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Assessing the Current Situation in the South Caucasus

Alan Whitehorn Professor Emeritus in Political Science, The Royal Military College of Canada

Despite signing the November 9, 2020 ceasefire, Azerbaijan and Armenia have not been able to agree on an actual firm ceasefire. There are too many border incursions and military incidents, despite the existence of decades-old soviet boundaries between republics that were firmly regulated in the former Soviet Union. Peacekeepers are too few and not located in enough areas to address all of the border incidents.

Azerbaijan has not followed through on sufficient international monitoring of POW conditions and the release of all prisoners of war, despite foreign governments' pleas to respect international norms.

Aggressive nationalist rhetoric has not diminished with the war's signed ceasefire. One side seems more confident and emboldened and the other shocked and angry. The current prospects for peaceful dialogue, cooperation, let alone economic integration, are dismal. Instead of a preliminary ceasefire leading to a long-term peace accord, it seems more like an uneasy interregnum between wars. To make matters worse, the military technology lessons extracted from the 2020 war have heightened the interest in and pursuit of even more advanced deadly weaponry amongst military planners. It may well be that the worst is yet to come.

The South Caucasus and Game Theory

Whether it be children playing or state officials and military planners charting scenarios, there are only three major types of games: The most common is a zero-sum game. It is a competitive see-saw like interaction. When one goes up, the other goes down. I win when you lose or vice versa. But competition can get out of hand. It can create rivalry that fuels animosity, which, in turn, can trigger a conflict spiral. When nations go to war, each country and countless families pay a deadly price, albeit not all equally. Wars are minus-sum games. In contrast, teaching and sharing knowledge are examples of a cooperative plus-sum game where we all benefit. It is the core basis for the advancement of global development.

Azerbaijan and Armenia currently view each other through the lens of a zero-sum game. Each side wants to win at the expense of the other. But in so doing, they have created a far more dangerous minus-sum game. Increased animosity, along with death and destruction of war, are the result. A technological arms race of advanced weaponry has been unleashed that hurtles towards mutual assured destruction.

What needs to be done is to find new forms of mutual aid and cooperation. And in so doing, foster shared benefits and greater well-being. Each generation must decide what kind of game it intends to play. Their future depends on it.

Some Proposals for Conflict Resolution and Regional Cooperation

NATO DEEP has operated in both Azerbaijan and Armenia, but currently as separate and isolated programmes. Despite the significant challenges involved, NATO could suggest offering some joint webinars for the military of both countries on the critical and highly timely topics of conflict escalation, de-escalation, conflict resolution, and the dangers of unrestrained military spending spirals.

War in the South Caucasus has the capacity to be far more deadly due to technological advances in modern weaponry. The main sources of these weapons are foreign countries. Turkey and Israel, as major exporters of advanced weaponry to Azerbaijan, need to dramatically lessen their sales to slow the arms race in the region. Russia, as a major advanced weapons supplier to both Armenia and Azerbaijan, needs to stop arming both combatants, particularly while serving as a peacekeeper in the region. International discussions amongst all of these major arms exporting countries need to take place urgently. This might be a role for the Minsk co-chairs to sponsor or some other international entity.

Increasingly in the post-soviet era, the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities have become segregated from one another, except on the battlefield. The peoples of both countries need to learn more accurate information about each other. Relatedly, leaders in the Azerbaijani and Armenian diaspora communities need to initiate a dialogue to foster peace and not fuel the rhetoric and patterns of conflict between the two states. Academic historians and social scientists that are experts on these countries can perhaps facilitate this learning process.

There is much to be done and time is short. The weaponry of tomorrow is already on the horizon.
