



MANAGING CROSS-BORDER CONFLICTS: POLICY INSIGHTS FROM NAGORNO-KARABAKH FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a protracted territorial and ethnic dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, provides a critical case study for understanding conflict management in complex geopolitical environments. Despite decades of international mediation and multiple ceasefire attempts, the conflict remains unresolved due to deep-seated historical grievances, strategic stalemates, and ineffective diplomacy. This study analyzes the conflict using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), which classifies conflict-handling approaches into avoiding, accommodating, compromising, competing, and collaborating styles, with the aim of deriving lessons relevant for Pakistan, which faces similar challenges in a volatile South Asian context. Employing a mixed-methods design, quantitative data were gathered via structured questionnaires from students of international relations, political science, and defense studies at major academic institutions, while qualitative insights were obtained through semi-structured interviews with a senior academic, supplemented by secondary literature, official reports, and media analyses. Findings reveal that Azerbaijan's competitive strategy, particularly during the 2020 conflict, leveraged Turkish-supplied drones and precision warfare to shift territorial control. Conversely, Armenia's accommodating and compromising approach, combined with the OSCE Minsk Group's limited effectiveness, hindered sustainable peace efforts. Persistent mistrust, rigid negotiation frameworks, and fragmented diplomatic initiatives further obstructed resolution.

The study highlights the significance of strategic innovation, credible deterrence, and adaptive conflict resolution mechanisms. For Pakistan, these insights emphasize the need for a proactive, multi-dimensional approach to conflict management that strengthens national security, enhances diplomatic credibility, and ensures preparedness amid regional instability.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main territorial and ethnic conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan known as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has become a primary example of researching the current dynamics of conflict and ways of its management. The conflict based on administrative boundaries of the Soviet period and inspired by ethnic nationalism intensified in the war of 1991-1994 and again in 2020,

with the human and material costs being high (De Waal, 2013). With numerous ceasefires and external mediation particularly by the OSCE Minsk Group, lasting peace has continued eluding them. Azerbaijan recorded a military victory in the 2020 war, however, using Turkish military equipment that provided drones and tactical solutions, which made the balance of territories on the map turn. The



trend suggests the growing role of technology in fighting wars and emphasizes the need of the conflict management strategies to change in the face of new necessities (Mölling, 2018; Lanoszka & Hunzeker, 2023).

Although a lot of literature exists regarding the history, ethnic and political factors of the conflict, there exists a lack of literature regarding how structured conflict management frameworks could be applied. The current research addresses this gap by using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), a tool that characterizes strategies as the strategies of avoiding, accommodating, compromising, competing, and collaborating to assess the approaches of the strategies of Armenia and Azerbaijan. It also analyses the continued failures of diplomacy, which are occasioned by mistrust, inflexibility and failure to mediate effectively. (Kilmann & Thomas, 1977). The aim of the study is to derive lessons, or takeaway points, of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that could be used when Pakistan contours its strategic and conflict management approach. The Nagorno-Karabakh case can provide useful lessons to Pakistan, which has similar issues with its eastern neighbor and has no institutionalized tools to end conflict. It also discusses the impact of military innovation on strategic results and security planning.

Problem Statement:

- The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains one of the most enduring and volatile disputes in the post-Soviet space. Despite decades of mediation, ceasefires, and shifting military dynamics, both states have failed to achieve lasting peace. Strategic missteps, deep mistrust, and a reliance on force have often overshadowed diplomacy. While the conflict has been studied from historical, ethnic, and geopolitical angles, limited research assesses the practical application of conflict management strategies across its phases. The absence of structured, stage-wise analysis using formal models like the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument restricts deeper insight

into the causes of failed or partial outcomes.

- This analytical gap is particularly relevant for Pakistan, which faces similar unresolved tensions with its eastern neighbor, marked by stalled dialogue and repeated escalations. The lack of formal conflict management frameworks adds to regional instability. By analyzing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through a structured lens, this study provides context-specific insights to enhance Pakistan's security planning, crisis response, and diplomatic strategy amid rising geopolitical complexity.

