



Aghdam- Azerbaijani ghost town destroyed by Nagorno-Karabakh fighting. WIKIMEDIA/João Leitão

THE REALITIES AGAINST ARMENIA’S “NAGORNO-KARABAKH STRATEGY OF PREEMPTION”

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Abstract. The article explores the historical background of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the reasons of current stalemate and prospects for conflict resolution. The interrelated nature of security in the international system and the South Caucasus region has been brought to the fore. The possible implications of renewed escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan have been highlighted. The importance of international actors’ involvement to ameliorate the current crisis has been underscored.

Keywords: Nagorno-Karabakh, energy security, escalation, territorial integrity, Madrid principles.

Introduction

An Armenian author Benyamin Poghosyan blamed Azerbaijan for lingering Nagorno Karabach conflict in his recently published paper on “Armenia’s Karabagh Strategy, from Status Quo to Preemption” (<http://gpf-europe.com/context/publications/?id=22519>).

It is abundantly clear that he hadn’t referred to any legal or reliable documents when he developed that paper. In order to come to grips with this issue we should hark back to the origin of the conflict. We will be focusing on three stages to let you digest the whole information: Where did this issue emanate from? What is the current situation? What are the prospects of future detente?

Historical background

If we scrutinize the history, we would definitely see that Nagorno Karabagh has always been an integral part of modern Azerbaijan. But when did Armenians start to predominate in Nagorno- Karabagh? The ancestors of the Armenians currently living there emigrated from Iran and the Ottoman empire during Russia-Iran wars (1804-1813, 1826-1828), Russia-Turkey wars (1806-1812, 1828-1829) and particularly after the Turkmenchay (1828) and Adirna (1829) treaties. Thus, Russian empire created favorable conditions for the ' settlement of Armenians in Karabakh. When the Northern Azerbaijan was incorporated into the Russian

empire, Azerbaijanis were more numerous than the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. According to a census made by Tsar statistics officials in 1810, 9,500 and 2,500 of a total of 12,000 families living in Nagorno-Karabakh region were Azerbaijanis and Armenians respectively. According to a statistic conducted in 1823, more Azerbaijani people were living in this region than Armenians. But in 1823, the Armenians immigrated to this region according to the Tsar’s policies [1]. As a result, the population in the region changed in favor of the Armenians.

In order to enlighten you on this issue let’s shed a light on the origin of the conflict. Emboldened by the Russian Tsar, Armenians later began to orchestrate a “Greater Armenia” campaign from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea. One of the ways to achieve this goal was to remove Azerbaijani population from Nagorno-Karabakh, Nakhichevan and other Azerbaijani territories.

Released from the thralldom of the Russian Empire, which lasted for approximately 120 years, the Azerbaijani people established a new independent state in Northern Azerbaijan. The Declaration of Independence of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic stated that the lands of Northern Azerbaijan, once occupied by Russia in accordance with the Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) agreements, were the legal heritage of the Azerbaijani people. The first article of the

declaration read: “Beginning from this day the people of Azerbaijan will have their sovereign rights. Azerbaijan, that consists of Eastern and Southern Transcaucasia, is a legal independent state” [2]. At that time the newly established Republic of Armenia laid groundless claims on Karabakh, but the government of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic opposed those claims.

With the establishment of the Soviet government the process of restoring the Russian tsarist borders went underway. The occupation of all three independent South Caucasus republics by the 11th Red Army precipitated the dissolution of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR). The ADR existed for only 23 months and was incorporated into the Soviet government after being occupied by the 11th Red Army. At that time, Nagorno-Karabakh was one of the provinces of the ADR. After the incorporation of the fledgling democracies into the Soviet government and the establishment of USSR Stalin's plan on autonomism was introduced as the implementation of Lenin's concept on constructing federative states. In his article entitled “The Caucasus revolt” A.M.Skibitski mentioned: The Karabakh plateau was attached the status of autonomy in 1923 and was called the Autonomous Province of Nagorno-Karabakh, or briefly “Nagorno-Karabakh”, within the new boundaries of Azerbaijan” [3]. After the attachment of the status of autonomy, the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia and even those

