

THE KARABAKH CONFLICT AFTER THE “FOUR-DAY WAR”: A DYNAMIC STATUS QUO

In April 2016, an escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, often called the “four-day war,” took place. The fighting, which threatened to transform into a full-scale war was halted with Russian mediation. In the aftermath of the fighting, there were attempts to re-energize the peace process around the Karabakh conflict, with mediation by the co-chairmen of the Minsk Group of OSCE – France, Russia, and the US. In this article, the author parses the latest developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, arguing that while these efforts have helped to prevent another major escalation, so far, no major breakthrough in terms of a peace agreement has been made and the situation in the conflict zone remains tense.

Mikayel Zolyan*



* Dr. Mikayel Zolyan is an analyst at the Regional Studies Center in Yerevan, Armenia.

The escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh, sometimes called the “four-day war,” which took place in April 2016, did not come out of the blue.¹ There have been a number of major incidents on the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as on the Armenia-Azerbaijani border, ever since the 1994 ceasefire two decades ago. A dramatic increase in the number and intensity of the incidents was observed long before the April events: since 2014, tension started to increase, both in terms of quantity of incidents and the nature of the weapons used.² While the majority of analysts seemed to think that a major escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh was unlikely, there were also voices in the policy community that pointed to worrying dynamics in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, warning that a flare-up could become the next big crisis in Eurasia.³ Thus, even though the recent round of fighting may have caught both the societies of the region and the international community off guard, it was hardly unpredictable. By spring 2016, a combination of internal and external factors made the military escalation more likely than ever.

The Road to the “Four-Day War”

First of all, the tense international and regional climate made an escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh probable. Both Russia and the West were distracted by the crises in Syria and Ukraine. The refugee crisis, terrorism threat, and rise of populism dominated the agenda in Europe, while the US was in the midst of a ruthless election campaign. An important factor that might have played a catalyzing role was the Russian-Turkish confrontation after Turkey shot down a Russian military airplane in November 2015. Apart from increasing the overall level of tension in the region, it created a situation in which Moscow would be less likely to punish Baku for any activity in Nagorno-Karabakh, as doing so would risk “losing” Azerbaijan to its more traditional ally, Turkey. This would have been unacceptable since maintaining “a strategic partnership” with President Ilham Aliyev’s government is one of the priorities of Moscow’s policy in the Caucasus. In fact, Moscow has gone through great pains to make sure that this strategic partnership does not interfere with its strategic alliance with Armenia.

Today, the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic is an unrecognized state, which controls not only the territory of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region, as it existed in the Soviet times prior to the beginning of the conflict, but also adjacent

¹ The article is partly based on a research project implemented by the author with the support of The Hurford Fellows Program, sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and made possible by a generous grant from the Hurford Foundation. The views presented in the article are those of the author.

² On the creeping escalation of violent clashes in 2014-2016 see Laurence Broers, “The Nagorno Karabakh Conflict Defaulting to War,” Research Paper, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House, July 2016, pp. 6-8.

³ Paul Stronski, “Finding the Next Flashpoint in US-Russian Relations,” Eurasianet.org, 4 December 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/76426>

territories, which Baku considers “occupied,” while Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh consider them part of a “security zone.” Most suggestions for peace have revolved around the idea of exchanging lands for status recognition, peace, or security. The so-called Madrid Principles, which are the basis of the peace proposals that had been put forward by the mediators, are suggesting a temporary solution, in which parts of the Armenian-controlled territory would be exchanged for an internationally recognized interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh, along with security guarantees and a mechanism for determining the status of the region in the future. However, so far the sides have been reluctant to make the concessions necessary in order to modify the status quo by achieving a breakthrough in the conflict resolution on the basis of these proposals. While both sides are suffering from the current situation of the unsolved conflict, it is Azerbaijan that views the prolongation of the status quo as unacceptable and has been pushing to change it. These considerations may have been among the ones that led Azerbaijan to adopt a new strategy, which Azerbaijani analyst Zaur Shiriev has described as a “war of attrition: wearing down the enemy to the point of compromise through continuous losses.” In his words: “The ultimate goal of Azerbaijan’s attrition strategy is actually to bring Armenia back to the negotiation table, as maintaining the military status quo along the Line of Contact in Nagorno-Karabakh will now be more costly for Yerevan and could spark domestic turbulence in Armenia.”⁴

