

Stopping Europe's Next War

Why Nagorno-Karabakh's Quest for Freedom and Self-Determination Must be a Foreign Policy Priority

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Amidst doubt over the U.S.-Russia reset and Europe's austerity challenges, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's struggle for freedom and self-determination in the South Caucasus has emerged as a rare opportunity for cooperation between the United States, Europe and Russia. For almost two decades, diplomatic talks between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly Armenian enclave which freed itself from Azerbaijani control during the eclipse of the Soviet Union, have failed to reach a resolution. Meanwhile, an escalating arms race, precipitated by Azerbaijan's massive defense expenditures and saber-rattling, combined with frequent sniper attacks and skirmishes, make Nagorno-Karabakh the most likely site of Europe's next war. Action must be taken now to prevent this from happening.

The U.S., Europe and Russia must cooperate on making the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict a common foreign policy priority. An escalation of the conflict would threaten each party's respective foreign policy goals in the region. Tripolar cooperation on Nagorno-Karabakh therefore represents a unique opportunity to prevent another war in the South Caucasus, the likes of which have not been seen on the continent since World War Two. Recognizing Nagorno-Karabakh's legitimate quest for self-determination is the only way to secure a lasting and peaceful resolution to this oft-ignored, yet critically important conflict.

Trouble on Europe's Frontier: The Dangers of Renewed Warfare over Nagorno-Karabakh

European Energy Insecurity

Though most European policymakers see the South Caucasus as a remote southeastern frontier, the region's geostrategic significance to the continent warrants much greater attention from its capitals. The region has a crucial role as an energy corridor for hydrocarbon resources en route to Europe from the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Three of the

four major pipelines that transport Azerbaijani oil and gas to Europe lie close to the front line positions of Armenian and Azerbaijani forces stationed along both the Line-of-Contact between the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, Artsakh (hereinafter Nagorno-Karabakh Republic) and Azerbaijan, and along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. These include the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline.¹ In the event of renewed warfare, these pipelines would be early targets for Armenian artillery, stymieing Europe's goal of diversifying its energy supply.

Jeopardizing the Southern Spur of the Northern Distribution Network

Another Nagorno-Karabakh War would also complicate the withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Northern Distribution Network (NDN) plays an important role in transporting supplies out of the country. In November 2011, Pakistan closed NATO supply routes to Afghanistan, following a U.S. air strike that accidentally killed 24 Pakistani troops. Over the next seven months, NATO became almost completely reliant on the NDN, as evidenced by NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen's June 2012 announcement that the alliance had reached an agreement with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to allow for the withdrawal of equipment through their territories on route to Russia and finally to Latvia.

This arrangement suggested the alliance's increasing doubt that Pakistan would reopen its less expensive routes to Afghanistan, whose costs are roughly 17% of those of the NDN.² However, following U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's July 3 statement that the U.S. was sorry for the Pakistani military's losses, Islamabad reopened NATO supply routes.³ Despite the restoration of this vital artery, relations between the U.S. and Pakistan remain very poor. There is no guarantee that Pakistan will keep its routes open, which makes it

imperative that the NDN remain viable.

Though the route outlined above will be the NDN's primary conduit for evacuating equipment from Afghanistan, its Southern Spur – extending from Georgia to Afghanistan via Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – is an important alternative. It is the NDN's only route which does not traverse Russian territory. Renewed conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh would undoubtedly disrupt this route significantly and very likely close it altogether. If Pakistan were to once again close its supply routes, and the NDN's southern route were lost, all roads out of Afghanistan would have to pass through Russia.

Certainly, Russia's present cooperation with NATO's withdrawal should be praised; it is a sign that there is still hope for the continuation of a "reset" in relations between Washington and Moscow. However, given the recent return of Vladimir Putin as Russia's president, and the 2012 U.S. presidential election, such cooperation, however desirable, is not guaranteed. One need only be reminded of Republican Party candidate Mitt Romney's campaign statement that Russia is America's "top geopolitical adversary" to understand the potential for damage in bilateral relations.⁴

