

Could Karabakh Violence Spur New Peace Talks?

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Analyst weighs possible next steps parties may take if newly-agreed truce holds.

A ceasefire has been reached between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces following the worst spike in violence over the Nagorny Karabakh region in decades.

Arastun Orujlu, director of the East West Research Centre in Azerbaijan, talked to IWPR about the factors possibly fuelling the latest hostilities and what prospects he saw for meaningful peace talks.

Until now, he said, negotiations had been largely for show and had done nothing to resolve the fundamental issues.

IWPR: How do you explain what is going on? What are the reasons for the escalation of the conflict, and why now?

Orujlu: What is going on? Let's start with this. What is happening is that a crisis of the peacemaking process has come about.

For 22 years, since the signing of the armistice, an imitation of peace talks has been held. In addition, almost all the international participants in the process have forgotten that a considerable part of Azerbaijan's territory is under occupation. The international community has put the occupier and the victim of occupation on the same level. What happened is that the status of the parties to the conflict has not been determined properly. Of course, this has led to the current crisis.

The crisis is fairly serious. All these years, both sides have been arming. Primarily, Russia has been arming both sides. A couple of Russian politicians have cynically called it the conservation of parity. They sold weapons worth billions of dollars to Azerbaijan. Then, observing "parity," they sold Armenia, as their strategic ally, the same or nearly the same amount of weapons. All of this was bound to explode at some time.

Throughout this period, Armenia has felt very comfortable in the occupied lands. Moreover, the ceasefire was violated fairly intensively. From time to time, it openly sabotaged the negotiation process. So, you get what you get.

Why did it happen now? I think that Azerbaijan wanted to catch up.

Have internal factors in Azerbaijan - the economic crisis, the warming of relations with Europe and the West, distancing from Russia - influenced the intensification of military activity?

I do not know to what extent the economic crisis has had an effect on the situation, but the impact of political changes in the country are obvious. In recent times, Azerbaijan has systematically moved away from NATO, violated its principle of a balanced foreign policy and ended up standing alone before Russia.

When Azerbaijan started to receive offers to join the [Moscow-led] Customs Union, the Eurasian Economic Union, of course it was not in the interest of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's relations with the West were destroyed from within the authorities, precisely by those groups that are consciously and systematically carrying this out, so that Azerbaijan will be vulnerable in front of Russia without the support of the West. These forces are satisfied with the pro-Russian foreign policy. However, at the very last moment, this has started to change. I mean literally in the last few months.

Finally, [Azerbaijani president] Ilham Aliyev's visit to Washington took place with meetings, negotiations, positive statements by US officials towards Azerbaijan, even before the summit on nuclear security. In particular, the US Ambassador to Azerbaijan, Robert Cekuta, and the American co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, James Warlick, said that the occupied territories of Azerbaijan must be liberated. US Congress suspended funding of the unrecognised separatist regime in Nagorny Karabakh. Apparently, all this has caused some irritation [in Armenia]. And it was decided to draw Azerbaijan into conflict. In recent months, there was an intense concentration of Armenian troops in the occupied territories, which resulted in a clash. The confrontation took place right at the time when the heads of both countries were in Washington. I think this was no coincidence.

How realistic is the narrative that Turkey and Russia are trying to shift their differences from Syria to the Caucasus?

I do not think so. This is a rather biased version, which serves a certain political agenda. Speaking more

bluntly, this version has the character of blackmail against Turkey, so that it does not intervene in the conflict in any form. It is known that Azerbaijan and Turkey have an agreement on military-strategic partnership. Of course, Turkey cannot become actively involved [by sending] troops, but it can provide necessary military assistance in many different forms. Therefore, they want to move Turkey into the background. At the same time, I think that this version serves to divert attention from the real levers of escalation of the conflict. The main lever is not to be found in Ankara and Moscow, but mostly likely in Moscow and Yerevan.

What do you think will change in terms of geopolitics?

There are several possible versions of events in terms of geopolitics. The fight over Azerbaijan has not come out of nowhere. An east-west and north-south transport corridor [led by Russia, Iran and India and signed by nine other regional powers] is planned through Azerbaijan. The fight broke out precisely on this basis. Talking about transport links, which will soon connect Europe with Indochina. Here we are talking about trillions of dollars of business. Naturally, Russia also wants to have a north-south corridor to Iran to maintain its presence in the Middle East. I do not exclude that some agreement was reached or is intended. I do not mean the agreement between Baku and Moscow or between Baku and Washington, but a triangular Moscow-Baku-Washington agreement.

The second version of events is that Russia really wants to thwart the plans of the West to connect Indochina with Europe via Azerbaijan, the Central Asian countries, Ukraine and so forth. But this analysis is weak, it does not correspond with the relations between Washington and Moscow in recent weeks. We are seeing some positive development.

There is also a possible third version. Azerbaijan just wanted everyone to know that it does not plan to accept the further occupation of its lands, especially if they have great geopolitical importance. That is the message for everyone. And Azerbaijan will be at the centre of how events develop.

Can the escalation of the conflict be considered a collapse of the Minsk process? Or is it a transition to some other stage or level of peace negotiations?

I think this will be the beginning of negotiations. As I have already said, so far there has only been an imitation of the peace process... Perhaps [people hoped that] the problem will eventually sink into oblivion. But everything went astray. Everyone – in Washington, Brussels and Yerevan too – has witnessed the complete opposite. Everyone has seen that Azerbaijanis, irrespective of their views and age, are in no way prepared to make concessions on such a question as the country's territorial integrity. Reconciliation with the occupation is perceived very negatively. It is a psychological moment, which can be called a humiliation of national dignity.

If you follow the dynamics of public opinion today, one can see that the mood to go to the end with military action dominates. This also sends a certain message. And the peace process will have to take these realities into consideration as it develops.

So you think that the situation has changed in favour of Azerbaijan?

I think so. If you do not take into account some "side effects," such as the Russian mass media, which has turned to anti-Azerbaijani hysteria. Let's hope that this is not the official position of Moscow. Basically, I think the situation has changed in Azerbaijan's favour.

A truce has now been announced. Do you think this was achieved under the pressure of international organisations? Or did the parties come to such an agreement between themselves?

A ceasefire agreement was to be expected. There are several reasons. First, Azerbaijan has already reached its goal. On the other hand, the continuation of hostilities would have caused greater loss of life and could have escalated into a large-scale war. Neither side needed that. In addition to all this, the pressure of the international community also played a role, of course.

What prediction can be made as to what will happen next? What solution to the Karabakh conflict can be expected?

Now intensive negotiations will begin. This will not be an imitation of negotiations, such as were held by the Minsk Group. This will be a more serious process. As for trying to persuade Armenia that it can no longer have Azerbaijan's territory under occupation, if the superpowers understand that all this can turn into a major war in the region, they have to influence Armenia that it releases the occupied territory. The psychological advantage today lies with Azerbaijan and makes it stronger at the negotiating table. Moreover, one should not try to escape from the main reason of today's confrontation. This is the occupation of the territory of one party by the other.

Of course, this will stimulate a real peace process. I am convinced that there is no alternative to this. Information leaks about Russia being on the verge of bringing peacekeeping forces to Karabakh under the

auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation [CSTO] are just nonsense. The CSTO has absolutely no right to send peacekeepers there. Peacekeeping operations can be held under the auspices of some [other] international organisations. Also, Azerbaijan is not a member of the CSTO, and Nagorny Karabakh is officially considered to be Azerbaijan's territory.

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