have strategic interests in the affected region, to strengthen their position.

The period from 2019 to Azerbaijan's military intervention in NK in September 2023 saw significant shifts in the regional power dynamics in the South Caucasus. These changes, driven by actions of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, and Turkey, created a complex geopolitical environment that eventually led to the escalation of the conflict. The systemic factors that have contributed to these shifts included military advancements, shifts in alliances, and broader international events, particularly Russia's involvement in Ukraine.

From 2019 onwards, Azerbaijan emerged as a dominant force in the South Caucasus, capitalizing on military modernization and strategic alliances, especially with Russia, to alter the regional status quo. The 2020 NK conflict was a crucial moment for Azerbaijan. During that war it regained significant territories in NK. This military success was supported by the effective deployment of advanced weaponry, including drones from Turkey (De Waal, 2021). Azerbaijan started to focus more on extensive military upgrades post-2020, doubling its budget between 2021 and 2022. Turkey provided critical military training and advanced technology which enhanced Azerbaijan's military capabilities. On the contrary, Armenia struggled with political and military instability following its defeat in the 2020 war. The country faced internal political crises and remained heavily reliant on Russian support, which exposed its vulnerabilities. Although Armenia tried to stabilize, it could not match Azerbaijan's advancements. This exacerbated its security challenges.

Also, Russia's traditional role as a stabilizing power in the South Caucasus was disrupted. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 redirected Russian military and diplomatic resources. This weakened its regional influence and created a power vacuum. The reduction in Russian dominance gave Azerbaijan and Turkey the space to expand their influence even more, which challenged Moscow's historical control over the region (Helvaciköylü, 2021). Although Russia

maintained its presence, its ability to manage regional dynamics was compromised. This created an environment ripe for more instability and strategic maneuvering by other regional actors (Isachenko, 2020).

On the contrary, Turkey's involvement in the South Caucasus became more prominent from 2019 onwards. During the 2020 NK war, the country became a proactive power instead of a supportive ally. Turkey was an important ally for Azerbaijan in order to achieve the military successes in 2020. The strengthening of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations was driven by shared interests and economic ties. Also, Turkey's actions were part of a broader strategy to counterbalance Russian influence in the region (Kharshiladze, 2021).

The cumulative effects of these regional shifts created a strategic opportunity for Azerbaijan. The distraction caused by Russia's involvement in Ukraine and Armenia's ongoing political and military difficulties created a good moment for Azerbaijan to try to assert its dominance in NK. Enhanced military capabilities with Turkish support put Azerbaijan in the position to take advantage of the regional power imbalance. Therefore, Azerbaijan's military intervention in September 2023 can be considered as a strategic move to solidify its control over NK. The interplay of systemic factors has reshaped the regional power dynamics in the South Caucasus from 2019 onwards, and it is likely this has had a significant impact on Azerbaijan's foreign policy decision in September 2023. This fits with the assumption of offensive neorealism that when states perceive an imbalance of power, they view it as an opportunity to enhance their relative power and improve their position within the regional balance of power. On top of this, Azerbaijan has always had strategic interests in NK. This drive to maximize power is a fundamental aspect of state behavior in an anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2001).

To gain a comprehensive view, it is also essential to examine domestic factors that possibly influenced the decision of Azerbaijan to intervene militarily in NK in September 2023. These domestic factors can provide additional context and nuance. This complements the systemic factors and offers a fuller understanding of the research question. Therefore, the next section will elaborate on Ilham Aliyev's leadership style in the period from 2019 until the September 2023 intervention.

4.3 The Development of Ilham Aliyev’s Leadership Style (2019-2023)

Ilham Aliyev has been an important figure in Azerbaijan’s political landscape since he assumed the presidency in 2003. Over the years, his leadership has evolved, influenced by the dynamic geopolitical context of the Caucasus region, internal political dynamics, and the ongoing conflict over NK. Understanding the development of Aliyev’s leadership style from 2019 until July 2023, before the military intervention in September, requires a systematic analysis of his official speeches, which reflect his strategic priorities, motivational drivers, and responses to various constraints. This analysis employs Hermann’s Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) methodology, providing a comprehensive profile that elucidates his approach to conflict management. As explained in the methods chapter, the focus is on the degree of task-orientation and whether Aliyev tends to be more constraint challenging or constraint respecting. Task-orientation, as conceptualized by Hermann (1999), signified a leadership style focused on problem-solving and achieving specific goals.