Hostilities broke out in the early hours of 2 April 2016. Azerbaijani forces advanced in two directions: in the north and south of Nagorno-Karabakh. In particular, they captured the village of Talish (where atrocities against remaining civilians were reported) in the north and the strategically important hill Lala-Tepe in the south.⁵ Karabakhi Armenian forces counter-attacked on 3 April, and by the end of the day had retaken some of the lost positions. By the time the fighting ended on 5 April, Talish was again under Armenian control, but Lala-Tepe and some other positions remained under Azerbaijani control. The sides differed in their assessment of how much land had exchanged hands and the importance of these positions. Later, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan dismissed the importance of the lost positions,

“While both sides are suffering from the current situation of the unsolved conflict, it is Azerbaijan that views the prolongation of the status quo as unacceptable and has been pushing to change it.”

⁴ Zaur Shiriev, “Azerbaijan’s War of Attrition: A New Strategy to Resolve the Karabakh Conflict?” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 13, No. 67 (6 April 2016), http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_tnews%5Btt_news%5D=45281&cHash=9636c7ddda38c2e853bdc60fa8983e53#.V7h_C_I97IU

⁵ Broers (2016), p. 16.

saying that it was “merely 800 hectares of land,” which had no strategic significance.⁶ The Azerbaijani side, on the contrary, celebrated the capture of these positions as a major achievement.⁷

“Azerbaijan’s military campaign led to a consolidation of various groups of its population around a patriotic discourse.”

While, as per usual, both sides blamed each other for the outbreak of the four-day war, the logic of the status quo preservation strategy suggests that Yerevan and Stepanakert had few reasons to restart escalations. In the aftermath of the April hostilities, there were opinions in the media suggesting that the aim of Azerbaijan’s actions was to perform a blitzkrieg,⁸ while others argued that the fighting represented a more limited operation.⁹ Arguably, apart from testing the defenses on the line of contact, the operation pursued external and internal political goals: modifying the status quo in the peace process and testing the international community’s reaction to military action in the region, as well as consolidating Azerbaijani society around its ruling government. The latter goal was important in light of the internal socio-economic and political situation in Azerbaijan, as the country suffered from the consequences of a global slump in oil prices.¹⁰ Azerbaijan’s military campaign led to a consolidation of various groups of its population – including even a large part of the opposition and NGO sector – around a patriotic discourse, simultaneously marginalizing the government’s opponents.¹¹

Caught by Surprise? The Reaction of the International Community

Another important goal was testing the reaction of the international community and the important players thereof. The reaction to the four-day war showed that the international community was concerned with the events in Nagorno-Karabakh. Most international players expressed concern and refrained from supporting or placing blame on either side of the conflict. The only exception was Turkey, which, not unexpectedly,

⁶ “Karabakh Lost 800 ha that Played no Strategic Role: Armenia,” *Panarmenian.net*, May 17, 2016

⁷ Thomas De Waal, “The Threat of Karabakh Conflict in 2017,” *Carnegie Europe*, 24 January 24 2017, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/67774>

⁸ This was the point of view voiced by many Armenian sources, including the spokesperson of the Ministry of Defense, see Marianna Mkrtchyan, “Artsrun Hovhannisyan: Azerbaijan’s attempt of blitzkrieg failed,” *ArmInfo*, 4 April 2016, <http://www.arminfo.info/index.cfm?objectid=A35495F0-FA77-11E5-9D010EB7C0D21663>

⁹ For an informed discussion on this question see Broers (2016), pp. 16-18.

