



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**THE RECENT FLARE UP IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH:
AZERBAIJANI IMPATIENCE, ARMENIAN PERSEVERANCE
AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY COMPLACENCY**

EUGENE KOGAN

68

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Key Points

1. The simmering conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region was not and is not the so-called frozen conflict but rather conflict with its own pace and dynamics. The conflict erupted or rather ignited since Azerbaijani leadership was not and still is not satisfied with its prolonged status quo, while for the Armenian leadership maintaining the status quo was and still is the preferable solution.
2. The recent flare up of the conflict did not set a precedent but rather show that the unresolved conflict can get out of control but still not develop into a full-blown war. The difference between the recent flare up and the earlier ones is that a four days conflict was very intense, with a large number of casualties and both sides use a wide-range of weapon systems.
3. The international community was taken by surprise as a result of its preoccupation with other raging conflicts around the globe and in Syria in particular. Russia and Turkey as the Allies of Armenia and Azerbaijan respectfully behaved with restraint. Russia and Turkey have no longer sway over the leadership in Yerevan and Baku, while the rest of the members of the OSCE Minsk Group have rather limited mandate over resolution of the conflict that in the meantime disappeared from the headlines.
4. The current break in hostilities does not augur well for the near future since Azerbaijani military failed to reach their goals, while the Armenian military are likely to reassess their strategy. As General Vitaly Balasanyan, Deputy of the Nagorno-Karabakh National Assembly, said: “the Azerbaijani military conducted a competent warfare both in terms of strategy and tactic. The fact that their operations failed does not speak of the *incompetence* [author’s italics]. I am assured that they were seriously trained. They are not weak and we should not underestimate Azerbaijan.”¹ This is the highest accolade that the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army General can bestow on its adversary.
5. Weather or not the next round of confrontation will turn into a full-blown war with hundreds of casualties and will involve Russia, Turkey and Iran is not a foregone conclusion but neither such scenario nor such option can be dismissed out of hand.

In early February 2016 it was reported that senior political figures in Azerbaijan have warned that a military option remains on the table to resolve the smouldering conflict with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Baku prefers a diplomatically brokered resolution to the conflict but Hikmat Hajiyev, Spokesman for Azerbaijan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, cautioned that if the resolution does not bear fruit, Azerbaijanis *may lose patience* [author's italics] with the international community. He said that "Azerbaijani armed forces 'stand ready' to prevent any 'provocation'. We have the defence capabilities to take back these territories militarily. We do not want to use force but we can be patient only up to a certain point."² Azay Guliyev, Azerbaijani Member of Parliament (MP) reiterated Hajiyev's statement by saying that: "We are losing our *patience* [author's italics] with the international community."³ The issue of the Azerbaijani politician impatience should be remembered and emphasised. Azerbaijan is not happy with the prolonged status quo since it leaves Azerbaijan without the lost territory that it considers being a part of Azerbaijan. Therefore, impatience was and still is the driving force that drives and continues to drive the Azerbaijani military to confrontation in the Nagorno-Karabakh. It should also be emphasised that from the moment that Lieutenant-General Zakir Hasanov was appointed Azerbaijani Minister of Defence namely, on 22 October 2013, policy of confrontation with Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh has intensified. Just to remind the reader about the human losses on both sides back in August 2014. Still, the Year 2015 was fairly calm and, as a result, the international community that was preoccupied with other urgent calamities around the world left the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict unattended.

