

**NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT MANAGEMENT - A CASE
STUDY TO DERIVE RELEVANT LESSONS FOR PAKISTAN**

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Abstract

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a long-standing territorial and ethnic dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, serves as a critical case study for evaluating conflict management in complex geopolitical settings. Despite decades of international mediation and multiple ceasefire attempts, the conflict remains unresolved due to entrenched historical grievances, strategic deadlocks, and ineffective diplomacy. This study aims to analyze the conflict through the lens of the Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), which categorizes conflict-handling styles as avoiding, accommodating, compromising, competing, and collaborating. The objective is to extract relevant lessons for Pakistan, which faces parallel challenges in a volatile South Asian context. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study collected quantitative data via structured questionnaires from students of international relations, political science, and defence studies at major academic institutions, and qualitative insights through a semi-structured interview with a senior academic, supported by secondary literature, official reports, and media analyses. Results indicate that Azerbaijan's competitive strategy, particularly during the 2020 conflict, leveraged Turkish-supplied drones and precision warfare to shift the territorial balance in its favor. In contrast, Armenia's reliance on accommodating and compromising strategies, combined with the OSCE Minsk Group's failure to mediate effectively, undermined lasting peace efforts. Persistent mistrust, rigid negotiation structures, and fragmented diplomatic initiatives further stalled resolution. The findings underscore the importance

of strategic innovation, credible deterrence, and adaptive conflict resolution frameworks. For Pakistan, these insights suggest the need to adopt a proactive, multifaceted approach to conflict management that strengthens national security, enhances diplomatic credibility, and ensures preparedness in the face of 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 collaborates 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

NagornoKarabakh 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, repeated ceasefires, and shifting military dynamics, both states have failed to secure a lasting peace. Strategic missteps, entrenched mistrust, and reliance on force have often overshadowed diplomacy. Although the conflict has been widely studied from historical, ethnic, and geopolitical angles, limited research evaluates the practical application of conflict management strategies across its different phases. The lack of structured, stage-wise analysis using formal models like the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument limits deeper insight into what contributed to failed or partial outcomes.

This analytical gap holds particular relevance for Pakistan, which experiences similar unresolved tensions with its eastern neighbor, marked by stalled dialogue and repeated escalations. The absence of formal conflict management mechanisms heightens regional instability. By evaluating the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through a structured framework, this study offers context-specific insights to improve Pakistan's security planning, crisis response, and diplomatic strategy amid growing geopolitical complexities.

Research Gap

Although Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been extensively studied for its historical background, ethnic roots, and geopolitical consequences. However, there is limited academic focus on the structured application of conflict management frameworks throughout its various phases. Specifically, the use of analytical tools like the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)

which identifies styles such as avoiding, accommodating, compromising, competing, and collaborating remains underutilized in assessing how Armenia and Azerbaijan managed different stages of escalation and negotiation. A more focused application of such models could yield clearer insights into strategic behavior and decision-making in protracted conflicts.

Furthermore, the potential to extract and apply policy-relevant lessons from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to similarly affected states particularly Pakistan has not been fully explored in current literature. Pakistan faces recurring tensions with its eastern neighbor, often without sustained diplomatic engagement or formal conflict resolution mechanisms. A comparative study of peace process failures, the limits of international mediation, and the influence of modern military technologies like drones may offer valuable guidance. These insights can support more flexible and informed approaches to strengthen Pakistan's security planning and regional diplomatic posture.

Significance and Objectives of the Research

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains a critical case study for understanding how long-standing ethnic and territorial disputes evolve amid changing geopolitical, technological, and diplomatic contexts. Despite decades of international engagement by actors such as the OSCE Minsk Group, United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), and Russia, the conflict has defied a lasting resolution. This study contributes to ongoing academic and strategic discussions on the real-world application of conflict management models. Specifically, the use of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) addresses a notable gap in evaluating conflict-handling styles avoiding, accommodating, compromising, competing, and collaborating across various phases of escalation, negotiation, and ceasefire. Existing literature has largely emphasized the conflict's ethnic, historical, and geopolitical dimensions, while structured analyses of conflict behavior and its influence on long-term outcomes remain underdeveloped.

Research Questions

Key Questions

- How and at what stages Armenia and Azerbaijan applied conflict management approaches (TKI model i.e avoiding, accommodating, compromising, competing, and collaborating) to influence or resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict?
- Why did peace talks and other conflict management strategies aimed for Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict fail and what pertinent lessons can be drawn by Pakistan from these failed initiatives?
- 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?
- 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?