¹⁰ Thomas de Waal, “Azerbaijan’s Perfect Storm,” *Carnegie Europe*, 19 January 2016, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/?fa=62501>

¹¹ Sabir Akhundov, “Azerbaijanism,” 3 August 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/sabir-akhundov/azerbaijanism>

expressed its support to Azerbaijan.¹² International organizations such as the UN, the EU, and the Council of Europe expressed concern for the course of events and condemned the violence (without naming the side responsible), including the governments of the Minsk Group countries, as well as other countries of the region.¹³ However, the majority of international players were seemingly willing to delegate a leading role in dealing with the crisis to Russia, in spite of the contradictions that existed between the West and Russia with regard to many other global and regional issues.

As a result, it was Russia’s position that mattered the most. Observers have offered various interpretations of the Russian reaction to the escalation. In the view of Alexey Malashenko, “Moscow missed the beginning of the conflict... in the beginning it simply did not know what to do.”¹⁴ However, the general line of Moscow was to keep the balance. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev visited both Yerevan and Baku in the immediate aftermath of the four-day war, and made statements that were extremely cautious.¹⁵ There were some exceptions though. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Secretary Nikolay Bordyuzha released a statement on the first day of the conflict that placed the blame for escalation on Azerbaijan.¹⁶ On the other hand, several days after the four-day war, Russia’s Deputy Prime Minister in charge of the defense industry, Dmitry Rogozin, visited Baku and not only announced that the arms sales to Azerbaijan would continue, but dismissed his Armenian critics calling their criticism “demagoguery.”¹⁷ A Russian expert ascribes the discrepancy in such statements to a lack of coordination among various Russian state agencies and officials.¹⁸

“The majority of international players were seemingly willing to delegate a leading role in dealing with the crisis to Russia.”

¹² “Nagorno-Karabakh clash: Turkey backs Azeris ‘to the end’ against Armenia,” BBC News, 3 April 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35953358>

¹³ The Minsk Group is co-chaired by France, Russia, and the US. The Minsk Group also includes the following countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Germany, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, and Turkey.

¹⁴ Алексей Малашенко, Юрий Югов [Акежsey Malashenko, Yuri Rogov], “От Москвы в Ереване ждали более прорармянской позиции, и армяне обиделись,” [“Yerevan expected a more pro-Armenian position from Moscow”] Carnegie.ru, 12 July 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/2016/07/12/ru-64065/j2y0>

¹⁵ Moskovksy Komsomolets, Медведев обсудил с Саргсяном проблему Карабаха, [“Medvedev Discussed the Issue of Karabakh with Sargsyan”] 7 April 2016, <http://www.mk.ru/politics/2016/04/07/medvedev-ob-sudil-s-sargsyanom-problemu-karabakha.html>

¹⁶ “CSTO Chief Blames Baku For Escalation in Karabakh,” Radio Azatutyun, 2 April 2016 <http://www.azatutyun.am/a/27650276.html>

¹⁷ «Рогозин: Азербайджан – не союзник, а платежеспособный стратегический партнер», [Azerbaijan is not an ally, it is financially solvent strategic partner], Radio Liberty Armenia, 12 April 2016, <http://rus.azatutyun.am/a/27670946.html>

¹⁸ Expert interview, Moscow, July 2016, Vadim Mukhanov.

“Russia’s policy of maintaining the balance between Armenia and Azerbaijan led to serious tension between Moscow and Yerevan.”

eggs at the Russian embassy.¹⁹ While there was an understanding in Armenia that direct military assistance from Russia would be unlikely, there had also been expectations of political or psychological support from Moscow, which were not fulfilled. As Alexey Malashenko put it, “in Yerevan they expected more... they expected from Moscow a pro-Armenian position, even if not officially stated.”²⁰

In any case, it was Russian mediation that put an end to the fighting, when Yuri Khachaturov and Necmeddin Sadygov, Chief of Staff of Armenia and Azerbaijan respectively, agreed to a ceasefire at a meeting in Moscow.²¹ While skirmishes and shootouts continued in the following days, in general, the ceasefire was respected.

