

EXPERT OPINIONS

Just Another Incident or an Evolving Status Quo? Four Takeaways From the July Clashes Along the Armenia-Azerbaijan Border

21.08.2020

Laurence Broers

The inability to avoid a minor incident's slide into a major one is a worrying new trend indicating a growing 'totalization' of the conflict beyond contested sovereignty in Nagorny Karabakh itself. July's clashes thus serve us warning that any issue or setting can become a source of new Armenian-Azerbaijani violence – not necessarily due to deliberate escalation, but due to the domestic costs of de-escalation, writes [Laurence Broers](#), Caucasus Programme Director at London-based peacebuilding organization Conciliation Resources.

Over several days in July 2020 [clashes](#) in the area of the international Armenia-Azerbaijan border killed eighteen people, including a civilian. The fighting ended a de facto truce in place since late 2017, and [subsequently affirmed](#) by President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in Dushanbe a year later. Each new round of Armenian-Azerbaijani violence tests the fragile balance of forces in the region, and by implication the constraints on a major new war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This article identifies four takeaways from the latest violence.

Issues and spaces unrelated to the core issues contested in Nagorny Karabakh can become sources of new Armenian-Azerbaijani violence

Perhaps the single most striking feature of July's clashes was their location: some 200 kilometres away from the ground zero of Armenian-Azerbaijani antagonism in Nagorny Karabakh. The violence took place along the de jure Armenia-Azerbaijan border, running between Armenia's north-western region of Tavush and Azerbaijan's north-eastern region of Tovuz.

Although not contested between the two states, the international borders between them have in many areas never been formally demarcated. No man's lands created by vaguely demarcated de jure borders here and in Nakhichevan have become arenas for encroachments as each side seeks tactical advantage. [Previous small-scale movements](#) into undetermined no man's lands have not led, however, to such large-scale violence.

Why this happened in July is still not clear. [What seems to have happened](#) is that Armenian forces established a new post beyond their previous line of actual control, yet still technically within de jure Armenian territory, and Azerbaijani forces tried to recapture it. Significantly, neither side felt it could de-escalate a situation where core strategic interests relating to the conflict in Nagorny Karabakh were not at stake.

This may relate to the fact that this was Nikol Pashinyan's first test on the battlefield as a new leader whose security credentials have repeatedly been impugned by the 'strongmen' associated with the former regime. Their motives, of course, are in part to divert attention from the grave lapse in Armenian national security that took place on their watch in [April 2016](#). One net result for Pashinyan is to have demonstrated greater battle readiness as compared to four years ago.

The 'four-day war' of April 2016 was arguably a tactical success for Azerbaijan, and was framed in the country as a turning of the tide moment justifying billions spent on defence. Sustaining this mood may have influenced Baku's decision-making in July, but there would be no euphoria this time. The death of the popular and widely-respected Major-General Polad Hashimov in particular was greeted with [public anger](#) and mass protest.

The inability to avoid a minor incident's slide into a major one is a worrying new trend indicating a growing 'totalization' of the conflict beyond contested sovereignty in Nagorny Karabakh itself. July's clashes thus serve us warning that any issue or setting can become a source of new Armenian-Azerbaijani violence – not necessarily due to deliberate escalation, but due to the domestic costs of de-escalation.

Democratic breakthroughs are insufficient to change long-term dynamics of militarised rivalry

After Armenia's 'Velvet Revolution' in April-May 2018, when Nikol Pashinyan came to power on the back of a non-violent civic uprising, [expectations of a reset](#) in the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process rose.

Particularly in Azerbaijan, Pashinyan's predecessors, Karabakh natives Robert Kocharian and Serzh Sargsyan, were associated with a 'Karabakh clan' who had captured Armenia. There were expectations that after the complete collapse in trust between Sargsyan and Aliyev, a new relationship might be possible with Pashinyan.

These expectations under-estimated the embeddedness of long-term interstate rivalries, which can persist independently of regime effects. India and Pakistan have passed through period of joint democracy, yet these have

never lasted long enough for the 'democratic peace' – the notion that democratic states avoid coercion in their relations with each other – to take hold.

Moreover, movements towards democratization are moments of heightened risk of renewed violence. In the context of weak institutions, pre-existing conflict creates incentives to appeal to the emotive force of nationalism. Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1988-1992 are textbook examples of this dynamic, where democratisation and escalation took place in parallel.

[Armenia's Velvet Revolution](#) was without any doubt a significant breakthrough. Two years, however, is insufficient for an assured democratic transition. Rather, Armenia currently features a 'dominant power system', where Nikol Pashinyan's 'My Step' bloc is the dominant power. But while My Step may face few domestic constraints, it does not yet resemble an institutionalised political party, operating within a stable system of checks and balances. Pending a deeper and sustained institutionalisation of democracy in Armenia, and under continual pressure from the 'old guard', more populist strains of nationalism will remain tempting.