It needs to be remembered that compared with other unresolved conflicts over the globe the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has disappeared from the media headlines and basically has been forgotten. Therefore, Azerbaijan from time to time sends a reminder note to the international community: 'Hello there! The unresolved conflict can escalate at any time whether or not you are ready for it. Please remember that and behave accordingly.' In addition to the Azerbaijani impatience and unhappiness about the unchangeable status quo Laurence Broers from the London-based Chatham House think tank notes that without the ability to influence the conflict parties or credibly enforce a ceasefire, the international community has left a *security vacuum* [author's italics] in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴ Broers further reiterates the point that he made

before namely, the lack of ability to influence the conflict. He writes that underlying the scramble to contain the violence is the lack of leverage among outside actors. Having privileged higher-order interests for so long, great power levers are too diffuse to control the situation. This is no proxy war⁵ but rather confrontation between two states over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. And both Armenia and Azerbaijan remains at loggerheads over the disputed territory. Furthermore, presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan are no longer so easily persuaded by and ready to meet each other at the request of Moscow. Meetings between presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan and their counterpart in Moscow failed to produce any results. As a result, the current situation has been exacerbated and it is not surprising that Serzh Sargsyan, President of Armenia, told Dmitri Medvedev, Prime Minister of Russia that Yerevan expects from Moscow “targeted statements and concrete actions” that would keep Baku from again ratcheting up tensions in the conflict zone. Sargsyan warned that another “large-scale” Azerbaijani attack on Nagorno-Karabakh would result in a full-blown war.⁶ Sargsyan message should be taken seriously since thus far Armenia reacted with restraint against Azerbaijani fire. However, in the next round of confrontation all restraints or limitations might be lifted or as it says the gloves will be off.

It is important to remember that since summer 2013, security incidents have become significantly more frequent and more serious in intensity, including the use of artillery in and around civilian areas. As a result, the risks over the past years have not diminished but in fact have grown.⁷ Furthermore, experts warned about the rising chances of renewed warfare⁸, however, familiarity with the prolong conflict breeds *complacency* [author’s italics], if not contempt, which is why the international community was largely unprepared for the heavy fighting that erupted in Nagorno-Karabakh on 1 April 2016.⁹ In addition to complacency and contempt the OSCE Minsk Group is not exactly babysitter and as it was written above the OSCE Minsk Group levers are rather limited. Thomas de Waal, a Senior Associate with Carnegie Europe, is indeed correct when he says that: “the OSCE Minsk Group try to manage the ceasefire. They try to organise things between the presidents [of Armenia and Azerbaijan]. But they are certainly not running the show.”¹⁰ Furthermore, they also have no mandate to resolve the conflict. The only parties to the conflict namely, Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan may resolve the conflict.

The recent flare up began during Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan attending the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington on 1 April 2016. What is more interesting is that the fighting erupted just hours after Presidents Sargsyan and Aliyev, each met separately with US Vice President John Biden on the margins of the summit. Biden cautioned both presidents about the need for restraint¹¹ but Biden's advice was not taken into consideration. In other words, the United States as one of the most important world actors has rather limited leverage upon decisions made in Baku and Yerevan.

It appears that the recent flare up was not an accidental escalation¹² but rather pre-planned initiative of the Azerbaijani military that learned from their mistakes of the August 2014.¹³ In the words of General Vitaly Balasanyan, Deputy of the Nagorno-Karabakh National Assembly, "the strategy and tactic of the adversary was not illiterate. They conducted a competent warfare both in terms of strategy and tactic. The fact that their operations failed *does not speak* [author's italics] of the incompetence. I am assured that they were seriously trained. They are not weak and we *should not underestimate* [author's italics] Azerbaijan."¹⁴ However, the difference between the recent escalation and that of the August 2014 was that this time around a wide-range of military hardware was used namely, artillery, armoured infantry vehicles (AIVs), helicopters, Multiple Rocket Launchers (MLRs), tanks, and a novice unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) both armed and non-armed.

It appears that despite serious assault by the Azerbaijani military on Nagorno-Karabakh the military of Nagorno-Karabakh stand their ground. Due to the timely and professional actions of the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army it was possible to bring the situation under control.¹⁵ According to General Balasanyan "Our goal was the mobilisation within a short period of time, reorganisation, and quick move, to take our positions."¹⁶ Apparently, this goal was achieved successfully, while the Azerbaijani military underestimated the swift action of the soldiers of the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army. There is an additional factor that Burcu Gultekin Punsmann rightly emphasise. The degree of psychological preparedness of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians should not be underestimated. The population is on constant alert and resolute to fight fiercely back and especially if this struggle is perceived as a struggle for survival.¹⁷ And this struggle is indeed perceived by the population of Nagorno-Karabakh as struggle for survival.

