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Armenia Warns on Karabakh

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Armenia's president threatened on Friday to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as independent if Azerbaijan resorts to force to resolve their dispute over the rebel enclave.

"Armenia is absolutely against a military solution to the [Nagorno-Karabakh] problem," President Serzh Sargsyan said in Moscow. "In the event Azerbaijan unleashes a new military venture, Armenia will be left with no choice but to recognize de jure the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh and provide for the safety of its population by all means."

He spoke after a Kremlin meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russian-led security bloc of ex-Soviet republics.

The past two years have seen the worst skirmishes along the boundaries around Nagorno-Karabakh, which broke away with the support of Armenia as the Soviet Union collapsed, since a 1994 ceasefire ended all-out war between Muslim Azerbaijan and Christian ethnic Armenians.

No country has recognized the enclave as independent but it runs its own affairs with heavy economic and military support from Armenia.

An Azeri military assault or Armenian recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh would seriously undermine Western and Russian mediation to find a negotiated, compromise settlement.

Renewed fighting would also threaten Azeri oil supplies to the West, carried by pipelines skirting Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijan, host to oil majors including BP, Exxonmobil and Chevron and with its military coffers swollen by petrodollars, says it is losing patience with negotiations and is prepared to use force.

Mediators from Russia, the United States and France have led negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan since 1994 under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. They have made little headway.

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