Research Gap:

- Although the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been extensively researched based on history, ethnicity, and geopolitics, few studies have been carried out which apply structured models of managing the conflict at the different phases. In particular, Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) that still classifies the strategies into avoiding, accommodating, compromising, competing, and collaborating, are still underused in examining how the two parties negotiated escalation and negotiation. This limits further perception of strategic decision-making in any protracted conflict.

- Additionally, the possibility of extracting context-relevant lessons to other countries such as Pakistan has been unexploited so far. Pakistan does not have formal frameworks of resolving conflict, although it has had to live with perpetual tensions with its eastern neighbour. Lessons on comparative observations, especially on pertaining to mediation failures and strategic application of military technology, of Nagorno-Karabakh can prove beneficial in advising more dynamic and effective responses to national security and diplomacy of Pakistan.

Significance of the Study:

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will create a good case study to learn the principles of ethnic and territorial conflicts of protracted nature with recent changes in the geopolitical



landscape, as well as the trends of technological advancements. Further, the sustainable solution is yet to come into view after all these decades of international efforts indicating the importance of setting up organized conflict analysis. The present study helps to fill in this major gap since the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) is used to evaluate styles of conflict management at various stages of escalation as well as negotiation. This analysis is strategically relevant to Pakistan since it is constantly undergoing tensions with the eastern neighbour and no formal conflict resolution mechanisms exist. The conflict step in 2020 involving drone and electronic warfare combats by Azerbaijan can bring valuable insight to the present-day military planning. Besides, the weaknesses of international mediation accentuate the necessity of adjustable foreign policies. The context-specific significance of the study is to assist scholars, diplomats, and defence planners to deal with conflict resolutions and national security development.

Research Questions:

Key Research Questions:

1. What were the conflict management strategies employed by Armenia and Azerbaijan in various phases of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and why did the approaches to peace fail?
2. What are the strategic, diplomatic, and military insights especially in the employment of drones and information warfare that Pakistan could learn out of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict so as to enhance its crisis response and national security planning?
3. How did Azerbaijan's use of niche technology specially drones change the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict outcome and what can Pakistan learn to strengthen its military?
4. What can Pakistan learn from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to bring

improvements on diplomatic and national security fronts for dealing with any crisis situations like witnessed in recent past (May 2025) specially with its eastern neighbor?

Subsidiary Research Questions:

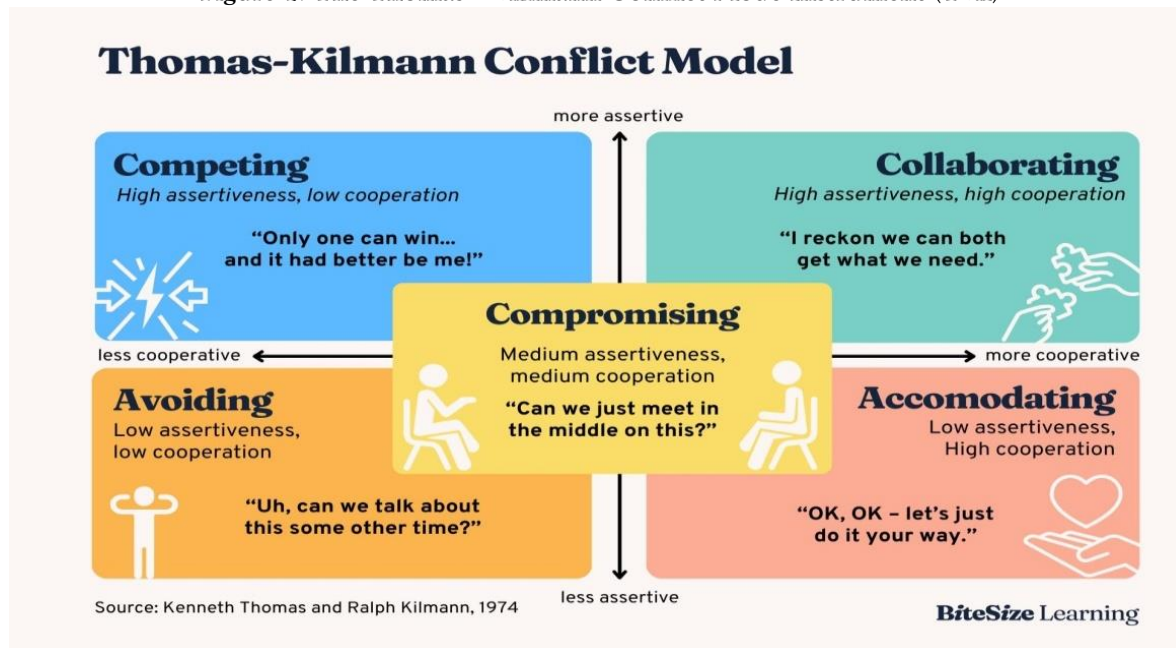
1. What were the reasons of the failure of international mediation and what the role of Pakistan could play to improve its third-party intercession in future conflicts?
2. What information warfare and media discourse had to say about the legitimacy and the perception of those with a stake in some conflict and what Pakistan can learn about handling a crisis where strategic communication is concerned?