Subsidiary Questions

- Why international mediations did not succeed in peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and how can Pakistan leverage on better mediation efforts in any future conflict?
- How did information warfare and media narratives influence the perception and legitimacy of conflict parties during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and what insights can Pakistan draw for managing strategic communication in future conflicts?

Literature Review

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management Model (TKI) is one of the most well-known models that are used to diagnose and explain the behaviour of people who experience the conflict. It classifies conflict-handling behaviour into five categories known as competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding and

accommodating all of which depend on levels of assertiveness (how much one endeavours in trying to meet his worries) and cooperativeness (how much one tries to address issues of others). TKI model is not only the instrument of behavioural classification but also is the guide of decision-making that provides people and organizations with the understanding of the way to adjust their responses to conflict situations according to the strategic, interpersonal, or situational factors. The specific value of this model is that it can be useful both in the interpersonal and institutional environments, as it represents the concept that in respect to the conflict style. In essence, the TKI encourages flexibility, emotional awareness, and strategic choice in conflict resolution processes (Thomas & Kilmann, 2007).

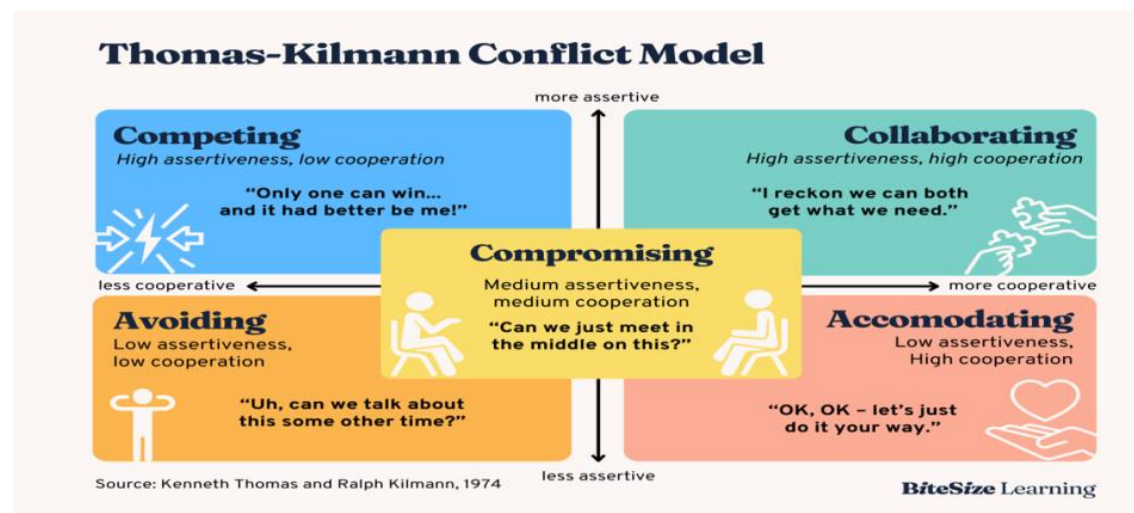


Figure 1: Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management Model (TKI)

(available at www.bitesizelearning.co.uk)

TKI model was introduced in 1974 by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann, It depends on the theories of psychology and management studies which had been held previously. It has been theorised in a time that more and more interest in the study of conflict in organisational settings was maturing always more so perhaps because of the rise of systems thinking and behavioural sciences and approaches to participative leadership styles. The theoretical basis of the TKI model is that of the dual-concern theory which

says that when addressing the problem of conflict management, a person would evaluate their personal impacts along with the impacts of the other person. It is important to note that TKI model came into place at a time when human relations, teamwork and participatory decision-making concerns had begun to flower in organizations, and they made the concerns on the topics of conflict understanding and management to be more meaningful than ever. The model has been tried out, expanded and revised post decades but the initial formulation of the model has played a leading role in the scholarly as well as professional arena (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). It is built upon the early theory of social psychology that includes; Kurt Lewin who suggested that behavior is a function of the person and the environment; and Blake and Mouton managerial grid which analyzed the leadership behavior in terms of concern with people and concern with results. Such dynamics are hard and informal and what Thomas and Kilmann tried to do is to formalize and simplify them in to a model that ought to practically be applied in psychometric instrument namely, the TKI instrument. Consequently, the tool was rapidly being incorporated to managerial training programs in addition to conflict management seminars since it emphasized on awarenessness and adoptability, rather than on certain procedures (Lewin, 1947).

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: Nagorno Karabakh Conflict Area between Armenia & Azerbaijan

(www.wikipedia.org/wiki/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.

