

Analysis of Nagorny Karabakh Conflict

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Abstract

Ethnic conflicts are one of the main hampering factors of the state's security and development. Despite the fact that in this global world a lot is done for eradication of conflicts, in many parts of the world they still are a big threat periling global security.

Conflict discussed in the article below was the first ethnic conflict of the USSR, which continued after its collapse and still takes place between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorny-Karabakh. Conflict hampers the security of the whole South Caucasus region and strongly hinders regions development.

Nagorny-Karabakh conflict that is one of the bloodiest disputes in South Caucasus was the beginning of the ethnic tensions in the Soviet Empire and together with many other reasons eventually lead to its collapse.

Keywords: Conflict, Nagorny Karabakh, South Caucasus

Introduction

The present article analyzes the conflict that still takes place in South Caucasus between two independent post-Soviet countries: Armenia and Azerbaijan, about the region of Nagorny Karabakh. The conflict that is one of the bloodiest disputes in South Caucasus initiated the ethnic tensions in the Soviet Empire and together with many other reasons eventually led to its collapse.

Conflict started in 1988; it became a devastating factor not only for the Soviet Union itself, but also for the two main warring parties, Azerbaijan and Armenia, which became independent in 1991.

So if during Soviet Union it was (1988-1991) it was the inner conflict of the USSR, from its collapse it became the conflict between two newly independent countries. Subsequently, more than 850 000 Azerbaijanis and 300 000 Armenians were deported or ethnically cleansed from their homes. Full-Scale military hostilities ended with a shaky ceasefire, though 3000 people in total from the both sides have been killed in skirmishes along the boundary line since May 1994 ceasefire took effect.

Emergence of the Conflict

No one can say exactly, what was the first reason that started the increasing disgust between people of two nations; besides, during long time of Soviet Union they lived in peace, were neighbors, friends, were intermarried, and so on but by the end when National Movements started to flourish in post-soviet countries Armenians remembered

that historically Nagorny Karabakh was Armenian territory.

The greatest problem of Nagorny Karabakh was that it was always in the middle. Geographically it is situated on the Azerbaijani side of the mountainous watershed that runs down between the two countries. Demographically it was mixed, as it evidently had been for centuries: the Armenian predominated in the hills with more Azerbaijani in the plains, as well as in the city of Shusha (or Shushi as it was known to its Armenian inhabitants). Culturally it had great significance for both sides. For Armenians, the meaning of Nagorny Karabakh lay in the dozens of Armenian churches dotted around the territory, its tradition of local autonomy through the "melik" princes of the middle ages and the material reputation of Karabakh Armenians. For Azerbaijanis, the associations were primarily with the khanate based around the great eighteenth century city of Shusha and with the great cultural flowering of composers and poets such as Vagif, Nattavan and Uzeyir Hajibekov. Karabakh was in short a culturally rich border-zone and exactly because of it was always a place of battlefield.

For centuries the region has had an allure. Karabakh has been famous for its mixed Christian-Muslim population; for the independence of its rulers, whether Christian or Muslim; for being fought over by rival empires; for its forests and monasteries, for producing warriors and poets; for its grapes, mulberries, silk, and corn.

All conflicts have a pre-history. Few have as clear a beginning as the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. The basic positions – the Karabakh Armenians' determination to secede from Azerbaijan with the support of Armenia and Azerbaijanis' resolve to stop that happening – were adopted in

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February 1988 and that month saw turmoil erupt as if out of the blue in the form of demonstrations, strikes, political quarrels, flights of refugees and pogroms. That full-scale Armenian-Azerbaijani fighting only broke out at the end of 1991 is more a matter of weaponry than of intention.

