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Nagorny Karabakh Conflict Escalation and the Peace Process

By Artak Ayunts, Yerevan

Abstract

This article describes the summer 2014 violence along the Line of Contact in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict and then examines the potential for conflict transformation in the future. A central problem is the nature of the authoritarian regimes in Azerbaijan and Armenia, while solutions would come from a greater involvement of civil society groups in the negotiating process.

Violence on the Line of Contact

The ceasefire agreement signed among the parties of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict in May 1994¹ and reinforced in February 1995² has been violated numerous times since then and permitted multiple fatal incidents across the conflict divide in the last twenty years, influencing the everyday lives of people living in the border areas by forcing them to constantly feel anxiety and insecurity. The North-East part of Armenia bordering Azerbaijan, as well as South-East and North-East parts of Nagorny Karabakh bordering Azerbaijan, have seen the most turbulent times during the period of the “frozen” conflict, or *no-war-no-peace* situation. However, in the end of July 2014 through early August 2014 violence on the Line of Contact in the same areas escalated to unprecedentedly high levels, with some unofficial estimates of up to twenty casualties among Azerbaijani soldiers and several deaths among Armenian soldiers, as well as incidents including civilians directly affected by gunfire and shelling both on Armenian–Azerbaijani and Karabakhi–Azerbaijani border areas.

The last time the situation significantly deteriorated on the Line of Contact was more than six years ago in March 2008, when the post-election crisis in Armenia triggered a serious outbreak of hostilities in the North-East part of Nagorny Karabakh in the Martakert district causing several casualties. Official Yerevan and Baku blamed each other for provoking the clashes. Armenians claimed that Azerbaijanis wanted to use the vulnerability of the domestic political situation related to the post-election developments and state of emergency. Azerbaijanis claimed that Armenians triggered the clashes to divert attention from domestic problems.

Who Started It?

Similar mutual accusations for provoking clashes on the Line of Contact were also made during the recent upsurge of violence. One of the key differences this time

was the scale of the information war waged on both sides including propaganda, disinformation and government-controlled newsfeed. It was practically impossible to figure out what happened in reality and what was the sequence of developments on the Line of Contact. One other characteristic was the use of social media, in particular Twitter, to galvanize international support for a favorable solution to the conflict, including Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev’s Tweets regarding the clashes and unresolved conflict in general.³ Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan used a more traditional approach, giving an interview to one of Armenia’s TV stations on the outbreak of the hostilities and infiltration attempts by the adversary, highlighting the peaceful way of conflict settlement as the only option for long-lasting peace.⁴

Having said this, the general perception among most of the Armenians was that violence on the Line of Contact was initiated by the Azerbaijani side simply because there was no interest for the Armenian side to resume violent clashes and change the favorable status quo. This is not necessarily merely a biased Armenian perspective. A renowned expert on the Caucasus and the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, Tom de Waal, made similar arguments: “In the last couple of months, the Azerbaijanis were maybe challenging the status quo. We know that the status quo does not suit them, as they are the ones that have lost territory. So, as you observed, it is more in their interest to challenge the ceasefire.”⁵

The main message communicated by official channels in Armenia and media outlets was that the Armenian armed forces used all necessary measures, including proportionate military offence to thwart the Azerbaijani military threat. This, in turn, ensured that the Armenian army was capable of holding the adversary back in case Azerbaijan turned to war and a signal that any military offensive, including large scale violence along

1 <http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/ArmeniaAzerbaijan_BishkekProtocol1994.pdf>

2 <<http://www.ca-c.org/dataeng/books/book-1/12.appendix-12.shtml>>

3 <<http://civilnet.am/aliyev-threatens-war-twitter/>>

4 <<http://www.president.am/en/interviews-and-press-conferences/item/2014/08/11/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-interview-Arm-news-Sochi/>>

5 <<http://civilnet.am/interview-tom-de-waal-carnegie-karabakh-august-clashes-text>>

the Line of Contact, would be resisted accordingly and could have unpredictable consequences on different levels: national, regional and global.