A Window of Opportunity or a Threat of Further Escalation?

Initially, the April fighting led to an intensification of the peace process. The first meeting after the escalation took place in Vienna on 16 May 2016, with the participation of the Minsk Group co-chairs (France, Russia, and the US), and the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan. In Vienna, the co-chairs issued a statement, which said that the two presidents did not merely “reaffirm their commitment to a ceasefire and peaceful settlement of the conflict,” but agreed on an “early completion of the work on the OSCE mechanism to investigate the incidents” and “expansion of the office of the personal representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office.”²² The next meeting took place in St. Petersburg on 20 June 2016, in the presence of Russian President

¹⁹ “Armenians Protest Against Russian Arms Sales to Azerbaijan,” *RFE/RL*, 13 April 2016 <http://www.rferl.org/content/armenia-protest-russian-arm-sales-to-azerbaijan/27673173.html>

²⁰ Алексей Малашенко, Юрий Югов, “От Москвы в Ереване ждали более проармянской позиции, и армяне обиделись,” [Aleksey Malashenko, Yuro Rogov “Yerivan expected a more Pro-Armenian Postion from Moscow and Armenians are Upset”] *Carnegie.ru*, 12 July 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/2016/07/12/ru-64065/j2y0>

²¹ Erik Davtyan, “The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict at the center of Russia-Armenia relations,” 13 May 2016, *The Central Asia and Caucasus Analyst*, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/13363-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-at-the-center-of-russia-armenia-relations.html>

²² Joint Statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Secretary of State of the United States of America and State Secretary for Europe Affairs of France, Vienna, 16 May 2016, <http://www.osce.org/mg/240316>

Vladimir Putin.²³ After this meeting, with the presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, a statement was released that claimed “the presidents reiterated agreements reached at the ... Summit in Vienna aimed at the stabilization of the situation in the conflict area and creation of an atmosphere conducive for moving the peace process forward,” and that “they agreed in particular to increase the number of international observers.”²⁴

However, since then, no major breakthroughs in the peace process have been observed. Even the limited suggestions regarding mechanisms of observation and investigation of incidents, which were discussed in Vienna and St. Petersburg, failed to materialize. There was much speculation in the aftermath of these meetings as to whether there had been attempts by Russia to push the West out of the peace process, or vice versa.²⁵ However, one should remember that throughout the mediation efforts, various actors were taking upon themselves to initiate a resolution, with support (or at least declared support) from the other co-chair countries.

[REDACTED]

“The four-day war radicalized the societies and the political elites on both sides of the conflict.”

[REDACTED]

The situation in the conflict zone remains tense: the explosive situation in the wake of the April incidents could not be neutralized by one or several meetings, even at the highest level. The four-day war radicalized the societies and the political elites on both sides of the conflict. In the case of Azerbaijan, the April events have arguably led to a situation in which Baku is unlikely to accept the need for compromise – at least a compromise that would be more or less acceptable for Yerevan and Stepanakert. Although territorial gains made during the April incidents were rather insignificant, they brought Baku some dividends, particularly in domestic politics. The four-day war enabled authorities to keep internal instability – caused by the fall of energy prices and socio-economic problems – at bay. The pro-government media are playing up the alleged successes in the four-day war, raising more expectations

²³ On these meetings see Mikayel Zolyan, “Jaw-Jaw is Always Better than War-War: What are the implications of the Vienna meeting of the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan?,” *Russian Council on Foreign Affairs*, 24 May 2016, http://russiancouncil.ru/en/inner/?id_4=7703#top-content; Ни мира, ни войны: Результаты встречи президентов Армении и Азербайджана в Санкт-Петербурге, [Neither War, Nor Peace: Results of Armenia-Azerbaijan Presidents’ Meeting in St.Petersburg] *Russian Council on Foreign Affairs*, 23 June 2016, http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=7827#top-content