Yet even if democracy in Armenia is sustained over the long-term, mixed-regime rivalries, where one party is democratic and the other authoritarian, can thrive, as the examples of the Cold War, Israel and the Arab states and North and South Korea show. The July clashes provide a reality check that there is no straight line between a unilateral democratic transition and a peace dividend.

Majority opinion among outside actors continues to favour restraint, but cannot be taken for granted

Within a few days of the escalation beginning, local causes were largely forgotten in a flood of commentary that sought to explain it in terms of geopolitics, gas pipelines and great powers. A wave of op-eds depicted the latest violence as an outcome of dynamics and decisions outside of Armenia or Azerbaijan.

These views obscured a more mundane conclusion: there remains a critical mass of international opinion that sees a major new Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict as an outcome to be prevented, and acts accordingly. [Russia](#) and [Iran](#) immediately offered mediation. The European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell [convened a call](#) between the leaders of the two countries. The United States also urged caution and restraint.

Turkey was the exception, declaring unconditional [support](#) for Azerbaijan and threatening Armenia with punishment. This is again not new, as in April 2016 Ankara likewise declared its support for Azerbaijan "to the end".

While there was a sense of déjà vu in July, there are also nuances indicative of new dynamics. Ankara's support of Azerbaijan in 2016 came in the context of open conflict with Russia, following the shooting down of a Russian plane along the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015. Even if they are supporting rival factions in both Syria and Libya, in 2020 Russia and Turkey

are not in open conflict. They sealed [a major arms deal](#) in mid-2019 and are [negotiating more](#).

Turkey's assertiveness reflects confidence after several years' battle experience in cross-border operations across the Middle East since 2016. It also signals opportunism for Turkey's own arms industry, [close to saturation](#) of domestic demand and in need of new customers – such as Azerbaijan – if the growth of recent years is to be sustained. Recep Tayyip Erdogan is also more reliant than ever before on an authoritarian form of populist nationalism in the face of economic decline.

Against a backdrop of waning American interest and withdrawal from the Middle East, regional power posturing is also symptomatic of the global shift towards a more multipolar order. This is significant for the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict because the multilateralist approach of OSCE mediation is a particular legacy of the unipolar moment characterising the end of the twentieth century. OSCE mediation efforts, notably the Basic Principles, are premised on the Helsinki Final Act and liberal norms of conflict resolution providing for rights, electoral mechanisms and inclusivity. These once hegemonic ideas are now challenged by global multipolarity featuring global and regional powers practising very different models of conflict resolution.

[Russia and Turkey](#) are two such powers. Muscle flexing by these powers is unlikely to tip into open warfare. But such regional rivalries further disrupt the ailing rules-based international order. July's clashes are thereby a reminder to the parties that while outsiders do not drive Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, there are powerful external actors well-placed to profit from it. Those powers, moreover, are entrepreneurs of more authoritarian models of conflict management over which Armenia and Azerbaijan would have less control than they do now over the consensual model of OSCE mediation.

The globalisation of Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict has entered a toxic new phase

It used to be a truism that if Armenians and Azerbaijanis disagreed in the South Caucasus, then that was not necessarily the case outside of the region. July's clashes have rendered this truism obsolete with an unprecedented degree of [mobilization](#) among Armenian and Azerbaijani communities in Russia, Europe and the United States, leading to scuffles, street-fighting and brawls, and in some cases dozens of arrests. What explains this?

The Nagorny Karabakh conflict has become more 'mediatized' than ever before, allowing Armenians, Azerbaijanis and others all around the world to participate in local events in real time in an expansive social media space. Even the most localized incidents in remote areas become globalized media spectacles with polarizing effects.

This combines with the [communalization](#) of conflict, a political strategy to homogenise ethnic and political identities around the respective Armenian and Azerbaijani positions vis-à-vis the conflict. Homogenizing ethnic and

political identities implicates anyone who identifies as Armenian or Azerbaijani, and excludes moderate or nuanced positions.

These factors are not new. Yet it appears that a tipping point has been reached where these dynamics are reaching into global communities, perhaps through the addition of younger migrants from Armenia and Azerbaijan recently educated in environments where phobias towards the other have been encouraged. Homeland ‘[management](#)’ of diasporan communities in the service of state interests has also become more sophisticated in recent years.

The capacities of diasporas for ‘long-distance nationalism’ is well documented. Yet Armenians and Azerbaijanis in diaspora also have more opportunities than their compatriots in the homeland to interact with one another, to think in post-nationalist categories and imagine a different kind of [relationship](#). July’s clashes serve notice that more must be done to amplify these voices’ stand in favour of dialogue and nonviolence.

In conclusion, the status quo inhibiting a major new Armenia-Azerbaijan war holds, yet July’s clashes also illustrate new dynamics threatening it. This underlines the need for de-escalatory measures in areas and policy domains that do not involve Armenian and Azerbaijani red lines. A timely report by the [International Crisis Group](#) has highlighted several such areas, precisely in the region where July’s escalation took place: cooperation on enabling agriculture, restoring water infrastructure and clearing landmines.

Views expressed are of individual Members and Contributors, rather than the Club's, unless explicitly stated otherwise.