On the other hand, few Armenians tend to understand that the status quo is not acceptable for Azerbaijan and, as long as no peace agreement is signed, violent encounters of different scales will occur from time to time for various domestic and international reasons. Azerbaijan's defeat in the war in the beginning of 1990s was just one stage in the conflict dynamics.

Nevertheless, Armenia's use of military force cooled down the situation on the Line of Contact for the time being even though smaller scale ceasefire violations continue on almost a daily basis. Violence, however, will only end once all parties to the conflict agree to certain terms and achieve an outcome of the conflict acceptable for all parties.

Political Implications

Talks to resume negotiations, which were halted after the Kazan meeting⁶ between the Armenian and Azerbaijani Presidents in 2011 based on the so-called Madrid Principles, are again on the agenda of the leadership of Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, few people in Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh believe that a breakthrough is possible in the foreseeable future. One of the reasons for this is the reluctance by the fully authoritarian political regime in Azerbaijan and the competitive authoritarian regime in Armenia⁷ to reach a peaceful settlement of the conflict, which would require a significant amount of political will and sacrifice as it will require certain unpopular decisions to be made on both ends while endangering the leaders' political capital.

The argument here is that authoritarian regimes are keen to maintain the status quo and not risk losing power, which may be fraught with much more serious consequences for both regimes. If they lost power, key figures in the governments may face criminal investigation for previous fraudulent practices while in power. Under both competitive authoritarian and full authoritarian regimes, the authorities frequently use and manipulate the Nagorny Karabakh conflict in their domestic policies specifically to galvanize an enemy image of *the other* with the aim of fostering their own power positions. Thus, continuation of the current status quo is probably the most favorable condition for preserving the authoritarian nature of the political systems on both sides.

Tensions on the Line of Contact have often been manipulatively used by the authorities also to crash opposition sentiments and strengthen their own power positions in Armenia. This time though, key political opposition groups in Armenia responded to the escalated violence on the Line of Contact along the same lines with the authorities, calling for tough measures to be adequately executed to defend the borders and prevent further violations and military assaults. At the same time, a clear message was delivered by the opposition that the struggle against the autocratic regime in domestic politics will continue without any doubt. The example of Israel was highlighted as a state with democratic practices within domestic politics which does not preclude unanimous political support to fight against any form of encroachment against its sovereignty. The only reservation for halting the struggle for democratic reform by opposition in Armenia was in the case of a resumption of war by Azerbaijan.⁸

Global and Regional Dimensions

Global instability and volatility from North Africa across the Middle East and Eastern Europe sidelines the Nagorny Karabakh peace process from international attention and even violent clashes claiming dozens of lives attract significantly less attention compared with the conflicts in Iraq, Gaza, Syria, Libya and Ukraine. The OSCE Minsk Group co-chair countries—Russia, France and the US—responsible for mediation in the Nagorny Karabakh peace process are directly or indirectly engaged in various hot-spots around the South Caucasus region.

The OSCE Minsk Group has been assisting the peace process since 1992, but all their efforts have failed to bring the parties closer to a negotiated solution. Different co-chair countries have played leading roles in the peace process in different times. Since the late 2000s Russians have made several attempts to revive the peace process, with the Maindorf declaration⁹ being the only document where Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders put their signatures on the same document after the ceasefire agreements in 1994 and 1995. In 2001, negotiations to sign the Framework Agreement in Kazan again mediated predominantly by the Russians failed because of the last minute withdrawal of the Azerbaijani President. It was no surprise that after the clashes on the Line of Contact in August 2014 the Russians again intervened and invited the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan for a meeting.

