

The Difficulties of the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process: Washington and Moscow

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The Nagorno-Karabakh war officially ended on 16 May 1994 with the military Chiefs of Staff of Armenia, Karabakh and Azerbaijan signing a ceasefire agreement mediated by the Kremlin, who seemed to ignore the efforts of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) for an international mediation in the conflict. The OSCE had formed the Minsk Group in 1992, co-chaired by the Heads of State of France, the United States and Russia to mediate in the conflict. However, constant unilateral actions by the Kremlin to bring the conflict under its sole control¹ and mistrustful of any international encroachment in its *backyard* would come to constitute just one of the major reasons for the failure of the post-war negotiation process.

In the post-war period, Moscow and the OSCE (i.e. Minsk Group) countered one another in individual attempts to apparently reconcile the two warring parties and propose solutions to the conflict. In the Lisbon Summit of 1996 the Minsk Group declared itself favourable to the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. The next year in Copenhagen a plan for greater autonomy of the enclave within Azerbaijan's territorial borders was proposed. Nonetheless, both were rejected by the Armenian side. In 1998 proposals for a "common state"² between Karabakh and Azerbaijan were accepted by the Armenian side; however, they were rejected by Baku. The new millennium brought about two big changes in each of the opposing countries. In Azerbaijan, the death of President Heydar Aliyev in 2003 brought his son to power, whose stance on the conflict proved to be more intransigent than his father's. The other big change occurred with the accession of Karabakh-native Robert Kocharian to the Armenian presidency, who turned Yerevan into the sole negotiator for Karabakh, essentially nullifying Karabakh's presence at the negotiating table.

The 1990's were a period of uncertainty regarding a final solution to the conflict. This uncertainty transformed into an impossibility starting the 2000's due to changes in the geopoliti-

¹Maresca, John: "Agony of Indifference in Nagorno-Karabakh", *Christian Science Monitor*, [online], 27 June 1994

²Artzruni, Ashot: *Historia del Pueblo Armenio*. 2º ed., Sirar Ediciones, Barcelona, 2010, p.487.

tical situation. Despite the hindrances, the negotiation process continued. In 2007 the OSCE formulated a series of propositions termed the Madrid Principles, which underlined, among other things, the transfer of territories surrounding the enclave to Azerbaijan, the creation of a corridor territorially connecting Armenia with Karabakh and the return of refugees and the internally displaced to territories under Armenian control³. Constant disagreements due to each side's intransigent positions contributed to a failure of the negotiation process in the 2000's. At the end of the decade, daily exchanges of gunfire and skirmishes on the line of contact between Armenian-Karabakhi and Azerbaijani troops developed into a common occurrence. Periodically small-scale battles took place producing losses on both sides, as was the case in 2008 and 2010 in the northeastern Karabakhi region of Martakert. Beginning with 2012 onward, skirmishes on the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia proper had developed as well. Since an escalation of tension hundreds of soldiers from both sides, as well as civilians have fallen victim to the violence.

The year 2014 marked the start of small-scale military operations, which in the month of August resulted in around 20 military losses on both sides. In November of the same year the downing of an Armenian military helicopter during training exercises by Azeri forces almost came to spark a new war. The most distressing moment since the 1994 ceasefire however occurred at the beginning of April 2016. This *war*, lasting four days produced hundreds of losses on both sides and concluded with the overrunning by Azeri forces of several Armenian positions. For the first time, Baku started combat operations using a combined force of areal units, armoured vehicles and artillery, reminiscent of German *Blitzkreig* tactics. The Armenian forces counter-attacked with heavy artillery in what appeared to be the start of a new war between the two. Almost immediately diplomatic efforts came into effect, again unilaterally from the Kremlin, who, outside the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group succeeded in ending hostilities⁴.

The Minsk Group's efforts to mediate a solution clashed with the inflexible positions of the two opposing sides of the conflict. Neither Stepanakert-Yerevan, nor Baku show themselves

³OSCE: "Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries", 10 de Julio 2009.

