

COLLOQUY

Covering the Latest Developments in the Armenia- Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Matthew Bryza*



* Matthew Bryza is a former OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair and the former United States Ambassador to Azerbaijan. Mr. Bryza is currently a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Center and Global Energy Center of the Washington-based think tank Atlantic Council.

The long-lasting conflict between the Republic of Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region has been on the agenda for more than two decades. The conflict started at the end of the 1980s, when Armenia sought to annex the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) of Azerbaijan, seizing the opportunity created by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The conflict gradually evolved into a full-scale interstate war between Armenia and Azerbaijan as they gained independence in 1991, causing approximately 30,000 fatalities and over a million IDPs and refugees, an overwhelming majority of them Azerbaijanis. The active phase of the bloodiest of the post-Soviet conflicts ended with a ceasefire agreement in 1994, leaving 20% of internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan under Armenian occupation. Hostilities have continued ever since, with dozens of soldiers and civilians dying each year. The Line of Contact (LoC) between Armenian and Azerbaijani troops has become the most militarized area in the whole post-Soviet space.

Much effort has been made over the past two decades to achieve peaceful resolution of the dispute, but to no avail. Though the conflict has never been truly frozen, the situation along the LoC remained more or less stable until the recent re-eruption and an acute increase in instability. The escalation on the frontline in April 2016 brought about heavy clashes and casualties, with international community expressing disapproval of the armed hostilities along the frontline. At this point, hope for reasonable and practical steps taken towards comprehensive peaceful resolution of the conflict emerged.

Caucasus International discussed the latest developments in the peace process with Matthew Bryza, a former OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair and the former United States Ambassador to Azerbaijan. Mr. Bryza is currently a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Center and Global Energy Center of the Washington-based think tank Atlantic Council. In this interview, he talks about the peace process and the repercussions of the April escalation, the geopolitics of the conflict, and the role of the United States in the resolution process.

CI: *How would you evaluate the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process since the latest escalation on the frontline in April 2016? After the escalation, in one of your interviews, you said that the St. Petersburg meeting does appear to have moved the parties to a safer and more stable situation.¹ What has changed since then*

¹ APA (22 June 2016) *St. Petersburg meeting appears to have moved Karabakh conflict parties to*

and is it realistic to expect long-awaited tangible steps toward the resolution of the conflict?

Bryza: Unfortunately, the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process does not appear to have moved forward since the St. Petersburg meeting. In St. Petersburg, Presidents Aliyev and Sargsian agreed to deescalate tension along the LoC, while the Minsk Group returned to center stage after President Putin initially filled a diplomatic vacuum left by the US and France in the immediate aftermath of the April 2016 clashes. Perhaps most significantly at the St. Petersburg meeting, President Putin reportedly made a proposal to break a longstanding impasse in the talks, according to which Armenia would return two of the five Azerbaijani territories it currently occupies in exchange for Azerbaijan resuming normal transit and economic connections to Armenia; all other aspects of the Madrid Principles, including the return of the remaining five occupied territories, would be subject to further negotiations.

Since St. Petersburg, the parties have not advanced President Putin's proposal. This may largely be due to the hostage crisis at the police station in Yerevan, which appears to have been carried out by opponents of Mr. Putin's proposal.

Since St. Petersburg, the parties have not advanced President Putin's proposal. This may largely be due to the hostage crisis at the police station in Yerevan, which appears to have been carried out by opponents of Mr. Putin's proposal.

CI: *The Azerbaijani and Armenian sides are referring to two different arguments while defending their position on the resolution of the conflict – inviolability of territorial integrity, and the right to self-determination. This is also one of the conflicting issues for the Madrid Principles. In this respect, what is needed to reconcile the two positions in order to move the peace process forward, and is it possible for the Armenian community of Nagorno-Karabakh to exercise their right to self-determination within the framework of territorial integrity of Azerbaijan?*

Bryza: Actually, the concepts of the territorial integrity of states and the self-determination of peoples are two of the three cornerstones of the Madrid Principles, (with the third one being the non-use of force). The Madrid Principles reconcile the apparent contradiction between these two concepts by: (1) Returning to Azerbaijan all seven occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh; and (2) Providing Nagorno-Karabakh an “interim legal status,” with the region's final legal status to be determined

safer and more stable situation, available at: http://en.apa.az/nagorno_karabakh/matthew-bryza-st-petersburg-meeting-appears-to-have-moved-karabakh-conflict-parties-to-safer-and-more-stable-situation.html (accessed 16 September 2016)

by a popular vote by the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh at some time in the future. During the period of Nagorno-Karabakh's interim legal status, Azerbaijan can argue legitimately that the region remains within the framework of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, while Armenia can legitimately argue that this is not the case.

