

To avoid total conflict

The current truce between Armenia and Azerbaijan cannot be taken for granted. Dialogue is more important than ever.

A new outbreak of violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan could once again upset the delicate balance that prevents the start of a new war in the South Caucasus. And although the conflict was settled literally a few days after it began, and the balance of power remained unchanged, the new dynamics once again shows that the current ceasefire should by no means be taken for granted. Given the widespread radicalization of all aspects of relations between these countries, Baku and Yerevan must urgently return to the negotiating table in order to reach functional agreements on the least controversial issues.

The conflict that erupted on July 12 killed 18 people, including one civilian, in the largest outbreak of violence since the April 2016 Four-Day War. Although the conflict was settled five days later, this escalation clearly demonstrated the emergence of new or exacerbation of old trends (<https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/just-another-incident-or-an-evolving-status-quo/>) that jeopardize the delicate balance that maintains peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

First, the violence took place on the de jure international border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, 200 km from the center of the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Secondly, although this trend is not new, this time Turkey's support for Azerbaijan was even more frank, active and aggressive than in 2016. In particular, immediately after the conflict, many meetings were held between representatives of the defense departments of both states. In addition, all over the world, representatives of the diaspora and communities of emigrants from Armenia and Azerbaijan were instantly mobilized (<https://eurasianet.org/fighting-between-armenians-and-azerbajjanis-spills-beyond-caucasus>), which in many cases led to clashes, fights and vandalism.

In general, the July clashes once again demonstrated the full nature of the long-standing conflict, because of which any controversial issue and any region (even located far from the notorious Nagorno-Karabakh) can serve as an impetus for a new outbreak of violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The July outbreak of violence drew a line under the 36-month period of "preparing peoples for peace." This phrase is a quote directly from the meeting of Azerbaijani Foreign Ministers Elmar Mammadyarov (who recently left office (<https://eurasianet.org/azerbajjan-fires-foreign-minister>)) and Zohrab Mnatsakanyan of Armenia, held in January 2019. Indeed, prior to the July events, peace and tranquility reigned on the front lines, so that public discussions could concern not only security, but also many other topics.

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Nevertheless, despite the wide range of proposals (https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Preparing_populations_for_peace.pdf) put forward by civil society, “preparing peoples for peace” has remained just an empty promise. After a single exchange visit from each country in November 2019, Armenia and Azerbaijan chose to launch a new cycle of symbolic offensives (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/armenia-and-azerbaijan-s-season-symbolic-offensives>). .

Over the years, the positions of Armenia and Azerbaijan on key political issues - the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, population displacement, access to the region, and security on its territory - have been strikingly different from each other. Alas, after the July clashes, it seems that it will be more difficult for these countries to reach a constructive dialogue on the Basic Principles or find a worthy alternative.

Significantly, the resumption of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict coincided with a broader crisis in multilateral diplomacy. On July 18, as the last shots died down on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) faced an unexpected crisis (<https://www.shrmonitor.org/the-osce-is-dysfunctional-but-necessary/>): the participating States were unable to agree on the extension of the powers of some key positions, including the Organization's Secretary General.

While this turn of events will not have a direct impact on the Minsk Group (the organization that mediates negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan), it is a clear symptom of the decline of the (<https://caucasusedition.net/laurence-broers-stuck-in-post-liberal-limbo-conflict-resolution-in-the-south-caucasus/>) liberal world and multilateral diplomacy. With the decline of multilateralism, more authoritarian models of conflict resolution will enter the scene. Libya and many countries in the Middle East are a prime example of such models.

Despite the fact that both sides often expressed their dissatisfaction with the Minsk Group, the fact remains: Yerevan and Baku are more likely to influence the processes on the basis of consensus, rather than using the authoritarian models practiced by the neighboring states. If disagreements reach the stage of total conflict, there is a risk of losing control over the dynamics of negotiations between the parties. What can be done to resolve the conflict in this case?

It is imperative not to allow multiple disagreements to escalate into all-out conflict. This can be done by breaking down the Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation into smaller components. The emphasis should be on less controversial topics. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan could win by resolving disputes that are not fundamental for both sides.

To prevent multiple disagreements from developing into a total conflict, it is necessary to break the Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation into smaller components. The emphasis should be on less controversial topics.

In fact, the July clashes were the result of unregulated events on the second plan of military operations, not related to Nagorno-Karabakh and not having any strategic significance for both sides. Therefore, a military conflict on this territory did not make any sense from the point of view of protecting the interests of either side. Quite the opposite: densely populated areas on both sides of the border, as well as important transport and energy infrastructure, posed additional risks in the event of escalating conflict in the region. Therefore, both sides would benefit from adopting measures aimed at combating prejudice and supporting effective communication between the parties.

The International Crisis Group, (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/259-preventing-bloody-harvest-armenia-azerbaijan-state-border>) in its highly timely report, highlighted several such areas for cooperation in the region, where conflict escalated in July: agriculture, rebuilding water infrastructure and clearing landmines.

Moreover, the region was a precedent for Saferworld's (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/653>) innovative work in 2010-2012 to support the civilian ceasefire oversight mechanism.

Azerbaijan is skeptical about the initiative to introduce ceasefire control infrastructure along the contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku considers this position to be the enemy's way of maintaining an unacceptable balance of power in the region. However, in non-contested territory (which has not yet been demarcated), the ceasefire infrastructure would minimize potential risks. In addition, it would also help to make the relationship of the sides more predictable on a secondary battlefield, where stability would benefit both sides.

Social and Identity Issues are becoming as serious a constraint on progress in negotiations as are key disagreements

In addition to a pragmatic approach to resolving local and bilateral conflicts, best practices in the field of peace require building a dialogue based on finding solutions to broader social and identity problems. As a rule, such issues are not discussed in the context of OSCE mediation. Meanwhile, as the July Armenian-Azerbaijani conflicts and the subsequent fierce polarization of Armenian and Azerbaijani communities around the world show, such problems are becoming no less a serious factor holding back the progress of negotiations than are the key disagreements. Discussions about nationalism, divergence of views on justice, history and politics of memory (<https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/reframing-past-armenians-and-azerbaijanis-face-painful-truths-karabakh-war>), the consequences of militarization and dehumanization, and the impact of political patriarchy - all these issues play an important role in the potential resolution of the conflict.

After the outbreak of violence, it is always very difficult to return to the old state of affairs. At this stage of the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, this task becomes even more difficult. According to a 2019 study (<https://ypc.am/projects/2018-2019-armenia-azerbaijan-searching-for-new-models-of-dialogue/>), the activity of informal dialogue between the parties reached its lowest level since the beginning of the conflict back in 1988. As demonstrations in Baku have shown, in such conditions, the public's reaction to events on the front line becomes more difficult to control and channel into the channel of peaceful change.

It is for this reason that it is extremely important to resume the informal dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan as a normal (<https://www.caucasustalks.com/>) element of interaction between all parties to the conflict, devoid of any contradictions.

Militarized societies, locked in their own small worlds, will inevitably turn into arenas where leaders can easily fall into the trap of their own discourse. Faced with a new impasse in the negotiations, to which they themselves have led, the leaders of both states must finally see representatives of civil society not as another threat, but as key allies and partners. Only such an approach will allow both parties to move to a new stage of relations.



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