Prisoners of the Caucasus: Resolving the Karabakh Security Dilemma

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Article

A Four-Day War in April

In four days of bloodshed in the South Caucasus from April 2 to 5, Armenian and Azerbaijani forces went back to war, unfreezing their conflict around the disputed territory of Nagorny Karabakh.

Moscow negotiated a verbal truce between the chiefs of staff of the armies of Armenia and Azerbaijan, but by then, according to the most reliable estimates, almost 200 people had died, many of them civilians. The Armenian side admitted to 88 casualties and reported that some of them were victims of atrocities. A nongovernmental Azerbaijani media organization counted more than 100 Azerbaijani dead.

The April fighting was the worst outbreak of violence since 1994. But it was not a full-scale military offensive by Azerbaijan, which has periodically said it does not rule out the use of force to reconquer territory it lost in the conflict in the 1990s. More likely, it was a limited operation staged by Baku to shake the status quo, put the conflict back on the international agenda, and put the Armenian side under pressure. The Azerbaijani army recovered two hills, one of which, Lele Tepe, lies about 3 miles north of the Iranian border and has some strategic significance. The fighting also rallied the Azerbaijani public around the flag and distracted them from economic woes caused by falling oil prices and a devalued currency.

The violence opened up a new security vacuum around Nagorny Karabakh. On May 16, the three mediators in the conflict, France, Russia, and the United States, moved to fill the vacuum in a meeting in Vienna between the Azerbaijani and Armenian presidents, Ilham Aliev and Serzh Sargsyan, led by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. A statement issued by the mediators afterward announced that both the Armenians and Azerbaijanis had acceded to long-standing demands. There will be a strengthening of the ceasefire regime and a mechanism to investigate ceasefire violations (an Armenian demand), and new comprehensive peace talks in June (the key Azerbaijani demand).

The basis for the new talks will be proposals drafted in 2015 by Lavrov, which modified a document put to Aliev and Sargsyan in 2011. The document sets out a phased plan in which transport communications would be restored and the Armenians would give up some territories in return for security guarantees for the Armenians of Karabakh.

The fighting and the new diplomacy make this a moment of opportunity and danger for the conflict. The parties still aspire to very different things, and the recent violence has only accentuated maximalist positions in Armenian and Azerbaijani societies. Despite the promise of fresh talks, many on both sides expect a new all-out conflict. Even though almost everyone involved believes such a conflict would be extremely bloody and destructive, some are keen to fight it. The security situation on the so-called line of contact that divides the two armies has remained volatile since April 5, with both sides reporting more exchanges of fire and casualties.

The April combat and ongoing tensions have raised the stakes for international actors who want a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Doing nothing or seeking to manage the decades-old ceasefire is no longer an option. Even those who would prefer to ignore this protracted dispute must face the prospect that the main choice now is between a more serious negotiation process and the risk of a dangerous conflict that could spill over into the wider region.

A Security Dilemma

Perceptions of mutual insecurity lie at the root of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. Indeed, in the Caucasus, a region where small ethnic groups live side by side in a complex highland geography and fear for their survival, the concepts of identity and security are almost synonymous.

The Karabakh conflict dates back to 1988, although it has roots in the early twentieth century. In 1923, Nagorny (or Mountainous) Karabakh was created as an autonomous highland region within Soviet Azerbaijan, with an Armenian majority—94 percent when the region was formed, 75 percent in 1989. (The lowland part of the region is technically Lower Karabakh, but this term is seldom used.) In 1988, in the context of then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's liberalization of the Soviet Union, the Armenians of Karabakh campaigned for their region to leave Azerbaijan and join Armenia.

Each side was driven into violence by fear: for the Armenians of Karabakh, that they would be swallowed up or driven from their homeland by Azerbaijan; for the Azerbaijanis, that Armenian-led Karabakh constituted a fifth column threatening the integrity of their republic. As the Soviet Union broke up and the two republics became independent states, the dispute escalated into full-scale war. By the time the 1994 ceasefire agreements were signed, around 20,000 people had died and more than 1 million had been displaced. The Armenians won control not only of Nagorny Karabakh but also of all the Azerbaijani land around it, amounting to 13.6 percent of the de jure territory of Azerbaijan. Negotiations led by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have not yielded a resolution to the dispute.