The events of February 1988 were dramatic, sudden, and almost universally unanticipated in a Europe that had all but forgotten the power of nationalism as a political force. In that sense, by being the first serious nationalist quarrel of the late Communist era, the Karabakh conflict can be called both the most unexpected and the most predetermined of all these disputes. More than any others in Yugoslavia or the Soviet Union, the conflict was all but inevitable, because its causes lay in the 'deep structure' of the relationship between its two parties in late Communist times. Four elements – divergent national narratives, a disputed territorial boundary, an unstable security arrangement and lack of dialogue between the two parties – had made fissures that would break Armenia and Azerbaijan apart, as soon as trouble began. Yet because the problem was both so new and so profound, no mechanism was found – or has yet been found – to repair the damage.

The Sides of the Conflict and the Parties Involved

Although according to today's situation Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorny-Karabakh are the parties directly involved in the conflict (though the consideration of Nagorny-Karabakh as a party is often highly disputed); the strategic interests of other countries are also at stake. As Caucasian countries, Azerbaijan and Armenia are part of the region that serves as a bridge between East and West, and between the territories of the former Soviet Union and the Islamic world. This causes many regional powers to be interested in the area, creating an unhealthy competition, often turning into a bitter rivalry, between them. As a result Nagorny Karabakh conflict remains frozen and unresolved. Besides strategic geopolitical location Azerbaijan also possesses vast oil and gas reserves. This has caused external powers such as the United States and EU become involved in the conflict. There are 7 major players in geopolitical game. There are: Russia, USA, EU, Iran, Turkey, Islamic World and even China (China can not be considered as a serious actor, just had a little appearance in the region and is in the shadow for sure). Many local analysts believe that Russia has been not only a geopolitical player in the Nagorny-Karabakh conflict, but also a direct participant in it. Although Russia denies this, there is plenty of evidence to support the claim. The conflict began when the Soviet Union was in its last years of existence, and thus the crumbling Soviet army and its military bases in the South Caucasus were drawn into the fighting.

Russia initially supplied weapons to both sides. This

was done both at the level of corrupt local commanders, who were simply selling the weapons for private profit, as well as at state level owing to Moscow's desire to keep both sides dependent on itself. Many analysts in both Baku and Yerevan believe that Russia intentionally fuelled the conflict in order to keep it alive and weaken newly independent Armenia and Azerbaijan, thus keeping them within its own orbit of influence. (In case of Azerbaijan weapon support from the side of Russia was mainly unofficial based mainly on corrupted private interests but in case of Armenia it was and still is official.)

At the moment, Russia is pursuing a somewhat more balanced policy on Nagorny-Karabakh compared to the mid-1990s because he has political interests in both of them.

Washington has been tied to the Caucasus because of the vast energy reserves of the Caspian Sea and the region's geostrategic importance in the war against terror. In addition, the strong, wealthy and active Armenian Diaspora in the United States has kept Washington's attention focused on the area since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was precisely because of the power of the Armenian lobby that the US Congress passed Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act in 1992, prohibiting any US governmental assistance to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis regarded this legislative bill as discriminatory and as a measure that punished the victim.

With the signing in 1994 of the "contract of the century" between Baku and Western (including US) energy companies to exploit Azeri oil fields, the US presence in the Caucasus has become part of the geopolitical reality and rivalry between Washington and Moscow. The construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, which opened in May 2005, is another major victory for the White House. This pipeline, actively supported by both the Clinton and Bush administrations, strategically connects Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, and ensures the Westward integration of Azerbaijan and Georgia.

But it was the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington and the subsequent US war on terror that cemented co-operation between the United States and the countries of the Caucasus, particularly Georgia and Azerbaijan, which have sent peacekeeping forces to Iraq and Afghanistan and provided air bases and air space for US planes. They have also co-operated with the United States in exchanging intelligence and in the fight against money-laundering.

The United States has thus become an active player in the region and specifically in the Nagorny-Karabakh peace process. Washington has supported the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, yet has also insisted that the conflict be resolved by diplomatic negotiations, not military means. The United States has sponsored a series of meetings between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan since 1999,

the most important being that between Presidents Heydar Aliiev and Robert Kocharian in Key West, Florida, in March 2002, at which a deal was nearly agreed. However, the negotiations ultimately proved fruitless as neither side was willing to compromise on the chief issue, the status of Nagorny-Karabakh. Despite Armenian Diaspora's influence America, strongly interested in finding alternative energetic supplies for Europe intensifies its relations with Baku, the good example of it was cancelation of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act in 1992.