⁴Тарасов, Станислав: "Карабахская война не позволила Турции укрепиться в Закавказье", *Regnum*, 08.04.2016. [Translation of original in Russian: Tarasov, Stanislav: "The war in Karabakh did not allow Turkey to strengthen its positions in the Caucasus", *Regnum*, [online], 08 April 2016].

willing to offer concessions. The Minsk Group's role is also undermined by the lack of coordination between the co-Presidents and a parallel process in which Washington and Moscow pursue their national interests in the region. The OSCE group has not succeeded in deploying permanent observers on the militarised border, which would undoubtedly contribute to maintaining the ceasefire. Baku and Moscow have stated their contrary positions to this; Baku strictly opposes the deployment of any foreign forces fearing it resulting in a permanent fixing of borders, while Moscow exerts pressure on both belligerent parties in order to counter and avoid the intromission of any international organisation or power in the conflict. Given the aforementioned circumstances, uncertainty plagues the negotiation processes of the Karabakh conflict.

Within the context of Moscow-Washington confrontation, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has a special importance. Each power seeks not cooperation, but regional control at the cost of the other. Due to this, their interests in Karabakh are not necessarily linked to resolving the conflict. Controlling the conflict implies exerting (or the capacity to exert) a monopoly of control over the two sides in conflict, Armenia and Azerbaijan. This control would have the capacity to change the two governments' orientations with the West and Moscow in favour of a given power. Thereupon, this conflict serves as a means of leverage to boost the two powers' influence over the region.

Policies aimed at controlling the conflict ultimately lead to a reconfiguration of the regional balance of power in favour of one or another power. With the purpose of defending their geostrategic interests, Washington and Moscow gradually implicate other countries as a means of counteracting the other's power. In this regard, we see the increasing cooperation between Russia and Iran in the face of the growing importance of the U.S. and its allies in the E.U., NATO and Turkey. The Kremlin has limited itself to Iran as a partner and regional power. The immediate cooperation between Moscow and Tehran to bring an end to the 2016 Karabakh war can be interpreted as a clear message to Washington (and the West in general): *the worldwide hegemonic role of Washington does not apply to the Caucasus, Karabakh is a regional issue*. The United States on the other hand, seeking to counter the powerful influence of Russia and Iran, implicated two of its allies in the region, Turkey, a regional power and Israel, a firm adversary of Iran. Turkish and Israeli impartiality regarding the conflict has the potential to create an illusion of unconditional support for Baku in case of renewed war. Besides the latter,

American *soft power* has been quite active in Armenian and Azerbaijan, creating and developing a civil society in terms with Western values, as well as providing specific military training programmes with both republics. Without pressure from the U.S. or Russian authorities, an uncontrolled situation could easily spark another regional conflict.

In practice, the positions that the U.S. and Russia maintain regarding the conflict show they are favourable to the preservation of the current status quo. This apparent *consensus* remains far away from cooperation between the two, as more so, it comes to represent a delicate balance of power. Resolving the conflict impartially is not possible. Speaking hypothetically, resolving the conflict even in a *partial* manner (i.e. favouring one side) would not be the fruit of cooperation between these two powers, as both have contradicting interests. Such a hypothetical solution to the conflict would offer opportunities to the disadvantaged side (Armenia or Azerbaijan) to adopt a clear position in favour of or contrary to the powerbroker in question, either Washington or Moscow. Each powerbroker in the conflict seeks to offer *its'* own solution to the conflict according to its particular geopolitical interests. Hitherto, one can only speak hypothetically of a solution to the conflict, as a real solution would require the full cooperation of both powers and both sides in the conflict, leaving aside their respective national interests. We have seen in the Ukraine, Syria and now in the Caucasus that international conflict prevention and mediation mechanisms lack the capacity to accomplish the objectives for which they were created. With increasing tension on the line of contact between Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan, as well as the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, many experts ask not *if* but *when* the next flare up in Nagorno-Karabakh will be.

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Map: Nagorno -Karabaj