Since the 1994 ceasefire accords were signed, the most thorny issue concerns the so-called occupied territories. The end of fighting left the Armenian side in control, in whole or in part, of the seven Azerbaijani territories around the Armenian-majority enclave of Nagorny Karabakh. In Soviet times, these regions were regular parts of Azerbaijan with no autonomous status, home to more than 500,000 Azerbaijanis. Armenian forces captured these areas in 1992–1994, calling them a buffer zone that protected the Armenians of Nagorny Karabakh from destruction. For Azerbaijan, the continued occupation of these regions, twenty-two years after the ceasefire deals, is an egregious injustice. They point to four UN resolutions from 1993 and 1994 that call for Armenian troops to withdraw from these territories.

Political scientists have called an impasse such as the one in Nagorny Karabakh a security dilemma. This is defined as a situation in which one side in a conflict seeks to strengthen its own security vis-à-vis its opponent by taking steps that the other sees as threatening, leading to an escalation of tensions that undermines the security of both.

The crux of the security dilemma here is that any effort by Azerbaijan to reverse the status quo by recapturing the occupied territories by force only reinforces Armenians' determination to hang on to the territories to protect their own security interests. This polarizing dynamic lay behind the small war in early April.

The basis of the OSCE draft peace plans is the idea that the Armenians will give up these occupied territories (with the exception of a corridor through the town of Lachin linking Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh) in return for guarantees of self-rule for the Armenians of Karabakh and perhaps eventual independence. Unfortunately, the worsening conflict dynamics are leading to a hardening of positions on both sides. Increasingly, many ordinary Armenians refer to these seven territories as being liberated rather than occupied. Speaking after the recent fighting, Antranig Kasbarian, a diaspora Armenian journalist, said, "These liberated territories are strategically crucial as security zones: They maintain Azerbaijan's distance from Karabagh's main population centers, while creating an integral, territorial bond between Karabagh and Armenia. At the same time, many of these territories have a historically Armenian pedigree." In Baku, meanwhile, there is less talk of giving autonomy to the Armenians of Karabakh and more of reconquest. At the end of 2015, Azerbaijani Defense Minister Zakir Hasanov warned that in 2016 "the Karabakh land will burn under the feet of the Armenian invaders."

A robust international security arrangement is needed to unlock this dilemma. Yet the only mechanism in place is the set of ceasefire agreements signed in 1994, which were supposed to be temporary arrangements and did not provide for peacekeepers. In an accord signed on July 27, 1994, the military commanders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorny Karabakh pledged to work within thirty days on a political agreement that would contain "technical military issues, including the interaction of international peacekeepers and a CSCE observer mission." Yet, no document has been agreed on since then. The OSCE's predecessor, the CSCE or Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, a relatively young multilateral organization, was unable or unwilling to step in decisively, especially as the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was commanding far more international attention.

At that time, crucially, none of the actors in the process could reach agreement on the role of Russia. Then Russian defense minister Pavel Grachev was keen to follow up on the truce of May 12, 1994, by deploying a Russian-led peacekeeping mission to the occupied territories around Nagorny Karabakh. This mission, analogous to the one that would be sent to the Georgian breakaway region of Abkhazia in the same year, would have given Russia a pivotal role in the conflict zone.

However, the Russian initiative was thwarted—and the story of how this happened should give pause to those who believe that Moscow pulls the strings in this conflict. In his book *Green and Black*, the Armenian journalist Tatul Hakobyan

relates how Azerbaijani officials, who had only recently seen the last Russian military base withdrawn from their territory, strongly opposed the return of Russian soldiers in the guise of peacekeepers. Significantly, the Armenians did not trust the Russians either. Hakobyan quotes Karabakh Armenian official Manvel Sarkisian as saying he worked with Azerbaijani negotiator Tofik Zulfugarov to keep the Russians out. Hakobyan writes, “It was a period when the Armenians and Azerbaijanis basically worked together against the Russians. And if that had not happened, then Russian peacekeepers would long ago have been sent to the Karabakh conflict zone, with say a [Commonwealth of Independent States] mandate, as happened in Abkhazia.”

As a result, no peacekeeping force was created, the lightly armed Karabakh Armenians stayed in the occupied territories, and just six CSCE (later OSCE) observers were deployed to monitor the ceasefire. The line dividing the two armies gradually became more established and known as the line of contact. It turned into a steadily more fortified network of trenches stretching across the territory of Azerbaijan to the border with Iran.