From the outset of the conflict, Turkey has condemned Armenia as the aggressor and supported its brotherly nation Azerbaijan by closing its border with Armenia and refusing to establish diplomatic relations with Yerevan. The Armenian claims about the so-called genocide of 1915, demands for territorial and financial compensation, attempts to force the parliaments of other countries to recognize—without proper historic study—the alleged genocide, and terrorist attacks by Armenian groups on Turkish diplomats in the 1970s and 1980s (more than seventy Turkish diplomats were killed) have further impaired relations between the two nations.

Yerevan has been pushing for the opening of the Turkish–Armenian border, a call supported by the United States and European Union. Ankara, however, ties such an opening to the liberation of the occupied Azerbaijani territories and to recognition by Yerevan of Turkey's territorial integrity.

While Armenian–Turkish relations remain cold, Azeri–Turkish relations have developed fast and are close and strong. Ankara has provided military and economic assistance to Azerbaijan and has also given it political support at major international summits. The BTC pipeline project has further strengthened ties between the two countries.

Turkey is a key power in the Caucasus and can be a major player in resolving the Nagorny-Karabakh conflict. Its opening of trade and communication links with Yerevan could be an important part of any peace package. Yet Turkey also figures as a major obstacle in the peace process, owing to its difficult relations with Yerevan.

Iran has taken a somewhat more balanced stance on Nagorny-Karabakh than Turkey: despite its Islamic identity, it has at times supported Christian Armenia over Muslim Azerbaijan. Although Iran has provided humanitarian aid to Azeri refugees and has fostered trade and economic relations with Azerbaijan, it has been angered by Baku and Washington's close co-operation on energy and has not welcomed the arrival of US companies in the Caspian Sea region. Neither does Iran appreciate Azerbaijan's friendly ties with Israel. A further complication in Iranian–Azeri relations is the fact that more than thirty million of Iran's populations are ethnic Azeris: Iran fears that Azerbaijan might plant secessionist ideas among this group.

While Iran has been somewhat excluded from the

Nagorny-Karabakh peace process (even though at the beginning of the conflict it played a mediating role between the warring parties), it is a major power in the region and any possible future peace deal will have to include Iran in the framework. In 2000–1, a “land-swap plan” envisaging an exchange of territory between Azerbaijan and Armenia circulated in the media of the two countries and allegedly featured in negotiations between their two presidents. Any such plan would necessarily also concern Iran, as it borders the lands of the conflicting parties. Nevertheless, Iran remains suspicious of peace proposals forwarded by the United States, because it fears they will increase US influence in the region.

EU activity in the Caucasus has so far been mostly economic in nature, with BP and other European energy giants (Elf, TotalFina, Eni) participating in energy projects in Azerbaijan. The European Union has also been developing the East–West transport and communication corridor and providing technical assistance to the three Caucasian nations (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) that fall within the framework of its Tacis Program to supply such aid to thirteen East European and Central Asian countries. Leading EU members Britain, Germany, France, and Italy have supported the territorial integrity of these three Caucasian nations and affirmed their intention to back peace negotiations on the various ethnic and secessionist conflicts that afflict them. As regards Nagorny-Karabakh, France has directly participated in the peace talks as one of the co-chairs of the Minsk Group.

The comparative trust between the European Union and Russia is more likely to advance a Nagorny-Karabakh solution than is the bitter rivalry between Russia and the United States. Russia currently enjoys warm ties with Germany and France, and this could assist the international negotiators in seeking to resolve the conflict.