living outside of these boundaries made a lot of effort to annex Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. But they didn't succeed in doing it. Anyway, Armenians' mass removal to Northern Azerbaijan lands, including Karabakh, continued after the 1930s. That is why N.Shavrov wrote in 1911, that more than 1 million of 1,3 million of Armenians in Transcaucasia were incomers [4]. Armenians that could not achieve their goals in the 1920-1930s intensified their activities after World War II. Grigory Arutinov, secretary of the Central Committee of the Armenian Communist Party appealed to Joseph Stalin and raised the issue of annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Province of Azerbaijan to Armenia, under the same status. Georgy Malenkov, secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party, sent the text of the message to Mir Jafar Baghyrov, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party on November 28, 1945. Malenkov suggested him to express his opinion on the issue raised by the Central Committee of the Armenia Communist Party. Short account of Baghyrov's answer to Moscow on December 10, 1945 was as follows: “Since ancient times the area of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Province was a part of the Karabakh khanate with the center in Panahabad city built in a form of a tower by Karabakh khan (king) Panah in 1747. The issue of annexing the mountainous part of Karabakh, mainly inhabited by

Armenians, to the Armenia SSR was raised in 1923. Thus, the Autonomous Province of Nagorno-Karabakh has never been part of Armenia SSR and so does it to date. At the same time, we suppose that it's also important to consider the annexation of Armenian regions Azizbekov, Vedi and Karabakhlar, adjacent to Azerbaijan and inhabited mainly by Azerbaijanis to our country, while considering the issue of annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia” [3]. Of course, such a substantiated position saved off Moscow from imposing pressure on Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, Armenian leadership did not give up its plans and even conducted mass deportation of Azerbaijanis from Armenia SSR in 1948-1953. The same issue (Nagorno-Karabakh's annexation to Armenia) was once more raised in the 1960s. This time, their plan was foiled by national leader Heydar Aliyev, who came to power in Azerbaijan in 1969. The separatist initiatives of the Armenians had not been fruitful for a pretty long period of time. Armenians tried to raise this issue once more in the run up to the 1977 Constitution of the USSR, but this initiative was successfully averted by Heydar Aliyev, the first Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan (1969-1982). As the First Deputy Premier of the Soviet Union (1982-1987) Heydar Aliyev dashed Armenian separatists' hopes of annexing Nagorno-Karabakh. As soon as Heydar Aliyev was released from power, nationalist-separatist activity in Nagorno-Karabakh intensified

again. Their campaign was supported by the Soviet regime in the period of “reconstruction” (perestroika) declared by Michael Gorbachev, who was surrounded by Armenian nationalists. The demise of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union reignited the century-old dispute. The full escalation of tensions and bloody events took place between 1988 and 1994. During this period, Azerbaijani population underwent a serious ethnic cleansing (around 10% of its population). According to Human Rights Watch, the Khojaly Massacre on February 26, 1992, where almost two hundred Azeri villagers, women and children were killed, is the largest to date in the conflict. Armenians gained the upper hand with the assistance of the Russian 366th rifle regiment occupying approximately 20% of Azerbaijani territories (Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding districts) [5]. Reacting to this occupation, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted four resolutions – 822, 853, 874 and 884 in 1993, which demanded an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from occupied Azerbaijani lands. These resolutions confirmed that the Nagorno-Karabakh region is an inseparable part of Azerbaijan. In May 1994 a Russia-brokered ceasefire agreement was signed between two countries. But sporadic shootings, as well as skirmishes have been taking place until now and the negotiations have not yet yielded any substantial results so far.

Current state of affairs

Even though the conflict still remains unresolved, the international community considers Nagorno-Karabakh an integral part of Azerbaijan. No country, not even Armenia, has recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent country so far. In March 1992, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, later the OSCE) Council convened a conference in Minsk to seek a peaceful solution. Eight countries agreed to take part, and the conference became known as the Minsk Group [6, p.5]. Meanwhile, the Minsk Group co-chairs, France, Russia and the U.S. have been seeking to broker peace talks. They emphasized the need to conduct negotiations in mutual confidence. Although 25 years have elapsed since four UN Security Council resolutions on the withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from the Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding districts were adopted, Armenia has not fulfilled them yet. On the contrary, it eschewed the negotiation process, and violated the cease-fire agreement. And that was the main cause of the escalation on the frontline, as it happened in August 2014 and in April 2016, when Azerbaijan managed to liberate a part of its occupied territories. The Minsk Group called on both parties to suspend hostilities, however, the problem remained unresolved yet, while the two sides were technically at war.