War Today Would Be Much Worse than in the Early 1990s

Renewed warfare over Nagorno-Karabakh would be significantly more deadly and destructive than the previous conflict, when Nagorno-Karabakh freed itself from nearly seven decades Soviet-imposed Azerbaijani control. In a 2011 presentation at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Colonel Jon Chicky of the National War College identified the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as the most dangerous in the greater Caucasus region, stating that a future conflict there will surpass the lethality of the previous one by orders of magnitude.⁵ Colonel Chicky cited as evidence that, "over the past 5 to 6 years there has

been an increase in numbers and sophistication of regional armaments," including "drones, advanced air and missile defense systems, long range artillery and rocket systems [and] tactical ballistic missiles."⁶ He drew special attention to the dangers posed by long-range multiple rocket launchers, high-altitude and long-range surface to air missile systems, and ballistic missiles.⁷

Colonel Chicky also highlighted the 2008 and 2010 Mardakert skirmishes, the rising number of ceasefire violations since 2009, and the fact that both the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis have weapons which can reach far past the Nagorno-Karabakh Line-of-Contact and its immediate vicinity.⁸ Renewed combat would involve counter-value targeting deep within both Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁹ This would include major cities (including Baku and Yerevan), oil and gas installations, power plants (such as Armenia's nuclear power station at Metsamor), highways, bridges and airports, among other sites. The capacity for death and destruction is truly frightening.

Spillover Effects: How Nagorno-Karabakh May Spur a Regional Proxy War

If war breaks out again over Nagorno-Karabakh, it will not be limited to the area in and around the enclave itself, as it largely was during the early 1990s. Rather, it promises to be a full-scale war between Armenia, allied with the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, and Azerbaijan. A renewed war would feature greater roles played by the major regional powers, Russia, Turkey and Iran, than during the last conflagration. Though the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic is not included in Russia's security treaty with Armenia, the pact could be invoked should the conflict spill over onto Armenia's territory, which is a very likely scenario.¹⁰

One would also be remiss to overlook Russia's significant economic interests in Armenia. Should renewed warfare over Nagorno-Karabakh



Source: International Crisis Group

surpass the threshold for economic risk, Russia might be prompted to intervene. Albeit not bound by treaty obligation, Azerbaijan's closest ally, Turkey, would likewise offer Azerbaijan its tacit, even open, support.¹¹

Considering the fractious relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, particularly over the latter's close ties with Israel, Iran would keep its trade routes open with Armenia in the event of another armed conflict, as it did in the 1990s. And direct Iranian support to the Armenians should not be entirely ruled out. Iran may see renewed armed conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh as a convenient way for it to weaken what it sees as a growing overt and covert Israeli presence in Azerbaijan. This has all the makings for a proxy war of epic magnitude.

The Kosovo of the Caucasus: Preventing War and Protecting Freedom in the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic

Despite plentiful warnings of the dangerous consequences of another Nagorno-Karabakh war, comparatively less attention has been devoted to what could be done to avert more fighting. The ensuing section seeks to rectify this by offering pragmatic policy recommendations that the U.S., Europe and Russia can cooperate on in order to prevent Nagorno-Karabakh from becoming Europe's next war.

A Reciprocal Removal of Snipers from the Line-of-Contact Must be a Priority

In 1992, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the predecessor of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), created the Minsk Group to facilitate a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.¹² The Minsk Group is co-chaired by France, Russia and the U.S.¹³ Though Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic signed a ceasefire in 1994, an estimated 30 people on each side of the Line-of-Contact in Nagorno-Karabakh have been killed by sniper fire every year since then.¹⁴ That comes to an unofficial estimate of over 1,000 Armenian and Azerbaijani deaths over the past 18 years. The Minsk Group proposed to Armenia and Azerbaijan that both sides remove their snipers at the OSCE ministerial summit in Helsinki in December 2008. Though Armenia agreed to the removal of snipers, Azerbaijan rejected the proposal, seeing sniping as a means of keeping pressure on the Armenian side and disallowing the maintenance of the status quo.

However, sniping has not achieved its desired aims

for Azerbaijan for almost two decades. Rather, it has made the Armenian-controlled buffer zones which form a security perimeter around the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic look increasingly like a national security necessity rather than a bargaining chip in the event of compromise with Azerbaijan.

Moreover, sniping carries the dangerous risk of triggering domino-effect responses that could reignite all-out warfare.¹⁵ The Minsk Group co-chair countries must increase high-level diplomatic pressure on the Armenians and Azerbaijanis to reciprocally remove their snipers from the Line-of-Contact. The withdrawal of snipers is the most immediate and practical way to prevent further armed conflict.

