

Nagorno-Karabakh – A ticking time bomb

Amanda Paul

Two years since the Russia and Georgia war ripped apart the fragile status quo in the South Caucasus there is growing concern that the region is on the brink of conflict again. Sixteen years since the ceasefire agreement was signed, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is far from over, with intensified skirmishes across the 'line of contact' that risk spiraling out of control.

The conflict first erupted in 1988 when Karabakh's then-Armenian majority population claimed independence; this was followed by full-scale war in the early 1990's, which left over 20,000 dead and more than 1 million displaced. Since then, Karabakh (an internationally-recognised province of Azerbaijan) and seven surrounding provinces have been controlled/occupied by Armenia.

Karabakh is a *de facto* Armenian entity although it is not recognised by any other state, including Armenia. Peace negotiations under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group (co-chaired by the US, Russia and France) have so far proved fruitless.

For Baku, territorial integrity is crucial and Karabakh must remain part of Azerbaijan with the highest level of self-rule which exists in international practice. This is unacceptable to the Karabakh Armenians (many fled from inter-ethnic violence in Azerbaijan during the war and still feel bitter and has no trust in Baku). Armenia backs the Karabakh Armenians. The Karabakh Azerbaijanis (some 850,000 who were expelled from Karabakh and the surrounding regions during the war) have no voice.

More than 20,000 Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers eyeball each other from trenches across the line of contact – in some places just a few metres apart. The air is tense, and the slightest noise can lead to serious exchanges of fire. The line of contact is monitored on an irregular basis by six OSCE observers, who cannot arrive unannounced, so are powerless to prevent either side taking military action.

The deadlocked peace process has resulted in a significant increase in ceasefire violations. In recent weeks several soldiers have lost their lives bringing the list of casualties so far in 2010 to over 20 – more than the 2009 total. With every passing day the likelihood of war increases. While it would probably not be the intention of either side to open hostilities – both leaders are cautious men who will not revert to war lightly- increased saber-rattling makes 'war by accident' more likely.

The international community: unaware or unconcerned?

In the run up to the Russian-Georgian war, the international community seemed unaware of what was happening until it was too late. This apparent danger seems to be similarly underestimated and unless open war breaks out Karabakh will continue to be low on the West's priority list with a number of other actual or potential conflicts taking precedence. The response to the escalation in hostilities has been rather tame and little more than issuing statements calling on both sides to respect the ceasefire.

The EU sends contradictory signals: on the one hand the European Parliament has called for a greater EU role in the conflict and the European Commission has launched an NGO confidence-building project, while on the other the job of EU Special Representative to the South Caucasus, Peter Semneby, will be abolished early in 2011 as the new External Action Service takes over, although it is still unclear whether it will result in a greater or lesser EU presence.

Despite his rather limited mandate Peter Semneby has been a consistent EU presence and recently responded to growing dangers by calling for an up-grading of the observer mission. Unfortunately this concern does not yet seem to have filtered through to the higher echelons of the EU.

Tied up in the Middle East, the US gives the impression it does not presently view the region as a threat to its national security interests. During US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's visit to the region in June, she simply repeated that the US remains committed to a peaceful resolution based on the Helsinki Principles of non-use of force or threat of force, territorial integrity and the right to self-determination. This lack of Western interest has opened the door for a stronger Russian role.

Growing frustrations in the region

Both Azerbaijan and Armenia continue to spend vast amounts of money on arms. Azerbaijan feels emboldened by its energy wealth, while Armenia feels reassured by its close (and recently upgraded), security relationship with Moscow, which has a military base at Gyumri. There are also unknown quantities of arms concealed in Karabakh and the surrounding territories.

With the peace-talks going in circles, frustration is growing. In particular Azerbaijan is becoming increasingly fed-up with the *status quo* which has resulted in increased talk of retaking its territory by force. This only serves to increase the siege mentality in Yerevan.

However, there are good reasons why Baku would not take such a step. First, it would result in the destruction of valuable pipeline infrastructure, (the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline is 15 km from the line of contact). Second, Azerbaijan's international standing would be ruined and Baku's leverage on world energy markets would be impacted. Thirdly, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev could fall from power if Azerbaijan was not victorious, and fourthly, there would be huge costs to human life from a war that could spill out far beyond the borders of this conflict.

New impetus needs to be injected into the peace talks on the set of the 'Basic Principles'. The delicate balance in the talks shifted at the end of last year, principally as a result of Turkey's decision to link its own *rapprochement* with Armenia to progress on Karabakh. This unhinged the process, making even a tiny compromise by Armenia appear as a concession to Turkey.

The 'Principles' foresee the return to Azerbaijan of the seven territories surrounding Karabakh; the right of all internally-displaced persons and refugees to return to their former place of residence; interim status for Karabakh that provides guarantees of security and self-governance; a land corridor linking Karabakh and Armenia; international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation; and future determination of Nagorno-Karabakh's final legal status through "a legally binding expression of will".

While the two leaders have agreed on many things, the main obstacle remains the eventual final status of Karabakh and when and how this will be decided. Given that nothing can be agreed until everything is agreed, this new cycle will ultimately mean a massive breakthrough or another failure, which will be disastrous for the region.

The international community should end to its apparent indifference

Overall the picture looks bleak unless courageous decisions are taken. The international community should end its apparent indifference and have a regular and effective presence in the region, not least to balance the role of Russia.

A first step should be a big push to strengthen the observer mission and send a fact-finding team to Karabakh and the surrounding territories to assess the situation on the ground. President Aliyev and Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan should be encouraged to increase their meetings (perhaps one per month) to keep up momentum and to take greater steps to prepare their populations for concessions.

The Armenian government needs to inform its population that the occupied territories will be returned and to convince Azerbaijan that it is genuine. Azerbaijan should restrain itself from war talk. Turkey needs to be told to keep out of Karabakh otherwise the talks risk remaining in deadlock which may result in further frustration.

The EU should take greater responsibility and have a clearer strategy for engaging with the problem, beginning with a reassurance that Semneby's departure will not mean a reduced EU presence. Furthermore, given that the infrastructure in the territories surrounding Karabakh was destroyed during the war and that it will take years of work before refugees can return, Brussels should draw on its experience in the Balkans and prepare for a post-settlement reconstruction and security programme.

The longer this conflict runs, the harder it will be to change the *status quo* and the greater the risk of a new war. The world simply cannot sit back and allow this ticking time-bomb to explode.

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