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THE KARABAKH PROBLEM IN THE MID-2010's

Abstract

In this article a situation on the territory of Karabakh conflict and the positions of the conflicting parties are analyzed. These are based on a “package approach” (Armenia) and “step by step approach” (Azerbaijan). These approaches of the sides are at a complete contradiction and are the main reason for the ineffectiveness of the negotiations under the OSCE Minsk Group, thus increasing the likelihood of a transition to a military-force scenario to solve the problem. Russia's policy is seeking to prevent a new war in Karabakh by maintaining a comparable military-political balance of power. In this situation, the main task of the OSCE Minsk Group and Russian diplomacy is a creation of effective mechanisms to prevent the resumption of hostilities. International ceasefire monitoring will create conditions for the activation of the negotiation process with the aim of achieving a comprehensive settlement of the Karabakh conflict. In the alternative the Karabakh problem will continue to be a source of international tension.

Keywords:

The Karabakh problem, Azerbaijan, Armenia, NKR, Russian policy, the OSCE Minsk Group, the CSTO, military-political balance

Introduction

The unresolved Karabakh problem continues to be a major obstacle to developing and modernizing the South Caucasus. Following the epic fail in the 1992-1994 war, Azerbaijani authorities realized that the Karabakh problem could not be solved by military means. Accordingly, during the first post-war years, the main focus was on diplomacy: Baku leadership was indeed set to use US and EU's interest in energy supplies from Azerbaijan to regain Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku treated energy cooperation treaties with EU within the only context: “oil in exchange for Karabakh”. They even tried to use Moscow's interest in bringing Azerbaijan to the Collective

Security Treaty Organization later on. The formula transformed into “CSTO in exchange for Karabakh” and then “EEU in exchange for Karabakh”.

The diplomatic gambits proved ineffective as (like in Georgia) they were based on an extreme overestimate of the country’s importance for the United States, EU and Russia. Not surprisingly, the twilight hopes that someone from external players would force Armenia to return Nagorno-Karabakh under the authority of Azerbaijan, did not materialize. The result was disappointment in US, EU and Russian policies within the Azerbaijani community, while the authorities recognized the necessity to develop a new approach towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and Armenia “based on own forces”.

The positions of the conflicting parties

The position of Armenia in the negotiations on the Karabakh problem (shared by Yerevan and Stepanakert) was based on the “package principle” which implied settling the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic based on the nations’ right of self-determination and Azerbaijan regaining control over the territories which constituted the “security belt” for the NKR after the war and were controlled by Armenian armed forces. Azerbaijan relied on the “staged approach” which would enable Baku to gradually regain control over all territories of the former Azerbaijan SSR lost after the war.

Narrowing the gap between the parties’ positions, which were mutually exclusive by default, proved impossible, and all attempts to reach a mutually acceptable peaceful solution in the negotiations under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group failed. The Azerbaijani government placed the Karabakh problem in the center of the country’s political life, the re-take of “occupied territories” developed into the nation’s principal idea designed to consolidate people around the acting government. Today, dropping this idea would be impossible for Baku like a surrender of the NKR for Yerevan.

A rise in energy prices in the early 2000s provided the Azerbaijani government with the financial resources required to pursue an active policy for regaining the lost territories. As it subsequently appeared, the aim of that policy was to exhaust Armenia and force it to

capitulate by exerting continuous pressure on all possible fronts. Concurrently with extensive purchases of modern weaponry, Baku increased tension at the demarcation line persistently as a means to put pressure on the Armenian government and society.

The Azerbaijani government did not exclude the possibility that a forced military settlement of the Karabakh problem might be used. That was evidenced by the commitment to gain military dominance over the Armenian army, statements of Azerbaijani officials (including the Azeri Ambassador to Russia P. Byul-Buyul Oglu¹) asserting Azerbaijan's right to a military resolution of the Karabakh problem and extensive diplomatic efforts to weaken Armenia's position on the global stage focused primarily on undermining the friendly relations between Armenia and Russia. Baku managed to capitalize on cooperation with Russia in the military and technical field: supplies of Russian weapons to the Azerbaijani army transformed into one of the most painful problems in the Russia-Armenia relations.