Stop Ceasefire Violations: The Need for an Incident-Investigation Mechanism

Currently, the Minsk Group's monitoring team tasked with overseeing the conflict has only six representatives to observe events on the ground, and their resources are limited. This contingent needs to be supplemented – both in the number of monitors and the resources at their disposal – to allow it to function more effectively. Furthermore, they need to have the authority to “name and shame” those responsible for the ceasefire violations.¹⁶ Since the ceasefire's signing, the Minsk Group has continually condemned violent incidents between Armenian and Azerbaijan forces. Yet the absence of a mechanism for investigating incidents on the frontlines has prevented it from assigning responsibility for ceasefire violations. This has created an environment where there is little incentive for the party perpetrating the violation to change its behavior.

Armenia is in favor of an incident-investigation mechanism. On June 12, 2012, in a news conference in Yerevan with OSCE Chairperson-in-Office Eamon Gilmore, Armenian Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandian expressed his country's support for such a mechanism.¹⁷ However, during Gilmore's news conference in Baku two days later, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov said that Azerbaijan's support is conditional on Armenian forces withdrawing from the buffer zones around the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. “This will work only if Armenian forces withdraw from the occupied territories of Azerbaijan,” he stated, adding “if the mechanism is put to work now, it would mean consolidating the status quo, which is unacceptable.”¹⁸ Such a deliberate attempt to tie an OSCE-mandated conflict-management mechanism – meant to save both Azerbaijani and Armenian lives – to

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an unrealistic and maximalist Azerbaijani demand should not be overlooked.

Considering Baku's unwillingness to support an incident-investigation mechanism, the U.S., Europe and Russia should implement such a mechanism on the Armenian side of the Line-of-Contact. Doing so would send a clear signal that they are serious about decreasing tension over Nagorno-Karabakh. This would be especially timely following the recent spate of violence along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and the Nagorno-Karabakh Line-of-Contact from June 4-6, 2012, which coincided with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to the South Caucasus.

The clashes claimed the lives of 4 Armenian and 5 Azerbaijani soldiers. Clinton's subsequent warning against the escalation in violence was echoed by the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, as well as the Russian Foreign Ministry.

New Ideas Needed for Conflict Prevention: Looking for More from the EU, OSCE and the UN

Dr. Walter Kemp recently argued that the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism currently in place in Georgia – a joint endeavor by the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) and the OSCE – might provide a model for the type of mechanism needed for investigating incidents on the Nagorno-Karabakh frontlines.¹⁹ However, in stating its intention to maintain an active sniping policy, Azerbaijan has blocked the Minsk Group from implementing such a mechanism. If the Minsk Group is unable to move forward with this proposal, it is difficult to imagine it having any success in developing a peacekeeping operation in Nagorno-Karabakh as envisioned by its mandate.²⁰ Considering the Minsk Group's inability to implement sorely needed conflict prevention measures, the U.S., Europe and Russia must act now to devise another way of instituting an oversight system for border incidents between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. We cannot afford to wait any longer.

As an alternative to an OSCE peacekeeping operation, Dr. Kemp suggests that the UN consider a preventive deployment, modeled after the UN Preventive Deployment Force (UNPREDEP) in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.²¹ By December 1995, UNPREDEP was administering 24 permanent observation posts along 420 kilometers on the Macedonian side of the border with the Federal

Republic of Yugoslavia and Albania. In addition, it had 33 temporary observation posts, and oversaw nearly 40 border and community patrols every day.²² This mission was successful in increasing stability and decreasing tension between the conflicting parties, and could be replicated along the Nagorno-Karabakh Line-of-Contact, which at 177 kilometers is less than half as long as the one UNPREDEP monitored in the Balkans.²³

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A Seat at the Table: Time to Take the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic Seriously

When the 1994 ceasefire was signed following Nagorno-Karabakh's six-year struggle to secure its independence from Azerbaijan, it included three signatories: Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.²⁴ Until 1997, representatives of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic participated in the peace talks, until Azerbaijan demanded their exclusion.²⁵ Since 1998, negotiations have been conducted between Azerbaijan and Armenia, with Yerevan speaking on behalf of both Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. This current format has proven to be ineffective: it is time for the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic to return to its seat at the negotiating table.