Literature Review:

Perhaps the most popular theory of conflict-handling styles is the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) which delineates five styles of handling conflicts: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating as shown in Figure 1. These styles are founded in two dimensions of behaviour, namely; assertiveness (concern of the self) and cooperativeness (concern of others). An evolution of precursors in dual-concern theories and the managerial grid developed by Blake and Mouton, the model was developed by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann in 1974. The TKI has become popular due to its ease of use and flexibility of conflict resolutions. It helps a person to identify which style of conflict is his or her primary one and be able to react accordingly depending on different circumstances. The model also enhances emotional intelligence, strategic agility as well as engenders better interpersonal relations. Its use can be applied not only within the organizational environment but also in such fields as crisis negotiation and international conflict management (Thomas & Kilmann, 2007; Kilmann, 2021).



Figure 1: The Thomas – Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)



The TKI model combines the behaviour of conflict behaviour into two dimensions includes assertiveness and cooperativeness yielding five loose styles. Competition (high assertiveness, low cooperativeness) focuses on speed in decision making, especially in circumstances of high stakes. Accommodating (low assertiveness, high cooperativeness) focuses on the maintenance of relationships at the expenses of letting others succeed. The drawbacks of avoiding (low on both) are withdrawal, which is effective at resolving a situation when the costs of the conflict are minimal or when the conflict is unproductive. Collaborating (high on both) pursues win-win by dialogue and creativity because open interaction and time allow doing things right, especially where trust is present. Compromising (moderate to moderate) efforts each and every one of them through work, this approach is successful when power is equal, or the timing requires action. These are not fixed styles but rather adaptable to the situation and one is required to be sensible in using styles depending on a certain situation and on the culture. (Rahim, 2022).

TKI model has continued to be applied in organizational training, leader development as well as in conflict resolution training. It is appreciated in its specificity and diagnostic value. The critics however believe that it oversimplifies relationship of conflict and

assumes a western centered understanding of assertive and direct communication which is not always well appreciated cross-culturally. Also, power inequalities and certain structural problems are not necessarily reflected by TKI, and these aspects tend to constrain the realistic variability of the conflict styles. Nonetheless the model has remained dynamic and has crossed over with other theories of emotional intelligence and interest based negotiation and further into fields such as international mediation where assertiveness and cooperativeness similarly translates into conflicting national policies, coalitions and peace proposals (Al-Hamdan et al., 2023).