Hermann’s methodology allows researchers to place individuals in typological categories, identifying how motivation is reflected in their responses to constraints and their ability to take in information. Using the Profiler Plus program developed by Levine & Young (2014), this study analyzes Aliyev’s leadership traits based on speeches from 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023. The program compares Aliyev’s trait scores to those of 87 heads of state from around the world. This provides a context for evaluating whether his traits are unusually high, low, or about average (Hermann, 1999). I have uploaded the five speeches in the Profiler Plus program that consequently made an analysis of it. The complete set of Aliyev’s leadership scores can be found in Appendix 1 (p. 65).

Figure 6 Table with Ilham Aliyev's LTA scores

	87 Heads of State	Ilham Aliyev October 2019	Ilham Aliyev December 2020	Ilham Aliyev October 2021	Ilham Aliyev November 2022	Ilham Aliyev July 2023
Belief can control events (BACE)	Mean = 0.44 Low < 0.30 High > 0.58	0.4	0.4	0.30	0.33	0.41
Need for power (PWR)	Mean = 0.50	0.12	0.12	0.39	0.12	0.24

	Low 0.37 High 0.62	< >					
Self-confidence (SC)	Mean 0.62 Low 0.44 High 0.81	= < >	0.45	24	0.32	0.45	0.31
Conceptual complexity (CC)	Mean 0.44 Low 0.32 High 0.56	= < >	0.57	0.43	0.68	0.57	0.56
Task focus (TASK)	Mean 0.59 Low 0.46 High 0.71	= < >	0.60	0.54	0.67	0.56	0.79
In-group bias (IGB)	Mean 0.42 Low 0.32 High 0.53	= < >	0.11	0.27	0.26	0.11	0.11
Distrust of others (DIS)	Mean 0.41 Low 0.25 High 0.56	= < >	0.02	0.21	ERROR	0.11	0.08

Figure 7 Table with Ilham Aliyev's LTA scores compared to the sample of 87 Heads of State

	October 2019	December 2020	October 2021	November 2022	July 2023
Belief can control events (BACE)	Average	Average	Average/Low	Average	Average
Need for power (PWR)	Low	Low	Average	Low	Low

Self-confidence (SC)	Average	Average	Low	Average	Low
Conceptual complexity (CC)	High	Average	High	High	High
Task focus (TASK)	Average	Average	Average	Average	High
In-group bias (IGB)	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Distrust of others (DIS)	Low	Low	ERROR	Low	Low

The data from Aliyev’s LTA scores reveal several consistent traits. Across the five speeches analyzed, Aliyev exhibits high levels of conceptual complexity and task focus. His conceptual complexity scores suggest a nuanced to problem-solving and strategic planning, while his task focus indicates a strong orientation toward achieving specific objectives (Hermann, 1999). I would argue that this high degree of task-orientation since July 2023 played a role in Aliyev’s decision-making process leading up to the military intervention in September 2023. It suggests that he approached the situation with careful consideration, assessing military capabilities, diplomatic options, and the possible geopolitical implications. This strategic mindset is aimed at achieving the specific outcome aligned with Azerbaijan’s strategic interests in NK, which is regaining power in NK. Also, leaders with a high degree of task-orientation are characterized as willing to challenge constraints instead of respecting constraints. This trait indicates a readiness to confront and overcome political, diplomatic, or military obstacles in pursuit of their goals. Aliyev’s leadership since July 2023 reflects his proactive stance and readiness to take calculated risks.

The trend of Aliyev’s increasing task-orientation, particularly peaking in July 2023 according to the LTA scores, underscores his approach to the NK conflict during that year. It highlights a significant shift towards assertiveness and strategic decisiveness. His leadership during this period was aimed at asserting Azerbaijan’s interests, guided by a vision of securing territorial integrity and enhancing regional influence.

This aligns with the hypothesis (H2) that Aliyev’s leadership style is characterized by a high degree of task orientation, which, according to NCR, enhances the likelihood of military intervention when systemic pressures are perceived. NRC argues that while systemic factors set the stage, domestic factors are crucial in understanding how states respond to those pressures

(Lobell et al., 2009). NCR emphasizes the need to understand which domestic actors matter, under what systemic circumstances they have influence, and under what domestic circumstances they exert those influences. This study used Ilham Aliyev's leadership style as the main domestic factor for explaining this theoretical assumption. NCR would suggest that Aliyev, as a key domestic actor, is responding to systemic pressures in a way consistent with his task-oriented approach.