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Persian Gulf nations have supplied humanitarian assistance to Azeri refugees and internally displaced persons, yet this assistance has been accompanied by an increase of religious propaganda, alarming Azerbaijan's political leaders, who are keen to build a secular state in their country. Azerbaijan pays special attention to relations with the Islamic world. The Organization of the Islamic Conference was the first, and is so far the only, international body openly to condemn Armenia for aggression over Nagorny-Karabakh. It has called for the immediate and unconditional liberation of the occupied Azeri territories. Islamic countries also partner Azerbaijan in energy, trade and investment, thus helping it to build a strong economy. Some Muslim countries, such as Syria and Lebanon, have also developed strong ties with Armenia.

Islamic countries have not directly participated in the Nagorny-Karabakh peace process, yet they are an important factor in the ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus because

they are capable of providing large sums of money, weapons and humanitarian aid to the various Islamic warlords in the region.

Although little active in the Caucasus in the 1990s, China has been increasing its role lately with greater participation in regional energy projects and enhanced trade and communication ties with Caucasian countries. In March 2005, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan travelled to China to develop bilateral ties.

China, with its growing economic power and military might, could soon be a major player in the region. In 1999, Azerbaijan was shocked by the transfer of eight Chinese Typhoon multiple rocket systems to Armenia, an act for which Beijing swiftly expressed official regret, blaming the deal on private companies. Although not a direct player in the Nagorny-Karabakh conflict, China has the capacity to become one. (ISMAILZADE, 2005)

Mediation Efforts

The Main external factor involved in the conflict resolution is OSEC, which is involved in the conflict resolution from 1990s. Nagorny-Karabakh was the first major conflict in which it had been involved, though it was often harshly criticized. The board members of OSEC are: Russia, Turkey, and the US. All of them have their own interest in the conflict and all of them have often worked at cross-purposes.

At the meeting of all organizations involved in the conflict on 24 March, 1992 in Helsinki, it was decided to hold a peace conference. Belarus volunteered his capital Minsk, as a venue. So the "Minsk Conference" was born.

Despite much effort the role of OSEC appears ineffective in conflict resolution and both parties are too critical towards the organization. Yet some positive efforts so far were made. The newest effect took place in March 2011 in Sochi, where presidents of both countries met together with Dmitri Medvedev acting as a honest broker. "They made some pleasant noises. Both parties committed to resolve their differences peacefully, and to implement fully an agreement on the exchange of prisoners of war made in October. They also agreed to investigate ceasefire violations, under the aegis of the OSCE. Such measures could restore some confidence. But they will do little more"; "The chances of pre-meditated war, the ICG argues, are slim. Both sides appear to believe that grandstanding is a useful negotiating tactic. The danger is that it increases the chances of front-line skirmishes provoking an accidental war. – is written in March 7, 2011 article in Economist".

As for mediators, it is obvious that Russia is likely to continue maintaining active negotiations, by exerting efforts to reach any agreements between the parties. However, the U.S.'s minimal role as a negotiator is unlikely to change. Washington is more likely to focus on resolving

local and global issues that are urgent to the U.S. recently, rather than the long-running territorial dispute in the South Caucasus. It also includes the NATO coalition in Afghanistan and the consequences of a financial crisis and the beginning of the struggle for the Oval Office.

However, the only innovation can come about by enhancing the role of the European Union as a negotiator in the peace process. There are prerequisites for this. The EU as an institution may become the main platform for negotiations. It brings together the conflicting countries in the Eastern Partnership program.