Russia sought to prevent new escalation in Karabakh by maintaining a military and political power balance in the region. The huge arms purchases for the Azerbaijani army (from Russia, Israel, Turkey, Belorussia, Ukraine and other countries) were offset by CSTO membership of Armenia, military cooperation agreements and supplies of relevant Russian-made weapons to equip the Armenian army. This enabled Moscow to maintain an approximate parity of power between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the setting of the ever-growing militarization in the region initiated by Baku and neutralize the threat of a new war.

Since the early 2000s, Azerbaijan has been purchasing large quantities of weapons from Russia. The largest set of contracts with an estimated value of at least \$4 bln was signed in the early 2010s. In 2015, due to commercial attractiveness of multibillion deals with Azerbaijan to the Russian defense industry (and arms producers from other countries), the military and political equilibrium was grossly

¹See: The Ambassador of Azerbaijan: a military option remains on the table to resolve the conflict. 02.04.2016, <http://www.svoboda.org/a/27650737.html>

disturbed in favor of Azerbaijan with regard to certain types of weaponry (tanks, artillery, heavy flamethrower systems, intelligence-gatherings and combat UAVs, etc.). The military build-up in Azerbaijan was accompanied by constantly growing military tension.

The destabilizing moves in the internal political landscape in Armenia in 2015 encouraged revanchist sentiments in Baku. Russia's position of a neutral go-between in the Karabakh conflict engendered discontent on both sides. Both countries were seeking support from Moscow, unwilling to compromise. As a result, the continuous military escalation may "defreeze" the Karabakh conflict which would change the current format of the region (3 + 2 + 1).

In 2015, the Azerbaijani side kept disrupting the ceasefire along the entire line of contact of the armed forces, which in fact transformed back into a front line in recent years. According to the Armenian side, Azerbaijan breached the ceasefire agreement about 300 times² between 28 June and 4 July 2015 and about 400 times³ between 15 and 21 November 2015. In their regular attacks against the NKR and Armenian border areas, the Azerbaijani armed forces used artillery missile units and heavy artillery⁴.

Moscow and Yerevan recognized the potential threat posed by the situation and, in February 2016, Armenia received a \$200 million ten-year state export loan for purchasing Russian-made weapons with payment deferral until early 2018.⁵ The agreement would neutralize the dominance of the Azerbaijan army in certain types of weapons in the area of conflict. But in early April 2016 (before Russian weaponry arrived to Armenia), military attacks broke out at the front line. According to military experts, one of the reasons for Baku to commence a large-scale military campaign at that particular time might have been Russia's "arms credit" according to which Armenia

²Beglaryan A., NKR: The Main Results of the Year. 27.12.2015. <http://www.kavkazoved.info/news/2015/12/27/nagorno-karabahskaja-respublika-glavnye-itogi-goda.html>

³Aksenov S., Karabakh of Discord, 27.11.2015, <http://rusplt.ru/society/karabah-razdora-19958.html>

⁴Beglaryan A., op.cit.

⁵Russia Grants a Loan to Armenia for Buying Weapons, 18.02.2016, <https://lenta.ru/news/2016/02/18/armenweapons/>

would acquire Smerch rocket launchers and Solntsepek heavy firing systems. That might impel the Baku government to launch their reckless undertaking before the power balance between the conflicting parties was finally centered⁶. It seems quite possible that Ilham Aliyev's plans were approved in advance during the meeting with the President Erdogan on 16 March 2016 in Ankara. This version is confirmed by statements of the Turkish government supporting Baku and criticizing Armenia's policy that immediately followed the onset of the military action⁷.

April 2016

On the night of 1 to 2 April 2016, the Azerbaijani reconnaissance and sabotage groups penetrated beyond the Armenian forward positions located within the "security area" at several points in order to cut off the approaching reserves until they are captured by advanced forces coming from the front line. In the early morning of 2 April 2016, Azerbaijani forces launched their offensive actions; hostilities broke out along the entire 200 km front line. The Martakert (northern) and Hadrut (southern) Armenian flanks came under massive artillery attacks. Concurrently, armored vehicles intended to step up the attack (219 tanks including T-90 and others) were moving in the direction of the central Agdam region. The Armenian artillery opened fire on the attacking troops and areas of concentration of the Azerbaijani second echelon forces. As a result, on 2-3 April, the Azerbaijani offensive broke loose several times 19-20 km off the front line⁸.