4.3.1 Comparison to Other Research of Ilham Aliyev's Leadership Style

Besides my own LTA using Profiler Plus, it is valuable to compare my findings with other research, such as that conducted by Sahakyan (2024), who draws on Robert Entman's (1993) framing theory to examine speeches by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. Sahakyan (2024) argues, in line with the theoretical assumptions of NCR, that the narratives of the state leader of Azerbaijan played a crucial role in shaping the conflict. Aliyev framed his perspective in a way that conceals his political interests, influencing both domestic and foreign policies related to NK. Sahakyan found that Aliyev's leadership style includes emphasizing Islamic solidarity, positioning Azerbaijan as a member of the Muslim community and advocating for Muslim solidarity in addressing the conflict. He engages in complex activities to gain support from international actors, particularly Muslim-majority countries, to bolster Azerbaijan's position, framing discussions for Muslim-majority audiences and seeking solidarity from members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Additionally, Aliyev seeks to politically isolate Armenia and garner support for Azerbaijan's position, calling for sanctions and resolutions condemning Armenia as an aggressor state, portraying Azerbaijan as a victimized Muslim-majority country. Furthermore, his leadership style involves leveraging strategic alliances, such as with Turkey, to support Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and position on NK, aligning his rhetoric with Turkish leaders' narratives and emphasizing the importance of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

When comparing these findings with my own LTA of Ilham Aliyev, several aspects align while others provide a broader context to his leadership approach. According to my LTA scores, Aliyev's task focus increased over time, peaking in July 2023, indicating a growing emphasis on achieving specific goals, which is consistent with his strategic framing of the conflict and efforts to advance Azerbaijan's interests. His conceptual complexity also remained high, suggesting a nuanced understanding and strategic approach to the conflict, aligning with the research's depiction of his international engagement and strategic alliances. However, Aliyev's

need for power and self-confidence scores remained relatively low, which contrasts with the strong political and strategic maneuvers highlighted in the research by Sahakyan (2024). This suggests that while Aliyev may not exhibit high personal dominance or self-assuredness, his leadership style effectively leverages external support and strategic alliances to compensate for these traits. This LTA seems to portray these theoretical expectations.

It is also valuable to compare the analysis of my LTA scores from 2019-2023 to Ismayilzada's (2021) discourse analysis of the 2018-2020 period, to see whether there are notable differences.

The results of Ismayilzada's (2021) analysis show that following the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia, Aliyev's leadership style experienced a shift. The change in leadership in Armenia and the subsequent lack of progress in the peace process led to increased dissatisfaction and frustration in Aliyev's rhetoric. His discourses became more critical and less patient, reflecting a growing sense of urgency and a shift towards a more pro-war stance. This period saw a diversification in Aliyev's strategic communication. He sought more support from Turkey and Islamic nations and started to target domestic opposition parties more aggressively. The tone of his speeches indicated a continuation and escalation of enmity towards Armenia, with a clearer inclination towards military solutions. When comparing this to my LTA scores derived from analyzing Aliyev's speeches (2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023), there are some notable differences. The LTA scores show high levels of task focus, but only in July 2023. This suggests an Aliyev's approach focused on problem-solving and strategic planning at that time. These traits align with his detailed and goal-oriented rhetoric observed in the discourse analysis. However, the discourse analysis was done during 2018-2020 and the high LTA scores on task orientation are from July 2023. In the years 2019-2023, Aliyev did not score high on task orientation yet. Aliyev's aggressive and frustrated tone resulting from the 2018-2020 discourse analysis suggests that Aliyev already had a high degree of task orientation before 2023. This is however not portrayed in the LTA scores of 2019 and 2020.

4.4 A Combined Analysis: Systemic and Domestic Factors

To fully understand the September 2023 military intervention by Azerbaijan in NK, it is crucial to combine the insights from both the systemic (shifts in regional power dynamics) and the domestic (the development of Ilham Aliyev's leadership style) factors. This combined analysis will provide a comprehensive view on how external pressures and domestic dynamics collectively influenced Azerbaijan's strategic decision-making.

From a systemic perspective, the regional instability and shifts in power dynamics played an important role. The South Caucasus region saw considerable changes, especially following the 2020 NK war. This causes a shift in the regional balance of power. Azerbaijan's military successes, backed by advanced weaponry and Turkish support, created a volatile environment. Armenia's political and military decline further contributed to the instability, creating opportunities for Azerbaijan to assert its influence. The impact of the Ukraine conflict on Russia's ability to maintain its traditional role in the region must be mentioned as well. The invasion diverted Russian military and diplomatic resources, which weakened its influence in the South Caucasus. This created a power vacuum that Azerbaijan was quick to exploit by pursuing more aggressive policies. Azerbaijan did this knowing there was a reduced risk of Russian intervention. Moreover, Azerbaijan's strategic partnership with Turkey has been important. The enhanced military and economic ties provided Azerbaijan with more support. This allowed Azerbaijan to strengthen its military capabilities and assert its regional dominance. The pragmatic alignment with Russia through the 2022 'Allied Interaction' declaration further secured its strategic position.

