

Armenia-Azerbaijan: Fears of "War by Accident"

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Analysts go behind the headlines to weigh up the risks posed by an upsurge in fighting.

After a spate of fatal shootings across the lines separating Armenian and Azerbaijani forces, analysts are warning of the danger that large-scale hostilities could resume if one of the sides miscalculates and overreaches itself. While incidents like this have been a constant feature of the fragile ceasefire, the wider political environment creates the risk that continued skirmishing gives a newly assertive Russia a pretext to step in and deploy troops.

Concerns about a spike in violence in January prompted IWPR and the Media Centre in Armenia to host a discussion on January 26 on the immediate military situation, the wider political context including Russia's role in the region, and the possible course of events.

The discussion was moderated in Yerevan by journalist Arshaluis Mgdesyan, with media expert and journalist Shahin Rzayev joining in via video link to set out the view from Azerbaijan. The panel in Armenia consisted of Richard Giragosian, director of the Regional Studies Centre, Stepan Grigoryan, who heads the board of the Centre for Globalisation and Regional Cooperation, and Tevan Poghosyan, a member of parliament from the Heritage Party.

MORE FIGHTING THAN TALKING

Since the war between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces ended in a truce in 1994, Nagorny Karabakh and adjoining territories have been governed by an Armenian administration that claims independence. Since then, the ceasefire has been broken by frequent gunfire and occasional incursions both on the "line of contact" around Karabakh and along the state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Ten soldiers from the Armenian army and Karabakh's armed forces were killed in January, official sources said. Several Azerbaijani soldiers are believed to have died, although officials in Baku have not released figures.

Giragosian opened the discussion by explaining why the current scale of violence was cause for concern.

"From a military perspective, this escalation per se is not new. What is new, however, is an expanded battle space – the geography of attacks is much broader and includes parts of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border – and an expansion in intensity of the attacks," he said. "We were very used to measuring ceasefire violations by the number of shots fired. Unfortunately, now the escalation is so serious [that] we measure ceasefire violations by the number of casualties."

Rzayev pointed out there had been spikes in violence before – most recently in summer 2014 – although the current situation was certainly troubling.

"Every year, in March, tensions traditionally rise on the front line. It's just that this year it has begun earlier," he said. "But the number of incidents has certainly increased. And I think that isn't a good sign."

DYNAMICS AND LOGIC OF LOW-LEVEL CONFLICT

The speakers agreed that the upward trend in violence was worrying, and that there was a risk that things could get out of hand.

"In military terms the danger of official war is still less. The real risk, however, is a war by accident, based on miscalculation," Giragosian said.

Poghosyan said the high number of incidents in January did not come as a complete surprise. He said the Armenian military appeared to have anticipated this since in early January, officers in the field were given greater autonomy to decide when to retaliate against an attack, and even to take preemptive action.

Poghosyan suggested that Azerbaijani leaders might have switched to more aggressive tactics for two main reasons – first as a show of support for their ally Turkey, given that April 2015 will mark the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide; and secondly to divert attention from domestic problems caused by falling prices for their main export, oil.

Rzayev said it was wrong to portray Azerbaijan as the aggressor and Armenia as an innocent victim with no reason to mount attacks.

"The economic situation in Armenia now is fairly difficult, there are tensions with Russia and the debate

around the Eurasian union. The authorities in Armenia also need a pretext to distract their population from domestic problems,” he said.

Rzayev went on to explain why different perspectives on the state of the conflict meant that the Azerbaijani view of shooting incidents diverged from the Armenian one.

“Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan considers that the war is not over yet. And since the war continues, soldiers will die, and unfortunately civilians, too, die sometimes,” he said. “As long as Armenian troops, conscripts from Armenia, are located in occupied Azerbaijani territories, it’s essential to do something about it. And these deaths of soldiers are the consequence of the continuing occupation. That’s the view in Azerbaijan.”

Grigoryan said that whenever there were tensions on the state border and on the line of control around Karabakh, they were always initiated by the Azerbaijanis, for reasons that he suggested were understandable, if misguided.

“Azerbaijan wants to show the international community that the Karabakh issue is not resolved, that it shouldn’t be forgotten, that the conflict isn’t ‘frozen’, and that tensions are high. I understand that, from the point of view of politics. The world is focused on Ukraine and Syria, and in that context the problem of Karabakh is naturally not of the highest importance to the international community,” he said.

But he went on to stress that these shooting incidents came at a price.

“In Armenia at least, they lead to a situation where there’s no optimism about reaching a swift settlement. Mutual distrust becomes even greater, and we grow further apart from one another in terms of a possible resolution of the conflict,” he said. “So there is a price that comes with this. You can agree or disagree with the politics of it... but you and your society [in Azerbaijan] need to be aware of the price.”

STALLED PEACE PROCESS

Negotiations on the Karabakh dispute are mediated by the OSCE’s Minsk Group, chaired by the United States, France and Russia. Azerbaijan refuses to recognise or talk to the Karabakh administration, and formal talks are thus between the states of Azerbaijan and Armenia. In two decades, little has been achieved because the sides are so far apart in their visions of Karabakh’s future – Armenians want independence and Azerbaijanis demand reintegration – making it hard to discuss even preliminary confidence-building steps.

President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and his Armenian counterpart met three times between August and October, in what was seen as something of a breakthrough since they had not seen each other since November 2013. (See **Reset in Azerbaijan-Armenia Talks Process?** as well as **Unquiet Peace Holds on Azeri-Armenian Lines** on the reduction in shootings that followed.) So far, however, the OSCE-led talks process has not restarted.

As Giragosian put it, “there is a peace process, but there is no peace and there’s not much of a process”.

Grigoryan agreed that there was “no talks process” at the present time.