The Peace Process Under Strain

Twenty years ago, the Nagorny Karabakh conflict was a much greater international priority than it is today. Great hopes were placed on the OSCE as the emerging European security organization that would handle it. At one of its earliest meetings in 1992, the organization called for a conference to resolve the conflict, to take place in the Belarusian capital, Minsk. The conference was never convened, but a Minsk group was formed to mediate between the warring parties. Following the 1994 ceasefire, a new framework for the Minsk process was formalized. Russia’s failure to become the unilateral mediator gave the responsibility to the OSCE as a whole—an arrangement that also allowed the conflict parties to play the mediators off against one another.

At a summit in Budapest in December 1994, the OSCE set up a framework with three main elements, which have been likened to three legs of a stool. First, at the high political level, the OSCE Minsk group had co-chairs responsible for mediating between the conflict parties. Since 1997, these co-chairs have been France, Russia, and the United States.

Second, the OSCE chairman in office nominated a personal representative on the ground whose mandate is to represent the OSCE in the region. Andrzej Kasprzyk of Poland has filled this role since 1997.

The third leg of the stool is the so-called high-level planning group (HLPG), which is mandated “to make recommendations for the Chairman-in-Office on developing as soon as possible a plan for the establishment, force structure requirements and operation of a multinational OSCE peacekeeping force.” The HLPG was extremely active in its first year of operation, making fact-finding visits to the region. In July 1995, the group presented a plan for a peacekeeping operation to the chairman in office. As the OSCE reported in 2007, “it included four options, of which three were a mixture of armed peacekeeping troops and unarmed military observers, their strength varying from 1,500 to 4,500 personnel, the fourth being an unarmed military observer mission.”

All three of these OSCE structures have lost power and prestige in the last twenty years. The international actors have seen Karabakh slip down their agendas and have increasingly focused on managing the conflict rather than resolving it. The rotating one-year chairmanship structure of the OSCE means that the chairman in office lacks institutional memory on the issue. Gradually, the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan, for whom the conflict remains the number one national priority, have become the chief conductors of the process and found ways to manipulate the OSCE mechanisms.

The main mediation track led by the three co-chairs has stalled in the face of objections from the two leaders. The co-chairs devised a sophisticated framework document centered on six basic principles, a draft of which was filed with the OSCE in 2007. However, since 2014, there has been a growing consensus that a package agreement tackling these issues all at once is unattainable, and the co-chairs have focused on a less ambitious, phased approach.

In the meantime, the ceasefire-maintenance mechanisms of 1994 have been inadequate in the face of a mass military buildup. Kasprzyk leads a six-man monitoring team that, incredibly, is supposed to observe the ceasefire not only along the 160-mile line of contact but also along the Armenian-Azerbaijani international border, where there are now frequent clashes. A 2011 initiative by the foreign ministers of France, Russia, and the United States to build confidence between the parties by having snipers withdrawn from the frontline was rejected by Azerbaijan. Baku has had no interest in strengthening a ceasefire regime that entrenches the status quo and in giving up almost its only leverage over the Armenians: the pressure of military force.

The HLPG has not been able to update its four options of 1995 for a peacekeeping force with proposals that would reflect either the more menacing situation on the ground or innovations in thinking on the use of peacekeepers in conflict zones. Both parties to the conflict have blocked the HLPG from making observation missions to the region—the last time the group visited the conflict zone was in 2006.

In this vacuum, both sides have purchased modern destructive weaponry, with Russia acting as the main supplier of arms.

Azerbaijan has used massive oil revenues to increase its military budget to more than $4 billion a year. In the recent round of fighting, Baku was able to use tanks, heavy artillery, and attack helicopters, as well as Israeli-produced military drones. One reason why the Azerbaijani government may have been tempted to use force in April was that it was a moment when the military balance was most in Baku's favor, as the military budget is being cut under pressure of falling oil revenues.

The Armenians cannot afford the same level of military expenditure, but they have the advantage of defending higher ground. At the same time, as a member of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, Armenia can buy Russian weapons at reduced prices.