Domestically, President Ilham Aliyev's leadership style can be considered as a critical factor. His leadership style is characterized by a high degree of task-orientation and a willingness to challenge constraints, especially from July 2023 onwards. Aliyev's approach was instrumental in translating the systemic pressures into decisive actions. His strategic focus on achieving the goals of reclaiming NK drove his aggressive military policies. Additionally, the internal political landscape in Azerbaijan was marked by strong nationalistic sentiments and unified support for the NK cause, especially after the 2020 war. That victory strengthened Aliyev's domestic standing, which made further military endeavors politically advantageous.

Combining these insights reveals a complex interplay of factors that led to the 2023 military intervention. The regional instability, weakened by Russian influence, and strengthened Turkish alliance provided a strategic context ripe for action. Aliyev's proactive and task-oriented leadership translated these systemic opportunities into concrete military actions. This synergy validates both the neorealist and NCR hypotheses, which will be elaborated on in chapter five.

5 Conclusions

In this study, I aimed to analyze the research question *‘What factors can account for the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in September 2023, leading to its unresolved status?’* The core of this research was to gain a better understanding the complex interplay between systemic and domestic factors in the context of frozen conflict dynamics through a single case study. This has been done by reflecting upon both neorealistic and neoclassical realistic (NCR) theory. I conducted a single case study combined with process tracing to analyze whether systemic and domestic factors contributed to Azerbaijan’s military action in September 2023 and to what extent Aliyev’s leadership style played a role. This research aims to evaluate the plausibility of neorealism and NCR. This case study tests the theoretical hypotheses and the hypothesized causal mechanisms derived from these theories by tracing regional developments. This final chapter discusses the findings of the analysis, providing an answer to the research question, and addresses the implications, limitations and recommendations for future research.

5.1 Evaluating the Theoretical Hypotheses

This study tested two hypotheses derived from neorealism and NCR. The first hypothesis (H1) is based on neorealism. It states that states are more likely to intervene militarily when there is an imbalance or instability in the international system, especially if they have strategic interests in the region. The study found that regional instability and Azerbaijan’s strategic goals indeed created a favorable environment for military action in September 2023. The systemic pressures of regional instability and strategic interests align with the neorealist hypothesis, showing how Azerbaijan perceived the opportunity created by the conflict in Ukraine and the subsequent weakening of Russia’s influence in the South Caucasus. This aligns with the theoretical hypothesis of neorealism, thereby strengthening its validity in this context.

The second hypothesis (H2), based on NCR, suggested that the leadership style of Ilham Aliyev played a significant role in the decision to intervene. I would argue that the analysis uncovered that Aliyev’s task-oriented and constraint-challenging leadership has been crucial. His proactive and aggressive approach turned the systemic pressures into concrete actions, demonstrating that domestic factors, in this case specifically leadership traits, influence strategic decisions. These findings align with the NCR hypothesis.

Both theoretical hypotheses were observed in this case study, which reinforces the relevance and validity of both neorealism and NCR in explaining Azerbaijan's behavior. The study's findings demonstrate the explanatory power of these theories when applying them to real-world conflicts.

5.2 Identifying Causal Mechanisms

The analysis found two main causal pathways that led to Azerbaijan's decision to intervene in September 2023. I have used the method of process tracing to uncover the underlying causal mechanisms that led to Azerbaijan's strategic decisions.

The first causal pathway, aligned with neorealism, demonstrated that the conflict in Ukraine created instability in the international system. I would argue that this instability provided Azerbaijan with a strategic opportunity to reclaim NK. With Russia's attention diverted by the Ukraine conflict, its influence in the South Caucasus weakened significantly. Azerbaijan interpreted this distraction as a chance to assert its control over NK. This illustrates how systemic instability can prompt decisive military actions. This causal mechanism supports the neorealist hypothesis that states are more likely to intervene militarily when they perceive an imbalance or instability in the international system, especially when they have strategic interests at stake.

The second pathway, consistent with NCR, highlighted the crucial role of President Ilham Aliyev's leadership style. I would argue that his task-oriented style since July 2023 has been instrumental in turning external pressures into concrete military actions. This leadership style, also characterized by a propensity to challenge constraints, facilitated the translation of systemic pressures into strategic decisions. This causal mechanism shows how domestic factors are essential in understanding state behavior. Aliyev's leadership style was focused on achieving specific goals and he was willing to take bold actions.