CI: *Currently we are witnessing a confrontation between the West and Russia over many important areas, including the crisis in Ukraine and the Syrian civil war. How would you evaluate the impact of this confrontation over the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, bearing in mind that these countries (considering France as the representative of the EU) are the co-chairs of the Minsk Group?*

In the weeks and months following Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008, for example, Russia sustained and even intensified its constructive efforts within the Minsk Group, perhaps in part to try to repair its reputation in the South Caucasus as well as in the Transatlantic Community.

Bryza: I don't believe the current confrontation between Russia and the West over Russia's invasion of Ukraine and mass killing of civilians in Syria will have much of an impact on the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. The Minsk Group Co-Chairs seem to be working well together despite the tensions mentioned above. Moreover, it is not in Russia's interest for violence, such as it has been generating in Ukraine and Syria, were to engulf the South Caucasus as well. In my experience, Russia, especially Foreign Minister Lavrov, has tried to play a constructive role within the Minsk Group. In the weeks and months following Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008, for example, Russia sustained and even intensified its constructive efforts within the Minsk Group, perhaps in part to try to repair its reputation in the South Caucasus as well as in the Transatlantic Community.

CI: *Considering the unstable political situation in Armenia, specifically the July 2016 attack on a police station that resulted in a two weeks long hostage crises and the attempted coup, how would you assess the readiness of the Armenian government to resolve the conflict in accordance with international law?*

Bryza: I sensed that President Sargsian was perhaps ready at the St. Petersburg meeting and afterward to advance the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process on the basis of President Putin's proposal. And, this may be precisely why the July 17 events (attack on a police station – CI) happened.

CI: *There were suggestions that after the Sochi meeting, the Armenian government used public opposition (as well as among*

the Armenian Diaspora) to a peace agreement based on the Madrid Principles to delay the peace process. What would you say about this?

Bryza: As noted above, I do believe the Armenian government would like to resolve the conflict, largely on the basis of the Madrid Principles, but perhaps with the serious modification of the return of only five rather than all seven Azerbaijani territories that Armenia currently occupies. I also believe, based on my personal experience, that some members of the Armenian Diaspora oppose any resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on anything other than maximalist demands. One of the most influential of these groups is the Armenian National Committee of American (ANCA), whose previous president served time in a US prison for his conviction on illegal possession of explosives.

I also believe, based on my personal experience, that some members of the Armenian Diaspora oppose any resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on anything other than maximalist demands. One of the most influential of these groups is the Armenian National Committee of American (ANCA), whose previous president served time in a US prison for his conviction on illegal possession of explosives.

CI: *Was there a visible disparity between the reactions of Russia and the United States (both OSCE Minsk Group Co-chairs) after escalation of the conflict in April 2016? Why was this the case?*

Bryza: There was definitely a visible disparity in the reactions of Russia and the United States after the unprecedented violence along the LoC. During the days immediately following the clashes, the White House never even issued an official statement on the events, while the State Department issued only a muted statement by Secretary Kerry, which did not correspond with the seriousness of the violence. President Putin, in contrast, consulted repeatedly with Presidents Aliyev and Sargsian, then sent his foreign and defense ministers, as well as Prime Minister Medvedev, to consult with their counterparts in Baku and Yerevan.

The reasons for this disparity were a combination of two factors: First, the Obama Administration's characteristic lack of strategic vision and aversion to aggravating Moscow in what it claims as its "near abroad;" and second, President Putin's strategic understanding that by conducting intensive diplomacy on his own (e.g., initially without the other two Minsk Group co-chair countries), Russia could both repair its international reputation and leave Armenia and Azerbaijan with the chilling impression that Russia alone plays a decisive role in the region.

The reasons for this disparity were a combination of two factors: First, the Obama Administration's characteristic lack of strategic vision and aversion to aggravating Moscow in what it claims as its "near abroad;" and second, President Putin's strategic understanding that by conducting intensive diplomacy on his own (e.g., initially without the other two Minsk Group co-chair countries), Russia could both repair its international reputation and leave Armenia and Azerbaijan with the chilling impression that Russia alone plays a decisive role in the region.

CI: *The US and the EU member states have expressed their unequivocal support for the territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine. But in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict they tend to avoid clearly supporting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Mr. Ambassador, as a final question, what, in your opinion, is the reason for such a divergent attitude?*

Bryza: I think there are two reasons for the differing ways the US and EU member states have supported the international legal principle of the territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine with greater intensity than in the case of Azerbaijan. Firstly, in the early 1990's the Armenian Diaspora in the US and EU conducted highly effective lobbying on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean to provide their view of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as having been started by Azerbaijan, rather than presenting the origins of the conflict with full complexity. Secondly, once the Minsk Group mediation process gathered momentum in its search for an agreement that could reconcile the seemingly contradictory principles of territorial integrity and self-determination, the US and France wanted to focus on finalizing that reconciliation, and the rest of the Transatlantic Community followed their lead.

Colloquy was conducted by Azad Garibov, Editor of CI