This is because the requirement of peaceful negotiations in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was constantly discussed in the U.S. Department of State (2020), as it did express support in using diplomatic tools based on the OSCE Minsk Group of the possibility of finding a solution in the form of a peaceful agreement. Such attempts notwithstanding, the failure to coordinate efforts and to mingle with the changing ground realities undermined the international diplomacy. This follows a larger trend, because super-mediation, despite its traditional symbolic value, usually fails to have an effect on deeply and historically rooted territorial and ethnic struggles unless supported by continued strategic pressure and resolve (U.S. Department of State, 2020).



Applying TKI to the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict:

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict presents a compelling case for applying the TKI model beyond interpersonal contexts as shown in figure 2. In the early phases, Armenia shifted from accommodation to competing by consolidating territorial control, while Azerbaijan, facing internal instability, adopted avoidance. During the 1994–2020 stalemate, both sides oscillated between avoidance and superficial compromise, hindered by deep mistrust. International mediators like the OSCE Minsk Group largely reflected avoidant or accommodating styles, lacking enforcement mechanisms to foster resolution.

The 2020 war marked a strategic pivot. Azerbaijan transitioned from avoidance to

competing, utilizing drone warfare and alliances with Turkey and Israel. Armenia’s reactive and rigid competing strategy, without modernization or strong partnerships, proved inadequate. As Azerbaijan gained the upper hand, it shifted toward collaborating and compromising through ceasefire negotiations and post-war arrangements. Armenia, in contrast, slid into forced accommodation and eventual avoidance, failing to influence outcomes. This phase-wise analysis highlights how timely and adaptive use of conflict styles particularly Azerbaijan’s strategic flexibility can significantly shape conflict outcomes, while rigid or delayed responses, as seen with Armenia, limit influence and success.



Figure 2: Territorial Overview of the Nagorno – Karabakh Conflict

TKI Conflict Style in Nagorno Karabakh:

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict represents two different conflict management styles on different stages of the conflict as used by the Armenia and Azerbaijan based on the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument (TKI) and Table 1 reflects the dynamic changes that occur on the conflict

management style at the time of the 2020 war. Such comparisons bring out the role of adaptive use of competing, accommodating or collaborating style in influencing military and diplomatic outcomes. TKI framework assists in unraveling decision making of both sides and its impact on peacebuilding.

Table 1: TKI Conflict Style – 2020 War Phase

TKI Style	Model	Armenia’s Actions	Azerbaijan’s Actions	Impact / Outcome
Competing		Defended positions conventionally despite inferior air	Launched swift, tech-intensive offensive using drones, precision strikes, and media	Armenia suffered major territorial losses; Azerbaijan gained



	capability; rejected early ceasefire proposals.	dominance.	upper hand.
Avoiding	Underestimated the threat; delayed international appeals and domestic mobilization.	Bypassed mediation efforts; excluded OSCE and minimized Russia's early role.	Reduced diplomatic options for both sides; war escalated quickly.
Accommodating	Accepted the Russia-brokered ceasefire; withdrew from occupied districts under pressure.	Halted operations under ceasefire; tolerated partial Armenian control under Russian observation.	Hostilities ended, but Armenian position weakened; Azerbaijan gained strategically.
Compromising	Accepted post-conflict terms including territorial concessions and prisoner exchanges.	Agreed to limited Armenian presence in Stepanakert and accepted Russian peacekeepers.	Created fragile but enforceable ceasefire; unresolved tensions remained.
Collaborating	Took part in talks on regional connectivity (e.g., Zangezur corridor), under trilateral monitoring.	Worked with Armenia and Russia on post-war logistics and transit arrangements.	Opened limited cooperation channels; trust gaps and unresolved sovereignty issues persisted.

Material and Methodology:

This paper presents a mixed method research in analyzing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its applicability to Pakistan. Students were asked to complete structured questionnaires that were quantitative in nature and expert interviews that were qualitative. Secondary sources upheld an in-depth perception of conflict dynamics. In the study, specific recommendations are drawn based on five focus areas, which include TKI use, military innovation, international mediation, conflict phases, and information warfare.

Sampling Technique.