The paths of the two countries have always been different since the end of the Cold War

in terms of their geo-political ambitions, with Armenia being a CSTO member, while Azerbaijan pursuing an independent policy regarding global powers. Although there were 27 years since the dissolution of the USSR, its legacy still strongly influences the current state of affairs. The lack of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia's increased assertiveness in the region and the absence of a Western military presence have been the central elements in understanding the current situation in the region.

With the benefit of hindsight, everybody is aware that the risks of escalation have been much higher over the last couple years. Both sides have been struggling to enhance their military capacities. In 2015, Azerbaijan spent \$3 billion on its military, more than Armenia's entire national budget. It has purchased hardware including attack helicopters, fighter planes, surface-to-air missiles, and anti-tank artillery systems. Armenia has similarly increased its defense spending. Although its 2015 total defence budget of \$447 million was far below Baku's, there are suspicions that Moscow has given Yerevan heavy discounts on armaments [7].

The world community is cognizant of the threat posed by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on peace, security and stability, not only in the South Caucasus region, but in Europe more broadly. Azerbaijan is committed and keen to build strategic

cooperation with the West based upon mutual interests, and to play a crucial role in Europe's energy supply. The West-Azerbaijan relations are particularly characterized by the implementation of huge energy projects. From the perspective of the West, these projects make Europe less dependent on Russian energy supply, while from the Azerbaijan side, the energy supply to the West is driving its economy and is sustaining its long-term socio-economic development. Azerbaijan has successfully implemented energy projects, such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum. It is supplying oil to the world market and it has recently launched the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad. Apart from these projects, due to the TANAP and TAP pipelines, currently under construction, Europe will also be supplied with Azerbaijani gas. Rapidly depleting hydrocarbon reserves put Europe in a desperate need of stable supplies, while Azerbaijan is among the most reliable and stable energy suppliers for Western Europe. However, despite the promising nature of the West-Azerbaijan relations, there are several factors that have made Azerbaijan to take some distance from the West. The most disappointing fact is that the West didn't take the same approach towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as it did against the Russia-Georgia war, and the annexation of Crimea. It is evident that the leading international organizations can play a larger role in the resolution of such conflicts. The military

actions conducted in Georgia (2008), Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (2014) clearly indicated that the EU and NATO should step up their efforts in conflict resolution based upon international law. After the Crimea crisis, the EU and the USA unanimously imposed sanctions on Russia for its violation of Ukrainian territorial integrity and state sovereignty [8]. But they have remained silent throughout the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. If they had imposed only 1% of these sanctions on Armenia, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict would have been definitely resolved. Therefore, the world community should pay greater attention to the Karabakh problem, since a full-fledged war between Armenia and Azerbaijan might wreak havoc on the economic interests of Europe as a whole. The war in Nagorno-Karabakh is a direct threat to the energy security of Europe. As Armenians themselves have long stated that, if they were attacked, Azerbaijan's energy sector would be an immediate military target. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline is a particularly vulnerable target, since it is very close from the Nagorno-Karabakh line of contact and the Armenian border. Another potential target could be the mammoth Sangachal Terminal, which is pivotal for processing the oil and gas from Azerbaijan's offshore platforms. Massive Western investments in the region's energy sector, particularly the current \$28 billion Southern Gas Corridor project, would also be threatened [9] by the intensification of military operations between Armenia and

Azerbaijan. It would definitely cripple Georgia (which relies on Azerbaijan for 90 percent of its natural gas imports) and harm Turkey, as well as some European countries.

Future prospects

Today, the whole world is affected by the scourge of separatism and its undesirable repercussions. Now it is necessary to step up efforts against this evil to prevent it from encroaching on the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. Azerbaijan is among the countries plagued by separatism and its dire consequences. When the so-called “referendum on independence” was held in Catalonia (Spain), the Spanish government succeeded in nipping the rising separatism in the bud. But Azerbaijan was not as lucky as Spain was. The European leaders instantaneously and unanimously supported the territorial integrity of Spain because they were well aware of the unpredictable consequences separatism might have if no preventive measures were taken. Unlike other hotbeds of unrest in the post-Soviet space, peacekeepers have never been present in Nagorno-Karabakh and in the neighboring territories. The line of contact (about 200 kilometers) is maintained due to the military and political balance of power. The ceasefire has been consistently breached, with the most significant breach since May 1994 occurring in April 2016. However, despite those shocks, the status quo has been preserved. The line of contact has not drastically changed. At the

same time, after the events of April 2016, the de-escalation of the military confrontation did not put an end to incidents along the line of contact. Is there any prospect of resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group? The Azerbaijani government and nation have reservations regarding the Minsk Group, since the latter’s activities have not been fruitful so far. It is also unclear whether the OSCE Minsk Group countries aim to see the conflict entirely resolved or not, since the Armenian lobby has strong leverage over the Co-Chairs’ governments. All three countries which co-chair the Minsk Group retain their consensus on acknowledging the Madrid principles, which were presented to the 2007 Madrid OSCE Ministerial as an outcome of long-standing negotiations between the presidents and foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is clearly questionable why Armenia is now daring to defy their call on implementing these principles.