The situation on the ground has become more volatile as both sides make contingency plans for more fighting. In February 2016, Armenia's First Deputy Defense Minister David Tonoyan announced that his country was moving from a "static" to a more proactive "deterrence" defense doctrine. In line with that approach, Yerevan secured a $200 million loan to buy new weapons from Russia, including Smerch rockets and TOS-1A flamethrower systems. These were not delivered before the April fighting began. During that recent bloodshed, an Armenian commander said anonymously that his army possessed Russian-made Iskander cruise missiles and that they were targeted at Azerbaijan's oil and gas infrastructure.

A rhetorical arms race has kept pace with the actual one, especially on the Azerbaijani side. Aliev has called Armenia a "criminal and dictatorial regime" that is guilty of "genocide" and asserted that "the current state of Armenia was established on historical Azerbaijani lands." The Armenians do not employ such extreme rhetoric, but as the victors in the 1991–1994 conflict, they do not need to. Armenians fuel the conflict by quietly reinforcing their grip on the territory they control—a stance that could be termed passive-aggressive. For example, a new road is being built across the Armenian-occupied Kelbajar region. In 2010, the Karabakh Armenian authorities announced they were giving the ruined Azerbaijani town of Aghdam the Armenian name of Akna.

Prisoners of the Caucasus

After the violence in April, it is hard to conceive how the Karabakh conflict can return to its semiquiet state of the last few years. Either a new political process will deliver results, or there will be more violence. Emotions are too high in the region, and the 1994 ceasefire regime has been shown to be inadequate. The whole OSCE framework to contain the conflict has been pushed to breaking point.

War is a risky adventure that few people want. Yet, if they do not agree to political compromise and resolve their extreme security dilemma, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan risk becoming trapped by their own rhetoric and public expectations on a path that could take them to war by miscalculation or misadventure.

Several scenarios could lead to this outcome. There could be a particularly egregious violation of the ceasefire. Seeing no prospect of a new political process, the Azerbaijani side could launch an operation to capture more land and change the facts on the ground in its favor. Armenia's parliament could carry through on a threat to pass a bill recognizing Nagorny Karabakh as an independent state, a move that would effectively end Yerevan's mandate to negotiate and would kill off the Minsk process.

One thing is certain: a new round of fighting would be harder to contain than previous conflicts. It is likely that the geographical range would be bigger, the weaponry more destructive, and the bloodshed much greater. Both Baku and Yerevan would be under pressure to invoke the security assistance treaties they have signed with Turkey and Russia respectively and to try to drag Ankara and Moscow into a proxy war. These security dynamics make both local and international actors prisoners of the Caucasus, to use the phrase of Russian poet Alexander Pushkin.

The security vacuum can be filled only by a sustained international push to resolve the conflict. In particular, that requires more proactive planning about the nature, size, and composition of the international peacekeeping force that is supposed to underpin a political agreement. Without this, it will be hard for the Armenian side to agree to withdraw its troops from the occupied territories and for Azerbaijani internally displaced persons to begin to go home. Asking the two presidents to agree to the political elements of a deal without a proper understanding of its security component is akin to building a house without a floor.

Since 1995, work on the security part of an OSCE-mediated deal has lagged behind the political dimensions. The complex geography of the conflict zone and the new weaponry deployed in it mean that the need for an international peacekeeping force with a strong mandate is greater than ever. However, planning such a mission is complicated by at least three problems.

The first of these problems is Karabakh fatigue. The major powers of the world have many other preoccupations and commitments, and it will be hard to find 4,000 armed peacekeepers to be deployed to an old conflict zone in the South Caucasus—let alone the larger number that the militarized conflict zone probably now requires. Such a force needs to be constructed to satisfy the claims of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis, both of whom would prefer to keep their own forces in large numbers in the conflict zone.

Second, the OSCE has no experience leading peacekeeping operations, as the 1994 Budapest summit mandated the organization to do for Nagorny Karabakh—nor does it have the budget for it. The final declaration in Budapest acknowledged this by asking the chairman in office to seek the “technical advice and expertise” and “political support” of the UN. This means that a Karabakh peacekeeping operation would likely be delegated to the UN following a Chapter 7 Security Council resolution—or perhaps to the European Union. That is not so much a technical challenge as a political one: it requires delicate navigation of international diplomacy that the parties to the conflict may seek to exploit to their own advantage.