²⁴ “Baku and Yerevan give different spins to St Petersburg Summit,” *Commonsace.eu*, 23 June 2016, http://commonsace.eu/index.php?m=23&news_id=3688

²⁵ See for example Юрий Рокс, Россию лишают инициативы в решении карабахского конфликта [Yuri Roks, Russia is Deprived of Initiative in the Solution of the Karabakh Conflict], *Nezavisimata Gazeta*, 17 May 2016, http://www.ng.ru/cis/2016-05-17/6_karabah.html

in society. In such an atmosphere, Baku is unlikely to make any serious concessions that any compromise would entail, as that could endanger the “victorious” narrative, which had been created around the April events.

As for the Armenian side, there seems to be an illusion among some observers that in the post-April context, its government could be pressured into making certain concessions to prevent another eruption of hostilities. This perception, however, is quite far from reality. In fact, the opposite is true. In the post-four-day war context, calls are voiced in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh to “not to give away an inch of land to the enemy.” These calls often go hand-in-hand with criticism of the authorities for their lack of preparation for the sudden Azerbaijani attack in April, for not doing enough to eradicate corruption in the armed forces, and for not taking a tough stand in the negotiating process. Whether these allegations are fair or not, this mood in the society means that if the Armenian authorities were to make any concessions under these circumstances, it would amount to a sign of weakness, which is fraught with unpredictable consequences for the country’s political elite. As for Stepanakert’s leadership, for years it has argued that it could not trust the negotiation process, in which it was not directly involved, and the April incidents only deepened that mistrust.

Against this background, it is hard to imagine that in the current context there could be a breakthrough in the settlement of the conflict. Nor is it likely that the mediators will manage to bring about the signing of any significant agreements, even if they do not go beyond the reiteration of the fairly vague Madrid Principles, which have, in various modifications, provided the basis of the talks over the last 10 years. Moreover, even the implementation of the measures aimed at strengthening the ceasefire is open to some doubt: the distance between declaring the agreement of the parties and actual implementation of these mechanisms may turn out to be considerable. Even if these measures are adopted, as the experience of settling other conflicts shows, the presence of observers and investigation mechanisms does not guarantee that the ceasefire will be honored.

On the other hand, another large-scale confrontation has so far been avoided. Even though there have been numerous incidents, so far none of them have reached the level of the April escalation.²⁶ It is unlikely that these incidents will stop, but it is also unlikely that they will lead to full-scale war. Thus, a peculiar situation in the

²⁶ Of the recent incidents, probably the most noteworthy in terms of its international response was the renewed fighting that took place on 29 December 2016 on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, which prompted a statement of concern on the part of Collective Security Treaty Organization, followed by statements from Baku and Moscow. “Moscow statement distances Russia from CSTO comments on Karabakh,” *Commonspace.eu*, 31 December 2016, http://commonspace.eu/index.php?m=23&news_id=4055

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has emerged, which can be described as a “dynamic status quo,” to use the phrase suggested by Russian analyst Sergey Markedonov.²⁷ This is a situation in which the status quo can hardly be considered stable, as at least one of the sides is constantly attempting to change it. However, these attempts remain within certain limits. In other words, while hopes for a breakthrough in the conflict resolution process have been futile, so far the fears of a new large scale escalation have also failed to materialize.

²⁷ Sergey Markedonov, “The current dynamics between Moscow and Ankara does not necessarily mean that the two will work together to form a new alliance,” *The Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies*, 16 January 2017, <http://www.iras.ir/en/doc/interview/2803/sergey-markedonov-the-current-dynamics-between-moscow-and-ankara-does-not-necessarily-mean-that-the-two-will-work-together-to-form-a-new-alliance>