The attackers did not manage to break through the Armenian positions, and, on 4 April 2016, the Azeri Defense Minister instructed all branches of the armed forces, including missile and artillery troops,

⁶For more detail, see: The Noah's Ark, No. 5 (280) May 2016, <http://noev-kovcheg.ru/mag/2016-05/5413.html#ixzz4ClrI75Fl>

⁷Erdogan supported the activities of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh. 03.04.2016, http://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/201604031118-jo8f.htm; The Turkish Foreign Affairs Ministry brought charges against Armenia. 03.04.2016, <http://www.iranonline.ru/all-news/v-mire/28942/>

⁸Interview with the General V. Balasanyan dated 16.04.2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-2B7kd80KM&feature=youtu.be>

to get ready for “knockout blows” against Stepanakert and other NKR cities using heavy weapons, if “the hostile party does not stop attacking our settlements promptly”⁹. Azerbaijan used Smerch rocket launchers and Solntsepek heavy firing systems for the first time since the military operations began. Nonetheless, on 4 April 2016, the lead eventually passed to Armenia, which successfully neutralized the Azerbaijani reconnaissance and sabotage groups acting beyond the front line and started preparing for its own offensive. In the opinion of Russian political analyst V. Mikhailov, the statement about possible missile attacks against the NKR capital indicated the “close-to-panic state of the Azerbaijani commanders”¹⁰.

The Azerbaijani offensive failed primarily because of the obstinacy of Armenian advanced forces who prevented defense penetration and efficient shelling by Armenian artillery¹¹. As a result of the four-days’ war, the Azerbaijani armed forces managed to take just a small territory located at the front of the main Armenian positions.

Given the loss of the surprise effect and advance of Armenian reserves towards the front line, the Azerbaijani commanders recognized the futility of further military action. Armenia decided not to launch an offensive which could have led to an unpredicted outcome for both parties. Under the circumstances, Baku and Yerevan preferred not to aggravate the situation. As a result of negotiations between the Armed Forces General Staff Chiefs of Armenia and Azerbaijan held through the mediation of Russia in Moscow, the parties agreed to cease fire along the entire contact line from 5 April 2016, 12 p.m.¹² The hostilities ceased but firing resumed in a few days, and the same “smoldering” stationary war designed to exhaust the enemy continued.

⁹The Azerbaijan Defense Minister put the army on full combat alert to attack Khankendi, 04.04.2016, <http://interfax.az/view/669288>

¹⁰Mikhailov V., The Second Karabakh War: a battling draw with military and political consequences, 15.04.2016, <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2016/04/15/vtoraya-karabahskaya-boevaya-nichya-s-voenno-politicheskimi-posledstviyami>

¹¹Interview with the General Balasanyan V. dated 16.04.2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-2B7kd80KM&feature=youtu.be>

¹²The agreement on ceasefire in Karabakh was reached in Moscow, 06.04.2016, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2112750.html>

The assessment of the outcomes of the military operations of 2-5 April 2016 by Baku and Yerevan was contradictory. The President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev claimed that the military acts of the Azerbaijani army were in fact defensive and that they occurred in response to just another military provocation against Azerbaijan. He highly appreciated the activities of the Azerbaijani armed forces as a “knockout blow against the enemy and big military victory”. The Azeri Defense Minister Zakir Gasanov also stated that “the 2nd of April will remain in the history of the Azerbaijani army as a day of great victory”¹³. These conclusions were made at the initial stage of the offensive and did not change after the end of the war which was not triumphant for Azerbaijan at all. For example, on 9 May 2016, Ilham Aliyev stated “our army conducted a successful counteroffensive operation in Karabakh. As a result, some of our occupied territories were liberated from intruders, and our positions on the contact line became even stronger. Once again I congratulate all Azerbaijani people on this great historical victory from the bottom of my heart”¹⁴.

In the opinion of the President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan, Armenian armed forces accomplished all tasks assigned to them. Responding to the strong criticism from the local opposition, he said: “I set a clear task for our armed forces and security system – to prevent a breakthrough and destruction of our front line, i.e. ruin the plans of the enemy. I believe you all could see that their plans failed”¹⁵.