The third issue that will complicate plans for any peacekeeping arrangement is Russia. Moscow made an aggressive but unsuccessful bid to lead a peacekeeping operation in 1994, a move to which the Azerbaijani side in particular objected. In a draft peace deal discussed in Key West in 2001, Russia made a gentleman’s agreement under which a peacekeeping force would include “no neighbors and no co-chair countries,” as former mediators have confirmed, a formula that would exclude both Russia and Turkey. However, there are indications that the Russians have not given up on their earlier ambition. In 2006, then Russian defense minister Sergey Ivanov predicted that Russian peacekeepers would be deployed to the Karabakh conflict zone “in the foreseeable future.”

There is a common view, both in the region and in some circles in the West, that Russia’s only interest in the conflict is in sustaining the status quo of no peace, no war. The reality is more complicated. During the 1991–1994 war, Russian servicemen fought on both sides. Russia has a military alliance with Armenia and a fairly close relationship with Azerbaijan. Russia mediated the ceasefire and has, since the late 1990s, worked in fairly effective coordination with its Minsk group co-chairs, France and the United States. In his push to resolve the conflict in 2009–2011, then Russian president Dmitry Medvedev cooperated closely with his French and U.S. counterparts. Russia certainly has an interest in preserving its influence in the region, but it cannot afford the risk of a new war in which it would be forced to support its military ally, Armenia, and lose everything that it has built with Azerbaijan. Moscow can also preserve its influence by promoting a phased peace plan that will take many years to implement and will reopen North-South communications between Russia and Iran via Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Some analysts also speculate that in the new international environment of competition between Russia and the West that has followed the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Moscow is seeking again the kind of unilateral role it tried to play in Karabakh in the mid-1990s and to use the conflict to establish a new military presence in the South Caucasus. Whether that is the case is a moot question. The key point is that if that is the Russian ambition, it is not matched by Russian capacities. In 1994, in 2011, and at other times, Armenia, Azerbaijan, or both have blocked Russian initiatives. The other two co-chairs of the Minsk group, though less visible, have a de facto veto over any plans Moscow may have to shape a peace deal to its own agenda.

Conclusion

Following the breakdown of the ceasefire around Nagorny Karabakh in April 2016, the formidable challenge ahead for international actors is to upgrade the faltering peace process to prevent a slide into full-scale war. That means getting the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan (as well as the Armenians of Karabakh) to agree to a package of political and security measures that they can accept and then sell at home. The only viable mechanism for doing this is the current OSCE Minsk group co-chair format—dismantling it would be an exercise of questionable merit that would take up valuable time. France, Russia, and the United States have the experience, the international weight, and the institutional memory to stay at the vanguard of the process.

However, it is important that other international players with a genuine interest in resolving the conflict are allowed to contribute more to the process. The EU, for example, has extremely valuable postconflict experience from the Western Balkans and a profile in the Caucasus that is much higher than it was twenty years ago. Other interested actors include Georgia, which was alarmed by how the recent fighting between its two neighbors threatened its own stability; Iran, which borders the conflict zone and has fewer obligations to either side than does Russia or Turkey; and even China, which is becoming a major investor in a region it sees as an East-West transit route.

On the security side, the OSCE chairman in office (held by Germany in 2016) also has a mandate to do more. It can use its political weight to invigorate the OSCE monitoring mission and the HLPG and enable them to carry out their mandates.

More broadly, high-level (and confidential) diplomacy by the Minsk group co-chairs and the chairman in office is needed to work out both the political and technical aspects of a draft security package and peacekeeping force. This means prior consultations with the UN and the EU and with nations that are perceived as neutral and could potentially provide peacekeepers. It means Moscow would clarify to the other mediators whether it still aspires to deploy Russian peacekeepers.

Once a draft document is agreed on internationally, it could be put to the conflict parties as a pledge of seriousness by the mediators. It would provide the floor for a new political and security deal to be presented to Armenians and Azerbaijanis at the OSCE Minsk conference, finally convened more than twenty-three years after it was first proposed.

These recommendations are made in the full knowledge that the Nagorny Karabakh conflict is still lower on the agenda than other international issues, such as Syria and Ukraine, and remains a matter in which many are still reluctant to engage more fully. However, a stronger investment in conflict resolution in this dangerous region of the Caucasus now is surely a better option than the much more costly alternative of dealing with a new conflict, with all its strategic and economic repercussions and terrible toll in human lives.

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