6 <http://www.rferl.org/content/nagorno-karabakh_kazan_summit_breakthrough_in_peace_process/24244645.html>

7 On political terminology see S. Levitsky and L. A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, 2010

8 See for example: <<http://www.ilur.am/news/view/33374.html>>, in Armenian

9 <<http://archive.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2008/11/208670.shtml>>, in Russian

The Russian-brokered meeting of the Presidents in Sochi on August 10 was a sign of Russian willingness to re-establish dominance over the peace process and dictate its own rules for possible conflict settlement. There were speculations that the Russians wanted to use the situation on the Line of Contact to deploy Russian peacekeeping forces in the region. True or not, the composition of the peacekeeping forces to ensure security of all communities has long been on the agenda of the negotiations and one of the sticking points along with the future status of Nagorny Karabakh, territories around Nagorny Karabakh, and the return of all refugee and IDPs. The core of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict and peace process, however, is transformation of the conflict versus conflict resolution.

Peace Process: What Next?

The Nagorny Karabakh peace process is predominantly single tracked where Track One official diplomacy is still the only mechanism of peace negotiations with large segments of society left out of the peace process. Even though it is high level officials' responsibility to sign peace agreements, without inclusion of other actors within civil society in the peace process, it will be much harder to achieve a sustainable positive peace.

In the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, all actors including political institutions, mass media, Diasporas, and even certain groups within civil societies, play significantly negative roles in bringing peace among Armenians and Azerbaijanis closer. Diasporas stick only to the well-established positions of the conflicting parties and rarely want to focus on potential mutual interests being probably the most nationalistically oriented groups in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. Mass media are the leading promulgators and channels of hate speech, war rhetoric and dehumanization of *the other*. Civil society actors "fighting" for peace are marginalized among influential nationalistic groups controlled by the Governments. And, the only actors of the official peace negotiations—top-level officials—have long shifted the emphasis from *grievances* to *greed*.

The violent incidents of early August 2014 not only endanger the fragile peace but also strengthen mistrust and animosity between the societies. In general hate speech, war mongering and the build-up of military arsenals not only jeopardize the peace process but also leave no room for trust-building in the future. Lack of trust and confidence building measures only deepens hatred among people significantly endangering any form of future coexistence even if a peace agreement is signed.

At this stage, there are several scenarios for the development of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict: preservation of the status quo, resumption of war and a negotiated settlement based on compromises. The war scenario is the least possible one given the unpredictability of the outcomes of war and the reluctance of authoritarian leaders to risk their power by waging all-out war despite the fact that Azerbaijan has been spending vast amounts of money to strengthen its military arsenal.

A negotiated settlement is also hardly possible in the near future particularly with the current leadership in Armenia and Azerbaijan in power. Compromises necessary for a peace deal require enormous efforts and political will by the leaders. This is a significant risk given some unpopular moves they will need to make which in turn can seriously damage their domestic political capital. There is also the *greed* component: autocratic regimes tend to maintain considerable wealth for themselves and their entourage rather than focus on the *grievances* of the conflict, genuinely searching for peace.

The most probable scenario is the preservation of the status quo, which unfortunately will continue claiming lives and provoking violence among civilians and the military. The *no-war-no-peace* situation is still far from being transformed toward a more peaceful state. With no mechanisms of incident control and independent investigation, it is hard to believe that violent clashes, infiltration efforts, shelling of border areas, and kidnapping attempts will stop before a comprehensive peace agreement is signed.

While many on all sides of the standoff will continue viewing the conflict from their own positions, they should know that there is no alternative to peaceful negotiations. Transformation of context, actors, structure and issues of the conflict should be sought in the near future, supported by all actors having stakes in peace, including middle-level activists and grassroots leadership rather than only political actors. Democratization reforms "dictated" by civil society should become more prevalent. Actor change based on substantial legitimacy is another prerequisite for conflict transformation. The consolidated approach of the Minsk Group Co-chair countries is important for context transformation. Transformation of the structure of the conflict by engaging all layers of the social structure is another significant factor. And lastly, acknowledging the grievances of all the people directly affected by the conflict and mechanisms of application of transitional justice mechanisms are the key for peace and reconciliation in the region.

About the Author

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