“Our presidents meet but there are no negotiations,” he said. “It’s a good thing that our presidents at least met... last year. But that isn’t a negotiating process.”

Despite the obstacles, Grigoryan believes resuming the formal talks process is essential.

“I think the most important thing is to try to revive the talks process....The situation is tense. Without negotiations, it will get worse,” he said. “And civil society figures and analysts should try to maintain some kind of dialogue at some level with their Azerbaijani colleagues.”

RUSSIA’S SHIFTING STANCE

Since the start of this year, Armenia has been a member of the newest Moscow-led regional grouping, the Eurasian Economic Union (which includes Kazakhstan, Belarus as well as Russia; Kyrgyzstan is expected to join later this year). Given Armenia’s already **longstanding security and economic ties with Russia**, this move should have strengthened the relationship further, and enhanced Armenia’s sense of security given that it is flanked by Turkey on one side and Azerbaijan on the other, and is still formally at war with the latter.

The panellists overturned this logic, however, arguing that Armenia had not been made stronger, nor had Azerbaijan been weakened, by the new strategic alliance.

“Armenia, with this recent escalation, is less secure than it was last year,” Giragosian said. “Armenia was forced to join the Eurasian union supposedly for security reasons, yet we are less secure now than Armenia was before joining the Eurasian union.”

Grigoryan explained why Yerevan appeared to have lost more than it gained.

“Joining the Eurasian union was the last ace Armenia had to play with Russia. Now we’re simply of no interest to Russia. We’ve given everything away to it. What interest do we hold now?” he asked. “Russia now has to work on Azerbaijan and do what it takes to get it to join the Eurasian zone, and more broadly to participate in Russia’s projects in the post-Soviet region. And that’s why we are frequently seeing what one could politely call this disrespectful attitude towards us, which was evident in events in Gyumri.”

This case, in which a soldier based at a Russian army base in Gyumri is accused of running amok and killing a whole family, has led to protests that highlight Armenian unease at the unequal relationship with Moscow. The suspect was taken back to the Russian base where the authorities said he would be tried there, not by the Armenian judiciary as bilateral treaties dictate. (See **Murder Case Strains Relations with Moscow.**)

According to Giragosian, “the tragedy in Gyumri has sparked a crisis raising bigger questions, not challenging the relationship between Armenia and Russia but revealing the dangerous asymmetry of the terms of the relationship.”

In the 1990s, post-Soviet Azerbaijan was estranged from Russia – it accused Moscow of covertly backing the Armenians in Karabakh, and went on to invite Western companies to develop its lucrative oil industry and build pipelines that bypassed its northern neighbour. Things have changed more recently, and Azerbaijan has warmed to Russia again, because that country is uncritical of its human rights record and is also prepared to sell it high-tech weapons even though that increases its arms race superiority over the much poorer Armenians.

In Rzayev’s view, officials in Azerbaijan were not dismayed by Armenia’s accession to the Eurasian Economic Union –they always believed it was “in Russia’s pocket” anyway.

“What has changed, though, is the relationship between Azerbaijan and Russia,” he continued. “After the events in Ukraine, Russia is making a determined attempt to retain its remaining colonies, if we can call them that. One might say it is very much courting Azerbaijan, trying to draw it into its sphere of political interest. This explains why Russia is now turning a blind eye to certain things. For instance, the Kremlin’s reaction to the helicopter downing was very muted. Five years ago or so, it would have been much tougher.”

Azerbaijani forces shot down an Armenian helicopter gunship near the boundary with Karabakh on November 12, killing all three crewmembers. They said it was firing on their ground positions; the Armenians said it was unarmed and taking part in a well-advertised military exercises. (See **Karabakh Peace Prospects Shot Down Together With Helicopter?**)

Poghosyan took issue with the view that the Eurasian Economic Union should or could guarantee Armenia’s security

“I’m very surprised when it’s sometimes suggested that entering the Eurasian union could in any way contribute to Armenia’s security,” he said. “Vis-à-vis Azerbaijan, at least, Armenia has to understand that it has no friends and that it must protect its own interests by itself.

FUTURE TRENDS AND RISKS

Looking ahead, Giragosian identified several key trends, among them the massive annual surges in military expenditure going on in Azerbaijan although he stressed this was not decisive enough to change a situation where “Armenia’s defensive position is still stronger than Azerbaijan’s potential offensive capacity”. Nevertheless, there was a trend towards “a shift in the balance of military power in Azerbaijan’s favour over the longer term”, he said.

Of the three Minsk Group members states, he said, only one did not have a consistent policy – Russia, which he called the “wild card”, first as a major supplier of arms to Azerbaijan, and also because it might shift position on who to support over Karabakh.

“In the wake of Russian aggression and war in Ukraine, there is a danger of a Russian policy shift over Nagorny Karabakh, away from its traditional position,” he said. “

Grigoryan also discussed Moscow’s uncertain behaviour and said that it was actually a positive thing that the armies of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Karabakh had maintained the 1994 ceasefire by themselves for all these years.

“We and you [Azerbaijanis] together control the situation. It is tense, sometimes it goes off the rails and we vent our displeasure, but all in all we control the situation. However strange it might seem, I think this point unites our interests; there should be no other players that might have a powerful influence on the situation.

Grigoryan warned that if the violence escalated further, Russia might use this as a pretext to send in troops. "They call them peacekeeping forces but we know from Crimea and Donbass roughly the kind of forces they will send into the Karabakh conflict zone. I would say that would be undesirable both for Azerbaijan and for Armenia," he added.

"This danger coming from Russia is very serious, and you [in Azerbaijan] must think about it. It can't be just us worrying about it. We and you must control the conflict zone ourselves, without other intermediaries."

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