In a very interesting analysis of Can Kasapoglu several important points were highlighted namely:

- a) In military terms, it would be fair to say that Baku and Yerevan would not go into an all-out war;
- b) However, a warlike rehearsal through skirmishes and the trajectory of the recent clashes hinted at what the next war between Azerbaijan and Armenia would look like;
- c) Russia would pretend to be a peace-mediator, while supporting the Armenian defence through the back door,
- d) Finally, Turkish public opinion would strongly side with Azerbaijan, and Ankara would play a supportive yet *cautious role* [author's italics].¹⁸

Undoubtedly, leaving emotions aside and making sober analysis of the situation it is evident that the Azerbaijani military failed to accomplish their mission to recover lost territories adjacent to the Nagorno-Karabakh. However, this time around the Azerbaijani military used a wide-range of weapon systems. That was much more than a usual sniper fire-exchange or even operations undertaken by the Azerbaijani military back in August 2014. And the next time around we may see fighter aircraft joining the operations. That would be no longer a usual skirmish but a real war with hundred of casualties.

At the moment it appears that the Azerbaijani military operates under certain constraint since they are not interested in spill over effect that may lead to a regional conflagration that [may, author's note] involve not just Russia and Turkey but also Iran.¹⁹ Therefore, local war between Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia is the likely scenario of the potential war. Furthermore, tensions along the Line of Contact (LoC) remain very high and the situation remains very fluid and very unpredictable. All the talks about Armenia being a member of Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and, a result, CSTO obligation to provide military assistance to Armenia in case of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is a loose talk and nothing more. What is more, the recent flare up over Nagorno-Karabakh clearly demonstrated that CSTO remains a neutral actor and as Zaur Shiriyev rightly asserts CSTO limited itself to calls to end the fighting. It did not support the Armenian position. Worse, one member state, Kazakhstan, released a statement of neutrality, while another, Belarus, declared that the conflict should be resolved based on international legal

principles of territorial integrity.²⁰ The same rules namely, maintaining a position of restraint apply to Turkey. Turkey as a member of NATO has its own obligations and cannot rush to assistance of Azerbaijan if Azerbaijan initiates the conflict. We need to remember that words are cheap but actions are costly.²¹ The short-term military gains are likely to be cheered by the public in Armenia and Azerbaijan, however, the long-term consequences are likely to be painfully unpleasant. It needs to be mentioned that economy in both countries is going through a difficult time and replenishment of military hardware used or lost during the recent flare up is a costly business for both countries.

To conclude, the imbalanced status quo that dominates Azerbaijan relations with Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh affect strongly both domestic and foreign policy of Azerbaijan. The thirst for revenge and deep desire to recover the lost territories is undoubtedly the dominant factor in political and military considerations and calculus of Azerbaijani politicians and military. However, unrealistic expectations and costs attached to such an undertaking is not properly learned and addressed by politicians and military officials in Azerbaijan. The resilience of the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army in their fight for survival accompanied by a support of the Nagorno-Karabakh population is perhaps the most important factor that explains the Nagorno-Karabakh region semi-independence. The role of Russia and Turkey over its respected allies is often exaggerated for the two countries domestic audience.²² The rest of the OSCE Minsk Group has a very limited lever over both parties. The political will of the OSCE Minsk Group so often emphasised was not and is not there to force the solution that is not going to be fully or even partly accepted by Armenia and Azerbaijan. Therefore, the next eruption of the conflict is unavoidable and even though the lost of human lives is terrible the two countries' politicians willing to accept the human cost.²³

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