The research involved convenience and purposive sampling. Accessible students received questionnaires whereas a chairperson of one of the departments knowledgeable in a particular subject was expertly interviewed.

Data Collection:

The measurement of perceptions of the conflict management strategies was based on the quantified data which were collected with the help of a structured and pilot tested Likert-scale questionnaire. The semi-structured expert

interview gave qualitative expertise, and secondary data were deployed to add context to them, with references to scholarly and credible authors.

Data Analysis:

The SPSS was used in the analysis of the quantitative data to analysis to understand the perceptions of conflict styles and their effectiveness. The qualitative data was analyzed using the thematic analysis to find the patterns that relate to conflict management and what it will mean to Pakistan.

Results:

The research found out that 80.6 percent of the respondents agreed that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict contains valuable lessons to guide on how to address regional conflict and strategic choices. And 78.2 percent of them highlighted that current warfare was worth learning, especially regarding the deployment of drones, airspace management, and live-time intelligence. Moreover, 77.8 percent of respondents admitted the importance of ordnance logistics such as ammunition handling, agile supply chains, and operational efficiency as presented in figure 3. These results



indicate the high level of recognition of the conflict in the context of Pakistan defence and security planning. Respondents considered technological adjustment as future preparedness. The outcomes further demonstrated the necessity of modernization in the conduct of military operations. On the whole, the conflict can be viewed as the important source of reference to the national security doctrine proper in Pakistan.

Triangulation Insight:

The consistency of the empirical data, literature review and Thomas-Kilmann model confirm the arguments central to the study. Most participants were inclined to competitor and collab characters, and so was the case with Azerbaijan. About 80 percent considered the TKI model applicable in the Pakistan domain, upholding the hybrid approach, which involves the combination of military readiness, diplomatic flexibility, and technological modernization.

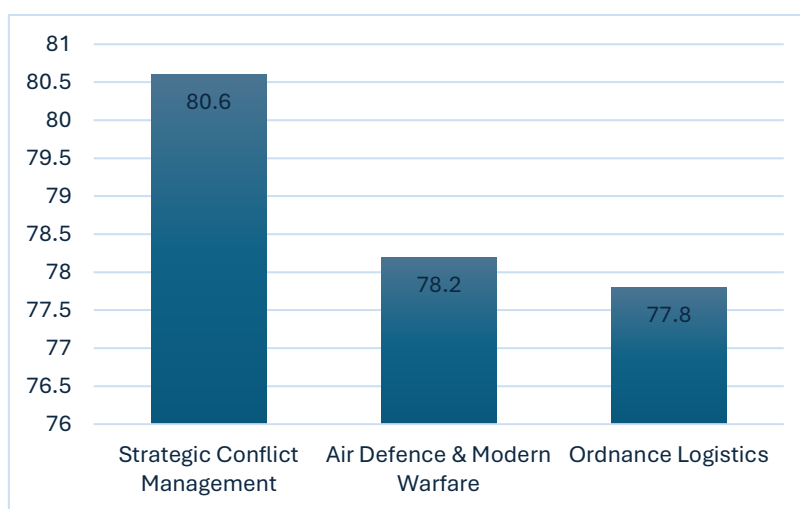


Figure 3: The bar graph shows that Strategic Conflict Management received the highest agreement (≈80.6%), followed by Air Defence (≈78.2%) and Ordnance Logistics (≈77.8%).

Discussion:

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict provides a distinctive case to analyze the conflict management using geopolitical realities, namely in conflicts that never have a structure resolution mechanism such as the case of Pakistan. Application of Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) demonstrated that conflict styles are dynamic in the sense that they change along with changing military, diplomatic and technological realities. The move of Azerbaijan to use not only avoidance tactics, but also competitive and collaborative ones, altered the situation in the war in 2020 because of the significance of the time and the need to be flexible in strategy (Petrosyan, 2021).