S. Sargsyan held back from enthusiastic conclusions: “If you necessarily want me to say we won, I can say that but most correct would be to say, “our armed forces accomplished their task”. Speaking about the territories lost in the course of the war, he commented, “Armenia which had 800 thousand hectares of land constituting the security area lost about 800 hectares, which is less

¹³The President Ilham Aliyev: Azerbaijan had a major military victory, 03.04.2016, <http://news.day.az/politics/765965.html>

¹⁴Ilham Aliyev equated the Karabakh war in April with the Great Patriotic War, 10 May 2016, <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2016/05/10/ilham-aliev-priravnial-aprelskuyu-voynu-v-karabahe-k-velikoy-otechestvennoy-voyne>

¹⁵Serzh Sargsyan: The army accomplished the task, 17.05.2016, <http://golosarmenii.am/article/40977/serzh-sargsyan-armiya-vypolnila-zadachu>

than one thousandth. Strategically and tactically, those territories are irrelevant. In a merely psychological context, of course, the Azeri government can persuade their people they got some result". The President of Armenia mentioned huge losses on the part of the Azerbaijani army and stressed that the Armenian armed forces could take those 800 hectares back, but the question was whether they were worth the lives of so many people¹⁶? Despite the numerous appeals to continue the offensive to broaden the "security area" and even "defeat the aggressor completely", in order to avoid new losses, Armenia decided not to continue its military action purported to regain the lost territory.

The reaction of the international community to the resumed large-scale hostilities in the area of the Karabakh conflict was unfavorable for Baku. On 2 April 2016, the Co-chairmen of the OSCE Minsk Group (France, Russia and USA) issued a joint statement condemning the use of force in the area of conflict and called the parties to cease fire and do everything needed to stabilize the situation at the local level¹⁷. The official representative of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) made a stronger and more straight-forward statement placing the entire responsibility for conflict escalation on Baku and supporting the Armenian army: "the activities of the Azerbaijani side in this case will lead to aggravation of the situation and conflict. The CSTO Secretary General Nikolay Bordyuzha and Head of the CSTO Administrative Office have an on-going contact with the Armenian government and receive exhaustive information about the armed conflict from the republican Ministry of Defense"¹⁸.

Conclusion

The military action that occurred on 2-5 April 2016 showed that Azerbaijan was unable to resolve the Karabakh problem by a short and triumphant military blitzkrieg. The offensive involved new types

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Press Release by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group. 02.04.2016, <http://www.osce.org/mg/231216>

¹⁸A CSTO source reported an aggravation of the situation in the NKR because of Azerbaijani activity. 02.04.2016, http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2016/04/02/n_8450927.shtml

of weapons and best-trained special forces who, together with the tank units, incurred the heaviest losses but did not manage to achieve the goals. The fighting reconnaissance conducted by Azerbaijan showed that all efforts and huge military expenses did not result in any measurable advantage for the Azerbaijani army. In the opinion of some experts, one can hardly refer even to “any meaningful build-up of combat power or proficiency of the military personnel”¹⁹.

The military action also revealed huge weaknesses in the Armenian armed forces, including intelligence, communications and procurement, which entailed dismissal of three generals who were in charge of these areas²⁰. It should also be noted that the fighting troops comprised Armenian advanced forces manned primarily by conscript soldiers. “The main forces, capabilities and reserve components of the NKR defense army and military units of the Armenian armed forces were not even given a chance to participate in the action. A large portion of available modern weapons and military machinery, including high-precision tactical ballistic missile systems, were not used”²¹.

Amidst the chronic stalemate in the negotiation process and soaring tension, the key task of the OSCE Minsk Group and Russian diplomacy is not just continued imitation of the “peaceful process” but a real ceasefire based on efficient mechanisms preventing the renewal of hostilities. The military operations between 2 and 5 April 2016 highlighted the need for a reliable monitoring system, including continuous presence of international military observer groups along the entire contact line, technical means for live recording, etc. An agreement providing for development of such system under the aegis of the OSCE Minsk Group should also include legally imposed obligations of the conflicting parties regarding detection and punishment of those who violate the ceasefire.

¹⁹Minasyan S., The Four-Days’ War: The status quo has become more explosion-prone, 01.06.2016, http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=7652#top-content

²⁰Mgdesyan A., “Blind and deaf”: Why Armenian generals’ heads came off? 30.04.2016, <http://easaily.com/ru/news/2016/04/30/bez-glaz-i-ushey-pochemu-poleteli-generalskie-golovy-v-armyanskoy-armii>

²¹Minasyan S., ‘The Four-Days’ War: The status quo has become more explosion-prone, 01 June 2016, http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=7652#top-content

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An efficient international ceasefire control would help step up the negotiation process towards an overall settlement of the Karabakh conflict. Failing that, the level of hostility between the parties will continue growing, and the Karabakh problem will remain the source of tension and an obstacle to the development of the entire South Caucasus.