Table 1: TKI Conflict Styles - 2020 War Phase

TKI Model Style	Armenia's Actions	Azerbaijan's Actions	Impact / Outcome
Competing	Defended positions conventionally despite inferior air capability; rejected early ceasefire proposals.	Launched swift, tech-intensive offensive using drones, precision strikes, and media dominance.	Armenia suffered major territorial losses; Azerbaijan gained 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	Hostilities ended, but Armenian position weakened; Azerbaijan gained

Compromising	Accepted post-conflict terms including territorial concessions and prisoner exchanges.	observation. Agreed to limited Armenian presence in Stepanakert and accepted Russian peacekeepers.	strategically. Created fragile but enforceable ceasefire; unresolved tensions remained.
	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 indepth 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.

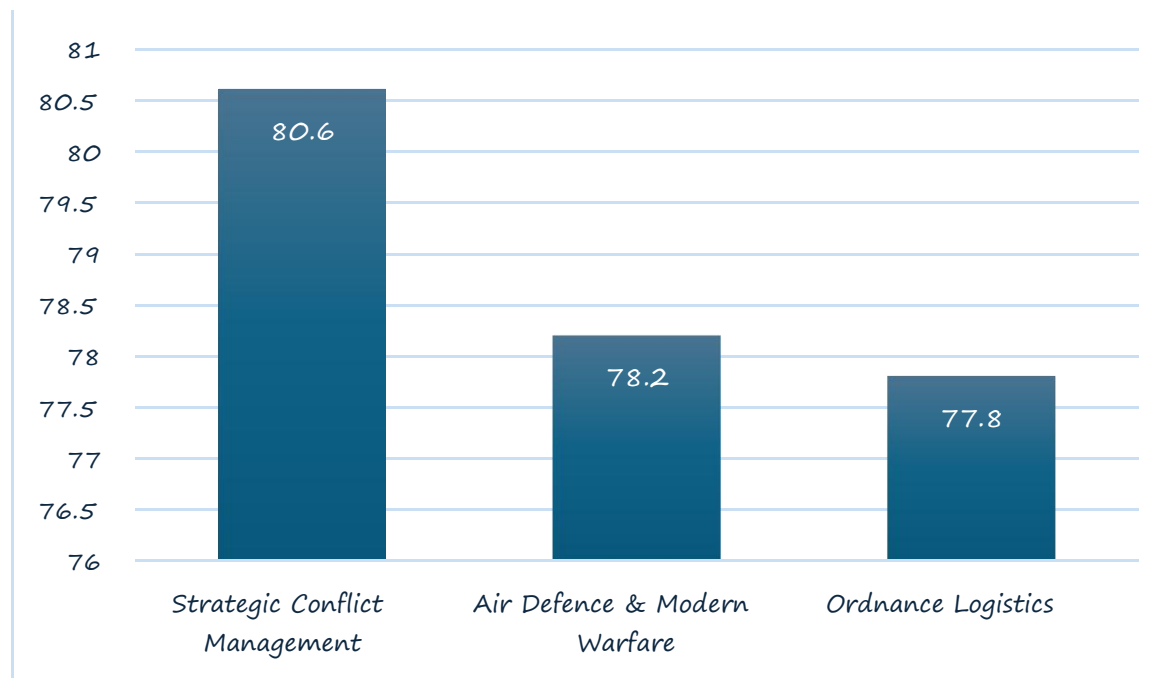


Figure 3: The bar graph shows that Strategic Conflict Management received the highest agreement ($\approx 80.6\%$), followed by Air Defence ($\approx 78.2\%$) and Ordnance Logistics ($\approx 77.8\%$).

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 Tec 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 Nagorno-Karabakh war delivered good lessons to Pakistan particularly on how to handle tricky challenges based on diplomacy, strategy and national security. The present security difficulties of Pakistan with the recent confrontation with the eastern neighbor in May, 2025 make the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan extremely plausible and familiar. The analysis underscores the fact that mere emphasis on the military power without the active involvement of diplomacy makes situations drag as opposed to solving the conflict. The implementation of Thomas-Kilmann conflict management model allowed to gain a better perspective on the possible effects of various styles including competing, avoiding, compromising, accommodating, and collaboration styles that might end when the result of such conflicts is taken. Pakistan can benefit by heeding these lessons in coming up with a more balanced and proactive approach to both its external and internal security where it entails maximum defensive capability as well as dialogue in finding permanent solution to peace as well as stability in the region.

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 Türkiye, 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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