Most of those who took part in this research expressed the view that the modern tools of war- drones, surveillance, and real-time intelligence had a decisive role to play on the

outcome and this was something that was very relevant to the evolving defence planning in Pakistan (Akram & Yilmaz, 2023). With diplomatic paralysis especially that of the OSCE Minsk Group, we find out the short comings of international mediation without enforceable frameworks (Grigoryan, 2022). Actively maintaining regional diplomacy and crisis management systems should therefore become a top priority of Pakistan (Bukhari & Ahmad, 2023).

The war also showed the extent to which information warfare impacts narratives, legitimacy, and the perception of a nation at the international and another area where Pakistan needs greater capacity (Aslam & Farooq, 2024). The fact that the respondents want to integrate both the competing and the collaborating styles is also in line with hybrid strategies such as firm military action intertwined with flexible diplomacy (Rahman,



2024). The ethnic and historical perspectives of Nagorno-Karabakh are different than South Asia, but the similarities between the pattern of escalation provides lessons that can be transferred (Yusupov, 2021). This study highlights strategic relevance of being in conflict readiness with regards to institutional reforms, updating military as well as legal preparedness. The relevance of the TKI model in interstate conflicts increases the argument in favor of applying structured tools in the building of policy (Latif & Qureshi, 2023). For Pakistan, lessons from Nagorno-Karabakh underline the urgent need to move beyond symbolic diplomacy and adopt calibrated, assertive, and tech-integrated responses to regional security threats.

Amidst these limitations, the paper has shown that there are indeed interesting structured models that can help with analysis of conflicts and learning lessons to apply to Pakistan, such as the TKI model. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war illuminated how technology, particularly the use of drones in warfare was a game-changer on the results of war and that served as a lesson to Pakistan related to defense planning and diplomacy. As has already been mentioned above, future wars will depend on technological advantage and variable strategy (Saeed & Khawaja, 2023). Consequently, Pakistan has to embrace a mixture of military innovation, strategic communication, and institutional diplomacy to secure its surrounding stability (Hassan & Tariq, 2024).

Conclusion:

This paper has revealed that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict presents certain valuable lessons to Pakistan and particularly in handling complex problems using diplomatic, strategic and national security responses. Current security issues of Pakistan such as recent standoff with the eastern neighbour May 2025, make the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan very realistic and close to one. The analysis makes it clear that one-sided military power and the unwillingness to engage in active diplomacy may stretch the conflict instead of ending it. The use of Thomas-Kilmann model of conflict management assisted in explaining the possible impact of various styles that include, competing, avoiding, compromising,

accommodating, and collaboration that can have in the outcome of such conflict. The above observations are useful to Pakistan to adopt more balanced and active approach of combining strong defensive capability with meaningful dialogue in achieving long term peace and regional stability. The ongoing security challenges faced by Pakistan, including the recent standoff with eastern neighbour in May 2025, make the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan highly relevant and relatable.

Recommendation:

- Pakistan needs to have a multilateral, technologically-oriented, and environmentally dynamic approach of diplomacy in order to augment the national security of the country within the region.
- Pakistan should start to pursue interest-oriented diplomacy by strengthening defense relationships with China and Tyrkiye, as well as pay attention to cooperation in the sphere of military production and cyber security. Gulf countries should be collaborated to focus on response to crisis and intelligence exchange. Pakistan needs to pursue in multilateral platforms such as SCO, SAARC and OIC conflict resolution arrangements and mediation over a particular issue. All this would improve strategic power and diplomatic, regional isolation.
- Pakistan needs to embark on lawful representation abroad and increase combined military training on hybrid threats. The development of liaison points will strengthen national preparedness against the emerging regional issues.
- Pakistan needs to improve its relations with Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asian countries by engaging in trade, construction of infrastructure and intelligence sharing agreements in order to minimize strategic weaknesses. Internal security can be improved through counterterrorism agreements and intergovernmental coordination at countries borders. At the same time, low profile diplomacy with its eastern neighbor and integration in the region will make Pakistan a stabilizing power in South Asia.



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