The European Union as a whole can act in resolving the problem. It can also play a more important role in the Nagorny-Karabakh conflict. Brussels could become a unifying element that would enhance the interest of European politicians in achieving stability in the Caucasus, and coordinate efforts of the EU capitals in resolving the territorial disputes in the region. The issue of separating the EU's role from that of the OSCE Minsk Group's becomes more urgent, if there is a larger role for the Armenian Diaspora in France and the United States in the negotiations on Nagorny-Karabakh. The Armenian lobby in the West plays an active political role in the decisions made by the U.S and French authorities, as opposed to those of the Russian Diaspora. In this context, it would be better if the EU shared more political involvement in the Nagorny-Karabakh settlement along with the Minsk Group. The EU mediation can be successful, especially given the project for European integration, in which all the Caucasus countries are equally interested. The project, hampered by the lack of stability in the region, can become the basis for dialogue between the parties in the conflicts, including Armenia and Azerbaijan. The EU needs to be better acquainted with the realities of the conflict to become an active participant in the settlement. Many European leaders are not sufficiently aware of the nuances of the Nagorny-Karabakh conflict. They do not know about the occupation of 20 percent of Azerbaijani territory." Writes Trend European Desk Commentator Elmira Tariverdiyeva

According to G. Vanian (Azeri artist) "This is ideology, whose main postulate is that Armenians and Azerbaijanis cannot live in peace and all that's keeping them from war to the better end is the strong hand of Russia, which the language of self-deception dubs mediation. The death of this ideology is important.

Future Threats

Despite the fact that some steps to negotiation are made, often described as "frozen" conflict of Nagorny Karabakh is warming up. A recent report from the international Crisis Group says that ceasefire violations rose by 53% last year. Besides Azerbaijan in cooperation with Israel is increasing and developing its arm supply. It is planning to become the

arm supplier of Caucasus and Middle East. Despite the fact that Azerbaijan spends more than whole Armenian budget on armament, Armenians are also trying their best to get as much weapon from Russia as possible. In the custom line which is 110 miles length EUMM has only 6 peacekeepers when 20 000 soldiers are placed there from the both sides. Despite this fact both sides avoid conflict escalation, as war is unprofitable for both of them. Azerbaijan avoids conflict escalation because most part of its economy is based on oil. In case of new war strategic places will be heated from the opposite side, this will cause foreign investors to leave the country that will cause the huge crisis. Another factor is that Azerbaijan will avoid irritation of Russia. On the other side Armenia, which is the winner side of the conflict does not have any interest to start a new war, but in case it will feel a serious threat caused by increased armament of Azerbaijan, it may make the first steps to attack, but in case it happens Armenia will face various insuperable problems: it's army is located at a problematic geographic location from where they were not able to leave in 1992, the country will suffer from economic crisis and so on.

In a conclusion I would state that conflict whether it is frozen or not should be by all means resolved peacefully. Even a frozen conflict may any time escalate and become a full scale war that will be destructive not only for the both sides of the conflict but for the whole region of South Caucasus. I would suggest both sides to realize that without their willingness of active negotiations and without several compromises from both sides situation will remain frozen and even may worsen soon. Both sides should become on more tough tone of speech. Experts consider and I agree that at the moment peaceful resolution of Nagorny-Karabakh conflict does not seem a near perspective unfortunately. It is clear that without intensive involvement and influence of the outside world, Armenians and Azerbaijan are not able to reach consensus and carry on negotiations. The factor of Russia should also be taken into consideration. "Russia may be interested in conflict aggravation, which is military-political ally of Armenia Recently Russia and Armenia signed agreement by which Russian armed forces will remain in Armenia till 2044. Russia does not want the conflict resolution for several reasons as it is interested in Azerbaijan's gas resources; on the other hand it (Russia) wants to keep military-strategic superiority in Armenia. Because of these reasons Russia may try to strain the conflict in case there will appear the chances of its peaceful resolution not to lose its hegemony on the Region of South Caucasus." – Stated military expert Mr. Mamuka Nebieridze in his interview with me. (Nebieridze, 2012) As at the moment USA and EU face the economical crisis and dozens of domestic problems, plus democratic movements in Middle East, the case of South Caucasus is somehow pushed back, but the fact that EU and USA interest in the region is high was once again proved with the President

Nicolas Sarkozy's visit in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the beginning of October, 2011. At the same time the tensed relations of Turkey and Israel may affect arm trade relations of Azerbaijan and Israel. I think the main point at the moment is avoidance of the new escalation of the conflict.

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