I would suggest that the hypothesized causal mechanisms, derived from neorealist and NCR theories, are exposed and strengthened by this case study. This study has provided a comprehensive understanding of crucial factors that contributed to Azerbaijan's military intervention in NK in September 2023. The combination of external instability and domestic leadership dynamics illustrate the complex interplay between shifts in regional power dynamics

and individual decision-making processes in driving state actions. This analysis reaffirms the relevance of both theoretical frameworks in explaining the strategic decisions of states in response to changing international contexts.

5.3 Shortcomings and Limitations

While this analysis provides valuable insights, it is also important to also acknowledge its shortcomings and limitations. Firstly, while LTA provides useful insights into Aliyev's leadership style, it relies only on the interpretation of speeches, which not fully reflects the complexity of decision-making processes. Secondly, the findings are specific to the 2023 NK conflict and the unique geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus. While some insights may be applicable to other frozen conflicts that burst into flames, the specific conditions and actors involved may limit the generalizability of the conclusions to other contexts. Besides this, the analysis focuses on a single case study, without comparative analysis with other similar conflicts. It is therefore challenging to determine whether the observed patterns and causal mechanisms are unique to NK or represent broader trends in international relations and conflict studies. Lastly, the role of two important external actors, Turkey and Russia, is highlighted, but the influence of other international actors is not examined. The role of US, EU, and UN, for instance, might have shaped the trajectory of the conflict as well. This is not analyzed in this study. Although this analysis shows that systemic and domestic factors had an impact on Azerbaijan's decision, I did not explore other potential factors that could have impacted the outcome. The factors I have analyzed might not be the only relevant ones at play.

5.4 Recommendations for Further Research

To build on this analysis of Azerbaijan's military intervention in NK in September 2023, I would recommend other researchers to investigate other frozen conflicts that have burst into flames, such as the conflicts in Eastern Ukraine, Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and the Western Sahara. Comparative analysis can reveal common patterns and unique factors that contribute to the eruption of such conflicts. This enhances the generalizability of the findings from this case study. Besides this, conducting Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) on key figures in other conflicts can help to understand how specific leadership styles impact decision-making processes in situations of frozen conflicts. By comparing other leaders with Ilham Aliyev could highlight how different or similar leadership traits influence the conflict dynamics and strategic decisions. Lastly, in terms of this case study about the NK conflict, it is interesting to investigate

the role of other external factors, such as the influence of international organizations (UN, OSCE) and major powers (USA, EU, China). Their involvement or the lack thereof could also have influenced Azerbaijan's 2023 military intervention.

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Appendices

Appendix I: LTA scores Ilham Aliyev 2019-2023

Table: LTA scores Aliyev October 2019

	HD	LD	DIS	HT	LT	TASK	IC	EC	BACE	HB	LB	IGB	HS	LS	SC	HC	LC	CC	HP	LP	PWR
Speech October 2019	2	84	0.0233	50	33	0.6024	18	27	0.4	4	33	0.1081	9	11	0.45	56	42	0.5714	5	38	0.1163

Table: LTA scores Aliyev December 2020

	HD	LD	DIS	HT	LT	TASK	IC	EC	BACE	HB	LB	IGB	HS	LS	SC	HC	LC	CC	HP	LP	PWR
Speech December 2020	22	83	0.2095	57	49	0.5377	33	38	0.4648	23	62	0.2706	16	12	0.5714	35	47	0.4268	27	46	0.3699

Table: LTA scores Aliyev October 2021

	HD	LD	DIS	HT	LT	TASK	IC	EC	BACE	HB	LB	IGB	HS	LS	SC	HC	LC	CC	HP	LP	PWR
Speech October 2021	37	88	296	59	29	0.6705	13	31	0.2955	12	35	0.2553	8	17	0.32	104	50	0.6753	17	27	0.3864

Table: LTA scores Aliyev November 2022

	HD	LD	DIS	HT	LT	TASK	IC	EC	BACE	HB	LB	IGB	HS	LS	SC	HC	LC	CC	HP	LP	PWR
Speech November 2022	14	114	0.1094	81	63	0.5625	52	107	0.3270	42	156	0.2121	14	20	0.4118	128	127	0.5020	56	104	0.35

Table: LTA scores Aliyev July 2023

	HD	LD	DIS	HT	LT	TASK	IC	EC	BACE	HB	LB	IGB	HS	LS	SC	HC	LC	CC	HP	LP	PWR
Speech July 2023	8	93	0.0792	153	40	0.7927	62	88	0.4133	15	140	0.0968	17	37	0.3148	180	140	0.5625	36	115	0.2384