Thus, the composition of the Minsk Group should be expanded. At least a representative of Turkey should be incorporated. Even though separatism is a very serious challenge and threat to the UN, it woefully lacks a strong will to ensure the prescriptions of international law. Not all countries fulfill the UN resolutions. As mentioned earlier, Armenia, for instance, is unabashedly ignoring them. Therefore, some other relevant organizations (such as the EU or NATO) with feasible mechanisms should intervene before

push comes to shove. These organizations need to keep an active focus on addressing the risks of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In addition to supporting the OSCE mechanisms, they should use their bilateral relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia to emphasize the need to avoid escalation and pursue a peaceful settlement.

The flare-up of hostilities in April 2016 left no doubt that the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, at the heart of the EU's Eastern Neighborhood, is a dangerous powder keg and has the capacity to be turned into a global crisis. As mentioned before, the damage it might inflict on the security of Europe is a foregone conclusion: chaos, damaged infrastructure, energy disruption, immigration and a swelling death toll. The immediate neighbors first, then others may gradually be embroiled in the quagmire.

Then, what is the most plausible solution for the conflict? It seems to be the Madrid principles, as the basis for the peaceful resolution of the situation. They proposed the following package of elements as the framework for a political settlement [10]:

- Armenia returns all seven territories it seized from Azerbaijan during their war in the early 1990s;

- Nagorno-Karabakh receives an "interim legal status," which preserves the current political and economic realities governing the region's Armenian residents until determination of the region's "final legal status";

- Nagorno-Karabakh's "final legal status" will be determined by a vote of Nagorno-Karabakh's population at a time still to be decided;

- A transit corridor will be established to link Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia;

- International peacekeepers will provide security to residents of Nagorno-Karabakh and villages along the line of contact;

- Azerbaijan lifts all transit restrictions between Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the rest of Azerbaijan.

Why haven't these principles been implemented so far? Armenia's inconsistent approach is the main stumbling block to the fulfillment of these principles. For instance, in January 2009, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and Armenia's President Serzh Sargsian did express optimism that they could eventually be accepted in principle. However, in late 2009, president Sargsyan shied away from his commitments and accepted in principle the return of only five territories to Azerbaijan [10].

In a nutshell, the world community unequivocally asserted that the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict should be settled within the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. Only then these two nations might live together. Another fact is that the April 2016 clash has changed the dynamic in the region. Azerbaijan is not the same country that used to be in the early 1990s. Since 2006, the country has spent over \$22 billion to acquire a

formidable arsenal of modern military equipment that Armenia cannot match [9]. These purchases have eroded Armenia's traditional military edge, which they used to have during the first Karabakh war. Ordinary Armenians witnessed their armed forces' poor military performance in the battles. Now they understand that any provocative action along the line of contact might end up with a conflagration with a heavy death toll.

Conclusion

Although a rapprochement between Armenia and Azerbaijan is implausible for the foreseeable future, it doesn't seem to be a pipe dream either. However, the only way to get out of this situation is the liberation of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan – Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding regions- as required by the four resolutions of the United Nations Security Council. Maintaining the status quo in Nagorno-Karabakh is in the

interest of the Armenian government emboldened by external powers. The ordinary people suffer the brunt of this animosity. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, is impatient with the status quo, while it aims to restore its internationally recognized territorial integrity. The resolution of the conflict will contribute to peace, stability and prosperity in the South Caucasus region. Azerbaijan has always noted its readiness to resolve the conflict by peaceful negotiations. But military means are not ruled out if Armenia persists in its current inconsistency on the Madrid principles. Due to the current irreconcilable differences in approaches, at present, the threat of renewed hostilities is high. To avoid a new military escalation, international actors should be involved on a level playing field. That would definitely attenuate the prospects for renewed violence and would dissuade Armenia from its current undesirable position.

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