After all, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in its most recent phase, arose out of the desire of the predominantly ethnic Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh to be free from Azerbaijani rule. The conflict began during the late 1980s as a civil war between the former Soviet Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (AO) and Soviet Azerbaijan.²⁶ This began on February 20, 1988, when the Nagorno-Karabakh AO appealed to Moscow to be reassigned from Soviet Azerbaijan to Soviet Armenia.²⁷

The deadly anti-Armenian pogroms that took place shortly thereafter, from February 27-29, in the Baku suburb of Sumgait, Azerbaijan, sparked inter-ethnic violence between armed Armenian and Azerbaijani militias that had formed in Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁸ Since Nagorno-Karabakh had been disallowed from changing its status from an Autonomous Oblast of Soviet Azerbaijan to an Autonomous Oblast of Soviet Armenia, it took immediate action once Azerbaijan declared independence from the Soviet Union on August 30, 1991. On September 2, Nagorno-Karabakh announced its secession from Azerbaijan, proclaiming itself the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.²⁹ This was affirmed by a December 10 referendum supporting Nagorno-Karabakh's independence (which Nagorno-

Karabakh's Azerbaijani minority chose to boycott), and a January 6, 1992 declaration of independence.³⁰ It is important to recall Nagorno-Karabakh's timeline because it shows consistent efforts at secession from Azerbaijan. Although it ultimately broke away from Azerbaijan through a forceful struggle, it first attempted to do so through the only legal and democratic means available to it at the time.

Over the past two decades, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic has striven to be taken seriously by the international community as a democracy. It satisfies the traditional criteria for statehood as prescribed by Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States, which explains that "the state as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: a) a permanent population; b) a defined territory; c) government; and d) capacity to enter into relations with the other states."³¹ It is high time for the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's development as a free and democratic state to be taken more seriously by the international community, especially following its 2012 presidential election, which generally adhered to international standards.³² This should begin with France, Russia and the U.S. supporting its return to its seat at the Minsk Group negotiating table.

Recognition of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's independence is not only prudent, but necessary, following the recent "Safarov Affair," in which Azerbaijan immediately freed and pardoned convicted axe-murderer Ramil Safarov, an Azerbaijani officer who brutally hacked to death an Armenian officer, Gurgen Margarian, while he slept during a 2004 NATO-sponsored course in Budapest. After spending eight years in jail in Hungary, Safarov was extradited to Azerbaijan on August 31, 2012, after Hungary received written assurance from the Azerbaijani Justice Ministry that he would serve at least 25 years of a life sentence there.³³ Adding insult to injury, upon his return, Azerbaijan also awarded Safarov "a new apartment, eight years of back pay, a promotion to the rank of major and the status of a national hero."³⁴

This incident is ultimate confirmation that any Azerbaijani assurance regarding the "future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will," as stated in the Minsk Group's Madrid

Principles - the proposed peace settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict—cannot be trusted.³⁵ The Madrid Document is dead. In gaining the undeserved freedom of a self-admitted murderer, and officially condoning his shameful Armenocidal act, Azerbaijan has solidified its permanent loss of any future claim to Nagorno-Karabakh. Its independence has reached a point of no return.

Conclusion: Transatlantic Action Must be Taken on Nagorno-Karabakh, Or Else

Tripolar action is needed now to effectively address the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, before it becomes Europe's next war, with all of the nasty and widespread consequences that would entail. This conflict should not be viewed through a Cold War prism: this is not a zero-sum game, in which Nagorno-Karabakh represents the prize in a West-versus-East struggle for South Caucasian dominance. Very much to the contrary, it is a unique opportunity for the U.S., Europe and Russia to step up their cooperative efforts in facilitating the resolution of a conflict which threatens their respective interests in the South Caucasus.

Nagorno-Karabakh could save the U.S.-Russian "reset," and usher in a new era of European-Russian cooperation, or submerge the region into a brutal war with devastating and unpredictable consequences. At the same time, recognizing the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's justified pursuit of self-determination as a free and independent state is the only way of securing a peaceful and lasting resolution to the conflict. There is little time remaining to stop Europe's next war. The clock is ticking. □

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