

The Future of Karabakh is the Future of the Caucasus

**Elnur
Aslanov***

Abstract

The article presents an overview of the resolution process of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which has blighted the Caucasus region for almost twenty years. The author argues that a central mechanism for conflict resolution is lacking; the OSCE Minsk Group is meant to serve this purpose, but has so far been unable to secure a peace agreement between the parties. Further, the author emphasizes the fact that Karabakh is an opportunity for the coexistence of the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities, and that there are many cases internationally where similar conflicts have given rise to autonomous regions following long term negotiations. Finally, the author demonstrates the enormous economic benefits for the Caucasus region as a whole if the conflict is resolved under the terms the paper proposes.

* Dr. Elnur Aslanov, Chief of the Political Analyses and Information Department at the Administration of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The ideas expressed here represent the author's own views.

The Karabakh conflict is the oldest and the most complex of all the conflicts in the former Soviet Union. What started in 1988 as Armenia's attempt to annex the historical territory of Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, resulted in a war in which about 50,000 people from both sides were killed and wounded. In terms of the involvement of each side in the conflict's settlement, which has gone beyond territorial claims on Nagorno-Karabakh and transformed into Armenian occupation of seven additional districts of Azerbaijan, adjunct to Nagorno-Karabakh, direct conflict in talks is quite rare. Today, the U.S., Russia, and France are trying to explore different approaches that could facilitate peace and stability between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Lack of resolution mechanism and/or pressure on aggressor

Established in 1992, the OSCE Minsk Group was not able during the years of the Armenian-Azerbaijani war to produce a mechanism that would persuade the parties to sign a peace agreement. Suggestions that could have led to the return of Azerbaijani refugees to their homes or to the establishment of peace and stability were rejected by the Armenian side. Even the four UN Security Council resolutions adopted in the 1990's have not secured a speedy and peaceful solution to the conflict, and Armenia is openly ignoring the calls for the immediate liberation of the occupied Azerbaijani territories.

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The overall global picture of recent years shows that the principles of international law prove more effective where there is strong political will and desire on the part of international superpowers. When this is the case, a conflict can be resolved in a matter of months, even hours. But such a speedy resolution is only really possible in the presence of two key contextual factors: geopolitics and geo-economics. In other cases, conflict resolution can be put on the backburner. Few seem to be concerned that the new world order - which was supposed to be fairer - has emerged as a Machiavellian system of the end justifying the means.

Despite the global vicissitudes of the new world order, Azerbaijan has been trying to find a mutually acceptable way to resolve the conflict for more than 22 years - unfortunately to no avail. This is for several reasons. Firstly, the fact of the Azerbaijani origin of Nagorno-Karabakh is not considered by the Armenian side. Secondly, the international community is failing to put sufficient pressure on the aggressor. This second factor is the result of other issues at play: to some extent, fear of the

Armenian lobby's political influence on the part of some politicians; and perhaps a historical view of the South Caucasus as an area of contradictions and conflicts, rather than a single and integrated space. All this and a much more further clouds the promise of resolution.

Conflict resolution and economic prosperity

A solution to the conflict would provide a range of important dividends to all of the parties. From a political standpoint, it would enable the stable social, economic, and political development of the South Caucasus, which in turn would pave the way for its full European integration as a regional player. From an economic perspective, there are multiple benefits. For Armenia, whose gross external debt accounts for 72 per cent of the country's GDP, it would mean the possibility of an economic uplift and subsequent effective development. It is no secret that the level of emigration from Armenia has reached catastrophic proportions, threatening the country with a wave of cheap labor migration, diluting the country's national and regional character. Armenia's industry, energy, agriculture, information and communication technology sectors lag far behind not only global trends, but also regional ones. The solution to the conflict will enable Armenia to be involved in numerous regional and international integration projects,

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allowing the South Caucasus to play a more effective role in the pan-European security architecture.

Finally, from a purely historical standpoint, if we proceed from the fact that Armenians were resettled in Karabakh about two hundred years ago with the Russian-Persian treaties of Gulistan and Turkmanchay, Karabakh is also home to tens of thousands of Armenians. The Caucasus as a whole is a multinational space, and so the notion of a common home for the indigenous peoples of this region is extremely important.

Karabakh is territory where Armenians and Azerbaijanis have lived and worked side by side. The small group of Armenians that arrived 1828 has grown, and by the start of the conflict in 1988, it already exceeded the number of Azerbaijanis. The same applies to the subsidies the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region of the Azerbaijan SSR received from Baku – they exceeded similar subsidies allocated to other regions of the republic. But after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent acceptance of Azerbaijan

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into the UN in 1992, the country's territory was recognized as covering 86,600 square meters, i.e. including Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, Nagorno-Karabakh is located within Azerbaijan's internationally recognized borders, and is an area of land under the sovereignty of Azerbaijan.

Time of Action

It seems self-evident that there is no future for Karabakh outside Azerbaijan; this is understood in both Karabakh and in Yerevan. It is not a question of military and political power. The future of Karabakh is an opportunity for the coexistence of the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities. Fortunately, there are numerous international models of successful autonomous regions— the Aland Islands, Tyrol, for instance.

It is time for Armenian leaders to understand that it is unforgivable to keep several thousand people locked up in Nagorno-Karabakh without giving them the opportunity to determine their own future. Now is the time that Armenia can make a choice in favor of peace and stability.

The longer the settlement of the conflict is delayed, the more harder it will be to resolve. Today, time is on Azerbaijan's side, as the country is becoming an economic leader of the region. At the same time, Armenia is increasingly sinking into despair. It is this future to which Armenia is condemning itself, despite Armenian president Levon Ter-Petrosyan's warnings back in 1997.

Thus the future of the Caucasus lies in the coexistence of its peoples. Only a peaceful and stable coexistence can provide economic prosperity and political security.